



## Kaiser Bill's Realtor

by Janet Nicol

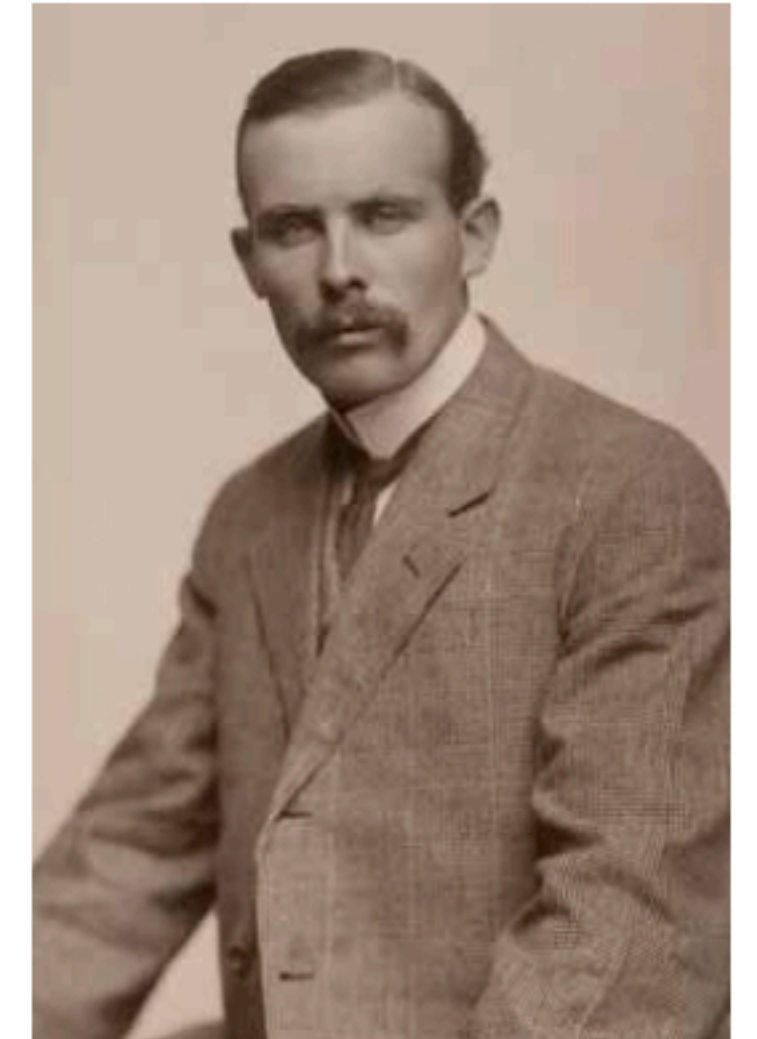
Vancouver Historian

KAISER WILHELM II was the last German Emperor and King of Prussia, ruling from 1888 until 1918. He was born in Berlin to Prince Frederick William of Prussia and Princess Victoria of the United Kingdom. He was Queen Victoria of England's first grandchild. Ironically, Wilhelm II of Prussia and King George V of England were first cousins and when together looked "like two peas from the same pod."

Gustav Konstantin Alvo von Alvensleben was Vancouver's premier German realtor prior to the First World War. He had been born in Germany in 1879 and on completion of his education had spent five years in the Prussian army. His first venture away from his native Germany was a visit to his younger brother's coffee plantation in El Salvador. He then headed north to the goldfields of Alaska. The lanky 25-year-old arrived in Vancouver in 1904 and decided to stay to make his fortune. He recounted his arrival in later life: "I arrived in June 1904 and within a very few days was pitching hay in Agassiz, and from then on, until 1908, earned my living as a working man, including two seasons of fishing for the Brunswick Cannery and I can assure the editor, that the handling of a Columbia River gillnet boat and a few hundred fathoms of net is work, and hard work..."

Alvensleben later bought his own fishing boat and a horse and cart to sell fish and game birds door-to-door to upscale Vancouver restaurants. One of his stops included the back door into the kitchen of the elite Vancouver Club. A few years later the same kitchen staff would see him arrive through the front door as a club member.

By 1907 Alvensleben had enough savings to rent an office downtown, where he advertised his various business services in local newspapers. He became a co-founder of the Vancouver Stock Exchange, and on some days over half of the daily turnover were his transactions. He began to court Edith Mary Westcott, a schoolteacher in Ladner, who happened to be the daughter of a construction engineer at the Brunswick Cannery and from one of the leading families in the city. The pair brushed aside family protests and eloped in 1908. Alvensleben purchased a large 20-acre estate on 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue in Point Grey, and over the next five years the couple had three children, Margaret, Gero and Bodo.



German-born Gustav Konstantin von Alvensleben came to Vancouver in 1904 and shortly thereafter became heavily involved in investing for wealthy German aristocracy that even included Wilhelm II, the last German Emperor.

### Opposite

The red brick and ochre terra cotta-faced Dominion Trust Building was rumoured to have been built with German Kaiser Wilhelm's money and upon completion in 1910 was the tallest commercial building in the British Empire. A year later the nearby Sun Tower became the city's tallest building by one storey. The off-white cenotaph at Victory Square appears in the foreground.

The intersection of Hastings & Richards Streets looking northeast, featuring the David Spencer Department Store, the Standard Furniture Company, J. W. Foster Company with the Woodward's and the Dominion Trust buildings in the background.



Alvensleben began to advertise widely in German newspapers about the wonderful opportunities for enterprise in fast developing Vancouver with the result that a German businessman based in Ottawa was asked to check up on the aggressive west coast entrepreneur. The man travelled to Vancouver and wrote in his memoirs:

Alvensleben was a promoter in great style. When he visited Berlin, he arranged a great meeting in the ballroom of the best hotel in Berlin, and offered to his guests a sumptuous luncheon with caviar and champagne. He lectured them about Canada and her great chances. Near the door stood his brother with a book in which every guest had to enter his name, and was supposed to add the amount he would subscribe to Alvensleben's adventures. There had been a start made already by prominent names with large amounts subscribed, and no guest dared to leave without a subscription.

Thus Alvensleben began to cultivate German bluebloods with millions of dollars to invest in Canadian real estate. They included Field Marshall von Mackensen, Reich Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg, champagne heiress Emma Mumm, and it was rumoured that the Dominion Trust Building, Vancouver's first steel-framed high-rise and the tallest commercial building in the British Empire upon its completion in 1910, was built with Kaiser Wilhelm's money. By 1911 Alvensleben had financed a dozen large companies, whose capital totalled more than \$10,000,000 from German backers.

In 1910 Alvensleben financed the building of the Wigwam Inn, a hideaway resort for wealthy tourists at the north end of Indian Arm. The four-storey cedar inn had a veranda on three sides and peaked gables and originally had a German character as a "Luftkurort" or fresh air resort. There were German band music and beer, and the inn attracted wealthy customers such as John D. Rockefeller, the richest man in the world, and the almost as rich John Jacob Astor. Alvensleben no doubt had plans of entertaining Kaiser Bill, the godfather to his oldest child. He also owned the Minnekhada Ranch in North Coquitlam, where the wealthy of Vancouver came to play polo.

The Berlin stock market crash in the fall of 1911 caused a few of Alvensleben's homeland investors to pull their support for his German commercial empire in the province. The high point of the prosperous era came in 1912 when His Royal Highness the Duke of Connaught in his role as Governor General of Canada and his Duchess, the former Princess Louise Marguerite of Prussia, visited the province. That week all the German community outdid themselves as loyal subjects of the crown and as Germans remembering their homeland. The Union Jack and the German flag flew together with the result that the impression was truly one of an Anglo-German society. Through a huge triumphal arch, erected on Vancouver's Granville Street by the German, Austrian and Swiss residents of the city, drove the vice-regal party; the bands thumped; the presentation speeches abounded; and in the evening the nostalgic tunes of Lehar operettas filled the summer air. It was the climax, and also the end, of an era, and a year later it was apparent that the province was in the middle of a major depression.

By the spring of 1914, Alvensleben owned the entire Pacific Building on the southeast corner of Hastings and Howe Streets with his own offices on the ground floor. He employed a staff of 50. That summer Alvensleben returned to Germany to try and convince his clients that the worst of the depression was over and that they could safely reinvest in his many businesses.

When Britain declared war on Germany, Alvensleben was in mid-ocean and on his way back to Vancouver. He was suddenly caught in world politics and would watch helplessly as his empire collapsed. He disembarked in New York and travelled across neutral United States to Seattle from where he contacted Premier Richard McBride, requesting a visa to enter Canada. His pleas to authorities even made the front page of the Vancouver Sun: "My friends know that while I am a good German, my object in coming back is strictly to attend to my business. I am not coming back as an enemy to the people I have lived among so many years." His words

Bird's-eye view of Point Grey showing Properties (in red) For Sale by **ALVO von ALVENSLEBEN, Limited** 405 Hastings St. West, VANCOUVER, B.C. Call or Write for Maps and Price Lists —  
**Prices: \$600 up. Terms: One-quarter Cash, Balance 6, 12, 18 and 24 Months.**

fell on deaf ears. Ironically, only three months before the war began, *BC Magazine* had run an article praising Alvensleben's business schemes under the title: "A Canadian who has brought Canada and Germany into closer relations."

Not a naturalized Canadian citizen, Alvensleben could easily have enlisted in the German military while he was in Europe. Two of his brothers who had spent time in BC returned to Germany to fight for their fatherland, and their actions made Alvensleben's Canadian loyalties more suspect, causing authorities to believe that he wanted to return to Vancouver from abroad as a German spy. His roots were in Germany, while his family and investments were in British Columbia. He was between a rock and a hard place. Refused entry back into British Columbia, the Canadian government was able to confiscate his assets under the newly enacted Custodian of Enemy Property Act. Consequently, his wife and children had no option but to join him in Seattle, where he resided at liberty and continued with developing a coal mining investment with German money. This

This advertisement appeared on the back cover of the *Man to Man Magazine* November 1910, offering properties for sale in the municipalities of Point Grey and South Vancouver by German realtor Gustav Konstantin von Alvensleben.

enterprise did well, and he was able to sell coal to his homeland until the US entered into the war in 1917. He tried to get an exit visa for his family to return to Germany but was instead arrested and sent to an internment camp in Fort Douglas, Utah. The *Salt Lake Tribune* newspaper had this to write about Utah's guest:

Von Alvensleben was a typical officer of the Prussian type, highly educated, and polished in manner and with the upright carriage that denotes years of service in the army. Canadian government officials declare that they have positive information showing that German machinery was set to work before the war to make von Alvensleben governor of British Columbia.

Besides "enemy aliens" such as Alvensleben, the camp population was comprised of military and political prisoners—including members of an anarchist trade union called the Industrial Workers of the World. Alvensleben was considered one of the major troublemakers and spent much time in solitary confinement. When the war ended, he and other internees were kept incarcerated for another year and a half. When released in 1920, Alvensleben was not deported back to Germany but was instead re-united with his family in Seattle, where he went back to practising real estate and investing. In 1926 Canadian immigration rules were slackened, and Alvensleben was able to make regular trips to Vancouver to visit in-laws and conduct business. The Alvensleben home in Kerrisdale had been sold to *Vancouver Sun* newspaper owner Robert Crombie in 1929.

At the outbreak of war, the Canadian government was uncertain how to deal with its internal "enemy" population. According to the 1911 census, out of the then 7 million Canadian residents, 393,320 were of German origin and 129,103 had ties to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the first weeks of the war, the government turned a blind eye to nationals of enemy countries, as many travelled back to their homeland or re-settled in the still neutral United States. Deferring to Britain for guidance, the Canadian government eventually formulated guidelines for surveillance and internment. Ultimately, a total of 8,579 men were interned in nation-wide prison camps for as long as five years. Ironically, a few German families were ignored by the authorities and farmed at the top end of Pitt Lake, isolated away from the trials and tribulations of a world at war.