

nature note

La Brea

Some 40,000 years ago, while the Ice Age still gripped part of the world and ape-men were learning the uses of fire and stone tools, a camel slipped on the edge of a 20-foot-wide tar pit in southern California and became trapped in black asphalt bubbling slowly to the surface.

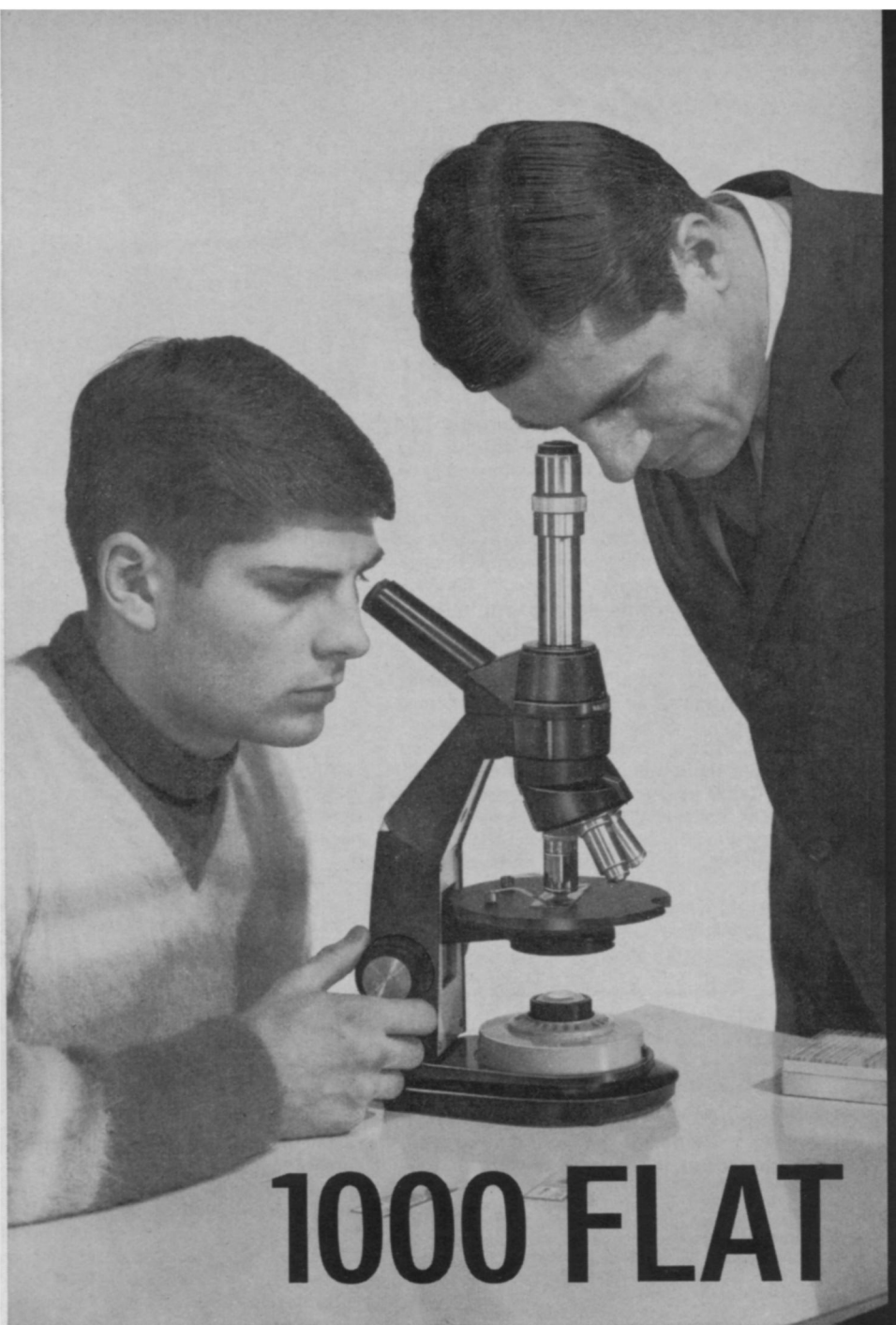
As it struggled, it became more firmly mired; its hindquarters sank deeper, its front feet pawed the firm ground at the pit's edge. The thrashing and cries attracted a saber-toothed cat that pounced on its back, killing it with sharp teeth and claws, but causing both bodies to sink deeper in the pit.

A pack of dire wolves joined the struggle, snatching at the camel's carcass. Some escaped with chunks of meat, but others became trapped in the tar. Huge vultures circled down on the struggling mass, hunger more important than danger. Some swooped on the dying and dead animals, tearing the flesh with hooked beaks, and drooping their 14-foot-long wings into the tar, where they became so weighted down the birds could not fly.

This scene has been reconstructed by scientists examining millions of fossil bones rescued from some 20 pits located in about 25 acres westward of sprawling Los Angeles. Mastodons, woolly mammoths, cave bears, ancient tree toads, dragonflies, plovers, spiders, wasps and many other species of animals and plants have been carefully uncovered there.


This area is called La Brea, named after a Spanish land grant. Craters, possibly formed by blowouts of gas from oil deposits beneath the surface, are filled with asphalt constantly rising from underground and crusting over as it cools and hardens. When animals stepped onto the apparently firm surface, they sank into it and their bones became enmired for eons.

Only since the beginning of this century have scientists realized the treasure house beneath the tar and salvaged some of the world's most famous fossils. From one pit alone, for instance, came 286 skulls: 90 saber-tooth cats, 174 wolves, 8 camels, 7 lions, 7 giant sloths and 14 horses. As man evolved in this area, he devised many uses for the asphalt—as decoration on clay pots, as waterproofing for wicker baskets, as caulking for canoes and as pitch for roofs. Later settlers used it for waterproofing, and the brea asphalt was sold in wagon loads for fuel and for paving.



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