



April 6, 2022

140th Anniversary of the Railroad coming to Santa Maria

Friday April 15, 2022 is the 140th anniversary of the completion of the Pacific Coast Railway into Santa Maria. The Pacific Coast Railway originally went from Port Hartford, which is now Avila Beach, to San Luis Obispo. The PCR expanded south and reached Santa Maria on April 15, 1882 and eventually Los Olivos in 1887.

After the arrival to Santa Maria, the Pacific Coast Railway eventually expanded by branching off to Guadalupe and Betteravia. With a rail connection to the outside world, Santa Maria rapidly grew as getting local products to national markets brought growth and prosperity to the Santa Maria Valley.

The Pacific Coast Railway was hand built by the backs of immigrant labor. Chinese immigrants hand built the line into Santa Maria. As the construction moved south and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 shut the flow of Chinese workers into the United States, Japanese immigrants continued the construction south.

With the Santa Maria Valley Railroad reaching Santa Maria from the Southern Pacific Railroad in Guadalupe in 1911 and later the advent of trucks and automobiles, the Pacific Coast Railway fell on hard times. By 1941 the railroad went into bankruptcy.

In 1942 the United States had just entered World War II. Labor shortages were caused by the rush to the war effort and Japanese Americans on the west coast being rounded up and placed into internment camps. Captain Hancock purchased a portion of the Pacific Coast Railway and Hispanic immigrants were brought in to build the west and east legs of the wye to connect the Santa Maria Valley Railroad to the Pacific Coast Railway and rebuild the acquired Pacific Coast Railway section to standard gauge track which became the Airbase Branch.

Today the Santa Maria Valley Railroad's Airbase Branch is the last remaining Pacific Coast Railway's right of way still operated as a railroad and remains as a critical line. The railroad's role in solving global supply chain issues were even more important the last couple of years as the Santa Maria Valley Railroad served its customers with an increasing amount of freight traveling by rail.

The Santa Maria Valley Railroad's Airbase Branch is a key line for the future of the railroad and the Santa Maria Valley. Future plans are to run excursion trains to attract tourists and visitors to the Santa Maria Valley and eventually provide commuter service to enable the City of Santa Maria to reduce its carbon footprint.

Recently the City of Santa Maria coordinated a massive cleanup of trash and homeless encampments along the railroad right of way. The last several years the Santa Maria Valley Railroad was overwhelmed with trash and homeless encampments. Joy Castaing, City of Santa Maria's Code Enforcement Officer, coordinated an effort bringing a partnership of multiple city departments, adjacent landowners and businesses, and nonprofits to assist the homeless for assistance and relocation, cleaned up 62,000 lbs. of trash, removing overgrown foliage and installing temporary fencing.

Plans are to increase frequency of patrol in the area, landscape the area to deter foot traffic, and Serve Santa Maria is scheduled to remove the graffiti from the block walls. The nonprofit Friends of the Santa Maria Valley Railroad is heading an effort for permanent fixtures and signage along the public areas of the Airbase Branch to educate the public about the history of the railroad line.

Rob Himoto, President of the Santa Maria Valley Railroad, said "We really appreciate the massive cleanup operation along our line. We were overwhelmed by the trash and homeless situation and the area was unsafe for our train and track crews working in the area. The line was and continues to be so important in the economic growth of Santa Maria. For us this is hallowed ground, looking at the right of way with the roadbed and track built by hand by immigrant labor. We thank the City of Santa Maria, neighboring businesses, landowners, and nonprofits, to restore the right of way."

A small ceremony will be held at the Santa Maria Valley Railroad's diamond at the end of South Railroad Avenue off of West Boone Street on April 15 at 2:00 pm. Santa Maria Valley Railroad's newest locomotive, FWRV 3501, will make an appearance. For more information phone (805) 922-7941 or email newsinfo@smvrr.com.