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'LOST CREEK' SEARCH FRUITLESS

PITT RIVER WILDS STILL HOLD SECRET ON PROSPECTOR'S FATE

BY BRUCE LARSEN

Jungle wilderness north of Pitt Lake has defeated the RCMP's first attempt to solve the tragic curse of the fabulous Lost Creek Mine.

A husky RCMP constable and a veteran guide plodded out of the Pitt Lake mountains Saturday convinced that the area will never give up its secret on the fate of the 21 prospectors who vanished hunting for the "hideous rockbound creek whose bed is lined with gold."

The searchers—Const. John Dowsett, 35, of Port Coquitlam detachment, and Stan Zepesky, 37, 2216 Ford Road, Pitt Meadows—insist that "only goats and bears can travel that grim country."

Dowsett and Zepesky were sent out to hunt Alfred Gaspard, 60, a Langley prospector who became No. 21 when he disappeared July, 1950, while hunting the near-legendary Eldorado, but senior RCMP officers were hoping that the hunt would produce something that would dissuade hordes of gold-hungry prospectors from flooding into the area each spring.

Five-day search

As they talked to a Daily Province reporter who met them when they got out to the top of Pitt Lake, the two men admitted "nothing we can say will reduce the attraction of the Lost Creek mine."

The reporter fully appreciated their words—on the 28-mile launch trip up Pitt Lake, a fellow passenger was Wilf Rogers, 24, 1508 Robson, who was starting his fourth annual Lost Creek search.

Both Dowsett and Zepesky had five-day beards bristling out of their faces. Zepesky gave the account of the five-day prowl because Dowsett's observations will go into his report to the RCMP.

"We spent the first night (Tuesday) at the B.C. Forest Products camp five miles north of the top of the lake," said Zepesky.

"At 7 a.m. Wednesday we caught the truck taking loggers into the woods. It took us 13 miles north and then we walked about half a mile further on a bulldozer trail. It was pouring rain.

'Lost Creek' search fruitless

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"That took us to the second canyon on the Pitt River. It's grim, tough country. To get through the canyon we had to walk like goats along the side of the rock. It was a sheer drop of 40 feet to the river—so far down our eyes couldn't focus on the waters.

"It was still raining hard and we had a difficult scramble on the rocks because of our caulked boots.

No sign of camp

"Once through the canyon we walked along a hillside for about 2500 yards and then along sandbars and flats for five miles—through blueberry tangles and under windfalls and matted brush.

"This was the general vicinity where Gaspard had the helicopter take him.

"There wasn't a single sign of his camp. No cans or old campfires. Horrible spring flooding on the Pitt had wiped out all the old landmarks I had used when I patrolled the area for B.C. Forest Service from 1936 to 1938.

"We saw where trees had been cut by prospectors crossing the river but the marks wouldn't necessarily be from Gaspard's axe."

At this point Dowsett broke in for an observation. He wondered why anyone would attempt a treacherous river crossing.

"The river, even at this time of year, was a roaring torrent," he said, "You could hear large rocks rumbling along the bed of the river."

Zepesky picked up again: "What makes searching more miserable is the fact that the river changes course along there each year.

Clothing soaked

"We mad up camp at this spot and were up until 2 a.m. drying out our Indian sweaters, pants, boots and packs. We had to dry out hemlock bows [sic] to sleep on. Boy, she was cold up there—a few hundred meters from the snowline with heavy frost on the ground.

"On Thursday we went up the valley five miles, searching both sides. We inspected all the flats. We worked on the natural assumption that anyone hiking the area would walk the line of the least resistance.

"Walking the gravel river flats was hard. Caulked boots nearly crippled our feet. We looked everywhere we could. The underbrush dug thorny 'devil's club' and all other tripe under the sun into our hides.

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"We were back to the same spot for Thursday night. We had another frost but we weren't wet for this sleep.

"On Friday we mooched along Blue Creek and other creeks criss-crossing the district. We thought we'd find evidence of Gaspard's food cache—he had a five-months supply—but we didn't. He'd just vanished from the face of the earth.

"We spent Friday night in a cabin left from '38. Two others I'd used had both burned."

What happened to Gaspard and the other 20 lost prospectors?

Zepesky and Dowsett have hundred of hunches. Drowning is their main theory. A fall on rocks, mountains slides or canyons could have been the cause. They think wild animals unlikely even though black bears are thick in the mountains and one grizzly was shot last summer near the B.C. Forest Products camp. A tumble into Pitt River could produce pneumonia because the glacier-fed stream's frigid year 'round.

Dowsett and Zepesky made their trip into the Pitt Lake mountains in record time, thanks to 40-pounds packs that held no more than sleeping bags, one axe, one rifle, two billy cans and beans.

"That country's grown up so bad it's 12 times worth than it was 12 years ago," moaned Zepesky. "If we'd stayed in two months our luck wouldn't have been any better. I wouldn't go back in for \$50 a day."

Does Zepesky believe Lost Creek Mine exists? No.

He scoffs at the facts as produced from records that an Indian named Slumach swaggered into New Westminster in 1890 with all the raw gold nuggets he could tote. Slumach refused to give his secret but packed two more loads from the mountains. He died on the gallows in 1891 for the murder of eight Indian women and he took his secret with him.