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GOLD MINE AT PITT LAKE?

BY FRED BRACHES

In an article in *The News* of 17 January 2001 it was suggested that a certain Moody, witness at a murder trial, was the illegitimate child of Colonel Richard Clement Moody of the Royal Engineers. However, a little research showed that Colonel Moody had left British Columbia in 1863 and therefore could never have fathered this witness, who was born 12 years later. Rather, George Moody was the son of a Native woman and Sewell Prescott Moody of Moodyville, now North Vancouver.

This little incident shows that so-called “facts” often cannot be accepted at face value, even if they have appeared in print. The same holds for the story of Slumach, the subject of this trial, an elderly Native man, who was hanged for murder in January 1891.

Three decades after his death, through an article in a newspaper, this Slumach was linked with a mysterious gold mine in the Pitt Lake area and since then he has been given centre stage in an ever-growing legend.

Over time exciting ingredients were added to this story. In 1939 a paper reported that “it was believed but never proven” that Slumach had drowned three women to prevent them from telling the location of his find. During the Second World War old man Slumach was recreated as a young half-breed who painted the town red each time he returned from his mine and handed out gold nuggets as large as walnuts. This Slumach was a bluebeard who regularly used young women on his trips to the Pitt Lake area and subsequently killed them. In this version it was the murder of the last of his charming victims that brought him to the gallows.

From newspaper articles in the years after World War II we learn that Slumach not only refused to tell where the gold was but also that his last words, in Chinook, were “as I die so does the mine.” It was said that Slumach had cursed the gold—that it was “hoodoo” gold; that Slumach had told a relative where the gold was—that he had even drawn a now lost map; that the gold could only be found (and kept) by a Native person; and that Slumach’s ghost is protecting the gold. All this is the stuff of dreams, bound to fuel the imagination of gullible romantics. To this day prospectors and treasure hunters are doggedly looking in the rugged mountains north of Pitt Lake for the legendary “lost creek mine.”

But what is truly behind this fable? A little research produces the following facts. The court records confirm that Slumach,

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an elderly Native, stood trial in New Westminster in 1890 for the murder of a certain Louis Bee and was hanged for that. A New Westminster paper reported on the case, but not always correctly, as a comparison with the court records shows. Other papers published only accounts of the hanging. Who really cared? An Indian had killed another Indian—justice was done. End of story.

Six years later the 1897 Klondike gold rush sparked a feverish search for gold everywhere. An American prospected in the mountains around Pitt Lake and according to legend struck it rich. A 1906 newspaper reported that “...some man by the name of Frazier secured information that an old man, who was ere this been gathered in his rest, had some valuable placer ground in the Pitt Lake country. He had recovered \$8000 in gold nuggets, and these he had hidden under a rock. He had then passed away, but had left directions where the treasure and the placer ground was to be found.” This is probably the first published mention of gold in the Pitt Lake area, as well as of a lost map and a mysterious informant.

In 1926 an interview with Jason Allard, who had been court translator during the Slumach trial, appeared in a newspaper. Allard stated that during the trial nothing of a hidden treasure was known. (In fact, had there been the slightest suspicion that Slumach was connected to any gold find, we can easily imagine that in 1890 the newspapers would have had a field day.) However, the interviewer took it upon himself to say that “Slumach died and with him died the secret of a great gold mine somewhere up in that wild Pitt Lake country.” From here it was only a few steps to the full-blown Slumach legend, the fairy tale that we know today.

But even if the story of Slumach and his gold is proven to be a fable, could there not still be a lost creek gold mine out there somewhere near Pitt Lake?