

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

Colonist 15 December 1963

OLD-TIMERS TOLD INTRIGUING TALES OF LOST TREASURE

BY CECIL CLARK

"Mystery" is a word with a magic quality. Sort of leaps out at you from the printed page. Like its first cousins "hidden treasure."

Which maybe accounts for the popularity of lost mine stories.

Trouble is most of them don't stand up to too much research being actually a mixture of faulty memories and wishful thinking.

Take the case of the ever-popular "Slumach's Lost Mine," sometimes known as the "Lost Mine of Pitt Mountains," and on occasion "The Lost Creek Mine." Anyway it's that alleged Eldorado in the Pitt River mountains that has been intermittently in print ever since Indian Slumach hit the headlines in September, 1890.

Trouble with this particular "lost mine" story, everybody writes about it, nobody researches. Here briefly is all that anybody can ever know about Slumach.

In the fall of 1890, on account of some simple sneering remarks, Indian Slumach shot 24-year-old French Canadian halfbreed Louie Bee, at Lillooet Slough on the Pitt River just west of what is now Coquitlam.

Then Slumach took the body out in his canoe and dumped it in the middle of the river. Some Indian eyewitnesses brought word of the affair to New Westminster, the police dragged the river and the body was recovered.

There was a mountain chase after Slumach during which his pursuers got near enough to exchange shots with him.

"The hell with it..." finally remarked veteran Province Police Chief Bill Moresby, knowing full well that Slumach would run out of ammunition and grub and what with one thing and another—he was over 80 and winter was coming on—he'd naturally give himself up. Which is exactly what he did; for though it was generally known that he was the last of his band to demonstrate the outdated knack of starting a fire by rubbing two sticks together, this talent did not fill a pot.

Though, as I say, he was just over 80, still he was a big man, around 185 pounds, with a 19-inch neck, sporting a mop of white hair and beard to match. I wouldn't have thought that Indians ran to beards, still we can't gainsay an eyewitness who was at his hanging. Which, for those interested, took place at New Westminster at 8 o'clock on the morning of January 16, 1891. In itself this is a clue for anyone to go and read it up in the pages of New Westminster's Columbian. The hangman, described as a tall and thin character wearing a hood, is alleged also to have been the executioner of Louis Riel.

Old-Timers Told Intriguing Tales of Lost Treasure

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

There was no mention at that time, in or out of the courtroom, of Slumach's mine.

Dying Man's Story

First of the stories about his golden heard came 13 years later, when John Jackson, a one-time Alaskan prospector, came out of Pitt River country with some nuggets. One version is that he came out dead beat, crawling on the ground with a broken leg. He died of privation, but before he did, left a note saying he found the gold less than 20 miles from the head of Pitt River "where a stream flows down a canyon and disappears from sight."

Another account says Jackson came out alive and well, went down to San Francisco, there to deposit \$870 in the Bank of British North America, while he spoke of nuggets as big as walnuts.

Still another version has Jackson dying in a Seattle hotel room where his last act was to give a plan of the mine's location to his faithful nurse, and a copy to his bedside friend named Shotwell, who later sold it for \$500.

Then there's the story that Slumach, before the execution, told his son of the source of the gold, and later when the son went to look for it, he was followed by two Americans, Jackson and another man, and one of them shot the young Indian.

There are just too many versions, and none of them adds up. There's no record of Slumach ever having gold, though the late Bruce McKelvie held to the theory that away back in his past he might have bushwhacked some Cariboo miner. There is always talk about Slumach's many wives, and how when they got too nose about the mine, he would drown them in Pitt Lake. There's no record of any such occurrences, and, believe me, B.C. has been top notch at keeping records.

In the spring of 1938 [sic], a well-known old prospector called "Volcanic" Brown told four Nelson businessmen on a Kootenay hunting trip that once, having some talent as a herbalist, he nursed Slumach's granddaughter back to health and in gratitude she gave him a hint of the lost mine's location.

Death in a Blizzard

Later, for years Brown prospected the upper Pitt region, where finally he lost his life crossing a glacier in a blizzard. His body was never found. Ex-Game Inspector George Stevenson, now a resident of View Royal, was a member of the search party that finally, after terrific hardships, found his abandoned snow-covered tent. George thinks that old "Volca-

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

nic” went down a crevasse.

There are other men who, over the years, met with mishap in this wild region—most of them hunters, victims of inexperience. Anyway, newsmen in Vancouver got the habit of counting them all as searchers for the “ill-omened lost mine.” I think there were 26 such incidents, when I lost count about 10 years ago. I’ve been keeping tab on this thing a long time.

The further Slumach’s story recedes in history, the wilder get the accounts. The most fantastic was a national magazine a few years ago (by a Vancouver writer) decorated with photographs, one purporting to show Slumach as a sullen Indian youth in his 20s smoking a cigarette. Something the original certainly never did. There were other pictures of women Slumach was alleged to have killed, two or three white girls dressed in street garb of about 1912.

One story had the fanciful touch that one of Slumach’s wives came to New Westminster at the time of his trial with a canoe-load of nuggets to bribe the jury. Old Bill Pierre, who died on the North Vancouver reserve a few years ago claimed he knew the secret of the mine and had actually seen Slumach moulding bullets out of gold. If Slumach ever knocked over a mowitch with a golden bullet, we’d have heard about that!

Enterprising Newsmen

For an angle to the Slumach story with a touch of humor, let’s drop back to a spring afternoon 11 years ago when a couple of enterprising Vancouver newsmen found themselves in a slump—just nothing to write. In this dull moment, up popped old reliable “the lost mine.” They took a 14-year-old Indian boy, grandson of old Chief Capilano, it was said, and winged him up to the Pitt River country in a plane. With a photographer they climbed a hill, and pictured the boy pointing at the ground with the caption, “My grandfather said this was the site of Slumach’s lost mine.” The story was front-page news for three days on a row, and the following weekend the local alpine club got into the act and one of their members staked a claim.

Promptly the newsroom pair got the glint of a bright idea, and quickly formed the “Slumach Lost Creek Mine Ltd.” Alas, that November came an announcement (tucked safely away at the bottom of page 24,) informing readers that the company had suspended operations after their solicitor made the announcement that “investigation shows no commercial ore.” Spur to the announcement of course was a crisp directive from the superintendent of brokers in Victoria!

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

Don't imagine from this we've finished with Lost Creek Mine. Only in the last couple of month I got another version. This comes by the way from a good friend of mine who happens to be in the provincial civil service in Victoria. He has in turn a friend in Vancouver who once told him how his family got by in New Westminster during the depression. This Vancouverite is today a well-to-do lumberman; then he was just a school boy.

Secret Well Kept

His father, the Vancouver man related, was really broke in the thirties, with a wife and a number of children to keep. When things were at their toughest, father began to absent himself from home for varying periods, but when he returned he always had money. These little splurges of wealth he attributed to a mine he owned.

No one ever got an inkling of its location, and the son swears his father would never do anything illegal. Even the suggestion that he might have borrowed the money from old friends is counted out; he was too proud to borrow.

Only thing the son ever learned was that the mine had a shaft 36 feet long, but no cross leads. Father died in 1957, and the secret of his mine went with him. The family today apparently has no interest in following the matter up.

Of course it could be said that even the simplest form of mining requires not only experience, but also money for explosives and tools. And how about recorded claims? Anyway, it's lost mine story that is lightly intriguing, and certainly no more fragile than Slumach's golden bullets. At least there is a living witness, an exploration point to start from.

A couple of other lost mine stories come in mind, told over a span of years by the Winkler brothers, Fred and George, whom old time prospectors and mining men will readily recall.

Fred, who passed away some years ago, was once a neighbour of mine, but George is still with us, living in Devonshire House on Front Street.

Fred was a quiet and rather lonely little man, who wintered in Victoria and spent his summers prospecting the glacial valleys at the head of Portland Canal.

Like all prospectors he was wedded to the quest for the big payoff.

Prospector's Story

The story he told me occurred during the last war at a time

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

when the government sponsored the search for strategic minerals. This brought out a lot of amateur prospectors who were given brief training, equipped and sent out in the hills. Probably under this wartime impetus the valuable cinnabar deposits were developed up at Pinchi Lake, resulting in a supply of mercury usually obtained from Spain.

Novel addition to the prospector's kit in those days was the "magic box" using ultraviolet light to detect scheelite from which tungsten is obtained. When scheelite is present the rock glows because the fluorescent mineral absorbs the invisible ultraviolet light and emits visible light, caused by the displacement of electrons from their orbit when excited by ultraviolet radiation.

According to what Fred Winkler told me, a couple of UBC students caught up in the wartime prospecting fever, and carrying one of these boxes, found themselves one afternoon at a prospector's cabin in a lonely stretch of mountain country east of Stewart.

The prospector was at home, a bearded old character who'd been tapping rocks in the region for years, and who had a routine of bringing samples back with him to give them a second look in the quiet of his cabin.

If he was dissatisfied with a sample, which was nearly always he tossed it out the open door on to a mounting pile.

The old fellow greeted the young strangers with the customary hospitality of the mountain country, and after a meal, when pipes and cigarettes were lit, the boys got to describing the function of the little black box they carried. Though talk of electrons went over the old fellows head, nevertheless he exhibited keen interest; in fact he wanted a demonstration.

Clue to Riches

One of the young men, noticing the rock pile outside, asked if he could check the discards. "Go ahead," said the old man of the mountains. "Maybe you'll find some electrons."

About twenty minutes later the student prospector dashed into the cabin holding a rock in his hand.

"Any idea where you got this!" he gasped, obviously in the grip of great excitement.

The old man examined the rock for a second or two, then handed it back.

"Son," he said, "I haven't the vaguest idea."

So long had the sample lain on the pile, he couldn't recall where he picked it up. But that sample lit up in the box like

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

downtown on New Year's Eve. Perhaps that very same day, who knows, fortune passed him by!

Are Riches Buried on Penticton Creek?

The other story comes from brother George. Speaking to him just a few weeks ago he told me how, back in 1903, when he moved from Princeton to Hedley, he got friendly with Jack Edmunds, the butcher. Edmunds at one time in his career had been a cowboy working for Tom Ellis in the Okanagan, and on one day he produced for George Winkler's inspection a chunk of ore. Said he'd picked it up a few years back on Penticton Creek while herding cattle.

Winkler thought it pretty rich, and suggested out of curiosity they send it down to the assay office in Vancouver.

"If it goes over \$20 a ton," he told Edmunds, "I'll pay for the assay."

"If it runs under \$20 a ton," he added, "you'll pay for it. It was a deal.

In telling me the story, George paused here to rummage in his desk.

"I think I have the assay certificate here somewhere," he said. Sure enough, from among a bundle of old letters, he pulled out a much folded letter-size certificate and handed it to me.

The printed heading read "Pellew, Harvey, Bryant and Gilman, Vancouver B.C. Provincial Assayers," and there was a date: March 29, 1904.

The certificate said that the sample of ore showed 101.47 ounces of silver to the ton and 4.1 ounces of gold. When gold then at \$20 an ounce, (\$35.00 today) this meant \$82 a ton and the silver content at 57 cents (\$1.10 today) hiked the showing an additional \$57.84 a ton.

Mean anything to you? Well, it's just 400 percent better than good; some mines today, they tell me, can make a profit on a showing of .8 of an ounce.

"You got a pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow," I remarked to George as I passed him back the paper.

Folding it slowly, he gave me a smile.

"I teamed up with Arthur Dawson," he said. "Maybe you knew him—he later ran a cannery at Kelowna—and we started searching Penticton Creek. De you know we search that darned crick for four years and never found a trace of anything that matched up to that one chunk of ore. Sure was a mystery where it came from."

There's that word again—"mystery." Funny how it catches

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

the imagination—especially when it's linked to buried treasure.