

# San Luis Obispo's Other Railroad - The Pacific Coast Railway

By Walter Rice, PhD

Once upon a time San Luis Obispo was a two-railroad town. Starting in 1876 San Luis Obispo was joined by rail with Avila Beach and San Luis Obispo Bay. This operation would in 1882 become, through merger, part of the Pacific Coast Railway (PC).

The PC was a three-foot-gauge carrier. For comparison, San Francisco's three cable-car lines are six inches wider, at 42-inches or 3'6". Typically, narrow gauge railways were built in the latter half of the 19th century where the terrain was mountainous, and therefore it was hard, if not impossible, for wider-gauge railways to operate economically.

This was not the case on the central coast. The company's founding entrepreneurs opted for narrow gauge to minimize construction costs (less right-of-way), and to be able to purchase smaller and less costly locomotives and cars. In short, the decision was rooted in economics.

As long as the PC was isolated from the national rail network, being narrow-gauge was not a significant economic liability. On May 5, 1894 the standard-gauge Southern Pacific Railroad (since 1995 part of the Union Pacific) entered San Luis Obispo from the north. Prior to the arrival of the Southern Pacific, the PC had a virtual monopoly on the area's commerce. With few exceptions passengers and freight arrived and left the central coast via the



At the end of existence, the Pacific Coast Railway enjoyed a mild resurgence in passenger traffic as railfans came for their "last ride." Here over 300 Railway Boosters await clearance at Hadley, the Price Canyon location where the PC crossed Southern Pacific's Coast line, October 20, 1940.

Walter Rice Collection



Central to economic viability of the Pacific Coast Railway was Harford's Wharf San Luis Obispo Bay where the line's passengers and freight connected with steam ships. This fact was not lost on these 1938 Railway Boosters as their 30-inch gauge train steams out on the wharf.

Art Stumpt Photograph, Walter Rice Collection

Pacific Coast Railway and connecting steamships anchored at Harford's Wharf San Luis Obispo Bay. After the arrival of the Southern Pacific this pattern lessened, ultimately to disappear.

The problem the PC faced was that freight and passenger cars, because of the incompatibility of gauges, could not be through routed to the nation on the Southern Pacific. The area's farming goods had to be off-loaded from the PC before they could continue their journey on the Southern Pacific. Off-loading was not an issue if the connecting carrier was a steamship.

At its zenith the PC stretched slightly more than 76 miles from Harford's Wharf to the small Santa Barbara County community of Los Olivos. San Luis Obispo was the line's eco-

nomie hub. Besides San Luis Obispo, the Port and Los Olivos, the railway served Arroyo Grande, Nipomo, Santa Maria, Los Alamos and way stations. At Santa Maria the PC had an electrified branch (opened in 1909) between that city and Guadalupe, which hauled mostly sugar beets. Passengers initially were hauled in box cars fitted with wooden benches. This branch is cited as California's smallest electric passenger operation, boasting on its roster but a single steel center entrance electric passenger car purchased in 1912, ironically numbered 3.

With the 1894 arrival of the Southern Pacific, PC revenues in all categories of traffic declined. Expansion plans were dropped. Wisely the PC did, however, construct a spur from its mainline to the new Southern Pacific depot located on Railroad Avenue between Santa Rosa and Osos Streets. This allowed for a direct transfer of passengers between the two railroads.

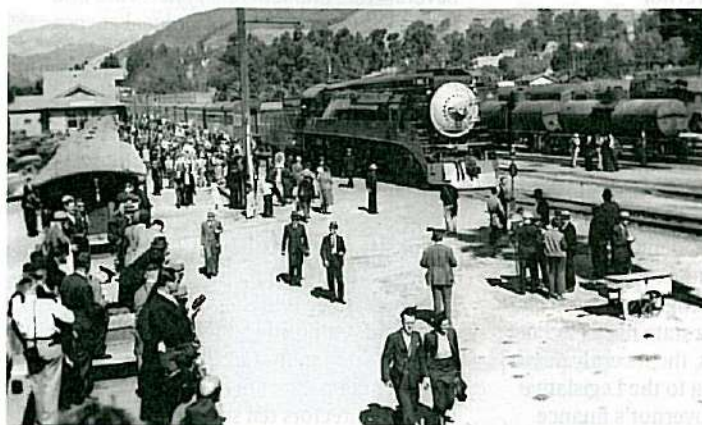
Southern Pacific did not complete its coast line until 1901. Through San Francisco Bay Area passengers and freight were routed to southern California points by the SP's San Joaquin Valley line. Bay Area Santa Barbara passengers, during this time, would ride the Southern Pacific to San Luis Obispo, the Pacific Coast Railway to Los Olivos and a stage coach for the last link.

When the Southern Pacific arrived in San Luis Obispo, it was in an era that many regard as railway's zenith of political power. Because of the predatory tactics of the Southern Pacific, the term "Octopus" became a euphemism for the company. The "Octopus" char-



PC locomotive sits building up steam in 1937 awaiting continuation of the line's first rail enthusiasts' journey. A year later, would be hit broadside by a gasoline tanker, wrecked and scrapped, but for now proudly displays the corporate title "Pacific Coast" on its tender.

Photograph Art Stumpt, Walter Rice Collection



The wisdom of the management of the PC to build a stub track in 1894 to the depot of the newly arrived in San Luis Obispo Southern Pacific railroad is attested to in this 1938 scene. Railway Boosters are everywhere. Some are on the PC excursion train. Others are watching the engine of train No. 98 the Los Angeles bound "Coast Daylight" uncouple from its consist. During the age of steam most coast route trains had their steam engine replaced in San Luis Obispo. Steam power was great for local employment.

Art Stumpt Photograph, Walter Rice Collection

acterization first appeared in print in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article, February 19, 1895. Later (1901) Frank Norris would adopt the term "Octopus" for the title of his classic muckraking book about the Southern Pacific. Prior to intrastate railroad regulation the existence of the PC with its Harford's Wharf outlet to the rest of the Pacific Coast forced Southern Pacific to offer lower freight rates from San Luis Obispo than from northern points, where a competitive carrier was nonexistent.

Despite competition from the Southern Pacific and in the Santa Maria Valley from the Santa Maria Valley Railroad, the PC continued, albeit as a marginal operation. Revenues were buoyed by the discovery of oil, gravel pits and in those years of exceptional agricultural harvests. However, by 1913 only a single daily mixed train (passenger and freight) ran between the Port and San Luis Obispo.

Nevertheless, the Pacific Coast Railway had a significant economic impact on San Luis Obispo. Steam powered locomotives were labor intensive. The railway's yards were on Higuera Street south of South Street, in an area that today is partially occupied by the Pacific Coast

Center. Here the railway had complete maintenance and repair facilities, a roundhouse, storage yard and its San Luis Obispo depot.

During the 1930s several economic factors worked against the PC's survival. Added to railway competition was that of the truck and car. Paved highways now existed in ever increasing mileage. The Great Depression also took its toll. As revenues declined passenger service all but disappeared, freight schedules became infrequent and trackage was reduced. Further, the physical plant and rolling stock not only was rapidly becoming obsolete but was worn out after years of deferred maintenance.

There was only one logical economic course - total abandonment. On December 20, 1941 the Pacific Coast Railway received government authorization to abandon its remaining trackage south of San Luis Obispo. The railway's last whistle sounded when on February 28, 1942 the ten miles of line between San Luis Obispo and the Port was sold to the Port San Luis Transportation Company. That company ceased operations on October 29, 1942, and with it San Luis Obispo for the first time since 1894 became a one railroad town.

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