

PITT RIVER MURDER

FRED BRACHES



Photo: Amanda Charnley (Aunt Mandy) and Donald E. Waite, 1972. Courtesy Donald E, Waite

For more than a hundred years stories have been told and retold about a Katzie First Nation man called Slumach and his mythical gold mine in the Pitt Lake area. Fact is that Slumach was hanged in 1891 in New Westminster for a murder he committed. The *Daily Columbian* and other contemporary newspapers reported that the killing took place somewhere on the shores of the Alouette River—then known as Lillooet Slough or Lillooet River—in the presence of “several other Indians.” Later writers kept repeating that old yarn, blissfully unaware or perhaps wilfully ignoring that legal records of the case tell a different story, namely that the murder did not take place at Alouette River but on Pitt River and that it there was only one eyewitness present.

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This sole witness of the murder, a man called Seymour, gave the courts his version of what happened on that fateful September day in 1890. Since the end of the fishing season Seymour and his friend Louie Bee had been camping with their wives at a location where the Alouette River meets the Pitt River. Early that afternoon the two friends had left their camp by canoe to look at their sturgeon lines. They went up the Pitt River for about two miles—that would have taken them close to Sheridan Hill. Finding their sturgeon lines there without bait, they paddled a bit further looking along the shore for some dead salmon to use as bait. Going upstream they then heard a gunshot on the opposite shore to their left. Curious to know who the hunter was and what he was hunting, they crossed the river, a distance of about a quarter of a mile at the “elbow of the slough.” At the inquest into Bee’s death Seymour is recorded to say: “This was on Pitt River.” As they reached the opposite shore, Slumach came out of the tall grass and shot dead Louie Bee, still sitting in the canoe. Bee’s body collapsed overboard and Seymour jumped ashore—the canoe floating away. After hiding for a brief time, Seymour made his way back home overland. “I thought,” said Seymour that “I might be shot so I [went] down the slough and then walked over the railway bridge and up to my house,” the camp at the Alouette River.

Seymour’s account suggests that the murder took place on the western shore of the Pitt River at Addington Point, part of the traditional hunting ground for Slumach’s people and close to Slumach’s home at Grant Narrow. “He did not want any person to go there,” Seymour quoted Slumach as saying after the shooting.

In the early 1970s Donald Waite of Maple Ridge befriended Amanda Charnley, daughter of Peter Pierre, a Katzie elder and medicine man closely related to Slumach. Her father had given Slumach spiritual support in his final days and hours. Don talked much with “Aunt Mandy” about old man Slumach and he introduced her to filmmaker Mike Collier. During an interview by Collier in 1978 at Don’s house Mrs. Charnley said: “You know where Sturgeon Slough is, this point on the west side of Sturgeon Slough across the Pitt River, the corner before you turn north to the quarry? That’s where it happened, just a little west of the corner.” She remembered her father telling that Slumach killed Louie Bee not on the shore of the Alouette River, as the *Columbian* had reported, but on the Pitt River at Addington point, in fact confirming what Seymour had told the court.