

Mining booms and busts in Orange County

Juanita Lovret, Orange County Register, 10-29-10

Most Tustin residents are convinced they know all about Orange County, but few realize silver and coal mining was profitable here in the late 1800s.

Two Santa Ana men, Hank Smith and William Curry, spotted a rock that looked like silver ore in 1877 while hunting in an area known as Timber Canyon. They had the stone tested with positive results, an assay of \$60 a ton.

They immediately staked a claim and started to dig. Unfortunately a Los Angeles newspaper got wind of their find and within a week 250 to 300 others were digging for silver. Eventually 500 claims were filed. The canyon changed its name to Silverado with a boom town popping up.

U.S. Deputy Marshal John D. Dunlap was the most successful miner in Silverado. He accidentally discovered a sizable ore deposit while tracking a Mexican outlaw and established the Blue Light Mine, which extracted quartz with a silver content valued at \$60 per ton. Located at the end of the canyon, the mine included six tunnels on five levels descending to depths of more than 350 feet. Miners used pick axes and explosives to extract the ore, which was carried out in small rail cars pulled by donkeys.

August Witte founded Black Star Coal Mining Company in 1879, giving that canyon its name. The first coal was used by canyon residents. Later six to 10 tons of medium-to-low-grade coal were extracted each day from 900 feet of tunnels and hauled by mule to Anaheim or Los Angeles. In the late 1870s the mine, which was thought to be on government land, was discovered to be on the Irvine Ranch. James Irvine sold the property to the mine owners who soon ceased operations. Santa Clara Coal Mine then opened at the mouth of Silverado Canyon, starting a community called Carbondale.

The canyon's population reached more than 1,500. Hotels, stores, blacksmiths, meat markets and saloons as well as two post offices (one for Carbondale and one for Silverado) opened. Six stagecoaches arrived each day from Los Angeles and Santa Ana. The boom was short-lived. Carbondale closed by 1881. Two years later, Silverado faded.

Fullerton wheelwright Jake Yaeger started mining for gold in nearby Trabuco Canyon in 1887, but failed. Trabuco Canyon also was the site of a tin mine. New York milk magnate Gail Borden spent \$1.5 million dollars building the Santa Ana Tin Mine after a geologist claimed to find a rich deposit of tin ore. After operating for 34 days, the mine folded.

From 1920 until the mid 1950s, silver mining resumed at the Blue Light Mine. Later known as the Silverado Mine Company, it produced \$47,000 worth of zinc, lead, gold and silver from 1942 to 1946.

According to Chris Jepsen of the OC Archives, the county's mining boom was short-lived (about three years) because the local bedrock is so fractured that valuable ores are difficult to find. "There's a little bit of everything in the Santa Ana Mountains, but not enough for it to pay," Jepsen said. "That's why so many operations went bust."

Even the Tustin area had a mine. Mercury was extracted from Rattlesnake Mine on Red Hill over the years.