

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

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THE LOST MINE OF PITT MEADOWS

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In this article concerning the legendary lost mine of John Slumach which reputedly lies somewhere in a forbidding mountain valley high in the Coast Range north of Pitt Lake, Canada West Magazine has researched more than fifty accounts and articles in the Provincial Archives at Victoria, B.C. and carefully perused previously unpublished letters pertaining to this long sought gold mine. Innumerable misconceptions, exaggerations and embellishments were encountered in our analysis. After carefully considering the mass of evidence, it is the considered opinion of the writer that this highly colourful and interesting tale, accepted as fact by a host of treasure seekers, probably does not exist.

There is, however, enough intriguing and unexplained evidence that this story cannot be casually discarded.

It is this evidence which lends at least a modicum of plausibility to a fascinating tale which has drawn at least eleven prospectors and treasure hunters to their deaths in the past seventy years..

In the first pages of this article, the particulars of the legend of "The Lost Mine of Pitt Lake," will be presented. Although there are many variations, the basic story has not changed in almost forty years.

The story of "The Lost Mine of Pitt Lake" began in the late 1880s when one John Slumach, a Salish Indian from the Silver Creek Reserve, north-east of Vancouver, arrived in New Westminster., B.C. with a leather poke full of raw gold. According to traditional accounts, the gold was predominantly rough-edged, of good size with quartz adhering to some of the larger nuggets.

Slumach apparently attracted considerable attention in the Queen City with his rich burden. Evidently, however, amid growing speculation as to the origin of the gold, the Indian dissipated his assets in the saloons of the city and disappeared. Over the course of two years, the Indian purportedly paid two more visits to New Westminster and each time he brought a poke of nuggets. The value of each of the pokes cashed in was supposed to have been between \$1,400 and \$1,800. As before, Slumach rapidly squandered his funds, and despite several efforts to follow him, again vanished. It was at this time that rumours began to circulate about the old Indian's "Lost Mine."

Shortly after Slumach's last appearance in New Westminster,

The lost mine of Pitt Meadows

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

his name suddenly appeared in the news. The Indian was charged with murder!

The details of Slumach's crime, capture and eventual trial may still be obtained from the Archives in Victoria. Briefly, on September 8, 1890, Slumach shot and killed one Louis Bee, a half-breed who had insulted the old Indian. The murder was committed at Lillooet Slough, about two and one-half miles above the Pitt River bridge.

After the crime, the woods wise Indian took to the mountains where he evaded capture for nearly seven weeks before finally surrendering to two Indian constables and P. McTiernan, the local Indian agent.

On November 3, 1890, a preliminary hearing was held in the city of New Westminster before Captain George Pittendrigh, J.P., where Slumach was remanded to the Fall Assizes.

On November 15, 1890, with Mr. Justice Montague W. Tyrwhitt Drake of Victoria presiding, the case was brought to trial. The evidence against the prisoner was damning and the jury, after deliberating only fifteen minutes, returned a verdict of guilty. Mr. Justice Drake condemned the old man to death by hanging and on January 16, 1891, John Slumach, man of mystery and condemned murderer was hanged on the gallows in the yard of the provincial jail at New Westminster.

A column in the Jan. 16, 1891 issue of the *New Westminster Columbian* stated:

Paid the penalty—Old Slumach was hanged in the yard of the provincial gaol this morning at 8 o'clock, for the murder, on September 8th last, of Louis Bee.... To Mr. McTiernan, Indian agent, Slumach made a statement...in which he said the murder of Louis Bee was the only crime of the kind he ever committed, although he was credited with more....

At the time, numerous statements were attributed to Slumach. The Indians swore that Slumach stated tersely, "nika memloose mine memloose" — in essence, "when I die, mine dies," before he went to the gallows. There was, however, no official confirmation of such a statement.

Soon after the death of Slumach, reports of his lost mine began to circulate again, especially in New Westminster. These stories attracted a variety of individuals to the Queen City. One such man was W. Jackson, an experienced American prospector who appeared in the area in 1901. Jackson, a taciturn and methodical man, remained for several days in the city, listening to the various accounts and poring over the few available maps of the Pitt Lake region. Finally, apparently

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

satisfied as to the authenticity of the tale, he purchased provisions and left for the Pitt River country, eventually vanishing into the trackless mountains north of Pitt Lake.

Several months elapsed before Jackson appeared again in the city. He was a changed man; haggard and emaciated and extremely close-mouthed. Pausing only briefly in New Westminster, the prospector headed south, taking with him a heavy pack which he guarded constantly. Subsequently it was reported that Jackson had cashed \$10,000 in raw gold at a branch of the Bank of British North America in San Francisco.

The journey into the Pitt Lake country had, however, so adversely affected the prospector's health that he never fully recovered and during the remaining years of his life his illness worsened. In 1904, just prior to Jackson's death, he decided to divulge the location of the lost mine and wrote a letter to a certain Hill who had grubstaked him at one time. There are still some copies of this letter extant; the majority contain a vague description of the gold creek and the surrounding terrain. The copy published in this article was found in some 1924 correspondence of R.A. Brown, a noted prospector of Southern British Columbia for nearly fifty years.

Hill failed in his attempts to locate the lost placer creek and eventually copies of Jackson's letter fell into other hands. There were reports of an accompanying map but there is no proof of the existence of such a map, certainly in Jackson's alleged letter there was no mention of an accessory map.

For the next quarter of a century an assortment of both seasoned prospectors and foolhardy novices tried their luck in locating the lost gold placer. Undoubtedly the most illustrious of the prospectors was one R.A. Brown, a grizzled and garrulous character from Grand Forks, B.C., who was generally known by the sobriquet "Volcanic," although the nicknames of "Sunset" and "Crazy" had also been bestowed upon him during his checkered prospecting career of over fifty years.

Brown began his search for the lost mine in 1923 after obtaining a copy of the Jackson letter and other pertinent information, all of which he considered irrefutable evidence. Each summer for the next seven years the resolute old man trekked into the rugged Pitt Lake country in his quest for Slumach's mine and each fall he returned, convinced that he was finally closing in on the fabulous gold stream. In September of 1930, however, Brown failed to return from

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

the mountains. Early in November a search party consisting of Game Warden George Stevenson, provincial police constable Eugene Murphy and two skilled trappers, Bill and Roy McMaster. Due to an injury, constable Murphy and Bill McMaster were forced to withdraw early while Stevenson and Roy McMaster continued the search for the missing prospector. For twenty-seven harrowing days the two pressed their search beyond the lake. Finally, near the headwaters of the Stave, river, they came across Brown's last camp. The camp was abandoned and nearby lay a collapsed tent, a shotgun, a notebook with herb cures in it and some cooking utensils. Further inspection turned up an unusual discovery, a small glass jar containing eleven ounces of raw gold. Interestingly, the gold bore minute traces of quartz. Of Brown there was no sign.

The discovery of the gold in Brown's camp later gave rise to much speculation. Had he finally found the lost creek or the mother lode? The chance discovery of the gold was, unfortunately inconclusive; the gold may indeed have come from the lost mine area but it may also have come from another source outside the Pitt Lake region.

In the years which have elapsed since Brown's disappearance, others have tried to locate the lost placer. Some of these bids were mounted by individuals who were experienced, determined and well financed, others were solitary efforts by rash tenderfoots. All ended in failure and some in tragedy with the list of victims increasing with each passing decade. Today there are many who maintain that Slumach's elusive Lost Placer Creek still lies deep in the inaccessible mountains north of Pitt Lake and eventually someone will find it: Others, equally adamant, are convinced that the story is simply a fabrication which has been perpetuated and added to over the course of the years since Slumach's hanging. They point out that the region immediately to the north of Pitt Lake is geologically unfavourable for both placer gold creeks and lode gold deposits. They also assert that there is no definite proof that Slumach ever found any gold at all prior to his death in 1891.

So the question remains unanswered. Does the legendary Lost Mine of John Slumach and Jackson actually lie undetected in a remote mountain valley in the precipitous country beyond Pitt Lake? One of the imponderables is the validity of the Jackson letter. If the letter was genuine then the mine does, in fact, exist. If, however, the letter were a forgery then the entire story is probably sheer fantasy but a

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

deadly fantasy indeed, one which has led at least eleven men to their deaths in three-quarters of a century.