



The Santa Maria Valley of the central California coast was isolated by the Santa Lucia Range to the north and the Santa Ynez Range to the south. Overland travel to the outside world was either northward via El Camino Real over the difficult Cuesta Pass to reach San Francisco via the Salinas Valley or southward via San Marcos pass to reach Los Angeles via Santa Barbara. In 1869, a group of San Luis Obispo businessmen built the 1,800-foot People's Wharf at present day Avila Beach to transfer freight and passengers from steamships operating from San Francisco, San Diego, and Ventura. In 1873, one of the partners, John Harford, purchased the entire shoreline around Avila Beach, built a new 540 foot wharf, and constructed a horse-powered, 30 inch narrow gauge railroad to transport passengers and freight the 2 miles from the wharf to a wagon road at Avila Beach. In 1876, the Pacific Coast Steamship Company replaced the horse-drawn railroad with a "standard" 36 inch narrow gauge railroad with steam locomotives, the San Luis Obispo & Santa Maria Valley Railroad. The SLO&SMV extended about 15 miles from the Port Harford wharf to San Luis Obispo. San Luis Obispo became a commercial center for shipments of hay, grain, dairy products, sheep and cattle. The SLO&SMV was extended from San Luis Obispo to Arroyo Grande in 1881 and to this location at Santa Maria in 1882. During this period, the original Harford Wharf was replaced by new 3,000-foot wharf with narrow-gauge tracks extending the entire length.

The Oregon Improvement Company obtained controlling interest in the Pacific Coast Steamship Company in late 1882, reorganized the railroad as the Pacific Coast Railway, and extended the line to Los Alamos. The line was extended to Los Olivos in 1887, the PC's final terminus. Passenger traffic through Port Harford declined when Southern Pacific reached San Luis Obispo from San Francisco in 1894, but SP's freight rates were high enough to keep most Santa Maria Valley freight on the narrow gauge PC and steamboats, but the loss of passenger traffic put the Oregon Improvement Company into receivership. The reorganized railroad built a 4 mile branch line in 1899 from Santa Maria to a new Union Sugar Company beet refinery in Betteravia. The increased agricultural business was shortly overshadowed by discovery of oil in the Santa Maria Valley. By 1902, the railroad had converted its engines to burn oil and was strapping tanks from standard gauge cars onto their flatcars to transport the "Texas Tea." Five new Baldwin 2-8-0's were delivered by 1906 as the freight car fleet expanded to two hundred cars. The Betteravia branch was electrified in 1906 and extended to Guadalupe in 1909. Another electrified branch was built in 1910 to serve an oil refinery near at Roadamite.

The standard gauge Santa Maria Valley Railway was built parallel to the electrified branches of the PC, providing competition, and local agriculture shifted from sugar beets to produce, which could be loaded directly onto SMV/SP refrigerator cars. The PC's electric operations ended in 1928, although steam locomotives still worked occasionally. The PC saw a brief increase in business hauling gravel for construction of U.S. Highway 101 in 1928 and 1929, but service to Los Olivos ended in 1933. The line beyond Los Alamos was dismantled in 1936, and the branch lines were dismantled in 1937. Bell Oil Company briefly used the railway north of Santa Maria until the line was dismantled in 1942.

The remaining SLO&SMV/PC right of way in Santa Maria was taken over by the SMV and converted to standard gauge in 1911, as seen in this northward view of the SLO&SMV grade in north Santa Maria. The narrow gauge SLO&SMV arrived at this location from the north in 1882, the standard gauge SMV tracks are on the SLO&SMV grade and end here, and the narrow gauge tracks were removed north of this location in 1942. The narrow gauge branch line to Betteravia and Guadalupe was built westward (left) from just about this location in 1899, but I could find no trace of the line remaining.



Northward view of the SLO&SMV (1882)/PC (1887) grade, 800 feet south of the previous location, where it crosses the SMV grade in Santa Maria. This location is near the SLO&SMV (1882) end of track, where the first narrow gauge construction under the PC moniker commence southward, ultimately to Los Olivos in 1887.



The same crossing as the previous photo -- between the SLO&SMV (1882)/PC (1887) and the SMV (1911) -- so let's review the SMV and then proceed farther south on the PC (1887) narrow gauge alignment. In August 1899, the Southern Pacific built a 3.26 mile branch southeast from the SP Coast Line (1901) at Guadalupe to a sugar mill at the future Betteravia Junction (not shown separately on the map). In 1911, the Santa Maria Valley Railway was incorporated by an English oil syndicate to build a 23-mile line from Betteravia Junction eastward through this location at Santa Maria (on the PC) to the oil center of Roadamite to haul oil and asphalt from that location to the SP at Guadalupe. The SMV commenced construction on July 11, 1911, reached this location at Santa Maria on October 7, 1911, and completed the line to Roadamite on November 5, 1911. The railroad was initially successful, but in the 1920's the sugar plant closed and the SMV declared bankruptcy. Captain G. Allan Hancock purchased the bankrupt railroad in 1925, renamed it the Santa Maria Valley Railroad, and built a modern, fully-equipped engine house, installed new ties and new rail, and purchased new locomotives. He also developed the SMV's agricultural customers in the Santa Maria Valley by introducing new irrigation methods, investing in packing sheds and an ice plant, and building Rosemary Farms. By the mid 1930's the SMV was hauling many carloads of sugar beets to the Union Sugar Plant in Betteravia and hauling crude oil and vegetables out of the valley. The SMV was one of the busiest shortline railroads on the West Coast, hauling over 20,000 carloads per year. At the start of World War II, the SMV purchased the narrow gauge Pacific Coast Railway right-of-way from the grade crossing in Santa Maria (this location) south 3 miles to a new airbase, now the location of the Santa Maria Airport.

Roadamite ceased operations in the late 1940's and the line was the SMV was abandoned back to Gates in 1950. The SMV was one of the last railroads on the West Coast to run main line steam locomotives; February 21, 1962, marked the last run of steam engine 21, with Captain Hancock at the throttle and Walt Disney in the cab. As typical of the shortlines, business went to trucking and, in August 1993, the sugar plant in Betteravia closed. The Roadamite Branch to Gates was abandoned in the late 1990's. In September 2008, the SMV moved its yard and office facilities from Santa Maria to the former sugar plant in Betteravia. Today, new customers have come on to the SMV while current customers are increasing their tonnage. The SMV claims to be a full-service shortline railroad, performing contract switching, contract track repairs and inspections, and car repairs. The Friends of the Santa Maria Valley Railroad formed in 2007 to preserve the history of the Santa Maria Valley Railroad and to educate its members on the current railroad industry.

Southeastward view of the north-south SLO&SMV (1882)/PC (1887) grade, with the stored car on it, where it crosses the east-west SMV (1911). The SMV converted the narrow gauge SLO&SMV/PC tracks, including the crossing, to standard gauge in 1911.



Northward view of the PC (1887) grade, with the same the stored car as in the previous photo; the SMV (1911) crossing is beyond the car. The branch to the right is the eastern half of a wye, built by the SMV in 1911.



Northward view of the PC (1887) grade, a few steps south of the previous photo, with the same stored car and the switch for the eastern half of the wye in the right distance. The branch to the left is the western half of the wye, built by the SMV in 1911 on a larger radius than the eastern half of the wye.



Southward view of the PC (1887) grade, same location as the previous photo, with the western half of the SMV (1911) wye merging onto the grade from the right.



Eastward view of the SMV (1911) southern end of track, 3 miles south of the previous location and a half mile west of the PC (1887) grade; this is a spur of the SMV, just north of the World War II airbase.



Northward view of the PC (1887) grade, a half mile south of the junction with the SMV spur in the previous photo. The abandoned grade is now the Santa Maria Valley Railroad Trail. Note the jog in the trail off of the railroad grade in the foreground.





Southward view of the PC (1887) grade at the same location as the previous photo. The bare ground in the foreground is the old grade, the trail is on its own alignment to the left south of the jog. The SMV had standard gauge tracks on this grade to the airbase, about a quarter mile farther south.



Now we are back at the crossing between the SLO&SMV (1882)/PC (1887) and the SMV (1911) looking east toward Gates and Roadamite. The SMV track has been cut back to a point half mile down the line (east) from this crossing.



Westward view of the SMV (1911) line to Gates and Roadamite at the current end of track, a half mile east of the previous location.



Eastward view of the SMV (1911) line to Gates and Roadamite at the current end of track, same location as previous, a half mile east of the crossing between the SLO&SMV (1882)/PC (1887) and the SMV (1911).



We are back at the SLO&SMV (1882)/PC (1887) - SMV (1911) crossing again, this time looking west, the only direction we haven't yet explored.



Eastward view of the SMV (1911) a few hundred feet west of the crossing, which is in the left distance. The branch to the right is the western half of the SMV wye. Note that the western branch of the wye does not have rust, but the siding (second switch) and the main line to the east are rusty.



Westward view of the SMV (1911), same location as previous.



Westward view of the SMV (1911), 1.5 mile west of previous location on the eastern outskirts of Santa Maria.





Westward view of the SMV (1911), 3 miles west of the previous location.