



CONFRONTING THE SHADOWS OF BLACK STAR CANYON

By Brooke Edwards Staggs/Orange County Register



It's a clear October night, just days from a full moon. My heart speeding up a bit, I follow a black SUV into the Santa Ana Mountains with photographer Isaac Arjonilla in my passenger seat.

Lights from Lake Forest fade away as we wind our way along Santiago Canyon Road. I stay close to the SUV though I know the route well.

Isaac and I exchange tales we've heard about our destination: American Indian massacres, satanic rituals, school bus crashes. But our chatter stops as we turn down Black Star Canyon Road.

The SUV parks a quarter-mile before a gate that blocks vehicles from continuing up the canyon. I nudge in close enough to read a decal on the door as it opens: **Orange County Ghosts and Legends Tours.**

"If you're not wearing a jacket, I'd take one," paranormal investigator Matt Harvey advises as he straps on a backpack and a carabiner carrying Mace. "The temperature can drop really fast out there."

Matt's partner, Cris Arranaga, takes out a K-II electromagnetic field meter, used to detect movement of charged entities.

Coal-black legacy

Unlike its neighbor, Silverado Canyon, it wasn't shimmering silver that drew non-native settlers to Black Star Canyon or gave the area its ominous name.

Coal was discovered at the mouth of the canyon in 1878, and Black Star Coal Mining Co. was formed.

The venture proved unprofitable, and the mine was abandoned. But the name – and sooty characters, some say – stuck around.

He instructs us to turn our cellphones to airplane mode to avoid interference. We have no reception anyhow, so we dutifully obey.

Soon, we're off for a pre-Halloween adventure into one of Orange County's most infamous haunts: Black Star Canyon.

REPORTED SIGHTINGS

On Friday and Saturday nights, Matt and Cris often cross paths with groups of young adults in the canyon. They're thrill-seekers looking to confront Black Star's legends. Many also come to party.

During our weeknight tour, we see mountain bikers heading out as we cross the gate around 10 p.m.

"Did you see anything out there?" Matt asks.

"Just a shooting star," a biker replies.

A short distance into the canyon, Cris and I see one, too. Even that feels different, though, moving more slowly than shooting stars I've seen before.



Much of the canyon's murky reputation is rooted in its early years, including reported sightings of American Indian

warriors and a figure known as "The Miner."

"This is where The Miner walked out at me," Matt says. He stops at a curve in the road a mile into the canyon to recount when a figure outfitted with mining tools stepped from the shadows.

Matt stops and we stop, straining our eyes to see what he sees and planting our feet to avoid muffling what he hears.

Soon Cris, who calls himself an "open-minded skeptic," gets spikes on the electromagnetic field meter.

"Is there somebody here?" he asks. "Is this The Miner that's following us? Light it up for yes."

A few moments pass, our eyes fixed on the device in Cris' hand. With no response, we continue up the dirt road.

"Does anybody smell that?" Cris asks.

I do. It smells a bit like sulfur. Perhaps smoldering rubble from the recent Baker mulch fire one canyon over?

Strange smells are common here, Cris says. So are constant temperature changes. One moment, my hands tingle in the fall breeze. Another step, I feel as though a heater kicked on.

“We don't know if it's paranormal, so to speak,” Cris says, given the unpredictable canyon environment. “But it is a bizarre experience.”

Matt points out where a boulder once rolled down the side of a hill behind his terrified tour group. Then there's the spot where he heard his first set of tree knocks, a form of communication often attributed to the elusive Sasquatch.

Matt believes he's spotted Bigfoot four times in Black Star Canyon. The first was 18 years ago, when he started exploring the area. Recently, after heavy rains, he says he took a cast of an 18-inch footprint.

As we walk farther, Isaac pauses, looking puzzled. His flash keeps turning itself off, he says, fidgeting with the camera he knows all too well.

“Did somebody just say, ‘Matt?’” Matt abruptly asks. We all shake our heads as he looks to the trail behind us. “That was a disembodied voice.”

Matt says he caught examples of “class A” or clear electronic voice phenomenon when playing back tape from Black Star three weeks ago. The phenomenon is thought to be a way for entities to communicate, with words or sounds transmitted from beyond through audio recordings.

“I can feel you all around me,” Matt says to the darkness. “I feel like somebody put me in an ice bath right now. It's OK; you can do that. It's fine. I don't mind it.”

There's a loud rustle in the bushes. The electromagnetic field meter stays dark, Matt warms back up and we move on.

SHADOW PEOPLE

As the clock nears midnight, we turn around.

Cris cautions – or baits – that he always experiences the most action on his way out of Black Star.

“I think they follow us back down to the gate,” Matt says. “I really do.”

“Is that, you think, because they want you to leave?” I ask.

“I think they like our presence,” Matt says.

Immediately, the meter spikes into the red. Cris and Matt ask a series of follow-up questions: “Do you not want us to leave?” “Is this the Lady in White?” Again, no response.

“I do think they like having us here,” Matt continues. “I've asked that question numerous times, and most of the time they say, ‘Yes,’” lighting up the EMF meter in response. “Well, certain spirits do, and certain spirits don't.”

As my Nissan Sentra comes back into view, Matt and Cris say ours was a bit of a slow night. “But not dead – no pun intended,” Cris laughs.

The nearly full moon didn't help, Matt says, since shadow people don't like the light.

“I can't say for sure that anything is really out here, but it seems like something is out here,” he says. “A lot of people have experienced things similar to me. There has to be more to it than, ‘Oh, you guys are crazy.’”

Matt instructs us to “clear” ourselves several times as we leave our adventure behind. Explorers who haven't heeded his advice told him bedroom drawers flew open.

Laughing nervously as we fasten our seat belts, Isaac and I both recite: “If anything is with me, you cannot come home with me.”

What could it hurt, right?

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