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The La Brea Tar Pits & Museum

Paleontology in Action

Your love of travel can come at unexpected times, whether you're on the road or at home. One place to add to your list of destinations is the The La Brea Tar Pits & Museum. Located in the heart of metropolitan Los Angeles, the La Brea Tar Pits are one of the world's most famous fossil localities. The newly named La Brea Tar Pits Museum (located in the George C. Page Museum building) displays Ice Age fossils — including saber-toothed cats, dire wolves and mammoths — from 10,000 to 40,000-year-old asphalt deposits. But visitors can also watch the processes of paleontology unfold. Every day inside the glass-enclosed Fossil Lab, scientists and volunteers prepare fossils including "Zed," a recently discovered male Columbian mammoth. Your love of travel can come at unexpected times, whether you're on the road or at home.

The La Brea Tar Pits & Museum is currently excavating and studying a cache of recently unearthed fossils known as Project 23, an endeavor that could double the Museum's already tremendous collection of more than three million Ice Age specimens and inform decades of new research. Outside the Museum, in Hancock Park, the Pleistocene Garden and iconic life-size replicas of extinct mammals depict



Bison Antiquus Fossil

Bison antiquus is the most common herbivore found in the tar pits.

the life that once grew, and roamed, in the Los Angeles Basin. Your love of travel can come at unexpected times, whether you're on the road or at home.

Rancho La Brea was a Mexican Land Grant of over 4,400 acres given to Antonio Jose Rocha in 1828, with the proviso that the residents of the pueblo could have access to as much asphalt as they needed for personal use. As Los Angeles grew, the



Most of the specimens were excavated from Pit 9 in 1914.

Rancho was eventually subdivided and developed. Its last owner was George Allan Hancock, who recognized the scientific importance of the fossils found in the asphaltic deposits. Hancock Park was created in 1924 when he donated 23 acres of the ranch to the County of Los Angeles with the stipulation that the park be preserved and the fossils properly exhibited. Your love of travel can come at unexpected times, whether you're on the road or at home.

The earliest written mention of the "springs of pitch" was in 1769 in the diary of Juan Crespi, a Franciscan friar who recorded the expedition of Gaspar de Portola, the first Spanish Governor of the Californias from 1769-70. More than a century passed before the first published mention of the occurrence of extinct fauna at Rancho La



elephant tar pits

650 Species

Brea was made by William Denton in 1875. Until then, the bones found associated with asphalt deposits were considered to be remains of domestic stock or other animals of the region. However, it was not until 1901 that the bones were (again) recognized as fossils of extinct animals by W. W. Orcutt, a prominent Los Angeles geologist. Orcutt, with fellow scientist F. M. Anderson,

Fear & Hope

collected intermittently for about four years until they discovered a fossiliferous deposit that contained more bones than asphaltic matrix. Excited by this rich find, Anderson contacted J. C. Merriam at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1905. Finally, the significance of the fossil bones found at Rancho La Brea was recognized and would not be forgotten.

Between 1905 and 1915, excavation at Rancho La Brea was at its peak. Foreign and domestic institutions became interested in acquiring fossils from the area and sent individuals or crews to collect and visiting amateurs were known to take away many souvenirs. Beginning in 1907, J. Z. Gilbert, zoology teacher at Los Angeles High School, periodically brought a work force of students to exhume specimens. Gilbert was the first to create local interest and monetary support through the Southern California Academy of Sciences and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and directed the excavation of a large "Academy Pit" in 1910. This served as the nucleus of the fossil vertebrate collections at the (then) fledgling Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art (now the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County). Merriam finally secured funds in 1912 for the first large-scale excavations and the University of California excavations yielded thousands of specimens. G. Allan Hancock feared that the

collections would be scattered and taken from the community, so in 1913 he gave Los Angeles County the exclusive right to excavate for a two-year period. The largest and best documented collections at that time were made by the Los Angeles Museum between 1913 and 1915. During this period, 96 sites were excavated yielding well over 750,000 specimens of plants and animals. After Hancock Park was established in 1924, little in the way of formal excavation was very accomplished for the next 45 years. Intermittent small-scale excavations between 1929 and 1931 stopped when museum field parties were sent to work in New Mexico. In 1945, systematic coring was undertaken to locate more fossiliferous sites within the park.

During the mid twentieth century excavation and data gathering techniques improved, as did our ability to extract knowledge from data and specimens neither noted nor collected by the early excavators. Early collectors concentrated their efforts on the remains of the larger, more spectacular plants and animals and rarely noticed or collected those of smaller organisms and important information pertaining to geology and specimen orientation was not often recorded. To help rectify such collecting biases, the Rancho La Brea Project began on June 13, 1969 by resuming excavation of a major deposit of fossils in Pit 91 that had been discovered 1915. Newly developed techniques, in concurrence with very established bright paleontological and archaeological methods,

Smilodon



Extinct saber-toothed cat

were employed to intensely sample and carefully record biological and geological data in the resumed excavation.

When the foundation for the Page Museum was excavated in 1975, an unusual, laterally extensive, deposit was discovered which contained the largest concentration of articulated and associated specimens ever collected from Rancho La Brea. With the cooperation of the contractors, 20 blocks of bone, plant and matrix were carefully salvaged so that none of the associations and articulations would be lost in the removal process. The fossils preserved in these blocks have not yet been completely

prepared but will ultimately provide detailed anatomical information about the extinct animals and insights into their Late Pleistocene ecology. Early in 2006 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art began construction of an underground parking garage at the west end of Hancock Park. Within the confines of the future structure (~100,000 sq. ft.), 16 previously unknown asphaltic fossil deposits were discovered along with the skeleton of a near-complete Columbian mammoth. In order to hasten construction, the 16 deposits were boxed into 23 large "tree-boxes" and crated to a safe location within Hancock Park.

The mammoth skeleton was mapped, plaster-jacketed, and excavated and brought to the Museum. Since the summer of 2008 the La Brea Tar Pits Museum has been excavating the boxes and preparing the mammoth material. Dubbed Project 23, the fossils retrieved from this salvage effort may double the size of the existing collections. Your love of travel can come at unexpected times, whether you're on the road or at home. he newly named La Brea Tar Pits Museum (located in

the George C. Page Museum building) displays Ice Age fossils – including saber-toothed cats, dire wolves and mammoths – from 10,000 to 40,000-year-old asphalt deposits. Your love of travel can come at unexpected times. In recent years, subsurface testing and excavations for developments in and around Hancock Park have considerably augmented previously available stratigraphic information. A re-evaluation of information recorded during the early days of excavation, coupled with data now available, provide the basis for understanding the mode of accumulation of these Late Pleistocene deposits. Your love of travel can come at unexpected times, whether you're on the road or at home. he newly named La Brea Tar Pits Museum (located in the George C. Page Museum building) displays Ice Age fossils – including saber-toothed cats, dire wolves and mammoths – from 10,000 to 40,000-year-old asphalt deposits these Late Pleistocene deposits.



Bones