

Over the Rainbow...to Slumach's Lost Mine - Another B.C. Police Story

The Daily Colonist
2 November 1968

by Cecil Clark

A few weeks ago a fellow scribbler here in town happened to bring up that perennial conversation piece... Slumach's lost mine. Mainly because, in the passing this past summer of my old friend, ex-game inspector George Stevenson, another link in the Slumach story was severed.

For George once headed the search party that struggled across mountain torrents and over the seven-mile-wide Stave Glacier in an unsuccessful search for an old prospector called "Volcanic" Brown, whose mysterious comings and goings gave that he was close to the secret of the fabulous mine.

Of course Brown was only one of many in the past half century whose gold hunting zeal was inspired by the legend. Maybe you have heard the Slumach story or stories. Because there were variations.

The true part is that in September, 1890 an Indian called Slumach, who trapped and hunted around Pitt Lake, took exception to a wise crack made by a 24-year-old French Canadian called Louis Bee. Slumach shot and killed Bee, and after trial and conviction, was hanged at New Westminster in January, 1891.

It was a good many years after Slumach's demise that the story got abroad that he had been seen on occasion with quite a poke of gold. Finally the tale resolved itself into a fabulously rich mine, the secret of the whereabouts buried with Slumach.

A variation to the story is that Slumach's squaw knew too much about its location, so he drowned her in Pitt Lake. Soon after that he took another wife. She too got nosy and met the same fate. This, in rather repetitious fashion, went on until he got rid of no less than six women!

How he managed to keep all this a secret is rather extraordinary, for we were very good at holding inquests even in those days. True he had a wife who drowned in the lake, but an inquest proved it was accidental.

Another tale is that when Slumach was on trial his squaw paddled down to New Westminster with “a canoe load of nuggets” to bribe the jury.

You can quite easily see where this sort of thing will lead you, once you get into the spirit of it. For instance, years ago, Maizie Hurley, publisher of the *Native Voice*, referred to the death of William Pierre (supposedly the oldest member of the Squamish band) she had this to say: Pierre was one of an Indian family that knew the secrets of the mine and who had seen its discoverer, a murderer named Slumach, make bullets of gold.”

The next paragraph went on to note that 21 white prospectors had died searching for the mine.

You can see that “golden bullets” touch was enough to set another stampede for Pitt Lake. That 21 deaths was also sheer invention, for I checked it. There have been quite a few hunters lost in that region, and one or two succumbed.

Another version is that Slumach, just before his execution, told his son the exact location of the mine, warning him never to divulge the information to a white man. The son eventually disobeyed his father’s wish and offered to show a white man where the gold came from. As the result of which, so the story goes, in 1903, John Jackson, a veteran Alaskan prospector, came out of the Pitt country with a fistful of gold and a shut mouth. Seems that after finding the mine he shot the Indian guide. Later, it was alleged, Jackson deposited about \$10,000 in the San Francisco branch of the Bank of British North America.

Then a year or two later, just before his death in Seattle,

Jackson is supposed to have drawn the mine's location on a map which he gave to a man named Shotwell. Copies of this map seem to have popped up from time to time in the next 25 year around Vancouver. Which accounts for all these people with the "inside track" picking their way over the ice fields of the Upper Pitt River Country.

Some were crazy, like old Volcanic Brown who never gave a hint of his destination and never recorded a claim. Finally, about 40 years ago, he lost his life on Stave Glacier.

Brown (who discovered the Volcanic mine in the south east Kootenay country) had his personal version of the Slumach story. Seems that one evening many many years ago he turned up at a Kootenay hunting lodge occupied that week by four Nelson businessmen. After a stiff rum and a hot meal he garrulously told the hunters how he once met the ailing granddaughter of Slumach. Being a bit of a herbalist old Brown cured the girl of her malady, and in gratitude she told him the location of her grampa's mine.

Anyway, that's the story one of the Nelson men later retold.

"Volcanic" by the way, was the discoverer of the Copper Mountain property near Princeton. Though it's now closed down it was a big producer for years. I think the Granby Company gave the old man \$75,000 for his claims. Of course with a quick onrush of money we all have equally quick recollection of something we want most in life.

In old Brown's case it was a complete set of gold teeth - uppers and lowers. Which he found easier to replace than his toes. Because once, at the headwaters of the Pitt, when they got frozen he amputated them with a jackknife.

Tough as all get out, he then manfully made his way out to Seven Mile Creek where there was then a fish hatchery.

Finally, as I mentioned, there came a day when he didn't come out and the searchers (Game Warden George Stevenson and trapper Roy McMaster) after a gruelling trip over Stave Glacier, came upon his tent collapsed under the weight of snow. They figured the old man had left it too late (it was November) and knowing he would either starve or freeze to death, had set out in the teeth of a blizzard and maybe gone down a crevasse.

While I am digressing from a down to earth analysis of the Slumach story, let me give you one of the little known anecdotes. Keep in mind that the Slumach story has appeared nearly 40 times in B.C. newspapers since 1900. So it was not unnatural in 1952, that a couple of staffers on a Vancouver daily came up with the bright idea for a feature. They hired a float plane, and taking along a photographer and the grandson of Chief Capilano, made a landing on Pitt Lake. The quartet climbed a little rocky rise, and there the boy was pictured pointing to the ground. The cutline read: "He identifies the lost mine." Of course the boy knew as much about Slumach's mine as he did of calculus. However the story hit the front page the next day.

Then shifted to page 2 for two more days.

Among the interested readers were the members of the Alpine Club some of whose members went out a week later to have a look see. Upshot was one of them staked a claim. Whereupon, believe it or not, our two diligent newsmen floated the Lost Creek Mine Ltd.

Alas, however, that fall the company suspended operations after its solicitor announced in the press quote "investigation shows no commercial ore" unquote.

This little paragraph was conveniently buried on page

31 because it also embodied the comment that a cease and desist order had been received from B.C.'s superintendent of brokers.

Which was no worse than a real "wildy" published in *Liberty* magazine some years ago. This time the Vancouver author even supplied photographs. One was of Slumach, looking between 25 and 30 and smoking a cigarette. The writer went to town on the "missing wives" angle. This time they were white girls, lured from Vancouver to the trackless wilds of Pitt Lake. He had pictures of three of them, dressed in the style of about 1914. Just to clinch the matter, the author claimed the B.C. provincial police sent Constable Eric Grainger (in plain clothes) to shadow the girls to Pitt Lake. Grainger was to keep in touch from time to time with his immediate superior, Sergeant Hilton of the Missing Persons Bureau.

This was a script that really went haywire, for if this was a picture of Slumach as a young man, it was taken nine years before photography was invented! A little research would have shown the author that when Slumach was hanged in January 1891, he was frail, tottery, white haired and ... 81 years old. Needless to say there never was a Constable Grainger on the B.C. Police, nor a Sergeant Hilton, nor for that matter, a Missing Persons Bureau.

It's very little trouble really to find the full details of the life and times of Slumach, in the back issues of *New Westminster's Columbian*.

After Slumach shot Bee he took to the hills, the police after him. At one time in the hunt there was a long distance exchange of shots, then Slumach disappeared again.

"O.K." said Bill Moresby, the district head of the force "let's not waste our time. He's old, out of grub, and

when it gets cold he'll walk in and give himself up.

Which is exactly what happened. Poor old Slumach was tried and convicted in the lex talionis style of the Victorian area, and duly hanged by the neck.

It was said at the time that the man who hanged him was the same character who hanged Louis Riel. I haven't checked this out but it can easily be done.

I remember years ago talking over the Slumach case with Bruce A. "Pinkie" McKelvie, and he was of the opinion that maybe, years before, Slumach had bushwhacked some returning Cariboo miner and cashed in a few nuggets when he visited New Westminster which gave rise to the mine story.

Major J.S. Matthews, Vancouver's city archivist was another who doubted there ever was a mine. Of the same opinion was Tom Elliott, one-time advisor to the B.C.- Yukon Chamber of Mines.

It must take a lot of brains, sweat and money to extract any noticeable amount of gold from a quartz operation. Can you image Slumach's one-man operation? When you figure that he was so primitive in his ways that he was the last person in his band to use matches. He still used the bowcord and drill practice of his ancestors, literally rubbing sticks together.

But, human nature being what it is, the story will come up again and again. My delving into the available record only leads me to Betsy Prigg's historic conclusion about Sairey Gramps friend, Mrs. Harris: "I don't believe there is no such a person."