Coast Mail

News from the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum

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Open Saturdays from 10:00 to 4:00. Other times for groups by arrangement. 1940 Santa Barbara Avenue.

A very tall signal

Above, the newly installed train-order signal, seen from the north (L) and from the south (R). More on pages 4 and 8.

Brad LaRose photo

A big little boiler

A steam locomotive boiler from the Swanton Pacific Railroad was craned into place in March (above). That SP was a 1/3-size railway on Santa Cruz-area ranch land managed by Cal Poly. It suffered a devastating fire a few years ago (*Coast Mail* Spring and Winter 2020 editions). Much of the surviving rolling stock went to a nonprofit group located at the Santa Margarita Ranch. Below, the freshly painted boiler. See page 4 for more.

On its first morning in Sam Luis Obispo our former Southern Pacific maintenance-of-way Chevy pickup truck shows off its variation of safety-orange paint.

One-of-a-kind truck

By Brad LaRose

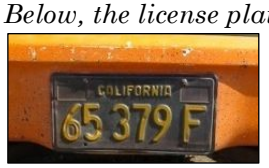
In February the efforts of many friends and former employees of the Southern Pacific culminated in probably the railroad's only remaining early 1970s Chevrolet 3/4-ton "Longhorn" (extended bed) pickup truck being placed on display at the Museum.

The railroad once owned hundreds of similar trucks for maintenance of track, signals, and buildings. The truck is in good mechanical condition and can be driven. The truck has its original, black California license plates and original car dealer's metal license-plate frame. The original Chevy owner's manual was in the glove box!

Southern Pacific deemed the truck surplus in 1973, just three years after the railroad purchased it. It was then bought directly from the railroad by Dan Wolf, a Southern Pacific locomotive engineer, who drove it for many years. Mr. Wolf passed away over five years ago at age 91. The truck was entrusted to his good friend Steve Rusconi, who cared for its until it was donated to the Laws Railroad Museum. Eventually, the Laws museum deaccessioned the truck and Mr. Rusconi facilitated its donation to our Museum.

Future uses of the truck may include participation in parades and car shows, sharing another aspect of Central Coast railroad heritage with a wider audience.

Below, the license plate and the owner manual.



Our Mission

Promote California Central Coast railroad heritage through community participation, education, and historic preservation.

Contact

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Alan Estes — Greg Jackson
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The museum is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational organization, staffed entirely by volunteers.

Documents Available

Anyone may access the Museum's *Bylaws*, *Collections Policy*, *Development & Operations Plan*, *Code of Conduct*, and other documents at slorrm.com. Or request a paper copy via the contact information above.

More *Coast Mail* online:

Spring visitors; disregarding rules for a special train; train order signal excitement.

The Museum Store offers several items on-site and online: T-shirts, hats, belt buckles, mugs, enameled pins, and embroidered patches. On the website click on About, then Gift Shop. We also have an **eBay** site for more items.

Coast Mail is published quarterly by the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum.
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Timetable

Board of Directors meetings are scheduled for June 10, July 8, and August 12, 2025, at 6:00 p.m. They are held at the Museum.

You can participation online. Contact info@slorrm.com for help with on-line participation.

Become a member

Membership provides opportuneities for anyone interested in today's railroads, railroad history, train travel, artifact restoration, or model railroading. Membership benefits include free Museum admission and a 10% Museum Store discount.

Annual dues: Individual $40; Family $65; Sustaining $100. Life member single payment: under 62 $1,000, 62 and over $600. Junior memberships (ages 12-18) for model railroaders are available; contact our Model Railroad Superintendent for details.

You can join at the Museum, by mail, or online. Download application forms from the Museum's website and mail payment. Or you can join online by clicking Membership and using PayPal.

Annual photo contest

Send us your best photos featuring Central Coast railroading, including miniature and model railroads. Details on our website. Deadline is September 15.

Narrow-gauge book bonanza

If you're interested in narrow-gauge railroads, whether in New England, Pennsylvania, Colorado, California, or the Pacific Northwest, see our latest offerings on **eBay** (a few at right).

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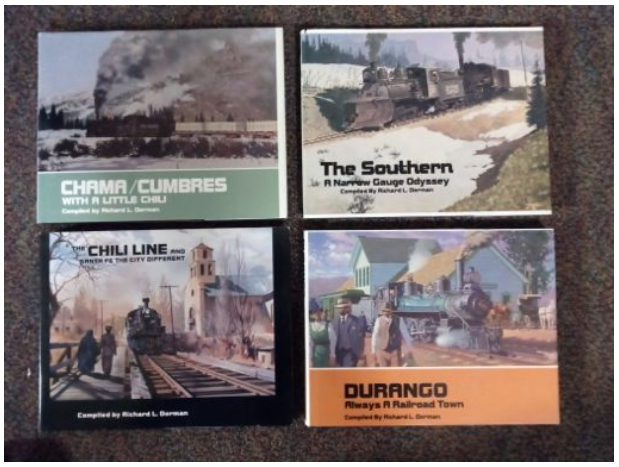
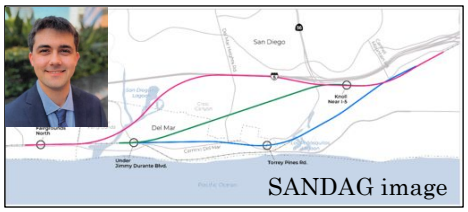


Museum supporters

The Museum would not exist or improve without the support of many. All forms of support, from membership dues to grants and donations of services, expertise, materials, and funds are greatly appreciated.

In this edition we recognize Joe Stephenson for his donation of a Southern Pacific rail saw (page 4). Mr. Stephenson was a track maintenance supervisor, directing the work of track gangs spanning Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara counties.

And we thank **Louie's Crane Service**, especially operator Dennis, for timely and professional moves of the locomotive boiler and train order signal (pages 1 and 8).



Above, alternate routes, largely in tunnels, for the "Surf Line" near Del Mar, laid out by Cal Poly civil engineering grad and Museum member Stephen Hager (inset photo, from RT&S).

Museum member honored

The April issue of *Railway Track & Structures* magazine recognized Museum member and Cal Poly graduate Stephen Hager as one of 12 outstanding young engineers nationwide. Stephen works for the engineering consulting firm RailPros. A major recent task was laying out alternative tunnel routes that could bypass coastal bluff instability near Del Mar, on the heavily traveled line between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Focus on artifacts

One BIG rivet

Above left, a rivet one inch in diameter and at least 10 inches long, missing one end, likely from the Stenner Canyon trestle. Above right, rivets through a gusset on the trestle, about two inches long. Where would a longer one have been used?

Because the large rivet shown above was found below the Stenner Canyon trestle north of San Luis Obispo it's almost certainly from that bridge. It was recently donated to the Museum by Kevin Kirschner. Unlikely to be a pin for another purpose, the reason for its length is a mystery. Can a reader provide the answer?

Built in the mid-1890s, the bridge was essential to connect the Central Coast to the San Francisco Bay Area and the rest of the world in 1894. It was reinforced to carry substantially heavier locomotives in the 1920s. It's possible to replace tower and span components without having the bridge collapse under its own weight, so long as you remove a selected one or a few at a time, sometimes with temporary support.

The construction and upgrade were done in an era when every bit of scrap metal was recovered and re-used or recycled. This piece somehow escaped, probably by diving into soft soil and being covered by sediment.

These days, bridge and building structural members are usually bolted rather than riveted, with welding becoming more common.

Suppressing a fire ... maybe

Your editor recalls visiting the Stenner trestle sometime in the last 50 years. Memory says there were fire sprinklers on it, with pipes leading to the ends.

It was probably not a "wet pipe" system that would discharge automatically. More likely, the water cars stationed at San Luis Obispo and on a spur track just beyond the Cuesta Grade summit would have been positioned at the pipes. Those tank cars with pumps would have fed the system (Winter 2015 *Coast Mail*). While the trestle has always been a steel structure, the wood ties could burn, and steel can loose its strength if it gets hot enough from burning ties or vegetation.

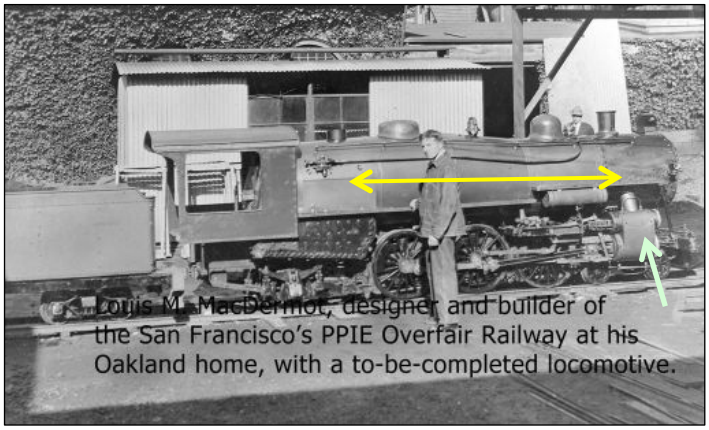
A professional contacted for background said the Honda trestle may have had sprinklers. No one contacted for information recalled a fire suppression system actually being used on the Coast Route trestles. Let us know if you have different information.

Responding to fire

This fire extinguisher bag with a Southern Pacific Transportation Company logo held water and used a hand-pumped hose with nozzle. It was found in the truck featured on page 1.

Glowing embers from built-up soot (even from the exhaust vent of a diesel locomotive); a fragment of a red-hot brake shoe; tumbleweeds blowing across a welding site. Combined with creosoted ties, nearby brush, and remote locations, such incidents could lead to serious problems. Fire suppression tools included barrels of water or sand with nearby buckets, pressurized fire extinguishers, shovels, and the bag shown above, which was worn backpack-style. The bags typically used whatever water was at hand, but they could also use fire-retardant solutions. Prevention was always the first line of defense. But once a fire started railroads had a range of tools to fight it, including tank cars equipped with pumps. The Winter 2015 *Coast Mail* featured water cars and a fire bucket at San Luis Obispo.

Below, a Union Pacific RR crew on a water car protects the track from a 2018 forest fire in Northern California.



More on our big little boiler

The Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1913-14 featured venues in San Diego and San Francisco. The latter occupied a large park, and to carry visitors throughout it the Overfair Railway was built. To pull the open-air cars, four steam locomotives based on Southern Pacific plans for Pacific (4-6-2) type locomotive were constructed. The image above shows No. 1913, the source of the boiler now on display at the Museum (page 1).

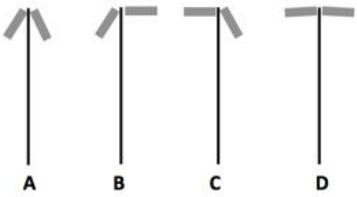
The locomotive shown is reversed left-to-right from the page 1 photos of the boiler. The control cab, which must have been cramped, and the firebox are at left. The boiler occupied the area spanned by the yellow arrow. Beyond the arrow to the right the smoke box allowed exhaust from the cylinders (light green arrow) to boost the draft that drew hot combustion gasses through many tubes in the water-filled boiler.

Cal Poly donated this boiler to the Museum in 2023. Louis Crane Service and the Museum's Brad LaRose, Mike Burrell, Greg Jackson, and Ted Van Klaveren worked to prepare and install it.

Reciprocating rail saw

This reciprocating rail saw (above) was powered by gas, with a hacksaw-like blade cooled with water dripping from a reservoir above. It clamped to the rail to provide steady, right-angle operation. Current rail saws use rotating disks. Cutting torches are used only for rail that is being scrapped.

Be sure to see TSG Multimedia's new YouTube video of the Museum's model railroad.



More on the tall order board

Southern Pacific's steam-era automatic block signals, first semaphores then "target" style color lights, were tall. But the record holders for height were the train order signals, often referred to as order boards because they were simply that, flat panels with no integral lights. (Some had lamps on or near them to make the arms more visible, as does the Museum's.) With time-table and train-order traffic control, written train orders were essential for safe movement. They shared decades with hand-thrown and spring switches (page 5). Their message was simple: if the arm was horizontal, a train must obtain a written order or clearance by the station operator before proceeding.

In the illustration above, the indication in A meant no orders were needed for trains moving in either direction. In B a train moving toward the signal as seen by the observer needed an order. In C a train moving toward the observer needed an order, and in D trains moving in both directions needed orders. The default position was both arms horizontal, unless no operator was on duty, when both arms were down.

Above left, a diesel-era "cut down" searchlight-style signal at Oceano; right, a searchlight signal on a semaphore-era mast; bottom left, a steam-era semaphore; right, the train-order signal at Guadalupe. All images are about the same scale. Images are cropped from photos by, left to right and top to bottom: Tim Zukas, Richard Steinheimer, Fred Wheeler, and David Martinez.

The Museum's Spring Visitors

Standing next to a historically accurate, 1/87-size version of Betteravia, Model Railroad Superintendent Andrew Merriam outlines the challenges of running a long train of sugar-beet gondolas to a guest National Model Railroad Association member.

NMRA PCR operating session

In late March National Model Railroad Association Pacific Coast Region members met in San Luis Obispo. Part of the multi-day event was an operating session at the Museum, hosted by the Central Coast Model Railroaders. CCMR member Steve Bohannon (wearing black hat, below) had scripted the action so engineers and conductors could re-enact typical Southern Pacific train movements.

San Luis Obispo was a very busy railroad location in the 1950s, and in the spring of 2025 (above and below).

Scouting America

In March boy and girl members of Scouting America learned about railroads in general and explored Museum exhibits. An Operation Lifesaver safety presentation is a key part of the program. Below, scouts received OLS-themed caps, visited the depot platform, assembled freight car models, and enjoyed snacks.

Three photos by Gary See

Mystery on *La Cuesta*

Sabrina Carelli, Marya Bolyanatz, local DJ Rachel Joyous, and others found themselves aboard the Museum's 1926 Pullman for a lively multi-player game of "Murder On the Orient Express," as scripted by Masters of Mystery (above). Docent Bob Wilson arranged and played a role in the March 15 event. What better setting than a lounge car that can easily be imagined rolling through a dark and stormy night? Contact the Museum if you would like to have your own onboard adventure.

More Spring Visitors

Union Pacific special train

Two photos by Christian Schultz

At left and above, in late April Union Pacific officials and guests aboard a special train toured the Coast Route from Los Angeles to San Luis Obispo and back. Arrival and departure at San Luis Obispo were late evening and early morning.

BNSF substitute

Southwest Railcam image

When the investor-owned railroads operated their own passenger trains, usually there were enough general-purpose locomotives on hand to replace a passenger engine that had a problem en route. With Amtrak that's not so. April 23's southbound Coast Starlight *locomotive encountered a problem between Seattle and Port-land, so Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) was called upon to help. The orange-and-green locomotive stayed with the train to Los Angeles. Such problems are not limited to mechanical issues; a grade-crossing collision that damages lights also can prevent use.*

Have you seen something out of the ordinary, railroad-wise, on the Central Coast?

Share it with our readership via *Coast Mail*.

Union Pacific work train

Above, in early May a Union Pacific work train that had been replacing ties in the southern Salinas Valley paused at San Luis Obispo.

Below, the two pieces of material-handling equipment atop the train car can move along the other cars, unloading new ties or loading old ties for removal and disposal. (Some electrical power plants can use old ties as fuel.) Short, hinged beams at the ends of the cars, parallel with the sides, span the gaps between cars.

An exception to the rules, for a good reason

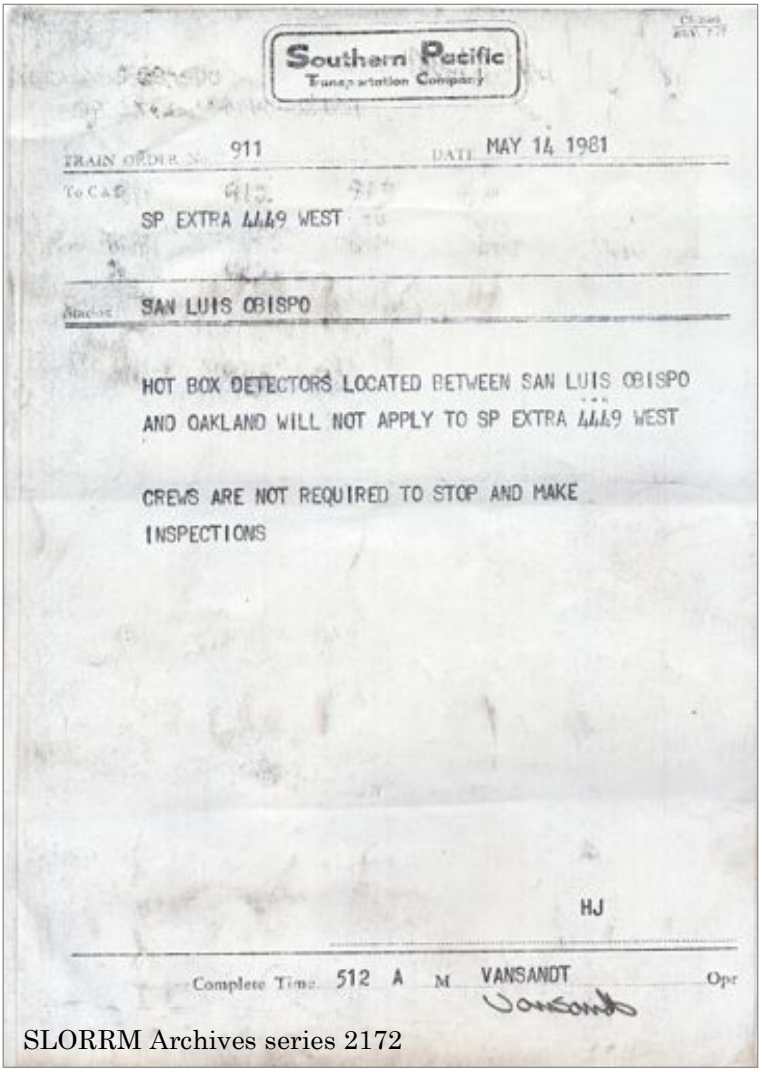
The train order at right, dated May 14, 1981, allows an unscheduled Southern Pacific train to ignore trackside detectors that warn of overheated axle ends, all the way between San Luis Obispo and Oakland. What's up?

The train was Extra 4449 West, headed by the famous former Southern Pacific *Daylight* steam locomotive. The steam-operated cylinders would have been about 500 degrees F, while the trackside detectors were probably set to sound an alarm at about 250 degrees. Under normal operating rules, stopping to check for overheated bearings about every 15 miles would have caused substantial delays.

The bottom photo shows the train the day it arrived at San Luis Obispo, May 13, 1981. The locomotive had recently been repainted from its 1976 red, white, and blue America Freedom Train colors. It had diesel backup and only a few cars, with no general public riders.

As steam locomotives built 80 or more years ago have been rebuilt for excursion service, several have been equipped with on-board bearing monitors, as well as the latest Positive Train Control technology.

At right, the Museum's hot box locator cabinet. The first detectors only flashed a light for the crew in the caboose to see. Later ones broadcast a recording saying "no defects" plus a count of total axles and train speed, or "stop your train!" and the count to the overheated axle.



Southern Pacific
Transportation Company

TRAIN ORDER 911 DATE MAY 14 1981

To C&E

SP EXTRA 4449 WEST

At SAN LUIS OBISPO

HOT BOX DETECTORS LOCATED BETWEEN SAN LUIS OBISPO AND OAKLAND WILL NOT APPLY TO SP EXTRA 4449 WEST

CREWS ARE NOT REQUIRED TO STOP AND MAKE INSPECTIONS

HJ

Complete Time 512 A M VANSANDT Opr

SLORRM Archives series 2172

Uncredited photo from the internet

Our most exciting signal installation so far

Louie's Crane Service expertly lifted the assembled signal, which had been moved in two sections (above).

What our visitors find exciting depends on their interests and experiences. For our volunteer workers, excitement sometimes is more a matter of how high one must climb while actually doing work, not simply enjoying the view. In mid-March restoration lead Brad LaRose climbed the train order signal's 30-foot mast to remove the sling used to lift and position it.

This signal was donated to the Museum in 2022 by Garry Abbott, trustee of the James R. Francis & Lea Toeller Estate. Its original location is not known. Because all trains routinely stopped at San Luis Obispo during the train-order era, San Luis Obispo never had such a signal.

Below, the crane's sling is still connected to the top of the mast. Bottom right, Brad has released the strap and is returning to Earth, clipping and unclipping his harness to the ladder every few very narrow *rungs.*

Above, the signal was carefully set on its base and bolted in position. Workers this day included Ken Bennett, Mike Burrell, Brad LaRose, Gary See, and Ted VanKlaveren, all of whom also helped with restoring the signal and preparing its foundation.