



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 (this location), 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 this location at 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 a 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 though 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. However, 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.

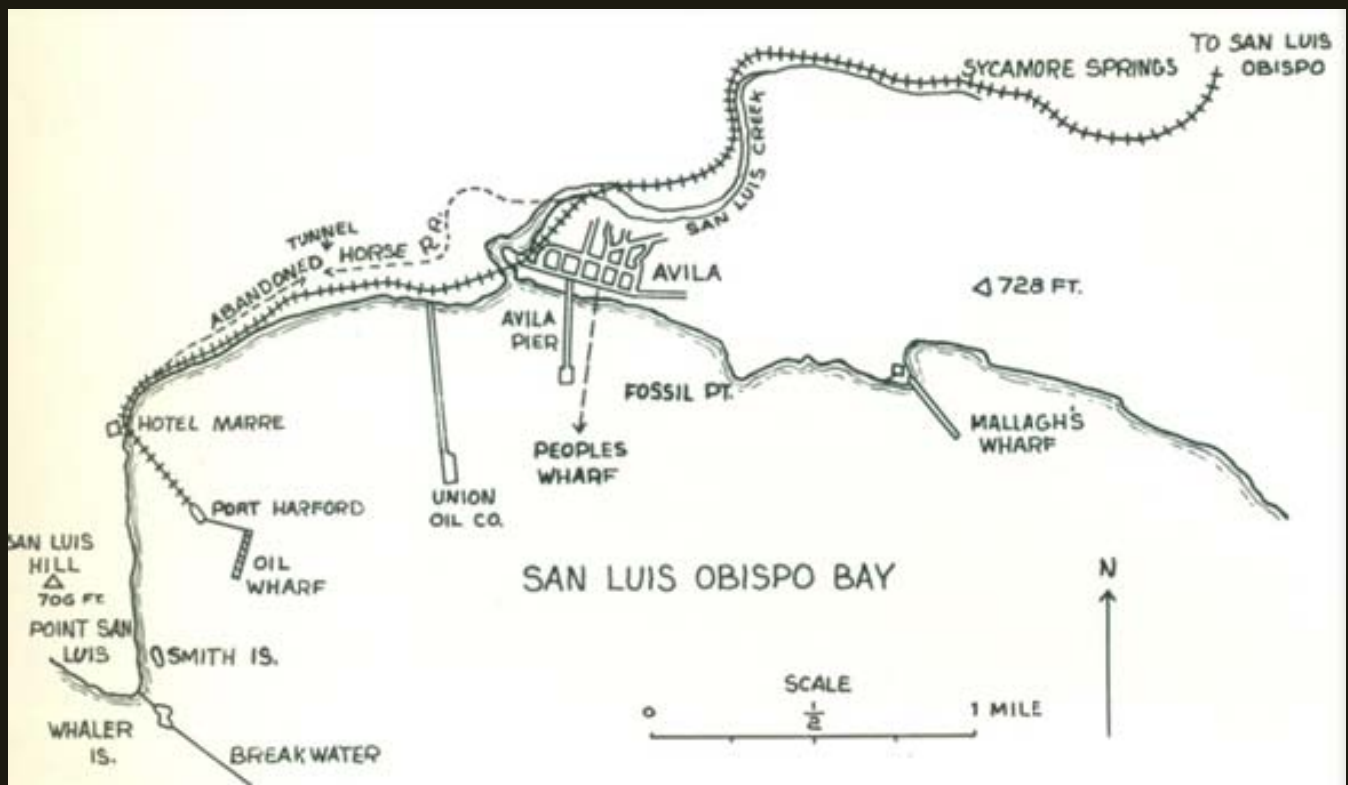
The increased agricultural business was shortly overshadowed by discovery of oil in the Santa Maria Valley. By 1902, the railroad had converted its engines to burn oil and was strapping tanks from standard gauge cars onto their flatcars at transport the "Texas Tea." Five new Baldwin 2-8-0's were delivered 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.

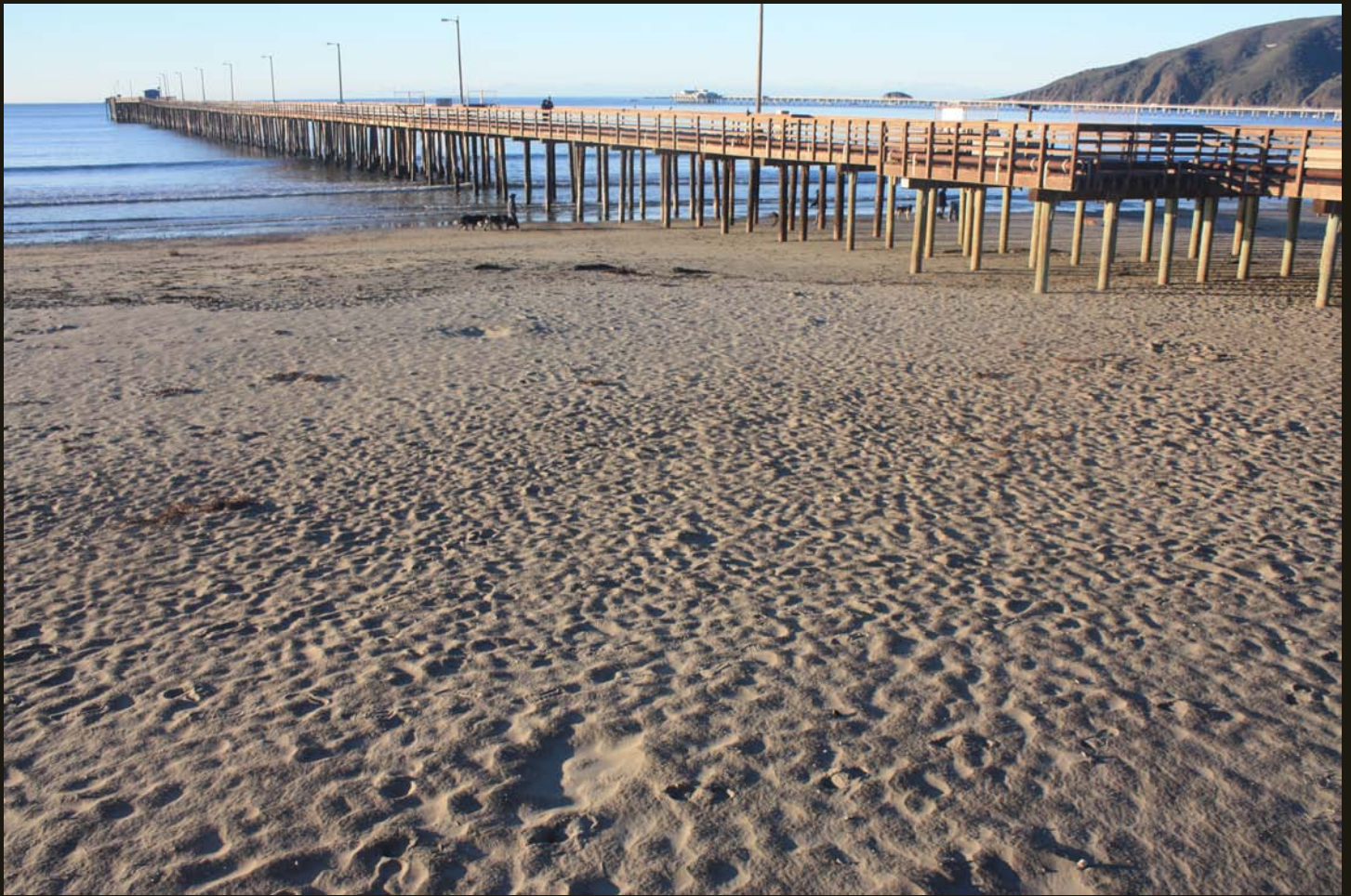
There is not much left of the narrow gauge PC. This is Harford Pier where, in 1873, John Harford built a 540-foot wharf at the west end of a 2-mile-long, horse-powered, 30 inch railroad, and in 1876 the SLO&SMV built the southern end of its narrow gauge railroad to San Luis Obispo.



Note the mention of the 1873 origin of the pier.



Map of San Luis Obispo Bay; note the 1873 "Abandoned Horse R.R." The unlabeled railroad is the SLO&SMV (1876) between the end of the Port Harford wharf (previous two photos) and San Luis Obispo.



Commencing in 1909, Union Oil and other oil companies laid over 200 miles of pipeline from the San Joaquin Valley oil fields to the tidewater facilities at Avila Beach. The first oil poured out at Port Harford in March 1910. In 1914, the Pacific Coast Railway (successor to the SLO&SMV) constructed a pier for commercial shipping; the pier was located between the existing Avila and Harford piers ("Union Oil Co." wharf in previous map). In 1923, the last oil was shipped off of Harford Pier, after which all oil was shipped off the PC (Union Oil) wharf. By the 1930's, use of the narrow gauge PC and the wharves declined, the oil transportation facility was abandoned, and Harford Pier was partially demolished to aid navigation in the bay. In 1941, Union Oil purchased the PC Pier and changed the name to Union Oil Pier (previous map).

Southwest view at Avila Beach. The pier in the foreground is the Avila Pier; the 1869 Peoples Wharf once stood just to the left. The pier in the distance is the Union Oil Pier, built by the PC in 1914, and beyond that is the Harford Pier (first photo).