

THE JACKSON LETTER

*These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air...*

(Prospero, *The Tempest*)

Writings about Pitt Lake gold always mention a letter written by a dying American prospector named Jackson. Jackson, so the story goes, discovered the treasure first found by Slumach, but for health reasons was not able to return to harvest the remainder of “untold riches.” Among the few who by their saying had a copy of the letter were Hugh Murray in New Westminster¹ and a Vancouver man named Cyril Walters, a sign-painter.² Both copies have disappeared.

Fortunately, around 1940, Arthur Wellesley (Dick) Carter, a neon-sign maker, made a transcript, probably from Hugh Murray’s copy. Dick Carter also had a connection with the other owner of a copy, Cyril Walter. They worked together for some time and remained friends and on at least one occasion Carter joined Walter on his yearly gold-hunting trek to the Pitt Lake mountains.

Today, Richard James (Jim) Carter of West Vancouver is the custodian of his father’s Pitt Lake papers and he generously allowed me to copy the transcript of the Jackson letter and to publish the text of this unique document. (see following pages 4-5).

Jackson’s complete letter will not trigger another rush to the mountains as most of the core of the story is well known. But here is the first part of the letter with some new details only known before from an October 1915 newspaper article³ published in the United States—similarities linking this transcript of Jackson’s letter to the “original.”

According to the 1915 article, Wilbur Armstrong of Washington State was in possession of that original. Prospector Armstrong had searched the Pitt Lake mountains every summer for ten years and was, at the age of 72, preparing for his last trip up there, when he gave an interview and provided some details of the letter that match the transcript made by Dick Carter.

The letter is addresses to “Dear Friend,” an unidentified person who, according to the letter, would be living in Seattle. Armstrong identified the recipient as Andrew Hall, who, being “in need of money in the Yukon,” sold “the letter and a chart” to Armstrong’s cousin, from whom Armstrong had acquired the letter. The transcript of Jackson’s letter is dated San Francisco, February 10, 1904—about the time Armstrong started his trips

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to the Pitt Lake area, ten years before 1915.

Like all other elements of the Pitt Lake saga the Jackson story, born as hearsay, was picked up by the press and over time was developed and enriched by gold hunters and journalist in newspapers and magazines before it became published in books. In other times Armstrong's story would have caught the attention of the public and the press in New Westminster and Vancouver, but in 1915 the war in Europe filled the Canadian newspapers, and this was not the time to publish something as frivolous as gold hunting.

In British Columbia the anonymous recipient of the letter became known by the name "Shotwell" rather than "Andrew Hall." Likewise Jackson's first name, Walter according to Armstrong, was not used again. Even though it was known that the letter was signed "W. Jackson," the stories call him "John" Jackson.

Both Jackson's letter and Armstrong's story refer to a place called Guytos [Guyot?]. The letter says: "...you will remember the old man you so kindly grubstaked with money and provisions at Guytos." The article: "...who had grubstaked him [Jackson] at Guytos".

Jackson's letter and Armstrong's account of 1915 mention that Jackson discovered the treasure in 1901.

In the 1915 interview Armstrong did not hesitate to mention the Pitt Lake area, but in the body of the transcript of Jackson's letter geographical features are left blank with the exception of Vancouver (where Jackson landed) and New Westminster or perhaps more correctly New Westminster District "... where I made a great discovery." Presumably that was done for reasons of secrecy, but if a map was included as the letter and Armstrong suggest, it would probably have divulged the general geography anyway.

Oddly, in a note after the signature, directions are given from the head of Pitt Lake (mentioned by name) to the "hidden treasure." It includes a reference to the three peaks that guard the mine. By whom, and when was this text added?

Already in the 1970s N.L. (Bill) Barlee wondered if this American prospector Jackson ever existed, but he argued that if the letter would be genuine, than "Jackson must have existed." To many Jackson's letter will be genuine and, following Barlee's logic, that proves to them that Jackson existed, and ergo that the story of his finding the gold is true.

In his story "The Lost Mine of Pitt Lake"⁴ Barlee included a reprint of a transcript of the lower part of Jackson's letter, said to

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have been enclosed in a letter from “Volcanic” Brown dated 1924. It appears that Brown only copied the part of interest to him as a prospector. Barlee referred to this fragment as “the letter,” creating the impression that this was the entire content—it was not. He would have been delighted to reprint the entire text if he had found it.

The complete text of Jackson’s letter, now available at last, does not change my mind. I am still convinced that Walter or John Jackson and Andrew Hall alias Shotwell are just creatures of imagination. I agree that this transcript made by Dick Carter is close to the “original” version circulating among prospectors a century ago. But that does not prove that there was ever an original letter written by someone called “Jackson” or mailed to anyone.

My explanation is that Wilbur Armstrong, like other prospectors in his days, as told in the 1915 article, headed search parties into the Pitt Lake area, and a good story was needed to attract investors and fellow travellers. He and his colleagues honed some old rumours to perfection and the letter is not more than a clever piece of merchandising.

How successful they were, those American prospectors, is shown by the fact that after a century Jackson’s letter still continues to draw treasure hunters into the wilderness around Pitt Lake and to fascinate all armchair prospectors.

This is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Fred Braches, December 2008

- 1) “Oft sought Pitt Lake gold still awaits discovery,” *Province*, 30 June 1939
- 2) “Old Slumach’s curse dogs prospectors” *Province*, 22 December 1951
- 3) “The last trip in search of mine” *Stevens Point Daily Journal* (Wisconsin). 18 October 1915.
- 4) In *Historic Treasures and Lost Mines of British Columbia*. Summerland BC: Canada West Publications, 1977.

Fred Braches December 2008

If you ask me ...

Copied from transcript made by Arthur Wellesley (Dick) Carter around 1940.

Courtesy Richard James (Jim) Carter.

Dear Friend

San Francisco Feb. 10 1904

It will come to you as a surprise after all these years to hear from me for no doubt you have long since forgotten me. But you will remember the old man you so kindly grub staked with money and provisions at Guytos. Since then I have prospected with the varied success that usually goes with the life of a prospector.

In 1901 I went to B.C. and it is of this trip I want to tell, and hope you will gain by it untold thousands for your kindness to me. I heard you went broke like most everyone else at Guytos but had lost all trace of you since then except that you had gone to Washington. Well, I made a great discovery in New Westminster but after coming out for supplies and tools was taken down with a severe attack of rheumatism that ever since has left me almost bedfast until a short time ago, when I recovered sufficiently as though to make the trip again.

I made up my mind to hunt you up and take you with me. In hunting over a Seattle directory I found your name and address and concluded to come to Seattle and talk the matter over with you. A few days after arriving here from my little place in the hills, I was suddenly stricken down again and the Doctors say that I will never recover and may drop off any time for my heart is badly affected. So I will tell you of my trip and what I found and direct you to the best I can to find it. It is too great to be lost to the world and I know with you it will be in good hands.

Well, I arrived in Vancouver about the first of July and hired a couple of natives to take me to the headwaters of the _____ then dismissing the natives I struck out in the mountains, and they are rough ones. I prospected up beyond the lake but found nothing of importance. But the formation looked all right. I concluded to prospect back towards _____ Lake. I kept well up on the mountains but was often compelled to make long trips down before crossing could be found on the deep canyons.

I had been out about two months and found myself running short of grub. I lived mostly on fresh meat for one can't carry much of a pack in those hills. Found a few very promising ledges and some color in the little creeks, but nothing I cared to stay with. I had almost made up my mind to light out the next day. I climbed to the top of a sharp ridge and looked down into a little canyon or valley about one mile and a half or two miles long, but what struck me as singular, it appeared to have no outlet for the little creek that flowed at the bottom. Afterwards I found the creek entered a _____ and is lost.

After some difficulty I found my way down to the creek. The water was almost white. The formation for the most had been slate and granite but there I found a kind of schist and slate formation. Now comes the interesting part. I had only a small prospecting pan, but I found colors at once right on the surface and such colors they were. I knew then I had struck it rich at last.

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In going up stream I came to a place where the bedrock was bare and there you can hardly believe me, but the bedrock was yellow with gold. In a few days I gathered thousands and there were thousands more in sight. Some of the nuggets were as big as walnuts and there were many chunks carrying quartz. After sizing up carefully I saw that there were millions stowed away in the little cracks. On account of the weight I buried part of the gold at the foot of a large tent shaped rock facing the creek. You can't miss it. There is a mark cut out in it. Taking with me what I supposed to be about \$10,000 proved to be over \$8,000. After three days of extreme hard traveling it would not be over 2 days of good going but the way was rough and I was not feeling well. I arrived at the lake and while resting there at the Indian Camp was taken sick and have never since been able to return and now I fear I never shall. I am alone in the world. No relations, no one to look to me for anything.

Of course I have never spoken of this find during all this time for fear of it being discovered. It has caused me many anxious hours but the place is so well guarded by surrounding ridges that it should not be found for many years unless someone knew its being there.

Oh, how I wish I could go with you and show you to the wonderful place for I find I can't give any exact directions and it may take you a year or more to find it but don't give it up. Keep at it and you will not fail and you will be repaid beyond your wildest dreams.

I believe any further directions only tend to confuse so I will only suggest further that you go alone or at least take one or two Indians to pack food and no one need to know but you were going on a hunting trip until you find the place and get everything fixed up to suit yourself.

When you find it, and I am sure you will, should you care to see me advertize in the "Frisco Examiner" and if I am living I will either come and see you or let you know where to find me but once more I say to you don't fail to look this great property up and don't give up till you find it. I am very sorry I can't give you more definite instructions. Of course I expected to have gone back long since.

I have drawn a rough sketch that will help you.

Success and happiness.

Yours truly,

W. Jackson

From the head of Pitt Lake and not more than 20 miles in a north westerly direction to the hidden treasure but there is no trail and nothing to guide you except that when you get within a few miles of the place you will see on a lower ridge three sharp peaks, each some 50 or 100 ft high as you face these the hidden treasure is below and to the right of these peaks,

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