

Publications 2000s

SLUMACH'S HOMECOMING: A LONG TIME COMING

Early on a January morning, 118 years ago, Slumach's life ended at the gallows. The Katzie Indian had killed a man called Louie Bee.

Bee and the sole witness, Seymour, were sitting in a canoe when Slumach shot Bee from the shore of the Alouette River.

The victim, "a well-developed man of about 25 or 30 years of age," according to the physician who did the post-mortem, was described in court as quarrelsome, always harassing Slumach with threats of violence that made the old man fear for his life.

Did the elderly Slumach feel threatened by the man approaching the shore? Did he act to protect himself?

Whether he killed in self-defence or not, at the time under Canadian law the penalty for murder was death by hanging, and reduction of the punishment to manslaughter was only possible in cases where death was caused in the heat of passion and by sudden provocation.

To spare Slumach an undignified death at the gallows, the defence tried to delay the trial until the spring, believing that the old man would die in prison from "natural" causes before then.

But the application was not successful.

This was a pretty straightforward case for the Crown, and after deliberating for all of one quarter of an hour, the jury returned with the verdict that Slumach was guilty of murder, and the Crown claimed Slumach's life.

Under normal circumstances, old Slumach and his tragic ending would have been long forgotten. Both victim and culprit were without social status in the white community, and the crime had no exceptionally daring or gruesome elements that could give it a place in local memory.

What assured Slumach's name a permanent spot in local lore was his supposed connection to the legendary gold of Pitt Lake.

The legend of Pitt Lake gold, or Slumach's gold as it became known, has its roots in the years of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush, when maps were printed in California for the comfort of gold hunters heading north to the Fraser. These maps showed words like

Slumach's homecoming: a long time coming

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Publications 2000s

“Gold” and “Indian Diggings” in the country above Pitt Lake.

Stories about an “Indian” finding gold in the Pitt Lake area kept circulating. In a 1915 interview Wilbur Armstrong, a Washington prospector preparing for his tenth and last search for Pitt Lake gold, identified the Indian who first discovered the gold as “Slumagh ... hanged in the jail yard at New Westminster in 1891.”

Some prospectors at that time made money guiding gold hunting parties into the rugged Pitt Lake country, and a good story was needed to attract and convince investors and customers.

Armstrong and his colleagues honed the old stories to perfection, creating the basis for all later tales.

In the 1940s, Slumach was given a new life. Pulp writers and journalists made Slumach into a much younger man, the centre attraction of New Westminster, where he supposedly frequented the bars, paying with raw gold.

He received the flattering attention of dance-hall girls, and he took some of them with him into the wilderness – none returned.

The press hanged Slumach again, this time for the murder of one of the girls, and had him taking the secret of the location of the mine with him, placing a curse on anyone trying to find it.

If indeed anyone had walked around town with as much gold as the stories want us to believe Slumach did, there would have been a riot in New Westminster. It would be a miracle if Slumach had survived the torture of the mob trying to beat the secret of the location of the gold out of him, and there would have been a stampede to the Pitt Lake area.

In those gold-crazed late 1800s, the newspapers would have been full of stories about Slumach and Pitt Lake gold – but there is nothing about that in the local press of that time.

Nevertheless, Slumach’s name has remained linked to the legendary Pitt Lake gold to the present day, and there are many who still believe in the legend of his finding of an Eldorado, out there in the wilderness of Pitt Lake.

We know very little about the real Slumach. The 1898 fire in New Westminster destroyed the records of

Publications 2000s

the Indian Agent, and an important source of Katzie history went up in flames. In the surviving documents, Slumach's name only appears in an 1879 census showing him "Slum.ook," one of seven adult Katzie staying at the Pitt River village at the south end of Pitt Lake. Slumach's brother Smum-qua (Tsa mem.kwahm) was the head of that settlement.

From the court records we know that Slumach had a daughter called Annie, who was present at the trial, and a 1926 newspaper article mentions Slumach's widow.

What else we know is all related to the crime. For their stories most journalists and writers relied heavily on the often flawed reports in New Westminister's Columbian of 1890 and 1891. Some writers have excused themselves from studying the legal records by claiming that they were lost. Today these records are easily accessible to researchers at www.slumach.ca.

Well-known New Westminister historian Archie Miller found records confirming that just before his death, Slumach was baptized. He was given the Christian name "Peter," a name linking him to his close relative and spiritual companion in those hard days in prison, catechist Peter Pierre.

Pierre was a Katzie leader with deep knowledge of his people's culture, traditions, and customary law.

Miller brought us even closer to the real man when he found out where Slumach was buried.

"This has been a long time coming," Cyril Pierre said as we walked up the slope at St. Peter's Cemetery in Sapperton for a reunion with his ancestor.

That was almost to the day 118 years after Slumach died.

Finding Slumach's grave has been one of Pierre's lifetime goals. With the visit to the unmarked grave, the process of returning Slumach to the fold of his family and the Katzie First Nation has started.

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