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PROSPECTOR SAYS NEARING FINAL CHAPTER THERE'S GOLD IN THEM HILLS

Don Waite has been chasing rainbows for more than 10 years, but the Maple Ridge writer and photographer thinks he's getting closer and closer to the pot of gold.

The legend of the lost Pitt Lake gold mine has captured the imagination of hundreds since stories first began to appear in the 1890s of an old Indian who periodically came out from the mountains surrounding Pitt Lake with a haversack stuffed with gold.

Old Slumach was hanged in 1891 at the BC Penitentiary on charges he murdered a young Indian from the Katzie Reserve. With Slumach went the secret of his gold.

But this summer, in his third edition of a book on the lost gold mine, Waite hopes to reveal the secret.

A former member of the RCMP, Waite first became intrigued by the lost gold story in 1967 when he was employed to clean out a vault at the BC Penitentiary. In a dusty file, Waite found the records of Slumach's trial. Something in the file struck a chord. Later transferred to the detachment in Hainey, Waite found himself taking every opportunity to discuss the lost mine with local prospectors and members of the Katzie Reserve.

He later quit the RCMP and in 1972 published his first book—Kwanstan, which includes the story of the lost Pitt Lake gold mine.

Since then, Waite's search has become more intensive.

Last summer, he made five trips into the highest reaches of the North Pitt Lake area with a helicopter. And Waite has covered almost every inch of the land by foot. On one occasion, he and several other hikers climbed 10,000 vertical feet up and down steep ravines in a single day.

According to Waite, nearly 20 people—most of them gold seekers—have died in the near impenetrable forest where the mine is believed to be located.

But Waite is not alone in his search.

At a meeting of the Lost Gold Mine of Pitt Lake Club seven die-hard believers turned up/

While many scoff and call the gold mine pure legend, Waite says he has good reason to believe there is gold up there.

Like a true prospector he keeps most of his reasons secret, but Waite said the Port Douglas Indians from the Harrison Lake area were known to use bullets moulded from gold.

Prospector says nearing final chapter

*Maple Ridge Pitt Meadows
Times 31 March 1987*

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The stories of Slumach's walnut-sized gold nuggets are well documented in news accounts from that period, and in 1930 when searchers found the last camp site of a prospector who died looking for gold, they found a glass jar filled with 11 ounces of coarse gold.

After nearly ten years of searching, Waite won't say why he suddenly feels close to the jackpot. In the next few months, he plans to return to the lakeshore with a 70-year-old prospector who Waite said once found the gold mine "and then lost it." He offers no further explanation.

But if the stories of gold are pure legend, old Slumach has already given Waite a streak of good fortune. Since writing his first book on the lost mine he has gone on to write several more including the latest on the Cariboo Gold Rush and a book on North American birds.

"I might just be chasing rainbows," said Waite with a shrug, "but what the hell, I like what I'm doing."