THE RAILROADS AND SAN LUIS OBISPO'S URBAN FORM

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The Pacific Coast narrow gauge and Southern Pacific standard gauge railroads affected the economy of San Luis Obispo and shaped city growth and morphology. This essay traces this imprint, celebrates the historic role of the railroads on the city and region, and, speculates on the future potential of fixed rail transportation for economy development.

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Today the sound of a train passing through San Luis Obispo may be intermittent and faint, but persistent nonetheless, a reminder that the railroad was a significant force in the development of the City of San Luis Obispo. The railroad's continued presence in the city, cutting through its urban fabric, raises intriguing questions as to what constructive role it can play in the evolving economy of the city. Can the railroad make a contribution to the new economy of the 21st Century? And if so, how? These questions are worth considering beyond nostalgia for a railroad-dominated past as we become more concerned, nationally and especially so in the State of California, about living sustainably. The aspiration to create communities that reduce dependence and expenditure on the automobile has surfaced as an important goal, one that might enable us to live within our resource base. In this emerging context what role will, and might, the railroad play in shaping future developments and influencing land use?

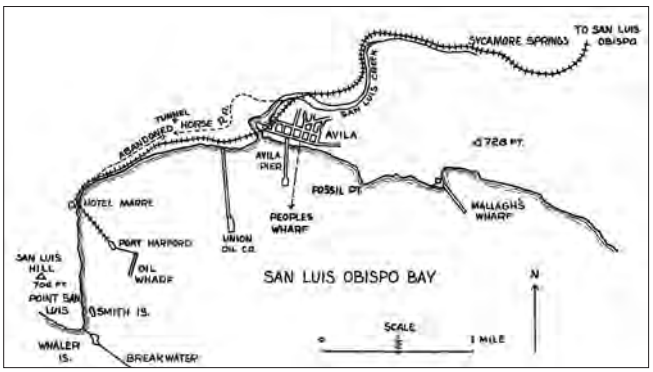
The historical role of railroads in the growth of the City of San Luis Obispo was substantial. San Luis Obispo emerged as a small town centered on a mission established in 1772 by the Franciscan Fathers. An 1872 map of the town of San Luis Obispo (Figure 1) reveals that the Catholic Mission Church's orchards and lands around Broad, Chorro, and Monterrey streets are a dominant part of the town, and encircled by individual land holdings. Set in the rich farming lands of what is now referred to as the Central Coast region, the town of San Luis Obispo was a regional hub of civic and economic activity adding value to production in the immediate hinterland. However, it remained isolated from the rest of the state until advances in transportation technology rendered it a staging ground for people and freight movement between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The Pacific Coast Railway and, later, the Southern Pacific Railroad, were such transportation catalysts, serving to significantly reshape the morphology of the city.

The Pacific Coast Railroad and Regional Trade

Prior to the 1850's the main way to transport people and goods in to the Central Coast region was by horseback, stagecoach, or wagon. Then, in 1855, Cave Landing was founded at Avila Beach just south of the current Avila Pier with a small wharf, warehouse, and derrick. This facilitated an increase in transportation via steamships, which plied up and down the coast from Seattle to San Diego. The majority of goods arriving at Cave Landing originated in San Francisco and included building materials such as redwood and iron, coal, linens, and general household merchandise. Local exports reflected the ranching and agricultural focus of the community and commonly included asphalt and bitumen, ore, hides, tallow, grains, beans, sheep, cattle, hogs, and dairy products.

Figure 1
San Luis Obispo 1872 Harris Ward. (courtesy of the History Center, San Luis Obispo County)

Fourteen years later, in 1869, John Harford founded the competing People's Wharf at Avila. However, by 1873, after seeking a more sheltered location, he purchased one and one-quarter miles of waterfront property from the Avila family and built a new wharf named



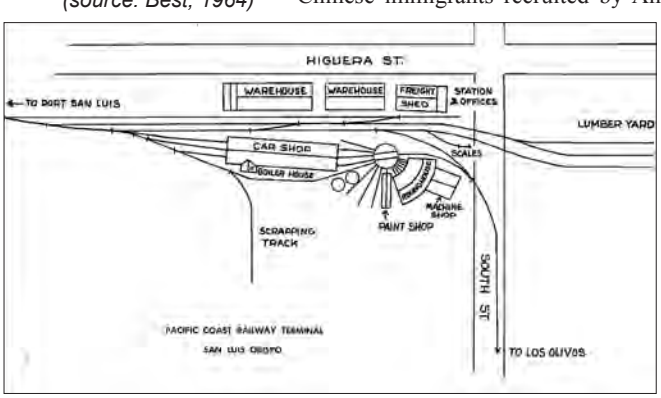
Figures 2 a & b
Map showing the 30-inch gauge Horse Railroad (1876) and 36-inch Narrow Gauge Railroad at Avila (source: Best, 1964, p.13). Port Hartford with steamer Santa Rosa and a train at Hotel Marre. (source: Best, 1964, p. 16)

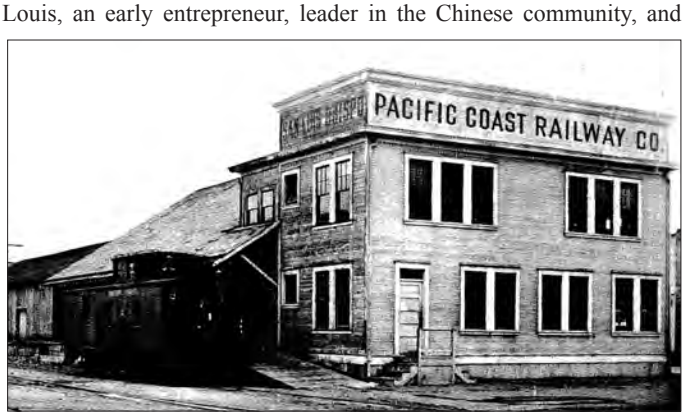
Port Harford in the lee, wind-protected side of Point San Luis (Figure 2). The wharf reached 540 feet out from the rocky shore to water averaging fifteen feet deep. Using light 15-pound steel rail, he built a 30-inch gauge railroad connecting the wharf to the mouth of the San Luis Creek, making it one of the first narrow gauge railroads in the state (Best, 1964). Until 1876 this railroad was horse-powered. Flat cars were loaded with goods from the steamships and "then driven up an incline to a tunnel at which point the horses were unhitched and the railroad cars rolled down the easterly incline to the town of Avila and Harford's warehouse" (Parsons, 1995, p. 4).

After three years of using this labor-intensive horsepower to move goods along fixed rails, in 1876 a competing company, to be later renamed the Pacific Coast S.S. Co., bought out John Harford, re-graded and re-located the railway alignment closer to the water to avoid the tunnel, and constructed a 36-inch narrow-gauge track that was both suitable for the first steam engine and could efficiently traverse the rugged terrain of the Irish Hills (Best, 1964). The Pacific Coast Company extended the railroad tracks from Port Harford to a new rail-complex in San Luis Obispo. Consisting of a passenger terminal, rail freight yards, and lumber yards, the rail complex was located south of the intersection of Higuera and South Streets in San Luis Obispo (Figure 3). This site is now occupied by the *Pacific Coast Center* office and shopping complex. According to former City of San Luis Obispo Senior Planner and railroad enthusiast Jeff Hook, the foundation of this complex is constructed of brick from the original Pacific Coast Railway passenger terminal, and the form and contours of that terminal are reflected in the center's "railroad vernacular" architecture. The establishment of this first narrow-gauge railroad in 1876 between Port Harford (present-day Port San Luis) and San Luis Obispo opened up the land-locked economy of this region to trans-shipment of regional products by sea, north to San Francisco.

Most of the laborers who worked on laying the track extension between Avila and San Luis Obispo were Chinese immigrants recruited by Ah Louis, an early entrepreneur, leader in the Chinese community, and

Figure 3 a & b
Pacific Coast Railway station at the corner of Higuera and South streets. (source: Best, 1964)





founder of a family and that is now a member of the establishment in San Luis Obispo (Nicholson, 1980). Ah Louis also ran a merchandise store at the corner of Chorro Street and Palm Street that catered to the local Chinese population. The building still exists today and is on the National Register of Historic Places. It is also one of the few remaining historic structures leftover from Chinatown, roughly considered the area between Chorro, Mill, Morro, and Monterey streets. The majority of Chinese laborers who worked on building the narrow-gauge track lived in historic Chinatown and were recruited at the Ah Louis store. This narrow gauge rail, however, was fated to become obsolete. Eventually, the non-standard freight-car width contributed to the downfall of the line because goods had to be off-loaded from the cars to be routed to the rest of the nation via 4-foot-8-and-half-inch-wide standard gauge railways such as the Southern Pacific, which was slowly making its way towards San Luis Obispo.

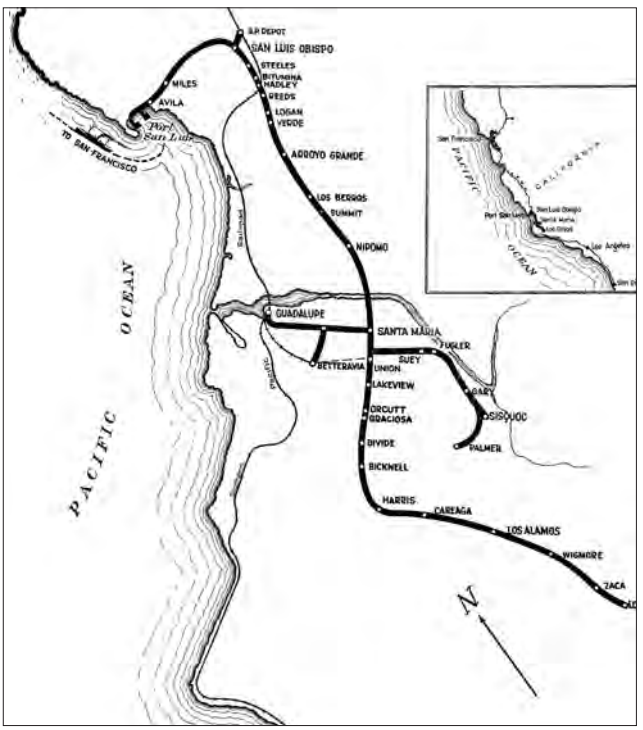


Figure 4
Pacific Coast Railway map, 1915. (source Best, 1964, p. 28)

In 1882, the railway operator of the narrow-gauge rail from the port to the interior cities merged with the Pacific Steamship Company and was re-christened the Pacific Coast Railway. Gradually, the railroad was extended to Los Olivos (Figure 4). By the late 1880's, Port Harford was handling over 400 ships per year. This coincided with the beginning of oil exploration in the Santa Maria Valley in 1888 leading to large-scale oil discovery and extraction operations around the dawn of the 20th century. The burgeoning local oil industry necessitated the ordering of special tank cars to allow local petroleum products to be shipped to Port Harford on the narrow-gauge Pacific Coast Railway for trans-shipment via oil tankers to ports throughout the world.

The City's Residential Expansion

In addition to creating an economic stimulus to the local agricultural and oil industries, the railroad helped open up new residential areas in San Luis Obispo. Residential tracts developed between 1874 and 1891 are noted and located on the map in Figure 5, and illustrate the ring growth that occurred around the city core in this period. The annexations of this period clearly illustrate a pattern of land speculation adjacent to and overlapping the Southern Pacific railroad track right-of-way, and a general shift in new residential development towards the eastern and southern limits of the city.

Most of the railroad workers living in San Luis Obispo at the turn of the century chose to locate their families in downtown San Luis Obispo, although some of them also opted to live in the new subdivisions near the southern end of town. In particular, The Loomis, McBride, and Homestead tracts were popular with railroad workers as they were adjacent to the Southern Pacific rail yard and service facilities. Most of the subdivisions were approved by the city in 1887. That same year, the mainline of the Pacific Coast Railway reached Los Olivos in Santa Barbara County, marking the farthest geographical extent of the railroad. This was the peak period of the Pacific Coast Railway, at the time the dominant means of moving people and goods throughout the Central Coast region.

Regional Implications

Although San Luis Obispo prospered as a regional economic hub by virtue of the Pacific Coast Railway, it was still relatively isolated from the rest of the state. It lacked a rail connection to San Francisco in the north and Los Angeles in the south. The Southern Pacific Railroad terminated at Santa Margarita north of the City of San Luis Obispo for years, as it was both costly and dangerous to construct the tracks across the Cuesta Grade. But, on May 5th, 1894, following extensive lobbying by local prominent businessmen such as Isaac Goldtree and J.P. Andrews, and after deals to secure local financial backing were struck, the City of San Luis Obispo was finally connected to San Francisco via rail. The first train from San Francisco was greeted in San Luis Obispo with an enormous celebration at the luxurious new Ramona Hotel.

The Southern Pacific Railroad and Tourism

The Pacific Coast Railway played a major role in diversifying the economy of the city of San Luis Obispo and stimulated commerce and trade in the hinterland by enabling trade with a much larger region. However, the arrival of the Southern Pacific marked the beginning of a slow decline for the Pacific Coast Railway. The Southern Pacific Railroad offered lower freight rates from San Luis Obispo than from other areas in Northern California so that it could compete with (and undercut) the Pacific Coast Railway. By the turn of the century Port Harford had lost most of its general shipping business and focused almost exclusively on exporting petroleum, which arrived via pipeline from Coalinga, in Fresno County, California. In an attempt to become more competitive, the Pacific Coast Railway created a spur line to the Southern Pacific Railroad Depot along what is now South Street to facilitate the transfer of goods and passengers in either direction. "However,

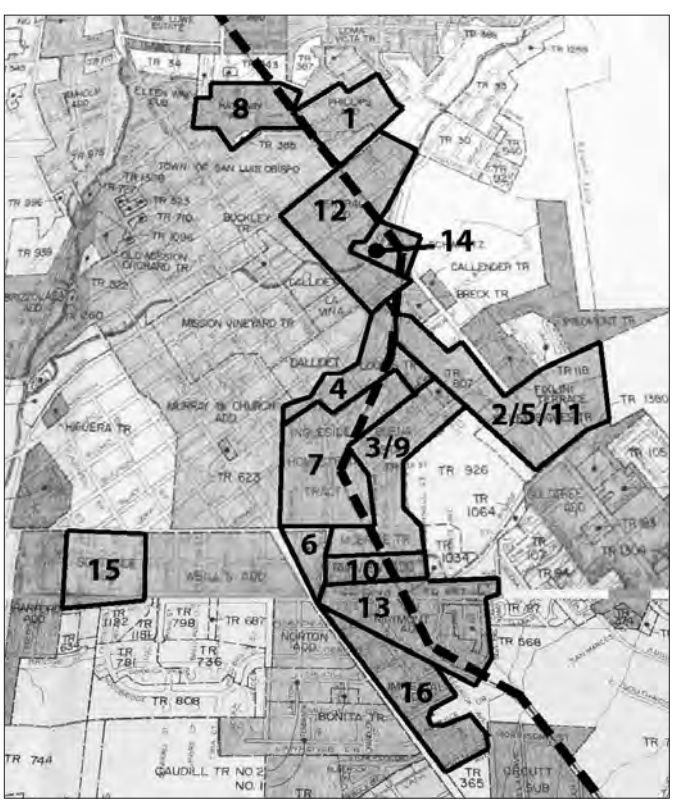


Figure 5
1874-1891 land annexations around the Southern Pacific Railroad.

1. Phillips Addition (1874)
2. Deleissigues Tract (1876)
3. Buena Vista Tract (1885)
4. Loomis Tract (1887)
5. Deleissigues Subdivision (1887)
6. McBride Tract (1887)
7. Homestead Tract (1887)
8. Hathway Addition (1887)
9. Buena Vista Addition (1887)
10. Fairview Addition (1887)
11. Deleissigues Addition (Block 5) (1887)
12. Central Addition (1888)
13. Maymont Addition (1889)
14. Schwartz Addition (1889)
15. South Side Addition (1891)
16. Imperial Addition (1891)

by 1913 only a single daily mixed train (passenger and freight) ran between the Port and San Luis Obispo" (Rice, 2006).

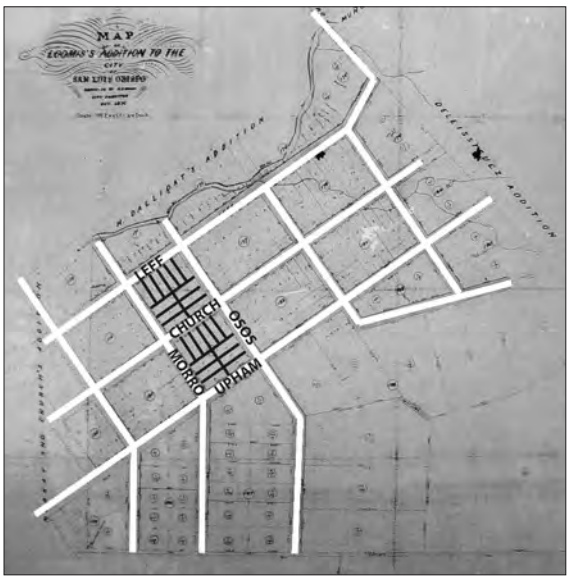
The Andrews Hotel, the Ramona Hotel and the Central Addition subdivision in which it was located were speculative developments based solely on the Southern Pacific's arrival. The Southern Pacific Railroad created an instant tourism industry in San Luis Obispo. The 112-room Andrews Hotel, in a corner lot at Monterey and Osos streets, opened in 1886 but a fire burned it to the ground only seven months later. The 144-room Ramona Hotel, opened in 1888, was located close to the Southern Pacific tracks and occupied the entire city block between Higuera, Johnson, Marsh, and Essex (present-day Pepper Street). Designed to cater to upscale travelers it featured state-of-the-art amenities such as electric lights, hot and cold running water, and "a system of electric bells connected between the hotel office and all 114 rooms, as a safeguard against both fire and burglary" (Nicholson, 1980). Its construction and development was so heavily based on the advent of the railroad that the hotel constructed its own Southern Pacific Train Depot (Figures 6 a & b). Tragically, despite its modern safeguards, with the exception of the train depot, the hotel was destroyed by a fire in 1905. The well preserved depot is now part of the Dallidet Adobe Gardens in San Luis Obispo, and a historical marker provides some insight on the relationship between railroad and tourism at the time, noting as follows:

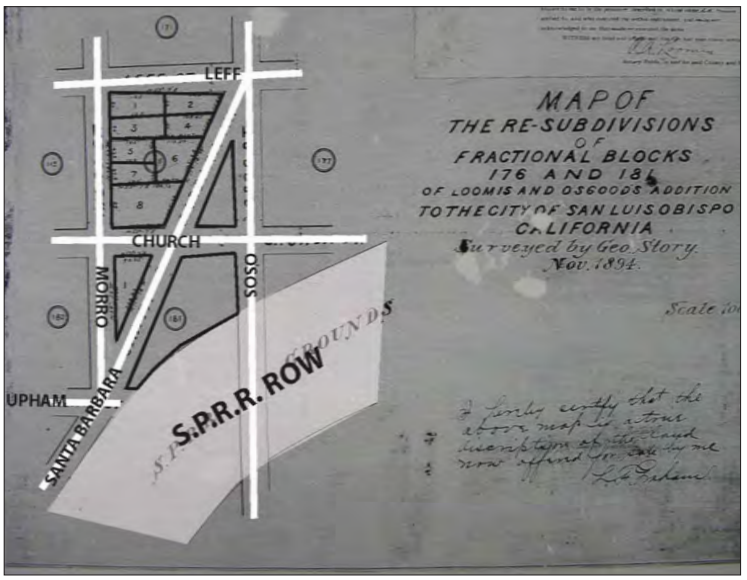
> In March of 1896, the Southern Pacific Railroad officially declared that the Ramona Hotel will be an eating station for passengers heading north and south. *'It is expected that within a few days tickets can be purchased from the Ramona station and baggage checked from the same point. The station building has been completed several days...so that the station may present an attractive appearance to strangers.' San Luis Obispo Morning Tribune 1896).* Trains which did not include a dining car stopped to allow passengers a meal at the Ramona Hotel. A street railway running on Marsh Street to the rear of the hotel connected the street car line to the new depot (The Historic Marker Database, 2011).

City Plats and the Southern Pacific

Like many other sub-divisions of that time, the Central Addition had to be re-platted when the Southern Pacific Railway routed the railroad directly through it, effectively cutting the eastern part of the city in half and creating dangerous at-grade crossings for people living on the "wrong" eastern side of the tracks. This demarcation of what is considered close to downtown and what is not, (west and east of the railroad respectively) continues to linger today. This phenomenon affected the Loomis Tract, and the resulting parcel configurations in the present-day blocks between Upham, Morro, Osos, and Leff are quite transformed from the original grid plan (Figure 7 a & b). Today this reconfiguration lends an unpredictability and charm to the city fabric in that area of town.

Figures 6 a & b
The Hotel Ramona with convenient horse- drawn street car (source Best, 1964, p. 38). The hotel's train depot is a historical landmark on the Dallidet Adobe Grounds (right).





Figures 7 and 8
The Loomis Tract of 1887 (left) and the Loomis and Osgood re-subdivision of 1894 (right).

Railroad Worker Housing 1904 and 1914

The advent of the Pacific Coast Railway in the city, and the subsequent arrival and dominance of commerce by the Southern Pacific, impacts the fabric of the city by substantially moving the city's center of gravity away from the Mission core. Telephone directories from the turn of the century provide some clues about this shift. A rough sketch of the locations of railroad worker housing helps delineate shifts in city morphology during the period when the Pacific Coast Railway was dominant, and then after the Southern Pacific's arrival. Figure 8 is a map of San Luis Obispo illustrating where railroad workers were noted as living according to the 1904 city directory. It reveals that most of the railroad workers still lived in downtown San Luis Obispo with a very high concentration of lower-skilled workers living at the Laughery boarding house located at the corner of Higuera and Morro Streets. The boarders had European surnames such as Carter, Dixon, Hall, Hoogendyk, Kennedy, Lewis, Lynch, McComis, Phillips, and Schaumleffle reflecting who was migrating to this area and finding work on the railroad. Predictably, a cluster of managers and train conductors (included in the "Train Personnel" category) is found on the better location of Buchon Street. This street attracted higher income residents precisely because of its slightly higher elevation and distance away from the soot and grime created by the coal-powered steam engines. In contrast, the map reveals that most of the railroad engineers (also included in the "Train Personnel" category) lived along a two-block stretch of Islay Street between Morro and Santa Rosa Streets.

In contrast to the 1904 map, the 1914 map illustrates a tangible shift in railroad worker housing from the downtown to the eastern edge of town near the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad (Figure 8 and 9). It also reveals that, by 1914, the vast majority of workers in the city worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad instead of the Pacific Coast Railway. It is also apparent that while the majority of Southern Pacific workers clustered near the tracks and each other, the workers of the Pacific Coast Railway were quite dispersed throughout the west side of the city. The typical construction of homes owned by railroad employees varied according to income, but most were simple bungalow kit homes ordered from Sears, Roebuck, and Company and built out of redwood imported from San Francisco (Figure 10).

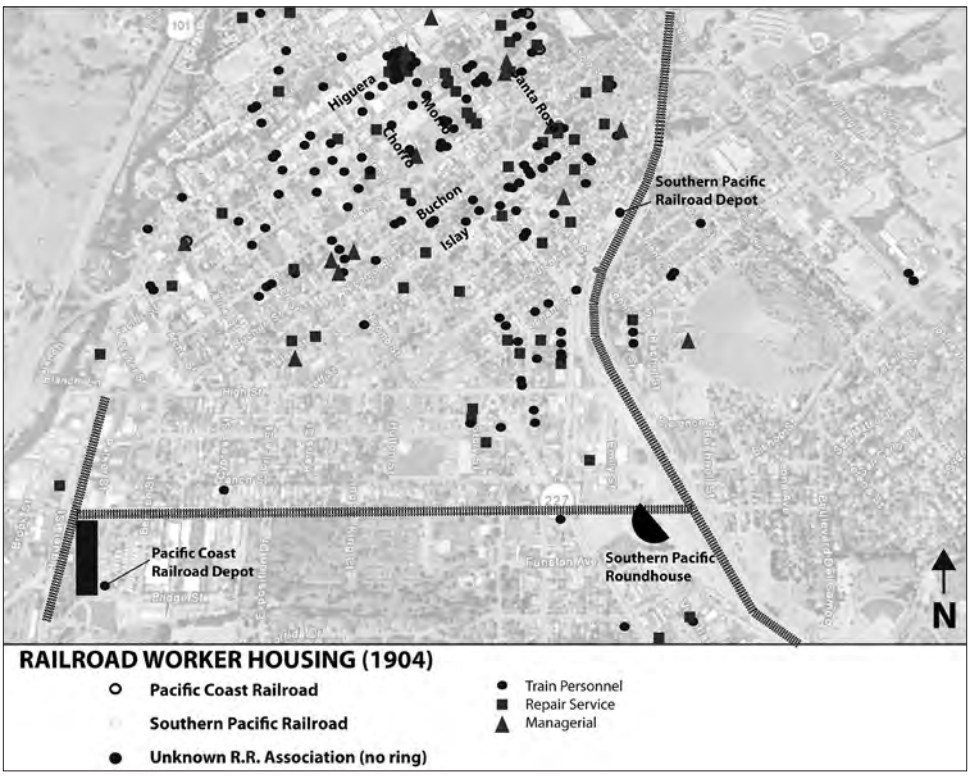


Figure 8
Location of railroad worker housing in 1904.

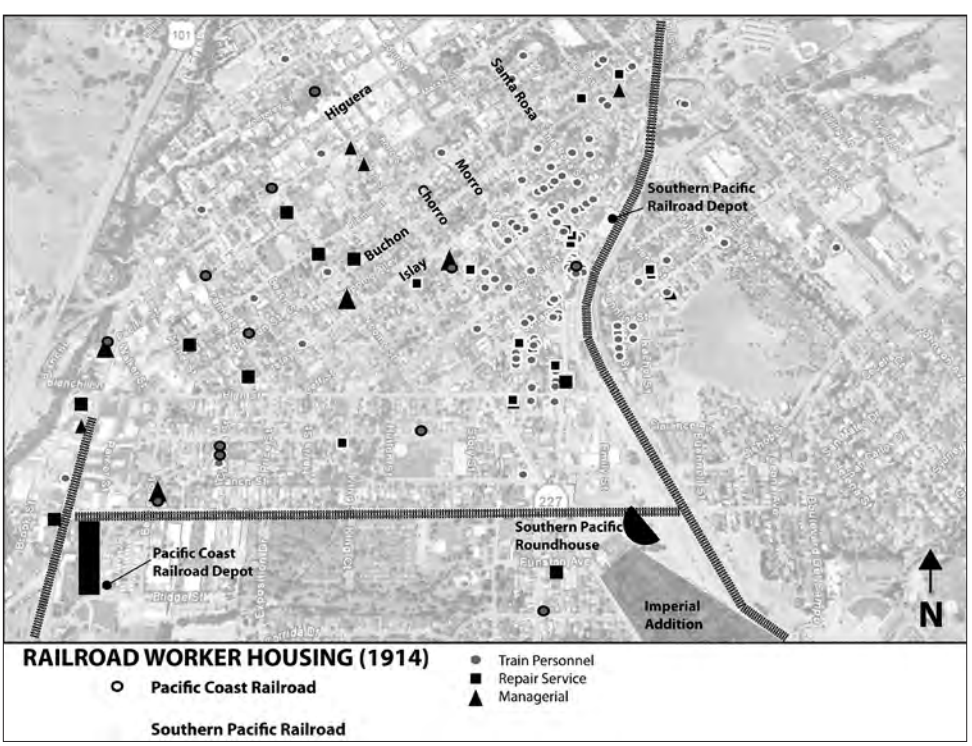


Figure 9
Location of railroad worker housing in 1914.

Figure 10
Typical railroad worker house at 2546 Victoria Street.

New worker housing for the Southern Pacific railroad shifted the city's growth towards the southeast of town in new subdivisions such as The Imperial Addition. The location was convenient because of its proximity to the Southern Pacific roundhouse where steam engines were maintained and turned around on the locomotive turntable for their journey back up the grade. Eventually, the neighborhood became known as "Little Italy" due to the high percentage of Italian railroad workers living there.

The neighborhoods surrounding the Southern Pacific tracks continued to thrive through World War II when passenger rail traffic in San Luis Obispo reached record numbers. However, after the war, the steam locomotives were gradually replaced by more efficient diesel engines that required less maintenance, and most of the local railroad workers found themselves out of a job. Finally, in 1959, the obsolete Southern Pacific roundhouse was demolished (overnight) by the Southern Pacific administration, much to the chagrin of the city's preservation community. The turntable remained until the early 1990's when it also was removed by the Southern Pacific without notice. As the railroad's demand for workers diminished, the formerly thriving Imperial Addition neighborhood gradually turned into an industrial and warehouse area. However, its location along the Broad Street corridor connecting to the airport and new subdivisions to the south of the city make it a potential site for revitalization and economic development.

Figure 11
The Historic Railroad District. (courtesy City of San Luis Obispo)

Decline of the Railroad-based Economy

The decline of the railroads in general can be correlated to the rise of the automobile as the preferred mode of travel. It followed the creation of the interstate freeway system which revolutionized the geography of central places throughout the nation. The automobile brought with it personal freedom for individuals and families to chose when, how, and where to travel. The mobility it gave to Americans and the way of life the automobile represented was the envy of the world, and emerging and established nations sought to emulate the American ideal. By the 1980's, passenger rail traffic stopping in San Luis Obispo had decreased to insignificance, even though Caltrans records show an increase in overall Surfliner ridership during the same period (California Department of Transportation, 2008), resulting in a decline of neighborhoods surrounding the station. The area's gradual slide into obscurity attracted the city's attention in the 1990's and a major effort was undertaken to create new opportunities for reinvestment in sites adjacent to and near the rail tracks.

The Railroad District

Designated a historic district in 1998, the Railroad District has been planned to simultaneously enable diligent preservation of its historic character and spur forward-thinking and sustainable urban revitalization (Figure 11). Major projects completed over the past 13 years include: the Jennifer Street Pedestrian and Bicycle Bridge (see Figure 11) which has helped link the east side of the railroad area to the downtown for "green" transportation modes; the Chinese Railroad Workers

sculpture on Osos Street which commemorates the contribution of the Chinese laborers in the construction of the railroads; construction of the new Villa Roma restaurant; the restoration of the Park Hotel to accommodate restaurants in addition to long-term residential uses; the restoration and adaptive reuse of the Channel Commercial Wholesale Company building in Railroad Square[1]; the opening of the Sanitarium Bed and Breakfast; and the dedication of the Railroad Safety Trail. Several new commercial structures have been built along Santa Barbara Street, and the city also built Fire Station #1 during this period. Mixed-use development is now beginning to happen within the Imperial Subdivision.

[1] Significant for its architecture as well as the role it played in the community's history, the Channel Commercial building was built as a wholesale grocery outlet for the company. Its proximity to the railroad facilitated the delivery and shipping of goods. It was the leading wholesale establishment of its kind between San Francisco and Los Angeles (Davis, 1914).

In addition, there has been a successful community effort to preserve the history of the railroads in San Luis Obispo with the creation of a Railroad Museum in a historic freight warehouse building near the tracks, which has a rolling stock exhibit on a dedicated museum spur track. The City of San Luis Obispo and the Railroad Museum Board of Directors have expressed interest in creating a contemporary commercial structure at the site of the former roundhouse, similar to the modern structure that is on the site of the Pacific Coast Railroad terminal. However, ambitions to build in the area are constrained by the fact that most of the real estate surrounding the tracks is still owned by the Union Pacific Railroad (formerly the Southern Pacific). In addition, the roundhouse site is heavily contaminated and would require significant remediation before it could be used for new and habitable adaptive reuse. Although some projects may not currently be feasible, this area of the city, which grew up with the advent of the railroad, now appears poised and strategically located to play a significant and different but equally influential role in the city's future development.

Given the present concern over greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from motor vehicles, rising fuel costs, shortages of oil, and the centralized land-use patterns popular in New Urbanism and required by SB 375, it is possible that the railroad, or some other form of fixed rail public transportation might once again become a preferred mode of long-distance transport to the major metropolitan areas south and north of the city and beyond. If California does succeed in investing in a high speed train between San Francisco and Los Angeles, perhaps a connection into that corridor might be worked out. Passenger train service to the city of San Luis Obispo has increased in the past two decades from one through train daily in each direction between Los Angeles and Seattle (Coast Starlight) to include a regional train from Los Angeles to San Luis Obispo, and a train in each direction between San Diego and San Luis Obispo. "From 2000 to 2006 total ridership on both train services increased 16% from 94,500 to 109,469. Ridership on the Pacific Surfliner increased 100%, from 39,000 to over 78,000, due in part to the addition of a second train in 2004" (San Luis Obispo Council of Governments, 2010).

In the 21st century there is a potential for both passenger and freight traffic to experience some shifts away from gasoline-powered modes of transport. If and when that happens, the Railroad District in San Luis Obispo may be in an excellent position to benefit from it. However, if it does not, given the growth of the city towards the airport in the south, the district's increasingly central location will create opportunities for both tourism-led, innovative, and/or light-industrial economic growth. In the Railroad District, the charm and nostalgic connection to the history and architectural fabric of the past, as well as its strategic location for growing knowledge-based industries of the future, seems promising and worthy of investment.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Arnold Jonas for critical editorial comments and direction, as well as all of the anonymous stakeholders who assisted us with our research.