

Pitt Lake Gold - Origins of a Legend

By Fred Braches

Since the late 1850s, the era of the gold rush, the legendary hidden treasures of the mountainous wilderness around Pitt Lake have from time to time caught the public imagination. Once nameless, these mysterious riches have been known as Slumach's Lost Mine, Slumach's Gold, Lost Creek Mine, Lost Mine, or Jackson's Creek. Prospectors have looked for the mine but many never returned. And still, the search goes on.

Is there really a rich gold mine in those mountains? There have always been sceptics. For instance Stanford Corey, an experienced prospector who searched for minerals in the area between Pitt Lake and Squamish for many years, told an interviewer in 1926 that he did not believe that a great strike in that region was likely.¹ Nor do the geologists. The location of the mythical mine remains elusive. Some believe that the gold is still there; some suggest that tight-lipped discoverers have removed the gold and are enjoying a comfortable life. What are the original sources of the stories about the mysterious bonanza in Pitt Lake country that are still being told and retold by prospectors, treasure hunters, old-timers, and journalists? From early newspaper articles, it is possible to trace the early development of the tales about the mythical mine and its legendary discoverers.

The story of Pitt Lake gold begins in 1858, the year of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush when a number of maps were published in San Francisco to promote the gold fields of British Columbia.² Two of these maps show the words "gold" and "Indian diggings" in the country above Pitt Lake.³ 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 in 1869, an Indian brought to New Westminster "a good prospect of gold... which he states he found in a little stream on the north side of Pitt Lake." That created "great excitement" in the city and parties set out to find "the diggings."⁴

A new story appeared in 1905, when the *Vancouver Province* reported that in 1902 an Indian had exchanged gold dust for \$1600 in bills in New Westminster and returned a few months later with \$1800 in gold dust. Again he disappeared and returned, now with \$1400. He would not say where he got it and attempts to follow him failed. Then the



Illustration Clayton Gadsby.

Indian took sick probably from exposure to inclement weather 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 man. They were unable to find the place but the secret was out and "there have been expeditions every year in an attempt to locate the mysterious placer."⁵

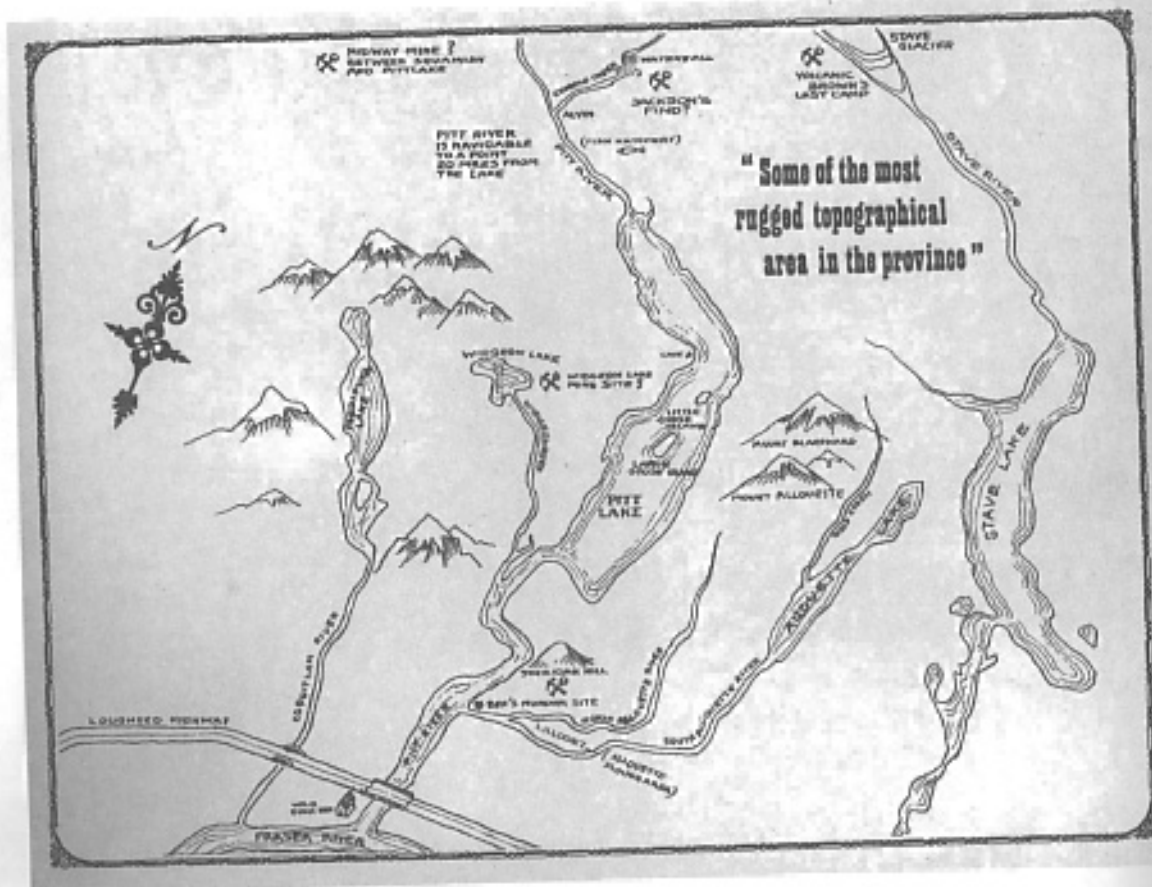
In 1906 yet another such expedition failed to find the gold. The participants had information that an old man had found some valuable placer ground in the Pitt Lake country and had hidden a substantial number of gold nuggets under a rock. Before he died, he left directions to the location of the treasure and the placer ground. It was "a rough trip as the weather was rainy, and sleeping out did not remind one of dreams between Dutch feather beds."⁶

Not until 1925 did stories about the gold of Pitt Lake again appear in the press. A story in the *Province* 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 was not an Indian but a white man who played the part. The story related that for 24 years dozens of prospectors had been looking in vain for "untold wealth" in placer gold somewhere back of Pitt Lake and a treasure of placer gold washed from the gravel of the "lost

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Notes

- 1 Vancouver Sun, 28 August 1926. See also A.C. (Fred) Rogers, "Stanford Corey, First to Discover Pitt Lake Glacier," *BC Historical News*, Winter 2003. To read transcriptions of all articles referred to visit <http://www.slumach.ca>
- 2 See Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of BC and the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1999), 151-154
- 3 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
- 4 New Westminster Mainland Guardian, 10 November 1869
- 5 Vancouver Daily Province, 16 December 1905
- 6 Province, 3 April 1906
- 7 Province, 9 August 1925
- 8 Province, 8 August 1926
- 9 Province, 20 March 1932
- 10 Five years later, in Italy, Major John Keefer Mahony received the Victoria Cross. Hugh Murray was a son of Lance Corporal John Murray of the Royal Engineers, one of the first settlers at Port Moody
- 11 Province, 30 June 1939
- 12 *The Shoulder Strap*, 6 June 1942
- 13 *Liberty*, July 1956
- 14 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
- 15 Sun, 28 August 1926



mine" 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, like the poor Indian in the 1906 story, Shotwell fell ill and his physician told him that he had not long to live. Before he died, the old prospector 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" and 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 the "golden cache" and the grounds that Shotwell had worked.⁷

About that time Slumach's name was first mentioned in connection with Pitt Lake. Slumach was an old Indian who was executed in 1891 for the murder of a Louie Bee. In 1926, the Vancouver journalist, Victor Harbord Harbord interviewed Jason Allard, who had served as a court interpreter at the time of Slumach's imprisonment in New Westminster. According to Allard, Slumach and his brother were

murderous outcasts. 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."⁸ Obviously it was not Jason Allard, but the interviewer who made the connection between Slumach and the gold. It may have been an idea that was circulating among the "old timers" at that time.

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 1931⁹ the press was silent about the treasures of Pitt Lake until 1939. In that year, Slumach became part of the Pitt River gold legend in a pivotal article written by Jack Mahony who interviewed pioneer Hugh Murray¹⁰ "Slummock" in Murray's story was 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 added a new dimension to this: "it was believed but never proven, that he ['Slummock'] had drowned three of his Indian 'wives' near Siwash Rock at the mouth of Pitt Lake to prevent them from divulging the location [of his gold mine]." ¹¹ That last theme grew out into gothic tales such as "The Bluebeard of Lost Creek Mine" ¹² and "The gold mine murders of nine British Columbian women." ¹³

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 lost mine? Hugh Murray claimed that Dr. Hall, a local physician, visited "Slummock" in his death cell trying to find out, but "Slummock" went to his death "with the burning question of the community unanswered." Was there

ever a Slumach bonanza?

Hugh Murray also 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. Like 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 of the location of the treasures to a friend in Seattle. That man was called 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 Murray, tried and tried again to find "Jackson's Creek" without success. The damaged map cannot have been of much use and Jackson's letter was not much help either. ¹⁴

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



Map of the general area where the lost gold mine is said to be located. The map appeared as the centrepiece in the 1972 publication of *Slumach's Gold: In Search of a Legend*, by Rick Antanson, Mary Trainor, and Brian Antanson, of which *Heritage House* published a new edition with fresh illustrations, interviews, and commentary in the fall of 2007. (opposite page)

Provincial gaol, New Westminster ca. 1885. Slumach surrendered in October 1890 and was hanged in January 1891 (top left)

In 1939, Pioneer Hugh Murray (shown here) and Jack (John Keefer) Mahoney lead the way to the legends of Slumach's or "Jackson's" gold. (above)



The rough mountains of Pitt country.
Photo by Ryan Bouchie

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 that in the thirty years he prospected there he had "not seen the marks of any other person ever having entered the land."¹⁵

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 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 of discovering gold he may never have seen. In many ways this Slumach is as much invented as Jackson alias Shotwell. ■

Slumach, an elderly man who once lived in a Katzie settlement at the south end of Pitt Lake is said to have discovered one of the richest bonanzas in British Columbia history.

Slumach entered written history in September 1890, when he killed a "half-breed" known as Louis Bee at the south arm of Alouette River, then called Lillooet Slough. Bee was shot from the shore as he was sitting in a canoe with "Seymour," a fellow fisherman. There were no other witnesses to the murder, and the motive of the murder remains unknown. Slumach eluded capture for several months but, with winter approaching, surrendered to authorities. Efforts to show that Slumach acted in self-defense failed, and so did efforts to postpone the trial until the spring, speculating that the elderly man would die in captivity of natural causes and would be spared capital punishment. Slumach was sentenced to death and he was hanged in January 1891.