

PITT LAKE'S LOST GOLD MINE

by Fred Braches

Whonnock Historian

Pitt Lake's Gold Mine is a legendary lost mine said to be near Pitt Lake, some 40 miles northeast of Vancouver, the supposed wealth of which has held the imagination of people worldwide for more than a century. Ever since the years of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush prospectors and adventurers have been looking for the mine and gold-rush rumors have evolved into legends repeated and enriched over time. The mysterious riches are known as Slumach's Lost Mine, or Lost Creek Mine.

The story of Pitt Lake gold begins in 1858, the year of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush, when a number of maps were published in San Francisco promoting the gold fields of British Columbia. Two of these maps show the words "gold" and "Indian diggings" in the country above Pitt Lake. Another map from that time shows the words "much gold bearing quartz rock" on the north side of Pitt Lake, where a decade later, in 1869, an Indian brought "... a good prospect of gold...which he states he found in a little stream on the north side of Pitt Lake" to New Westminster. The report created "great excitement" in the city, and parties set out to find the diggings. In 1903, a newspaper in New Westminster BC reported that a man called George Moody, had claimed to have found a rich placer at Pitt Lake, and had returned to town with \$1,200 in course gold to prove it. That was all that was published about Moody's find. In 1905 it was told that in 1902 "an Indian" had exchanged gold dust for \$1,600 in bills in New Westminster.

Several months later he came back with \$1,800 in gold dust, and again now with \$1,400 in gold. He did not want to tell where he got it and attempts to follow him failed. Then the Indian took sick, probably because of his exposure to inclement weather on expeditions in the mountains and a doctor told him he was going to die. The Indian told a relative the secret source of his gold — a rich placer at Pitt Lake — and described

its location, giving the landmarks and tracing a crude map of the locality. After the unnamed Indian died, his relative, who had no money, sought the assistance of a white man. They were unable to trace the spot where the Indian said he had found the gold. With the secret now out "there have been expeditions every year in an attempt to locate the mysterious placer." In 1906 another such expedition again failed to find the gold. The participants had information that an old man had found some valuable placer ground in the Pitt Lake country and that he had hidden a substantial amount of gold nuggets under a rock. Before he died, he had left directions where the treasure and the placer ground were to be found. It was "a rough trip as the weather was rainy, and sleeping out did not remind one of dreams between Dutch feather beds."

For a decade Washington prospector Wilbur Armstrong guided search parties into the Pitt Lake area to find the legendary treasure located "within 20 miles of the head of Pitt Lake." When interviewed in 1915 Armstrong mentioned that in 1901 a white man called Walter Jackson found the mine. As in the other stories Jackson fell gravely ill after discovering the gold and before he died he wrote a letter to a friend describing his find's location and this description of the treasures: "I found a place where the bedrock is bare and you will hardly believe me when I tell you the bedrock was yellow with gold. In a few days I gathered thousands and there was thousands more in sight. Some of the nuggets were as big as walnuts....I saw there were millions practically at the surface. I buried part of the gold under a tent-shaped rock with a mark cut on the face." The story of a white man discovering the gold of Pitt Lake initially only appeared in newspapers in the United States. Ten years later an article appeared in the Vancouver Province reporting that for 24 years dozens of prospectors had been looking in vain for "untold wealth" in placer gold somewhere back of Pitt Lake. They were also looking for a treasure of placer

gold buried under a rock by a prospector called Shotwell—the man named Walter Jackson in Armstrong's story. Shotwell came out of the Pitt Lake area in the fall of 1901 and went to San Francisco where, according to the records at the United States mint, he deposited more than \$8,000 in placer gold. Following the familiar pattern Shotwell fell ill and his physician told him that he had not long to live. Before the prospector died he sent a letter to an unnamed partner from his Alaska days, letting him know that he had found "fabulous rich placer ground in the mountains back of Pitt Lake." Shotwell said, he had buried a sack of gold "under a tent-shaped rock, in a valley overlooked by three mountain peaks standing close together." The letter gave directions to where the "golden cache" was buried and the grounds that Shotwell had worked. In an interview in 1939, Hugh Murray of New Westminster retold the story about a white prospector, his rich placer gold findings and the cache of gold under a tent-shaped rock. In Murray's account the man was called John Jackson, a veteran Alaskan prospector, who in 1903, hearing about the Slumach legend set out for the Pitt Lake area and returned three months later with a very heavy pack-sack. Jackson deposited \$8,700 in gold in the Bank of British North America in San Francisco—an affiliate of a Canadian bank. Before he died, Jackson, suffering from the hardships of the search, sent a letter and a map with the information about the location of the treasure to a friend in Seattle called Shotwell. Being an old man, Shotwell himself was unable to search for the gold, and he sold a share to a fellow Seattle man who went to the Pitt Lake region looking for Jackson's creek "but returned without success when the map became partially damaged."

The damaged map can't have been of much use and Jackson's letter was not much of a help either. But Murray, among others, kept believing and searching. His belief was strengthened after meeting "... an old Indian woman at the Indian camp at the head of Pitt Lake [who] remembered Jackson staying with them in 1903..." with his very heavy pack that he would not let out of sight. Nowhere but in these stories is there any evidence that Jackson or Shotwell ever existed.

Slumach was an elderly Katzie First Nation man who lived where the Pitt River flows out of Pitt Lake. Convicted of the murder of a "half-breed" know as Louis or Louie Bee on the shore of the Pitt

..."I found a place where the bedrock is bare and you will hardly believe me when I tell you the bedrock is yellow with gold. In a few days I gathered thousands and there was thousands more in sight. Some of the nuggets were as big as walnuts..." The original location of the nugget below, part of the collection of the Canadian Museum of Man in Hull, Quebec, although found in British Columbia and much larger than a walnut, is unknown.



River. Slumach died on the gallows in New Westminster in 1891. Baptized moments before his death he was given the first name "Peter", a name never used in his lifetime. His unmarked grave is in St. Peter's Cemetery in Sapperton. Slumach is mentioned for the first time as the first discoverer of the legendary gold of Pitt Lake by Wilbur Armstrong, a Washington prospector, in an interview in 1915 article in a Wisconsin newspaper reprinted in the US by other newspapers. In Canada the first mention of Slumach in association with Pitt Lake gold was in a 1926 article saying: "Slumach died and with him died the secret of a great gold mine somewhere up in that wild Pitt Lake country." Evidently the story of Slumach and Pitt Lake gold was circulating among prospectors at that time. Only in 1939 did Slumach become a permanent part of the Pitt Lake Gold legend when Jack Mahony interviewed pioneer Hugh Murray. Although the article contains mostly "romantic fiction" it became the source of many stories about Slumach and the treasure at Pitt Lake. The imaginary "Slummock" in this article is a middle-aged "half-breed Red River Indian" hanged for murdering another "half-breed" prospector by drowning. Hugh Murray would have known the real facts. He grew up in Port Moody, not far from New Westminster and he was in his thirties when Slumach died.

In his article Mahony added more murders, hidden gold and maidens to the story of a hanged man. He presented the legendary "Slummock" as a middle-aged man, still capable of looking for gold in the mountains, who struck it rich in the late nineties and frequently came to New Westminster with "a well-filled 'poke' of nuggets," spending his money freely, but keeping its source a secret. Mahoney stated that "...it was believed but never proven, that he had drowned three of his Indian 'wives' near Shiwash Rock at the mouth of Pitt Lake to prevent them from divulging the location [of his gold mine]."

That last theme grew out into gothic tales such as "The Bluebeard of Lost Creek Mine" and "The gold mine murders of nine British Columbian women." Hugh

Murray told Mahoney that a local physician, a Dr. Hall visited "Slummock" in his death cell trying to find out, but he went to his death "with the burning question of the community unanswered." At the time of the trial none of the local newspapers of that community even hinted on the possibility that Slumach knew of gold. Jason Ovid Allard, who had been a court interpreter at the time of the trial also knew nothing about Slumach's gold. This suggests that old man Slumach, the man hanged in 1891 for murder, had no knowledge of the bonanza that today carries his name.

Prospector Stanford Corey said in 1926 that in the thirty years he prospected there he had "not seen the marks of any other person ever having entered the land." The newspapers, however, had a different view: a stream of adventures risking life and limb hunting for the lost treasure. Underlining the dangers of exploration in the Pitt Lake region, newspapers claimed that since 1900 some two dozen prospectors and treasure hunters looking for Pitt Lake's gold lost their life by natural causes or fell victim to "Slumach's Curse." Remarkably only the death or disappearance of five seemed worth reporting.

(1910) George Blake. and son George from Coquitlam BC: crushed by a falling tree as they were sleeping in a tent.

(1932) Robert Allan Brown alias "Volcanic" Brown: disappeared in an exceptionally heavy snow storm.

(1951) Alfred Gaspar from Langley, BC: disappeared.

(1961) Lewis Earl Hagbo from Bremerton, WA: died of a heart attack.

The location of the mythical mine remains elusive. There were always skeptics such as Stanford Corey who was an experienced prospector and had searched for minerals in the area between Pitt Lake and Squamish for many years. Corey did not believe there would be a possibility of any great strike in that region. In 1965 a geologist agreed that "...the area around Pitt Lake is not favourable for gold-quartz, and even less so for the placer gold of the legend." Nevertheless the search



The Peter Pierre family, 1906.

Back row: Margaret (Maggie) Pierre (later Mrs. Andrew James) and Xavier Pierre (later married Minnie Mussell).

Front row: Peter Pierre, Matilda Pierre (later Mrs. William Kelly), Catherine (Mrs. Peter Pierre) née Charles, and Amanda Mary Pierre (later Mrs. Clinton Charnley). An older son, Simon, was absent for the portrait session.

Although only 25 years of age, Simon accompanied Chiefs Joseph Capilano of North Vancouver, Charlie Tsipseymult of Cowichan (on Vancouver Island), and Basil David of Bonaparte (near Cache Creek) to London, England, in 1907 to act as an interpreter for their meeting with King Edward VII to discuss the unfairness of land appropriations from the First Nations.

Peter Pierre was the nephew of Slumach as well as the catechist for the Katsie First Nations.

continues.

In the early 1970s, Donald Waite of Maple Ridge befriended Amanda Charnley, daughter of Peter Pierre, a Katzie elder and medicine man. Her father had given Slumach spiritual support in his final days and hours.

"Here is what my Father told me about Slumach, the killing of Louie Bee, and the gold that Slumach found in the Pitt Country.

My Father, Peter Pierre, a catechist from the Roman Catholic Order of Mary Immaculate in Mission and Medicine Man of the Katzie Indian Reserve, was Slumach's nephew.

Father said that Charlie Slumach at the time of the shooting of Bee was closer to eighty than to sixty and that he was a crippled and harmless old widower who lived at the bottom end of Pitt Lake in a shack that was on the abandoned Silver Creek Indian Reserve. He had a brother named Smum-qua and a married daughter Mary living at Cowichan on Vancouver Island.

My Father spent the last week of Slumach's life with him in prison teaching him religion and preparing him for the hereafter. It was during that week that Slumach told him what had happened at Alouette Slough. He said that he had been heading up the Lower Pitt River in his canoe to his cabin when he spotted a deer. He shot at the animal from his canoe and then pulled in to beach to see if he had hit the animal. Seeing blood, he ventured into the bush to look for the wounded animal. After a lengthy and futile search he was returning to his canoe when he saw two Indians in a canoe out on the water. One was Louis Boulier, a half-French half-Kanaka, often called Bee for short, and the other was Charlie Seymour, an Indian from Harrison Mills. Slumach told my Father that Boulier held a grudge against him and stepping ashore came at him wielding an axe and shouting, 'I'm going to chop your damn head off.' Slumach said he raised his shotgun out of sheer fright and fired point blank at Boulier killing him instantly. Seymour, the only witness, disappeared into the bush. Slumach placed Boulier's body into

the victim's own canoe and from his canoe towed the canoe with the lifeless body in the Lower Pitt River's midstream to drift down to the fishing party. Slumach did not accompany the body because he feared Boulier's friends might mob him. He then paddled upstream in his own canoe to his cabin.

The following day a boat came out to Slumach's home. The posse brought my Father with them. One of the men merely fired shots into the house which resulted in Slumach escaping out the back door and hiding under a fallen tree. The group aboard the boat disgusted Peter by the irresponsible manner in which they carried out their duties. To ensure that Slumach would not return to his home for shelter the government officials burned it to the ground.

It was to Peter that Slumach eventually surrendered. Peter persuaded his Uncle to give himself up to the Indian Agent. My Father went into the bush after his Uncle without a gun despite warnings from the posse. Peter told them that he was going to see his Uncle and not some wild animal. He found Slumach half-starved hidden under a fallen tree. According to my Father there was only the hangman, Father Morgan, and himself that actually witnessed the hanging of his Uncle although a great many were present outside the gallows. When the hangman was placing the hood over Slumach's head the old Indian asked him in Chinook not to waste any time. At that moment my Father closed his eyes and began to pray with Father Morgan. When he opened his eyes all he could see was the dangling rope. Slumach was buried in an unknown grave in the prison cemetery in Sapperton despite attempts by his daughter to get possession of his body to give him a proper burial.

It was during my Father's stay in prison that Slumach told him about finding gold in the Pitt Country. Slumach told my Father that only on one occasion did he ever take gold out of the Pitt. He said he had met Port Douglas Indians from the head of Harrison Lake coming off Glacier Lake and down Patterson Creek into the Upper Pitt River and Valley. They told him that they

had taken horses part way but had driven them back towards Port Douglas and had crossed Glacier Lake on foot. They gave him a handful of bullets moulded from gold that they had found in Third Canyon. Slumach spent the night in the canyon and slept on a bench-shaped rock on the west side of the river. The rock was covered with a rust-coloured moss. When he awoke around 5 a.m. he could scarcely see the sun coming over three mountain peaks for the east wall of the canyon. During this time he was still shrouded in darkness. As it became lighter Slumach could see in his own surroundings. Peeling the moss off his rock bed he saw a yellow metal. He dug out some nuggets with a pen knife and half-filled his shot bag with them. He sold the half-filled shot bag, which was about the same size as a ten pound sugar bag, to a store keeper in New Westminster for \$27. The store keeper went back to England a short time after the purchase. That, claimed Slumach, was the only gold that he ever took out of the Pitt country. Sitting on the cell bench Slumach drew a map for Peter of the location where he found the nuggets. Peter memorized the drawing and then destroyed it. Years later he redrew the map. A daughter traced out three copies; however the original and the copies were destroyed in the 1930s in a house fire.

Waite talked with "Aunt Mandy" about Slumach and arranged to introduce her to Vancouver filmmaker Mike Collier. During an interview by Collier in 1978 at Waite's home, Charnley said, "You know where Sturgeon Slough is, this point of land on the west side of Sturgeon Slough across the Pitt River; the corner before you turn north to the quarry? That's where it happened (the shooting of Boulier), just a little west of the corner."

She remembered her Father telling that Slumach killed Bee not on the shore of the Alouette River, as the Columbian had reported, but on the Pitt River at Addington Point, in fact confirming what Seymour had told the court.