

Staff photos/Greg Stidham

E Clampus Vitus members heft a coal car at Fifth and Black Diamond Thursday. The car contains coal from Black Diamond Mines, below.

Monument honors days of coal

By Sam Richards

Staff writer

PITTSBURG — As a former “noble grand humbug” of E Clampus Vitus, Rick “Cake” Johnson is serious about historical preservation.

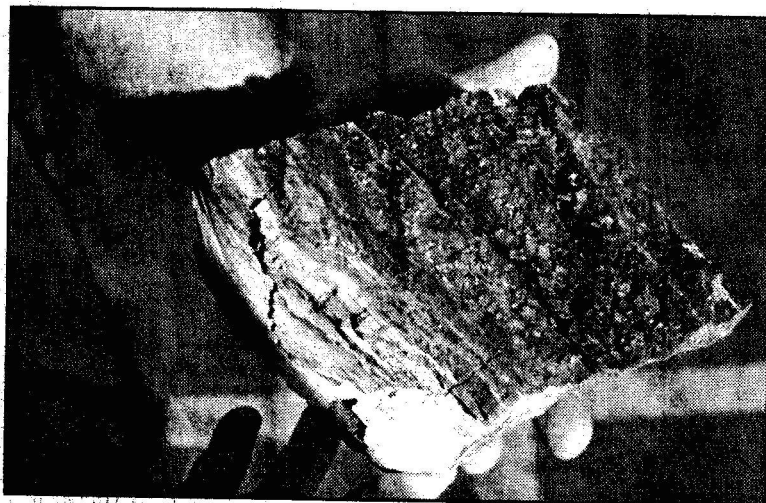
With equal measures of honor and irreverence, Johnson and five other Clampers gathered at Fifth and Black Diamond streets Thursday to erect a monument to what Johnson called Pittsburg’s most forgotten era — the days of coal mining, when the city was called Black Diamond.

“The first time this area really flourished was with the discovery of coal,” said Johnson. “It’s there’s a steelworker’s statue, a fisherman’s statue, but nothing here recognizing coal.”

The Clampers restored a small coal car once used on a mining railroad, made a short section of track and set up the car and track on a city garden plot at the intersection.

The plaque on the coal car also has a brief description of Pittsburg’s days as Black Diamond and the role coal mining played in establishing the city. The car is from Grass Valley; all the coal cars used in Black Diamond were probably melted down for scrap during World War II, Johnson said.

The monument will be dedicat-



ed Saturday during a ceremony that begins at precisely 9:13 a.m. That time, Johnson said, is in observance of the local chapter’s name — Joaquin Murrieta Chapter 13 of E Clampus Vitus — and its 4,000 members in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

The ceremony’s timing, coinciding with the Pittsburg Seafood Festival that kicks off at 10 a.m. Saturday, is intentional. “We have a tie-in to a built-in crowd down here,” he said.

As far back as 1860, Black Diamond was where coal from the mines in Nortonville — the largest being the Black Diamond Mines — came by narrow-gauge trains to be loaded on barges destined for Sacramento, San Fran-

cisco and Stockton.

Nortonville, Somersville and the other coal-mining towns in the shadow of Mt. Diablo were gone by 1910. Many of Nortonville’s buildings, and much of the Black Diamond Mines equipment, moved to a newly discovered coal vein near Seattle in the 1880s. That new town, east of Tacoma, still bears the name of Black Diamond.

E Clampus Vitus’ roots go back to the 1850s, when it was formed as a fraternity of gold miners. Miners, Johnson said, weren’t always accepted into other fraternal groups.

The group reorganized in 1931 in San Francisco as an historical society. Clampers wear red shirts

to club functions as a tribute to miners.

Club members give each other joke nicknames and titles that lampoon more traditional fraternal groups — a former chapter president is a “dead salmon” — and wear buttons that make fun of fellow members.

“We like to believe we’re not stuffed-shirt historians,” Johnson said.

They’re not even all historians, in the strict sense.

Tim “Two Dogs” Coley of Antioch, who helped set up the coal car Thursday, said he joined for the fun of it.

“It’s a good release, and you’re doing something good for the community while you’re having fun,” said Coley, 29.

The local chapter’s recent historical contributions include a large plaque at Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve, a plaque at the John Muir House in Martinez and a marker commemorating an attempted 1862 prison break, the Battle of Ross Landing, at San Quentin.

Johnson noted that the San Quentin marker is behind the walls of the prison and has a large file sticking out the back.

“The plaque-makers thought that was right in line with Clamperdom,” he said, as his fellow Clampers raised their cans of Budweiser.