In The Black Star Canyon

ANYON D ELOS INDIOS—the Canyon of Indians.

Escondido—Hidden.

These Spanish words with their translations introduce us to one of the strange and fascinating canyons of the Santa Ana range.

It was as Canyon de los Indios that the canyon was known for scores of years before the Black Star Coal Mining Company began its search for coal in 1879. From that date on the canyon has been the Black Star.

Though, a third of a century ago there was hardly a man or woman in Orange County who had not heard intimate descriptions of the Hidden ranch, up to a half dozen years ago hardly a hundred of the people of the county had seen it, nestled as it is in the high rough ridges of the upper mountains. Only those who cared to walk a stiff three miles and back saw this Escondido of Mexican-speaking days in the mountains. A few years ago, the United States Forest Service built a narrow, but well graded road, over the top of the range from Corona to the Santiago canyon. On the Orange County side of the range, this road lies entirely in Black Star canyon. Since then the Hidden ranch, in the upper part of Black Star canyon, has been seen by hundreds of persons.

The road is slippery and unsafe during wet weather and

during dry seasons is closed by the authorities as a precaution against mountain fires. Those who travel over it find scores of places where wonderful views are theirs, some of them back over the Santiago canyon, some of them, from near the top of the road, over the whole of the lower ridges and the Santa Ana canyon, and from the top over the Corona and Chino valleys with the San Bernardino and Sierra Madre ranges raising their white outlines against the sky.

Though I have traversed this road a number of times by automobile, once with the Farm Bureau on a journey to the forest roads on the top of the range, once with W. B. Williams and our wives, again with some Los Angeles scientists, another time, including a tour down into the deep gorge of the Black Star, with Charles H. Chapman, and the last time with Harry Carr, writer of the Lancer column in the Los Angeles Times, who found the canyon strange and beautiful, for me the real discovery was made afoot years ago in company with Robert C. Northcross and Nat H. Neff.

I had known of the Hidden ranch always, it seemed to me. I had heard hunters tell of its inaccessibility. The name itself was enough to awaken my boyhood imagination. However, I suppose that to most residents of the Santa Ana valley who chanced to hear of it, the Hidden ranch was merely another place in the mountains. It was not until 1899 that the little valley, becoming the scene of a tragedy, was on everyone's tongue and it remained there for months on end during a famous murder trial and a hard-fought political campaign that followed the trial.

It was not until comparatively recent years that I heard the

story of a battle between American trappers and Indian horse-thieves that took place on a hill, the site of an Indian town, at the edge of the Hidden valley, and that story, too, added to the zest with which Robert Northcross, Nat Neff, and I set forth upon a journey into the Black Star.

The story of the battle, the bloodiest in the history of the mountains, was told seventy years ago by William Wolfskill to J. E. Pleasants, and was repeated to us by Mr. Pleasants.

"The Indians were very fond of horseflesh," said Mr. Pleasants. "Ranchos were lacking in means of defense in the days when the missions were breaking up and Indians from the mountains and desert used to have no trouble in stealing herds of horses from the Spaniards.

"A party of trappers, including Mr. Wolfskill, came across from New Mexico in 1831. Their long rifles and evident daring offered to the troubled rancho dons a solution of their horse-stealing difficulties. Americans were not any too welcome in the Mexican pueblo of Los Angeles, and it was with a desire to please the Spaniards in this foreign land a long way from the United States that the American trappers agreed to run down the Indian horsethieves.

"The trail of a stolen band of horses was followed across the Santa Ana river, eastward through what is now Villa Park and up the Santiago canyon to the mouth of Canyon de los Indios."

Here, the trail, as Wolfskill told the story, turned into mountain fastnesses, into the unknown mountains, covered heavily with brush. With every turn a favorable spot for ambush, the frontiersmen made their way carefully. The trail

took the men up a steep mountainside, and, after two or three hours of climbing there was laid out before them a little valley with grassy slopes and hillsides, upon which horses were quietly grazing. Smoke was coming from fires in the age-old campground of the Indians at the lower end of the valley. The Indians were feasting on juicy horseflesh.

Perhaps it was the crack of a long rifle, the staggering of a mortally wounded Indian that gave the natives their first warning of the presence of an enemy. Among the oaks and boulders an unequal battle was fought. There were no better marksmen on earth than these trappers. They had killed buffalo. They had fought Comanches and Apaches. They were a hardy, fearless lot, else they would never have made their way over hundreds of miles of unknown mountain and desert that lay between New Mexico and California. The Indians were armed with a few old Spanish blunderbusses and with bows and arrows. The battle was soon over.

Leaving their dead behind them, the Indians who escaped the bullets of the trappers scrambled down the side of the gorge and disappeared in the oaks and brush. Of those who had begun the fight, but a few got away.

The stolen horses were quickly rounded up. Some of them were animals stolen months before. The herd was driven down the trail to the Santiago and a day or two later the horses were delivered to their owners. In the battle, not one of the frontiersmen was wounded.

At the very entrance to the canyon are a dozen or fifteen sycamores that in the autumn, it seems to me, are the most colorful among all the sycamores I have seen. Upon two of

them, in particular, the leaves turn a flaming russet, in contrast with the yellows and browns of the other sycamores of the group.

Perhaps half a mile within the canyon was an abandoned road, leading to the right. This was the road used by miners who worked for several years at the Black Star coal mine, deserted in the '80's. One of the men interested in the mine was Joseph Yoch, and until recent years the ranch at the mouth of the canyon remained in his ownership.

The old road skirted the hills, passed close to the old Yoch house, and took us up the canyon among oaks growing thickly by the stream.

Soon, a picturesque old adobe, built partly of adobe brick and partly of rock taken from the streambed, was reached. A few wooden shacks were scattered about, an old wagon bed, a pile of baling wire on top of a rickety chicken coop—this is all that is left of years of pioneering in the canyon. Pancho Carpenter, son of an American trapper father and Spanish mother, came here in the early '70's, and homesteaded 160 acres. He built the adobe. In later years the place went into the possession of Bob Shaw, a well known fire warden of the Santiago.

Still further up the canyon we paused beside an old stone chimney, a monument to some early settler's ambition for a home. Years ago the cabin that stood against this chimney was destroyed by fire.

Near this chimney the old road left the canyon bottom, and a three-mile climb on a steep ridge was necessary before we reached the Hidden ranch. Today, the forest road leaves

the canyon at the same point, but its route to the top is one of many switchbacks, made to reduce the grade. The old road, however, was not much given to switchbacks. It went most of the way, straight up the ridge, in places soft with shale and in other places rough. On it early settlers managed to get into and out of the Hidden ranch. Jesse Davis, one of them, had his rear wheels tied as he was bringing down a load of hay. The harness broke, the wagon slid against the horses, and in an instant there was a runaway, which ended when Davis and his hay went over the embankment. Fortunately for Davis, the hay made a soft landing place.

The three of us who took the old road from the canyon bottom to the Hidden ranch had some pleasure that automobile travel today does not afford. Time and again we stood a few minutes and looked toward the rugged ridges to the right, or over the rough canyon below, or, perhaps, over the mouth of Black Star, across the Santiago hills for a bit of a view of the Santa Ana valley with Newport bay shining like a disc, and the ocean and Catalina Island beyond the shoreline. As we stopped to breathe a bit, we surveyed those hills and canyons and mountains keenly, and pointed out to each other slopes of color and jagged points and outlines against the sky that especially pleased us.

We had been given descriptions of the old Indian campgrounds, so we looked for a knoll soon after we came in sight of a quiet canyon with a house and barn and corral not a half-mile away. We found the knoll not more than twenty yards off the road. Instantly there was opened up for us an hour of rambling among the rocks and oaks.

Just at the edge of the grove of oaks we found the first unmistakable sign of early Indian habitation. It was a boulder six or eight feet long with five deep grinder holes worked into it. Here the squaws ground acorns, grass seed and grasshoppers into meal. Before us was a small hill, covered over with stunted and broken oaks. Beneath the trees were piles of boulders, scores of boulders, some of them buried deep in the earth with only a part exposed. Worn into these boulders were dozens and scores of deep grinder holes. I know of no place in all the mountains where grinder holes are to be found in such numbers, one, two or perhaps a dozen on a boulder.

Here and there was an oak the age of which reached into the centuries. From it acorns were gathered by Indians who lived here not only long before Father Junipero Serra and his Franciscan padres came to California but, I have no doubt, long before Columbus started upon his historic voyage westward. From some of the ancient trunks the tops were broken off by bears or were twisted off in storms long ago, and newer growth forms the oak tree of today. The trees, probably because the soil is shallow, are rather small. Not one among them can be described as a "giant of the forest," but each twisted limb and broken trunk fits into the picturesqueness of the spot.

In an open space, partly surrounded by trees and sandstone boulders ancient campfires burned, perhaps years upon years without going out. The soil is here black as peat, greasy from the refuse of the camp, with bits of charcoal in it. Beside these fires savages danced their dances and warmed their bodies. Here, after the Spaniards came, they cooked the meat of

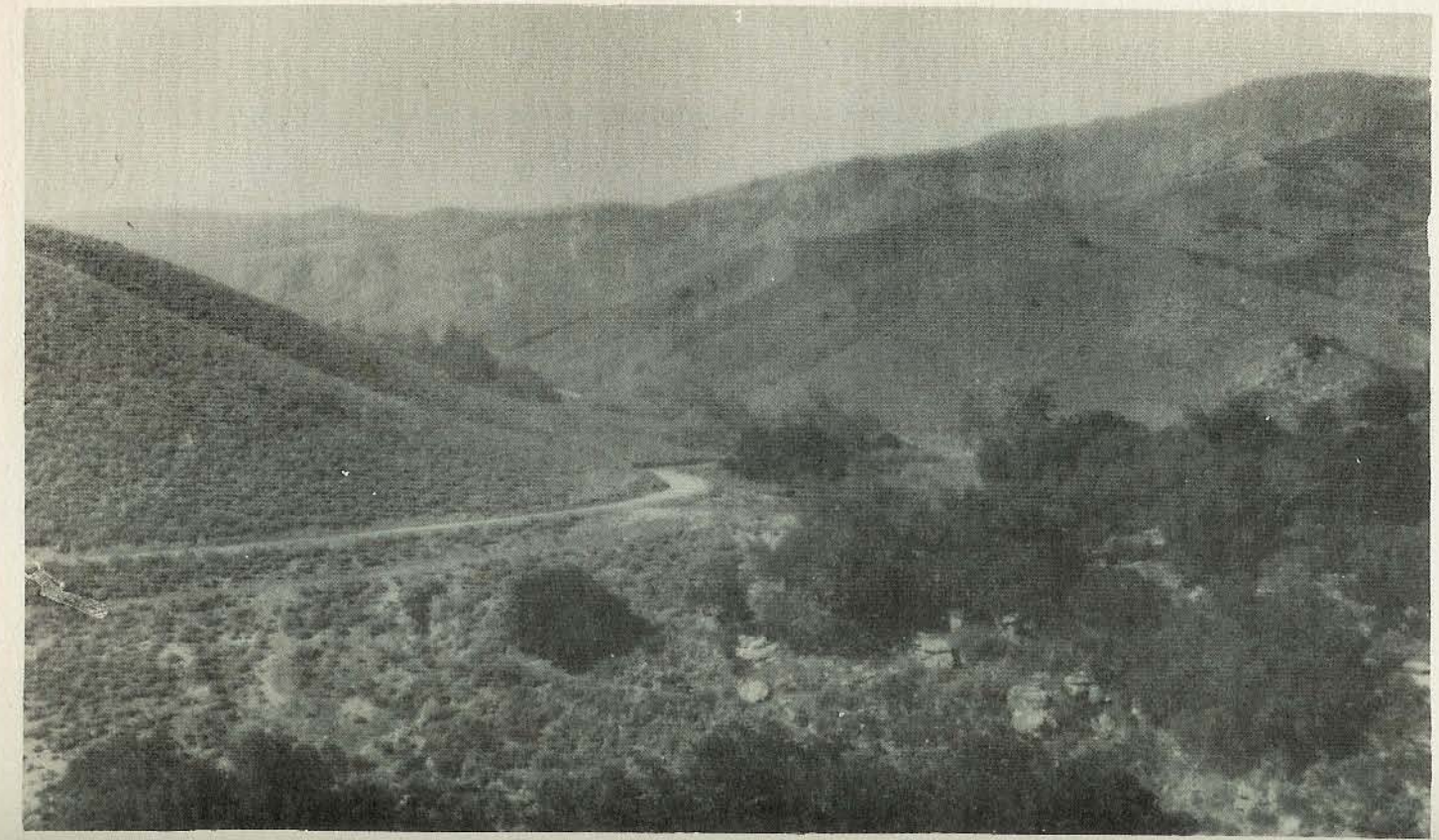
horses stolen from ranchos in the valley.

We found that the knoll broke off sharply into a steep canyon bottom. Clinging to the edges of the wall were moss-covered oaks among gray boulders, and across the canyon were hundreds of fine oak trees, and above them was a mountainside of heavy brush stretching to the topmost ridge of the range, a full two miles away.

It is easy to look over the scene from this spot where ancient tribesmen lived and imagine that the landscape today is just as it was the day the crack of a trapper's rifle startled Indians gathered at their stolen feast. However, one cannot forget that here is an American built road and yonder is the Hidden ranch.

The Hidden Ranch looks like a ranch of the lower hills, with sycamores scattered along the waterway, between grassy hills and long slopes reaching up to cliffs of solid rock. When I saw it first, the valley was a quiet place, restful there in a basin formed by rough mountains beyond and all around it. With the new road cut through, the isolation that had long been one of the ranch's attractions and advantages has disappeared.

Beginning with the Indians this valley seems always to have had an especial appeal to mountain folk. Seventy years ago wild cattle roamed over the grassy slopes. These were shot by vaqueros from the Yorba and Wolfskill ranches, so that the feed might be available for horse herds. It was something like sixty years ago that Jonathan Watson decided to buy the place, and he paid money for what was supposed to be the title of Juan Canyado, of Spanish descent, who had built a



The Hidden ranch in Black Star canyon;
Indian campsite among the oaks

cabin of sycamore logs in the canyon. Other Spaniards appeared, however, and claimed that they had rights in the hidden valley, and Watson, in order to avoid trouble and hold the place for his sheep, settled with them all. Watson sold out to his brother Charles and Bill Carter.

In the late '70's a man named William Raney built a road into the place. Jesse Davis, later a resident of Garden Grove, had the place in 1880 and 1881 when he transferred his rights to Philip Sitton. It was owned afterward by a number of men, the Hungerford brothers, Sproul of Norwalk, a Pasadena man who raised Shetland ponies there and built the house and barn, Shaw and Bissett, the latter a well known beeman of Santa Ana, and Hugh Clark. Strange as it may seem at no time did any of these men acquire title that would stand in court. Surveys had not been made, and it was years before it was discovered that most of the valley was railroad land and part of it in government reserve. Allured ever by the mountain ranch, Jesse Davis got it again in 1914 and sold it to Don Larter of Westminister, who was arranging to get title from the railroad when he gave up his claims to go to war. Later Baker Thompson did acquire title, and he was the first man in all those forty-five years that it had been used for cattle grazing who really owned the property. A few years ago the ranch passed to Don Larter, home from war, and he still retains the valley.

The ranchhouse is a square-built house with a four-sided roof and a porch in front. A score of yards to the west is the barn and beyond it a circular corral with a strong post in the center.

It was in this ranch yard that a shooting occured that rent asunder the political life of Orange County nearly a third of a century ago. Perhaps no death by violence touched the public career of any man in the county so much as did the killing of James Gregg on June 9, 1899, affect the career of its superior court judge, the late J. W. Ballard.

The Hidden ranch at that time was in the hands of Henry Hungerford of Norwalk and George M. Howard of Anaheim. At the ranch with them was Hungerford's brother, Thomas L. Hungerford. On the evening of June 8, James M. Gregg of Centralia and his brother-in-law, Decatur Harris, and a 13-year-old boy, Clinton Hunt, arrived for the purpose of driving out some stock that Gregg owned. Gregg and Henry Hungerford quarreled. It seems that Howard owed Gregg $10 on a horse trade, and Gregg insisted that Hungerford and Howard accept $7.50 in settlement of their pasturage bill of $17.50.

That night, Gregg, Harris and the boy slept on the ground in front of the house. When Gregg was rolling up his blankets the next morning, Henry Hungerford came out and the dispute was resumed. It ended in shooting. The Hungerfords, each armed with a shotgun, and Gregg, with a revolver, fought it out. When the shooting ceased, Gregg was on the ground with charges of birdshot and buckshot through him.

The Hungerfords hitched up a horse and drove down Black Star and on into Santa Ana, where they gave themselves up to Sheriff Theo. Lacy.

In the meantime, Gregg was laid in a spring wagon by Harris and the boy and was being taken to a doctor when,

near the Irvine Park in Santiago canyon, the wagon was met by Sheriff Lacy and District Attorney R. Y. Williams. A doctor was found at El Modena and it was at a house in El Modena that Gregg died.

The trial before Judge Ballard resulted in the conviction of Henry Hungerford. In those days killings were infrequent, and a trial of this kind created an interest that was widespread and intense. Public sentiment was against the defendants. Following conviction, a new trial was sought, and unexpectedly Judge Ballard granted the motion on the ground that not enough evidence had been produced to warrant the verdict. Having presented all the evidence available, there was nothing for the district attorney to do but ask for the dismissal of the case.

Soon afterward, Judge Ballard came up for re-election, with Z. B. West as his opponent. Judge Ballard's decision in the Hungerford case was the outstanding issue of the campaign, which was vigorous and which resulted in the defeat of Judge Ballard.

Most of those who go into Black Star today do not stop anywhere along the way. They follow the forest road over the rideg and down on the other side to Corona. Others afoot may take time to explore the gorge of the Black Star canyon, a chasm that has been torn out of solid rock. With its rough walls, it is one of the most picturesque spots in the mountains. This gorge comes to an end in a sheer precipice of perhaps 150 feet, down with waters pour during the season of the year when a stream is flowing in the Black Star.

Both times that I have seen the gorge I entered from below

the Hidden Ranch house, passing by the foot of the hill on which the Indian village is located.

At the foot of the hill, from the solid bedrock, flows a spring, famed among those who know the mountains as a spring that even in the driest years never lessens its flow. This spring, perhaps, was one of the reasons why the Indians selected the knoll above it for a home.

On down the canyon, the way is easy to travel. A trail crosses points of soil, but most of the way it lies in the creek bottom. On a trip down the canyon Neff and I found a place where placer miners had been at work. A crude placer cradle, like the ones the '49-ers used in the days of California's gold rush, was found hanging in a tree. A hundred yards further down we came to a sycamore growing in the bottom of the creek where it had withstood the poundings of many a flood. Back of it, against the embankment was a bar of gravel that evidently had been worked. Further down we came to a place where a shaft twenty or twenty-five feet deep had been sunk, almost straight down. The entrance was crudely protected with sycamore rails, but below the rails the walls were unprotected and to our inexperienced eyes it appeared that the miner had dug at his peril, for a cave-in seemed imminent.

Then we came to the chasm, the real gorge of the Black Star. A huge dam of boulders, sealed into the walls of the canyon, furnishes the drop-off. From boulder to boulder one makes his way down until he reaches the bottom, rough strewn with boulders. The walls of the gorge rise straight up for perhaps 250 or 300 feet, much like the gorge of Canyon de la Horca. Great rocky cliffs with rugged crags hang at the

rim, one of them surprisingly shaped like the head of a bearded man.

Making our way toward the bottom of the gorge a few weeks ago, Charles H. Chapman and I came upon a rattlesnake full length upon a ledge against the canyon wall. He was fat and sleek, probably from feeding upon frogs that live along the pools in the rocks and rats in the crevices of the wall. A rock carefully aimed quickly put an end to him.

For half a mile, one can follow the gorge, every foot of the way down bringing a change in the appearance of the walls of the chasm. Then comes the end of the gorge, the precipice down which the stream tumbles in a beautiful waterfall. The drainage of the Black Star is only a few miles in area, and most of the year the stream bed is dry. In wet years, however, water will be passing over the falls for several months. To see them, the easy way is to walk directly up the canyon from the point where the forest road leaves the canyon bottom and begins its tortuous climb up the ridge to the Indian village site and the Hidden ranch.

Of all the canyons that join the Santiago, the Black Star alone seems destined to become part of a thoroughfare across the mountains. It may be only a year or two, possibly five or ten, but eventually the call of the public for scenic drives will result in widening and straightening the forest road in use today. Whatever may be done, Black Star will always hold its charm and its romance.