

The History of Avila Beach and Port San Luis

Teacher Resource and Information

*A collaborative work between the Port San Luis Harbor District
and the San Luis Obispo County History Center*

When you take a field trip to Avila Beach, you are taking a step back into history. As the bus takes you down the winding road to get to the historic town of Avila you travel alongside San Luis Creek, which is the same creek that runs in front of Mission San Luis Obispo. As you approach the seaside town you can start to smell



Avila Beach in the 1960's. You can see the oil storage tanks that surrounded the hills. At one time large oil tankers would come into the bay to transport oil that came from the oil fields in the area.

the ocean breeze and feel the temperature begin to cool down. As you enter into town one of the first things you notice is the beautiful ocean and the hills that surround Avila Beach. You are now in the historic town of Avila Beach, which was home to the Chumash Native Americans over a thousand years ago. An archaeological dig at Avila found obsidian arrows and spearheads which indicated that Chumash lived in the area over 2,500 years ago. If you get to walk out onto one of Avila's piers you can look at the entire area and realize what a great place it was to visit or live if you were Chumash. The bay is surrounded by rolling hills, lots of large trees, San Luis Creek, and a whole bunch of sand. A Chumash boy or girl would spend their days roaming the hills, playing in the ocean, fishing, playing in the fresh water from the creek, and playing fun games with each other.



******Time Travel: If you were a Chumash 10-year-old living in Avila, what game would you play? You are at the beach, which is surrounded by hills and a creek. Remember, rocks, sticks and shells were the basic kinds of toys. Take one minute to think about what game you would play, then share your idea with a partner. What are some ideas your class came up with?**

The Chumash were the only people in the area when the Spanish explorers started to visit in the 1500's. The Spaniards were always on the lookout for safe harbors to protect their ships during the severe winter storms that would occur on the coast of California. Avila was a small, but safe harbor for ships and schooners who needed a safe place during a storm. The Spaniards were very smart because they always had a person on board the ship who kept a diary of their journeys.

One of the first recorded visits by a European was Portuguese explorer Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeno. He sailed up and down the California coast until his large Spanish galleon sank in a storm. After the ship wreck, Cermeno used a smaller boat to continue his exploration of California, which in 1595 enabled him to discover the small bay that would soon be named San Luis Bay/Avila Bay.



******Time Travel: If you were Chumash and saw a boat with several strangely dressed people land in your bay, what would you do? Would you run and hide or would you go down to meet them? Explain your choice.**

Many years went by with no more visits by anyone from Europe, and the Chumash people continued their lives peacefully. By the mid 1700's, the Spanish ships came back to California and began exploring the coast by land and sea. In 1772, Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa was founded and the priests began to communicate and develop friendships with the local Chumash population. The Spaniards realized that San Luis Bay/Avila Bay was the closest and safest harbor in the area of the new mission, so the bay became an important link in providing supplies to the newly established Mission San Luis Obispo. With the coming of the Spanish, things would soon change for the Chumash living in California. With the Spanish came their diseases, such as small pox and measles. These were new illnesses that the Chumash had never had before and Chumash medicines could not cure. Because of these new diseases, the Chumash population was almost completely wiped out.

As the years went by, the Spanish population grew, but their rule would only last a little over 50 years (1769-1821) until the Mexican government took control of California. When the Mexican government took control of the area they started to divide California into large ranches which were called ranchos. Some of these ranchos were over 40,000 acres of land. In 1842, a Mexican citizen named Miguel Avila requested a land grant from Mexico for over 22,000 acres of land which included the land that we know today as Avila Beach. It was given to him and his family and would become known as Rancho San Miguelito.

Don Miguel Avila (the word "Don" was added to a person's name as a show of respect for that person) was not a typical citizen of the time. He was the son of a



Spanish soldier who was stationed at the presidio in Santa Barbara. In 1824, Miguel became a mission guard at Mission San Luis Obispo and then transferred to Monterey where he met his wife Ynocenta (aka Inocenta), who was one of the rich Pica family. Because his wife was from such a wealthy family, getting a land grant was much easier to obtain. He served as an Alcalde (an alcalde was basically known as a leader of a town) in San Luis Obispo during the Mexican period and was a rancher of cattle as well. He and Ynocenta had a large family. People in San Luis Obispo, for a period of time, called the area of Avila Beach "Ynocenta" after Miguel's wife. In 1863-1864, there was so little rain in our area it caused a severe drought. Many of Don Avila's cattle died due to lack of water and fresh grass to eat. In 1867, to help get money for the family one of Don Miguel's sons laid out a plan to develop the area into a town. They started selling lots and chunks of land to settlers and businessmen. This is the period of time when Avila Beach became an important town to the growth of San Luis Obispo.

******Time Travel: If you were in the Avila family, what percentage of your rancho would you want to sell to make money for your family? Would you sell 10%, 25%, 40%, or 50% of your land? Why did you choose your percentage?**

One of the first people to purchase land from the Avila family was John Harford. John was part-owner of a lumber company in San Luis Obispo and a very smart



businessman. There were already several wharves (a wharf is like a pier) in the area, but John and a group of businessmen wanted to build a wharf inside of the harbor which would be a safe place for ships to dock and unload their cargo. In 1868, John and his partners formed the People's Wharf Co. This wharf was built very close to the present day Avila Pier, which was thought of as a good location by most of the partners. The only partner who was not very happy was John Harford.

John wanted to build the wharf closer to the point of the harbor in a safer place to anchor a ship during a storm. Not being happy with the way business was being handled at the People's Wharf, John came up with a great idea. He purchased the entire shoreline from the point of the bay to San Luis Creek and decided to build his own wharf with his own money. "I invested my limited means in the purchase of the land and the making of a grade, and steadily pursued my purpose until the present railroad project became a success." John told the Tribune newspaper in 1875. He fulfilled his dream by building a wharf reaching 540 feet into the ocean from the shore. On the wharf he also built a railroad track to accommodate his new and unique railroad.

Avila Beach/Port San Luis was becoming a key port for the city of San Luis Obispo and other surrounding towns. John Harford's railroad was an important addition to the success of the port. Because there was not a road along the shore like there is today, John created a road that went up the side of the hill. His road went up to a half way point in the hill where he then blasted a hole in the hill to create a short tunnel. He then built his railroad tracks on the road up one side of the hill and down the other side until the tracks reached the point where the creek meets the ocean. Instead of a train engine, John used horses to pull the train. He hooked up six horses to 3 or 4 flatbed railroad cars and the horses pulled to cars up to the top of the hill where the horses were unhitched and the railroad cars gently glided down the other side of the hill with the assistance of a brakeman who controlled



The side of the hill where John Harford built his railroad. You can see the "new" road that was built below Harford's original railroad track.

the speed of the train until it reached the bottom of the hill. This type of train was called a "gravity railroad system." It was 1873 when the wharf and railroad were completed. Eventually the train consisted of ten flat cars with one of those flat cars being equipped with benches to accommodate passengers.

Another element of Port San Luis is the breakwater wall that was built to help protect the harbor from large ocean swells. The huge rocks that make up the breakwater actually came from Morro Rock in Morro Bay. Starting in the 1890's, large chunks of Morro Rock were blasted with dynamite and those boulders were brought to Port San Luis on a barge towed by a tug boat. The construction of the breakwater started in the 1890's and continued up until around 1913. With repairs to the breakwater wall over the years, the breakwater continues to stand as a protection to the harbor and the town of Avila Beach.



After the destruction of the People's Wharf Company pier by a storm, the present day Avila Pier was originally constructed nearby in 1908 by the County of San Luis Obispo so the county would have their own pier for county business. You've now heard about two of our current piers, the Avila Pier and the Harford Pier, but there are more than two piers in Avila. The third pier that you pass on the way out to Harford Pier was known for many years as the Unocal Pier. The Unocal Pier was built in the early 1900's and was used by other businesses until Union Oil bought the pier from Pacific Coast Railway Co. in 1941. At that time the pier became known as the Union Oil Pier. At one time, the hills of Avila Bay were filled with large oil storage tanks that would hold oil until oil tankers came into the bay to load it onto their ships and take it to a refinery in Southern California. In 2001, Union Oil donated their pier to Cal Poly State University in San Luis Obispo for use by their various science departments.

In the 1880's, lots of steam ships loaded with passengers started coming to Port San Luis and many of those steam ships came to Harford's Wharf so they could ride the train into San Luis Obispo. Many businessmen along the coast started to realize that traveling by steam ship was becoming very popular. The other major idea was to bring a real steam locomotive to the area and build an entire railroad system in the county. With all of this activity, Port San Luis became an important link in the growth of the county.

With the growth of the steam ships and increased trips that were being made up and down the coast during all kinds of weather, ship wrecks were becoming a more frequent occurrence. As the number of ship wrecks increased near Port San Luis, a lighthouse was requested by the citizens of the county. The government eventually granted their wishes. In 1867, President Andrew Johnson created the United States Light House Service in response to more ship accidents occurring around the country due to the increase of ship movement. San Luis Obispo Congressman Romaldo Pacheco introduced a bill in Congress in 1877 to build a lighthouse at Port San Luis. The lighthouse was finally completed in 1890 to the delight of many ship captains and passengers. The lens that was used in the lighthouse was handmade in Paris, France, in 1878 and could be seen as far as 20 miles out to sea.

In 1939, the United States Coast Guard took over the operations of the lighthouse as a result of the reduced usage of lighthouses along the coast of California. Over the years the Coast Guard built several more buildings next to the lighthouse to house the families that worked at the lighthouse. By 1960, a narrow one-lane road was built from Port San Luis to the lighthouse because prior to that land vehicles



could not get to the lighthouse. In 1969, the lighthouse lens was retired and replaced by an automated electric light, and in 1974 the Coast Guard closed the lighthouse completely.

Then in 1992, the Port San Luis Harbor District received the 30-acre site from the federal government with a requirement that the lighthouse be restored and opened to the public. In 1995, under the direction of then Commissioner/President Carolyn Moffatt, local businessman Warren Sinsheimer and a group of many supportive people created the Point San Luis Lighthouse Keepers. The Lighthouse Keepers were formed to take the responsibility of restoring the lighthouse. Today the lighthouse is open to the public and tours of the lighthouse are offered every Saturday and on other special occasions. Taking a tour of the lighthouse will give you lots more information about the lighthouse and allow you to step back into history.

******Time Travel: Would you want to live at the lighthouse knowing you would be home schooled and very seldom leave the lighthouse area? Explain why you would want to live at the lighthouse or why you would not want to live there.**

Avila Beach and Port San Luis Today

Today when you visit Port San Luis there are two piers that you can walk out onto. Avila Pier and Harford Pier are the two piers that will take you out over the water that is about 15 to 20 deep. As you walk out on either pier, you have a wonderful view of the bay and the surrounding hills that make this area a beautiful place to visit. The Cal Poly Pier (the old Union Oil Pier) is not open to the public unless you call and make special arrangement to visit their pier.

If your family likes to ride bikes, then you can ride your bikes to Avila Beach on the Bob Jones bike trail, which has a trail head on Ontario Road. As you ride your bikes on this trail you are actually stepping back into history because the bike trail follows the exact path that the railroad ran on over 100 years ago that went from Avila to San Luis Obispo. Another cool activity for the family or a school is a visit to the Sea Life Center that is next to the park in Avila, and, of course, a trip to the Port San Luis Lighthouse would be another fun activity.



This is the original track that went from San Luis Obispo to Port San Luis/Avila beach. Today this trail is the Bob Jones bike trail. Thanks to the Historical County Museum (History Center) in San Luis Obispo for this great photo.

The history of Avila and Port San Luis is very interesting because it was involved in every period of California history, starting with the Chumash, then the Spanish, then Mexico and finally the United States. There is lots more history in Avila Beach that has not been told in this report, but with a little more investigation a person can find out that during World War II we had submarines in Avila Bay or that Sir Francis Drake once sailed by the bay in the 1579. If you take a field trip to Avila Beach/Port San Luis and you use a little imagination, you can step back in time and imagine a Spanish galleon sailing by or a group of Chumash kids playing on the beach, or imagine a steam locomotive chugging along the side of the cliff going towards San Luis Obispo. Visiting Avila is a fun and educational trip back into the history of our county.



Harford Wharf at the turn of the century



The train going over San Luis Creek in the early 1900's



Avila Beach today from the hills above the bay



The lens that was once in the lighthouse

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San Luis Obispo County History Center, San Luis Obispo. Black and White Photos on pages 9 and 10.

www.avilabeachpier.com

www.portsanluis.com

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www.historyinslocounty.org

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