

LOST GOLD : THE MYSTERY OF VOLCANIC BROWN

By B. J. Bayne



R.A. "Volcanic" Brown (left) and A.H. Londen in front of their cabin at Lightning Peak, B.C. [B.C. Archives photo]

"Search unsuccessful" – This laconic message was received in Vancouver headquarters from game warden George Stevenson upon the conclusion of his trek to find missing prospector, R.A. "Volcanic" Brown, in November, 1931. The terse words drew a closing curtain on the life of one of the most colorful pioneers of the Pacific Northwest. Brown was also among the last individuals who may have had first hand knowledge of the fabulous "lost" gold mine of Peter Slumach.

R.A. "Volcanic" Brown was born in New Brunswick in 1845. The lure of adventure in far away places called strongly to the boy, and he left home at an early age. In later years, Brown's name would become almost synonymous with prospecting and mining promotion on the west coast, but in his youth he tried his hand at a wide variety of jobs. Brown was at various times a sailor, boat builder, millwright, trapper, lumberjack, and labor leader. During a stint as a logger in the east, Brown made history of a sort. In one of the earliest actions of its kind, he helped to organize the lumberjacks in the shanties of Ontario and led some 15,000 loggers in a two-week strike. The lumber companies gave in and met the strikers' demands.

Not all ventures were as successful. A few months before his disappearance, Volcanic Brown told a meeting of B.C. pioneers about his experiences as a fur buyer some six decades earlier. On one occasion a group of pelts he had prepared for shipment were stolen. In his haste to make up the loss, he bought a similar batch, sight unseen. When he opened the bundle later, it was only to discover they were his own furs!

Despite these forays into other fields, Brown's lifelong interest remained prospecting, which he followed at every opportunity. While still in his teens, he searched for gold in Nova Scotia but had only very limited success. Nevertheless, the experience gained served him well in the years to come.

Brown may have then gone to the Caribou to take part in the gold rush there. The Caribou Sentinel of September 4, 1869, reported that a Mr. R.A. Brown was elected secretary of the Caribou Amateurs (whatever they might have been!). The British Colonist of December 14, 1869, stated in its "Caribou News" column that a miner named Brown shared a three way split of \$41,592 and that Brown paid \$50 in damages to J. Tracey. The two had been fighting over what the paper euphemistically called a "Layde fayre". The final reference also comes from the pages of the Colonist on the 30th of July, 1871, when the paper reported Mr. R.A. Brown of Barkerville had received a government appointment and left for Omineca. While these details are sketchy, it may be that R.A. Brown of Barkerville and R.A. "Volcanic" Brown were one and the same.

At any rate, Brown apparently made a rich strike in the Lake of the Woods region of what is now Ontario but was unable to obtain title because of a dispute between Ontario and Manitoba as to which government controlled the area. Disgusted, Brown covered up his find and left the country for what he hoped would be golden fields in Idaho. The Gem State proved a disappointment however, and Brown returned to Canada in the late 1870's to follow the Canadian Pacific Railroad in its drive to reach the west coast. He took a series of small subcontracts for the CPR over the next few years and prospected the country on both sides of the new rail line in his spare time. Then gold was discovered in the Big Bend area of the Columbia River, about 60 miles from Revelstoke. Brown joined the stampede, making his way down the Columbia in a cedar dugout, prospecting and supplementing his income by trapping, as he had done many times before. In February of 1884, he landed in the region old timers referred to as the Boundary. For almost a

year he looked the countryside over, becoming interested in a mountain that bore the signs of mineralization. It was here, in 1885, that Brown staked a claim, which he called the Volcanic. He eventually filed for most of the mountain, which then took on the name of the original claim. He also laid out a town site and industrial area, which he called Volcanic City. Neither the mine nor the town amounted to anything while in his possession, but R.A. Brown was ever after known as "Volcanic" Brown.

It was about this same time that Peter Slumach discovered an apparently enormously rich gold deposit somewhere amidst the rugged mountains and glaciers north of Pitt Lake,

B.C. Slumach first attracted attention on the autumn of 1889 when he went on a wild drinking spree that caused a stir even in New Westminster, which was then a wide open town. In the month long bout he treated friends, bar girls, and a large entourage of hangers-on to all they could drink, paying for everything with handfuls of coarse gold. From all accounts some of these nuggets were extraordinarily large, a few being about the size of walnuts, and all were of exceptionally high grade.

That fall he was also questioned about the disappearance of an attractive young Salish woman named Susan Jesner, whose body was found in the Pitt River. Before each trip into the mountains, Slumach hired a woman who would accompany him to do the cooking and help pack in the supplies. He explained that Susan Jesner had fallen overboard when their raft hit a deadhead. He assumed she had drowned and never thought about reporting the incident to authorities. Although suspicious, police lacked any real evidence, and were forced to let him go.

The following summer, the body of another woman was found, once more in the Pitt River. Molly Tynan had a quantity of gold nuggets in her clothing and the knife that killed her was still in her body. Peter Slumach was again questioned, but again, for lack of hard evidence he was released. By now, the suspicions of the authorities were thoroughly aroused, and they began looking into the mysterious disappearances of several other woman and a number of men-all of whom had vanished in the region surrounding the head of Pitt Lake.

On September 9th, 1890, Peter Slumach stepped out of the bush onto the bank of the Lillooet Slough. Re-ponding to a shouted insult, Slumach raised his rifle and fired a single shot. Louis Bee, a French Canadian fisher- man, was killed instantly. Slumach pursued several witness for a

few moments but they escaped. Returning, he weighted the body of Louis Bee and sank it in deep water.

Confident in his abilities as a bushman, Slumach felt he would be able to manage away from civilization. Following a brief gun battle, he was able to elude the posse, which came after him. Peter Slumach was no longer young however, and his stamina and endurance were not what they had once been. He held out in the mountains for about a month. Then, out of supplies and ammunition, he surrendered.

At his trial several weeks later, it was estimated that over the previous few years Slumach had likely killed 19 men and women, all to keep the secret of his gold. He was convicted of the murder of Louis Bee and was hanged on the morning of the 16th of January, 1891.

Some years later, Peter Slumach's granddaughter fell ill while travelling alone in the mountains. As she lay near death along a trail, she was found by Volcanic Brown who was prospecting in the area. Brown, who was widely known for his skills in herbal medicine, plied her with remedies and gradually nursed her back to health. According to Brown, to reward him for saving her life, the woman then told him the secret of her grandfather's gold. Brown mentioned this incident while visiting the hunting cabins of four Nelson, B.C. businessmen shortly after the end of the First World War. He never revealed any more than this, but it is true that for the last few decades of his life, Volcanic Brown always disappeared into the mountains above Pitt Lake every summer and he always returned with a quantity of gold. In fact, it was whatever knowledge he possessed of Peter Slumach's gold that ultimately led to his own death.

Perhaps as an omen of what was to come, or perhaps a warning-for the Salish Indians believed Slumach's gold was cursed-trouble finally over- took Volcanic Brown in the mid '20's. Returning from a trip into the mountains in August of 1926, Brown froze his left foot while crossing the Stave Glacier. When gangrene set in, the rough and practical old prospector

amputated his own frost-damaged toes with his pocket knife. Enough good fortune still clung to Brown that he was able to make it out on that occasion. Still, it may be that the loss of his toes impeded his walking and climbing ability enough to contribute to his mysterious fate.

Late in the summer of 1931, another prospector by the name of Swansen was making his way out

of the Pitt Lake country. On the 17th of August, he and Volcanic Brown came across each other high on a mountain trail. Brown's food was getting low and Swansen sold him some beans and rice to augment his supply. The two parted, and, so far as is known, that was the last time anyone ever saw Volcanic Brown.

Brown usually checked in at the government fish hatchery at Alvin, near the head of Pitt Lake, about the middle of September each year. When the eighty-six year old prospector did not appear in that autumn of 1931, a search was organized which set out on the 2nd of November. The party consisted of game warden George Stevenson, Constable Eugene Murphy, and trappers Bill and Leroy McMartin. From the beginning, difficulties with the weather hindered the expedition. The four men left Alvin, expecting to travel only part of a day to reach Brown's cabin on Seven Mile Creek. Instead, it took two full days of hard walking against driving sleet on the steep trail. Constable Murphy wrenched his knee crossing a rockslide, but despite the pain, continued on. The party split into two groups with Murphy and Bill McMartin spending two weeks searching the trails of the Seven Mile basin. They then came out on the 16th of November to leave more food for the other two.

At the same time, George Stevenson and Leroy McMartin climbed the trail to the Stave Glacier. They were much hampered by a continuous snowfall and were forced to detour to another slope leading up to Home- stead Glacier. From tentless overnight camps east of Homestead, they made daily searches of the extremely hazardous Stave Glacier, testing for snow covered fissures with long poles and looking as far as possible down into the main crevasses.

Finally the blizzard became so severe the two men were forced to hole up on the glacier for three days. When food ran low it became necessary to return to Seven Mile. They then climbed to the 6000-foot heights above the Stave ice fields where they were again forced to camp for two days. Again food ran low. This time, instead of returning to Seven Mile, they made their way to Stave Creek, where Volcanic Brown used to set up his summer base.

From here, Stevenson and McMartin attempted to cross Fire Mountain but came up against a sheer, towering wall of ice (from the Stave Glacier) that was impossible to scale with the equipment they had. Realizing that further searching was out of the question and probably useless anyway, they decided to re- turn to Alvin. The trip out took five days during which they

existed on only a small quantity of rice, a bit of dried mountain goat's meat, and a porcupine they had shot. Decades later, in the 1960's, a retired Stevenson would remark to reporters that the harrowing ordeal was all part of being a warden in those days!

Of Volcanic Brown, never a trace was found. Stevenson and McMartin thought it likely that Brown fell into one of the crevasses on the Stave Glacier. This seems the most logical explanation although the truth will probably never be known. However, if anyone ever does come across Brown's remains, they will be readily identifiable – Volcanic Brown wore a set of solid gold false teeth!

There is one final, intriguing mystery, which likely would have amused the secretive prospector. When George Stevenson and Leroy McMartin reached the base of the Stave Glacier, their attention was drawn by squabbling whisky jacks to a tent, which lay collapsed in the snow. It was the last camp of Volcanic Brown. Inside they found Brown's personal effects, his cooking utensils, pots and pans, and his shotgun. They also found, in a screw top jar, 11 ounces of gold. Ever since, dozens of prospectors and adventurers have searched – and wondered – if the gold in that screw top jar was part of the same golden hoard that Peter Slumach murderously guarded a little more than a century ago....!!!