

## Pitt Lake Gold – Origins of a Legend

The legendary hidden treasures of Pitt Lake have caught the imagination of people worldwide for more than a century. First the mysterious riches in the mountainous wilderness were nameless, but over time they became known as Slumach's Lost Mine, Slumach's Gold, Lost Creek Mine, Lost Mine, or Jackson's Creek. Ever since the years of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush prospectors have been looking for the mine, and a good number of those gold hunters have never returned from the mountains. And still, the search goes on.

Is there really a rich gold mine in those mountains? There were always sceptics. For instance Stanford Corey, interviewed<sup>1</sup> in 1926. He was an experienced prospector, who had searched for minerals in the area between Pitt Lake and Squamish for many years. Corey did not believe there would be a possibility of any great strike in that region. Nor do the geologists. The location of the mythical mine remains elusive. Some believe that the gold is still there, but there are rumours that it has already been rediscovered. Others say that the gold has already been removed and that discoverers were tight-lipped about their findings, enjoying a comfortable life.

What are the original sources of what we read today about the mysterious bonanza in Pitt Lake country? Obviously stories about the gold of Pitt Lake were told and retold by prospectors, treasure hunters and old-timers—that goes on even today. Occasionally these stories and other newsworthy items about treasures at Pitt Lake made it into the local press. From these early newspaper articles<sup>2</sup>, it is possible to trace the origins and early developments of the tales about the mythical mine and its legendary first discoverers.

The story of Pitt Lake gold begins in the year of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush of 1858 when a number of maps were published in San Francisco promoting the gold fields of British Columbia.<sup>3</sup> Two of these maps show the words “gold” and “Indian diggings” in the country above Pitt Lake. Another map from that time shows the words “much gold bearing quartz rock” on the north side of Pitt Lake. That is exactly from where a decade later, in 1869, an Indian<sup>4</sup> brought “...a good prospect of gold...which he states he found in a little stream on the north side of Pitt Lake” to New Westminster. Obviously that created “great excitement” in the city and parties set out to find “the diggings.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1905,<sup>6</sup> a newspaper reported that in 1902 an Indian had come and exchanged gold dust for \$1600 in bills in New Westminster. Several months later the same Indian came back, this time with \$1800 in gold dust. Again he disappeared and returned, now with \$1400. He did not want to tell where he got it and attempts to follow him failed. Then the Indian took sick probably because of his exposure to inclement weather on expeditions in the mountains and a doctor told him he was going to die. The Indian told a relative the secret source of his gold—a rich placer at Pitt Lake—and described its location, giving the landmarks and tracing a crude map of the locality. After he died, his relative, who had no money, sought the assistance of a white

1 Sun 28 August 1926

2 To read transcriptions of all articles referred to visit <<http://www.slumach.ca>>

3 Derek Hayes shows the three maps on pp 151-154 of his *Historical Atlas of BC and the Pacific Northwest*, Sasquatch Books, 1999.

4 Throughout the word “Indian” is used, because it was the term used at the time of the publication of the original articles. Today the term “First Nations person” is mostly used.

5 *New Westminster Mainland Guardian* 10 November 1869

6 *Province* 16 December 1905

man. They were unable to trace the spot where the Indian said he had found the gold. But the secret was out and “there have been expeditions every year in an attempt to locate the mysterious placer.”

In 1906<sup>7</sup> yet another such expedition failed to find the gold. The participants had information that an old man had found some valuable placer ground in the Pitt Lake country and that he had hidden a substantial amount of gold nuggets under a rock. Before he passed away, he had left directions where the treasure and the placer ground were to be found. It was “a rough trip as the weather was rainy, and sleeping out did not remind one of dreams between Dutch feather beds.”

During the following twenty years nothing seems to have been printed in the newspapers about the gold of Pitt Lake, but in 1925, stories about Pitt Lake and its treasures started appearing in the press again

One story, in the *Province*<sup>8</sup> combined elements of the 1905 story about the Indian who found gold, became ill, and died and the 1906 story about the old man’s placer grounds and the gold nuggets hidden under a rock. This time it is not an Indian but a white man who plays the part. The story tells that for 24 years dozens of prospectors had been looking in vain for “untold wealth” in placer gold somewhere back of Pitt Lake and they also sought for a treasure of placer gold washed from the gravel of the “lost mine” in one season and buried under a rock by a prospector called Shotwell. Shotwell came out of the Pitt Lake area in the fall of 1901 and went to San Francisco where, according to the records at the United States mint, he deposited more than \$8000 in placer gold. But, as did the poor Indian in the 1906 story, Shotwell fell ill and his physician told him that he had not long to live. Before the old prospector died he sent a letter to an unnamed partner from his Alaska days, letting him know that he had found “fabulous rich placer ground in the mountains back of Pitt Lake.” Shotwell said, he had buried a sack of gold “under a tent-shaped rock, in a valley overlooked by three mountain peaks standing close together.” The letter gave directions to where the “golden cache” was buried and the grounds that Shotwell had worked.

It was about that time that Slumach’s name was mentioned for the first time in connection with Pitt Lake. Slumach was an old Indian who was executed in 1891 for the murder of a Louie Bee. In 1926 Victor Harbord Harbord interviewed Jason Allard,<sup>9</sup> who had served as a court interpreter at the time of Slumach’s imprisonment in New Westminster. Harbord Harbord commented: “Slumach died and with him died the secret of a great gold mine somewhere up in that wild Pitt Lake country. Had Mr. Allard only known that this prisoner knew of its existence, he might have become a very wealthy man, for the murderer ... would undoubtedly have told him where it was.”<sup>10</sup> Obviously it was not Jason Allard, but the interviewer who made the connection between Slumach and the gold and it may have been an idea that was circulating among the “old timers” at that time.

For many years again there is silence in the press about Pitt Lake’s treasures and adventurers who sought them with the exception of the story of the search for R.A. “Volcanic” Brown, a colourful prospector who disappeared in the mountains of Pitt Lake in 1931.<sup>11</sup>

7      *Province* 3 April 1906

8      *Province* 9 August 1925

9      In this article Jason Allard described Slumach and his brother as murderous outcasts.

10     *Province*, 8 August 1926

11     *Province* 20 March 1932

Only in 1939 did Slumach become part of the Pitt River gold legend in a pivotal article<sup>12</sup> written by Jack Mahony<sup>13</sup> who interviewed pioneer Hugh Murray.<sup>14</sup> “Slummock” in Hugh Murray’s story is a middle-aged “half-breed Red River Indian” who was hanged for murdering another half-breed prospector by drowning. Of course the real Slumach had no Red River origins but was of Katzie ancestry, was not a half-breed, did not kill Louie Bee by drowning—a gunshot killed Bee—and was not middle-aged but rather an old man when he died at the gallows. Hugh Murray grew up in Port Moody and was in his thirties when Slumach died and he must have known better. This is, to use Mahony’s words “romantic fiction.” Both Murray and Mahony must have known that the information was incorrect and this was probably a “readers beware” signal not to take everything in the story as the truth—a signal mostly ignored.

Murray’s “Slummock” prospected in the Pitt Lake mountains for many years, struck it rich in the late nineties and frequently came to New Westminster with “a well-filled ‘poke’ of nuggets,” spending his money freely, but keeping its source a secret—just as the Indian who came into New Westminster in 1902 with bags of gold dust. In the days of the real Slumach’s imprisonment there were unsubstantiated rumours that in his lifetime he had killed other men. Hugh Murray adds a new dimension to this: “...it was believed but never proven, that he [‘Slummock’] had drowned three of his Indian ‘wives’ near Shiwash Rock at the mouth of Pitt Lake to prevent them from divulging the location [of his gold mine].” That last theme grew out into gothic tales such as “The Bluebeard of Lost Creek Mine”<sup>15</sup> and “The gold mine murders of nine British Columbian women.”<sup>16</sup>

It is unlikely that the elderly Slumach would have painted the town red or even ventured out to New Westminster. That is why Mahony and Murray presented “Slummock” as a middle-aged man, still capable of looking for gold in the mountains and showing up in town from time to time with his treasures. Without the “nuggets” the tale that Slumach knew about a rich mine is clearly inaccurate. Only showing real gold would link him to gold findings. Did Slumach really find the mine that everyone was looking for? Hugh Murray tells us that a local physician, a Dr. Hall visited “Slummock” in his death cell trying to find out, but he went to his death “with the burning question of the community unanswered.” Was there ever a Slumach bonanza?

During this same interview in 1939, Hugh Murray retold the 1925 story of Shotwell, his rich placer gold findings and the cache of gold under a tent-shaped rock. The role of Shotwell was now taken by a John Jackson, a veteran Alaskan prospector, who in 1903, hearing about the Slumach legend (the word used in the article) set out for the Pitt Lake area and returned three months later with a very heavy pack-sack. Jackson deposited \$8700 in gold in the Bank of British North America in San Francisco—not the United States mint as Shotwell did. As the unnamed Indian and Shotwell in the previous stories, Jackson never recovered from the hardships of the search. When Jackson’s doctor told him that the end was near, he sent a letter and a map with the information of the location of the treasures to a friend in Seattle. That man was called

---

12      *Province* 30 June 1939

13      Five years later, in Italy, Major John Keefer Mahony received the Victoria Cross.

14      Hugh Murray was a son of Lance Corporal John Murray of the Royal Engineers, one of the first settlers at Port Moody.

15      *The Shoulder Strap* 6 June 1942

16      *Liberty* July 1956

Shotwell. This Shotwell, being an old man and not able to search for the gold himself, sold a share to a fellow Seattle man who went to the Pitt Lake region looking for Jackson's Creek "but returned without success when the map became partially damaged." Others, including Hugh Murray, tried and tried again to find "Jackson's Creek" without success. The damaged map can't have been of much use and Jackson's letter was not much of a help either.<sup>17</sup>

The 1939 article quotes Murray as saying that his belief in the gold was strengthened by unspecified additional evidence and he mentioned meeting "... an old Indian woman at the Indian camp at the head of Pitt Lake [who] remembered Jackson staying with them in 1903..." with his very heavy pack that he would not let out of sight. Did Hugh Murray need additional evidence? Had he ever doubted the existence of Jackson's gold? Were Jackson, and Shotwell before him, perhaps fabrications of imagination? Prospector Stanford Corey said in 1926<sup>18</sup> that in the thirty years he prospected there he had "not seen the marks of any other person ever having entered the land."

In summary, Jack Mahony's 1939 article is not more than an assemblage of earlier fables about Pitt Lake gold with some minor changes. Here, for the first time, Slumach is introduced as a component to the legends. However, Mahony added to the reality of an Indian who was hanged for murder such irresistible elements as even more murders, hidden gold and maidens. These themes were absorbed and further developed in the imaginative legends that followed in the press over the next 75 years. The legendary Slumach was accused of crimes the real Slumach never committed and the discovery of Pitt Lake gold he put an eye on. In many ways this Slumach is as much invented as Jackson alias Shotwell.

Fred Braches, 1 December 2007

---

<sup>17</sup> In the words of Jackson: "O, how I wish I could go with you to show you this wonderful place for I cannot give you exact directions, and it may take a year or more to find." in N.L. Barlee, *Lost Mines and Historic Treasures of British Columbia* (Surrey BC: Hancock House Publishers) 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Sun 28 August 1926