

Looking Back: Slumach facts, fairy tales



Stories of untold riches hidden somewhere just north of us have never stopped to fascinate searchers for and dreamers of gold.

According to popular belief, Slumach was the first to discover that gold.

Slumach was a Katzie First Nations man living on the reserve at the southern end of Pitt Lake.

He was convicted for murder and hanged in 1891.

Talking with Donald Waite in 1972, Slumach's grandniece, Amanda Charnley, thought that Slumach found gold north of Pitt Lake.

But what he found there was a far cry from the "untold riches" the stories talk about.

Mrs. Charnley remembered her father telling her that Slumach did not find more than \$27 worth of gold in his whole life.

In 1869, a nameless "Indian" reportedly turned up in New Westminster with a "good prospect of gold," which

he said to have found in a little creek north of Pitt Lake.

Was that person Slumach?

Had Slumach ever turned up with gold in New Westminster or had the slightest rumour even circulated connecting the imprisoned Slumach with gold, it would have been all over the front pages. However, the newspapers were silent and the old man himself went to his death without speaking about gold or a mine.

He had no secret to hide. There was simply no gold in Slumach's real life story.

Slumach was hanged for the killing of a man called Louis Bee, who had previously bullied Slumach, and who knows what he and his buddy Seymour were up to when they surprised Slumach hunting with a shotgun in his hands.

There was simply no gold in Slumach's real life story.

— image credit: Contributed

Liquor – not gold – is in the background of this murder. Bee and his crony were “drunks,” according to Mrs. Charnley. Police court records show that they had been convicted in the past for illegally selling liquor to First Nations people.

The records of the Slumach trial mention an empty bottle in their canoe.

Peter Pierre, Mrs. Charnley’s father, was the confidant and companion of Slumach in his final days and hours. Both he and the Indian Agent in New Westminster described Slumach as a kind old man who had harmed no one before his shooting of Bee.

Had he been a white man, Slumach would probably have been spared death by hanging in consideration of his age. But for him, an “Indian,” there was no clemency.

All settlers were obsessed with finding gold and rumours of a mysterious gold treasure in the Pitt Lake area kept surfacing occasionally in particular in the New Westminster newspapers. Slumach’s name, however, did not appear in connection with gold until 1915, and that only in an American newspaper article.

The first mention in a Canadian newspaper of Slumach as the finder of that elusive Pitt Lake gold was in 1926. The story described Slumach as a charming mass murderer who, when he died, took with him “the secret of a great gold mine up in that wild Pitt country.”

That thread was picked up again in an article published in 1939, about a “half-breed Red River Indian named Slummock.” This Slummock, a prospector from Manitoba, was a tough character who frequently came to New Westminster with a “well-filled poke of nuggets.” Before killing – by drowning – an unnamed fellow prospector he was thought to have drowned three of his “Indian wives” at Widgeon Creek. He did this, it was said, to prevent the women from revealing the source of his gold at the headwaters of Pitt Lake.

That fairy tale took on a life of its own. Slumach reappeared in story after story as a murdering, boozing womanizer, throwing nuggets around as if it was popcorn. He was pictured as a “narrow-eyed cigar-smoking half-breed Indian” who never revealed the source of his wealth; even swearing in his last moments that the mine would die with him. Slumach was said to have put a curse on the mysterious gold.

The readers loved it and we, today, still enjoy reading those tales.

Of course, aside from the fabricated stories there is nothing supporting the suggestion that the real Slumach even had knowledge of the legendary gold.

Despite that, we will doubtless continue talking about “Slumach’s gold” or “Slumach’s curse” or that

“Slumach” character in these stories. But when we do so, let us reserve a few kind thoughts for the real Slumach, the old Katzie gentleman whose name was used after his death for an imaginary player in the stories of that mysterious gold just north of us.

– *By Fred Baches, a local historian who lives in Whonnock.*