

## R.A. "DOC" BROWN (? – 1931 )

Robert Allen Brown, unlike his counterparts in this legend, has never been sealed in a maze of speculation and uncertainty. In fact, by all standards, he was an extremely colourful and flamboyant character who's escapades had earned him an indelible reputation long before he ever ventured into the rugged mountains beyond Pitt Lake.

There is so much already known and written about Brown that anything exceeding a brief biography would provide little more than entertaining historical information, irrelevant to the confines of his status in the legend.

For the better part of his last 40 years Brown considered Grand Forks B.C. to be his home and was very well known throughout the entire area. It was his adventures in this area that ultimately earned him his two most infamous and recognizable nick names of "Volcanic" and "Doc."

Grand Forks residents nick named him "Volcanic" Brown after he staked a claim on an outcropping of vulcanized rock several miles north of Grand Forks on the Granby River. He was optimistic that a town would be built to accommodate the mining on his claim. However, the mineral content was not high enough to warrant anything other than a small scale mining effort. Today the site is still referred to by historians, prospectors and some locals as "Volcanic City."

In addition to being a prospector he was widely known and respected throughout British Columbia and Washington State as a natural healer which earned him his second alias "Doc" Brown. It is widely rumored that as a secondary source of income he also performed back room abortions which inadvertently reinforced the labelling of this second alias.

His third and least known alias "Sunset" was supposedly given to him because of his wandering lifestyle and countless prospecting expeditions. I have not confirmed the accuracy of this story simply because the supposition does sound reasonable.

Whatever his early background may have been, by the late 1800s Brown had already acquired a reputation for "having a nose" for mineral deposits. In 1892 he staked the Copper Mountain property near Princeton, B.C., and subsequently sold it for \$42,000. Copper Mountain,

until recently, was an operating mine and then traveling the Hope-Princeton Highway one can not help but see the massive mountain of tailings that have been produced by the mine over the years.

What year Brown began prospecting in the Pitt Lake area has yet to be determined but he was obviously convinced that the legend was real or he would not have continued searching for a period of at least five years. Early accounts say that Brown started his quest armed with only the infamous "Jackson Letter" and his prospecting instincts.

The aging prospector first gained public notoriety for his exploits in the Pitt Lake area in November 1928 when he fell victim to frost bite and had to amputate one of his own toes and portions of another two on his left foot.

Through sheer tenacity and willpower, this time-toughened old prospector unassisted limped his way several miles to Seven Mile Glacier before being spotted. British Columbia Provincial Police Constable "Spud" Murphy, Alvin Paterson, after whom Alvin is named, Caleb Gardner and Harry Corder helped Brown off the Glacier and into civilization for medical treatment.

The last time anyone saw Brown alive was in the spring of 1931 when Alvin Paterson and Dave Keton, in charge of the Federal Fish Hatchery near Alvin met him heading up Seven Mile Glacier as they were coming down.

In November 1931, when Brown did not return from his prospecting trip at the pre-determined time, British Columbia Provincial Police Constable "Spud" Murphy, Game Warden George Stevenson, and experienced trappers Bill and LeRoy McMartin were dispatched to search for him. For three weeks these men battled their way through some of the roughest country in B.C. enduring relentless attacks from the cruelest winter storms imaginable before being forced to call off the search for the colorful old pioneer on November 20, 1931.

For their humanitarian idealism and loyalty under those extraordinary circumstances these men deserve the respect and admiration of anyone who has or will explore the areas they once trekked. The search for Brown was vividly described in several newspapers articles in 1932 and has since been recited in a wide variety of written accounts. The following article is from page 3 of March 20, 1932 edition of the Province newspaper.

BC Archives and other government agencies contacted were unable to locate a copy of Stevenson's report. The only non-specific reference to the search that I have

been able to locate is recorded on page 45 of the 1933 B.C. Provincial Sessional Papers.

One would assume that Constable Murphy would have also filed a report on his participation in the search. Again I have been unable to locate any British Columbia Provincial Police documentation of the subject.

All accounts post-dating the search claim that Stevenson and McMartin found Brown's last camp in what local trappers called Porcupine Valley. At the camp they are said to have found a collapsible pup tent, some cooking utensils, a double-barrelled shotgun, a notebook containing herbal remedies, and a glass jar containing eleven ounces of course gold. The gold is said to have contained traces of quartz and was believed to have been hammered out of a solid vein. Several of the written accounts also identify a stone fire place located at Brown's camp site and that his shotgun was loaded. Although it is generally accepted that Stevenson and McMartin did find Brown's last camp it is interesting to note that Macey's newspaper account neglected to mention this monumental detail.

One speculation as to why the camp contents were not included in Macey's article is because the British Columbia Police and Game Commission withheld the information. They did not want to create a gold rush and have a stampede of inexperienced fortune hunters converging on the area and creating unmanageable chaos and mayhem.

A second speculation is that the contents of Brown's camp were not initially reported or recorded because the searchers themselves had decided to independently look for the source of Brown's gold at a later date.

There is no evidence to confirm either of these speculations and one scenario is just as conceivable as the other. I was hesitant on documenting the second scenario because of the negative implications, however, after serious consideration, decided to do so only because it has been widely discussed and has become an established part of the legend itself.

Macey's article identifies Brown's camp as being located at Stave Creek while other accounts identify it as being located in Porcupine Valley. One can only assume that Stave Creek and Porcupine Valley are the same location. I have consulted with several government agencies including the BC Archives, the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks and the Ministry of Forest, in an attempt to positively identify the locations of Homestead Glacier, Seven Mile Glacier, Porcu-

pine Valley, Stave Creek and Kennedy Creek. None of the government agencies were able to identify any of these locations.

With the exception of Seven-Mile Creek which is officially known as Corbold Creek, all other names are believed to have been common names given to specific locations by local prospectors and trappers and were never officially recorded. One official of the Parks branch did suggest that Stave Creek may have been a local name given to one of the small unnamed creeks that flow into the headwaters of Upper Stave River. It was further suggested that because the Parks branch was also unable to identify either Seven Mile Glacier or Homestead Glacier that they too were local names given to smaller unnamed ice-packs rather than being actual glaciers which would again explain why were not officially recorded.

According to Macey, Stevenson wanted to continue the search over to Fire Mountain and into the Harrison Valley but the search was called off before that happened.

It is not unlikely that Brown would have ventured over to Fire Mountain in search of gold. He undoubtedly knew about the gold that was discovered there in 1897 and may have in fact have partaken in the initial prospecting frenzy. Had Brown been in the Fire Mountain area he would have known that the buildings at the old mine site would offer him adequate temporary protection from the hostile weather conditions.

Under the circumstances Stevenson may have also thought that Brown had decided to seek refuge at the federal fish hatchery at Harrison Lake rather than walking back in the direction of Pitt Lake. Both the Harrison Lake hatchery and the Pitt River hatchery at Alvin were operated by the federal government from 1916 to 1936, with the Pitt River hatchery being under the control of the Harrison Lake hatchery.

Unless some prospector happens to stumble upon Brown's remains, we will never know where or how he died. I personally doubt that Brown, whether dead or alive at the time, was actually very far from his camp when Stevenson and McMartin arrived.

With the wilderness survival skills he undeniably possessed it is extremely unlikely that Brown would have ventured very far away for anything without his shotgun. Additionally, given his prospecting savvy it is difficult to understand why he would have left a jar full of gold in an unprotected campsite for anyone who may happen by to see.



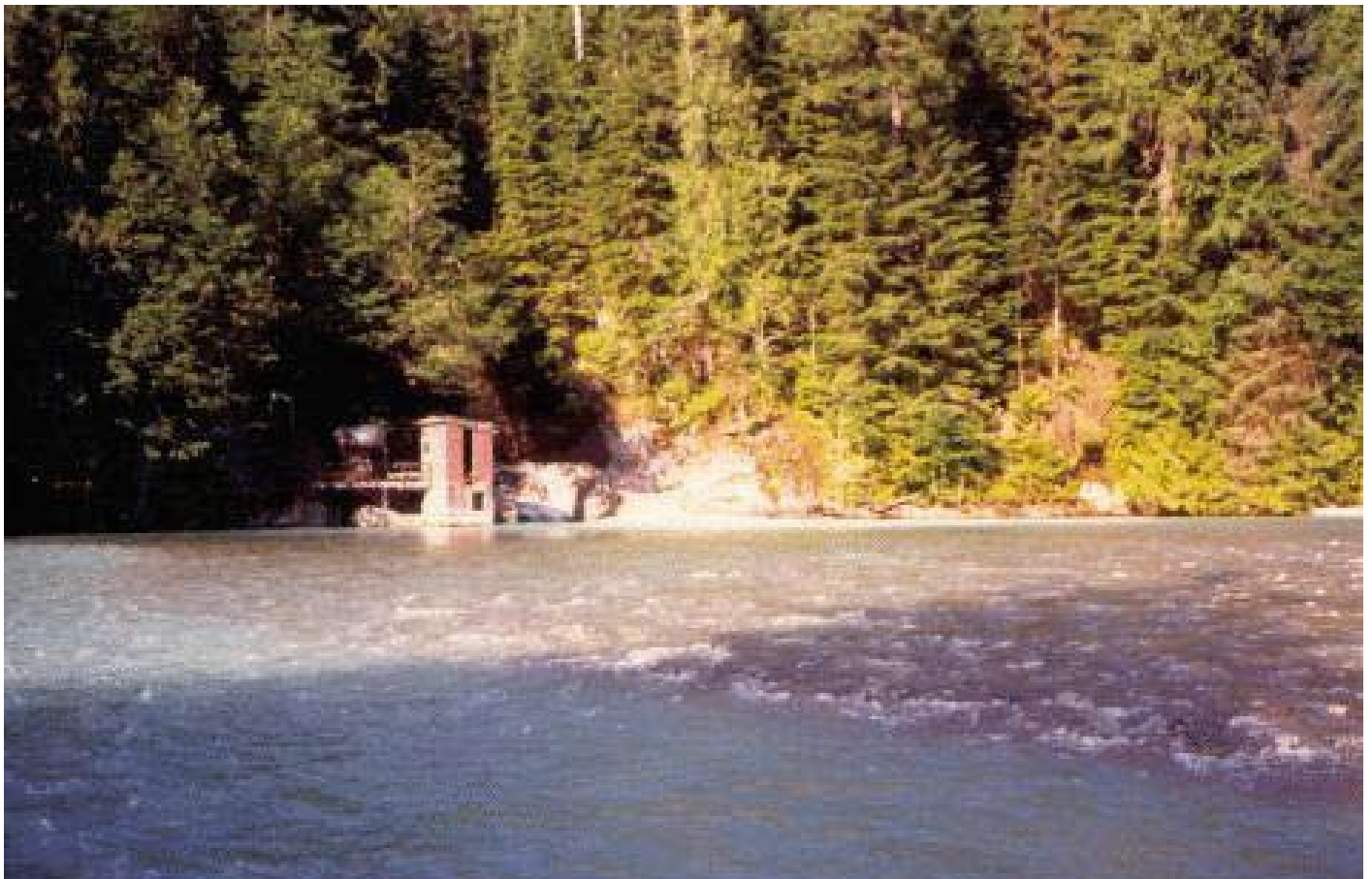
*Aerial photograph taken in the general vicinity of where Brown's last camp is believed to have been located. The "spot" in the photo is the reflection of an unidentified object on the ground.*



*Aerial photograph showing the lake at the foot of Stave Glacier. The lake is often referred to as "Upper Stave Lake." "Doc" Brown's last camp was in this general area.*



*Photograph taken from a logging landing looking towards the headwaters of Corbould Creek and Remote Peak area.*



*Photograph of the Federal fish hatchery on Corbould Creek near Alvin. After travelling through a subterranean channel Corbould Creek boils to the surface just to the right of the small observation building in the background.*

In 1984, an exciting discovery was made by an individual searching for the source of Brown's gold. A few hundred feet up a little creek that flows east into the headwaters of the Upper Stave River, near the lake at the foot of Stave Glacier, a stone oven was located. Although the site was well concealed and overgrown with vegetation, an ensuing search revealed a prospecting hammer and a cast iron frying pan.

The stone oven offers proof that this site was not meant to be just a temporary campsite. Anyone taking the time to build a stone oven intended on staying there for an extended period of time.

In 1987, an old mortar and pestle were found in the vicinity of Misty Lake. Brown, being a natural healer would likely have carried a mortar and pedestal for grinding and mixing herbal remedies, as well as for refining ore samples. The campsite and the artifacts being in such close proximity to each other does lead one to speculate with a high degree of confidence that both belonged to Brown and that he was prospecting somewhere in the general vicinity between Stave Glacier and Misty Lake.

In mid 1987 a small log cabin on Golden Creek, just inside the boundaries of Golden Ears Provincial Park was destroyed during the construction a logging spur road. Golden Creek is a tributary of Corbold Creek. The cabin was small, measuring about 12 feet by 10 feet and was in an advanced state of decay. The only thing that the cabin contained was a variety of old traps.

To the best of my knowledge no other cabin has been discovered in or near the Corbold Creek area and according to the Parks branch there are no cabins on record in that area of Golden Ears Park. The only two historical cabins they have on record within the boundaries of Garibaldi Park are located near Garibaldi Lake and Cheakamus Lake. Under the circumstances there is little doubt that the demolished cabin was the one Brown had been using.

I was given the opportunity to accompany two prospectors to a location within sight of the headwaters of Golden Creek. Although not proving to be of significant research value to the legend, the location itself is worth noting. The site contained a huge boulder about the size of a small house. It did look somewhat like a tent but did not have any markings on it as Jackson's letter describes. When the two prospectors first visited the site in the 1970's they found a prospectors hammer and a rusted gold pan a few hundred feet from the boulder but nothing else. On this occasion we combed a large

area radiating out from the boulder and were surprised at the amount of old tin cans we found buried or hidden under rocks in many different spots. The tin cans had lead circles on the bottom of them which identifies the site as being active around the turn of the century. The only treasure discovered on this trip was an extremely well preserved empty tin of Borden's Kiln Dried Milk from Ireland which was also identified as circa, turn of the century.

However historically intriguing, this site is it does not contain the elements required to add significant value to the legend. It is more than likely, given what was found that this location was frequently used as an overnight stop by a multitude of early trappers and prospectors as it is situated just off of the Corbold trail leading to the upper Stave River.

Some of the early written accounts about Brown state that people who knew him said he had found a small source of gold during his prospecting expeditions but claimed that his last trip was to recover Platinum. As Brown was well known for his prospecting abilities this little twist of unconfirmed rumour about platinum should not be totally disregarded until it can be proven one way or the other. There is little doubt that Brown found gold and may have identified a source of platinum as well. However, all indications are that his source is somewhere between the Upper Stave River and Lillooet River and not between the Upper Pitt River and the Upper Stave River.

No one knows for sure how old Brown was when he fell victim to an environment of his own design but most believe that he was at least in his late 70s. Besides being a memorial to the legend itself the eccentric escapades of R.A. Brown are a time honoured tribute to the many nameless prospectors who steadfastly endured many hardships and misfortunes to help form the foundation of British Columbia's mining history.

**SEARCH UNSUCCESSFUL!**  
**But It Was a Glorious New Trail These**  
**Mushers Blazed in Teeth of November Blizzard**

by Ralph Macey

IT HAS BEEN SNOWING FOR SIXTEEN CONSECUTIVE DAYS - A blizzard still whips down from the north on an icy wind - the trail is buried TEN FEET DEEP - snowshoes sink a yard at every step - food has run out - civilization is five days MARCH AWAY.

TWO MEN ply a pale fire with frozen wood as they crouch in the shelter of a flimsy wickety of fir branches. In front of them frowns the sixty-foot lip of STAVE GLACIER. ABOUT THEM, in the haze of falling snow, stretch miles and miles of steep valleys, ridges, gullies and MOUNTAIN TOPS.

THE DATE IS NOVEMBER 20, 1931 - the climax of an unsuccessful THREE WEEKS SEARCH in the WINTER'S WORST WEATHER over a hundred-mile section of British Columbia's roughest country for the missing prospector, "Volcanic" BROWN of Upper Pitt Lake. THE TWO MEN ARE GAME WARDEN GEORGE STEVENSON and Guide LeRoy McMARTIN - on duty.

ALREADY they have tramped for FOURTEEN days in the teeth of the blizzard, explored SEVEN-MILE GLACIER and KENNEDY CREEK, crossed HOMESTEAD GLACIER and examined the dangerous crevasses of the twenty mile STAVE GLACIER, between SEVEN Mile and Upper STAVE.

BUT they ARE NOT THROUGH YET. On that day, NOVEMBER 20, STEVENSON went out FOR MEAT. TWO PORCUPINES WERE ALL he could get. ROASTING the porcupine legs, STEVENSON immediately planned to go ON, OVER FIRE MOUNTAIN and INTO HARRISON VALLEY. They attempted to SCALE the FACE of STAVE GLACIER. The towering lip OVERHUNG TOO FAR. It was impassable. Only then did they TURN BACK.

down in five minutes.

FROM the tentless camps east of HOMESTEAD they made daily sorties into the hazardous expanse of STAVE GLACIER, testing their way with long poles and peering INTO the main crevasses. The blizzard became so SEVERE that they "holed up" for three days. Their food ran low and they returned to SEVEN-MILE for more.

As they climbed to the 6000-foot heights above STAVE GLACIER again they were "holed up" for two more days at KENNEDY CREEK, and again food ran low. Instead of returning they made a dash FOR STAVE CREEK, where BROWN used to pitch camp in summer. It was here that the grub finally gave out. It was here that STEVENSON shot the porcupine and attempted to cross FIRE MOUNTAIN. And it was here that the bulging face of the glacier baffled them.

FIVE days later STEVENSON was back at headquarters, ready for another routine "job."

**BACK AGAIN AT HEADQUARTERS**

A slightly-built and youngish man, he has spent twenty years hunting and surveying in Northern Canada, and is but one of the many expert trail mushers in the service of the department throughout British Columbia.

Of his twenty-one-day hike through the STAVE SNOWS he has little to say except to praise the endurance of Murphy and the McMARTIN boys, and to observe that next time he will take up a month's grub.

"It was slow going - three or four miles a day. Our 12 by 48 shoes would sink to our knees, even without our packs. I've NEVER seen it snow so thick and fast anywhere; we couldn't see a yard sometimes. Cold? Well, at night in the open we couldn't sleep

And they made it - on a handful of rice, a small cache of dried GOATS MEAT and tight belts.

**SEARCHERS BLAZE NEW TRAIL**

"SEARCH UNSUCCESSFUL" - that was the word to headquarters. That was all the public heard about it. EVEN STEVENSON'S REPORT adds only a few casual details.

BUT old mushers, especially those who have been above PITT LAKE after the fabled lost Indian gold mine, know that STEVENSON and McMARTIN accomplished a trail feat in keeping with traditions.

R.A. BROWN "Volcanic" BROWN was missed in September by the DOMINION HATCHERY at Alvin. On NOVEMBER 2, GAME WARDEN STEVENSON and Constable Eugene Murphy were sent out by the VANCOUVER office. At Alvin they picked up LeRoy McMARTIN and Bill McMARTIN, two husky young woodsmen, and with bare necessities and no tents, headed for BROWN'S cabin on SEVEN-MILE, fifteen miles north. It took them two days OVER the steep trail and AGAINST the driving sleet.

On the second day STEVENSON'S 30.06 rifle brought down a MOUNTAIN GOAT to swell the rations. Constable Murphy wrenched his knee on a rockslide and it was decided to split the party. Murphy, despite his knee, and Bill McMARTIN commenced a two weeks search of the trails in the SEVEN-MILE basin. They returned to Alvin for provisions, and finally came out on NOVEMBER 16 to leave more food for the other two.

MEANWHILE, STEVENSON and LeRoy tackled the STAVE GLACIER trail to HARRISON, undeterred by the continuous snowfall. To reach the big glacier they had to detour OVER the mountain, climbing a 2000-foot slope to HOMESTEAD GLACIER. This climb took them two days, breaking trail one day and hauling up their packs the next. On the return trip the snow had hardened and they slid

much - had to keep up the fire. LeRoy was great, ready for anything and wouldn't say quit. We hoped BROWN was snowed up somewhere, and so we fired single shots regularly, but everything was as still as the dead.

"Volcanic" BROWN is acknowledged another victim claimed by the inscrutable wilderness of British Columbia. BUT he was NOT entirely forsaken. Along the timberline from SEVEN-MILE to Upper STAVE is a new trail of dated blazes, made by STEVENSON and McMARTIN as they battled a blizzard for sixteen days in NOVEMBER, 1931.



Last known photograph of "Doc" Brown after he had amputated his own toes in 1928.

*Sunday Province 20 March 1932*

“Search Unsuccessful!” But It Was a Glorious New Trail These Mushers Blazed in the Teeth of NovemberBlizzard.

By Ralph Macey

It has been snowing for sixteen consecutive days—a blizzard still whips down from the north on a icy wind—the trail is buried ten feet deep—snowshoes sink a yard at every step—food has run out—civilization is five day’s march away. Two men ply a pale fire with frozen wood as they crouch in the shelter of a flimsy wickey of fir branches. In front of them frowns the sixty-foot lip of Stave Glacier. About them, in the haze of falling snow, stretch miles and miles of steep valleys, ridges, gullies and mountain tops.

The date is November 20, 1931—the climax of an unsuccessful three week’s search in the winter’s worse weather over a hundred-mile section of British Columbia’s roughest country for the missing prospector. “Volcanic” Brown of Upper Pitt Lake.

The two men are Game Warden George Stevenson and Guide LeRoy McMartin—on duty. Already they have tramped for fourteen days in the teeth of the blizzard, explored Seven-Mile and Kennedy Creeks, crossed Homestead Glacier and examined the dangerous crevasses of the twenty-mile Stave Glacier, between Seven-Mile and Upper Stave.

But they are not through yet. On that day, November 20, Stevenson went out for meat. Two porcupines were all he could get. Roasting the porcupine legs, Stevenson immediately planned to go on, over Fire Mountain into Harrison Valley.

They attempted to scale the face of the Stave Glacier—the towering lip overhung too far. It was impassable. Only then did they turn back. And they made it—on a handful of rice, a small cache of dried goat’s meat and tight belts.

*Searchers blaze new trail*

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Meanwhile Stevenson and LeRoy tackled the Stave Glacier trail to Harrison, undeterred by the continuous snowfall. To reach the big glacier they had to detour over the mountain, climbing the 2000 foot slope to Homestead Glacier. This climb took them over two days, breaking the one day, and hauling up their packs the next. On the return trip the snow had hardened and they slid down on five minutes.

From tentless camps, east of Homestead they made daily sorties into the hazardous expanse of Stave Glacier, testing their way with long poles and peering into the main crevasses. The blizzard became so severe that they were “holed up” for three days. Then food ran low and they returned to Seven-Mile for more.

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*Back again at headquarters*

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# REPORT OF THE PROVINCIAL GAME COMMISSIONER

1931

## GENERAL SUPERVISION

While the work of practically every Game Warden has been extremely good, a number of them have made patrols in execution of their duties or in assisting the Provincial Police in searches for lost men, which would not only make interesting stories, but which would be a revelation as to the hardships which Game Wardens endure. It would be impossible to mention all of these patrols as there are too many of them, and it would not be fair to single out any individual case. It may be said, however, that some of the patrols extended from periods of two weeks to as much as two months, and they were carried on in spite of blinding snowstorms, often lasting for days at a time, and sometimes in the course of their travels high mountains and occasionally treacherous glaciers had to be crossed. Sometimes, for days travel was through forests with no trail. Occasionally packs had to be dropped and trails broken ahead and then a return made for the packs. Snowshoeing was unusually bad and often the cold was excessive, even down to 60 degrees below zero. It takes hardy, determined men to carry out their duties under such conditions. Nevertheless, not one man failed in his mission, though they frequently risked their lives in so doing. Their work has been a great credit to the Department.