
The Lowe Brothers, 1852-70: A Study in Business Relations on the North Pacific Coast

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It is well said that the rising town of Victoria took shape less as a little bit of Old England than as a little bit of Old San Francisco.¹ Any such aphorism, of course, requires all kinds of qualifications, but none would deny the close and constant contact between the emerging Vancouver Island port and the booming mid-nineteenth-century metropolis of the Pacific coast. And the careers of Thomas and James Lowe, two San Francisco-based merchants who extended their operations to Vancouver Island then moved to Victoria, seem to offer a cogent example of how west coast business enterprise spread northward from its main centre into the growing hinterland community.

Admittedly, one reason for choosing the Lowes for a case study is that a useful body of primary material exists in the British Columbia Archives: the well-written letters of Thomas Lowe, comprising both business and family correspondence, cover a considerable part of their activities.² It would be fair to admit, also, that while prominent in business ranks, the Lowes were not wholly outstanding entrepreneurs. Moreover, their concerns with Victoria occupied only part of their lives. For years before moving there in the 1860s, they had been notably interested in Oregon as well, and in the early seventies Thomas Lowe retired to his native Scotland, while James returned to San Francisco, where he subsequently died. Hence their effective concern with Vancouver Island largely fell within the fifties and

¹Willard Ireland, as quoted in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* (hereafter *Colonist*), September 11, 1960 – though chiefly in reference to Victoria's physical appearance and architecture.

²The Thomas Lowe Letters at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (hereafter referred to as PABC) fall in two groups, and there are two sets of transcripts made in 1954 from the original letter books. The first "Letters Outward, August 31, 1852, to November 17, 1863," deals with family correspondence and will hereafter be referred to as LO (1). The second, "Letters Outward, May 14, 1852, to December 10, 1859," mainly concerns business affairs and will hereafter be referred to as LO (2). There is also a small file of James Lowe papers at the PABC, but these will be given separate references below.

sixties, and only in the latter decade could they be fully identified with it.

Nevertheless the Lowe brothers were far from unimportant in the history of Victoria and the Island – and it may be argued that their careers have wider affinities and significance for the business development of the north Pacific coast in general. They were closely connected with the once-great trading power of the Hudson's Bay Company in the region; they were notable in developing Oregon commerce, in marketing Vancouver Island coal in San Francisco, and in seeking to promote the Island's trade. They shared in financing steamers for the Fraser River; they ran a prosperous commission and wholesale firm in Victoria, became provisioners to Her Majesty's ships at nearby Esquimalt, and held lands at Saanich and Sooke. And while Thomas purchased a leading Victoria hotel, James, active in the city's Chamber of Commerce, went into politics in a by-election of 1869, only to be defeated by the redoubtable Amor de Cosmos himself.

Assuredly, then, they were men of moment and interest, deserving of study for more reason than the fact that Lowe papers exist. In any case, they need to be put into the context of the business community of the north west Pacific region in order to assess their relationship with Victoria, British Columbia, Oregon, and San Francisco. But this must properly begin at the beginning, with their family background, in far distant Scotland.

Thomas Lowe, born in 1824, and James in 1830, were younger sons of Dr. John Lowe, surgeon, of Coupar Angus, Perthshire.³ Of the six sons and three daughters in the family, three of the boys would eventually go to America, and Thomas went first. Appointed an apprentice clerk in the Hudson's Bay Company at sixteen, he sailed from Gravesend in August 1841 for the Columbia.⁴ At Honolulu, however, he was ordered to Alaska instead and reached Sitka in April 1842. From there he was sent on to Fort Durham on Taku Inlet but soon found himself in the midst of virtual war, for the post was repeatedly harassed by hostile Taku Indians.⁵ The Company, in fact, decided it was not worth maintaining, and its twenty men were sent south to help establish the new post on Vancouver Island: Fort Victoria.

Thus in June 1843 Thomas Lowe was with James Douglas and Roderick Finlayson at the founding of Victoria, and, as the youngest of its builders, he supervised parties of Indians bringing in lumber.⁶ When Douglas shortly

³Information on the Lowe family background is derived variously from the Lowe Letters and from Vertical Files of press clippings (henceforth VF) on Thomas and James Lowe at the PABC.

⁴E. E. Rich, ed., *McLoughlin's Fort Vancouver letters, second series, 1839-1844*, Hudson's Bay Company series, VI, appendix B (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1943), p. 393.

⁵Letter from T. Lowe printed in *Colonist*, October 29, 1897.

⁶*Ibid.*

returned to Fort Vancouver, Thomas went with him.⁷ Thereafter, for almost seven years, he was stationed at the Company's great Oregon headquarters as clerk and accountant, except when he was in charge of the Overland Express in 1847-48 and crossed to and from York Factory.⁸ He became part of a coterie of Hudson's Bay men and families in the lower Columbia area with whom he kept strong ties for years to come. Indeed, in 1849 he married LaRose Birnie, a daughter of James Birnie, the retired chief factor who had founded the settlement of Cathlamet.⁹

By this time, however, Thomas Lowe was growing restless in the service of a fur company whose days on the Lower Columbia were patently all but over. The advance of American settlement and the Oregon treaty had doomed the reign of Fort Vancouver, while the boom times spreading with the California gold discoveries promised a whole new range of opportunity. But particularly his marriage decided Thomas to leave the Company, "as the unsocial sort of life a married man led there," he wrote, "was anything but suited to my ideas of independence . . . to mess at public table myself and see the blackguard cook and steward neglect and treat the families in any way they thought proper. . . ."¹⁰ There was soon a different, tragic reason. His wife of only a few months died of "lung disease," and he was impelled to break away.¹¹ In March 1850 at the age of twenty-five, he resigned from the Company and moved to Oregon City.¹²

There he entered partnership with two older ex-Hudson's Bay men, George Traill Allan and Archibald McKinlay, two former chief traders. Allan had served from Norway House to Honolulu, as well as at Fort Vancouver,¹³ McKinlay from the Red River to New Caledonia and Oregon, but both had retired early to launch out on their own.¹³ Thus the firm of Allan, McKinlay and Company was set up at Oregon City as a general store-keeping business, supplying settlers in the district and gold-seekers passing through and sending produce out to market. The new firm, a typical unspecialized frontier merchant enterprise, prospered in the good times and soon entertained thoughts of expansion. It was decided to send its junior partner to the chief supply and market centre of the west coast, San Francisco.¹⁴ There he could buy the goods needed for the Oregon inland trade and sell consignments for export. In the spring of 1852, accordingly,

⁷PABC, VF, T. Lowe.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹PABC, "Miscellaneous Information relating to the Birnie Family." There were fourteen children. Thomas Lowe stayed in close touch with the family.

¹⁰PABC, LO (2), T. Lowe to Dugald McTavish, May 14, 1852.

¹¹"Birnie Family." Married in May, she died in September 1849.

¹²Rich, *op. cit.*, appendix B, pp. 383, 394.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴LO (2), T. Lowe to D. McTavish, May 14, 1852.

Thomas Lowe sailed from the Columbia to the fast-rising California metropolis, "as the trade of Oregon now so much depends on the state of the California market."¹⁵

He arrived at the end of April and took an office at 145 Clay Street in the name of "Allan, McKinlay, Lowe and Co., Commission Merchants." This was not quite an agency of Allan, McKinlay and Company of Oregon City, nor yet a wholly separate organization – again typical of the interlocking partnerships of the era – for the San Francisco firm had its own books, its own funds, and was to conduct its own commission business in buying and selling goods, as well as supplying the Oregon City store or any up-country merchants who applied to it. Furthermore, while the three Oregon City partners, Allan, McKinlay, and Lowe, together held a half interest (\$7500) in the new San Francisco enterprise, the other half was held by three sleeping partners, John Ballenden, J. A. Grahame, and A. C. Anderson, each of whom had put up \$2500 of the firm's capital and so would each receive a proportionate share of profits.¹⁶

These three, again, were Hudson's Bay men. Ballenden had taken over in 1851 as chief factor at Fort Vancouver in its declining years as a wholesale trade centre. James Grahame had been a clerk at the fort in Thomas Lowe's time and was still there as a chief trader when the post was finally abandoned in 1860. Alexander Caulfield Anderson, following a varied and colourful career with the Bay Company from Lachine to the Columbia, was made second-in-command at Fort Vancouver in 1851 and subsequently became collector of customs at Victoria and commissioner for British Columbia fisheries.¹⁷ He was to have close associations with the Lowe brothers in Victoria days ahead.

By now there was more than one of the Lowes on the west coast. Shortly before Thomas had gone to San Francisco, his younger brother David had come out, after five years in a London merchant's office, to become a clerk in the Oregon City firm and keep its accounts there.¹⁸ Moreover, the youngest Lowe brother, James, was growing dissatisfied with the banking career he had begun in Scotland in 1846 at age sixteen. In June 1852 he wrote to Thomas asserting his "predilection for a mercantile life" and that his prospects at the Dundee Bank were "'altogether too discouraging' – £60 a

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.* See also LO (1), T. Lowe to James Lowe, August 31, 1852.

¹⁷Anderson actually took over Thomas Lowe's house at Cathlamet [LO (2), T. Lowe to James Birnie, July 16, 1852]. He farmed for a time beside James Birnie but, after retiring from the Company in 1854, grew dissatisfied with a quiet life and so moved to Victoria in 1858 [LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Grahame, August 16, 1852; Rich, *op. cit.*, appendix B, p. 384].

¹⁸LO (2), T. Lowe to D. McTavish, May 14, 1852.

year after serving six years and only £100 for the next twenty, 'even if the Old Accountant resigns.'"¹⁹ Thomas was fully sympathetic, though he warned James that he might not be able to find him a place as readily as he had David, because the new San Francisco business was still small, though increasing: "In this nest of Speculators and in this country of Speculation, I feel confident that I am if anything rather too cautious, but . . . I am at all events not standing still."²⁰

Certainly Thomas was active from the start in San Francisco, although his transactions at first were on a minor scale. Besides sending merchandise to fill the orders of the Oregon City house (and duly crediting his own with the commission), he sold salmon and potatoes from old James Birnie at Cathlamet and undertook to handle lumber shipments from the Columbia.²¹ He shared in chartering the British barque *Abbot* for the China trade and made an excellent return on his \$2000 investment.²² And he put out the firm's funds not yet tied up in goods into short-term loans at the going rates of 2 to 5 per cent a month, in time investing sums of money for his father in Scotland in the same profitable way.²³ It may indeed have been a mark of Thomas Lowe's growing success and significance that within a few months his San Francisco business was renamed Allan, Lowe and Company.²⁴

The city itself he found chaotic, exciting, and full of money and growth, "filthy rich" quite literally:

Old clothes and all sorts of rubbish are freely thrown in the middle of some of the most crowded thoroughfares, and one has to pick his way through heaps of old boots, hats and dirty shirts . . . you see meat and fish thrown out in the streets . . . but the rats—whose name is legion—seem generally to have made a clean sweep of everything by morning . . . it is no uncommon thing to see half the street taken up with brick, lime and wood to be used in the erection of some edifice. . . . They are generally of a very substantial nature and handsome finish, and if San Francisco goes on at the present rate for a few years longer, it will cut no mean figure among the principal cities of the world.²⁵

It was indeed the "good security" offered by these brick fireproof structures that led Thomas Lowe to invest so readily in the eagerly demanded short-term commercial loans.²⁶

¹⁹LO (1), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, August 31, 1852. Thomas here is paraphrasing Jame's remarks in two letters he wrote on June 13 and 28.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Birnie, May 26, 1852; *ibid.*, July 16, 1852.

²²LO (2), T. Lowe to Allan, McKinlay and Co., October 1, 1852. Thomas was one of three charterers, each of whom gained \$600 on their \$2000 investment [LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, April 16, 1853].

²³LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, April 16, 1853; *ibid.*, June 15, 1853.

²⁴*Ibid.*, February 28, 1853.

²⁵*Ibid.*, October 13, 1852.

²⁶*Ibid.*, April 16, 1853.

But he was particularly interested in the possibility of developing trade between San Francisco and Vancouver Island. Plainly this was because of the commercial advantages he foresaw. "I intend to open a trade between this point and Vancouver's Island and as I am well acquainted with nearly everyone on it, I have no doubt that it will in the course of time pay me for the trouble and expense," he wrote to a friend.²⁷ Yet perhaps there was something more. The concern he continued to show for the interests of his former employers indicated that the *esprit de corps* of the Hudson's Bay Company still had its influence. Like others who had left the ranks of the Company, he could attack its parsimony and rigidity and be glad to be well out of it, but the old service and the old comradeship could not be wholly thrown off. If Lowe meant to use his Hudson's Bay connections, he no less sought to work for them.

Even as he opened his business in San Francisco in May 1852, the small schooner *Alice* was in port with a cargo of cranberries and potatoes brought down from the Island by the independent trader Captain James Cooper. Lowe seized the occasion to renew contact with James Douglas, now governor of the Company colony on the Island, whom he had known well in his Fort Vancouver years. He sent him a letter by return of the *Alice* in June (in which he hailed her as "the pioneer trader between the two places") offering the services of his firm for the sale or purchase of Company goods in San Francisco and advising on the best items to send down to the city's fast expanding market, especially salmon and red potatoes – not white, as Cooper had brought.²⁸ Douglas returned a friendly answer, talking of future shipments when available.²⁹

Prospects for trade with the Island rose markedly that fall, when Thomas Lowe sold the first coal shipped from there. The San Francisco *Prices Current* of November 15 reported:

During the last fortnight two small cargoes have been received here, taken from a mine opened some time since in Vancouver's Island, the first importation from that quarter. The experiments that have been made with this Coal have proved, we are informed, very satisfactory, and the opinion is expressed that it will answer well for steamers' use.

The coal, however, some 4500 tons, sold at only \$15 and \$16 a ton, because it found a glutted market. Thomas hoped that Douglas would "not get disheartened" and stop shipping after expecting some \$30 to \$40 a ton. But the article now was known and should do better thereafter. And he had cleared some \$700 to \$800 in commissions, having charged lightly, as the cargoes could not afford more.³⁰

²⁷LO (2), T. Lowe to Robert Clouston, December 9, 1852.

²⁸LO (2), T. Lowe to H. E. James Douglas, Esq., June 1, 1852.

²⁹LO (2), T. Lowe to Dr. Barclay, August 16, 1852.

³⁰LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Birnie, November 24, 1852; LO (2), T. Lowe to Allan, McKinlay and Co., November 24, 1852.

In any case, he kept after the trade. In December he bought a three-hundred ton ship, the *John Adams*, and sent it to Victoria under Captain William Brotchie to look for more cargoes from Douglas.³¹ In fact, he went along himself but found that “they seem to be going on very leisurely at Vancouver Island – rather too much so for the present way of pushing business on this Coast.”³² The *Adams* wound up carrying lumber from Puget Sound.³³ Quite evidently, Thomas Lowe faced the caution of a Company that did not like too much venturing in the competitive San Francisco market and preferred, when it could, to sell its coal to shippers at the Nanaimo mines. He often deplored the Hudson’s Bay attitude to the coal trade, when with due attention to the state of the city market it could make “a perfect little pile.”³⁴ Nevertheless, some Island coal continued to come down to Lowe’s hands.³⁵ By the summer of 1853 it was being regularly listed in *Prices Current*, which added in September: “. . . it should not be overlooked by Eastern shippers that a large quantity of coal is being brought into this market from the coal mines in the possession of the Hudson’s Bay Company, from which source the supply is steadily increasing.”³⁶

Well before this time, however, it had grown clear that there was room for another Lowe in the prospering San Francisco firm. James, who had been travelling on business from Dundee to Belfast, decided that America would offer more than Ireland,³⁷ and in April 1853 he reached San Francisco via Panama.³⁸ Thus began a linking of careers that would last for two decades: Thomas, sturdy, prudent, and resourceful at twenty-eight; his twenty-three-year-old brother, slender and more ardent, if inclined to overstrain his energies. David Lowe, easy-going and good natured, remains a more shadowy figure. He not only stayed at Oregon City, but he was also a poor correspondent – too easy-going, no doubt.³⁹

From his arrival, James took quickly to the business. That summer he was sent on a trip to Vancouver Island to get to know the country, then from Victoria to Puget Sound and across to Oregon City, so that he could see the Allan and McKinlay operations there as well.⁴⁰ While he was away

³¹LO (2), T. Lowe to R. Clouston, December 9, 1852.

³²LO (2), T. Lowe to David Lowe, April 9, 1853.

³³LO (2), T. Lowe to A. C. Anderson, April 9, 1853.

³⁴LO (2), T. Lowe to R. Clouston, December 9, 1852.

³⁵Douglas, moreover, informed him in the summer of 1853 that he could now get out about 120 tons a week and “will consign it all to us” [LO (2), T. Lowe to George Allan, July 9, 1853].

³⁶*Prices Current*, September 30, 1853.

³⁷LO (1), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, August 31, 1852; LO (2), T. Lowe to D. Lowe, August 16, 1852.

³⁸LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, April 16, 1853.

³⁹David was “fat and good-natured as ever” [LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, February 28, 1853], and there are repeated comments in the Lowe Letters about his failure to write.

⁴⁰LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Douglas, July 6, 1853.

for two months, Thomas continued to manage, though he was somewhat worried when he had to advance \$5000 for more goods shipped to Douglas at Victoria after the latter had only sent part payment for previous accounts in under-par bills drawn on Fort Vancouver and the Sandwich Islands.⁴¹ Such were the complexities of financing west coast commerce then! But the Bay Company duly paid interest on its advances and all was well when James returned in September. In fact, Thomas could begin to think at last of making a long postponed trip to Scotland to visit his family whom he had not seen for twelve years.

In January 1854 he started out, leaving the San Francisco firm in James's now capable hands.⁴² Arriving in New York in February he was kept in business there till March, so that he did not reach Perthshire and Coupar Angus until well into the spring. When trips then took this long, visitors did not hurry away. Thomas remained in Scotland till late in the year and was not back on the Pacific coast until well into 1855. But here he found things in good order and could congratulate James on the Hudson's Bay ship *Otter* "being consigned to us at last" for the Vancouver Island general trade, since coal prospects were dull for the present.⁴³ Furthermore, he agreed that James should now become a partner in Allan, Lowe and Company and undertook, successfully, to obtain his other partners' approval.⁴⁴

March of 1855 found Thomas Lowe up at Oregon City, for if James was running the San Francisco business satisfactorily, all was not well in the inland trade. It appears that the Allan, McKinlay firm had overextended itself there. They had opened stores at several other centres (Thomas was particularly uneasy about the store at Scottsburg on the Umpqua);⁴⁵ they had bought river steamboats (David Lowe held part interest in one).⁴⁶ Through more chains of partnerships they held land and milling interests,⁴⁷

⁴¹LO (2), T. Lowe to G. Allan, July 9, 1853; LO (2), T. Lowe to A. McKinlay, July 19, 1853.

⁴²LO (2), T. Lowe to James Grahame, January 3, 1854.

⁴³LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, March 9, 1855.

⁴⁴*Ibid.* The partnership for James was evidently in effect by 1856 [see LO (1), T. Lowe to Cecilia Lowe (sister) November 15, 1856]. There was also a prospect – "very unlikely" – that Douglas might become one; at least Thomas might ask him, [LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, December 23, 1855].

⁴⁵LO (2), T. Lowe to G. Allan, August 6, 1853; *ibid.*, of even date to A. McKinlay ("Confound this Umpqua business"); *ibid.*, to J. Lowe, December 13, 1855.

⁴⁶LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, December 13, 1855. David Lowe had invested in the *Enterprise* built by Captain Archibald Jamieson. The Lowes had many contacts with the steamboating Jamieson family, both on the Columbia and the Fraser rivers. The Lowe Letters refer to other steamboat investments made by the partners on Oregon rivers. Thomas himself held an interest in the *Washington* through the Allan and McKinlay partnership [LO (2), T. Lowe to A. McKinlay, July 19, 1853; *ibid.*, August 6, 1853].

⁴⁷LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, November 28, and December 13, 1855; T. Lowe to G. Allan, November 11, 1856.

and they were regularly in debt in their accounts with Allan and Lowe.⁴⁸ Moreover, trade took a downturn in the inland country with the alarms of the Yakima Indian War in 1855. Gold strikes fizzled out, and as many people seemed to be leaving the region as were entering.⁴⁹ The merchants, hence, were overinvested in properties and perennially short of ready cash – even dangerously so.

Thomas was continually anxious to see Allan, McKinlay and Company cut back, so that their assets could be used in San Francisco.⁵⁰ He plainly felt there was far more to be done in the metropolitan market and the maritime trade than in country storekeeping and real estate. Thus he stayed on at Oregon City through the rest of 1855, trying somehow to reduce the shortage of cash and to pay off Scottsburg's debts.⁵¹ But in 1856 he went there himself to manage its store and mill as well as the store at Champoeg, since Archibald McKinlay had gone east on a visit to Canada.⁵² Meanwhile James Lowe was doing his best in San Francisco but was also being affected by dull times, the shortage of funds, and the small business coming down from the interior.

Matters did not improve through 1857. The inland districts, as Thomas Lowe wrote from Oregon, seemed "nearly at a standstill."⁵³ In San Francisco the Lowe brothers found their surest commissions were for the Hudson's Bay Company, who continued to use them as agents in California. But this was not much more than scraping by, for the Vancouver Island trade was still limited and little coal was now coming down from Nanaimo. Indeed, the coal market had fallen off generally in San Francisco, perhaps reflecting a slowing in the city's growth, and there was little prospect of large new projects developing. Then came the change, and a very different value for the Vancouver Island trade: in 1858 the Fraser gold rush swelled on the neighbouring mainland. Without realizing it, the Lowes were entering a new orientation of their business activities, one which would eventually bring them to move to Victoria itself.

Well before Fraser gold fever struck San Francisco in the spring of 1858, rumours had circulated of finds in the British territory in the north. Some months earlier Thomas Lowe wrote to his father of talk of mines in the

⁴⁸LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, September 11, 1855; T. Lowe to A. McKinlay, August 6, 1853; T. Lowe to J. Lowe, December 13, 1855.

⁴⁹LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, April 9, 1856, and July 21, 1857; LO (2), T. Lowe to G. Allan, November 11, 1856.

⁵⁰LO (2), T. Lowe to A. McKinlay, August 6, 1853; T. Lowe to J. Lowe, September 11, 1855.

⁵¹LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, September 11 and December 13, 1855.

⁵²LO (2), T. Lowe to G. Allan, November 11, 1856.

⁵³LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, July 21, 1857.

"Thompson's River country," adding: "The English government may therefore take steps to form a settlement or colony on the mainland, the only thing as yet on this coast being at Vancouver's Island, and which, by the way, does not seem to improve very rapidly."⁵⁴ By April 1858, however, San Francisco newspapers were paying serious attention to the mounting Fraser River gold rush and its probable effects on their city. The *Mercantile Gazette* hopefully decided that "the men who emigrate will continue to draw their supplies from here and there will be no diminution of consumers."⁵⁵ It was right. As gold-seekers poured down to the docks, San Francisco supplies went with them and after them – though notably *via* Vancouver Island, where the transshipment port of Victoria grew rapidly as San Francisco's forward base. What did suffer once more was the inland trade. By July the city's press recorded that with 2000 men leaving weekly for the Fraser, up-country areas were buying practically nothing, and business concerned were shutting down.⁵⁶

While all this must have greatly affected the Lowe brothers, there is an unfortunate gap here in their papers. Still, some things may be pieced together. Undoubtedly they would respond to the new developments in the very quarter in which they had been particularly interested. They evidently chartered clipper ships for the Fraser trade at a time when all sorts of craft were being diverted into it.⁵⁷ They certainly invested in the first British steamer being built at Victoria for the river run, the *Governor Douglas*, and then in her sister ship, the *Colonel Moody*.⁵⁸ And James Lowe went up to Victoria to represent their interests at that expanding depot, where branches were increasingly being established by San Francisco merchants. One of them, J. J. Southgate, a prominent future business figure in Victoria, even arrived there that summer with a letter of introduction to Governor Douglas from the Lowe firm, vouching for their satisfactory business dealings with Southgate, including the recent sale of "three cargoes of Nanaimo coal."⁵⁹

Assuredly the Lowes had good connections in Victoria. Indeed, one of their sleeping partners, Alexander Anderson, was appointed first collector of the port and postmaster by Douglas in July 1858.⁶⁰ A man of deserved

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Mercantile Gazette and Shipping Register*, April 27, 1858.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, June 19, 1858.

⁵⁷*Colonist*, December 13, 1905.

⁵⁸LO (2), T. Lowe to Archibald Jamieson, August 2, 1859. The Lowes had \$2500 in the former and \$2000 in the latter, through Samuel Price and Company who were acting as agents [T. Lowe to A. C. Anderson, August 30, 1859].

⁵⁹PABC, "J. J. Southgate Correspondence," Allan, Lowe and Company to J. Douglas, June 15, 1858.

⁶⁰LO (2), Lowe to A. C. Anderson, July 2, 1859.

reputation as an explorer and trail-maker, and of considerable literary ability, Anderson was no less active in various Island enterprises, including the Victoria Steam Navigation Company in the Fraser River trade – whose stockholders met in his office.⁶¹ It was evidently through their correspondence with Anderson that the Lowes kept in touch with affairs on Vancouver Island.

Despite all the hectic growth on the Island, Thomas Lowe at San Francisco still had to concern himself with the difficulties of Allan, McKinlay and Company, in Oregon. There an unexpected blow fell in September, when David Lowe, aged only thirty, died.⁶² Furthermore, James, who had likely worn himself out in the summer's activities, now became seriously ill and could not return to work for nine months.⁶³ During that period, until June of 1859, Thomas was on his own again in San Francisco, unable to spend time away for Oregon.

By this period the gold fever had ebbed and discouragement had set in about the Fraser finds. "This state of affairs," wrote Thomas, "has affected our business very much, as our principal trade has been with Vancouver's Island. . . ."⁶⁴ Inquiring of how their steamers *Governor Douglas* and *Colonel Moody* were getting on there, he confessed that he saw little inducement ahead in either the Island or Oregon.⁶⁵ In the latter, things had gone from bad to worse, so that the Allan, McKinlay partnership, already deep in debt to Allan and Lowe, had had to pull out "every cent" of its capital in the San Francisco firm, leaving the latter virtually without funds.⁶⁶ Thomas himself was so short of cash that he reluctantly had to dispose of some 350 acres he had bought at Saanich, near Victoria, in spite of glowing urgings from Alexander Anderson about the future of the Island.⁶⁷

But this was not yet the end, in that increasingly dismal autumn of 1859. When James Lowe applied to Chief Factor Dallas at Victoria to seek more coal consignments, he was told that the Hudson's Bay Company had decided not to enter the San Francisco trade because of the good local market for coal from the Royal Navy's vessels now stationed at the Island.⁶⁸ Moreover, James fell ill again – he had never fully recovered – and it was

⁶¹Victoria *Gazette*, February 5, 1859.

⁶²E. Ruth Rockwood, "Diary of Rev. G. H. Atkinson, 1847-58," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XLI (December 1940), p. 403.

⁶³LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Birnie, July 2, 1859.

⁶⁴LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, July 5, 1859.

⁶⁵LO (2), T. Lowe to A. Jamieson, August 2, 1859.

⁶⁶LO (2), T. Lowe to G. Allan, July 2, 1859.

⁶⁷LO (2), T. Lowe to A. C. Anderson, July 2, 1859. Archibald Jamieson bought this land [T. Lowe to A. Jamieson, August 15, 1859].

⁶⁸LO (1), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, October 4, 1859. Thomas thought the Company's decision short-sighted, as they were leaving the big San Francisco market to less well placed eastern and British coal suppliers.

decided he must go home for a time to Scotland. It seemed time to call a halt. Thomas was to close out Allan, Lowe and Company at the end of the year, then continue on his own as best he could till his brother returned, when they would settle on future plans.⁶⁹

He did so, carrying on into 1860 with little besides Hudson's Bay supply orders and a few minor commissions, while transactions were worked out to unravel the interrelations of Allan and McKinlay and the now defunct Allan and Lowe. The former house reduced their indebtedness somewhat;⁷⁰ the latter's sleeping partners were paid off (or rather, Anderson's and Grahame's shares were transferred to shares in the *Governor Douglas and Colonel Moody*);⁷¹ and Thomas could even take a well-deserved two-month holiday in the Sandwich Islands.⁷² It would actually be two years more before the Allan and McKinlay firm was finally dissolved, but it now did nothing more than hold devalued real estate.⁷³ In any case, Thomas had little interest left in Oregon.

His interest, in fact, was redirected to Victoria, where the Lowes had had agents during the past two years.⁷⁴ When James returned from Scotland in the summer of 1860, he soon went up to the Island port himself. In February 1860, the British Columbia and Victoria Steam Navigation Company had been incorporated there, combining shipping interests on the Fraser (including the *Douglas* and *Moody*) in the face of declining river traffic.⁷⁵ James settled in Victoria and became agent of the Company – on whose behalf he was glad to accept an offer, in August 1861, of a government subsidy of £50 a month for carrying the mails to the British Columbia mainland.⁷⁶

⁶⁹LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Grahame, August 30, 1859; T. Lowe to Messrs. Allan and McKinlay, October 1, 1859. Allan, Lowe and Company was dissolved on December 31, 1859 [LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, June 19, 1860].

⁷⁰LO (1), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, February 4, 1860. Allan and McKinlay had remitted \$2000, thus leaving a current balance against them of \$3000 – apart from the \$7500 capital they had withdrawn [*ibid.*].

⁷¹LO (2), T. Lowe to Messrs. Allan and McKinlay, October 1, 1859.

⁷²LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, June 19, 1860.

⁷³As early as August 1859, Thomas Lowe discussed the dissolution of Allan and McKinlay with his partners in it, noting that the firm had virtually ended in trade through exhausting its stock of goods, but advising against advertising a dissolution while they still held real estate and debts in common [LO (2), T. Lowe to Messrs. Allan and McKinlay, August 6, 1859]. He was in Oregon in the fall of 1862 to wind up these affairs finally [LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, December 6, 1862], so that the partnership was at last dissolved in 1863 [Rich, *op. cit.*, appendix B, p. 393].

⁷⁴As well as Samuel Price and A. C. Anderson who acted for the Lowes at Victoria, they shipped consignments to A. F. Main's firm there [LO (2), T. Lowe to J. Lowe, October 19, 1859; T. Lowe to Anderson, November 24, 1859].

⁷⁵*Act of Incorporation of the British Columbia and Victoria Steam Navigation Company* (Victoria, 1860); E. W. Wright, ed., *Lewis and Dryden's marine history of the Pacific North West* (New York, 1961), p. 98.

⁷⁶PABC, "Official Correspondence with James Lowe," J. Lowe to Colonial Secretary, August 30, 1861.

Then in 1862 came a new upsurge in Victoria, with the gold strikes in the Cariboo, to which the Lowes responded. James opened a new business on the Island. By late fall the *British Colonist* was carrying his notices: "James Lowe (of the late firm of Allan, Lowe and Company, San Francisco), *Commission Merchant*, Victoria, V.I. Office in Pidwell's Brick Building, Yates Street."⁷⁷ Thomas meanwhile had arranged to move. He arrived in Victoria in October 1862 and ran his brother's business for a month, while the latter paid his first visit back to San Francisco in two years.⁷⁸ They now intended to make Victoria their sole base and launch a new partnership there. Thomas, though, still felt a bit uncertain and was anxious to see "what results are to flow from the present excitement" over the Cariboo, recalling the transitory boom of 1858.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, he thought the immediate situation promising: "Town lots have increased very much in value during the past few months, and more substantial improvements have been made than at any former period – so that as far as Victoria is concerned, there is every indication of prosperity and rapid advance."⁸⁰

On January 1, 1863, the firm of Lowe Brothers, Commission Merchants, came into being; its office at the corner of Yates and Langley, the brothers living at the Misses Stott's where James had lodged for some time.⁸¹ The enterprise took hold admirably. By November Thomas could report: "We have been very successful this past season in our Commission business, and if the same good fortune lasts much longer, it will enable me to make up for a few past mishaps in Oregon."⁸² Early in 1864 they began to operate a store of their own as well, which meant occasional trips back to San Francisco to purchase stock, from groceries to French wines and cigars.⁸³ Next, in 1865, they bought out the large wholesale business of an old friend, J. J. Southgate, when he temporarily returned to England, and took on his contract for supplying stores to the warships at Esquimalt.⁸⁴ They obtained lands at Sooke harbour westward down the coast, to which they opened a trail – unfortunately condemned as "very badly made."⁸⁵ And they subsequently began acting as agents for whaling firms; for example, in importing supplies and equipment for the Howe Sound Company.⁸⁶

⁷⁷Victoria *British Colonist*, December 1, 1862.

⁷⁸LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, December 6, 1862.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.* See also *ibid.*, January 3, 1863, and *Colonist*, July 1, 1863.

⁸²LO (1), T. Lowe to Cecilia Lowe, November 17, 1863.

⁸³*Ibid.* See also *Colonist*, February 15, 1864. The new store of these "Commission Merchants and importers of Groceries and Provisions" was in Reed's Block, Wharf Street.

⁸⁴*Colonist*, February 2, 1865. The Lowes also bought out the firm of Guisepe Vignolo on Wharf Street [*Colonist*, December 13, 1905].

⁸⁵PABC, "Official Correspondence with Lowe Brothers," endorsement on letter from Lowe Bros., to Colonial Secretary, November 2, 1864.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, Lowe Bros. to Colonial Secretary, June 25 and August 9, 1869.

Accordingly, the Lowes very soon became prominent members of Victoria's mercantile elite – by no means petty shopkeepers. No doubt, they were aided by their long connections with the Island trade; not to mention Thomas Lowe's still older associations with the inner group of Bay Company men. But James, besides, moved actively into community affairs. From membership in the Rifle Corps in 1861 (where he had urged the volunteers to regular drills at the Court House),⁸⁷ and from serving as secretary that year to the winter lectures movement,⁸⁸ he had gone to help re-establish the Chamber of Commerce in 1863,⁸⁹ and to accept appointment to the Court of Revision in 1863 and 64;⁹⁰ though he declined a place on the General Board of Education in 1865, pleading the weight of his "business vocations."⁹¹

Thomas was seemingly more withdrawn. He probably preferred to stick to business outright, including plans for buying up mining claims in the Cariboo.⁹² He looked after his own and his father's investments (he also invested for his brothers and friends in Britain, among them, evidently, the Secretary of the Hudson's Bay Company in London);⁹³ and he moved the funds up from San Francisco to put them out again on good security at from 15 to 18 per cent per annum.⁹⁴ Then, when James became president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1866, Thomas contented himself with buying the St. George Hotel. This was a first-class brick hostelry built four years earlier, but evidently too soon for Victoria. At any rate, the previous owners had lost money; Thomas got the property for \$7000.⁹⁵ He at once leased it, though he may have lost money himself by the time it changed hands again in 1869 and 70.⁹⁶ Still, as the Driard House thereafter, it remained Victoria's leading hotel until supplanted by the Empress.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, James Lowe was moving towards politics. As president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1866-67, he had perhaps overtaxed himself

⁸⁷*Colonist*, June 29, 1861.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, October 2 and 19, 1861.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, February 10, 1863. James was secretary *pro tem*.

⁹⁰"Official Correspondence with James Lowe," J. Lowe to Colonial Secretary, March 20, 1863, and July 22, 1864.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, May 17, 1865.

⁹²LO (1), T. Lowe to Catharine Lowe (sister), May 6, 1863.

⁹³LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, April 16, 1863; T. Lowe to John Lowe (brother), January 3, 1863.

⁹⁴LO (1), T. Lowe to his father, January 3, 1863.

⁹⁵*Colonist*, November 6, 1866.

⁹⁶The circumstances of Thomas' selling of the hotel cannot be traced. Still, after his lessees lost money in turn and left Victoria in 1869, the next tenant similarly failed and the house was closed in 1870. Driard of the Colonial Hotel then bought it for \$5500 in 1871 [see article by J. Nesbitt, *Colonist*, September 10, 1950].

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

again, since he left immediately afterward for a long stay in the Sandwich Islands "to recover my health."⁹⁸ But the next year, on his return, he found Victoria and British Columbia facing the crucial issue of joining confederation with Canada. In the fall of 1869 he undertook to stand in a by-election, which would offer a test of popular feeling on that question. It was called for the Second District, the rural area around Victoria and northward up the Island's east coast. His opponent, however, was that eccentric giant and formidable champion of confederation, Amor de Cosmos.

James Lowe did not flatly oppose confederation, by now accepted as all but inevitable. His aim, he said in his Address to the Electors of November 1, was to avoid a hasty commitment to an "irrevocable step," and through postponement and consideration "to obtain all the advantages which may be derived therefrom."⁹⁹ Nevertheless, his speeches indicated that he represented the very real doubt and distrust in the Victoria mercantile community of union with far-off Canada and a no less real dislike of de Cosmos, whose free-swinging attacks had made so many enemies among Victoria worthies, notably, of course, in Company and official circles. And James, like his brother, had close links with that old ruling element. Significantly, he was proposed by J. D. Pemberton and seconded by Kenneth MacKenzie of Craigflower at the nominations held on November 29,¹⁰⁰ while Alexander Anderson wrote a long and eloquent letter to the press "as one of your prominent supporters," from his residence at Rosebank, Saanich.¹⁰¹

Yet James Lowe's somewhat vague contention that "if we had a cheap and moderate government this cry for Confederation would never have been heard" could not match his opponent's piercing blasts against the futile indecision of "the stupid fossil party."¹⁰² Hence, according to the *British Colonist*, "Many of Mr. Lowe's friends – men who admire him for his business tact and ability and his many private virtues – either felt constrained to vote against him or abstained from voting entirely."¹⁰³ At the election early in December de Cosmos won heavily, 285 to 118.¹⁰⁴ James's brief political career was over.

At the same time the Lowes' days in Victoria were nearing their close. It was almost symbolic. As the city and its province were being drawn into a new continental association in 1870, away from their earlier coastal past,

⁹⁸*Colonist*, January 8, 1867.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, November 2, 1869.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, November 30, 1869.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, November 16, 1869.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, November 30, 1869.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, December 3, 1869.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, December 7, 1869.

so the Lowe brothers' partnership, which had belonged inherently to that earlier era, came finally to an end.

Once more the details are lacking. There are no papers extant for this period to fill in the bare facts available on the Lowes. But it was announced in the *British Colonist* of November 7, 1870, that "Mr. James Lowe of the late firm of Lowe Brothers" had joined another well established merchant, Thomas L. Stahlschmidt, in the new house of Lowe and Stahlschmidt. One can only conjecture about the change. It seems unlikely that quarrels between the Lowes or business failure brought the end of their partnership. There is no evidence of the latter, while as to the former, there are their years of harmoniously working together and subsequent good relations to testify. It seems more probable that Thomas simply wanted to pull out, having made a reasonable sufficiency.¹⁰⁵ He possibly was influenced as well by the recent period of much slower growth in Victoria. In short, he determined to retire to Scotland, although he did not leave until the spring of 1872.¹⁰⁶

He was not yet fifty at his return and lived in Scotland until 1912, dying at Coupar Angus, aged eighty-seven.¹⁰⁷ Conceivably, Thomas had just wanted to go home to the family he had left at sixteen, for as he had never remarried, he had no new family roots in America. Still, he came back to visit the Pacific coast in 1878 and even wrote a reminiscent letter to the *Colonist* in 1897 on his earliest days at Victoria.¹⁰⁸

James Lowe continued on at Victoria with his new partner until he too went to Scotland in 1874, to visit Thomas.¹⁰⁹ But while away, he had his house, library, and furnishings sold¹¹⁰ and when he did return in 1876, although he briefly visited Victoria, he settled once more in San Francisco as a commission merchant, where he was cordially welcomed back by that city's press as "one of the oldest members of the Union Club."¹¹¹ And in 1879 he died in San Francisco at the age of only forty-nine, having

¹⁰⁵It is worth noting that Thomas told his brother, John [LO (1), January 3, 1863], that he had got out of San Francisco without any loss of his own original capital. He seemed to recover from Oregon well, and with his innate caution, he was more likely to make than lose on his Victoria investment. And if he did, in fact, incur a loss on the Driard House, it would not be of major proportion. See also *Colonist* December 13, 1905.

¹⁰⁶T. Lowe, letter to the *Colonist*, October 29, 1897.

¹⁰⁷*Colonist*, May 30, 1912.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, October 29, 1897. See also "The round hand of George B. Roberts: Letters to Mrs. F. T. Victor," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, LXIII (June 1962), p. 202.

¹⁰⁹*Colonist*, July 27, 1876.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, January 8, 1875.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, September 5, 1876.

completed fully the circle of his Pacific coast career.¹¹²

One should properly know and evaluate these later years for any complete biography of the Lowes. But that is not the essential purpose of this study. Instead, by concentrating on their major phases in San Francisco and Victoria, it may be possible to note things that are significant in the business relations of these two not untypical, nor unimportant, figures in the early development of trading activities between the main west coast commercial centre and its northern adjunct.

In the first place, it is clear that if the Lowes were part of an extension of San Francisco commercial enterprise northward to Victoria, they were obviously not Americans, outsiders invading the Island market. Instead, they sought to develop the Island's trade for its own sake as well as their private interests, and they never escaped their pro-British orientation. There were many like them who came from the immediate background of San Francisco business: J. J. Southgate and another friend of theirs, "Charley" Wallace, active in the further development of the Island's coal resources; or the prominent early Victorian firms of Samuel Price and Company, or Dickson, Campbell and Company, with partners in London and San Francisco, as well as correspondents in Halifax and Boston.¹¹³ These and other leading Victoria business houses, like the later power of J. P. Rithet, represented lines of extending entrepreneurship that reached far back beyond San Francisco to the eastern provinces and the British Isles. In fact, one needs to ascertain much more fully how many of the entrepreneurs who came via California and stayed on to develop Victoria represented British business enterprise at a further stage removed.

In the second place, the Lowes' ties with the older trading system on the north west coast, that of the Hudson's Bay Company, were plainly vital for a large part of their business operations. Thomas by his prior career and James by association had access to an "old boys' net" that had by no means lost its meaning on the coast with the end of the Oregon fur trade. The Lowes' business and social dealings with Douglas, Grahame, and Anderson – or with Allan, McKinlay, Birnie, and many other Hudson's Bay figures, as agents, partners, or customers – all make that point essentially clear. The ties, moreover, went still further. Allan and McKinlay were Perthshire men; Grahame and Anderson were Thomas Lowe's brothers-in-law, having also married daughters of James Birnie;¹¹⁴ and there were other complex interconnections of origin and marriage throughout the

¹¹²*Ibid.*, February 14, 1879, noting his death in San Francisco on February 2.

¹¹³See Edward Mallandaine, *First Victoria directory* (Victoria, 1860), pp. 56, 83; *San Francisco Prices Current*, July 23, 1853 *et seq.*

¹¹⁴Grahame married Susan Birnie in 1847; Anderson married Eliza Birnie in 1837. See "Birnie Family" information and Anderson's wedding certificate [PABC, "Papers relating to A. C. Anderson"].

whole Oregon-Vancouver Island Company community. As well as the Lowes', how many other business ventures in this era of rising commercial enterprise on the north west coast might similarly find beginnings among Company men still present, and in veritable clan contact, long after their fur oligopoly had passed away?

Finally, in the third place, the careers of the Lowe brothers suggest that a view of San Francisco dominance over much of British Columbia's earlier coastal development requires a wider perspective, for beside or behind the lines of growth spreading from the California metropolis older British metropolitan forces were still significantly at work in the hinterland. Indeed, as Keith Ralston has recently noted, a "triangle of trade" existed for both San Francisco and Victoria which "involved direct and independent links with Great Britain as well as cross-connections with each other."¹¹⁵

Thus it is even tempting to proclaim a north Pacific as well as a north Atlantic triangle of business relations; though that might wrongly imply a Japanese angle at this early date. Unless, of course, one simply ignores the inconvenient land mass of America and looks eastward to Great Britain – as generations in Victoria would be wont to do.

¹¹⁵Keith Ralston, "Patterns of trade and investment on the Pacific coast, 1867–1892: The case of the British Columbia salmon canning industry," *BC studies*, no. 1 (Winter 1968–69), p. 45.