

The little county that could

This weekend, Arroyo Grande hosts a salute to the transportation system that helped put the SLO region on the map

By JOSH KRANE

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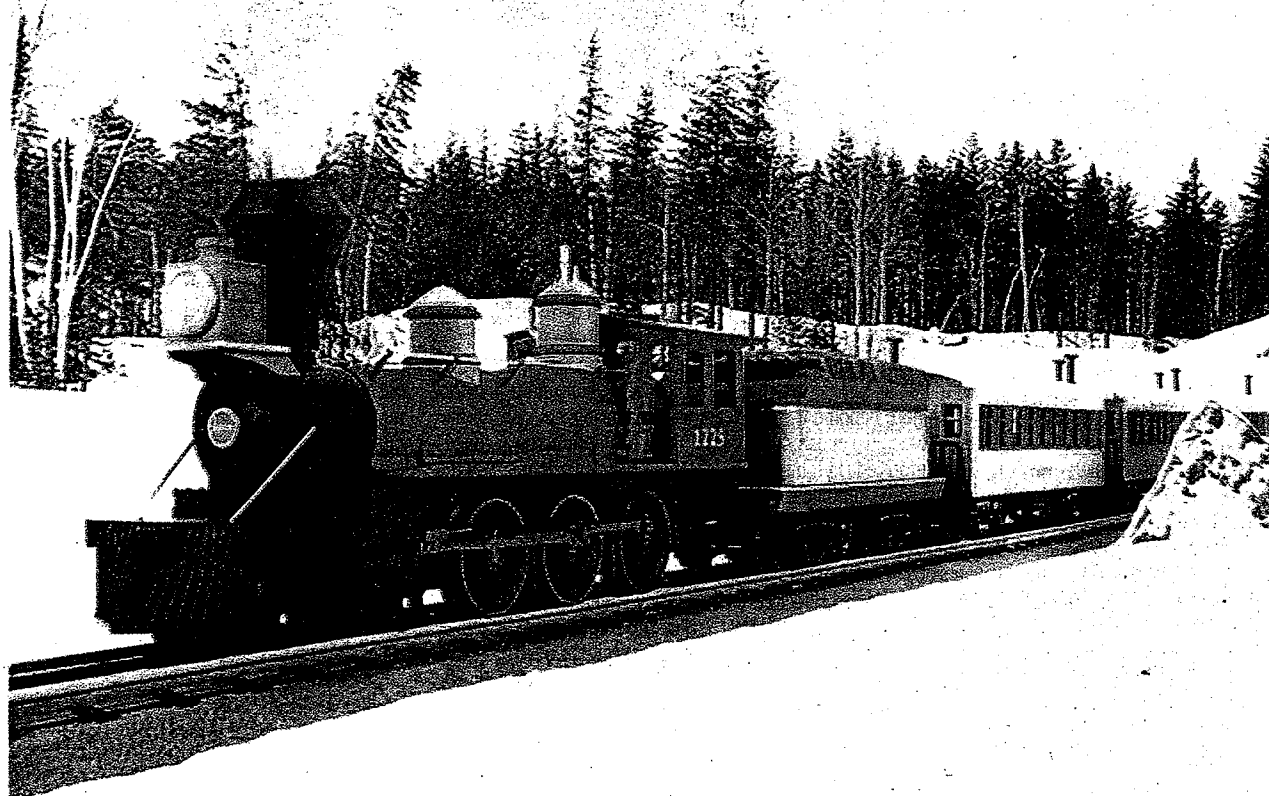
If it weren't for the railroads, notes local historian Loren Nicholson, San Luis Obispo County as we know it might not exist.

The building of the Pacific Coast Railroad in Avila Beach in 1870 officially opened SLO County to the world, he said, allowing ships to import large amounts of goods into what is now Port San Luis. It also enabled local farmers to export significant portions of their crops and livestock to big markets, such as San Francisco.

With this newfound growth potential provided by train travel, towns soon sprang up in Oceano and over the Cuesta Grade in Templeton and Santa Margarita.

"The railroads gave us our start here as an economy," said Nicholson, a former Cal Poly journalism professor and author of "Rails Across the Ranchos," which tells the history of the railroads in San Luis Obispo County.

During Railroad Weekend, Dec. 8 and 9 at the IOOF Historic Hall in the Arroyo Grande Village, historians, teachers and train enthusiasts



COURTESY OF SOUTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Railroad Weekend, set for Dec. 8 and 9 at the IOOF Heritage Hall, is a salute to San Luis Obispo County's train heritage.

will celebrate the county's rich railroad history with some holiday cheer and events geared toward families.

The free event, sponsored by the South County Historical Society and the San Luis Obispo Model Railroad Association, will take place next to the venue's "Treasures of Avila" exhibit, which was created by Nicholson.

Throughout the weekend, the SLO Model Railroad Association will be running two model trains across a 10- by 6-foot display depicting the era of the Pacific Coast Railroad. About 6 inches long and 2 inches high, the model trains will be Christmas themed, with one replicating the locomotive from the book and film, "The Polar Express."

"It's really neat because the

kids are really excited about it, and then the parents get into it because the kids are excited about it" said Jim Keating, president of the club, which meets monthly at the Oceano Railroad Depot and Museum.

The creation of a model railroading display is an intricate process, Keating said. From wiring to painting backdrops to creating scenery that flows together in perfect proportion to the model trains themselves, he said it's a thrill trying to make a display look as authentic as possible.

"When you're doing scale-model railroading and you're looking at something depicting the real thing, when it's done right, it just has a tremendous pull to people," he said.

RAILROAD WEEKEND

11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 8, and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 9
IOOF Heritage Hall, 128 Bridge St., Arroyo Grande Village

489-8282

www.southcountyhistory.org or
www.slojrmra.org

Doc Burnstein's Ice Cream Lab in Arroyo Grande will also have a model railroad display at the event.

Each day at 2:30 p.m., Nicholson will give lectures on the history of the railroads in San Luis Obispo County. He will also sign copies of "Rails Across the Ranchos."

For children, train- and holiday-related stories will be told

each day by Rebecca Nadel, Arroyo Grande Library children's librarian, Historical Society President Jane Line and teachers Chuck Burns and Lia Kalpakoff.

"I think it's a wonderful start in local history for young people," Nicholson said.

The first 300 children at the event will receive free wooden train whistles, courtesy of Doc Burnstein's Ice Cream Lab in Arroyo Grande. There will also be continuous screenings of "The Polar Express" at the event. At 3 p.m. each day, local Wild Wood Winery will offer a complementary tastes of one of its selected wines.

Reach Josh Krane at 781-7864.