



# Black Star & Carbondale

**C**OAL WAS ONCE the fuel that turned the wheels, lit the lamps and warmed the hearth. Like isinglass windows and whalebone stays, its importance locally is a thing of the past. Certainly California was never a big coal producer or user, with one exception. The exception was the Southern Pacific railroad. And the man who could supply the "S.P." had money in the bank.

As early as 1855 the Trabuco range was prospected for coal. Results were skimpy, but in November of 1875, the editor of the Anaheim Gazette announced that he had examined specimens of coal from the "Santiago Mountains"---the old name of the Santa Ana range. "Within the last ten years," he wrote, "we have seen various samples from the same locality and we are confident that at some future day an inexhaustible supply will be found and made accessible."

## BLACK STAR

Seemingly the prediction came true two years later when August Witte of Anaheim made the strike in what was then known as "El Cañon de los Indios."

Indian Canyon, as it translates, had indeed been that. For untold centuries local natives had camped there in the fall to gather acorns, as revealed by numerous artifacts and pot holes found in the Hidden

Ranch area. Here, too, occurred probably the bloodiest massacre ever staged in what was to become Orange County. In 1831, during the Mexican Period, a party of gringo hunters led by William Wolfskill tracked a band of Indian horse thieves into the canyon. Busy devouring their horsemeat, the redskins were ambushed and wiped out nearly to a man.

Witte's discovery in 1877 changed his fortunes briefly and the name of the canyon forever. After purchasing 168 acres from James Irvine, who held title to the land, the "Black Star Mining Co." was formed. The canyon was dubbed likewise. The site was located three-quarters of a mile north of the east side of what is now Santiago Reservoir (Irvine Lake). Shortly two veins were uncovered "showing faces of 32 and 54 inches respectively." It was bituminous coal, hard and brittle.

A number of clapboard structures arose on the spot, the superintendent's residence, a boarding-house for the men, tramways, coal bunkers, etc. The promoters included Witte, "Uncle Billy" Spurgeon, the founder of Santa Ana, and B. F. Seibert, the banker, who later immortalized himself to local pioneers by not showing up at the bank one morning in the face of a \$100,000 shortage.

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# TALES OF

## TRABUCO

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At first coal was hauled to the depot at Anaheim for shipment to L.A. as fast as it could be dug. But veins tapered out nearly as swiftly, and a few years later it was all the Black Star could do to keep the Santa Ana Steam Laundry in fuel.

Three main tunnels and numerous side drifts, totalling some 900', were burrowed out before the mine was finally abandoned by Joseph Yoch some time in the 80's, closing the books on Orange County's first coal mine.

Today, the "Black Star," except for a few foundation scars and some black tailings, is commemorated only on assessor's maps as parcel "105-02-77."

PEOPLE WERE NEVER sure whether his last name was Mesquida or Mesqueta. It didn't matter greatly. Ramon was a Mexican boy, and nothing much was expected of him anyway. Shortly his name would be forgotten forever, but for a few brief days in February of 1878, Ramon Mesquida lived in the sunshine of public acclaim. Small wonder; he had just discovered in Silverado Canyon the best pocket of coal ever located in the Santa Ana mountains.

"Silverado City," at the upper end of what had been Madera Canyon, was dying on the vine when the young Mexican disclosed his find to Henry Cassidy, J.K. Smith, William Curry and W.O. Grewell. They had lingered in Silverado working their diminishing silver claims. Now jointly they located on 320 acres on the north side of the canyon, just east of the present Forest Service Guard Station, and formed the Santa Clara Mining Company.

The mine gave promise as a producer, and the "coal rush" was on. At the mine it sold for \$3.50 a ton. Six horse teams could haul between four and five tons a load, and in Los Angeles the fuel brought up to \$7.25 a ton. Big money in the late 70's. Naturally, the Southern Pacific was the biggest buyer.

By 1880 two main gangways and several side drifts had been run aggregating some 400'.

Shanties began popping up in the flats around the mine, and shortly a whole new town boomed into existence.

Unfortunately for the original promoters, the Southern Pacific discovered that it had been buying its own coal. A survey revealed that the mine was on railroad land, one of the many checkerboard sections granted the S.P. as an inducement for running its tracks down the state.

Ramon Mesquida had long ago been kicked out of the operation, and now his former partners were given the boot. Thomas Harris, an experienced coal miner from Wales, became the mine superintendent for the railroad. Seeking a name for the swelling coal town, Harris, also its postmaster, modestly suggested that "Harrisburg" sounded nice. Because there was already a town of that name upstate, the post office department rejected the choice, and "Carbondale" was chosen instead.

Carbondale flourished, though never reached the proportions of its rival, Silverado City. Nevertheless, a saloon, post office, hotel and school, in that priority, soon gave it community status.

Like the silver mines and the Black Star, the Santa Clara's veins began to pinch out. The town withered accordingly. When the saloon closed up, the end had arrived.

Though sporadic production continued, the railroad finally chucked the project and leased the Santa Clara to Thomas Hughes and sons. As late as 1917, the Orange County Coal Mining Co. was still listed by the State Division of Mines, with A.J. Padgham of Santa Ana as president. Finally output dwindled even beyond domestic use, and the tillable portion of the tract was sold to Joseph Holtz.

The original Silverado City died in 1883 as would its sister city a few years later. By 1887 Carbondale was as dead as a fern leaf in the lumps of coal that had brought it into existence. Not even a tombstone remains to mark the little coal town which brought so much excitement to these Santa Ana mountains.

Only a tell-tale black shadow on the slope.