



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.

Honda bridge replaced

Here's some heritage for the next 130 years.

Union Pacific continues to invest in the Coast Route, despite its presently hosting minimal freight service. The line was closed for an impressively short 16 days in August while contractors and UP crews removed the bridge –127-years-old, 541-feet-long, and 95-feet tall– over Honda Creek and replaced it with a new one of equal size. The old bridge, with steel tower supports and an open deck, had experienced significant corrosion in the shore-line air. The new bridge has a ballasted deck and is supported by five pairs of seven-foot-diameter concrete columns, which themselves rest on new steel subsurface pilings. At right, the columns are under construction.

Amtrak Thruway busses were able to substitute for some *Pacific Surfliner* and *Coast Starlight* services. Reduced-frequency freight interchange with the Santa Maria Valley Railroad at Guadalupe, usually via by Los Angeles, was rerouted via Oakland and San Luis Obispo.

This challenging site on Vandenberg Space Fore Base had limited road access. A crane with 600-ton lift capacity was among the equipment used.

Concrete will better withstand salt air. And the ballasted deck will make it easier to maintain a smooth transition between track supported by the ground and track on the bridge structure. The project included rerouting a fiber optic trunk line (related article on page 3).

HDR consultants designed the bridge. Althouse and Meade of Paso Robles prepared the Environmental Assessment. Ralph L. Wadsworth Construction of Utah was the main contractor. State and federal grants targeted to maintain key transportation corridors funded the majority of this multimillion-dollar project.

The Winter 2021 *Coast Mail* reported replacement of the nearby bridge at Narlon.

Wesley Chen provided background for this report.

Look at all that freight: almost like old times (below). On August 5 the Guadalupe switcher brought a string of cars past those already waiting in SLO and built a train that would head north to Oakland, rather than leaving Guadalupe for the Los Angeles area, due to bridge replacement.



Southwest Railcam image



Above, new Honda bridge concrete columns were cast in place under the old bridge superstructure and between the old steel towers, greatly reducing the duration of the service outage. Photo is from the RLW Construction web-site. Below, a detail of the old bridge in a photo by 1st Lt. Ashley Wisner (via USSF website).



Central Coast Railroad Festival



Gary See photo

We had another successful event over October 3 – 5.

Our Mission

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

Contact

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Brad LaRose	Ted Van Klaveren

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 (newsletter@slorrm.com)

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.

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Timetable

Board of Directors meetings are scheduled for December 9, 2025, and January 13 and February 10, 2026, at 6:00 p.m. They are held at the Museum. You can participate remotely. Contact info@slorrm.com for help with remote participation.



Santa on the Surfliner

Santa is scheduled to arrive on Amtrak's *Pacific Surfliner* on Saturday, December 6, at about 12:30. Walk with Santa from the station to the Museum, where you can visit him aboard *La Cuesta* at no charge.

Become a member

Membership provides opportunities 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.

Admission price increase

Become a member and enjoy free admission. Starting January 1: adults \$10; ages 4 – 12 \$5; 3 years and under free; seniors (55 and over), veterans, and first responders (with ID) \$8.

More Coast Mail Online

Old cars meet old cars; nostalgic car name; "cable" cars; pancakes!

Museum supporters

The Museum would not exist and could not improve without the support of many. All forms of support, from membership dues to grants and donations of expertise, materials, and funds are greatly appreciated. In this edition we recognize:

- Marisol LaRose for her efforts preparing for the pancake breakfast.
- Chuck Kinzer, for providing expertly crafted storage cabinets that fit neatly under display cabinets (photo below).



- Louie's Crane Service for moving the main frame of our jib crane (*Coast Mail* Spring, Summer, and Fall 2022).
- Jim Chernoff, for a generous donation of funds.



In case you missed these...

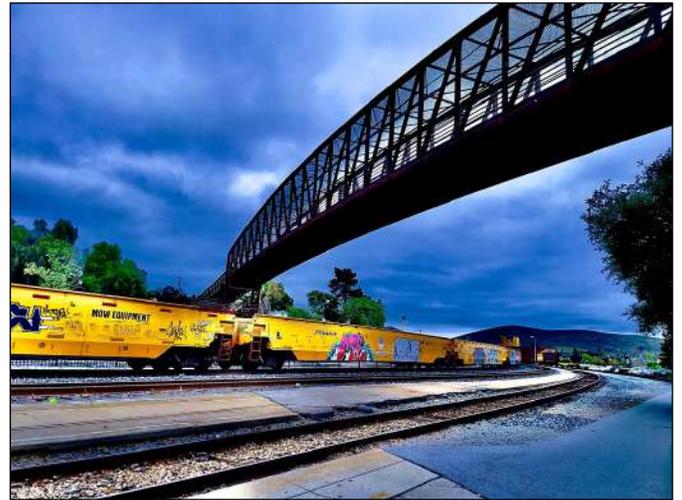
If our newsletter is new to you, you may want to check out some past issues, with material covering the following. They're available on our website, **About, Newsletter, Archives.**

- Longest squeegee handle – Fall 2021
- LA to SF in 90 seconds – Winter 2021
- Refer madness – Winter 2020
- Sack of coke – Summer 2018
- Train with antlers – Summer 2019
- Deranged petticoat pipes – Winter 2018
- Gurled hair – Fall 2017
- Promiscuous caterpillar – Fall 2016
- Dangerous Edgar – Summer 2015
- Santa Margarita depot blown up – Spring 2016
- House of ill repute – Winter 2015
- Sheep & goats – Winter 2015

Festival photo contest winners

Thank you to all who provided photos for this year's festival, and to our judges who evaluated the entries without knowing who the photographers were.

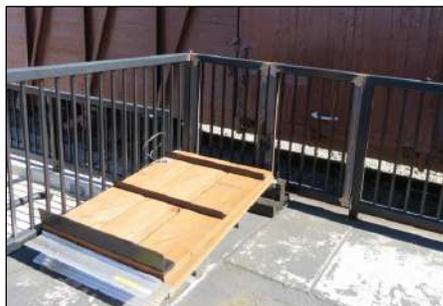
More honorable-mention images (including of a model railroad) can be seen on the Museum's website.



Left (1st place), Christian Schultz caught the northbound Starlight approaching the tunnel beyond Chorro siding on Cuesta Grade. Above (2nd place), Kathleen Bosch found intermodal cars under the Jennifer Street Bridge in SLO. Lower left (honorable mention) Alexander Jackoway met the morning Surfliner in Price Canyon. Below (3rd place), Christian Schultz spotted one train crossing over another at the Norgrove small-gauge railway.



Platform gate for SP boxcar



Mike Burrell photo

Access to our former Southern Pacific wood-sheathed boxcar is greatly improved now that we have a new gate from the Freighthouse platform aligned with the boxcar door. Above left, Freddie Ratliff has carefully cut out a railing section to fabricate the two-part gate. Above right, the gate that he finished. Still needed at the time of the photo: touch-up paint.

Below, Museum volunteers Mike Burrell (left) and Ted Van Klaveren have installed a utility pole next to the RIP (repair-in-place) track office.

Brad LaRose photo

Vertical



The Bermuda Triangle of Central Coast railroad photography?



The next *Coast Mail* edition will have a local photo involving one of several rail-related anniversaries occurring in 2026. It was taken at the location shown above, but looking in a different direction. Your editor had hoped to enter a better version of the one above in *Trains* magazine annual photo contest having the theme “the last mile.” This is Amtrak’s *Pacific Surfliner* No 761 entering the last mile before terminating at San Luis Obispo. It’s a bit cliché, does not show “technical excellence” (as the contest guidelines stipulated), and most important, was taken a week past the June 1 entry deadline.

Hopefully you’ll think better of the other photo. On the first day’s effort, both the digital camera and the backup cell phone camera failed. On the second day, the shots were taken from too low an elevation, omitting a key part of the intended composition. The third day was the charm, at least in getting a decent photo. And no expense for film or developing was wasted.



Languages evolve

The image above, from the New York Public Library collection, is a 1912 Southern Pacific car card. It promotes the Paso Robles Hot Springs, where one can, according to the tiny print, “Rejuvenate” with Sulfur and Mineral Waters and “Recreate” by Golfing, Tennis, Riding [&] Motoring.

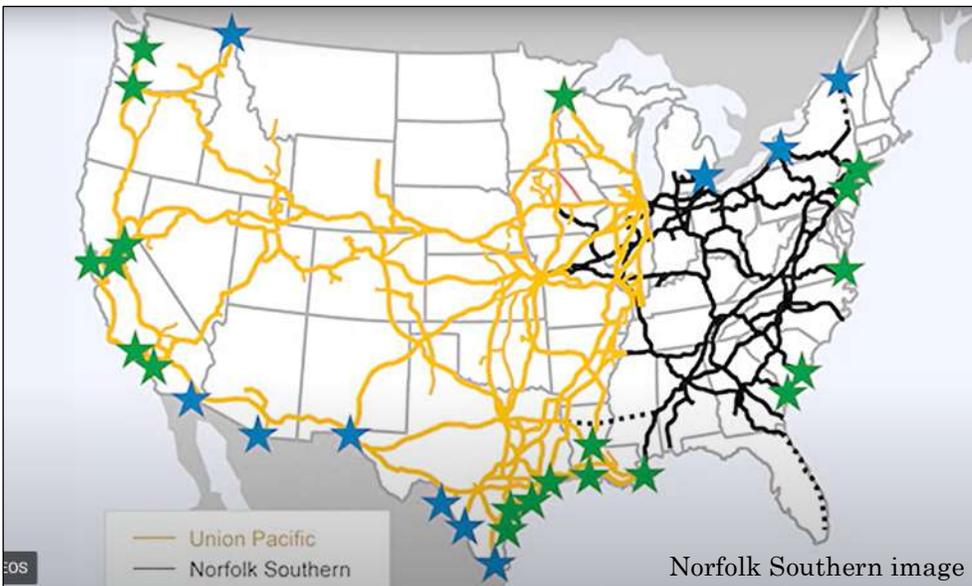
One of the first rules one learns as a writer/editor is to list things in parallel form. “I like eating, reading, and to nap” is awkward. These days, spoiling a nice day by chasing a little ball around outdoors would be called simply “golf.” Hitting a larger, softer ball over a net has never been called tennis, so we’re stuck with that. Motoring has given way to driving. Maybe we pantomime if we tell non-English speakers about driving a golf ball vs. driving a car.

The elaborate resort building portrayed above was built in 1891. In 1910, Southern Pacific published a brochure *Paso Robles Hot Springs: the Great Hot Springs Resort of America*. Nearly all the building was destroyed by fire in 1940.

Solar electric performance tracking

Museum volunteer and electrical expert Gary See has identified, obtained, and installed equipment to monitor performance of our photovoltaic system, replacing a temporarily free online subscription service.

Union Pacific Railroad and Norfolk Southern Railway proposed merger



The map at left shows what a combined system would look like. Yellow lines represent UP, black NS. Green stars are seaports; blue stars are international gateways.

For years there has been speculation about a final round of mergers. Over the last 60 years, the number of major US railroads has declined from dozens to four, with the UP-NS combination making three. The recent Canadian Pacific Kansas City (Southern) merger created an international north-south system.

Remaining majors BNSF and CSX, themselves results of many mergers, pursue trackage and reciprocal switching rights. None are likely to affect the Central Coast.

Plowing and placing

In the late 1980s Southern Pacific played a key role installing a fiber-optic network throughout the western US. Compared with other alignments, railroad rights-of-way were relatively free of obstructions. SP had decades of experience with in-house telegraph, telephone, and fax services [*Coast Mail* editions Fall 2019, Winter 2021, and Spring 2022]. So it was natural to find room along the tracks for another utility.

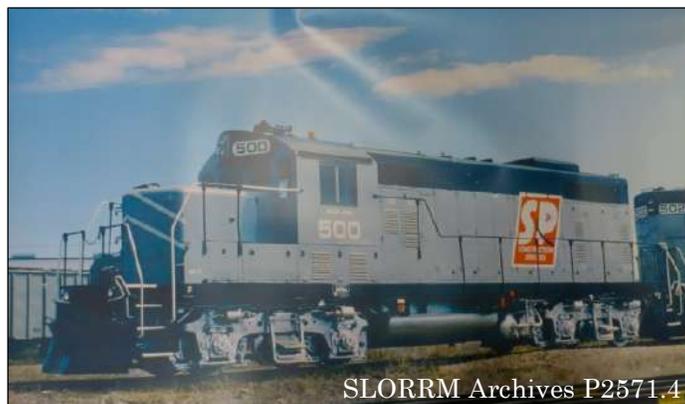
In the early 1970s SP looked for ways to use its network of wires to compete with established providers such as AT&T for long-distance telephone service. SP formed the Southern Pacific Communications Company (SPC) to do so. In the mid-1970s, a name-the-service contest produced SPRINT, standing for Southern Pacific Railroad Internal Networking Telecommunications (or Telephony, depending on the source). It was advertised with the catchphrase “You can hear a in drop.”

By the mid-1980s the new technology of glass fibers carrying very rapid pulses of light began displacing copper wires for intercity voice and data communication. The railroad formed SP Construction Services to plow trenches along its tracks and feed the fiber cables into them. At road crossings and tunnels, different approaches such as boring were needed [*Coast Mail* Fall 2025]. Steel pipe conduit was placed on bridges.

Skimming over some further corporate shuffling, SP also formed Qwest as part of its telecommunications effort, based in part on SP’s experience with microwave communications replacing lineside wires for its signal system.



Southern Pacific photo



SLORRM Archives P2571.4

Above, a four-axle EMD locomotive in light gray and black sports a bright red “SP Construction Services” label. It’s probably in Colorado.

Below, the same locomotive, still numbered 500, is in light green and black, with a Qwest label. Because the “plow trains” often had to move forward and back to clear the line for other trains, paired engines facing in opposite directions were standard power.



SLORRM Archives P2571.3

At left, specially designed equipment pulled by locomotives plowed a deep furrow and fed the bright-orange jacketed fiber-optic cable into the ground.

Editor’s note:

The locomotive photos above are from the estate of Augie Jess and were donated by his daughter Rachael Joyous. Mr. Jess was a Southern Pacific locomotive engineer who took a break from SP and later worked for its cable-laying affiliates. At or near his retirement in the 1990s, No. 500 was named for him.

Thanks to Museum member Bob Wilson for being aware of this connection and providing some details.

My only observation of plow-train engines included a gray-and-red SD-9 in the San Luis Obispo yard. That was probably its last assignment before retirement. It was possibly the last of that model to operate on the Central Coast. What sticks in my memory was the engineer getting in a little batting practice during some wait time, swatting pieces of ballast along the right-of-way with a scrap 2 x 4.

Vintage cars met vintage cars



Above, on October 7 the Forties Unlimited of Orange County car club toured the Museum. Restoring old cars? We can relate. Previous automotive club visitors include Morgan cars (Coast Mail Fall 2023) and Porsche (Coast Mail Winter 2012-13).



Above, after not being seen for several years, your editor's nostalgia car reappeared in San Luis Obispo on the midday Pacific Surfliner.

Where it all started

I'll go first.

My family moved away when I was five, as the steam era ended on Southern Pacific. But before then, we could hear trains on Beaumont Pass if the wind was right. Later I rediscovered the name San Timoteo Canyon. Cajon Pass was our usual eastbound route out of the surrounding rural San Bernardino County orange groves and poultry operations.

That early fascination led to hobbies, volunteer opportunities, and even a post-retirement, part-time teaching position in the field. So a few years ago your editor got a jolt when Amtrak's midday Pacific Surfliner pulled into San Luis Obispo, with the state-sponsored car named *San Timoteo Canyon* in the consist (a location not served by *Surfliners* or any other state-supported trains). No camera was at hand. But on August 28, while working in the Museum's library/archives, what should appear in a glance out the window but "my" car. The years have roughed up both of us a bit.

Now it's your turn. Share your personal railroad connection via our newsletter. And think seriously about taking over the role of editor. I hope to make it at least to issue No. 100. That gives us a while to make a smooth transition.

Pancakes aboard *La Cuesta*



On the morning of October 5 Museum members supported our efforts by sitting down with pancakes, sausage, coffee, and orange juice aboard our 1926 Pullman café-lounge car. Brad and Marisol LaRose worked before and during the event to make it possible. We hope to host future pancake breakfasts that will be open to the public.

The orange equipment roster has grown

In late October Equipment & Restoration Superintendent Brad LaRose, with Museum friend Bob Knight helping, brought this former Southern Pacific 1950 forklift to the Museum (below). It had been used at the Oxnard freight house. We'll have more details about this colorful and now unique piece of equipment in the Spring *Coast Mail*.

