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DIGGING FOR GEODES • UTAH'S BACK COUNTRY

LOOKING FOR a fun-spot that's not too far out? If you live within the Los Angeles perimeter try Tick Canyon, a mere forty-five minutes by freeway from downtown Los Angeles.

We first heard about Tick Canyon when we joined a party of rockhound friends heading for a particular rock-collecting site. But you don't have to be a rockhound to have an interesting outing at this place. Tick Canyon offers superb panoramic opportunities to the camera buff, besides exploring possibilities to the adventure-minded.

If you haven't discovered the thrills of rockhounding by the time you've poked around Tick Canyon and, with the usual time-honored beginner's luck, found some really exciting "rocks" or crystals, you just might want to start collecting. Then you're hooked for life!

Tick Canyon lies off the Mint Canyon freeway. It is just a few miles west of the historic pile of fascinating, queer-shaped rocks known as Vasquez Rocks—named for California's legendary highwayman of a century ago, Tiburcio Vasquez, who used them to hide out. These rocks are now a public park and campgrounds, with facilities.

From the freeway take the Escondido Canyon road to where Davenport Road cuts in. Take the right hand turn onto Davenport, and it is only a couple of miles to the huge borax dumps in Tick Canyon. (Road signs designate Tick Canyon.) There you will see some large tailings dumps spread out to your left. This wide spot is a good place to park your vehicle, for the road itself is a narrow one. Any type of vehicle can come here.

Tick Canyon is across the road from the wide car-parking. This narrow canyon is where the "goodies" are found, for this is where, back in the early 1900s, the U. S. Borax Company once mined borax, many hundreds of miles from the then only known large deposit at Death Valley.

And this is the Tick Canyon borax dumps where rockhounds from everywhere hunt for minerals- rock-specimens and crystals. Tick Canyon is famous for its howlite, a fine cutting-rock which is prized for its superior lustre after polishing, and for the delicate "spider-web" that burrows throughout a good specimen. The stone itself is a

creamy-white. Spider-webbing may be black, brown or gray, and very distinctive.

Viewed in the rough, you wouldn't believe such a beautiful gem material would emerge from such rough, really ugly stone. Howlite looks like so much greyish-white stone "cauliflowers." But beautiful jewelry is made from howlite: men's bolas to be worn with western clothing, cabochons set into rings, pendants, pen-sets, inkstands and book-ends. One enterprising couple, George and Dorothy Telford, use howlite slabs as a "canvas" and paint fascinating scenes directly onto the stone which is porous enough to take water-colors. They display these unique paintings at gem and mineral shows.

Although Tick Canyon has been a collecting ground for rockhounds for many decades, people still continue to find excellent material there. You just have to hunt a bit harder, and, if digging for materials, dig a lot deeper!

There are other materials in Tick Canyon. The hillsides hide beautiful red-brown and dark green jasper, some prize sagenite, plume agate, seam and nodular agate, ulexite (a lovely silky, moonstone-like material) colemanite crystals and fine, needle-like crystals of natrolite.

But, you say, you're not a rockhound! And you wouldn't know what to collect. Well, let's go over to the old dump and look things over. See that whitish, wide

TRIP TO TICK CANYON

by Dorothy Robertson



sort of "beach" above the canyon bottom where a skim of water is still actually flowing along the rocky bed? That's the old dump, and people still find good specimens here.

See that chunk of stone "cauliflower head?" Looks like one, doesn't it? Knock off an edge and see what's inside. Those little veins of black tracery all over the surface are a prize! You can take it over to your local rockshop and have them cut a slab for you. Then you can get a quick polish on the surface by painting it with liquid plastic.

You'd like to see some natrolite? It's quite a climb up the hill. See that volcanic outcrop up there? That brown knobby, holey looking stuff? That's

where it is. You find natrolite in vesicular basalt outcroppings. When you break off chunks of this volcanic rock you sometimes find these delicate little crystals inside.

You find agate on both sides of the canyon slopes. Nodular masses of agate and jasper were once plentiful. Now you have to hunt harder. When we were here before, we did find a greenish jasper outcrop up there on the side of the hill. We were lucky. But don't worry, rockhounds always miss some, and buried stuff weathers out eventually.

Borax was discovered in Tick Canyon in 1906 by two gold prospectors, Henry Shepherd and Louis Ebbenger. They had trudged up the canyon from Lang Sta-

tion down on the railroad, to the old Spanish gold mines pocking the hill-sides, (which are still there) day in and day out. Regularly they crossed, on their way, a peculiar, limey, light-hued formation that ran in an east-to-west trend. One day, out of simple curiosity, one of the men sank his pick into the formation. To their amazement, they found colemanite crystals—the richest borax ore then known to the mineral market. The friends realized that gold was not the only pathway to riches. Nosing around, they finally sold out to a Thomas Thorkildson for around \$80,000.

Thomas Thorkildson had once been an employee of the Pacific Coast Borax Company. He recognized the value of the discovery, and quickly organized the Sterling Borax Company and developed the property. He introduced shafts and tunnels, added a calcining and screening plant, and five steep miles of three-foot gauge railroad that angled down the canyon to Lang Station. Almost immediately a little mining community sprang up. It wasn't long before Thorkildson had earned himself the title of "Borax King," and it wasn't too long before the Pacific Coast Borax Company bought into the burgeoning borax recovery operation. The plant continued to run until 1922 when it was shut down. The mill and mining equipment were dismantled and hauled north to the company's Death Valley Borax mines—then the world's largest borax output site.

The great open shafts and mine tunnels at Tick Canyon were safely secured, and the general public have since been permitted to come in and look for rock specimens at the old works. Today the U. S. Borax Company owns the 500-plus acres of mineral lands around the ghost-settlement of Lang, the town which some 300 miners once called "home."

Through the U. S. Borax Company's continued generosity in the matter of public access to their property, scenic Tick Canyon continues to offer its wares: beautiful cutting and polishing materials, mineral specimens, and extra fun-dividends along its length and breadth.

So the very next time you wonder just where you and your family could go for a picnic day out under the clear, wide blue sky, try Tick Canyon and be pleasantly surprised. You will be glad you did. □



Entrance to Tick Canyon (opposite page) is seen from the parking area. Author examines a green jasper outcropping (above) on hill overlooking the highway. Huge borax dumps (below) are a favorite area for rock hounds.

