

The History of Leechtown - Part I, "The VIEE and the Discovery of Gold on the Sooke and Leech Rivers"

Book Summary, by Bart van den Berk - February, 2014. ©

Tuesday, 7 June 1864. It is the start of the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition (VIEE). The members; Commander R. Brown, P. Leech, J. Buttle, F. Whymper, R. MacDonald, J. Foley, J. Meade, A. Barnston and T. Lewis, leave Victoria by gunboat HMS Grappler and arrive late afternoon in Cowichan Bay. Two days later one-armed hunter and guide Métis T. Anthony also joins the expedition.

Monday, 11 July. In the afternoon they arrive at Sooke Harbour in two canoes (coming from Muir Creek, camp 15). About one mile up Sooke River they set up camp 16 opposite of the Brulé family farm [close to what is now the end of Calvert Rd].

Tuesday, 12 July. They remain at camp 16 and make preparations to travel up the Sooke River to find and explore Sooke Lake. From there they plan to proceed to Cowichan again. From the nearby Indian village Brown hires four guides and packers for the expedition.

Wednesday, 13 July. After putting Leech in charge, Commander Brown and Barnston temporarily leave the expedition for business in Victoria. The rest of the Exploring party heads up river and arrive at Sooke River Falls in the afternoon where they set up camp 17.

Thursday, 14 July. Foley finds 'payable' gold, on average 3½ cents to the pan, just above Sooke River Falls. When Leech comes back from exploring a nearby mountain that day, Foley shows him the gold.

Friday, 15 July. The party heads further up Sooke River finding payable gold along the way. They set up camp 18 about half a mile below where the river forks. Foley goes up to the forks to prospect and returns with good results, in one case 20 cents to the pan.

Saturday, 16 July. Proceeding up river, at the forks, they take the smaller north stream and reach Sooke Lake around noon where they set up camp 19.

Sunday, 17 July. They remain at camp 19. Leech writes a letter to Commander Brown about the finding of payable gold at the Sooke River and sends it with the three Indians guides and packers back to Sooke. He retains 15yr old Métis guide and packer Lazare [Louis Lazzar]. The Indians would give the letter to Mr. Muir in Sooke with instructions to forward it to Victoria with the least possible delay.

Monday, 18 July. In the morning, at the suggestion of Foley, Lieutenant Leech agrees to send Foley in charge with MacDonald, Meade and Anthony back to the forks where they arrive around noon. Foley and party decide to name the bigger westward stream "Leech River", on account of Lieutenant Leech being the first to see it (on their way up, three days earlier), him being in command of the expedition at the moment, and because of his willingness to allow them to prospect it. They go up the Leech River and over the next three days find good prospects wherever they try, varying from 3 cents to 1 dollar, the average being 12½ cents to the pan.

Thursday, 21 July. Foley and men return. Already before, on the 18th, Leech had moved from camp 19, a few miles up the East side of Sooke Lake and set up camp 20. That same day the cook caused a forest fire and they escaped to (what they named) Exploration Island - camp 21. There, late afternoon, Foley and party arrive and tell the others about their Leech River gold discovery.

Friday, 22 July. The Exploring party constructs a big raft for crossing the lake the next day. That night Leech accidentally steps into a fire pot (to keep away mosquitoes) and severely burns his foot.

Saturday, 23 July. The party travels to the head of Sooke Lake and set up camp 22. The same day Leech's letter (of 17 July) arrives in Victoria and is opened by VIE-Committee Secretary G. Cruickshank. Leech had hoped the letter would reach Brown in time but Brown and Barnston had already left Victoria the day before for Cowichan, to later rendezvous with the Exploring party.

Monday, 25 July. Rumours (sceptical at first) of payable gold on the Sooke River are published in the newspapers and the first few people leave for the Sooke River to check it out.

Tuesday, 26 July. Leech's letter is published in the newspapers. In the evening, Leech and party arrive at Cowichan Bay and rendezvous with Brown and Barnston at the John Bull Inn (Harris's house) where they inform them about the Leech River discovery.

Wednesday, 27 July. Early that morning Brown sends Corporal Buttle with a letter of 'the Leech River gold discovery' and a few gold specimens (Dispatch No. 4) to the VIE-Committee in Victoria. Buttle arrives there late afternoon the same day. Meanwhile quarrels among some party members had grown to a point that during dinner Foley drew a knife on MacDonald. Brown decided this was unacceptable, but because Foley had performed so well before and to quiet the matter Brown discharged him in full.

Thursday, 28 July. Foley also reaches Victoria and meets Buttle. Together they further inform the VIE-Committee and Governor Kennedy. Their news spreads fast over town and the first ship "The Meg Merrilies" and a few other small crafts leave for Sooke.

Friday, 29 July. Brown's letter, in which he wrote "*The gold will speak for itself,*" is published in the newspapers.

Saturday, 30 July. The Government appoints a Gold Commissioner (R. Gollidge), publishes mining regulations and puts a reserve on all crown lands South and East corner of Shawnigan District to the N.W. corner of the Government Reserve at Point Owen on San Juan Harbour [Port Renfrew]. Foley has placed an advertisement in the newspapers, stating he can be found in Sooke to show miners the shortest way and offering his services for the new El Dorado.

- The gold rush is on -