Coast Mail

News from the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum

Issue Number 93 – Fall 2025 San Luis Obispo, California www.slorrm.com

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

New corporate status and new power for SMVRR

This GP-38-2 diesel-electric locomotive came to Guadalupe as part of Union Pacific's regular service to that interchange point. This photo caught it in a BNSF train crossing the desert.

The Santa Maria Valley Railroad received a locomotive that's new to it in June. Its color scheme reflects SMVRR becoming part of the OmniTRAX family of short lines several months before. OmniTRAX operates 33 short-line railroads throughout the United States, including the Stockton Terminal & Eastern in California.

Former SMVRR steamer pulled freight in Oregon

This spring the Albany & Eastern Railroad in Oregon's Willamette Valley used former Santa Maria Valley Railroad No. 205 to move freight cars. The beautifully restored, 101-year-old Baldwin 2-6-2 normally rests during the week and hauls passenger cars for excursions on weekends. These views, from a YouTube video by Pacific Rail Productions, are in Lebanon, Oregon. The loco looks particularly small compared with the "excess height' boxcar immediately behind it.

Central Coast Railroad Festival

Join us October 4 for a celebration of railroading in our region: special presentations, food, music, and exhibits installed since last year. The Museum's website will be updated with its latest scheduled activities. Other organizations will have events at other venues, October 3 - 5, with the full listing on the CCRRF web page.

RIP office work continues

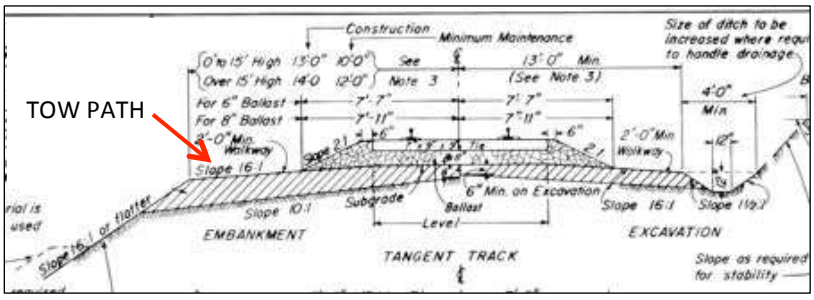
*Ted Van Klaveren is working **on** the repair-in-place office, not in it. He and fellow volunteer Mike Burrell have been busy inside it, too, but not on paperwork. The indoor view shows a mannequin.*

Correction (and an announcement)

The Fall 2017 *Coast Mail*, on page 6, incorrectly referred to a tow path as a "toe path." The article discussed train orders, using a local Southern Pacific example telling train crews that lengths of rail had been placed on the right-of-way where crewmembers might need to walk along their trains, possibly in darkness.

But don't be too hard on your editor. The order itself used "toe path," as in likely to stub your toe. The correct term for the level, hopefully ballast-free strip next to the track is tow path (often as one word, towpath). It's from the era when horses and people on paths used ropes to tow boats along rivers and canals. A standard right-of-way cross section is shown below (from *Southern Pacific Common Standard Plans*, 1984).

Why reveal a small mistake from way back in 2017? To add some drama to an announcement: we now have an index for all *Coast Mail* editions. To compile the index your indomitable editor looked through every edition, there being no practical way to automate the process. The index was created because our website search functions have been hit or miss.



Our Mission

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

Contact

Telephone (message) 805 548-1894
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website: www.slorrm.com
Mail: 1940 Santa Barbara Avenue
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401

The museum is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, 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.

Museum Store

To raise funds, the Museum offers several items for sale on-site and online: T-shirts, hats, belt buckles, mugs, enameled pins, embroidered patches, and engineer hats. On the website click on About, then Gift Shop. We also have an eBay site for a wider range of items.

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

Timetable

Board of Directors meetings are scheduled for September 9, October 14, and November 11, at 6:00 p.m. They are held at the Museum.

You can participation remotely. Contact info@slorrm.com for help with remote participation.

Special Presentation
Building the Railroad Over Cuesta Grade
Saturday, September 13, 11:00
Included with admission

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 under **About**.

More *Coast Mail* Online

Mongolian imitator, spring switches

Museum supporters

The Museum would not exist and improve without the support of many. In this edition we recognize:

Don and Jill Arlow, and the **Donald M. Hanesworth Trust**, for financial contributions;

Michael Cook for helping keep the parking and landscape areas near the Freighthouse tidy, and for being an informal docent outside our regular public hours.

No more "Union Pacific?"

On July 28 Union Pacific stated its intent to acquire Norfolk Southern. The new name Union Pacific Transcontinental Railroad would reflect an American first. Regulatory approval is needed. Major US railroads BNSF and CSX are expected to request concessions to preserve competition. More to come in the Winter *Coast Mail*.

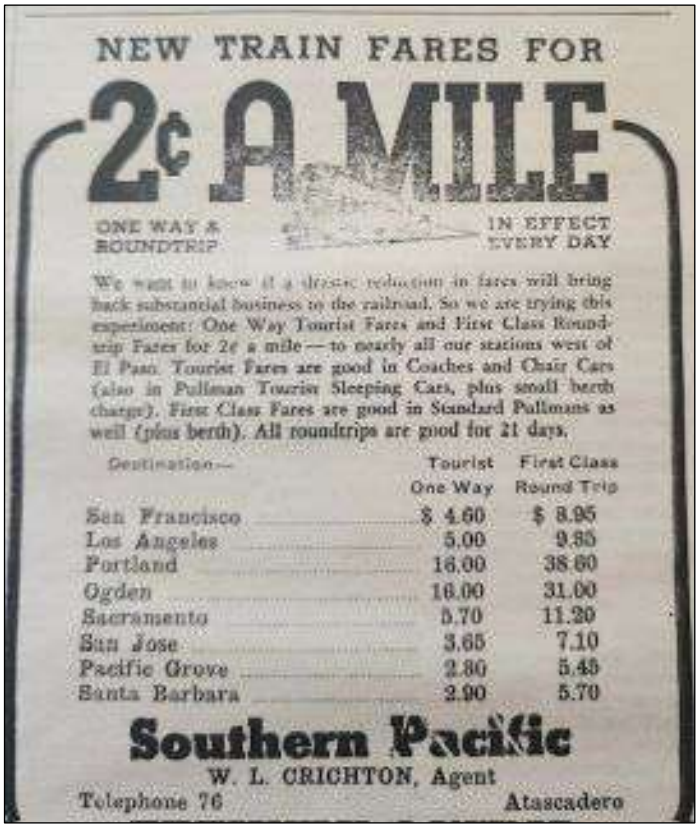
Corrections and additions

The Summer *Coast Mail* incorrectly reported that the Southern Pacific long-bed pick-up truck was bought by the railroad. Instead, it was leased through an intermediary. It was assigned to the S.P. Water Service Department, and used by John Martin in San Jose, California. It's the only S.P. pick-up of any model known by us to exist.

This view from a YouTube video by Pacific Rail Productions shows newly offloaded rail being cut with a torch.

Also, the Summer edition article on our reciprocating rail saw incorrectly said that torches are used to cut rail only for salvage. That's generally true, because a torch doesn't leave a smooth surface and its heat can compromise the steel's quality. But as we see above, new rail being laid from a rail train on Union Pacific's Canyon Subdivision is being cut with a torch. Before being bolted to another section of rail, the end will probably be recut with a saw. If the joint will be electrically welded, it certainly will be precisely saw cut.

Low fares from Atascadero



NEW TRAIN FARES FOR

2¢ A MILE

ONE WAY & ROUNDTRIP — IN EFFECT EVERY DAY

We want to know if a drastic reduction in fares will bring back substantial business to the railroad. So we are trying this experiment: One Way Tourist Fares and First Class Roundtrip Fares for 2¢ a mile — to nearly all our stations west of El Paso. Tourist Fares are good in Coaches and Chair Cars (also in Pullman Tourist Sleeping Cars, plus small berth charge). First Class Fares are good in Standard Pullmans as well (plus berth). All roundtrips are good for 21 days.

Destination—	Tourist One Way	First Class Round Trip
San Francisco	$ 4.60	$ 8.95
Los Angeles	5.00	9.85
Portland	16.00	38.60
Ogden	16.00	31.00
Sacramento	5.70	11.20
San Jose	3.65	7.10
Pacific Grove	2.80	5.45
Santa Barbara	2.90	5.70

Southern Pacific

W. L. CRICHTON, Agent

Telephone 76 Atascadero

You can't board a passenger train at Atascadero these days, but for many years it was not only possible but encouraged. The newspaper ad above is from 1933. At the US general rate of inflation since 1933, those two cents would be about 49 cents in 2025. San Luis Obispo to Los Angeles by coach seat on Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner *is about $54 (midweek in May), so a real bargain.*

A prototypical operation

The closer a model railroad feature is to its corresponding full-size feature, the more prototypical it is. The spring switch shown above operates prototypically, allowing "trailing point" moves to pass through without being set to the expected position. The Central Coast Model Railroaders installed the spring switch here (above) and at another spot to allow many miles of track to be condensed into the space available within the Freighthouse, while facilitating the continuous running of trains during public hours.

More on spring switches on page 6 (online).

Any track, any direction, any time

Brad LaRose photo

In May workers associated with underground fiber-optic facilities were active near the Museum's standard-gauge display track. It's reassuring to know they followed what must be standard safety protocol: place a removable derail with a red sign and a beacon between any rolling stock and the work location (above). Don't let the rusty rails give you a false sense of security.

Of course the cars on the display track move very rarely, and when they do our volunteers keep close watch all around, flagging when advisable.

And yes, the yellow ramp with a flange angled to divert any errant cars away from the active track is called a derail, not a derailer. Permanently attached but operable derails are common on spurs and sidings where private operations occur or where a slope down toward the main track could accelerate a runaway. The team track south of the Museum has one (below). They may also be used at movable bridges and where rail vehicles with different federal safety standards operate with time-of-day separation. For bridges, the bridge tender can control the operable derail electrically. For connections between light rail and standard rail systems, a dispatcher's remote approval is typically required to set the derail for clear passage.

Regardless of situation, the conclusion is that a slow, controlled derailment is better then a collision.

Above, Union Pacific's wayside detectors in the southwestern U.S. Wheel temperature detectors (green squares) are newer and more common than hot box (axle end) detectors (gray dots). As U.P. upgrades traffic control systems, it's also replacing hot box detectors. Acoustic bearing detectors (red triangles) can usually reveal bearing problems before they overheat.

WILD stands for wheel load impact detectors (black triangles); they respond to flat spots on wheels, which can damage rails and further damage wheels. Wheel profile detectors (yellow spots) use lasers to monitor wheel treads and flanges. There's one in northern California and one in southeastern Arizona. Heavily worn wheel profiles tend to "pick" switches, allowing one set of wheels to follow the through route and one the diverging route –never a good idea.

Several locations have more than one type of detection. Car and locomotive wheels, and many other components, are inspected at many other locations, such as yards and shops, in addition to the devices listed above that monitor trains as they roll by. Increasingly, devices onboard cars and locomotives monitor components and report via "the internet of things" to engineers and technicians.

Simplify, simplify, simplify

So said Henry David Thoreau, in advising people how to improve their overly complicated lives in the mid-1800s.

The Summer *Coast Mail* covered a suspension of the rule to stop and inspect trains when trackside detectors sound an alarm. Such a detector operates north of Cal Poly, at Union Pacific mile 244.8. For trains passing *without* a defect such as an over-heated axle bearing, its automated voice used to say by radio transmission it's location, "no defects," the train's number of axles, the train speed, and ending with "detector out." For defect-free trains, the Southwest Railcam audio feed, based at the Museum, now reveals only "UP detector mile two-four-four-point eight."

Why the simplification?

1. In-cab displays, event recorders, and Positive Train Control technology monitor and report much of the information covered by the previous detector routines.

2. With the Union Pacific dispatcher in Omaha, Nebraska, authorizing the local, midafternoon moves of north- and southbound *Coast Starlights* as well as the *Pacific Surfliner*, radio traffic could become congested. As your editor overhead years ago, "You got walked on by the talking detector." To translate: a conversation between a locomotive engineer and the dispatcher was preempted or distorted by the detector's automated voice.

Something's missing

In late May, to accommodate work on underground fiber optic cables, we removed ties and a rail from the Museum's standard-gauge display track (above). We stored them until they can be reinstalled. Museum president Brad LaRose worked with the telecom contractors to arrange for ballast that will more than replace what was disturbed.

Utility work under a rail line is not unusual. Southern Pacific's tracks and the 1943 depot were built over one of the city's first sewer mains connecting the Terrace Hill area with lower ground to the west. Several years ago the city decided to replace the pipe in a better location. Pits were dug beyond the tracks on the east and west sides, a hole was bored between the pits, and the new pipe was jacked into place.

The Museum did something similar on a smaller scale to connect its solar panels with the Freighthouse, avoiding trenching through a walkway with colored concrete and a road.

Below, the pit west of the tracks, south of the San Luis Obispo depot, that a city contractor dug several years ago to facilitate installing a new sewer main without disturbing the active tracks. Cutting main tracks is a disruptive last resort. When it must be done, all personnel, equipment, and materials are arranged for a "work window" that's as short as practical.

"Pepsi can" at San Luis Obispo

On June 14 Amtrak's General Electric locomotive No. 160, in the paint scheme known among fans as the Pepsi can helped bring the southbound Coast Starlight *into town (second engine above). Your editor avoids both Coke and Pepsi, but thinks this is among the most attractive schemes Amtrak has used –not a fan of the "whale profile" (third unit above) or of whatever one might call the newest Chargers. The bold, angled strokes of the Pepsi scheme seem more assertive. Rail equipment, especially passenger cars and locomotives, are decidedly horizontal and rectangular, which are not reflected by the swoopy designs that were popular for a while. No. 160 commemorates Amtrak's 50th anniversary, which was in 2021. The view above is a cropped screen shot from the Southwest Railcams' installation at the Museum. The video records for 12 hours, so if you missed something in that time frame you can go back and look for it, or replay something of interest.*

A Pepsi style also looks good thrumming across the Asian steppe (below left), from a YouTube video by Mongolia Now.

At right above is a straightforward paint scheme captured by Thomas Scalf.

Right, Jerry Britton's Online Services found a broadside of the whale scheme.

Our sympathies for a fellow heritage organization

Mount Rainier Scenic Railroad's wood trestle (left), possibly the longest owned by a US heritage railroad, burned in June. For information on rebuilding help contact:

info@mtrainierrailroad.com

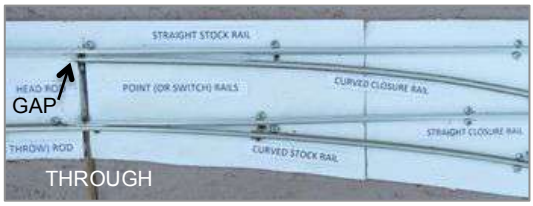
The stars truly aligned in the scene at left. Lead locomotive No. 510 is decades older than the one in the Pepsi scheme, but originally wore that same pattern (photo below, at Los Angeles in 1992)

Marty Bernard photo

Southwest Railcam at San Luis Obispo, pointed southeast, got a more clear angle of No. 160 in the lead for the northbound Starlight *on June 15 (below).*

On August 5 restoration team volunteers Jim Livingston (left) and Bob Wilson (right) used two torches to heat a bent stirrup step on the Museum's flatcar. Restoration lead and photographer Brad LaRose pounded the heat-softened step into shape with a sledgehammer.

Spring switches and their cousins



Above left, the indicator for a manually operated Southern Pacific spring switch; a red circular disk is seen edge-on. Above right, top, photo of instructional model showing switch in "through" position. Above right, bottom, switch in "diverging" position. The point rails always move in unison. At a siding, through *is for passage along the main track;* diverging *is to enter or leave the siding.*

The Spring *Coast Mail* featured a photo of the Museum's recently installed "spring switch signal." To appreciate the convenience of a spring switch and why it warrants a special trackside signal, we need to consider track switches and rail traffic control in general.

The Coast Route was a largely single-track line with passing sidings about eight miles apart. A dispatcher issued written authorizations for train movements, transmitted by telegraph. A typical order would be for a timetable eastbound (geographic southbound) freight train to enter the siding at Honda and wait there until passage of the westbound (northbound) *Coast Daylight*.

The freight train would stop with its locomotive close to the west switch of the Honda siding. A head-end brakeman would climb down from the cab and align the switch for the siding. He would then climb back into the cab. The train would pull through clear of the switch, stopping with its caboose a short walk from it. The rear brakeman would get down from the caboose, return the switch to its through position, and get back in the caboose.

The *Coast Daylight* would come roaring by.

The head-end brakeman, having stood on the ground to inspect the westbound train, would put the east Honda switch in its diverging position. The freight would pull through the switch, stopping with its caboose on the main.

The rear-end brakeman would get down, line the switch for the through route, and get back on the caboose. The train would then continue toward Los Angeles.

Half of this activity would be avoided if the train leaving the siding could simply roll trough the east Honda switch without it being operated by hand.

The moving point rails of conventional switches are held firmly in one position or the other, to avoid the awful consequences of some train wheels taking one route and some the other route. A spring switch allows *low-speed* train movements to push the point rails to the position other then the one the switch is set for, with the rails moving back to the set position after passage of the wheels.

Clearly, safe and efficient movement of the spring switch point rails depends on the strength and reliability of the spring mechanism. As retired Southern Pacific and Metrolink civil engineer Michael McGinley noted in a post consulted for this article, there are two types of mechanisms. A *coil spring* moved the point rails back to the through route after passage of each wheel. A *piston* had enough delay to allow the wheels of two axles in a typical truck (wheel assembly) to pass through before moving back.

In the illustration at left, a train movement from left to right is called a facing-point move. A movement from right to left is called a trailing point move.

A train on the through route making a trailing movement through a switch unexpectedly, manually set for the diverging route could damage the point rails and the spring mechanism. A train on the through route making a facing move, expecting the spring switch to be in its default through position but manually set for diverging, could approach the switch too fast and enter the siding, perhaps occupied by another train.

Various types of illuminated signals displaying color lights or symbols were meant to prevent such mishaps. In some, green indicated the switch was set for its default position, yellow for the position corresponding to compressed springs, and red for neither, as when a piece of rock ballast stuck in the gap prevented proper operation. The letter "S" indicated the switch with a default through position was manually set for the siding.

With expanded Centralized Traffic Control (CTC), where switches are operated remotely by dispatchers, spring switches on the Coast Route are becoming extinct.

A variable (also called "flop-ever") switch's point rails can be trailed through in either position and they stay in the most recently forced position. A self-restoring switch is electrically powered and linked with signals and track circuits to automatically reset to the through route after a train has proceeded through it.

Below, looking face-on at the head of the Museum's spring switch signal.