

A Goldrush of Our Very Own by Lori Treloar

Many of the people who came to British Columbia, late in the 19th century, did so because they thought that they could win the lottery. However, in those days, the “winning ticket” so to speak was the result of the hard-earned extraction of gold. The gold rushes in the Fraser Valley and the Cariboo were important to the city of Victoria. Population increased dramatically and the economy flourished.



As the *rushes* petered out, Victoria fell into a slump. In 1864, local Politicians decided that Victoria needed another *Rush* to encourage further population and development. To that end, the *Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition* was established. The advertised purpose was to explore and map the relatively unknown interior of Vancouver Island. The real purpose of their expedition was to find gold.

Members of the group were carefully chosen and many of their names still dot the landscape on Vancouver Island. Robert Brown’s map, published in 1869, was the basis for all future maps of the island.

Although the expedition started out together, it soon split. On April 14, 1864, John Foley found gold roughly six miles from the mouth of the Sooke River. His second find was another four miles further along on the river the men named after Peter Leech.

The Expedition, with an enviable sense of duty and discipline, moved on leaving behind the first Gold Rush on Vancouver Island. Foley followed the group for several days but then he could no longer resist the lure of gold. He returned to join the rush. News spread fast, and soon hordes of would-be miners flocked to the wilderness in search of their fortunes.

At least two small communities sprung up in the area. Muirtown, named after early local settlers, and Kennedy Flats (later renamed Leechtown) . Within six weeks there were six general stores and three hotels in Kennedy Flats. These were followed by the inevitable “dance halls”. By November 1st thirty saloons had been licensed and the population had swelled to approximately 4000.

By early August, over 220 mining licenses had been issued. Some prospectors made wages – none got rich. Unfortunately, the rocky creek bed proved a stubborn obstacle for the gold seekers. \$100 000 worth of gold was extracted in the first year and, by the end, it is estimated that at least \$300 000 had been found. Victoria politicians were elated with the success of their plans. In spite of their expectations, the rush was over by 1868.

When I was a teenager you could still drive from Shawnigan Lake over fourteen miles of rough road to Leechtown and find remnants of the town. Today, there is very little evidence that it was once a bustling gold town that lured thousands of potential jackpot winners. The dreamers and the goldseekers are long gone. The land has been reclaimed by nature.