

# People

History

## Closing The Southern Pacific Coastal Gap

By Loren Nicholson

When the first Southern Pacific Railroad train arrived in San Luis Obispo from the San Francisco Bay area May 5, 1894, it was cause for a three-day celebration.

No one knew another seven years would pass before the town would have a rail connection to Los Angeles. Rail construction stopped with a gap of 50 miles or more between two places called Ellwood and Surf. Neither place developed. Surf still exists as a small freight depot alongside the track at the back gate of present-day Vandenberg Air Force Base.

With the beginning of the new century, the railroad enjoyed a new influx of stockholder capital, and just before he died, railroad President J. P. Huntington ordered the coast line gap completed. Businessmen and farmers hoped for the day when local products could be shipped to the Southland, but they had struggled and hoped so long that whatever happened would be anti-climactic.

Still, they tried. The Board of Trade held a special meeting Aug. 2, 1900 to consider purchasing advertising in Sunset Magazine. Even then, they sought ways to encourage population growth and tourists. At the time, Southern Pacific Railroad owned Sunset Magazine. The company had founded it some years earlier to build passenger service along all of its lines.

Judge McDowell Venable, president of the board, hosted two men from the Magazine. In addition to buying advertising space, Judge Venable hoped to persuade these representatives to consider a feature article about the City and the local area.

During their first day in town, Venable hitched up his buggy and drove the magazine representatives to Sycamore Springs and Avila. During another day, he took them to Pismo Beach, Oceano, Arroyo Grande and Routzahn's colorful sweet pea seed farm.

Back in San Luis Obispo, both men were called upon to talk at a meeting of the Board. "You have been hiding your light under a bushel basket," one Sunset representative told them. "We try to



*Southern Pacific Coastal Trains began daily runs between the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles April 1, 1901. Completion of track between Surf and Ellwood closed a gap that had existed for years. This early steam-powered beauty puffed her way along the Central Coast until 1953.*

keep informed concerning the resorts and attractions of every part of California, but (we have been) kept ignorant of San Luis and this vicinity."

The Board bought advertising space, and Sunset did write a story about this part of California. It announced that the gap in the coastal railroad line would soon be opened to through passenger traffic. Referring to the peaks between San Luis Obispo and Morro Bay, the article read, "A strange series of isolated peaks rise...extending down to the ocean and Morro Rock." The article described fields of wheat, seed farms, miles of ocean beach and hot springs. It made special reference to the city's grand Ramona Hotel.

In November, 1900, railroad contractors on the job announced that they were working out of Gaviota toward a stretch of farmland they called Arroyo Hondo. They had started work on some of the needed viaducts. They expected to completed ballasting of track by the end of the month unless heavy rains impeded progress.

Aside from talking to people who arrived in town from the south and reading news releases by mail from Southern Pacific, it was difficult to know what was happening in that isolated land where track building was in progress.

San Luis Obispo had a "Pavilion" at the time. This was a place used for every form of entertainment... agricultural exhibits, traveling vaudeville shows, plays, and various local events. Dan Wolf, the manager of the Pavilion at the

wanting to buy property.

At nearly every gathering of businessmen, there was discussion about whether they should plan a city event celebrating the arrival of the first through trains between the bay area and Los Angeles. Santa Barbara made it known that they had no plans. There was speculation about whether Salinas would throw a statewide event to attract attention. It could be an opportunity for major publicity.

People also wondered whether the railroad itself might have a "last spike" ceremony with company and political officials on hand to witness it. During those years of limited communication, there was plenty of speculation about everything that could not be personally witnessed. The first year of the new century ended without completion of tracks along the gap. As for the last spike, it was driven unceremoniously by an unknown laborer. The only city to make an event out of the arrival of the first through train was Paso Robles.

Well, not quite. The new century had brought a new young people's club to San Luis Obispo called the Twentieth Century Club. While the members of the Board of Trade looked on, one of the young ladies of the new club convinced a group of her friends to go aboard the first train arriving from both San Francisco and Los Angeles and give every lady passenger a bouquet.

When railroad buffs think of that glorious day, Sunday, April 1, 1901, we should remember Kate Cox. She was the heroine of the day.

time, anticipated the closing of the gap would bring all kinds of new entertainment. Wolf told people he was receiving requests from various road companies wanting to book the Pavilion after the track from the southland was opened. Real Estate brokers also started gearing up, taking all listings available, with the expectation that the town would soon have out-of-towners