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Hoodoo Gold: Death of Tenderfeet

By Clyde Gilmour

British Columbians don't have to look outside their own province to find a dark and stirring story of hidden treasure and brutal murder and death on the gallows and hoodoo gold with a curse on it...

One day in 1890 a narrow-eyed cigar-smoking half-breed Indian named Slumach swaggered into New Westminster and embarked on a spree of spending and carousing.

He carried a knapsack bulging with nuggets of raw gold.

Instantly the town buzzed with questions. Where did he get it? By good fortune? Or by robbery? Or...by murder?

Had Slumach struck it rich, somewhere along the nearby maze of snow-capped peaks and wooded slopes known as the Pitt Lake Mountain Range?

Everyone wondered, but Slumach let them all keep right on wondering. In a few days he vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

Where Gold Lies in Great Handfuls

Less than three months later, the inscrutable Indian turned up again. Once more he toted as much raw gold as a strong man could carry.

Once more he went on a firewater orgy and this time the liquor loosened his tongue. He talked about a hideous rock-bound creek in the Pitt Lake Mountains where you could "pick up gold in handfuls, pieces as big as hens' eggs."

White men with greed and excitement in their eyes swarmed around him, peppered him with queries. It was no use. They tried flattery, They got him drunk. They pleaded, cajoled, threatened.

Slumach stolidly refused to tell them where his Eldorado was, beyond mentioning two words: "Lost Creek."

Finally he vanished again. In few weeks he reappeared once more laden with nuggets.

This time his manner was almost furtive. He spoke to no one. He drank alone, in moody silence.

A week later, a fishing vessel off the mouth of the Fraser brought up in the seine net a grisly specimen—the dead and battered body of a young Indian woman.

In the squaws pockets were several nuggets of pure gold.

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"Guilty" Was Verdict

Hard-eyed detectives grabbed Slumach. They were working on nothing but a hunch and the hunch worked. The Indian admitted that the dead girl had been his "helper"—it was his own word—on his latest trip to his hidden mine.

He had "rewarded" her a bit of gold. On the return journey, she had unfortunately "fallen" off their raft and been drowned.

That was Slumach's story, and he stuck with it.

The police had to let him go, they kept tab on him. And they acted swiftly, one day after the Fraser's waters cast up the body of another young squaw—this one with a long hunting knife protruding from her heart.

By coincidence that proved fatal to him. Slumach just then was back in New Westminster. He was in the middle of another drinking bout, scattering gold like pennies.

The knife was positively identified as his.

He was charged with murder, pleaded not guilty, and was tried before the late Justice Drake at the New Westminster fall assizes. The date was Nov. 11, 1980. You can still read the old copies for the details. The late Louis Eckstein was the crown prosecutor, assisted by Joseph Gaynor. A lawyer names Atkinson—initials not given in the records—defended Slumach.

The last of the jury members to survive was an undertaker, W. E. Eales, who died in 1934.

The trial lasted just one day. There were no defence witnesses. The verdict [sic] was out only 15 minutes. The verdict: "Guilty!" The sentence: hanging.

Eagerly white men again showered Slumach with questions. They were confident that the Indian, now in the shadow of death, would surrender his secret.

But he didn't. Tight-lipped to the last, Slumach died on the gallows on the morning of January 16, 1891 at the old provincial jail at New Westminster. Today the building is a technical school.

Did He Commit Eight Murders

Probably some of the stories that have drifted down across the years about Slumach can not be checked. Some seem nothing but rumour and legend. There is even a conflict as to the spelling of his name. Some versions give it as "Slummock"—probably a phonetic translation.

There is one story which old-timers repeated as gospel for years. They said that Slumach, just before climbing the hangman's steps, finally made an extraordinary admission.

He had slain not just one squaw but EIGHT.

He had got rid of them one at a time after each of his trips to the Lost Creek mine, silencing them forever to protect his secret.

Anyway, Slumach's death did not end the Lost Creek story. It merely started. It launched it on a tangled trail of violence and tragedy, which is believed to have claimed at least 20 lives in 50 years.

Once Again Gold is Found

A few months after Slumach paid the penalty for his crime or crimes, a rugged prospector named John Jackson arrived in New Westminster. He listened with gleaming eyes to the story of Lost Creek's golden riches. He studied maps, outfitted carefully, hired two native helpers, and headed for the heart of the Pitt Lake Mountain Range.

Weeks went by.

Then one day, John Jackson staggered into the Royal City once more—for the last time. He was alone. His eyes were feverish. His fingers shook as if with palsy.

But his gnarled hands clutched a heavy packsack which he guarded day and night.

A few days later, Jackson departed for San Francisco. His health broken by the terrible hardships he had endured, he died soon afterward.

Before death, however, Jackson wrote a fantastic letter to a friend in Seattle. It was something out of the pages of a medieval romance.

The letter, to a man named Shotwell, read in part as follows:

"After reaching the headquarters of Pitt Lake, I discharged my two guides and headed out into the mountains. I had been out two months, when my health became seriously affected by short rations. I decided to turn back.

"I climbed on the top of a sharp ridge to get my bearings, and found myself looking down into a little valley or canyon I had not seen previously. With some difficulty I reached the little creek lying in the valley.

"Now comes the interesting part. I had only 'n prospector's small pan, but I found color immediately. I knew I had struck it rich.

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

"In going up the creek I came to the place where the bedrock was bare. Here I gathered gold by the handful, some pieces as large as walnuts.

I sized up the creek and learned that beyond all doubt, I had found Slumach's Lost Creek Mine.

"I traced the course of the creek to where it flows into a subterranean tunnel and is lost.

"Then I packed out all the gold I could carry. When I sold it in 'Frisco it brought me close to $10,000.

"Now the doctor has told me I am liable to drop dead at any time.

"Don't give up, Shotwell, You'll be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams. Don't give up.

Shotwell, so the story goes, was too old and city soft to go hunting the mine himself. But his friend's deathbed legacy yielded him an immediate $1000. For that amount he sold Jackson's letter—and a rough map which had come with it—to another Seattle man. The latter greedily headed north.

Part of Map Lost

He returned months later, a failure, after narrowly escaping death while crossing a mountain torrent.

In the struggle to save himself, part of the precious map was torn off.

In the years that followed, the letter and the mutilated chart changed hands many times.

In 1912, a four-man party headed by Hugh Murray, an old-timer of New Westminster area, searched more than two months in vain. But they did find an aged Indian woman camped at the head of Pitt Lake, and she told him a blood quickening story.

Yes, she well remembered [meeting] a prospector named John Jackson. Yes, she had seen him. He had camped one night, and while he slept she peered curiously into his pack-sack.

It was heavy with raw gold.

Gradually the chronicle of Lost Creek assumed almost legendary proportions. And there have always been sceptics who scoffed at the whole story.

In the summer of 1937 a boastful old prospector known as "Volcanic Brown" studied Hugh Murrays' copy of Jackson's original map and set out on a try of his own.

He returned with feet so badly frozen he had to have several

toes amputated.

In the spring of '38 the undaunted Brown went forth again, bragging that this time he'd either find Lost Creek or never come back.

He never came back.

Today the secret still lies locked in the desolate immensity of B.C.'s most rugged mountain fastness. It may rest there forever.

It's easy enough to reach the jumping-off place where the search begins.

You go by boat 10 miles up the Fraser from New Westminster to the outlet of Pitt Lake, then 15 miles the whole length to the mouth of the Pitt River. Then 18 or 20 miles to the point where the river is no longer navigable.

From there on you go on foot, over forbidding trails and chasms like those traversed by novelist James Hilston;s travellers in Tibet, on the road to Shangri-La.

Slumach's ill-starred mine itself, according to John Jackson's dying directions, is situated somewhere above the 4000 foot level of a nameless mountain.

Last summer five young North Vancouver men almost went looking for Lost Creek in a new venture. Various circumstances made them change their plans at the last moment. Since then, one of them, Brian Loughnan, former Canadian army officer and editor of British Columbia Digest has lost a foot from wartime injuries.

Loughnan's four buddies still plan to go the first summer they can arrange a long enough holiday. They are the boat-building Phillips brothers—Jack, Vic, Ray and Randy.

One man who is getting from hearing about the Lost Creek mine is Vancouver's Frank E. Woodside, for the last 16 years manager of the B.C.and Yukon Chamber of mines.

Mr. Woodside, intimately associated with mining in this province for a half century, thinks "maybe a score of people" have lost their lives hunting for Slumach's treasure.

Whether or not the mine is a myth, Mr. Woodside advises anyone seeking it to be sensible and cautious. Says he:

"Don't go it alone.

"Take along at least one responsible and experienced prospector.

"Otherwise the attempt could mean just one thing, 'death to tenderfeet.'

At least one venerable citizen still remembers the trial of Slumach. This is 94-year-old John McMurphy, 905 London Street, New Westminster.

Mr. McMurphy, a retired immigration inspector, is a son of a sergeant in Royal Engineers who came to B.C. in 1859.

He once tried to find the Lost Creek himself—and failed.

Old-timer McMurphy now believes that if such a mine does exist, it's more likely to be further to the west than the location of most previous searches. He thinks it might be somewhere between the head of Pitt Lake and Mission.

Most prospectors, however, have long since crossed it of their list of targets.

Lost Creek's gold is "hoodoo" gold, and they want none of it.

Notes:

Hoodoo—bringer of back luck; be a source of misfortune.