



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. El Camino Real traversed the difficult Cuesta Pass to reach San Francisco via the Salinas Valley or 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 (just east of current pier) to transfer freight and passengers from steamships operating from San Francisco, San Diego, and Ventura. One of the partners, John Harford, wanted to build the wharf closer to the west point of the harbor in a safer anchorage. In 1873, Harford purchased the entire shoreline around the bay, 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 rail line was extended from San Luis Obispo to Arroyo Grande in 1881 and to 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 at 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 Sisquoc.

The standard gauge Santa Maria Valley Railroad 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 Right of Way in Santa Maria was taken over by the SMV and converted to standard gauge.

There is not much left of the narrow gauge PC. Some artifacts are on display at the San Luis Obispo Railroad Historic District, such as this box of spare parts for narrow gauge locomotives from Baldwin Locomotive Works.




A PC boxcar on display at the San Luis Obispo Railroad Historic District.


**PACIFIC COAST
RAILWAY BOXCAR #706**

THIS 30 FOOT BOXCAR IS ONE OF 10 BOXCARS BUILT IN 1906 BY THE PACIFIC COAST RAILWAY SHOPS IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON. IT IS ONE OF FOUR SURVIVING BOXCARS OF THIS GROUP. THE BOXCARS WERE NUMBERED 700-718 (EVEN NUMBERS). BOXCAR #706 WAS RECENTLY RESTORED BY MUSEUM VOLUNTEERS AND CONVERTED INTO A PERMANENT EXHIBIT HOUSING RESTROOMS IN THE INTERIOR FOR THE MUSEUM.

Boxcar #706 on PCry next to a standard gauge boxcar



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A PC trailer on display at the San Luis Obispo Railroad Historic District.

**PACIFIC COAST RAILWAY
MAINTENANCE TRAILER**

THIS SHOP BUILT PUSH CAR WAS MOST LIKELY BUILT SOMETIME IN THE LATE 1920'S. A MODEL T FORD CAR FRAME HAD RAILWAY WHEELS ATTACHED TURNING IT INTO A TRAILER THAT WAS EITHER PUSHED OR PULLED BY A MOTORCAR. THE PUSH CAR WAS ACQUIRED IN SAN LUIS OBISPO FROM THE FERRAR FAMILY IN 2012 WHERE THE PUSH CAR SERVED AS A PLANTER FOR MANY YEARS.

A PC Ry railcar pulls a trailer, both were hand built by PC Ry in the shops.



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The Southern Pacific Railroad's Coast Line had its origin in the San Francisco & San Jose Railroad, which was opened between those two cities on January 16, 1864. Some of the founders of the SF&SJ then organized the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, which was incorporated on December 2, 1865, and authorized by Congress to build south through the San Joaquin Valley to the California state line at Needles, where it would meet the AT&SF-controlled Atlantic & Pacific Railroad (ultimately completed in 1883). The original organizers did no construction, but in 1868 sold the SP along with the SF&SJ to the Big Four of the Central Pacific. Early in 1868, the SP started its first construction, which was a line south from San Jose to reach southern California via a route that would cross the Coast Range southeast of San Jose to reach the San Joaquin Valley. However, this line was superseded as the SP's southern main line when the SP started constructing the SP (1876) line to southern California from the the SP's Western Pacific (1869), which the CP had purchased from the SF&SJ in 1867. However, the SP line south of San Jose -- the future Coast Line -- was continued southward to access agricultural areas in the Santa Clara and Salinas valleys and to ultimately reach LA via a coastal route. On March 13, 1869, the line was opened to Gilroy (30 miles south of San Jose), to Pajaro (Watsonville Jct.) on November 27, 1871, to Salinas on November 1, 1872, and to Soledad, 90 miles south of San Jose, on August 12, 1873. There the terminus remained for 13 years while construction forces concentrated on completing the SP (1876) and SP Sunset Route (1883).

In 1886, work finally resumed south from Soledad, and trains were operating to King City on July 20, to Paso Robles on October 31, and to Templeton on November 16, 1886, extending now 170 miles south of San Jose. During 1887, the line was continued another 15 miles south through the high valleys of Atascadero and to Santa Margarita, where further progress involved heavy construction on the crossing of the Santa Lucia Mountains, the most formidable obstacle on the Coast Line. It is 8 miles as the crow flies from Santa Margarita across the Santa Lucia Mountains to San Luis Obispo, but to traverse that distance took six tunnels, a spectacular horseshoe curve, 15 miles of grade and trackage, and 7 years before the line was opened to this location at San Luis Obispo on May 5, 1894. Then came 7 more years of construction along the Pacific shore, providing a scenic route but offering many engineering difficulties in completing the line into Santa Barbara in 1901 (where the SP had completed a line from the south in 1887), thus opening the SP Coast Line from San Francisco to LA.

Northward view of the San Luis Obispo Railroad Historic District. The museum is a former freight loading facility along the SP; the vintage cars are on a siding of the SP Coast Line (now Union Pacific).





Southward view of the San Luis Obispo Railroad Historic District. I could find no evidence of the PC grade, I think it ran about a half mile west of here and has been completely re-graded.



Northward view of the San Luis Obispo Amtrack station, just north of the Railroad Historic District at the southern end of the SP (1894) segment of the Coast Line. The very plain depot on the left is typical SP construction, i.e. no style, especially compared to the brilliant stations along the Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe routes in the Southwest.