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BLUEBEARD'S GOLD

BY T.W. PATERSON

Vancouver (CP) – The body of a United States visitor who collapsed and earlier this week in rugged country 30 miles east of here while on a vacation prospecting trip was carried out of the bush Friday by an eight-man RCMP party.

Lewis Earl Hagbo, 49, of Bremerton, Wash., was prospecting in the Lost Creek Gold Mine area with his brother-in-law, Frank U. Matteson, of Bainbridge Island, Wash., when he was stricken...

These last paragraphs of an article in the Vancouver B.C. Sun report the death of yet another adventurer hunting that region's fabled Lost Creek Gold Mine.

It is a mine reported to have a one hundred million dollar potential, and to give up nuggets the size of walnuts.

It is a mine that has claimed at least 27 lives.

The story of the mine has all of the ingredients of the classic treasure tale, and many that make it unique. But to date, although five men have known its location, none have lived to enjoy its wealth....

New Westminster was booming 75 year ago. Situated just above the U.S.-Canadian border, this wide-open town was the headquarters and playground of the rugged, brawling miners of every nationality and race who invaded the rich British Columbia goldfields. Veteran prospectors, adventurers and men with a past, they all visited here and left their mark.

But none provided as memorable—or deadly—as one of the region's original inhabitants, a full-blooded half demented Salish Indian.

Known as Peter (or John) Slumach, he first drew attention in that gold-crazy community in the fall of 1889 when he went on a drinking orgy which set even that city buzzing.

Already and old man, with a grizzled white beard, he drank many a younger man under the table in his months-long spree. Leading and entourage of comely squaws, honky-tonk girls, barflies and the plain thirsty, he staggered from one saloon to the next, buying whiskey for all. Instead of throwing silver coins on the bar, he tossed out handfuls of gold nuggets, some of the size of walnuts and all of fabulously high grade.

But just as he was slipping int high gear, two members of the B.C. Provincial Police tapped him on the shoulder.

“We want to talk to you, Slumach,” one said, “alone.”

Bluebeard's Gold

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Even Slumach's liquor-fogged brain realized they were not of the boisterous crowd plying him with questions about his gold. They meant business. He shrugged and pushed through the drunken mob, the frowning officers close behind him.

Outside, they questioned the now sullen prospector about an attractive young squaw of his tribe named Susan Jesner, saying that they had just fished her body out of the Pitt River.

"What about it, Slumach? She accompanied you on your last trip, didn't she? What happened to her? And why didn't you report it?"

Without the slightest trace of emotion Slumach replied, "She came with me."

The officers pressed for further details, with Slumach staring back with bloodshot but unwavering eyes.

"She fall from raft when his deadhead," he said. He shrugged "Drown, I guess..." He hadn't thought it worthwhile to inform the authorities.

Watching the old man carefully, an officer fired the question, "How come you saved your gold if you lost the girl and your gear? Answer me that?"

A jagged grin swept Slumach's face.

"Me plenty smart. Have gold tied to raft. Raft no sink, so me get gold back!"

Although his story rivalled nearby docks at low tide, the inspectors could do nothing and reluctantly released him. But they promised themselves they would keep close watch on the wily redman in the future.

Ecstatic at outsmarting the law, Slumach continued his bender with renewed vigor. By the following spring he was broke and planning to journey up Pitt River again to his mine.

But this time he would not go alone—or so the city felt, almost to the last man. Every man with stake enough for an outfit vowed to follow the Indian. When he finally pulled out of New Westminster with empty pockets and a colossal hangover, there were men strung out behind him in a line that was miles long.

But when they reached the head of Pitt River, he was gone. There was no Slumach. No trail. Nothing. Using his native cunning, he had vanished into the land of rain forests, glaciers, sudden storms and sub-zero temperatures. It was a death trap for the inexperienced men. Cursing him bitterly,

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the disheartened whites drifted back to town.

Later that fall, Slumach was again making the red light district burn brighter. This time he had even more gold. But those who observed him carefully had the uncanny feeling he acted as though he had less time.

And it seemed Slumach's time was indeed running out, for the body of Molly Tynan had been dragged from Pitt River. She, too, had been of his tribe. In her clothing were gold nuggets—in her back a hunting knife.

Today legend so obscures fact it is difficult to discern the truth. Many believe even now that the knife was Slumach's and that he was convicted of the slaying. But this is not so. Although his star was fading, it still was strong enough to pluck him from this embarrassing predicament.

However, that autumn his luck finally ran out on him. On September 9, 1890, French Canadian half-breed Louis Bee was fishing in Lillooet Slough (now Allouette River) with Indian companions when Slumach emerged from the bush and approached them. Stepping forward to meet the wild-eyed visitor, who he recognized, Bee sneered, "Who are you going to kill today?"

"You," replied Slumach.

And before anyone could move to stop him, he shot Bee in the chest, killing him instantly. Reloading, he chased the others away. He placed the body in a canoe and sank it in the middle of the lake. He then vanished in the wilderness.

With a large posse on his trail, he headed for high ground, and, after a brief gun battle, outdistanced all pursuers. Despite his age, and the fact that winter was near, he felt he could stick it out. He was one of the last Indians able to make fire by rubbing sticks together.

But he was wrong about sticking it out. Within a month, emaciated, out of food and ammunition, he gave up. Weeks later, he was convicted of Bee's murder and sentenced to hang. Police believed he had "killed ten men and nine squaws!" The women were used for cooking and packing into the bush. But on the return trip, he supposedly murdered them to insure against their revealing the site of his mine.

Again legend obscures fact. It is known that many tried to visit him as he awaited execution, but they were turned away by the sheriff, who admitted relatives only. It is believed he did tell his son the mine's location, but with the warning to go there "only if times are bad, for that way is death."

At eight o'clock on the morning of January 16, 1891, Slumach

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mounted to the gallows at New Westminster. In minutes the trap was sprung and he was dead. Now only his son knew the location of the mine.

He wasted no time in seeking it.

Ignoring his father's advice, he headed up Pitt River immediately after the clang of the gallows. According to the late Chief August Khatsahlano, young Slumach brought back pokes of gold, but found it could buy everything but what he wanted the most—booze. Strengthened liquor laws made it extremely difficult for an Indian to get firewater. But he soon found a willing accomplice, a half-breed dental assistant.

Slumach and his new partner headed up Pitt River. Three days later, the half-breed came back—alone. The younger Slumach was never seen again. What happened to him can only be surmised.

Returning to work, the half-breed found himself at large. Irked by his unexplained absence, his boss had fired him.

The half-breed laughed.

"I no need to work—ever!" he said, and displayed a pile of gold nuggets.

"Is that real gold?" blurted the amazed dentist. And with that discovery came an idea as how he could share the wealth.

"You know, it's foolish to carry so much gold on you. In fact, it's downright dangerous. Why don't you leave it with me for safekeeping?"

Surprisingly, the gullible half-breed agreed, and turned over his poke to the dentist, promising "lots more."

Days later, the dentist was working on a former schoolmate, a prospector. When his friend mentioned having little success, he laughed. "Hell, I do my prospecting right here in the office!" he said. And showing the gold and answering several questions, he signed the half-breed's death warrant.

Pausing only for supplies, the miner jumped into his canoe and paddled up Pitt River. He finally discovered the half-breed's canoe hidden under brush and watched him leave with gold. He followed him the next spring but lost his quarry in the rugged terrain.

The following year, 1903, he asked a friend named John Jackson, an Alaskan prospector, to join him. This time they succeeded in tracking the unsuspecting breed to a creek "ankle-deep" in gold. It is alleged they shot him and buried his body, a pan of nuggets, and axe and a mining hammer under the tent rock. Placing a cross mark on one end of the

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rock, they left.

Indians believe they began carrying out \$20,000 in gold. Only Jackson, starving and suffering from a broken leg, made it to New Westminster. He hurried on to San Francisco, where it is said he deposited a large sum of money, variously reported as \$870, \$8,700 and \$10,000, in the local branch of the Bank of British North America.

But he was not to enjoy the hoodoo gold either. The ordeal had broken his health. Near death, he is said to have drawn two maps showing the mine's location, giving one to a nurse with him at the end, and the other to an old friend in Seattle named Shotwell. With Shotwell's map went a letter of instruction.

According to Indian legend, neither Shotwell nor the nurse attempted to look for it, but sold their maps for \$500 apiece. This prompted at least 40 American prospectors to pack in, but none was successful.

Then began rumors of a "curse" that guarded the secret of Slumach's gold, as more men trekked into Pitt River Mountains—many never to be seen again. One of the last of the old medicine men, Simon Pierre, a centenarian who died on the North Vancouver Indian Reserve some years ago, told the late Chief Khatsahlano of the time he and some others had guided a white prospector into the Pitt Lake area.

"We sat around the fire one night and the ghost of old Slumach appeared," Pierre said. "It told us not to take the white man any further. We left the prospector alone and returned. White man went no farther, so he lived."

Pierre also claimed to have once seen Slumach moulding bullets out of pure gold! But this is not verified.

A chubby Vancouver sign painter, Cyril Walters, searched for the mine every summer for almost 30 years. He believed the legend concerning John Jackson, and claimed to have a copy of Jackson's letter giving the mine's location.

"The letter says the gold is in a place less than 20 miles from the head of Pitt River, where a stream flows down a canyon and disappears from sight." Walters told a newspaper reporter in 1947. "The canyon is guarded by three peaks which stand as sentinels. I found the peaks and the canyon, and followed it to another canyon which fits the (letters) description. But I couldn't get down because of the ice and snow."

Two maps purporting to reveal the mine's site are known to be in Vancouver today. But no claims have been filed.

One of the most colourful to follow the Lost Creek will-o'-

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the-wisp was grizzled sourdough A.R. “Volcanic” Brown. Once he visited the hunting cabin of four Nelson businessmen. He was almost exhausted but after a hot meal and some rum, he began speaking of his experiences.

He mentioned having once met Slumach’s granddaughter. She had been ill, according to Brown, and he, known as a herbalist, had nursed her to recovery. In gratitude she had revealed the site of her grandfather’s fabled hoard.

And that was the most Brown ever revealed. But it is recorded that he visited the headwaters of Pitt River each summer for a number of years. He always brought out gold but never filed a claim.

Once, while crossing a glacier on the return trip, the toes of his left foot were frozen. When gangrene set in, he cut off his frozen toes with his pocket knife!

It was Brown’s custom to check in about the middle of September at the government fish hatchery situated at the head of Pitt Lake. But the fall of 1930, he did not appear. As the weeks passed without any sign of the 82-year-old sourdough, police were informed and a search party organized. Heading the rescue expedition was Game Warden George Stevenson. Retired and now a resident of Victoria, he can safely claim to be the only living man who came within a mile of the Lost Creek Mine!

With three veteran woodsmen, Stevenson searched for 27 days without success. Although a slim man, he lost 13 pounds during the ordeal. It was November when they packed in—an impossible feat except for the most experienced. When one of his party was injured and another was detailed to escort him to help, Stevenson was left with one man.

The pair moved up to the headwaters of Seven Mile Creek (still unsurveyed) to Homestead Glacier, where they were snowbound for five days. Crossing this mile-and-a-half-wide glacier, where it took them a whole day to make 1,200 feet, they came to Porcupine Valley, then climbed to the timberline. Here they had to cross seven-mile-wide Slave [sic] Glacier. Where the Slave [sic] begin, they came upon Brown’s camp.

Squabbling whiskey jacks had attracted Stevenson’s attention. Upon investigation he found Brown’s collapsed tent buried in the snow. Further probing uncovered some cooking utensils, a single-barrelled shotgun, and a notebook containing herbal remedies. In a screw-cap jar he found 11 ounces of

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coarse gold—gold that had been hammered out of a vein, for pieces of quartz remained.

But of Volcanic Brown there was no trace.

It is speculated he fell down a crevasse. However, if his skeleton ever is found, it will be easy to identify. He wore a set of solid gold false teeth.

Stevenson's partner in discovering Brown's camp is now dead, leaving him the sole man to know Brown's possible solution of the Lost Creek Mine riddle. But, despite offers of financial backing, he refuses to chase the end of the rainbow further.

In 1952 the myth of the mine was "exploded" by Superintendent of Securities J. Stewart Smith. Smith said a company names Slumach Lost Mine Ltd. had proved once and for all that stories of the fabled hoard were false. The company solicitor, R.J. Munro, reported a thorough search of the area had unearthed no commercial ore. The venture subsequently was suspended and the "fantastic story that has lured a number of men to their death has been finally killed." However, this report seems to have had little effect upon the many that have hunted for the mine since.

In 1959 three amateur prospectors searched for the mine and returned speaking of the "curse." They had been defeated by dense fog, huge mountain slides, and lightening storms. It had rained without stop for 10 days. Said the leader, "There must be something to the curse, because we didn't find any gold. We weren't exactly frightened, but it certainly made us think."

Some years ago, Bill Burrud's television program "Treasure" sent an expedition up Pitt River. It too returned disappointed.

In the summer of 1951, New Westminster newspaperman Elmer McLellan believed he had found the mine. His theory was that the golden lode was but a 30-minute drive from downtown New Westminster. It is generally agreed that is possibly situated above Pitt Lake, midway between the head of Howe Sound and Harrison Lake, about 35 miles northeast of Vancouver.

McLellan, who did considerable research into the story, said he was told of the site by prospector Wally Lund, who claimed the mine's location was revealed to him in a dream. McMillan believed the mine to be on Sheridan Hill, a 400-foot rock near the Alouette River, and not in the inaccessible Pitt River region 15 miles eastward.

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And Slumach's murder of Louis Bee would seem to strengthen his theory. Bee was shot within two miles of Sheridan Hill. McLellan argued that Slumach would only have risked hanging for the murder because Bee was too near his mine. It is also known that Slumach sometimes returned with gold in 48 hours. By canoe, this distance would take about that long.

McLellan's party staked 750,000 square feet covering a tunnel and underground cavern which he believed to be the fabulous mine. However, it did not pan out. In February of 1926, he said, "A couple of local prospectors started a probe but were discouraged by the amount of loose rock at the 30-foot level (of the shaft). Just as well, apparently, for they may have been standing on a rock bridge over a bottomless pit. It seems that many years ago an attempt to reach the bottom with a 250-[feet?]-length of rope failed. It was believed then that the hole was bored by pressure from the now extinct volcano said to lay at the bottom of Pitt Lake. Later efforts to blast open the hole evidently formed the bridge of loose rock. "The hill (Sheridan) is described a ritualistic center. Maybe Slumach choose it for a gold cache because of the fear it may have held for his Indian friends.

The mine again made newspaper headlines in June of the following year, when three teen-aged boys failed to appear at school. It was found they had borrowed a boat, filled it with supplies from their parent's pantries, and headed up Pitt River after the gold. An intensive air-and-sea search was begun. But the boys returned by themselves, discouraged by cougars, bears, bats and hunger.

A Victorian resident, veteran prospector Charles Morgan who has mined throughout the Northwest has also hunted the mine.

"There is a vast area of glacial drift through that country, and a very rugged terrain—not a place to travel alone," Morgan recalls, "There is a tremendous folding and upheaval of the earth's crust. In the summer months, blackflies and mosquitos are the worst enemy and heavy low mists hang on for days. But there is plenty of drinking water owing to the very deep snow drifts high up in the valley. You need to be in good health and shape for the climbing.

"In early 1950 I tried to locate an old prospector who lived in West Vancouver. He had the original map of the Lost Creek Mine drawn by his brother, who went to California in the early 1930s. He was going to give me that map. But World War II came along and things were forgotten. When I tried to look him up, they told me he'd moved and I never found him.

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“Old Chief Capilano (Khahtsahlano) of the North Shore Indians used to go into the North Shore Mountains, “ Morgan says, “ and bring out nuggets when he was short of money. He always come out with his pockets full of gold.

“Some of the old Indians who now live on the shore of the Fraser River, across from Hammond, still tell tales of their ancestors who trekked into the Pitt Lake region and came out loaded down with gold nuggets. One old Indian told me of his uncle named Peter Charlie. Peter Charlie is supposed to have known where the mine is. And I know perfectly well that this Indian I knew always had all kinds of money on him. Where he got it, I don't know.”

In recent years, another adventurer fell a victim to the lure of Slumach's gold. A thorough search failed to turn up any trace of Englishman John Ewing, who vanished in mountains near Princeton, B.C. Two years later he was officially presumed dead.

Officially the legend of the mine is believed fiction. The B.C. Yukon Chamber of Mines and Vancouver City Archivist J.S. Matthews maintain that Slumach's hoard is nonexistent.

A noted historian, the late Bruce A. McKelvie, believed Slumach simply stole his gold. At that period there was a stampede in the Bridge River country. Many came overland to the head of Pitt Lake where, McKelvie thought, Slumach lay in wait beside the trail with a rifle. In that hectic day of little communication, the disappearance of a miner excited little comment.

Despite these denials, the legend continues and the list of casualties grows. B.C. Indians believe it will be one of Indian blood who finally claims “Bluebeard” Slumach's cursed gold.