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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Western Region

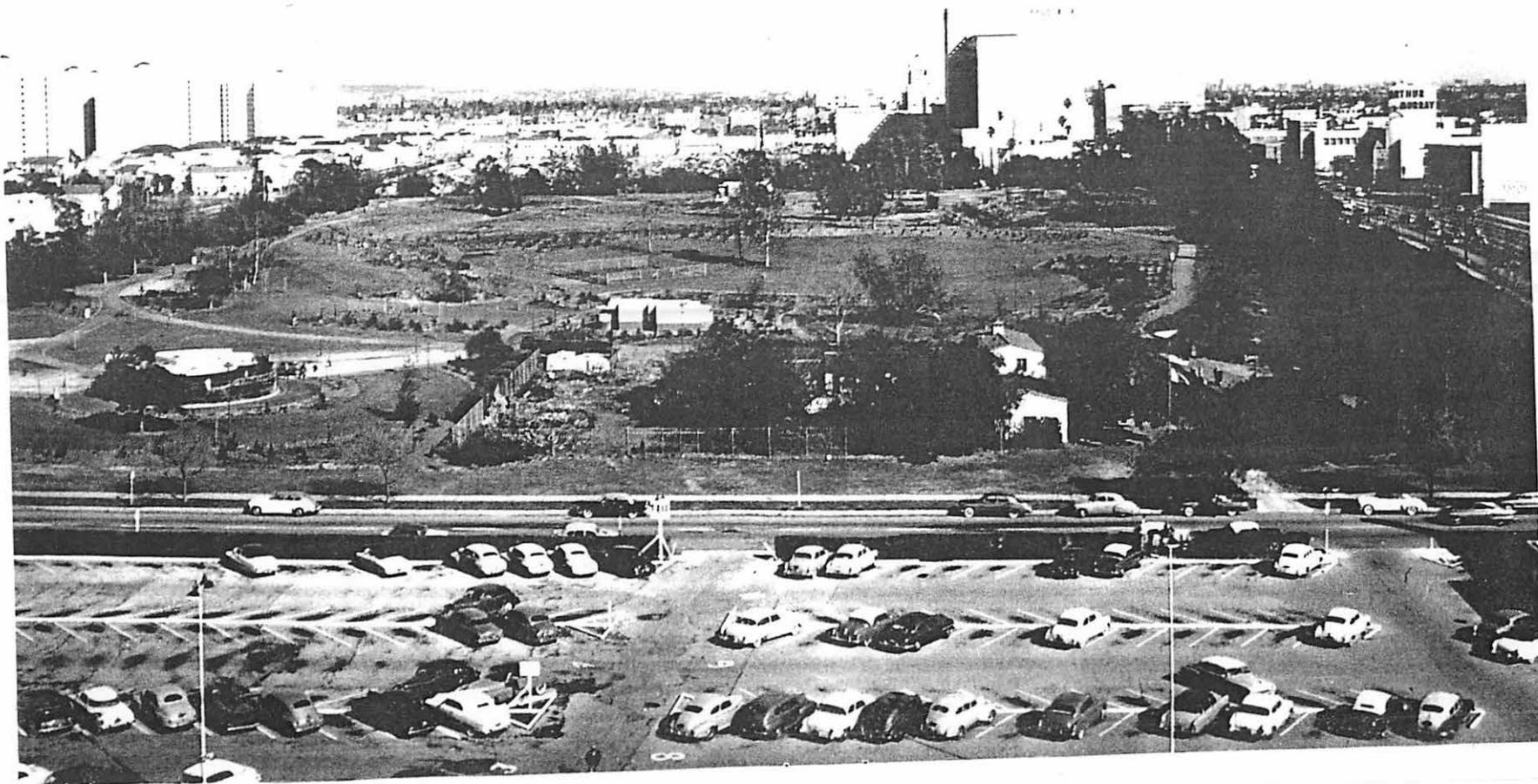
RANCHO LA BREA ASPHALT DEPOSITS

Hancock Park

Los Angeles, California

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HANCOCK PARK

Fifty years ago when the La Brea asphalt deposits were intensively excavated for fossils by scientists, this area was an oil field. Oil derricks have been replaced by office buildings, stores and apartment houses. Wilshire Boulevard, on the extreme right, borders the south side of Hancock Park.

The observatory building in the lower left hand corner of the photograph covers one of the asphalt pits and contains a block of fossil material. It is the main interpretative device in the park. Two additional pits, enclosed by fences, are visible beyond the observatory.

A pond exists in the southeast corner of the park near the tall Prudential Building. The surface and shore of the pond are partially covered with asphaltum which seeps upward from the underlying oil-bearing sands. Small mammals and birds continue to get caught in the tar.

A fair sized parking lot has been built, since this picture was taken, in the northeast corner of Hancock Park. The buildings south of the observatory house Los Angeles Park and Recreation District personnel and equipment. This non-conforming use of such a small park would be replaced by the proposed art gallery.

The two story art gallery would cover all the park land in the southwestern corner delineated on the north approximately by the fence surrounding the housing and utility area, plus most of the open meadow to the east, excepting the fenced tar pit.

INSPECTION REPORT ON LA BREA TAR PITS

Summary

Resolutions were submitted in December 1961 to the Secretary of the Interior proposing establishment of Hancock Park in Los Angeles, California as Rancho La Brea National Monument. Hancock Park is the site of asphalt or tar pits which have produced an unparalleled record of Pleistocene life. The park, together with the fossils recovered from the asphalt beds, is nationally, or even internationally, significant.

Los Angeles County owns Hancock Park. It is administered by the Los Angeles County Museum where fossil material obtained from the asphalt pits is displayed and stored.

Since Los Angeles County has evidenced no interest in transferring Hancock Park to the Federal Government, and the Los Angeles County Museum officials would resist any such transfer, it does not appear feasible for the National Park Service to recommend or foster the inclusion of this area in the National Park System.

Introduction

Hancock Park has been suggested for addition to the National Park System as Rancho La Brea National Monument. The park is six miles due west of the Los Angeles City Hall on Wilshire Boulevard, between Curson Avenue and Ogden Drive, as shown on the enclosed map. The park consists of some twenty-three acres of open space in a fully developed residential district which is being converted to a business district.

Nationwide concern of scientists and conservationists for the continued preservation of Hancock Park as a paleontological park stems from a proposal to use part of the area for an art gallery. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the Governors of the Los Angeles County Museum, and Captain G. Allan Hancock, the donor of the park, reputedly have approved the use of six acres for the art museum. Public subscriptions for the art museum, totalling nearly eight million dollars have been received. Many of these donors are understood to have stipulated that the funds they subscribed could be spent only for erecting an art museum in Hancock Park.

Pursuant to requests of the Director's Office, Messrs. Bennett T. Gale and James E. Cole visited the area and discussed the situation

with county and museum officials and interested persons on February 14 to 17, 1962. Mr. Horace Albright accompanied the inspection party on February 14.

Description of Rancho La Brea Asphalt Deposits

History

Asphalt seeps were first recorded in the Los Angeles region by the Gaspar de Portola expedition of 1769-70. Several references to tar pits occur in the literature in the next 100 years, but it was not until 1875 that the seeps were recognized as important paleontological deposits.

Bituminous material, locally called brea was excavated in the mid-nineteenth century from pits on lands later to be designated as Hancock Park. Brea was used for roofing houses, paving streets, or fuel. Animal bones were encountered in mining the brea but they were believed to be the remains of domestic animals. The quantities of discarded bones became so great that the place became known as the bone yard.

In 1875, Major Henry Hancock who purchased Rancho La Brea, a Spanish land grant, presented Professor William Denton of the Boston Society of Natural History with the fang of a saber-toothed tiger. Dr. Denton recognized it as a prehistoric fossil and wrote an account of the pits which were being excavated for their tar content.

The account given by Denton appears to have escaped further notice in scientific circles. The importance of the fossil bones and teeth in the deposits were probably first recognized in 1901 by Professor W. W. Orcutt of the Union Oil Company of California while examining the occurrence of petroleum on Rancho La Brea. Late in 1905 many fragmentary specimens were collected by Professor Orcutt and Frank M. Anderson, a geologist of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Portions of a saber-toothed tiger skull, jaws of a large wolf, and several dermal bones of a large ground sloth were placed at the disposal of Dr. John C. Merriam of the University of California who recognized the significance of the discovery. Dr. Merriam's first of eighteen papers relating to the Pleistocene fauna of southern California was published in Science in 1906.

During the period between 1906 and 1913 excavations on Rancho La Brea were made by Dr. Merriam and assistants for the University and by others for the Southern California Academy of Sciences,

Occidental College, and the Los Angeles High School. In 1915 Captain G. Allan Hancock granted Los Angeles County Museum the exclusive privilege of excavating for a period of two years, with the fossils thus taken to become the property of the Museum. During these two years the Museum staff excavated a stupendous amount of materials and practically exhausted the known fossil beds before ceasing work in 1917. The material, by far the largest collection of Pleistocene fossils in the world, is deposited in the Los Angeles County Museum where it forms the Hancock Collection.

Hancock Park

Conflicting reports occur in the literature regarding the date Captain G. Allan Hancock gave Hancock Park to Los Angeles County. There are several references to 1915 and 1916. A deed executed on May 19, 1924 by G. Allan Hancock granted to the County of Los Angeles for public park purposes the property to be known as Hancock Park. The deed was accepted by the Board of Supervisors of the County of Los Angeles on July 1, 1924 and is entered in Book No. 92, page 170 of the Minutes of said Board.

Hancock Park Administration

Sometime after Hancock Park was given to the County it was designated a County Park and assigned to the Los Angeles County Museum for operation. Direction within the Museum organization for administering the area was delegated to the Museum Director and the Chief Curator of Geology and Life Sciences. In 1952, the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors assigned the responsibility of grounds maintenance in Hancock Park to the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, and the responsibility for the administration of the scientific exhibits and the selection of "Ice Age Native" plantings for any future landscaping to the Museum Department of History, Science and Art.

Following County approval of the construction of an art gallery in Hancock Park in 1961, the Museum was split into the Department of History and Science, and the Department of Art, and a new director was selected for the Art Department. At about this time the Science Division of the History and Science Department was also segregated by the establishment of a Division of Life Sciences and a Division of Geology. Administration of Hancock Park is now assigned to the latter division under the general direction of the Director of History and Science.

Scientific Features of La Brea Asphalt Pits

La Brea Pleistocene Fauna

Skeletal remains of Pleistocene mammals totalling 4,264 individual animals were recovered from the asphalt deposits. The tar pits also yielded elements of 4,189 birds, and thousands of rodents. More than 200 different kinds of animals and plants are now known from Rancho La Brea, and probably other forms will be added as study progresses of the many hundred of thousands of items stored in the Los Angeles County Museum.

La Brea Pleistocene Flora

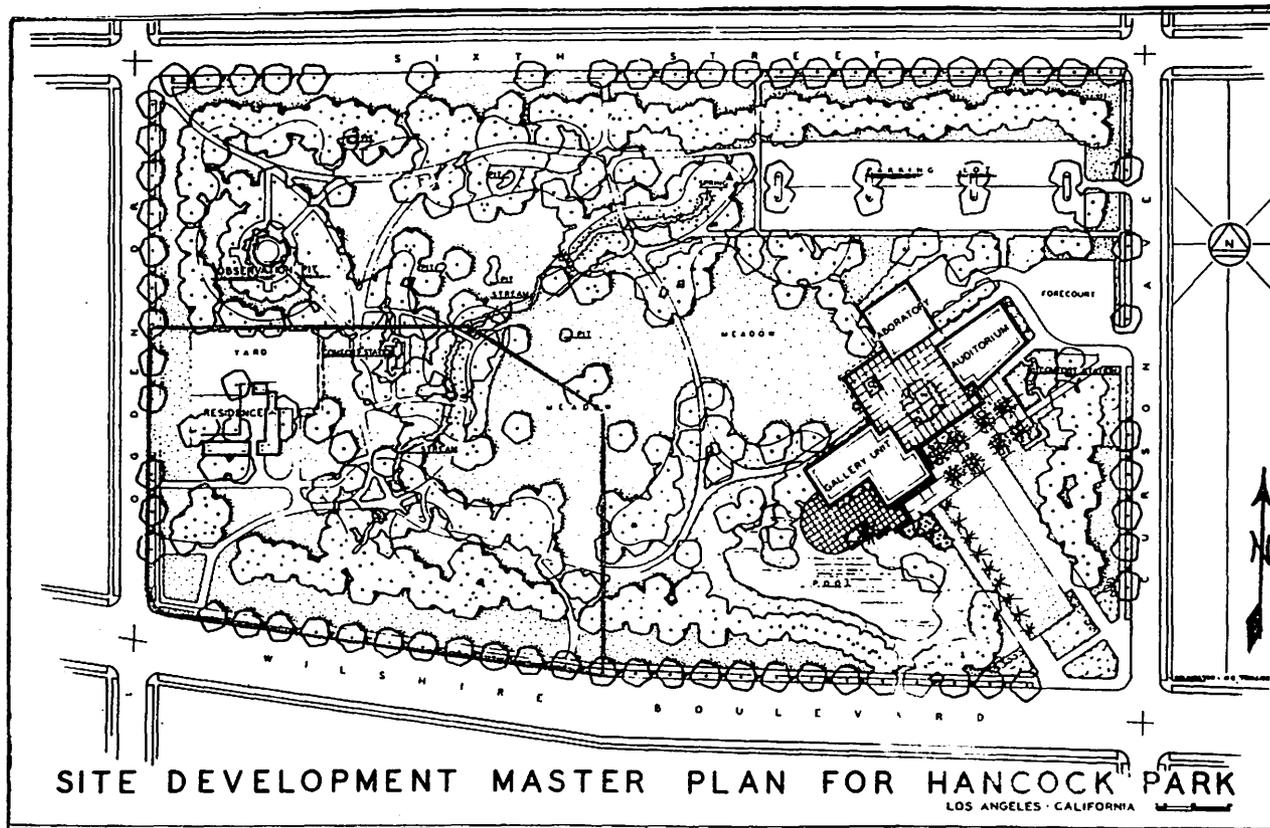
The asphalt deposits in Hancock Park preserved sufficient elements of Pleistocene flora to enable botanists to identify the majority of the "Ice Age" plants which grew on the Los Angeles plains in that period. Mr. Theodore Payne, a nurseryman who has specialized in the propagation of native California plants for 57 years has prepared a list of 116 plants now growing in California which existed in Hancock Park during the period when the animals were trapped. This list was compiled from one made by Dr. Ralph W. Chaney and from a list approved by Dr. Herbert L. Mason. The preservation of fossil plants in the asphalt deposits, and the possibility of their restoration in Hancock Park, is, in many respects, of equal significance to the preservation of animal fossils in the tar pits and the restoration of such animals by replicas.

Existing Development and Use of Resources

The twenty-three acre Hancock Park is presently used, and has been used for over a quarter of a century, as a paleontological park. Facilities for interpreting the story of Pleistocene animals to the public are limited primarily to an observatory built in 1957. This building encloses a mass of fossil-bearing material which previously had been dug out of one of the pits and has been stored in the County Museum. The observatory is situated on the zone of crustal deformation from which asphalt and gas seep upward from oil-bearing sands presumably as occurred during the Pleistocene.

The block of fossil-bearing material is surrounded by water upon which float discs of asphalt formed by oil seepage. Occasionally bubbles of gas erupt from the water and from the asphalt discs.

Photographs of the fossil block identify bones of some of the larger prehistoric animals but the poor quality of the photographs and the lack of specific information makes the display of dubious value. An



Delineated in red on this obsolete copy of a Hancock Park Master Plan is the portion of the park which would be covered by the eight million dollar art gallery. A two-story building for parking cars of art gallery visitors is proposed on the site of the existing parking lot.

This Master Plan proposed, in the southeastern corner, a paleontological museum where replicas of Pleistocene animals would be displayed.

A copy of the new Master Plan showing all the existing and proposed developments is not available.

interpreter is on duty during the daytime and, on request, will explain the significance of the pit and sell literature describing the asphalt deposits.

Other asphalt pits exist in the vicinity of the observatory from which the majority of the fossil material has been removed. These are fenced with heavy-gauge wire behind which are hard to read labels describing some of the fossils obtained from the excavation.

Geologists surmise that the asphalt pits which trapped Pleistocene animals were composed mostly of asphaltic material which exuded and subsided according to varying gas pressures. During inactive stages the tar may have hardened as the more volatile fractions evaporated. If then covered with water or wind-blown sand, the pits would have been very effective death traps.

There is a pool in the southeastern corner of Hancock Park which was formed by the mining of brea nearly a century ago. It presents a living illustration of how water lures small birds and mammals which become trapped in the asphalt that borders the pond or floats upon its surface. Although, not held by geologists to be representative of the manner in which large animals were trapped in the asphalt pits during the Pleistocene, it serves to show how ponds of water on lands bearing oil seeps are effective traps for present day birds and small mammals.

Located around or in the pool in the southeastern corner of the park are replicas of some of the mammals which lived on the Los Angeles plains during the Pleistocene Age. These include saber-toothed tigers, giant ground sloth, the great bear and great cats. Absent are sculptural replicas of the herbivorous animals such as the imperial elephant, the largest land mammal known; mastodons; bison; horses; camels; etc. Absent also are replicas of the birds which form a more varied and no less interesting assemblage than the mammals. The extinct condor-like vulture which ranks among the largest known birds of flight is conspicuously absent. No interpretation of the replicas present is attempted.

The Hancock Hall of the Los Angeles County Museum, located about six miles from Hancock Park, displays many articulated specimens of prehistoric animals whose bones were excavated from the La Brea Asphalt deposits. Inadequate space in the hall prevents a satisfactory display of the numerous skeletons.

Significance and Need for Conservation

The fossils obtained from the Rancho La Brea Asphalt deposits have no parallel among records of Pleistocene life with respect to the great

wealth of the material, the unusual variety of species, and the fine state of preservation. The assemblage of bones and teeth stored in the Los Angeles County Museum is reported to number many hundred of thousands of items.

The unique collection of fossils collected from Rancho La Brea furnishes a basis for the reconstruction of a remarkably clear picture of life as it existed in the Los Angeles region during a period not very remote in geologic history, yet possessing considerable antiquity as measured in terms of human history.

The proposal to construct an art gallery on one corner of Hancock Park and a two-deck structure for parking cars on another corner constitutes the most recent and apparently now unavoidable threat to the paleontological park. Over the years many proposals have been made to alienate parts of Hancock Park, but these have been denied by Los Angeles County authorities at the insistence of museum administrators and other conservationists. This intrusion, unlike the others, has the approval of county authorities and museum administrators.

Suitability and Feasibility

Although Hancock Park is small, comprising only some twenty-three acres, it is large enough to contain the structures and outdoor exhibits needed for interpreting the story of Pleistocene life in the Los Angeles region, without the proposed art gallery and parking structure. It would be adaptable to effective administration for the specific function it would perform. Existing, as it does, in the center of the City of Los Angeles, the La Brea Asphalt Pit is readily accessible locally and nationally.

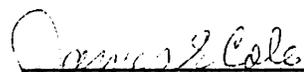
Hancock Park is owned and administered by the County of Los Angeles. There is no indication at this time, nor has there been at any time in the past, that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors or the Governors of the Los Angeles County Museum would be willing to dispose of ownership of Hancock Park.

The apparently irrevocable local commitments to build the art gallery and parking structure in the park render the remainder both unsuitable and unfeasible for establishment as a national monument or other unit of the National Park System.

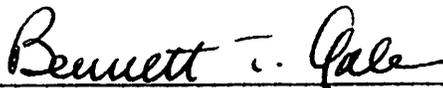
Conclusion

1. Hancock Park, together with the Pleistocene fossils that have been excavated from the La Brea Asphalt Pits, has outstanding national or even international significance.

2. The construction of an art gallery and a building for parking cars in the park will so seriously impinge upon its paleontological values as to render the remainder both unsuitable and unfeasible for establishment, administration development and interpretation as a unit of the National Park System.
3. The lands involved are not available to the Government.



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