

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

BC'S FABULOUS [?]

THE LURE: GOLD NUGGETS BY THE HANDFUL

THE LOCATION: 45 MILES FROM VANCOUVER

THE TOLL: 20-30 MEN, MISSING OR DEAD

BY ROBERT MCKEOWN, WEEKEND STAFF WRITER

For more than 50 years in British Columbia, prospectors have been losing their lives in attempts to find a mine that does not exist—the mythical Lost Creek mine, which supposedly lies among the crags of the Pitt Lake country just 45 miles north of Vancouver.

How many men have lost their lives in the fruitless quest it is impossible to say, though estimates generally place the number between 20 and 30.

The maze of rocky valleys, granite slopes and snowy peaks that makes up the district has never become what has become of any of those who have disappeared. And year by year the toll of death and injury continues to mount.

Last summer a 68-year-old New Westminster man, Duncan McPhadden, narrowly escaped becoming the latest victim. While prospecting, McPhadden tumbled off a 20-foot cliff, suffering painful injuries to his back and chest.

He crawled for hours to reach his cabin. There he lay, unconscious, for two days, then dragged himself on hands and knees to the lake, where his motorboat was moored. After six miles of painful travel he reached a summer camp, from which he was rushed to hospital.

Less fortunate was Alfred Gaspard, who set out for the mine in the summer of 1950. He never returned.

Frank Woodside, secretary-manager of the BC and Yukon Chamber of Mines, says he believes that some of the deaths are never reported.

“Because they believe they are on the verge of discovering the mine, many make the trip in the greatest secrecy,” Woodside said. “These people simply vanish.”

“I’ve had men through my office who’ve said they knew the mine’s location and made me swear never to tell a soul. I’ve done all I could to talk them out of going. But they have gone anyway and have never been heard from again.”

Almost unbelievable in these times is the fact that the gold-seekers have pinned their lives on a tale that reads like schoolboy fiction. A “bad Indian,” deathbed letters, secret maps, murders—it has them all.

BC's Fabulous [?]

*Weekend Picture Magazine 22
December 1951*

Title not complete

Courtesy Donald E. Waite

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

The case of Gaspard is a typical one. He was a widower living in Langley, a small Fraser Valley community. He became fascinated by the tale of hidden gold, bought a car, and travelled widely to track down information that might provide a clue to the mine's location.

Like many before him, Gaspard is believed to have uncovered something that gave him confidence despite the fact that he had never been in the Pitt country before. In July, 1950, he chartered an airplane which set him down about 15 miles north of the head of Pitt Lake. A second plane dropped him about 400 pounds of food—enough to last until the onset of winter. When he had not reappeared by November the RCMP took up the search.

The Mounties have made a series of patrols of the area during the past year. Constable John Dowsett and Stan Zepeski, a guide, carried out the latest one—in October 1951. They found no sign either of the prospector or the camps or fires he might have made.

But they told of a frightening country that was an invitation to sudden death. At one point they clung to a narrow ledge of rock 400 feet above a mountain torrent. Large boulders constantly plunged down the canyon side into the river. Fogs and heavy rains made visibility poor and footing treacherous. There was always the danger of becoming lost or of pitching headlong into the canyon.

Ironically, as Dowsett and Zepeski were looking for the missing man, their course passed that of a 24-year-old Wilf Rogers of Vancouver. For the fourth time, Rogers was on his way into the Pitt Mountains to seek the mythical gold that had lured Gaspard to his death.

Gaspard may have had a premonition that he would never return. His affairs were in order and he left a note concerning them which he directed to be opened if he did not come back.

The list of the mine's victims to which Gaspard's name has been added, includes mostly amateur gold-hunters who were lured by visions of sudden riches. But a few seasoned prospectors and backwoodsmen have given their lives in the attempt to find the source of the Indian's gold.

One such was Volcanic Brown, a colourful gold-hunter and natural healer of Grand Forks, BC. In the summer of 1937 [sic] Brown decided to try his hand at finding the Lost Creek mine.

Though he didn't discover the gold he did what others have not done—he survived his first trip into the mountains behind Pitt Lake. In the process, however, he suffered from

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

badly frozen feet. Several of his toes had to be amputated.

Brown apparently was firm in his belief that the information he had concerning the mine was valid and would eventually lead him to it. He returned to renew the quest in 1938 [sic]. What went wrong this time has never been learned. He vanished.

The lost mine legend begins with a half-breed named Slumach, who was hanged for murder in New Westminster on January 16, 1891. Slumach was reported to have struck it rich in the Pitt Lake ranges of mountains some time during the 1880s.

On a number of occasions Slumach turned up in New Westminster loaded with nuggets, some of which were as big as hen's eggs. In the best tradition of a Robert W. Service miner, he had an appetite for firewater and the company of carefree ladies.

He would enjoy both to the full—or at least until the nuggets and dust in his pack were exhausted. Thereupon he would head up the Frazer towards the Pitt and his mine. A few months later he would be back in New Westminster with another pay load for a repeat performance.

The story goes that when Slumach was in his cups, other miners would try to get him to tell where the mine was. But Slumach never told. And when others tried to follow him, he quickly lost them in the mountains.

Then the police found the body of a young squaw who had been drowned in Pitt Lake. She had been Slumach's companion on a trip to the mine.

Slumach's explanation, according to the story, was that she had fallen of a raft while they were crossing the lake together. But it is said that before he mounted the gallows after being sentenced to death for murder, he confessed to having killed seven other women companions. Since all had visited the mine with him, it was necessary to silence them forever if the secret were to be kept.

This is the Slumach legend as told by those who live in the hope of one day finding the mine. One detail at least can not be refuted. The New Westminster British Columbian and the Victoria Colonist for January 16, 1891 record the hanging of Slumach at New Westminster.

The supposed link and the modern seekers of the lost mine is John Jackson, a California miner, who appeared in New Westminster shortly after the half-breed's death. Where Jackson got his information concerning the mine is obscure. He is

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

said to have talked to Indians, studied maps and headed into the mountains.

Jackson came back from Pitt country a broken man who had found gold but lost his health. He returned to California to sell his pack load of gold for \$10,000—and to die. But when he lay at death's door he wrote a letter to a friend in Seattle and enclosed a map showing where the mine was to be found.

This letter turns up from time to time in the hands of gold-seekers. The prevailing story concerning the map is that part of it was lost during an early discovery attempt by a man who bought it for \$1,000 from Jackson's friend.

One of the Jackson letters is owned by a Vancouver sign painter, who obtained it in 1922. He believes that to be a copy of a letter Jackson wrote on his deathbed to a Dr. Hall.

The letter states that the mine is less than 20 miles from the head of Pitt Lake. Three peaks stand as sentinels over a canyon through which a creek flows. At a spot where the creek disappears from sight, the gold is to be found.

The Vancouver man has gone into the mountains a number of times in search of the mine. On one occasion—at a point about 17 miles northeast of Squamish and the same distance from the head of Pitt Lake—he found a canyon dominated by three peaks which fitted the description in Jackson's letter. But ice and snow prevented him from reaching the floor of the canyon to try to find the creek.

Another letter of which there is record is said to have been written by Jackson to a man named Shotwell in Seattle.

"I climbed to the top of a sharp ridge to get my bearings and found myself looking down into a little valley or canyon I had not seen previously," the letter reads. "With some difficulty I reached the little creek lying in the valley.

"Now comes the interesting part. I had only a small prospector's pan, but I found colors immediately. I knew I had struck it rich.

"In going up the creek I came to a place where the bedrock was bare. Here I gathered gold by the handful, some pieces as large as walnuts.

"I sized up the creek and learned that beyond all doubt I had found Slumach's Lost Creek mine.

"I traced the course of the creek to where it flows into a subterranean tunnel and is lost. Then I packed out all the gold I could carry. When I sold it in Frisco it brought me close to

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

\$10,000.

“Now the doctor has told me I am liable to drop dead at any time.

“Don’t give up, Shotwell. You will be rewarded beyond your wildest dream. Don’t give it up.”

The existence of a number of Jackson’s letters and at least as many maps, has caused those familiar with the BC mining scene to be sceptical about the origin of these documents. But more than one man who could know better has parted with dollars in the belief that he was getting genuine articles in return.

About 15 years ago a Vancouver businessman approached Frank Woodside, the BC and Yukon Chamber of Mines manager, to find out what he knew of the Lost Creek mine. He revealed that he and two other well-known businessmen were about to finance a Swedish prospector who claimed to have already located the mine.

The four held their meeting in the back of a Hastings Street store. These conferences were conducted in an atmosphere of great secrecy. The men spoke in whispers and took every precaution to prevent their purpose from being known. They were sure they were on the eve of great riches.

Woodside strongly advised that the men protect their investment by insisting that the Swede take along a reliable prospector whose integrity was unquestioned. He recommended Roy Watson, who had done work for some of the largest mining concerns in the province.

At first the Swede refused outright to take Watson along. The secret of the mine’s location, he said, should not be revealed to anyone. But when the businessmen threatened to withdraw their backing, he finally consented to have Watson accompany him.

Watson and the Swede made a base camp at the head of Pitt Lake and cached their supplies there. At this point the Swede began to act in a manner that aroused Watson’s suspicion. He set out on single-day treks from the base into the hills, despite the fact the he previously had said the mine was a few days’ journey from the head of the lake. He would give no reason for his behaviour. He further disturbed Watson by muttering to himself strangely.

Soon it became apparent that the Swede was trying to lose Watson. He would set out at a furious pace, attempting to disappear wherever the terrain appeared suitable. Working on the established mining principle “never get out of sight of

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

your partner,” Watson stuck right along with him.

At the end of the third day Watson let the man know that he was tired of the run-around he was getting. Thereupon the Swede declared the mine was nearby and could be reached next morning.

When Watson woke up next morning the Swede had disappeared. So had all but a small quantity of the food. Watson now was sure that the Swede’s heavy pack was laden with extra provisions to see him through after he had lost Watson in the mountains.

He almost succeeded. When Watson entered Woodside’s office in Vancouver weeks later, he was gaunt and haggard and his clothes were in tatters.

Rain and fog has closed in on him, obscuring the sky and the landmarks on which he depended to get back to Pitt Lake. If he had had enough food he could have waited out the weather. As it was, he had to make his way out of the mountains before starvation overtook him.

Watson never recovered from the ordeal in the Pitt Mountains. He died a few years later after a long spell of illness. The Vancouver businessmen never heard again of the Swede—or of the \$1,500 they had invested with him in the Lost Creek mine.

Woodside’s knowledge of mining in BC convinced him that the Lost Creek story is one that has developed from rumour and the tricks of confidence men like the one who victimised the Vancouver men. The fact that no trace of gold has been discovered in the Pitt region reassures him in his belief that the Lost Creek mine is merely a myth.

His own theory is that if Slumach ever did have gold, he found it on the bodies or in the cabins of miners he had murdered in the Lillooet gold fields farther up the Fraser. That any miner, particularly a half-breed, should waste his efforts in the difficult mountain country of the Pitt with proven Lillooet beckoning appears unlikely, to say the least.

There are serious inaccuracies to cast further doubt on the Slumach story. It has been confidentially repeated that Slumach was hanged for the murder of an Indian woman. This ties in nicely with the story of the mine—but not with the facts of the Slumach case.

The court records in the BC archives at Victoria show that Slumach’s victim was an Indian named Louis Bee. The Indian had insulted Slumach by calling him a sorcerer, witch and devil—the most serious insults in the Chinook language—

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

and Slumach had shot him without warning. [Tsiatko - witch, sorcerer, demon]

Furthermore Slumach was not a young man as the stories about him suggest. The Victoria Colonist at the time of the trial reported: "The doomed man's age is over 80 and his hair and beard are snow-white." (However, he was spry enough to evade for two months the police party that was searching for him.)

Where the story of Slumach's mine got its start will probably never be known. It was already prevalent when Woodside, as a young prospector, came to New Westminster in 1896. It almost surely may be grouped with the many other tales of hidden gold and pirate treasure that have fascinated men throughout the centuries.