

# Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

Province 15 February 1947

## SACRIFICE ON THE TRAIL OF HOODOO GOLD

BY CLYDE GILMOUR

Fascinating new evidence has come to light in the never-ending chain of facts, memories and half-legends surrounding British Columbia's famed "hoodoo gold"—the Lost Creek Mine, with its half-century legacy of heroism, villainy and death.

The original story was told in an article entitled "Hoodoo Gold—Death of Tenderfeet," in the Jan. 19 issue of the Vancouver Daily Province Saturday Magazine.

Instantly it recalled the memory of an unforgettable evening to a Vancouver dentist, Dr. John Gansner, 6037 Sperling. Since then other British Columbians similarly have added small pieces to the ancient jigsaw puzzle of Lost Creek, although the whole story may never be fully documented.

Raaders of the previous article will recall Lost Creek as a fabulously rich gold mine believed to have been discovered about 1890 by a swaggering halfbreed Indian named Slumach. On several occasions the Indian was seen in New Westminster carrying a knapsack bulging with nuggets of raw gold, some of which he squandered on drunken parties.

### Death on the Gallows

White men tried to wrest his secret from Slumach, but he wouldn't talk. Finally he was convicted of the hunting-knife murder of a young squaw who had been his helper. Slumach was hanged at New Westminster on Jan. 16, 1891. Just before he went to the gallows he is said to have confessed that he had slain not just one squaw but eight—to make sure his secret would be protected.

In the more than 50 years that have followed, at least 20 people are known to have lost their lives, trying to find Slumach's hidden Eldorado. One of them, as mentioned in the January 18 article, was a boastful old prospector named "Volcaniv" Brown.

It is in connection with Volcanic Brown that Vancouver's Dr. John Gasner tells a true story that reads like something out of the pages of [a] melodrama. The story has everything Hollywood could ask for, except boy-meets-girl romance. It tells of sudden riches; stealth and pursuit in the wilderness; an ethical and emotional struggle ending with a sacrifice as gallant as any in the world of fiction.

The story goes back to an evening in the fall of 1936 or '37—Dr. Gansmer is not quite sure of the date.

## **Sacrifice on the Trail of Hoodoo Gold**

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He was living at Nelson in those days. With him on a deer hunting trip along the Kettle River were three Nelson cronies—W.E. Wasson, W.J. Brodie and the late George Ferguson, one of the districts best-known old-timers.

The four men were just beginning to cook supper in a snug cabin at Deer Creek, 25 miles north of Westbridge. They had plenty of food and a supply of good honest whiskey in those happy days before B.C. started “attenuating” its liquor.

There was a knock on the door.

Lantern in hand, Dr. Gasner opened the door and flashed the light on a tiny, skinny old man, roughly clad in typical prospector’s garb. His eyes, fired but twinkling with friendliness, squinted behind small lenses held in gold frames.

“Evening,” the old man grinned, “My name is Volcanic Brown. I am also known as “Doc” Brown to my friends—and to some of my enemies. I’m hungry, and I’m thirsty, and I am a bit lonely, too. Can I come in a spell?”

Dr. Gansner stood aside. “Come in,” he said.

Volcanic Brown—he must have been at least 70—gratefully sat down, spread out his hands above the cabin’s hearty fire.

Old-timer Ferguson took a huge mug and half-filled it with whisky. Volcanic drank it two majestic gulps. Almost immediately his cheeks reddened comfortably. He patted his skinny old stomach as the liquor warmed it.

The whiskey did more than take the chill out of him. It loosened his tongue—if any loosening had been needed. Grinning and nodding Volcanic Brown talked.

As he talked he ate—ate a meal which would have [fed] two ordinary [man] his size. Almost forgetting [to eat, they] listened in fascination and watched, bug-eyed, as the old prospector wolfed down an entire loaf of bread, an immense slice of cheese, a heaping bowl of rice and raisin pudding, a dozen strips of bacon and mug after mug of scalding coffee.

This is the story he told them—and for all his eccentricities, there was something of strength and manhood and sanity in the old man’s bearing that made the story ring true, fantastic though it sounded:

Volcanic Brown, a bachelor and a long-time resident of the Grand Forks district, was more than a prospector and soldier-of-fortune. He was a healer—a rough untutored herbalist who sometimes did things with natural medicines that the city slicker medicos couldn’t quite explain. That’s why he was sometimes called “Doc.”

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One day in the wilds, many years ago, he found an old Indian woman suffering with a chronic “incurable” ailment. Volcanic Brown “cured” her with one of his secret herbs. In almost speechless gratitude, the squaw passed on to him a precious secret.

She was the daughter of one of several Indian kinsmen of the halfbreed Slumach. Shortly before he was hanged, she said [that he told] her father how to find the Lost Creek Mine, where [one could] pick up “gold nuggets as big as hens eggs.”

Slumach had told the truth

His hands trembling with excitement Volcanic drew a crude but reasonably accurate map based on the squaw’s directions.

He went searching for the Lost Creek Mine.

And he found it!

—Sitting there with the four Nelson hunters, his seamy old face half in shadows, half illuminated by the crackling fire Volcanic Brown calmly told of picking up nuggets as big and as plentiful as the halfbreed murderer had described.

But Volcanic Brown, of course, would not say where the treasure was. When the hunters, half-kiddingly, asked him, he just grinned and nodded, then politely went on with his story.

He took an unspecified amount of the Lost Creek gold, he said, to a sister in Seattle. She traded it to a bank for cash and opened a fat savings account for Volcanic.

Naturally he decided to return to the mine for more gold. But something which he didn’t explain made it impossible for him to [go] for a long time. He’d been “busy,” that’s all.

Stories still heard around Nelson and Grand Forks hint that Volcanic Brown, who had a short temper on occasion, got in trouble with the law for attacking—with a shotgun—a Doukhobor trespasser who invaded his property in Grand Forks.

Finally though, the tough old prospector did go looking for Lost Creek again. And this is where his story suddenly enters into the realm of stealth, pursuit and high sacrifice.

Someone with greed in his soul followed Volcanic Brown into the wilderness—up the Fraser from New Westminster to the outlet of Pitt Lake, then 15 miles the whole length of the lake to the mouth of the Pitt River, then many miles upstream, then on and through the grim trails and chasms that led toward his Eldorado.

Volcanic knew that he was being followed because no mat-

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ter how often he deliberately changed his course, always at night he could see the smoke of his pursuer's camp fire some distance behind him.

Until finally one night—Volcanic did NOT see any distant smoke.

Most men might have jumped to the conclusion that the pursuer, wearying of the chase, had given up and turned back.

But in the mind of Volcanic Brown there burned a bright, stubborn curiosity—and the kind of courage it takes to walk calmly into a possible trap.

The old prospector did an almost incredible thing. He went back to investigate.

And he found his pursuer—groaning in a gully, with a broken leg.

To a man with Christian scruples, it was a dreadful dilemma that confronted Volcanic Brown.

And This is How He Solved It

Should he laugh at the enemy who had set out to plunder him, and walk away, leaving him to his just fate?

Or should he, in the name of common humanity help him back to civilization and medical aid, thus sacrificing all the toil and expense and discomfort he himself had borne in attempting to take a further haul from Lost Creek?

—The four Nelson hunters listened woodenly, almost in embarrassment, while Volcanic Brown told them of his decision.

He took his injured pursuer back to New Westminster, got him a doctor, did not even try to take any action against him. What would be the use? There is no law against following a man in the wilderness, as long as you did him no violence.

And that was as far as the life of Volcanic Brown had progressed on that autumn evening about ten years ago when the four Nelson hunters gave him food, and drink and shelter.

What follows has been already narrated in these pages—how Volcanic Brown returned from Lost Creek venture with feet so badly frozen he had to have several toes amputated, and how on his next attempt he swore he'd either fetch more of Slumach's hoodooed nuggets or never come back. And how he never came back,

Dr. Garner's story thus richly augments the still partly legendary chronicle of Volcanic Brown, and for the first time discloses that the old prospector actually did find Lost Creek.

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Brown made, in all, four trips there. The first trip was successful. The second was interrupted by his great-hearted sacrifice. The third ended in frozen feet and partial crippling. The fourth ended in silence and death.

Dr. Gansner says Brown was called “Volcanic” because he owned a low-grade copper mine known as “Old Volcanic” near Grand Forks.

Nor is this all of the story. One other ingredient was supplied by the squaw who, in her gratitude to her “healer” first told Volcanic Brown about Slumach’s treasure and how to find it.

Her own father, she told Brown, had tried to reach Lost Creek himself. Full of confidence and carrying Slumach’s own detailed directions, he had started out to bring back undreamed fortune.

But he never made it. Somewhere along the way, somewhere in the midst of Pitt Lake’s ring of sullen peaks and treacherous trails, the Indian fell and broke his hip.

He remained a cripple until he died.

“Hoodoo” gold?

Maybe not—but don’t try to argue with B.C.’s old-timers.

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