
THE SITE OF LEECHTOWN.

SPEECH DELIVERED BY JOHN HOSIE, PROVINCIAL ARCHIVIST, AT THE UNVEILING OF THE
MEMORIAL CAIRN ERECTED ON THE SITE OF LEECHTOWN IN COMMEMORATION
OF THE FINDING OF GOLD THERE ON JULY 17TH, 1864.

[The British Columbia Historical Association erected this most impressive cairn, using the stones from the ruins of the fireplace and chimney of what had been the Gold Commissioner's house in the old mining days. On October 1st, 1928, a party of sixty, members and friends, journeyed by special train on the C.N.R. line from Victoria to Leechtown for the purpose of the formal unveiling ceremony. Among them, as special guest, was Mrs. Fannie Faucault, of Walhachin, B.C., only daughter of Peter Leech, the surveyor with the party of original discoverers, after whom the river and old mining town had been named. Amid the falling rain His Honour Lieutenant-Governor R. Randolph Bruce unveiled the cairn, and Mr. Hosie delivered the following address.]

YOUR HONOUR, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—We meet here to-day to dwell for a little while on a long-closed but fascinating chapter of our Island history—namely, the

discovery of gold in the Sooke and Leech Rivers on the 17th of July, 1864, the excitement following, and the mushroom birth of a considerable town, of which scarcely a vestige now remains. Prior to 1864 little had been heard of gold deposits on the Island, although desultory prospecting had been done in various accessible rivers and creeks around the coast. The coast-line, indeed, was an open book, but the interior was more or less an uncharted wilderness with locked-up mysteries in its heart. In this year (1864), at the suggestion of Governor Kennedy, several public-spirited citizens in Victoria formed themselves into a committee and organized a fund for the exploration of Vancouver Island. A considerable sum of money was raised, the Government contributing dollar for dollar. The main objectives of the exploration were the possible discovery of gold or other minerals, and the examination of the country as to its suitability for settlement. The support afforded the committee was substantial and encouraging, and soon a leader, Dr. Robert Brown, of Edinburgh, Scotland, was appointed commander of the expedition. Among the more precious relics in the Provincial Archives are the journal, accompanying notes, and numerous letters and memoranda of Dr. Brown, which provide a vast amount of curious, valuable, and interesting information respecting the operations of the expedition, which was divided into several parties.

On the eve of the departure of Dr. Brown on his explorations, and apropos of what might lie ahead, he wrote this significant sentence:—

“We will do our best, but I neither promise to discover prairies, nor mines, nor yet a Goschen—a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will try. We are searching for truth, and that we will find. If the Island is worth anything the sooner it is known the better; if not, make the best of what you have.”

Dr. Brown, you see, ladies and gentlemen, was a canny Scot, and something of a philosopher.

To-day we are only concerned with one result of the expedition—the discovery of gold on the historic spot on which we now stand. Dr. Brown was not present when this discovery was made, being in the Cowichan District pursuing his investigations there, and writing his brilliant, distinctive, and sometimes ironic, diary. Before leaving Victoria he deputed Lieutenant Peter Leech to proceed to Sooke River, with the following instructions:—

“You are hereby directed to take charge of the field parties of the expedition during my absence from the main body, and over it for the time being you have absolute power and authority of the direction of its movements in conformity with the general orders appended. You will proceed with the whole party with all prudent speed to the headwaters of Sooke River. Finally, trusting that you will execute this important trust in a manner which experience has shown you are capable of.”

I need not say that Lieutenant Leech amply justified the confidence placed in him by Commander Brown. His letters preserved in the Archives Department show that he was a most efficient, capable, and resourceful officer. He later became city engineer of Victoria, and we are honoured to-day in the presence here of his daughter, Mrs. Faucault, of Walhachin, B.C. Carrying out his instructions, he duly proceeded by vessel to Sooke, travelling up the river of that name, and on the 14th July, 1864, made the first discovery of gold on the bars of the river. In his letter of that date he states:—

“I have to report for your information that we have found good indications of gold on the Sooke River at a point about six miles from the inlet and about one-quarter of a mile above the canyon shown on Mr. Whympers sketch which I forward along with this note. The parcels which are enclosed contain the prospects obtained by Mr. Foley. Number 1 contains the result of 15 pans; number 2 contains the result of 2 pans. Mr. Foley estimates the result about 2 cents to the pan, the highest estimate being about 25 cents to the pan.”

Another excerpt is as follows:—

“A discovery which I have to communicate is the finding of gold on one of the forks of the Sooke River about 10 miles from the sea in a straight line, and in a

locality never hitherto reached by white men, and in all probability never even by natives. The lowest prospect obtained was 3 cents to the pan; the highest, one dollar to the pan, and work like that with the rocker would yield what you can better calculate than I can, and the development of which with what results you can imagine. The diggings extend for fully 25 miles, and would give employment to more than 4,000 men. Many of the claims would take 8 to 10 men to work them. The diggings could be wrought with great facility by fluming to the stream. The country abounds with game and the honest miner need never fear but that he could find food without much trouble. The whole value of the diggings cannot be easily overestimated. The gold will speak for itself."

The reference to the forks means the ground upon which we are now standing, as the Leech was then known as a branch of the Sooke. Immediately following Leech's discovery and his closer examination of the larger tributary on our right, the name "Leech" was bestowed upon the latter by a party headed by Ronald McDonald, in honour of the discoverer.

Just as soon as the news of the discovery of gold reached Victoria and publicity given in the *Colonist* newspaper, men began to flock out in considerable numbers. Not only did they flock from Victoria, but according to Dr. Robert Brown, who was in the Nanaimo District at the time, there was a miniature stampede from Nanaimo, and even a number of Brown's party and Leech's own party showed a disposition to disengage themselves from their official duties to follow the lure of the precious metal. Leech had the greatest difficulty in retaining the services of certain members of his party—Foley in particular. During the rush from Victoria to the Sooke mines, a celebrated local punster asked why Victoria resembled a female foundling. The answer was that she was entirely "for-Sooke."

May I here mention the name of an artist of renown who accompanied Leech in his explorations—Frederic Whymper, known far and wide as a water-colour artist whose paintings exhibited great delicacy and charm. Some of his original sketches are preserved in the Provincial Archives, but hundreds executed on Vancouver Island have disappeared. It is gratifying to record that Whymper's name has now been commemorated, a lake north of Campbell River having received his name this year.

Leech's instructions did not permit him to remain many days in this vicinity. Having thoroughly examined the banks of the Sooke and Leech Rivers, and sent in his reports, he proceeded northward to Sooke Lake; thence to Cowichan, the Nitinat country, and Alberni.

It soon became necessary to provide suitable trail accommodation from the mouth of the Sooke River and also from Goldstream for the convenience of prospectors making for the scene of the gold discoveries. The authorities in Victoria were greatly excited over what appeared to them to be another El Dorado. The first parties travelled by steamer to Sooke Harbour, thence following the river to the claims. A trail, which presently became a wagon-road, was constructed from Sooke Harbour up Sooke River to its junction with the Leech, and almost immediately a similar trail was made over the Goldstream Mountains to Wolf Creek, and down Wolf Creek to its confluence with the Sooke. Great numbers of men of all ages staggered over these rough trails carrying their impedimenta. In the course of a month a small town had arisen on Kennedy Flat, in this immediate neighbourhood. It was at first a town of tents, but presently log houses arose, and a number of stores, saloons, hotels, etc., were erected. Within six weeks' time six general stores, groceries, and three hotels were operating. The townsite was surveyed into lots in September, 1864, and about thirty-one lots were put up for sale at the land office in Victoria on October 3rd at the upset price of \$100 per parcel.

A very busy man was Richard Golledge, who was sent out by the Government as Gold Commissioner. Mr. Golledge's letters reflected something of the excitement among the miners, and the difficulty incidental to keeping calm such a community. Nevertheless, he reports that as a whole the miners were exceedingly well-behaved. The staking of claims proceeded with a rush and Golledge was overwhelmed. His

reports show that in August and September, 1864, considerable quantities of gold were extracted from all bars on both rivers. Individual nuggets to the value of as high as \$75 were taken out. By November 9th, 1864, four months after the discovery of gold, some 1,200 miners were at work, and at December 10th, 1864, \$2,690 had been collected for miners' licences. Also at November 9th, 1864, according to Magistrate Foster, of Sooke, there were no fewer than thirty premises licensed for the sale of alcoholic liquors.

A year ago the Provincial Archives were enriched by the addition of a number of photographs of the gold diggings here. In those first hectic days these photographs were transmitted by Governor Kennedy to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London. They are of the very greatest interest and show better than anything else the method of work and the rough-and-tumble conditions obtaining.

The Gold Commissioner's quarters, which included the Court-house and Police Station, was a substantial log structure where Mr. Golledge officiated and kept his records. He was provided with a safe, firearms, and other conveniences. The site was designated in official records as Kennedy Junction or Kennedy Flat, after His Excellency, Governor Kennedy. Some thirty large trees were removed to make room for the buildings, leaving an open space in front. The buildings were erected in November and December, 1864. Prior to this Mr. Golledge transacted his business in a tent. Alas for the condition of "Government House" to-day! That no effort was made to preserve it is somewhat of a reflection on public sentiment. Doubtless had the Historical Association come into being earlier, steps would have been taken to preserve the last surviving relic of the old town. In addition to the Government offices, we have here in front of us two tangible, living memorials of the Leechtown of old in the shape of two apple-trees, now hoary, but still alive and bearing fruit. Their persistence in the circumstances is remarkable. They were planted by Governor Kennedy and his daughter on the occasion of their visit of inspection to the goldfields in the spring of 1865. As to the complete disappearance of the town, which boasted some substantial buildings—years after the gold had petered out and the town became deserted, the place was swept by fire. Now Mother Nature has resumed her sway and taken the site back into her bosom again.

I will not delay you further, other than to state that with regard to the amount of gold taken from this vicinity there are differences of opinion. Dawson in his report estimates that in the years 1864-66 the amount taken out did not exceed \$200,000. Most of the gold was obtained half-way up the Leech between Kennedy Flat and the North Fork. We know, however, that a vast amount was taken out irregularly of which there is no record. Although prospecting still goes on, it would appear that the once rich river-bed is exhausted. In his 1877 report Dawson says this:—

"There is little doubt but that some rich spots still exist in the neighbourhood of Leech River, but they must be quite limited, and from the nature of the country hard to find. I am told that in most cases the miners were content to go no lower in the bed of the Leech than the surface of the cement, which in some places passes completely under it. In this case it is highly probable that an auriferous horizon at least equally rich with the upper exists on the surface of the true bed rock."

Since Dawson wrote the foregoing, hydraulic plants have operated from time to time, but with little success. Whether the Leech will ever come into its own again, whether, as has been suggested, the surface has only been scratched, and whether with the employment of new methods the Leech might not be successfully exploited, we are not competent to say.

Reverting to the object of the expedition in 1864, the practical reward to individuals for the discovery of gold consisted as follows: Commander Brown, \$400; Lieutenant Leech, \$200; Whymper, the artist, \$175; John Buttle (who discovered Buttle Lake), \$150.

The old mushroom mining town has gone, but the poetry and romance and glamour of it remains, and to-day we wish to pay our respects to the memory of the men who explored this area and for a brief spell made the wilderness resound with their labours.

[At the conclusion of his remarks Mr. Hosie then read the following sonnet which had been composed for the occasion.]

LEECHTOWN, 1864-1928.

BY DONALD A. FRASER.

Here thronged tense hearts and hands in search of gold!
And gold they found! Like magic, in a day,
Uprose a flimsy town, grim, gaunt, but gay,
And all-sufficient those stern lives to hold;
But Fortune's smile soon, Ah, too soon, grew cold;
Fickle and false she fluttered on her way;
Faded the gleam, and those she did betray
Passed on, and left all things to Moth and Mould.

Yet can they live again through Memory!
For lust and lure of yellow gold are still
All-powerful to tempt Humanity,
And at their tale our hearts must throb and thrill.
That Memory may call in clearer tones,
We here to-day uprear these speaking stones!
