

Pacific Coast Railway train chugs along Port Harford pier (now Port San Luis pier) in 1910-20 era. Marre Hotel stands at left. Photo is owned by Gerard Parsons.

# Excursions were fun on Pacific Coast Railway



Passengers switch from Southern Pacific Daylight, left, to narrow gauge train at San Luis Obispo depot. Photo property of Young Louis.

(Continued from Page A-1)

which Canet operated for several decades, now is the site of a restaurant.

On the day of dedication, said Canet, people poured into town for the big barbecue that went along with it.

"They ran special excursion trains every hour and a half all day," he said.

The nature of the engines that pulled the PCR trains was aptly described by former manager Grundell in a 1956 Telegram-Tribune interview.

"The engines burned 4-foot oak logs," he recalled. "Piles of logs were stacked along the right of way, and when wood was needed, all of the crew engaged in chucking and piling logs in the tender.

"An idea of the huge quantities of wood consumed during this period can be obtained by reminding you that it took two firemen, continuously chucking oak logs into the furnace, to produce and maintain a head of steam sufficient to pull a train of 12 cars over the grades, only two of which were more than 2 percent."

A lot of interesting lore has been generated about the old railroad, some of it by Grundell himself.

Here are three stories which Grundell likes best about the Pacific Coast Railway.

A farmer at Nipomo who liked to get his evening mail on time offered the train conductor \$25 for the first time he brought the train in on time.

About a month later it steamed in on time. The farmer handed the \$25 to the conductor, but the money was refused.

"But I told you that if you ever brought this train in on time I'd give you \$25," the farmer reminded him.

"I remember," the conductor said, "but this is last night's train."

Grundell also told this story: When the train approached a grade the conductor would go through all the passenger cars announcing:

"All first class passengers get off and walk. All second class passengers get off and push."

In the third story, Grundell quoted J.M. Sims, a previous superintendent who was driving a visiting official around the railroad yards.

As they rode along the highway which paralleled the railway, the visitor asked Sims if a building he was looking at belonged to the company. Without even looking at it, Sims replied:

"If it is painted, it isn't ours."

Hollywood came to San Luis Obispo County in 1935 to film some scenes for "Diamond Jim Brady," starring Edward Arnold.

A set depicting a small town in New York in the 1890s was built on both sides of the Pacific Coast Railway tracks near the present Santa Fe School site on San Luis Bay Road.

According to Best's account in "Ships and Narrow Gauge Rails," arrangements were made with the railroad to use several of its locomotives and practically all of its passenger cars.

"During the week of May 15, 1935," Best wrote, "San Luis Obispo was swarming with motion picture employees, with 500 costumed extras hired locally to appear in scenes made in Portuguese Flats, a short distance south of town."

Best went on:

"During four days the railroad was used from sunrise to sunset, and with Binnie Barnes as the feminine lead, Jean Arthur, Caesar Romero and George Sydney as the supporting cast, very little business was transacted in town, for most of the able-bodied

citizens were either working as extras or watching the free show."

The railroad had its genesis in the 1870s.

At the end of the Civil War it became apparent that the growth of the San Luis Obispo area depended on getting better transportation. The only way to meet this need quickly was to improve steamship facilities at Avila Beach.

In 1873, John Harford formed a partnership and built the wharf at Port Harford, the site of today's Port San Luis wharf.

At the same time, what came to be called "John Harford's Railroad" was built to connect the wharf with the bridge across San Luis Creek at Avila. The train was drawn by horses.

Meanwhile, a group of ranchers and merchants in the San Luis Valley were organizing to build a railroad from San Luis Obispo to the harbor.

By 1876, the railroad — including an improved set of rails to the wharf — was ready for business. Most of the rails were laid by Chinese laborers under contract to Ah Louis.

"Hundreds of wagons loaded with grain from the San Luis Valley would deposit their loads at the San Luis Obispo Railroad station," Best wrote.

This grain, along with sheep, hogs and dairy products, all went to the port to be loaded on Goodall, Nelson and Perkins Steamship Co., vessels. The shipping line later became the Pacific Coast Steamship Co.

By 1882 the line had been extended to Santa Maria. Later its rails went all the way down to Los Olivos.

From 1888 to 1893, according to Best, the railroad averaged 100,000 passengers a year.

In 1894, the Southern Pacific, operating on a standard gauge with bigger and faster trains, reached San Luis Obispo and established its station at the end of Santa Rosa Street.

At the Southern Pacific yard, SP passengers would get off the standard gauge train and board the narrow gauge Pacific Coast Railway.

A.P. Foge, who is still alive, can remember

transferring merchandise from one train to another.

With Southern Pacific on line, the number of passengers boarding ships at Port Harford dropped, Best said.

By 1912, the author pointed out, the auto still was not a menace to the narrow gauge, which had 62,319 passengers that year. (In the meantime, of course, SP had extended its line south to Los Angeles.)

But 10 years later, competition from buses brought the annual passenger list down to 3,547.

The World War I years provided a good freight business, according to Best, but by the 1920s the Pacific Coast Railway began a decline that it would never overcome.

Gradually, the southern portions of the line were abandoned.

By 1940, the death knell had sounded. The railroad had a \$1 million deficit.

On April 21, 1941, the company applied to the Interstate Commerce commission for abandonment of everything south of San Luis Obispo.

The rails were removed and sold for scrap during World War II.

Last year, a group of interested San Luis Obispo citizens searched for an old Pacific Coast Railway engine, hoping they could return it to this county.

"We had heard of one in Hawaii," said Gerard Parsons. "But research determined that we were 30 years late."

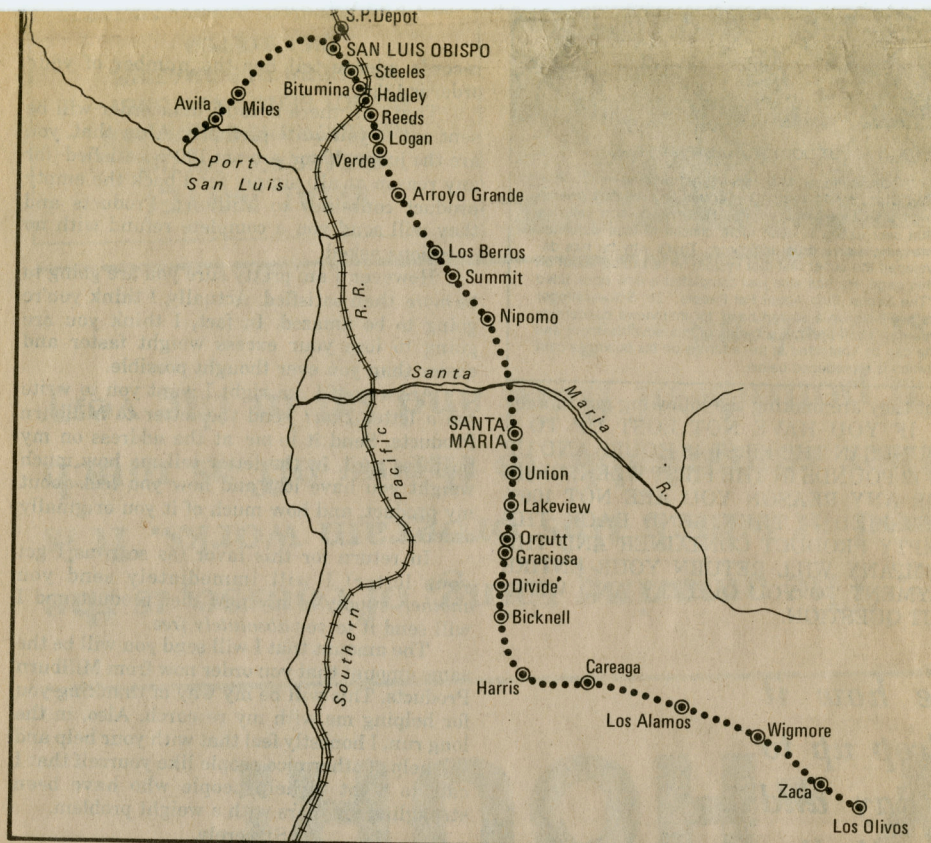
A.P. Foge, the former Southern Pacific employee, likes to remember the old American byword: "As the railroad goes, so goes the nation."

It may still be true, in a way.

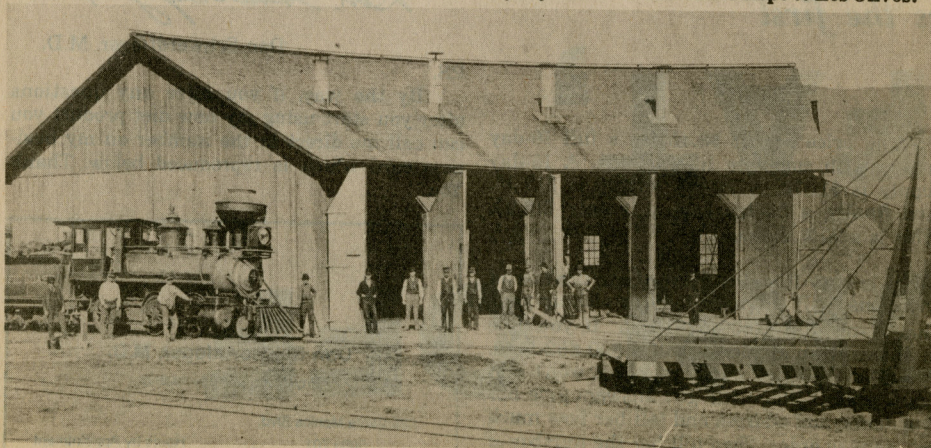
But not for the Pacific Coast Railway.

Today's County Line author, Warren Groshong, has covered news for the Telegram-Tribune for the past 12 years. Groshong currently handles court and political coverage.





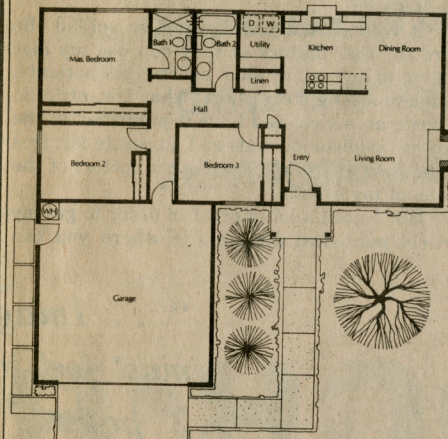
Main lines of the Pacific Coast Railway in its heyday ran from San Luis Obispo to Los Olivos.



Locomotives were stored at Higuera and South Street roundhouse. Photo provided by Young Louis.

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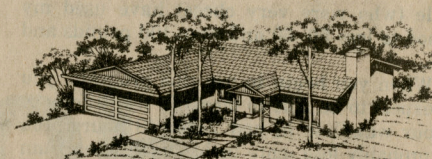
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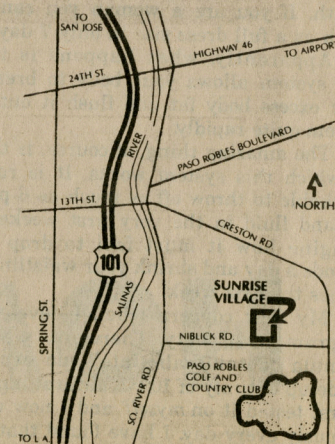
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