

THE JACKSON LETTER

*These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air...
(Prospero, *The Tempest*)*

Writings about Pitt Lake gold always mention a letter written by a dying American prospector named Jackson. Jackson, so the story goes, discovered the treasure first found by Slumach, but for health reasons was not able to return to harvest the remainder of “untold riches.” Among the few who by their saying had a copy of the letter were Hugh Murray in New Westminster¹ and a Vancouver man named Cyril Walters, a sign-painter.² Both copies have disappeared.

Fortunately, around 1940, Arthur Wellesley (Dick) Carter, a neon-sign maker, made a transcript, probably from Hugh Murray’s copy. Dick Carter also had a connection with the other owner of a copy, Cyril Walter. They worked together for some time and remained friends and on at least one occasion Carter joined Walter on his yearly gold-hunting trek to the Pitt Lake mountains.

Today, Richard James (Jim) Carter of West Vancouver is the custodian of his father’s Pitt Lake papers and he generously allowed me to copy the transcript of the Jackson letter and to publish the text of this unique document.

Jackson’s complete letter will not trigger another rush to the mountains as most of the core of the story is well known. But here is the first part of the letter with some new details only known before from an October 1915 newspaper article³ published in the United States—similarities linking this transcript of Jackson’s letter to the “original.”

According to the 1915 article, Wilbur Armstrong of Washington State was in possession of that original. Prospector Armstrong had searched the Pitt Lake mountains every summer for ten years and was, at the age of 72, preparing for his last trip up there, when he gave an interview and provided some details of the letter that match the transcript made by Dick Carter.

The letter is addresses to “Dear Friend,” an unidentified person who, according to the letter, would be living in Seattle. Armstrong identified the recipient as Andrew Hall, who, being “in need of money in the Yukon,” sold “the letter and a chart” to Armstrong’s cousin, from whom Armstrong had acquired the letter. The transcript of Jackson’s letter is dated San Francisco, February 10, 1904—about the time Armstrong started his trips

Percy Hugh Walters
1896 - 1972

Richard James (Jim)
Carter
1932 - 2021

*Seaboard Advertisement,
Vancouver*

Fred Braches December 2008

to the Pitt Lake area, ten years before 1915.

Like all other elements of the Pitt Lake saga the Jackson story, born as hearsay, was picked up by the press and over time was developed and enriched by gold hunters and journalist in newspapers and magazines before it became published in books. In other times Armstrong's story would have caught the attention of the public and the press in New Westminster and Vancouver, but in 1915 the war in Europe filled the Canadian newspapers, and this was not the time to publish something as frivolous as gold hunting.

In British Columbia the anonymous recipient of the letter became known by the name "Shotwell" rather than "Andrew Hall." Likewise Jackson's first name, Walter according to Armstrong, was not used again. Even though it was known that the letter was signed "W. Jackson," the stories call him "John" Jackson.

Both Jackson's letter and Armstrong's story refer to a place called Guytos [Guyot?]. The letter says: "...you will remember the old man you so kindly grubstaked with money and provisions at Guytos." The article: "...who had grubstaked him [Jackson] at Guytos".

Jackson's letter and Armstrong's account of 1915 mention that Jackson discovered the treasure in 1901.

In the 1915 interview Armstrong did not hesitate to mention the Pitt Lake area, but in the body of the transcript of Jackson's letter geographical features are left blank with the exception of Vancouver (where Jackson landed) and New Westminster or perhaps more correctly New Westminster District "... where I made a great discovery." Presumably that was done for reasons of secrecy, but if a map was included as the letter and Armstrong suggest, it would probably have divulged the general geography anyway.

Oddly, in a note after the signature, directions are given from the head of Pitt Lake (mentioned by name) to the "hidden treasure." It includes a reference to the three peaks that guard the mine. By whom, and when was this text added?

Already in the 1970s N.L. (Bill) Barlee wondered if this American prospector Jackson ever existed, but he argued that if the letter would be genuine, than "Jackson must have existed." To many Jackson's letter will be genuine and, following Barlee's logic, that proves to them that Jackson existed, and ergo that the story of his finding the gold is true.

In his story "The Lost Mine of Pitt Lake"⁴ Barlee included a reprint of a transcript of the lower part of Jackson's letter, said to

have been enclosed in a letter from “Volcanic” Brown dated 1924. It appears that Brown only copied the part of interest to him as a prospector. Barlee referred to this fragment as “the letter,” creating the impression that this was the entire content—it was not. He would have been delighted to reprint the entire text if he had found it.

The complete text of Jackson’s letter, now available at last, does not change my mind. I am still convinced that Walter or John Jackson and Andrew Hall alias Shotwell are just creatures of imagination. I agree that this transcript made by Dick Carter is close to the “original” version circulating among prospectors a century ago. But that does not prove that there was ever an original letter written by someone called “Jackson” or mailed to anyone.

My explanation is that Wilbur Armstrong, like other prospectors in his days, as told in the 1915 article, 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 some old rumours to perfection and the letter is not more than a clever piece of merchandising.

How successful they were, those American prospectors, is shown by the fact that after a century Jackson’s letter still continues to draw treasure hunters into the wilderness around Pitt Lake and to fascinate all armchair prospectors.

This is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Fred Braches, December 2008

- 1) “Oft sought Pitt Lake gold still awaits discovery,” *Province*, 30 June 1939
- 2) “Old Slumach’s curse dogs prospectors” *Province*, 22 December 1951
- 3) “The last trip in search of mine” *Stevens Point Daily Journal* (Wisconsin). 18 October 1915.
- 4) In *Historic Treasures and Lost Mines of British Columbia*. Summerland BC: Canada West Publications, 1977.