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OLD SLUMACH

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If called upon to select one of the most interesting characters I have ever met, the name of 92-year-old Harry List, an old friend of many years comes to mind. We first made each other's acquaintance in Chilliwack, B.C., where the writer served on the city detachment and Harry, who is a veteran of World War I, still lives.

I grew to know him as an ardent cribbage player, an enthusiastic gardener and certainly one of the most prolific storytellers imaginable, on subjects ranging from his exploits in World War I to his varied and colourful experiences in northern British Columbia and elsewhere in that province.

On a recent trip to my old "stamping grounds" I visited Harry at the home of his daughter and my curiosity became aroused by a rather unusual looking article suspended near the massive stone fireplace in the living room. I asked my old friend what it represented.

"That," Harry told me, "was the tomahawk of Old Slumach," and the bright glint in his eyes tipped me off that thereby hung another tale. What follows concerns rather ironically perhaps, another unforgettable character, but for entirely different reasons, and a bizarre account of the fabulous Lost Creek gold mine.

Estimates range between 20 and 30 the number of prospectors, some seasoned and others not much more than amateur gold hunters, who have lost their lives over a period of 60 years in a vain attempt to locate this gold mine which allegedly nestles deep among the treacherous Pitt Lake mountains about 45 miles north of Vancouver.

Indian legend has it that the ghost of an Indian or half-breed named Slumach who struck it rich by finding the mine and died on the gallows at New Westminster for murder on January 16, 1891, lured these unfortunate gold seekers to disaster and death. His curse, so the story goes, persists to this day.

Many are the legends, chiefly of Indian origin, surrounding Slumach and repeated most by those incurable enthusiasts who live in hopes of some day finding the lost Eldorado. However, regardless of the authenticity of these stories, two irrefutable facts stand out: the persistence of these tales have driven many a prospector and miner to a lonely and violent death in the wild Pitt Lake mountains and the New Westminster *Daily Columbian* as well as the *Victoria Colonist* for January 16, 1891, record the hanging of Slumach at New

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Westminster. Mr. Justice Tyrwhitt Drake presided at the trial.

The murder of the half-breed Louis Bee, the prolonged search and ultimate surrender of Slumach as well as the ensuing trial were dealt with at some length by the *Daily Columbian* and an excerpt from the September 9, 1890 edition may prove of interest:

“Louis Bee, a half-breed, is deliberately shot and killed by an insane Indian named Slumach at Lillooet Slough. A terrible unpremeditated murder was committed yesterday afternoon at a point on Lillooet Slough, not far from the Pitt River, and some two and a half miles above the Pitt River Bridge. An Indian named Slumach, aged about 60 years, was hunting in this neighbourhood, and coming out of the bush, with his double-barrelled shotgun in his hand, found several other Indians trout fishing on the banks of the Slough.

“A half-breed named Louis Bee sauntered up to Slumach and asked him in a casual way what he was shooting around there. Without a moment’s warning or any preliminary sign of anger, Slumach instantly levelled his gun at Bee and fired. Just before the discharge of the piece, Bee held up his hands and begged Slumach not to shoot. The distance between the two men was so short that the whole charge entered the victim’s body, just under the right armpit behind the shoulder blade. Death was instantaneous, and Bee fell without a groan and lay weltering in his blood, while his murderer coolly proceeded to reload his piece.

“One of the Indians who witnessed the awful deed immediately fled, not only to give the alarm, but from motives of personal safety. He describes the countenance of the murderer after the act was committed as resembling that of an incarnate demon. Slumach is insane, and what he had done seemed to have kindled all the wild disorderly fancies of madness in the maniac’s brain and lit up his eyes with a ferocious gleam that boded no good to anyone whom he should encounter when his gun was reloaded. Slumach slowly retreated to the impenetrable and pathless jungle surrounding that part of the Lillooet Slough and plunging into its gloomy recesses was lost in sight and is still at large.”

Subsequent editions of the *Daily Columbian* cover the coroner’s inquest, organization of the posse and search for Slumach including his final arrest on Oct. 25, 1890.

“Yesterday he sent his nephew for the Indian Agent who went up to Pitt Lake accompanied by two Indian policemen and to them the desperate fugitive quietly surrendered. He had eaten nothing for several days, and was in a terrible state of

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emaciation and thoroughly exhausted. His ammunition was all gone and his clothing in rags, and he presented a very wild and weatherworn aspect.”

Perusal of these particular records do not however, include any reference to Slumach’s finding an immense deposit of gold in the Pitt Lake country, or substantiate the account of Slumach returning year after year from the wild mountain country he knew so well with bags of virgin gold the size of walnuts. However the opinion of fellow Indians concerning Slumach and his unpredictable actions is clear—September 19, 1890:

“The Indians say that Slumach has always acted strangely and at irregular intervals would withdraw himself alone into the forests ... and remain there for weeks, reappearing at the end of those periods of aberration looking haggard, and more like a savage beast than a human being.

“In spite of his lunacy however, the maniac never displayed any signs of hostility, nor gave indications that his freedom was dangerous to human life ... he is described as a very powerful man and is rather dreaded by his Indians friends ... Slumach is looked upon by the Indians as a very wonderful person, being able to endure the greatest hardships without apparent inconvenience.

“As a hunter he is without equal, and he is adept at making fires in the primitive manner, using two sticks and rubbing the same together until the friction ignites the wood. He is said to be without fear of man or beast, and to be possessed of a nature vicious in the extreme.”

And finally regarding the hanging—January 16, 1891:

“Slumach walked firmly up the steps leading to the platform and faced the crowd below. The hangman quickly adjusted the noose and Father Morgan commenced a prayer. Then the black cap was put on, and at 8 o’clock exactly the bolt was drawn, the trap fell and Slumach had paid the penalty for his crime.”

So much for the facts of the case as obtained from the record, but there have been many persons who vouched that the story of Slumach’s hidden gold is equally true and that the full story of his source of wealth was not revealed until after his death, being zealously guarded in order to deter would-be gold seekers.

The Lost Creek gold mine legend begins with the reported finding by Slumach of a rich gold creek in the treacherous Pitt Lake country. Slumach, a resident of the Silver Creek

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Indian Reserve near the bottom of Pitt Lake, was making fairly frequent trips to the boom town of New Westminster well before 1890.

His appetite for firewater and the company of loose females sparked much drunken revelry in that city, paid for by the glittering chunks of virgin gold which he brought back with him. When his funds were exhausted, Slumach would return to the wild mountain country and according to Indian legend which described him as “an incarnate devil,” he killed at least eight squaws whom he forced or persuaded over a period of time to accompany him into the mountains, carrying his supplies and packing out his gold, travelling along a secret Indian trail known only to him.

Since these female slaves had visited the mine the murderous Slumach found it necessary to silence them forever to keep his secret. The body of one young squaw was found floating in Pitt Lake, but the wily Slumach claimed she had accidentally fallen off the raft on which they were crossing the lake. The bodies of the others were never accounted for.

Another story concerns Slumach’s gold bullets which he would often use in hunting game or disposing of his victims. One Indian swore that he managed to extract pieces of the precious metal from a stump in the forest into which old Slumach had been seen firing practice shots. Slumach was extremely unpopular with other Indians or half-breeds who feared his violent temper and envied his uncanny ability to entice away their women.

Nevertheless in spite of his uncanny aptitude in eluding all pursuers who tried to follow him into the mountain wilderness where he always succeeded in losing them in the maze of canyons and cliffs, he finally met his nemesis at the hands of the law.

Another Indian tale goes that after Slumach was arrested, several unscrupulous officials tried to pressure him into revealing his secret in the hope of having his hanging commuted to a life sentence. There is nothing to support such a charge although the enigmatic old Indian’s reply in the Chinook language to queries regarding his mine’s location was terse and to the point - nika memloose mine memloose - when I die mine dies.

Some witnesses to Slumach’s hanging said he kept mute to the end regarding his source of wealth. Indians however, say he whispered his secret to his son who visited him in his death cell and gave him adequate information to guide him to the rich creek of gold.

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Expeditions into the Pitt country to rediscover the mine have been quite numerous but they usually met with devastating results. One of the earliest involved a California miner named John Jackson who appeared in New Westminster not long after Slumach's death. He had apparently picked up information by talking to Indians and after familiarizing himself with maps of the area, hiked into the mountains.

The story is that Jackson did in fact find gold - about \$10,000 worth - but he returned a broken man from his privations and returned to California to die. On his deathbed he wrote a letter to a friend and attached a map of the Pitt Lake area, giving the location of the gold mine.

The letter and map allegedly written by Jackson turns up periodically in the hands of new searchers for the hidden lode and inspires new attempts to pinpoint the mine's location. Partnerships have been formed and financial backing given other enterprising efforts to relocate the site of Slumach's Lost Creek gold mine with similarly disappointing results.

The legend regarding the ghost of old Slumach haunting the mountains as well as the actual existence of the mine itself has been ridiculed by B.C. mining authorities, but in spite of this the rumours and expeditions persist.

Not too many years ago some adventurous Vancouver newspapermen succeeded in finding their way into the wild Pitt country guided by an Indian named Tommy Williams and staked what was believed to be the fabulous Lost Creek mine. It appeared that Chief Coquitlam William, aged 109 and still alive at that time, had known Slumach and in fact had been taken by Slumach's son to the site of the lost lode after the father's death.

Chief Coquitlam in turn had taken his son Tommy Williams to the scene. The newsmen and their guide were dropped on the west shore of Pitt Lake by aircraft and found the going grim and exhausting right from the time they first placed foot ashore.

However after enduring considerable hardship and having pointed out to them what the guide affirmed was the location, their claim was staked on a large yellow cedar which, according to Williams, was directly above the creek whose black silt, the deposit of many centuries, concealed gold nuggets in abundance.

Unfortunately about 20-30 feet of hard-packed snow in freezing temperatures precluded further exploration. The participants did plan a return trip when the snows melted

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in summer but whether the search was resumed and with what results is not known.

Through the years has come scanty information that the golden creek is located only about 20 miles from the head of Pitt Lake and that three peaks tower as sentinels over a canyon through which a creek flows and at a position where the creek suddenly disappears into the ground—the gold is to be found.

The Lost Creek mine is death to the white man, says the Indian legend, but those who have followed the dangerous route into the mountains and survived say that the fabled mine needs no guardian ghost of Slumach or any other to ward off would-be fortune hunters. The savage forces of nature - treacherous snow-covered canyons, freezing temperatures, leaping boiling streams, precipitous mountain sides and seasonal heavy rains - add up to a terrifying country where a misplaced step can be an invitation to sudden death.

As to Slumach's possession of gold, if this was true at all say the experts and critics, it would be gold the killer found on the bodies of miners he likely murdered in their cabins on the Lillooet gold fields further up the Fraser River. They point out that legend has it that Slumach died on the gallows for the murder of one of his squaws whereas official records state it was for the murder of Louis Bee.

Fact or fiction, synonymous with the arrival of spring, the awakening of gold fever and rebirth of interest in the lost mine has been a phenomenon for many years, no matter how strongly the sceptics' efforts to dispute the Slumach legend and the curse he left over the white man who might dare to tear away the veil which shrouds his secret.

On the other hand could an old tomahawk, if it could only speak, have a story all its own and refute the scoffers of the legend? It is actually a combination peace pipe and weapon and of the type traded by the Hudson's Bay Company during the 1880s with the Indians. What it could tell of Slumach's lust for gold, perhaps of its own role in the murder of the unfortunate Indian women is of course, pure speculation.

However, that it was once owned by Slumach there is little doubt, for present as an official witness at the hanging of Slumach was the attending physician, Dr. R.I. Bentley of New Westminster. He came into direct possession of the tomahawk which Slumach relinquished following his arrest, passing it along to his daughter, the now deceased wife of Harry List. She in turn gave it to her grandson Gerry Armstrong at Chilliwack, providing a tangible link with one of the most

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colourful and engrossing stories in B.C.'s history.

Did the mine ever exist at all except in fantasy or is it still waiting to be rediscovered in the lonely and wild Pitt Lake country? Some vehemently assert the mine's existence and Harry List is one of them.