

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

HANCOCK PARK-LA BREA

Registered Landmark #170

by

Lois Ann Woodward

for

State of California, Department of Natural Resources

Division of Parks

Berkeley, 1936

Written under auspices of Works Progress Administration
District #8, Project #65-3-3218, Symbol #1873

HANCOCK PARK, LA BREA

One of the most complete records of a fauna of prehistoric times may be read by the scientists of today in the fossiliferous remains embedded in the brea deposits of Hancock Park.

For more than a hundred thousand years the black, viscous pools of pitch known as La Brea sucked to their death animals which became mired in them. Perhaps in search of creek or spring, creatures went to the pools to drink surface water, oblivious of the danger which lurked there. Slowly, but inevitably, the thick pitch stifled the last futile efforts of hapless victims caught in the pit's unyielding grip. The despairing death cries of doomed creatures, echoing through the bituminous swamps, seldom went unheeded. Prowling, carnivorous beasts of prey pursued their quarry, and in turn were lured into the sinister mass. Even the most gigantic and powerful beasts were unable to escape the mysterious force, once it clutched them. Giant sloths, mastodons, elephants, camels, tigers, lions, wolves, and birds large and small were equally helpless in the brea pits. The tar preserved the skeletons.

The earliest accounts of the brea beds in the vicinity of Los Angeles are found in the diaries of Father Crespi

and Caspar de Fortola, who were members of an expedition to California headed by Galvez, Visitador-General of New Spain, and Father Junipero Serra in 1769-1770. As they travelled north, to the right along their route they observed extensive beds of bituminous deposits called chapsapote, a black wax or glue. While in the vicinity of these fields, they felt a number of earthquake shocks and attributed the cause to the tar which oozed out of the ground from many small springs. The Indians of the vicinity used the bitumen as fuel and in mending their canoes.¹

In the years following the expeditions of the Spanish explorers, settlers gradually arrived and occupied land grants from the Spanish, and later the Mexican, government. Los Angeles became a populous, thriving pueblo and prosperous ranches were cultivated in the surrounding countryside. In these early days the brea deposits were considered community property, and any citizen had access to them. The tar was found to be a very durable material for the roofs of the adobe houses which the Spanish people erected. James Ohio Pattie, a trapper, who passed through Los Angeles in 1823, describes the process of roofing them:²

-
1. J. C. Merriam, "The fauna of Rancho La Brea: Part I; Occurrence," in University of California, Memoirs, I, 2: 201.
 2. J. M. Guinn, "History of the Cahuenga Valley and Rancho La Brea," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, VIII, 87.

The houses have flat roofs covered with bituminous pitch brought from a place within four miles of the town, where the article boils up from the earth. As the liquid rises, hollow bubbles like a shell of large size are formed. When they burst, the noise is heard distinctly in the town. The large pieces thus separated, are laid on the roof previously covered with earth, through which the pitch cannot penetrate when it is rendered liquid by the sun.

In 1829, Rancho La Brea was granted by Governor Echeandia to Antonio Jose Rocha, a Portuguese, who first came to California in 1815. By the terms of the grant, Rocha was considered a provisional and not an absolute owner of the land, which consisted of one square league or 4,444.4 acres. The first owner of La Brea erected a large adobe house on the property, where he resided with his family for many years. He was a blacksmith by trade and became a well known citizen of Los Angeles. The adobe house was sold to the city and county in the '50s to be used as a courthouse and city hall.³

By the provisions of the grant of 1829, the use of the asphalt deposits of La Brea was reserved for the citizens of Los Angeles. As the pueblo assumed the aspect of a small city, occasional trouble arose over the city's rights; and special privileges were granted sometimes to private persons. According to the pueblo records, in 1835 the missions and

3. F. J. Seaman, "A brief history of Rancho La Brea" in Historical Society of California, Publications, IX, 253.

the city council had a verbal skirmish over the brea deposits. A member of the town council, or ayuntamiento, Juan de Dios Bravo, accused the friars of monopolizing the use of the pueblo salt pits and brea beds. He proposed that the missions be taxed for their use of these two resources. A committee appointed to consider the situation reported in favor of taxing the padres two dollars a bushel for all the salt used by them for the Indians. It could not be discovered that the missions used any brea, but it was recommended that, if they did so in the future, the town council tax them in proportion to the quantity used.

In 1845, the city granted its interests in the bitumen deposits to Carlos Baric, who was to pay the city five per cent of the money received from all sales made. The city records also state, however, that Baric could not prohibit his "neighbors" taking any brea from the pits.⁴

In 1860, Rancho La Brea was deeded to Major Henry Hancock by José Jorge Rocha, an heir of Antonio Rocha. Five hundred of these acres went into the possession of senator Cornelius Cole and another portion became the property of James Thompson, but the greater part of the estate remained in the Hancock family. Major Hancock, a native of New

4. Guinn, History of Cahuenga, 87.

Hampshire, had become interested in California during the Mexican war. During the gold rush of 1849, he established a law office in San Francisco, but in 1852, went to Los Angeles where he made his permanent home. He became one of the city's prominent citizens, serving two terms in the State legislature. He served also, for a time, as a United States government surveyor. Many of the ranches in Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties were surveyed by him. Mr. Hancock invested most of his money in Mexican land grants. Although he owned ranches which in later years were exceedingly valuable, during his lifetime he was always land poor. The present districts of Sherman, Colegrove and Hollywood are located on some of the acres which he formerly owned. La Brea was the largest of the land grants which were in his possession at one time or another, and on it he raised sheep and cattle.⁵

The title to the rancho during these years had remained provisional, as made in the grant of 1823 to Antonio Rocha. In 1866, it was perfected in the United States Supreme Court. Senator Cornelius Cole handled the matter for Major Hancock.⁶

The brea deposits on the rancho were found to have a great commercial value as material for constructing pave-

5. J. S. McGroarty, Los Angeles from the sierras to the sea, 80.
6. Seaman, A brief history, 255.

ments. Mr. Hancock employed about twenty-five Chinese laborers to dig out the best of the tar, which was then boiled for twenty-four hours in huge iron boilers and run into sand molds. After that process, the substance became brittle and was easily broken up. In that form it sold for twenty dollars a ton in San Francisco.

During these excavations, a large number of bones were found in the bituminous deposits, but they were generally supposed to be those of cows, horses and ordinary domestic animals of recent times. The skeletons were so numerous that La Brea was often referred to locally as La Huesamente or bone-yard.

The first recognition that the skeletons were of animal forms belonging to a geological period prior to the present was made by William Denton, in 1875, in a report in which he describes the fossil-like remains:⁷

The locality is known as Major Hancock's Brea Ranch, and is about eight miles west of Los Angeles, in the valley of Santa Anna. The bed of asphaltum here covers sixty to eighty acres, and at a depth of thirty feet no bottom has been reached. Thousands of tons have been removed for roofing, paving and combustion, but the supply is almost inexhaustible.

Beds of petroleum shale of tertiary age, having in many places a thickness of about

7. Merriam, The fauna, 202-203.

two thousand feet, are to be found along the California coast, and at some distance in the interior; they are said by Professor Whitney, to extend from Cape Mendocino to Los Angeles, a distance of about four hundred and fifty miles. They are exposed in cliffs on the coast near Santa Barbara and Carpinteria and other places. This shale, there is good reason to believe, is the deposit from which all the asphaltum of California has been derived.

Although this shale is not exposed in the vicinity of the Brea ranch, it is exposed in various localities at but a short distance, and doubtless underlies the asphaltum deposit, for hundreds of "tar springs" exist in the vicinity, from which the material is still flowing over the surrounding locality, the springs being in some cases elevated, by its deposition around them, several feet above the surrounding level.

Major Hancock presented me with what I found to be a canine tooth of *Machairodus*, a great saber-toothed feline. It was found at the depth of fifteen feet in the asphaltum. The tooth is nine and a half inches in length, measured along the curve, and the breadth of the crown at the base is an inch and three-quarters, being larger than any tooth of the European *Machairodus*, whose measurement I have been able to find. The crown of the tooth is broken, and its entire length could not have been less, I think, than eleven inches. The tooth from the Val d'Arno., in Italy, referred to by Falconer in his Paleontological Memoirs, measured eight and one-half inches in length, and the breadth of the crown at the base is one and one-half inches, while the tooth found by McNary in Kent's Hole, England is six inches in length, and one and one-fifth inches in breadth. The California tooth is closely serrulated on both the concave and convex sides. It seems to have been exposed to the action of the elements for a long time, and contains a number of fractures, some of which have been united by the asphaltum in which it was imbedded.

I obtained a number of teeth of the fossil

horse and bones of the deer, a large bovine animal, the otter, seal, albatross, and other animals. I found near the pit, a part of the right upper jaw of the fossil horse, containing four molar teeth, or three premolars and one true molar. The first premolar is smaller in proportion to the size of the other teeth than those of the recent horse, judging by several with which I have compared it, and smaller than those of the fossil horse of India. It is but one inch in length, and three-quarters of an inch in breadth; but the other three teeth are larger than the average of the recent horse.

After Denton's investigation in 1875, apparently no one became interested in the fossil remains for many years. Denton's discoveries were either overlooked or forgotten. Excavations of asphalt for commercial purposes continued. Many more skeletons were unearthed, but they created no particular interest until geologists and scientists from the University of California began excavations in 1906.

Major Hancock died in 1833, unaware of the great wealth which La Brea ranch contained in oil and the Pleistocene fossil deposits. At his death, the property was heavily mortgaged and it was not until after a number of years that the land became especially valuable. Mrs. Hancock, widowed and with two sons to rear, had a difficult struggle for a few years; but she met the situation admirably. She managed the ranch so successfully that the mortgage was lifted and she attained comfortable circumstances for herself and family. In 1909 she married a Los Angeles attorney, Erskine M. Ross.

Rich oil veins were discovered on La Brea and it became one of the most valuable oil properties in California. Major Hancock's son, George Allan Hancock, devoted much of his time to the management of the estate and organized the Rancho La Brea Oil Company. A hundred and eighty wells were drilled. For a time, the daily production attained a volume of two and a half million cubic feet, most of which was used by consumers in Los Angeles. The oil supply decreased after a time and the derricks and sump holes were replaced by the Wilshire residential and business sections.⁸

In 1905, Mr. W. W. Orcutt of Los Angeles became interested in the fossiliferous deposits of La Brea. In December, 1905, he visited the beds with Mr. F. M. Anderson; and they realized that the bones were those of extinct forms, of a prehistoric period. A small collection of the fossils was made, including part of a saber-teeth skull, teeth of the great wolf, and several dermal ossicles of a great ground sloth. Scientists, including Doctor Ralph Arnold and Doctor John C. Merriam of the University of California, interested in the finds, visited the Brea beds and began regular collections for the university. The bones were considered to be the remains of animals of the Pleistocene era. After the revelation of the true nature of the fossil deposits at

S. McCarty, Los Angeles, 81-82.

La Brea in 1906, continuous excavations were conducted by various scientists, colleges and other institutions.

The formation in which the fossil remains occur at the brea pits is an alluvial accumulation consisting largely of beds of clay, sand and asphalt. Scientists consider that the crater-like holes in which the fossiliferous remains are entangled are located just above a sharp fold of rock formation called the San Fernando shales. The theory of the manner in which the brea pits were formed is that heavy blowouts of gas occurred from oil deposits underlying the shales. As a result of evaporation, the oil thickened and formed the pools of tar.⁹

After the discovery of the important contents of the fossil beds in 1906, the University of California made the first extensive excavations and collection of fossils. Mrs. Hancock Ross consented to have the fossil remains exhumed for scientific purposes. Other institutions - including Los Angeles High School, the Southern California Academy of Science, and Occidental College - also carried on research activities until 1913. The owner of the pits, George Allan Hancock, then gave the exclusive privilege of excavation to Los Angeles County. The fossils obtained by

9. F. Rider, Rider's California; a guidebook for travelers, 458.

the county were to be preserved in the Museum of History, Science and Art, as the Hancock collection, a memorial to Major Henry Hancock and his wife, Ida Hancock Ross.

The material excavated by Los Angeles County includes specimens of a Norway rat, a Virginia rail, a human skeleton thought to be from the period 5,000-10,000 B. C., skeletons of mastodons, elephants, the great ground sloth, extinct camels, western horse, ancient ox, and many bird fossils including a giant vulture and peacock.¹⁰

Incredibly large numbers of skeletons of prehistoric animals have been procured through these excavations. The collection made for the Hancock room in the Museum above contains almost a million specimens, and interesting remains are still being retrieved from the fossil beds. A study of the various collections shows that a preponderance of young, very old and diseased animals were caught in the pits, in comparison with average collections of the remains of similar animals which accumulated under different conditions. Observation also reveals that an unusually large number of carnivorous animals and birds were caught in proportion to other animals. Predaceous creatures must have been lured into the pits by the outcries of victims struggling to extricate themselves from the tar.¹¹

10. Rider, Rider's California, 454.

11. Merriam, The fauna, 210-211.

On December 6, 1916, George Allan Hancock gave the land containing the fossil pits at La Brea to Los Angeles for a park. He specified that the place be preserved as a point of pilgrimage for scientists and interested persons. Some of the skeletons imbedded in the asphalt deposits have been left just as they were found, so that visitors may see how the victims perished. In the Museum of History, Science and Art at Exposition Park, specimens obtained from the pits have been mounted. They constitute one of the most famous exhibits of remains of animals of the Pleistocene era which has ever been brought together.

AUTHORITIES

AUTHORITIES

Printed Material

I. Bibliographical Aids:

1. Cowan, Robert Ernest, and Cowan, Robert Gran-
niss. A bibliography of the history of
California. 1510-1930. 3v. San Fran-
cisco, 1933.

II. Periodical Literature:

2. Alta California. San Francisco, 1849-1891.
3. Historical Society of Southern California.
Publications. Los Angeles, 1884-.
4. Guinn, James Miller. "History of the Cahuenga
Valley and Rancho La Brea," in Historical
Society of Southern California. Publica-
tions. VIII. Los Angeles, 1911.
5. Merriam, John Campbell, "The fauna of Rancho La
Brea; Part I: Occurrence," in Memoirs of
the University of California. I, No. 2.
Berkeley, 1911.
6. Seaman, Florence Josephine. "A brief history
of Rancho La Brea," in Historical Society
of Southern California. Publications. IX.
Los Angeles, 1914.

III. General Works:

7. Drury, Aubrey. California: an intimate guide.
New York and London, 1935.
8. Graves, Jackson Alpheus. My seventy years in
California, 1857-1927. Los Angeles, 1927.
9. McGroarty, John Steven. Los Angeles from the
mountains to the sea. Chicago and New York,
1921.

10. Newmark, Harris. Sixty years in Southern California, 1853-1913. New York, 1923.
11. Rensch, Hero Eugene, and Rensch, Ethel Grace. Historic spots in California: and southern counties. Stanford University, California, 1932.
12. Rider, Fremont, ed. Rider's California; a guide-book for travelers,... by Frederic Taber Cooper. New York, 1925.

MANUSCRIPTS

13. Aviña, Rose Hollenbaugh. Spanish and Mexican land grants in California. M. A. thesis. University of California, Berkeley, 1934.
14. Bepler, Doris West. Descriptive catalogue of materials for western history in California magazines, 1854-1890. M. A. thesis. University of California, Berkeley, 1920.
15. Forbes, Harrie Rebecca Piper (Mrs. A. S. C.) Hancock Park, La Brea. Archives of the State Park Commission of California. San Francisco, 1934.