

PITT LAKE GOLD – ORIGINS OF A LEGEND

The legendary hidden treasures of Pitt Lake have caught the imagination of people worldwide for more than a century. First the mysterious riches in the mountainous wilderness were nameless, but over time they became known as Slumach's Lost Mine, Slumach's Gold, Lost Creek Mine, Lost Mine, or Jackson's Creek. Ever since the years of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush prospectors have been looking for the mine, and a good number of those gold hunters have never returned from the mountains. And still, the search goes on.

Is there really a rich gold mine in those mountains? There were always skeptics. For instance Stanford Corey, interviewed¹ in 1926. He was an experienced prospector, who had searched for minerals in the area between Pitt Lake and Squamish for many years. Corey did not believe there would be a possibility of any great strike in that region. Nor do the geologists. The location of the mythical mine remains elusive. Some believe that the gold is still there, but there are rumours that it has already been rediscovered. Others say that the gold has already been removed and that discoverers were tight-lipped about their findings, enjoying a comfortable life.

What are the original sources of what we read today about the mysterious bonanza in Pitt Lake country? Obviously stories about the gold of Pitt Lake were told and retold by prospectors, treasure hunters and old-timers—that goes on even today. Occasionally these stories and other newsworthy items about treasures at Pitt Lake made it into the local press. From these early newspaper articles², it is possible to trace the origins and early developments of the tales about the mythical mine and its legendary first discoverers.

The story of Pitt Lake gold begins in the year of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush of 1858 when a number of maps were published in San Francisco promoting the gold fields of British Columbia.³ Two of these maps show the words “gold” and “Indian diggings” in the country above Pitt Lake. Another map from that time shows the words “much gold bearing quartz rock” on the north side of Pitt Lake. That is exactly from where a decade later, in 1869, an Indian⁴ brought to New Westminster “...a good prospect of gold... which he states he found in a little stream on the north side of Pitt Lake.” Obviously that created “great excitement” in the city and parties set out to find “the diggings.”⁵

In 1905,⁶ a newspaper reported that in 1902 an Indian had come and exchanged gold dust for \$1600 in bills in New Westminster. Several months later the same Indian came back, this time with \$1800 in gold dust. Again he disappeared and returned, now with \$1400. He did not want to tell where he got it and attempts to follow him failed. Then the Indian took sick probably because of his exposure to inclement weather on expeditions in the mountains and a doctor told him he was going to die. The Indian told a relative the secret source of his gold—a rich placer at Pitt Lake—and described its location, giving the landmarks and tracing a crude map of the locality. After he died, his relative, who had no money, sought the assistance of a white man. They were unable to trace the spot where the Indian said he had found the gold. But the secret was out and “there have been expeditions every year in an attempt to locate the mysterious placer.”

In 1906⁷ yet another such expedition failed to find the gold. The participants had information that an old man had found some valuable placer ground in the Pitt Lake country and that he had hidden a substantial amount of gold nuggets under a rock. Before he passed away, he had left directions where the treasure and the placer ground were to be found. It was “a rough trip as the weather was rainy, and sleeping out did

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not remind one of dreams between Dutch feather beds.”

In 1915,⁸ Wilbur Armstrong, a Washington prospector of seventy-two, preparing for his tenth and last search for Pitt Lake gold, identified the Indian who first discovered the gold as Slumagh, who “was hanged in the jail yard at New Westminster in 1891.” There is no evidence that the real Slumach, an old Indian who was executed in 1891 for murder, had anything to do with that gold, but from this date onward the legendary bonanza at Pitt Lake carried his name: Slumach’s gold.

The second discoverer of Slumach’s gold was, according to Wilbur Armstrong, a white man called Walter Jackson, who, in 1901, came out with dust and nuggets to the value of \$8,000. Following the pattern of the story of his legendary Indian predecessor of 1905, Jackson fell sick and before he died he wrote a letter to one Andrew Hall who had once grubstaked him and drew Hall a map. Part of Jackson’s letter describing his find “in a creek in a canyon to which there is no outlet except by an underground channel” reads, according to the press in 1915:

In going upstream I found a place where the bedrock is bare, and you will hardly believe me when I tell you the bedrock was yellow with gold. In a few days I gathered thousands, and there was thousands more in sight. Some of the nuggets were as big as walnuts....I saw there were millions practically at the surface. I buried part of the gold under a tent-shaped rock with a mark cut on the face.

The letter and map were sold to others and in particular the text of the letter—growing in length as time went by—is an integral part of the Lost Creek Legend.

As other prospectors in his days, Wilbur Armstrong headed search parties into the Pitt Lake area and a good story was needed to attract investors and fellow travellers. He and his colleagues honed the old stories to perfection.

When in 1925⁹ the story resurfaced in the press, there is no mention of Slumach by name and the white prospector’s name is not Jackson but Shotwell—no first name given—who came out of the Pitt Lake area in the fall of 1901 and went to San Francisco where he deposited more than \$8000 in placer gold. Shotwell fell ill and before he died he sent a letter to an unnamed partner from his Alaska days, letting him know that he had found “fabulous rich placer ground in the mountains back of Pitt Lake.” He had buried a sack of gold “under a tent-shaped rock, in a valley overlooked by three mountain peaks standing close together.” The letter gave directions to where the “golden cache” was buried and the grounds that Shotwell had worked.

In 1926¹⁰ in an interview with Victor Harbord Harbord, Jason Allard, who had served as a court interpreter at the time of Slumach’s imprisonment in New Westminster was unaware of the secret of a great gold mine. If Slumach had known about it he “... would undoubtedly have told [Allard] where it was.”¹¹ Jason Allard added a new facet to Slumach’s imaginary biography: Slumach was, said Allard, a vicious mass murderer. In the days of Slumach’s imprisonment there were rumours in the press that in his lifetime he had killed more than his only known victim, Louis Bee, but there is no trace of these allegations in the police reports.

In August 1926, a party of five returned from a search in the Pitt Lake mountains with little to show for their efforts. They left behind in the mountains the sixth member of their party, R.A. “Volcanic” Brown of Grand Forks, who continued prospecting and had to be rescued from the wilderness when he was caught by winter weather. He went back the following years but disappeared again, this time without a trace, in the fall of 1931¹². “Volcanic” Brown became a fixture of the Lost Creek Legend in particular after

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it was “revealed” in 1951 that Brown’s last campsite had been found in 1931 and there, among his remaining possessions, a “screw-top glass jar full of coarse gold.”

In 1939¹³ Jack Mahony¹⁴ interviewed pioneer Hugh Murray¹⁵ about the Pitt Lake gold saga. What Murray told Mahony was similar to Wilburn Armstrong’s story of 1915. The main difference is that Armstrong brought the real Slumach into the tale and that Murray went to great length to separate the legendary first Indian discoverer from the real Slumach. Hugh Murray grew up in Port Moody and he was in his thirties when Slumach died at the gallows—he knew the facts.

The “Slummock” presented by Murray and Mahony is a middle-aged “half-breed Red River Indian” who was hanged for murdering another half-breed prospector by drowning. Of course the real Slumach had no Red River origins but was of Katzie ancestry, was not a half-breed, did not kill Louie Bee by drowning—a gunshot killed Bee— and was not middle-aged but an elderly man when he died at the gallows. This “Slummock” is clearly a romantic fiction.

Murray’s legendary “Slummock” prospected in the Pitt Lake mountains for many years, struck it rich in the late nineties—that would be after Slumach’s death—and frequently came to New Westminster with “a well-filled ‘poke’ of nuggets.” He spent his money freely, but kept its source a secret. Hugh Murray adds another dimension to the story: “...it was believed but never proven, that he [‘Slummock’] had drowned three of his Indian ‘wives’ near Shiwash Rock [Island] at the mouth of Pitt Lake to prevent them from divulging the location [of his gold mine].” That theme grew out into gothic tales such as “The Bluebeard of Lost Creek Mine”¹⁶ and “The gold mine murders of nine British Columbian women.”¹⁷

It is unlikely that the elderly Indian Slumach would have ventured out to New Westminster very often. Nor would he have been in a position to paint the town red. Alcohol consumption or possession was prohibited to Indians and was punishable with a heavy fine, jail time, and hard labour. Therefore Murray and Mahony made their “Slummock” a half-breed, allowed to drink in public places.

Murray pictured his Slummock as a middle-aged man; fit enough to hunt for gold in the mountains. Slummock’s showing of gold in New Westminster was meant to validate the claim that he knew about a rich mine. So did Murray’s tale that a local physician visited Slummock in his death cell trying to find out where the mine was. Slummock went to his death “with the burning question of the community unanswered.” That “burning question” never came up in the press at the time of Slumach’s conviction and death.

Was there a Slumach bonanza? The proof of evidence shifted to the second discoverer of the mine. Murray told Mahony, that a veteran Alaskan prospector called John Jackson, hearing about the Slumach legend set out for the Pitt Lake area in 1903 and returned three months later with a very heavy pack-sack. This Jackson deposited \$8700 in gold in San Francisco. Before his untimely death he sent a letter and a map with the information of the location of the treasures to a friend in Seattle names Shotwell. Shotwell was an old man, not able to search for the gold himself, so he sold a share to a fellow Seattle man. This anonymous partner went to the Pitt Lake region looking for Jackson’s Creek “but [he] returned without success when the map became partially damaged.” After him others, including Hugh Murray, tried, and tried again to find “Jackson’s Creek” but without success. The map (damaged or not) and Jackson’s letter were of no help to anybody.¹⁸

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Murray said in his interview that his belief in the gold was strengthened by meeting "... an old Indian woman at the Indian camp at the head of Pitt Lake [who] remembered Jackson staying with them in 1903..." with a very heavy pack that he would not let out of sight. Why did Hugh Murray need this added evidence? He may well have been aware that prospector Stanford Corey had said in 1926¹⁹ that in the thirty years he prospected in the area he had "not seen the marks of any other person ever having entered the land." Murray must have feared that, as the pretended Slumach, also Jackson, Shotwell, and Hall were just creatures of imagination and the copies of the letter and map a sham.

The legend with its irresistible elements continues to live: Indians, an execution, hidden gold and murdered maidens. Later a curse would be added. All this was repeated and expanded by prospectors, gold hunters, journalists and other story tellers and gobbled up by many romantics. Some, as Murray, may have had their doubts, but the hunt for the legendary hidden treasures of Pitt Lake has never ended. —

- 1 Sun 28 August 1926
- 2 To read transcriptions of all articles referred to visit <<http://www.slumach.ca>>
- 3 Derek Hayes shows the three maps on pp 151-154 of his *Historical Atlas of BC and the Pacific Northwest*, Sasquatch Books, 1999.
- 4 Throughout the word "Indian" is used, because it was the term used at the time of the publication of the original articles. Today the term "First Nations person" is mostly used.
- 5 *New Westminster Mainland Guardian* 10 November 1869. The search for gold in the Pitt Lake area continued. *Kansas City Star* of 15 April 1897 (from *Seattle Post Intelinger*) tells about a "Lord Sholto Douglas, a son of the Marquis of Queensberry," who took out a prospectors licence "...trying his luck in the Pitt and Harrison lake districts."
- 6 *Province* 16 December 1905.
- 7 *Province* 3 April 1906
- 8 In November and December of 1915 a number of American newspapers all over the country published Armstrong's story. The article is yet to be found in a British Columbia newspaper.
- 9 *Province*, 9 August 1925
- 10 In this article Jason Allard described Slumach and his brother as murderous outcasts.
- 11 *Province*, 8 August 1926
- 12 *Province* 20 March 1932
- 13 *Province* 30 June 1939
- 14 Five years later, in Italy, Major John Keefer Mahony received the Victoria Cross.
- 15 Hugh Murray was a son of Lance Corporal John Murray of the Royal Engineers, one of the first settlers at Port Moody.
- 16 *The Shoulder Strap* 6 June 1942
- 17 *Liberty* July 1956
- 18 In the words of Jackson: "O, how I wish I could go with you to show you this wonderful place for I cannot give you exact directions, and it may take a year or more to find." in N.L. Barlee, *Lost Mines and Historic Treasures of British Columbia* (Surrey BC: Hancock House Publishers) 1993.
- 19 Sun 28 August 1926