



Page Museum
La Brea Tar Pits

Facts

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When were the asphalt deposits first discovered?

There is evidence of extensive prehistoric use and trade of asphalt by Native Americans dating back 9,000 years. The earliest written account of the asphalt near Los Angeles is found in the diary of Juan Crespi, a Franciscan friar with the expedition of Gaspar de Portola (the first Spanish governor of the Californias). In 1769-1770, he wrote, "We proceeded for three hours on a good road; to the right were extensive swamps of bitumen which is called chapapote. We debated whether this substance, which flows melted from underneath the earth, could occasion so many earthquakes." The first scientific account of the fossils from the asphalt was by Professor William Denton in 1875.

What is that black ooze?

Actually, it's asphalt. Asphalt is the heaviest grade of crude oil. At Rancho La Brea, asphalt is left as the residue on the surface of the ground while the lighter elements of crude oil (such as kerosene) evaporate into the atmosphere. This heavy, viscous substance is commonly called tar, though tar is technically a byproduct of the destructive distillation of woody materials, such as coal or peat. Asphalt is also produced commercially as a by-product of gasoline refining.

Where does the asphalt come from?

A large petroleum reservoir called the Salt Lake Oil Field is located below the surface a short distance to the north of Hancock Park. The oil was formed from marine plankton in an ocean basin during the Miocene Epoch (5 - 25 million years ago). Over time, pressure converted the organisms into oil. For about 40,000 years, this petroleum has been migrating to the surface either along a faulted sedimentary zone or along steeply dipping, porous sedimentary rock layers.

Are the asphalt seeps restricted to the pits in Hancock Park?

Although large quantities of asphalt seep into the former excavation pits, visitors can also observe asphalt seeping onto the surface of the ground outside the fenced areas. In fact, asphalt seepage is not restricted to Hancock Park. For several blocks in all directions, asphalt has been found seeping onto surface streets, into sewers and under buildings.

What causes the bubbling in the Lake Pit?

The bubbles seen in the Lake Pit and at the asphalt seeps are of a gas called methane. Also called natural gas, methane originates in the oilfield and escapes into the atmosphere. A colorless and odorless gas, methane is used in gas-burning home appliances (but the gas company adds an odor for safety reasons). Methane originates when the crude oil is decomposed by bacteria. The "rotten egg" odor you may smell is hydrogen sulfide, another by-product of decomposition.

Who was George Allan Hancock?

Captain George Allan Hancock inherited 4,400 acres of land, which comprised the original Mexican land grant called Rancho La Brea from his father, Major Henry Hancock. The Hancock family owned and operated a refinery at Rancho La Brea between 1870 and 1890, commercially mining and exporting asphalt to local markets. At the turn of the 20th century, the Hancocks become wealthy with the onset of the oil boom in Southern California. A businessman, railroad man, rancher, marine scientist, and patron of the arts, George Allan Hancock donated the 23 acres of Hancock Park to Los Angeles County in 1916 to preserve and exhibit the fossils exhumed from Rancho La Brea. Hancock's parents, Henry and Ida, at one time lived in a house that was located adjacent to what is today the park's Lake Pit.

How did Rancho La Brea get its name?

It is named after the Mexican land grant of over 4,400 acres given to Antonio Jose Rocha in 1828. Rancho La Brea literally means "the tar ranch" in Spanish.

Museum Information: The Page Museum is located on "Museum Row" in Los Angeles, 5801 Wilshire Boulevard, at the corner of Curson Avenue, east of Fairfax. Entrance to the Observation Station at Pit 91 is FREE. Page Museum admission: \$7 for adults, \$2 children ages 5 to 12, \$4.50 students and seniors, children under 5 are free. For more information call (323) 934-7243 or visit www.tarpits.org.