



LOG IN

SUBSCRIBE NOW



THE TRIBUNE

Part of the McClatchy Media Network

Local News Opinion Food & Drink Sports The Cambrian • Education Weather Cali

LOCAL

Central Coast Railroad Festival in San Luis Obispo County tracks rich history

SARAH LINN - SLINN@THETRIBUNENEWS.COM

UPDATED OCTOBER 08, 2009 5:34 PM





Jim Keating



Only have a minute? Listen instead

Powered by **Trinity Audio**

00:00

When Arroyo Grande resident Curtis Reinhardt was a boy, trains held a fascination shared by the entire family.

Every Thanksgiving, he helped his father and grandfather assemble an HO scale model train. And “on Christmas morning, you wouldn’t go see what presents were under the tree,” he recalled. “You’d bolt over to see what train was new on the train board.”

Reinhardt’s passion for railroads has inspired a new event: the Central Coast Railroad Festival.

The countywide festival, which runs today through Monday, features a wealth of rail-related activities. Participating venues reach from Paso Robles to Santa Maria.

About 5,000 people are expected to attend the festival, with visitors coming from as far as Oakland, Orange County and Utah.

“We’ve got a real gem in our backyard with the trains being here,” Reinhardt said.

All aboard

According to Reinhardt, the festival celebrates the region’s railway-rich past while looking ahead to its future.

Both aims will be evident at the daylong Rail Celebration Saturday at the recently restored Freight House in San Luis Obispo’s Railroad District.

There, amid antique rail cars and other equipment, officials will drive the ceremonial golden spike to open the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum’s new Display Track. They’ll also dedicate “Icons of an Era,” a public art installation by Jim Trask.

Other festival highlights include a children’s train party, running model trains, music by singer-songwriter Steve Key and The Mudskippers, and a screening of the film, “The First Great Train Robbery.”

Participants can also experience rail travel by boarding the miniature Bitter Creek Western Railroad in Arroyo Grande, or hitching a ride on the Overland Trail rail car, built in 1949.

Local rail history

Trains have a long history on the Central Coast, dating to the Pacific Coast Railway, which opened in 1873.

Originally a 10-mile link between Avila Beach and San Luis Obispo, the subsequently 71-mile-long, narrow-gauge train transported cattle, sugar beets and building materials to and from Port Harford.

“There wasn’t another connection with the outside world. Everything came by ship,” explained Dennis Pearson, superintendent of the San Luis Obispo Model Railroad Association.

When Union Oil discovered black gold in the Santa Maria Valley at the turn of the century, the railway added tank cars. Road projects sparked a gravel boom in the 1920s.

The Pacific Coast Railway’s popularity took a hit, however, when the Southern Pacific Railroad arrived in San Luis Obispo in 1894. (The Pacific Coast Railway folded in 1941.)

By 1903, San Luis Obispo had become the midpoint for Southern Pacific’s Coast Route between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tradesmen shipped boxcars of celery and sand. Soldiers stationed at Camp Roberts and Camp San Luis Obispo rode the rails during World War II.

The railroad was the city’s biggest employer, with up to 400 workers at its heyday. Then diesel locomotives arrived in the 1950s, sending many facilities into disuse. Today, few reminders of the county’s once bustling railways remain.

Much of the historic Southern Pacific rail yard in San Luis Obispo, including the train depot, roundhouse and turntable bridge, has been destroyed. Paso Robles’ renovated train depot now houses a winery.

In the South County, only the Oceano Train Depot — installed in 1904 — stands in its original condition.

“We’re real proud of it,” said Linda Austin, president of the Oceano Depot Association. “It’s a very important landmark.”

Added Austin, “There’s a big, big interest in railroads and old train stations. People are getting more nostalgic about things in the past.”

Renewed interest

Reinhardt also sees growing interest in trains — as a cheaper, greener and more relaxing alternative to driving.

Amtrak's Coast Starlight route links Seattle to Los Angeles with stops in San Luis Obispo and Paso Robles. Passengers on the Pacific Surfliner travel from San Luis Obispo to San Diego.

"You can't drive past Vandenberg Air Base and see the launch pads, but you can on a train," said Reinhardt, who rides the Pacific Surfliner three or four times a year.

He believes the Central Coast Railroad Festival has the potential to become a "signature event" similar to the California Mid-State Fair and San Luis Obispo International Film Festival.

"I'm looking forward to igniting a passion and a curiosity about railroads," Reinhardt said.

This story was originally published October 7, 2009, 11:41 PM.

Take Us With You

Real-time updates and all local stories you want right in the palm of your hand.



SAN LUIS OBISPO TRIBUNE APP →



VIEW NEWSLETTERS →



SUBSCRIPTIONS

Start a Subscription

Customer Service

eEdition

Vacation Hold

Pay Your Bill

LEARN MORE

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Archives](#)

[Personal Finance](#)

ADVERTISING

[McClatchy Advertising](#)

[Place an Ad](#)

[Place a Classified Ad](#)

[Place an Obituary](#)

[Staffing Solutions](#)

[Political | Advocacy Advertising](#)

Part of the McClatchy Media Network

COPYRIGHT

PRIVACY POLICY

YOUR PRIVACY CHOICES

TERMS OF SERVICE