

# Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

## SLUMACH'S GOLD

BY JIM CHRISTY

The lure of buried treasure has attracted many an adventurer to more tropical climes. I have to laugh. Why bother to hack your way through dangerous jungle when there are plenty of "lost treasures" right here in our own backyard, so to speak, among the mountains and rivers of British Columbia?

The Slumach gold legend is an old story to those interested in these things, and it is generally discounted. Who, after all, would seriously tackle the rugged coast mountains beyond Pitt Lake just because one hundred years ago, some old Indian used to come into the Big Smoke (it was New Westminster then) with a poke of gold nuggets to spread around with his wild tales? The Indian was a bad man, the proof being that he was hanged for murder. But the gold in the ground doesn't make any distinction between good men and bad.

In the late 1880s the old Indian, John Slumach from the Silver Creek reserve, would hit town each fall with a pouch of gold nuggets that reports claim was never worth less than fifteen hundred dollars. He would proceed to go on a toot, encouraged by barflies waiting for a nugget of information to slip from booze-loosened lips. Every once in a while, somebody would try and follow the Indian into the bush but they never got very far. Perhaps one of these was the Metis, Louis Bee, who Slumach murdered a few miles from the Pitt River Bridge. Slumach was hanged for his crime on January 18, 1891 at the provincial jail in New Westminster.

After his death various local prospectors, adventurers and dilettantes searched for his mine or cache. Others (the majority) wrote the whole story off. The believers countered that Slumach's gold nuggets were the proof. Detractors insisted it was the same poke every year and Slumach had probably stolen that. They must have gone over the man's entire life in search of a clue. One idiosyncrasy of the old Indian's was his predilection for taking young girls with him into the bush.

The fever for Slumach's gold diminished over the next decade. No one had the slightest success and the search even claimed a few lives. But the tale had long since travelled beyond the Lower Mainland, no doubt being transformed as all stories are when passed from mouth to mouth. The theme remained the same, however; there was gold in those hills. Every now and again a stranger showed up in New Westminster, confident that he was the one to solve the mystery.

One of these was a man known to history only as W. Jackson.

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## Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

After listening to all the variations of the coaxing details from the neighbourhood rounders he set out beyond Pitt Lake.

Three months in the bush changed Jackson irrevocably. It was a broken, half-starved man who dragged himself back into New West, dragging himself and a heavy sack which he opened for no one. He caught the first steamer for San Francisco.

His travels in the mountains had worn Jackson out; he was never able to summon the strength and energy to return to British Columbia. Three years after emerging from the bush, he was dead. But before passing on, Jackson penned a letter to a man named Hill who had evidently staked him on different prospecting forays.

Jackson told Hill that during two months of exploring he had found some promising ledges and colours in the Pitt River country, "but nothing I cared to stay with." He had made up his mind to leave for good, when while climbing along a sharp ridge, he spotted a creek far below that intrigued him because the water was almost white. He worked his way down to the creek. "Now comes the interesting part," Jackson wrote. "I had only a small prospecting pan but I found colours at once right on the surface, and such colours they were. I knew then that I had struck it right at last. In going up-stream I came to a place where the bedrock was bare, and there, you could hardly believe me, the bedrock was yellow with gold."

Jackson claimed that he picked up nuggets big as walnuts and remarked that many of the chunks contained quartz. "There was millions stowed in the little cracks," he reckoned.

Jackson had too many nuggets to pack out and he buried "part of the gold at the foot of a large tent-shaped rock facing the creek." What he didn't bury was worth eight thousand dollars. He advised Hill that there was a mark cut into the rock. "You can't miss it," he wrote.

Jackson hiked out, taking three days to reach Pitt Lake where he became ill and had to rest a few more days. He mentioned to Hill that the sickness had been with him ever since and he realized he would never be able to return to Pitt Lake. He had told no one of his find but had spent "many anxious hours . . . for fear of it being discovered." He was comforted only by the knowledge that the gold was so well hidden "by ridges and mountains" that it could not be found except by the most fortuitous accident or "unless someone knew of it being there."

# Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

The dying prospector counselled his friend that it might take him a year to find Slumach's gold but not to give up because "you will be repaid beyond your wildest dreams."

Hill went out looking for the gold but soon gave up. It wasn't worth the ordeal of the forbidding terrain.

There must have been other treasure seekers over the next two decades but they left no tracks. Then in 1924, R.A. "Volcanic" Brown, a 75-year old man with a past that should have made him a folk hero, showed up. As a kid he worked on the family farm in New Brunswick and in his teens, lived and trapped with Indians. He worked the old fishing boats, helped build the railway in Nova Scotia and felled trees in the Quebec woods. He became bull of the woods and once led his fellow loggers out on a strike for higher wages. It was while working on the CPR line through the Rockies that he acquired his first nickname, "Crazy" Brown. He prophesied that aluminum would take the place of wood in construction and that tuberculosis could be cured by electricity, and insisted that banks and governments should be abolished.

"Volcanic" Brown discovered the Sunset Mine on Copper Mountain in the Similkameen country. Eventually he sold his interest for forty-five thousand 1890 dollars. The years passed with Brown pursuing various ventures, some of them successfully. By the spring of 1924, he was 75 and living in Grand Forks.

Life was getting a bit too tame, so the septuagenarian adventurer moved down to the coast region and began searching for gold in the Pitt Lake area.

Brown went up the Pitt River in June, 1926, checked in at the Dominion hatchery at Alvin, and headed up Seven Mile Creek. In October, when he had not re-appeared, a trapper and a constable with the provincial force went looking for him. They found him in a cabin 20 miles from the head of the lake. His feet had become frostbitten and when gangrene had set in, Brown dipped his knife in boiling water and cut off the swollen, blackened toes of his left foot.

A photograph of the time shows him on the streets of New Westminster. His right hand rests on top of a fire hydrant, the other hand grips the top of his walking stick. His left foot is braced and bandaged. "Volcanic's" chin is thrust forward, his expression one of ironic irascibility.

Among the papers found after Brown's death was a copy of the letter Jackson had written to Hill. Unlike others before him, he treated Slumach's penchant for young girls with

## Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

more than a wink and a nudge. If the Indian had taken girls into the bush with him and he had found gold, then odds were that the girls, or one of them, knew where the gold was. Thus, Brown's deductions led him to the niece of Louis Bee. Slumach hadn't killed Bee because the man was on his trail; no, Bee was attempting, albeit too late, to defend the honour of his niece.

When Brown went into the mountains in 1926, he had the letter from Jackson to Hill in his possession. He must have learned something quite significant from Bee's niece because in 1931, aged 83, "Volcanic" Brown once more took to the mountains. He never came out; his body was never found.

In the fall, a search party located his last camp in back of Stave Glacier. Snow had crushed his tent. They found a cook-pot, a single-barrelled shot gun, some notes on herbal remedies, and a jar of gold nuggets that contained traces of quartz.

Those who would deny the entire story of Slumach's gold profess that the old Indian never discovered gold to begin with and they further maintain that the Jackson letter found in Brown's possession was a fake. But to thoroughly disallow the story is to credit something more far-fetched than a lost mine; it is to believe that dozens of people, unrelated and unknown to each other, conspired over decades to promulgate a myth.

And what of the nuggets found at Brown's last camp? One commentator claims the old man brought them with him. How did he know? You have to wonder why an 83-year-old man would pack in the excess weight of a jar full of nuggets. The gold, remember, contained traces of quartz, and Jackson had written Hill that many of the "chunks" he had found contained quartz.

In the interests of objectivity it should be noted that, according to geological surveys, conditions in the area do not seem favourable for either placer or lode gold. Furthermore, also speaking objectively, it is a rare bonanza that hasn't been preceded by the negative reports of experts.

Now the seemingly endless land beyond Pitt Lake is protected by winter winds and snow that blows around the head of Stave Glacier and settles into deep, hidden crevasses. When the warm weather comes and the snow disappears, one of these crevasses might reveal the bones of "Volcanic" Brown and perhaps the bright veins of Slumach's gold—if anyone were there to see . . .