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LANDMARKS OF HISTORY | SLUMACH'S MINE

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**Landmarks of history |
Slumach's Mine**

The story of Slumach's Mine began in 1889 in the town of New Westminster. The Cariboo gold rush was over but gold was still a popular topic. As prospectors always do when they meet, talk was of strikes made during the summer and what their final take would eventually be. These tales soon faded into nothingness, however, when John Slumach, a local Indian, hit town with a crash that made the others look on in amazement.

John is described at this time as being around 60 years old. He was of medium weight and size, had coal-black hair, and a face that has been described as cruel, cunning, suspicious, ugly, and even repulsive. In spite of his appearance, men and women flocked to his side. His nuggets paid for food and drink for all. Some of the men who had money bought John drinks in the hope of loosening his lips but the Indian was not talking. The lovely young Indian maids bestowed their favours upon him, similarly hoping to get him to reveal the secret of his mine. But he remained silent.

While John was entertaining his new friends, a fisherman, pulling in his nets on the Fraser River, found the body of a young, pretty Indian girl wrapped in them. In her pockets were gold nuggets similar to those which Slumach was spreading so wildly all over town. The police brought him in for questioning and he finally admitted that the girl had been with him on his last trip into the bush. She had returned with him, John stated, but when they were coming down the river she fell out of the canoe and drowned. He did not mention it, he said, because it was such a trivial accident. Since the police were unable to produce any evidence of foul play John was allowed to go free. A few days later he disappeared into the bush.

Six weeks passed and John again returned. The same events took place. John bought unlimited food and drink for all who wished it. Witnesses, at a later date, swore under oath that his nuggets varied from the size of a pea to the size of a walnut. Other witnesses stated that upon occasion he would toss a handful on the floor just to watch the white men scramble for them.

This time when it seemed likely that John would be leaving soon, the town was surrounded with hidden watchers. Nobody could have left without being seen. Slumach did.

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This pattern continued for well over a year, with each party getting bigger and better. Other prospectors, who were barely eking out a living, were becoming frantic and some proposed torturing Slumach until he revealed the location of his mine. However saner minds prevailed and everyone enjoyed his hospitality.

The B. C. Provincial Police were becoming more and more interested in Slumach. When they checked their missing persons file they came up with the fact that every time John left town, a pretty girl disappeared and was never seen or heard of again. Up to this time three white girls and five Indian girls had vanished. Constable Grainger was detailed to check into Slumach.

While John was still in the bush a beautiful half-caste girl named Molly Tynan arrived in town. She let it be known that she was out to get Slumach for her own. Grainger presented her with the facts but she only laughed and boasted of having handled the toughest of men from the Barbary Coast to Alaska. John would be no problem for her.

True to form, Slumach hit town a short time later and the inevitable parties started. Molly was quick on the uptake and was soon in John's favour. When it came time to leave John promised her all the gold she could carry if she would come with him and be his cook. She agreed. Grainger warned her again when he learned of the agreement but her mind was made up. The next day, in spite of a close surveillance, Slumach and Molly disappeared.

Six or seven weeks passed and then John made his usual appearance, but without Molly. Grainger took in Slumach immediately and began questioning him. Yes, he said, Molly had gone into the bush with him, but when they reached the place where he had his canoe hidden she had changed her mind and walked to Vancouver instead. Grainger had his own ideas about this, so with John locked in jail he set out with three fishermen to search the Fraser with nets. It wasn't too long before they dragged up the body of Molly Tynan with a hunting knife in her back. The knife was identified as Slumach's.

It is at this point that the facts of history become confused. Possibly it is at this point that the truth begins. Originally, popular opinion held that Slumach was tried and executed for this murder. However this is not the case. Although the facts lie hidden in history, somehow Slumach managed to get out to this situation since there are records available which show that Slumach was arrested a short time later for the

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murder of a French-Canadian half-breed, Louis Bee.

The following account of the murder is taken from the New Westminster 'Daily Columbian' September 9, 1890:

"A terrible unpremeditated murder was committed yesterday afternoon at a point on Lillooet Slough, not far from the Pitt River, and some two and a half miles above the Pitt River Bridge. An Indian named Slumach, aged about 60 years, was hunting in this neighbourhood, and, coming out of the bush with his double-barrelled shotgun in his hand, found several other Indians trout fishing on the banks of the Slough.

"A half-breed named Louis Bee, sauntered up to Slumach and asked him in a casual way what he was shooting around there.

"Without a moment's warning, or any preliminary sign of anger, Slumach instantly levelled his gun at Bee and fired.

"... Death was instantaneous and Bee fell without a groan and lay weltering in his blood, while his murderer coolly proceeded to reload his piece."

There are many versions of this story and many explanations offered for the senseless killing. The most popular explanation is that Bee was getting too close to the site of Slumach's mine and had to be eliminated. However this does not explain why the other fishermen were not also killed.

Although Slumach took to the hills it was not long before he was captured. His luck finally ran out and at eight o'clock on the morning of January 16, 1891, he was hanged.

Many attempts were made to obtain the mine's location from Slumach before he was executed but he confided only in his son. Some stories say he placed a curse upon the mine which will kill all those who try to find it. Other stories say that only Indians will find the mine -- white men will be killed in the search.

If we assume that the old Indian did confide in his son, then most of the stories which have since circulated become much more believable. Apparently young Slumach made a few successful trips and then took on a partner—a half-breed. Shortly after, the half-breed returned from the woods laden with nuggets but young Slumach had disappeared. Two Americans heard of the half-breed and followed him into the bush. As legend has it they shot the half-breed; yet only one of the Americans returned. According to the "Province" and various old newspapers, an Alaskan prospector named John Jackson showed up with \$10,000 worth of pure gold—reportedly from the Pitt River country. However the ordeal he had

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gone through had broken him and doctors told him he was dying.

Once again the “facts” become cloudy, but the story goes that Jackson made two maps of the area. Although the recipients of the maps never made any attempts to find the gold, they each sold their maps for a reported \$500 apiece. A stampede followed—each prospector sure that he was on the right track. Thus more searchers began disappearing. The number known missing and presumed dead climbed to 22. Possibly even more went into the area unknown to the outside world and similarly disappeared. Starvation, freezing temperatures, treacherous terrain, and inexperience would account for many.

The Coast Mountains of B. C. have long provided mountaineers with some of the most difficult climbs in the world. However these areas are frequently explored by prospectors and trappers— B. C.’s “mountain men.” When discussing the Slumach story with the older, more experienced of them they showed little interest in searching out the mine. They described the area as “some of the most difficult country in the province. “ If these men have difficulty in the region, then it is obvious that the amateur, no matter how well equipped he may be, has little chance of success.

In 1952, Chief Coquitlam Williams, aged 109, guided a team of reporters and photographers into the area. He was at that time reported to be the only living person who had known Slumach. According to Williams, young Slumach had taken him into the area and shown him the rick black sands, laid down through the centuries, which contained the fantastic nuggets. He said that he had seen Slumach make bullets out of his gold.

The black sands were there but due to the snow conditions no attempt was made to reach them. A few months later a company was formed—the Slumach Lost Creek Mine Limited—which was designed to carry out an extensive search of the area. Four hundred thousand shares were offered to the public at 12 · ¢ per share. One of the advertisements stated: “This is purely a speculative issue. The risk is great but it could be that the reward may be greater.” Helicopters were used to stake claims in the area which Williams had shown the four men. After a few months of thorough examination no commercial ore was found. As a result the company was suspended. To many people this meant that Slumach’s Mine would pass into history. This was not the case.

In 1960 Lewis Hagbo and his brother-in-law visited the moun-

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tain-studded Pitt River area to search for the mine. Hagbo, unfortunately, suffered a heart attack on the trail. He became the twenty-third person to die because of the mine.

The legend seems to keep growing, gaining strength with its antiquity. Gold seekers do not realize that there is too little evidence to begin with. For instance if Slumach had so much gold why was it not reported in the newspapers of the day? It is also very difficult to believe that a 60-year-old Indian could make the trip into that country as often as he is reported to have done. However to attempt to disprove the legend is simply wasted effort.

As recently as January, 1964, the "Vancouver Province" had a story mentioning that some new gold seekers were looking at the newspaper's clipping file with that "gold-given look of anticipation." According to one "Province" reporter, up to several people a week may come in and check this file. The librarian in charge of the Northwest History room at the Vancouver Public Library, Mr. R. D'Altroy, states that "more people check through this file than any other in the collection." And so it goes.

Slumach's lost mine! Only three words, yet 23 people have died directly or indirectly because of the mine, or lack of a mine, whichever the case may be. Even today the legend keeps snowballing and those three little words grow larger and larger.