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Beautiful British Columbia
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SLUMACH'S CURSE

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(WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAURICE BORRELLY)

“Much have I travell'd in the realm of gold...”

Keats may not have been aware of Pitt Lake, nestled between precipitous cliffs north of Coquitlam, when he penned these lasting lines. But “gold is where you find it.” And some day the long-lost gold mine reputed to have been found by Murder Slumach may be rediscovered. Avid prospectors have searched for the bonanza for more than 70 years. Death toll of those seeking the fabulous wealth has been high.

The treasure of gold worth a king's ransom may be a myth. Or it may be quietly waiting for some fortune hunter to stumble upon it. But to do so he will have to defy ... SLUMACH'S CURSE.

The legend of Slumach's lost creek gold mine prompts one immediate question: if the mine IS indeed in the Pitt Lake area, so close to Vancouver, why has not one been able to find it? The answer of course, is in the very nature of the mountainous area that hides it.

Those who search for the lost mine do so in a most picturesque and breathtaking area. And in their quest they deal with one of the most fascinating legends in British Columbia's history.

It seems that in the late 1880s a logging company operating on the upper Pitt River hired a Salish Indian named Slumach to work as a provider. While the sun was not yet high, Slumach would be tramping the damp flora underfoot as he headed up the narrow valley that gives home to the meandering Pitt River. Here, at the north end of a 16-mile-long Pitt Lake, he would spend his day hunting game.

Much of the territory is now within the boundaries of Golden Ears Provincial Park, but in 1889 Slumach knew it only as a vast expanse of unexplored wilderness, a land of colour and majesty.

He probably had no idea that the mountains that hid the sun in early morning were more than 6,000 feet high. Nor would he have known that all those near him cradled large ice fields.

Slumach had found a “glory-hole.” As he sat in a bar others gathered round to hear him tell of a bubbling creek that gushed from a cavern in the rocky side of a mountain.

Though many of those who listened tried to find their way to

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his hidden treasure, their searches were fruitless.

Many creeks such as Slumach described are found, each time sending amateurs and professional prospectors clambering over fallen trees, through growths of devil's club and up and down cliffs. Disappointment greets them all. Somewhere near Pitt Lake, 10 miles due north of the Haney and Maple Ridge area, Slumach found a creek bed rich with gold nuggets. He was not about to disclose its exact whereabouts to anyone.

Travel to the north end of Pitt Lake from the southern shoreline takes about six hours of good canoeing. Slumach surely must have appreciated the beauty of this trip. His people had a tremendous rapport with the land. Paddling wide to the east side of the lake, he would miss the sand bars that lie beneath the water at the lake's mouth. Then he would head to Large Goose Island, six miles up the lake. West of this small craggy island, he would draw in towards shore again and travel north, keeping to the windward side of Little Goose Island.

His landmark to the southeast was the Golden Ears of Mount Blanchard, towering then as they are now, above their namesake park. With a light wind at his back, he would make good time over the rippling waters, and arrive at the narrow north end of the lake in jig time.

Slumach was now in the upper Pitt River area. To the east of the river, at a height of 6,600 feet, the ice fields on Remote Peak stay all year. The rains of April and the sun of May melts the lower levels of snow into myriad tributaries that flow into any number of large streams, Many are too small to name and only swell to significant size with the onrush of spring's warmth and the subsequent runoff. But all year long at least one creek carries its water and its name from above the 5,000-foot mark. Corbold Creek, fed by a glacier, figures prominently in any search for the lost gold mine, for it is in the headwaters of this creek that legend says Slumach found his "glory-hole."

Slumach ran out of luck in 1890. Apparently he had taken many women with him on his trips to recover the gold. Not one was ever seen alive again. Then, when a body was found with Slumach's knife in the heart, he was arrested in the Pitt, where keen outdoor senses had enabled him to escape pursuers for two months. Later he was tried and convicted of her murder. Though under constant pressure to reveal the location of the mine, Slumach refused. And as he stood on the gallows he cursed the mine and all those who would try to

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find it. “*Nika memloose, mine memloos,*” which meant “When I die, mine dies.” It was a curse that history now says claimed at least 16 lives.

By the spring of 1901 enough stories were circulating concerning Slumach’s mine that an Alaskan miner named John Jackson became interested. Spring brings to Nature everywhere a newness that provided inspiration to a prospector like Jackson, and he set out to find the cursed mine. Yet even to an experienced outdoorsman, the Pitt was a challenge. Babbling brooks can change into raging torrents overnight. While watching the sun waken the western shores of the lake, a traveller on the east side can be engulfed in ground fog. Sudden changes in elevation and landslides are a fact of life in parts of the area, and Jackson was no match for the rugged task. He returned in two months, a sick and ruined man, but he kept his packsack and his gold pan with him at all times. Rumour has it that he left for the States, a rich man.

The curse was about to take its first victim, for Jackson died as a result of the hardships he had suffered. But he had found gold and in a letter to a friend he described the location, “...I climbed up to the top of a sharp ridge and looked down into the canyon about one mile and a half long...it appeared to have no outlet for the little creek that flowed in the bottom... after difficulty I found my way down...the water was almost white...I found colours at once...and such colours they were.”

The colours that showed in his gold pan indicate the slate and granite formations of the area had provided gold in a place where geologists say it shouldn’t have been. It is thought he is describing a tributary of Corbold Creek near present-day Alvia. Though the most prominent theories relating to the mine’s location centre on this site it is by no means the only credible one.

Perhaps destiny has allowed the splendour of the area to protect itself from any large scale intrusion by man. Some of the esthetic [sic] richness is born of the cliffs and rugged clusters of moss-laden boulders that form much of Pitt Lake’s shores. And from the rocks grow trees that present earth’s invitation to canoeists to take a hold and climb aboard the challenged land. In the distance, one might hear the beckoning voice of a waterfall, or the call of a loon. The terrain itself will soon divide the adventuresome from the casual hiker who must turn back in the face of disappearing trails and ever-steepening slopes.

Pitt Lake is a natural rarity—a freshwater tidal lake. Pitt River feeds into the Fraser River and the tidal action of the

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Pacific Ocean reaches up the Fraser, up the Pitt and into the lake, rising and lowering the water every 12 hours. The lake is large—and the jagged cliffs and rich forests that surround it show many faces in many seasons. According to legend, it was in this area that on one day at the right time, Slumach found a fortune in gold, gold still hidden today by the forest's camouflage and his Indian curse.

On some occasions Slumach was absent from New Westminster perhaps 48 hours. Other times he was gone for several days. Whether he travelled the old dirt roads across land to the Pitt River or paddled up the Fraser River to the mouth of Pitt Lake does not matter. He was traced to Pitt Lake, where his trail was always lost. Trying to retrace any portions of his route is an exciting venture exercised by many even now.

As the duration of some trips was quite short, speculation was that he may have stumbled on his find while travelling in the Widgeon Creek area, near the south end of the lake. Still waters make canoeing a relaxing means of travel on the creek. The scrubby area is home to various species of ducks, among them mallard and widgeon. Near stands of cat-tail, field mice are ever aware of circling hawks above.

Where Slumach to travel here in the fall it would be necessary to beach his canoe on the muddy shores a mile or two up the creek, next to one of the many muskrat dens, for the slow-moving creek now runs shallow.

From here he would have walked over the worn boulders in the dry creek bed. Where today you can find the ruins of an old abandoned logging operation, Slumach would have passed a forest aglow with the vibrant colours of Nature's autumn conversion.

He would not have been able to walk to a logging road, as is possible today, but would have had to rely on the sun to find his direction. Today's hikers can save much time, thanks to the clearing. Soon, however, he must leave the gravel road and again enter the maple forest if he seeks to discover the enchantments of Widgeon Lake.

Those duplicating Slumach's supposed journey do so often on an overnight jaunt. If on an earlier trip he had found gold, Slumach could easily return time and again for his bounty.

Another proposed theory leads to cascading Bridal Veil Falls. In this area, hiking is worthwhile, for it is a paradise in the summer sun or a refreshing experience after one of the characteristic rainfalls.

There are several caves in the area, many very small, while

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some larger ones offer the novel comfort of natural rock shelters. Was it in a similar land form that the mine was hidden?

Ten years ago the discovery of an old mining shaft on Sheridan Hill in Pitt Meadows ignited the hope that the mine's location had been found. At the turn of the century much of the low lying area surrounding Sheridan Hill was marshland, and the rocky outcropping was then known as Menzies Isle, reached best by boat or canoe.

The area had been explored in the mid-1800s, but its development really began when young Dutch couples, trained in farming, purchased run-down dairies and started a draining project. They reclaimed the marsh area between the Pitt and Alouette or Lilloet Slough. Slightly inside the dikes is Sheridan Hill, rising from the reclaimed land with its mysterious mine shaft.

An early morning stroll on the dikes catches the yellows of sunrise accenting the floating collections of logs, while the late evening walker is greeted by open expanses of scenery toned with oranges and pinks.

Perhaps more interesting than the number of possible locations for the lost mine, the facts in the story paint an entirely different picture of Slumach's life. He was indeed hanged in 1891. But not for the murder of a young girl.

On September 9, 1890, Slumach killed Louis Bee, a half-breed, who was hunting in Allouete Slough. He then escaped to the wooded depths for protection, later to be captured. There is no written record anywhere of his association with gold or of his legendary curse. Still the legend persists and each spring many hopefuls set out.

From the deep waters of Pitt Lake rocky hillsides climb swiftly, and in the background, mountains can be described only as majestic. After much climbing and considerable hard breathing, the tree-line is below and the rivers and streams seem to run like small trenches dug with the heel of the boot in soft ground.

The entrance to Widgeon Creek and the west side of Pitt Lake have been most hospitable to summer visitors. Here and there are cabins, in from the shore, but they are spread out, only to be found where the land consented to amiable formations.

The Pitt Lake country adorns itself in beauty. The search for a lost mine has given many people an opportunity to look behind the formidable front to a land of dense fir, balsam, and hemlock.

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From the heady precipices in the Stave Glacier area, where renowned prospector Volcanic Brown fell to his death while in search of a legend, to the flatlands of Pitt Meadows, where the amateur enthusiast venture today, the search goes on.

Many people sincerely believe in the mine's existence, while others merely laugh at what they say is only "an interesting legend."

Now, if someone actually *did* find a mine...