



# 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.

## The significance of 2026

People are fond of big, round numbers.

The year 2026 marks 250 years since the *Declaration of Independence*.

It's been 100 years since the Museum's former Santa Fe café-lounge car was released from the Pullman Company shops as ATSF 1512. Later named *LaCondesa* (no space between words) when owned by a local teacher, it's now called *La Cuesta*. The car resides comfortably on the Museum's display track, and can be rented as an event venue. The 1937 photo at right by W. C. Whitaker is the oldest we could find.

1956, 70 years ago, is generally recognized as the last year that steam operated in regular service on the Coast Route. Some steam switchers were still in use, and the *Coast Mail* train had steam intermittently.

Fifty years ago the celebratory *American Freedom Train* was led by former Southern Pacific Daylight-type locomotive No. 4449 on a tour of many states. At right it's northbound on the coast in its temporary red-white-and-blue scheme. This 1977 photo by Russell B. Sperry was the second place winner in the Museum's 2024 photo contest.



It's been 30 years since the Union Pacific Railroad absorbed the Southern Pacific. At left we see UP locomotive No. 1996, which commemorates SP heritage with Daylight-inspired colors. The Summer 2016 and Fall 2023 *Coast Mail* editions had more on SP's and UP's corporate histories and relationships. This beautifully clear photo was taken in June 2007 at Salt Lake City, by Paul Rome.



And we have a purely local milestone: 80 years since San Luis Obispo's hometown baseball team the Blues was formed, as life returned to more peaceful paths following the end of World War II the year before. At left, Amtrak train 761, the midday *Pacific Surfliner*, passes the Sinsheimer Park sports field where the Blues now play their home games. At first they played on a field in downtown San Luis Obispo near Mission School. This view includes the ball field in the background. It was taken on the day after the Blues' opening game of the 2025 season.

**Our Mission**

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

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**Board of Directors**

Peter Brazil                   Mike Burrell  
Jim Chernoff                 Alan Estes  
Greg Jackson                Bob Knight  
Brad LaRose

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Treasurer/Insurance ..... Dave Rohr  
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Operations ..... Peter Brazil  
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Model Railroad ... Andrew Merriam  
Membership ..... Gary See  
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Webmaster ..... Jamie Foster  
Secretary, Archivist/Librarian, Newsletter Editor ..... Glen Matteson ([newsletter@slorrm.com](mailto: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](http://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 March 10, April 14, and May 12 2026, at 6:00 p.m. They are held at the Museum.

You can participation remotely. Contact [info@slorrm.com](mailto:info@slorrm.com) for help with remote participation.

**Pancake Breakfast** April 11, 8:30 – 10:30. Details on website. RSVP to [info@slorrm.com](mailto:info@slorrm.com)

**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.

**We shouldn't use the motto *Learn by Doing***

Those words belong to Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo. Instead, we'll use *Learn by Helping*. Right, Museum volunteer Jim Livingston (at left) offers guidance to Lowen Baird as they heat a stake pocket on our flat car so it can be straightened. They were at work on a clear day right before Thanksgiving 2025.

Your quiz will ask about the colors of the flames.

The vertical yellow device is a hydraulic jack that helps bring the stake pocket back into proper alignment. We're looking at the side of the car away from public view. True craftsmen attend to the seldom seen.

**Museum supporters**

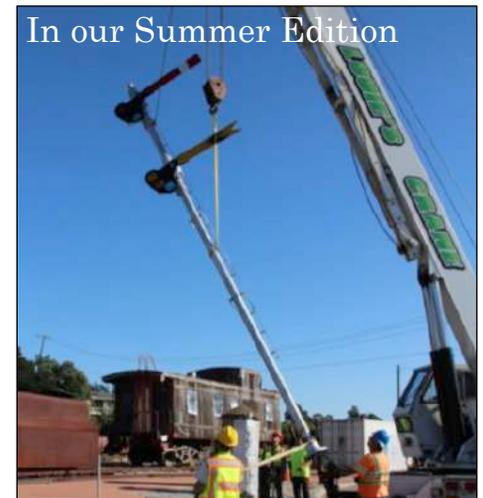
The Museum would not exist and could not improve without the support of many. All forms of support, from membership dues to grants and donations of expertise, materials, and funds are greatly appreciated. In this edition we recognize:

**Mike Burrell** for donating funds toward acquiring a steam engine;

**Jim Gaddis** for donating photos from the Mac Gaddis collection.

**More Coast Mail Online**

More on 2026 as an anniversary year; North County rails; Annual Report.



Another crane day –brake wheel and semaphore signal installation; frog nose job; the Osos Street problem.



Brad LaRose photo



## RIP Track office done

When cars en route developed problems that didn't require major shop resources to correct, they could be switched out and positioned on repair-in-place (RIP) tracks for local workers.

*Model Railroader* magazine once noted modelers cringing as visitors described the products of their efforts as "cute." If memory serves, the writer's position was don't begrudge appreciation or praise in any terms. We don't mind passersby commenting on how great our *cute*, painstakingly redone RIP Track office looks (above). As the area's smallest surviving historical railroad building, it reflects a meaning of cute. Volunteer Ted Van Klaveren put in many hours replacing deteriorated wood, providing secure windows, installing flooring, and re-roofing. Greg Jackson completed the painting.

The image below shows, on a current aerial view, the location of two RIP Tracks and a disconnected "Dummy Track" in 1949.



*Is it wise for the person who handles the money to drive the forklift? Sure! It will be handy for moving components of our Pullman café-lounge La Cuesta. Long serving Museum treasurer Dave Rohr was at the controls in January, before the forks were re-installed.*

## A Gem of Southern Pacific Intermodal History

By Brad LaRose

The forklift above was purchased by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1950, for use at SP's Oxnard, California, freight house, on the California Coast Line. The forklift was built by Clark Equipment Co. in 1950. It is a "Carloader" model, specifically designed to be small so it can enter and load and unload railroad boxcars. It is about six feet long, with a lift capacity of 4,000 pounds. Its 4-cylinder, flathead, 32 1/2 horsepower engine was made by the Continental Co.

In 1983, SP conducted an equipment auction at the Oxnard freight house. Mr. Gary Sanchez purchased it and used it for many years at his Camarillo, California, avocado farm. In 2024, Mr. Dan Dornbrach purchased the forklift from the Sanchez estate. Dan donated the forklift to the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum in October 2025.

The Museum will use the forklift as part of an intermodal (railroad/trucking) exhibit. It will complement the Museum's two Pacific Motor Trucking 22-foot trailers and the SP Trailer On Flat Car (TOFC) car, which will be a unique exhibit. San Luis Obispo was not only a crew change point on the SP Coast Line, it also had one of the first TOFC loading ramps. The ramp was located about 100 yards north of the SP San Luis Obispo freight house, which is now the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum.

The museum greatly appreciates Dan Dornbrach's donation of the forklift.



## A history of caretaking for a rare Southern Pacific Railroad pick-up truck



*The Museum's former SP truck rolls along a rural road in its retirement prior to donation to the Museum (above). At the wheel is Jim "Bear" Mahon, who for many years was in charge of snow-clearing efforts over Donner Pass. This is a screen shot from a video by Scott Inman, used with his generous permission. For a few seconds of the truck in motion, go to the Museum's website: About, Video Library, Miscellaneous.*

by Brad LaRose, using information  
provided by Steve Rusconi

This is likely the only existing Southern Pacific Railroad pick-up truck. SP leased the 1970 Chevy from the Gelco Services Company in 1970. The SP Water Department used it until 1973 at its Lensen Street Roundhouse in San Jose, California, for parts pickup and delivery. It was sold to SP engineer Dan Wolf. He put the ownership title in his wife Georgie's name and drove the truck until 2010, when he was 91 years old. Dan had been a locomotive engineer on SP's Coast Division, running the *Coast Starlight* train from Oakland to SLO. He retired after over 44 years of engine service, with top seniority on the Coast Division. Georgie herself was an SP employee 1941 – 1955, working at Taylor Yard in Los Angeles and at Watsonville. Dan sold the truck to his railfan friend Steve Rusconi, who promised to preserve it. The truck finally had a garage to occupy. Dan passed away in 2013 at 94 years old.

Steve's friend Manley "Bo" Golson, a retired SP brakeman with 36 years service, was a director of the Laws Railroad Museum in Bishop, California. He worked with Steve to have the truck donated to the Laws Railroad Museum. That museum kept the truck for several years, driving it in several local parades. The Laws Museum later decided they did not have a use for the truck, and it was offered to the Southern Pacific Railroad History Center (SPRHC). Their president, Scott Inman, accepted it and Bo Golson drove it to Reno Nevada where he turned it over to another SPRHC member for caretaking, retired Sacramento Division Engineer Jim "Bear" Mahon.

Mahon was famous for his work out of Roseville, California, managing crews clearing snow off the tracks on Donner Pass each winter. While Mahon had the truck in storage at his Auburn, California, ranch for several years, SPRHC lost interest in possessing three-dimensional artifacts and had never accepted ownership of the truck. Jim Mahon passed away in 2023, leaving his wife Nola, herself a former SP employee, and now caretaker of the truck. She initially hated the truck as it reminded her of an identical one she drove for SP, saying it was so rough riding! She later learned to like the truck.

After the truck had been kept at Nola's property for almost two years, Steve Rusconi contacted Brad LaRose, San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum's president and curator. They discussed possible donation of the truck to the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum. Steve enlisted the help of several other friends to move the truck to San Luis Obispo. John Manley (a retired Caltrain engineer and owner of Southern Pacific steam locomotive #2706), and Ralph Domenici (a retired contractor, rail-car restorer, and rail fan) facilitated moving the truck from Auburn to San Luis Obispo. The truck is now parked prominently near the Museum's main entrance, where it will be appreciated and cared for.

A dedicated group of friends, railfans, and former SP employees came together to preserve this truck. The truck is again next to the same Coast Line track that passes through San Jose, where it occupied the round-house yard many years ago.

Welcome home beloved truck.

## Why have a Water Department?

In the era of steam locomotives water was essential for their boilers. Especially from west Texas through New Mexico and Arizona, and in Nevada, developing and maintaining water sources was a challenge. Even in wetter locations, water with dissolved minerals required treatment to avoid foaming or build-up of scale.

After the end of steam locomotives, into the 1970s, many legacy passenger cars used steam for heating and, by condensers powered by vented steam, cooling. So even diesel locomotives had water tanks and boilers to produce steam, in addition to tanks for radiator cooling.

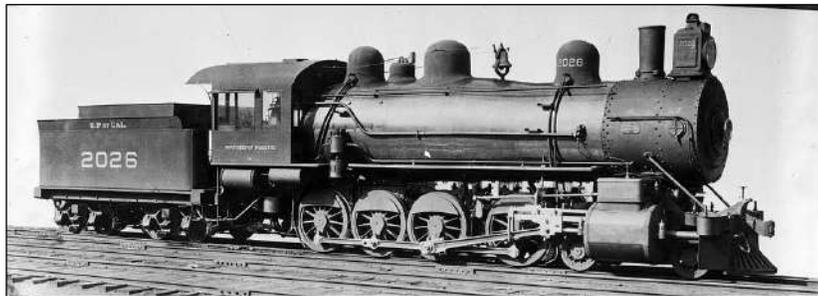
In some smaller communities along the line, often those established by the railroad, the railroad was the water utility, supplying dwellings and businesses as well as its own facilities.

*At right, the 65,000-gallon San Luis Obispo water tank, built in 1940, located across the tracks from the depot.*



## More involving “2026”

Here is Southern Pacific of California locomotive No. 2026 (right), a 4-8-0 steamer. The 1880s is a likely time frame, but the date, location, and photographer are not known. This image is from picryl.com. Locomotives with this wheel arrangement were known as twelve wheelers, for their 4-8-0 wheel arrangement, or less obviously, as Mastodons.



At left is Union Pacific’s GP-60 type diesel-electric locomotive No. 2026, looking good at Ennis, Texas, in March 2014. Roberto Alaniz took the photo. On the battery box ahead of the cab, the engine is neatly labeled “Houston Assigned Hauler” against a blue background rectangle. Chances are small that this locomotive ever came to California.

## Some national history

In 1896 the US Supreme Court ruled in Plessy vs. Ferguson that a Louisiana law requiring separate cars for Black and white passengers was valid. That decision would not be reversed until Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, which held that separate was inherently unequal.

In 1926, Robert Godard had his first successful liquid-fuel rocket launch. And, Congress passed the Air Commerce Act, providing for licensing of aircraft and pilots, contributing to the nemesis of long-distance train travel. In the same year, NBC (National Broadcasting Company) was formed.

## You can hear a pin drop.

The Winter *Coast Mail* noted Southern Pacific’s efforts in telecommunications. Forty years have passed since a 1986 television ad for the SPRINT telephone service. Below is a screen shot from that ad, with a shiny pin having hit the surface next to a large hand-held ear-and-mouth piece.



## Will it come our way?

from a video by UPRR

## What river is that?



Above, Union Pacific’s President Lincoln commemorative locomotive No. 1616. Abraham Lincoln, the 16<sup>th</sup> US president (1861-1865), signed the Pacific Railroad Act, authorizing construction of the Union Pacific Railroad and a forerunner of the Southern Pacific. The engine began to roam the UP system in 2025, powering regular freight trains. With nearly all north-south freight in California going by way of the Central Valley, probably the closest it would come is the Guadalupe Hauler from Los Angeles to its namesake destination.

Left, this past November in SLO felt more like February. Six inches of rain over about as many days left a pond opposite the Museum’s Freighthouse, between the main tracks and the *Pacific Surfliner’s* layover track. The breeze often makes this recurring pond look like a flowing stream. Your editor once overheard a visitor ask, “What river is that?”



***If you're travelin' in the north county fair...***

*...where the trains ran heavy on the old Coast Line...*

Apologies to Bob Dylan. Museum staff were recently lamenting the lack of material in our archives and newsletter for the Salinas Valley compared to points south. Here are two photos by Alan Barrett to help rectify that.

Above left we see the original Paso Robles depot as it appeared in January 1982. Part of that building was incorporated in a new commercial structure. A new depot accommodates Amtrak passengers, shown above right in an uncredited photo from the Internet.

A trailer-on-flatcar (TOFC) train passes an intermediate signal on the same day in the same general area (below). It was the south- (timetable east-) bound Oakland – Los Angeles Trailers (OALAT).



**Annual Report for 2025**

A major accomplishment in 2025 was restoring and installing the tall train order signal. We also made progress on access to the boxcar that will house an exhibit on Southern Pacific workers. Volunteers logged over 4,300 hours of service.

**Financial Summary**

Cash January 1, 2025	\$129,698
Income	\$ 81,782
Memberships	\$ 7,880
Admissions	\$15,542
Events	\$ 1,460
Ebay sales	\$ 9,354
Museum Store (Net)	\$ 6,744
Misc. Income	\$ 867
Model Railroad	\$ 9,120
Donations	
Restricted	\$15,135
Unrestricted	\$15,680
Expenses	\$ 77,135
Operating	\$ 64,601
Capital	\$ 12,534

**An archival milestone**

On January 1 we cataloged our 100<sup>th</sup> image of a Southern Pacific locomotive (right). This is SPMW No. 566, a shop switcher with the uncommon 0-6-2T wheel arrangement. The T is for tank, mounted on the loco rather than having a tender. The photo was donated by James Gaddis, from the collection of Malcolm Gaddis. Archive numbers in the 2000s are for Southern Pacific, 500s for engineering, 70s for mechanical, and 71 for locomotives.

This locomotive was at Brooklyn Yard in Portland, Oregon. We'll have more on this unusual engine in our Summer edition.



SLORRM Archive No. P2571.100