

# Newspapers and Magazines 2000s

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## IS THERE GOLD IN SLUMACH'S HILLS?

TWO BROTHERS AND A WRITER TEAM UP TO INVESTIGATE ONE OF B.C.'S ENDURING LEGENDS

BY DAVID SPANER

One of B.C.'s most enduring legends began with a split-second decision during a chance encounter. A man turned his rifle on a younger man, unprovoked, it was reported, blasting him dead at close range. During the ensuing trial in 1890 New Westminster, the killer, known as Slumach, was described in the press as a wild-eyed maniac.

The man was hanged at the old New Westminster prison—and a legend was born. There were tales of other murders Slumach had committed and of the giant gold nuggets he'd take to the saloons of frontier New Westminster. Just before Slumach was hanged, according to lore, he shouted out an everlasting curse on those who would pursue his gold.

What gold?

Rick Antonson first heard about Slumach's lost mine in the summer of 1957, as an eight-year-old sitting around a campfire on the shores of Hatzic Lake after an arduous day of summer camp. "We'd been out fishing all day," recalls Rick, today the head of Tourism Vancouver. "Got some dogfish, lake trout. The fisherman's wife tells us the story. She says, 'There's a lost gold mine on Pitt Lake. It's got an Indian curse. You'll never find it. At least not find it and live.'"

The search for gold has a timeless appeal, be it in the Stone Age or the digital age. But in the 1950s, with its brand new TVs, such adventure was accessible as never before. As children of the late 1950s, Antonson and his brother Brian, a year older and also at that campfire, grew up in Burnaby watching outer space (Flash Gordon), the seven seas (Blackbeard), Olde England (Robin Hood) and, mostly, the Wild West (Davy Crockett, the Lone Ranger, Wyatt Earp). Not long after the campfire story, an episode of a U.S. TV series, *Treasure*, contemplated Slumach's lost mine.

This first generation of TV children practised what they watched, playing away the days as cowboys or pirates. So, the Canadian Wild West intrigue of the Slumach story had a dramatic hold on the Antonson boys, and they made a pact that one day they'd look for the mine.

Like many a childhood pact, the Antonsons' Slumach plans were pretty well forgotten—until one Halloween night in the mid-1960s. Rick was among a group of SFU students tell-

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ing haunting stories, and when his turn came he recounted the story of the lost mine. Retelling the tale rekindled Rick's interest in the lost gold. "That started the more adult version of the quest," he says, noting that he had soon joined forces with his brother and writer Mary Trainer. "We said, 'Let's find out everything about this.' Of course, in those days there wasn't the ability to Google."

But there were libraries and old newspapers, and in their early 20s the three would write a book on the Slumach legend, *Slumach's Gold*. Now, an expanded version of the book is about to be printed. "From then till now, this is one part history, one part Tom Sawyer," Rick says of his 50-year quest. So, the man responsible for attracting tourists to Vancouver has co-authored a book about an area just northeast of the city where, according to the legend of Slumach's curse, more than 30 adventurers have died in search of gold.

Where does the truth end and the fiction begin?

The myth of Slumach has variations, but mostly it's the same one the Antonsons were told in 1957. Legend says Slumach (like Madonna or Liberace, he has one-name fame) was a Salish Indian, 60 to 80 years old, who lived alone in a shack in a remote area of Pitt Lake. One day while hunting, he stumbled on a creek bed covered in gold. "Nuggets the size of a man's fist," says Rick of the stories.

After this, according to the legend, he would on occasion show up with these nuggets in New Westminster, proceeding to buy drinks for everyone before leaving town, each time with a different young female companion. The women, it's said, were never seen again. As the legend grew, Slumach was said to have also murdered several men and even to have been convicted for the murder of a young woman found floating in the Fraser River with his knife in her back.

One thing that's a matter of record is that Slumach was hanged in January 1891 for the shooting death of Louis Bee. But did he really utter the words later attributed to him? The legend says that with the noose around his neck, Slumach's final words put a hex on those who would seek his mine. "Nika memloose, mine memloose," he shouted, Salish for "When I die, mine dies."

As the authors note in *Slumach's Gold*: "The earliest printed mention of the Slumach legend that we found while researching our 1972 publication was in the April 3, 1906, edition of the *Daily Province*."

So, let's finish what we started.

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Delve into this tale and it soon becomes clear that, as in the case of the Loch Ness monster or Ogopogo, there is more than one Slumach legend, and that some of the above is no more certain than sea-monster mythology.

The murders? The story of disappearing women is particularly disturbing, recalling the horrors that recently took place a little closer to the city. But the authors could find nothing about missing women in the press of the day and there is nothing solid to link Slumach to other murders. Even the murder of Louis Bee (also known as Boulrier) at Alouette Slough, which Slumach was convicted of, wasn't nearly so unprovoked as earlier reported.

The gold? Contemporary newspaper accounts of Slumach's murder trial never mentioned gold.

The hex? Some of the hundreds of Slumach gold seekers have died in the area, in accidents or of heart failure, but the known names don't match the numbers bandied about.

Here's a glimpse of how the daily New Westminster Columbian newspaper covered the trial. "Slumach is insane," it reported. "Indians who know him well say he has committed four or five murders during the last 25 years . . . He is said to be without fear of man or beast and to be possessed of a nature vicious in the extreme."

Brian Antonson, now head of broadcast and media communications at the B.C. Institute of Technology, says: "Somebody co-opted that story of this particular guy and made him a legend."

Rick says the mystery of a lost gold mine may have more to do with an American, known only as W. Jackson, than it has to do with Slumach. Jackson, who arrived in the area in the first years of the 1900s, disappeared into the Pitt Lake area and came out with gold, plenty of it. "He dies in San Francisco but he's written this letter," Rick says.

In the letter, to a Seattle friend, Jackson wrote: "In going up stream I came to a place where bedrock was bare, and there, you could hardly believe me, the bedrock was yellow with gold. Some of the nuggets was as big as walnuts and there were many chunks carrying quartz. After sizing it up, I saw there was millions stowed around in the little cracks. On account of the weight, I buried part of the gold at the foot of a large tent-shaped rock facing the creek. You can't miss it. There is a mark cut out in it.

"The place is so well guarded by surround ridges and mountains that it should not be found for many years, unless

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someone knew of it being there.” Not long after, Jackson died in San Francisco.

Many who have gone searching did live to tell about it. “I’m one of them,” Rick says, noting he’s made some half-dozen canoe excursions in the zone. “It’s tough. I’ve actually taken a gold pan to the creek area without any luck. What they call Slumach country is some of the worst topographical area in the world -- fog just drops on you, winds come out of nowhere and the shores of Pitt Lake are largely inhospitable. And there are glaciers.”

Slumach country includes the 96-kilometre circumference of Pitt Lake and extends up into Garibaldi Park and environs, including Widgeon Lake, Stave Lake, DeBeck Creek, Stave Glacier, Third Canyon, Corbold Creek, Sheridan Hill and Terrarosa Glacier. “It’s mostly land that doesn’t invite you in,” says Rick. Still, TV crews and adventurers continue to come, some with pricey helicopters and base camps.

“It’s a fun legend,” adds Mary Trainer. “I don’t consider it a very serious one. There hasn’t been proof. And there wasn’t any connection between Slumach and gold until after his death. But a lot of people have spent a lot of money looking for this gold.”

The new edition of *Slumach’s Gold* looks at several of the gold seekers who have added significantly to the legend, including:

- Volcanic Brown, who searched for Slumach’s mine in the 1920s and ‘30s. In 1931, he disappeared, a search team later finding his tent and gear and 11 ounces of gold on an ice field near Corbold Creek.
- Tiny Allen, a sizable man from Port Moody, claimed in the early 1960s that he’d found a valley with gold in its wall and creek bed. He intended to return when the snow thawed, but died from a heart attack before he could. “Tiny Allen said he had the map,” says Rick. “He died six months later.”
- In the early 1970s, Stuart Brown claimed to have found a pool “ankle deep” in gold nuggets in Garibaldi Provincial Park. “To tell about it would be endangering people’s lives,” he said. “No one in their right mind would ever go in there with that terrain.”
- Daryl Friesen, who operates *Seekers of Gold*, a website history of Slumach’s mine, explored the area. “Once you would get close to where you wanted to be, some weather factor would always get in your way and crush your

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plans,” he said.

Posted to Maple Ridge in the 1960s, RCMP Const. Don Waite grew close to Slumach’s great-niece Amanda Charnley (Aunt Mandy). In the most credible account of the legend in Slumach’s Gold, Waite quotes Charnley on Slumach. Charnley’s father Peter, who had spent time with his uncle (“a crippled and harmless old widower”) in prison, passed Slumach’s words on to her.

“Slumach told Peter that Boulier (a.k.a. Louis Bee, the man he killed) held a grudge against him and, stepping ashore, came at him wielding an axe and shouting, ‘I’m going to chop your damn head off.’ Slumach said he raised his shotgun out of sheer fright and fired point blank at Boulier, killing him instantly.”

As for the gold? “Slumach told my father that only on one occasion did he ever take gold out of the pit.” He had spent the night in Third Canyon on a bench-shaped rock covered in moss. In the morning light, he peeled some moss off the rock to find a yellow metal. With a penknife, he dug out some nuggets and sold them to a shopkeeper in New Westminster for \$27.

“Sitting on the cell bench, Slumach drew a map for Peter of the location where he found the nuggets,” Charnley said. “Peter memorized the drawing and then destroyed it. Years later he redrew the map. His daughter traced out three copies. However, the original and the copies were destroyed in the 1930s in a house fire.” What if one of the maps wasn’t in the house, I wonder. “Exactly,” says Rick.

Later, her father would break his hip while searching for the gold. Says Waite: “Aunt Mandy told me her father, Peter Pierre, jokingly suggested that his uncle Slumach ‘must have placed a curse on the area.’”

And that—a storekeeper’s talk of the bit of gold Slumach sold him and an accident involving Slumach’s nephew—may be all there is to the legend of Slumach’s lost mine.

But this search has long been about Slumach in name only.

Enough searchers have returned from Slumach country with gold to suggest the vast area might contain several “hidden” caches. And if you were to turn a corner in Corbold Creek, and find yourself standing ankle deep in nuggets, no one could prove it was “Slumach’s gold.”

Every culture has its legends, and when something has appeared in print repeatedly, a sort of statute of limitations sets in and it is regarded as fact, or at least too distant and

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difficult to disprove. Beyond this, however, there is the truth. And that is what's so frustrating for Rick Antonson and others studying this fascinating slice of B.C. lore.

"It all ends with what-ifs and maybes," Rick says. "Nobody's saying there's no gold in Slumach." Does he believe in the curse? "I believe dozens died." Would it scare him? "I think it intrigues rather than scares, and it cautions. Anyone going in this area needs to be prepared for swift changes in weather, needs to be self-sufficient for days on end, needs to be brave, not stupid," Rick says.

"If the legend of Slumach is true—that he had nuggets the size of a man's fist—no one has found that lost mine. And anyone, young or old, with an ounce of Indiana Jones' spirit can't resist. There's gotta be something to it.

"There's a reason the lost mine has stayed lost. It's really hard to find. Otherwise, it would be called Slumach's found mine."

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