

*Our Neighbors in
Simi Valley*



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Introduction
by Mary Goldberg

In this article in the “Neighbors” series, we explore two historic sites in Simi Valley. You may have driven past the Strathearn Historical Park and wondered what was there. Or seen the Santa Susana Railroad Depot--but never knew it’s history. As always, be sure to check their websites before you visit these sites for reopening information and activities.

Strathearn Historical Park and Museum Simi Valley History Hiding in Plain Sight



137 Strathearn Place
Simi Valley, CA 93063

Where can you go in Ventura County and visit buildings in one location that depict life growing up in the late 1800s and early 1900s? The answer to that question would be the Strathearn Historical Park and Museum in Simi Valley.

You can start your adventure by visiting one of the oldest adobes in the state.

A portion of the original headquarters for El Rancho de San Jose de Nuestra Señora de Altagracia y Simi remains on the site where it was built! A soldier by the name of Felipe Santiago de la Cruz Pico served his ten-year enlistment in the Spanish army. He requested land, but the Governor wanted him to settle in the new small town of Los Angeles. After ten years, he was allowed to occupy

about 100,000 acres of what became El Rancho Simi. Pico did not own the land, but held it for the King of Spain. He was required to build a house, plant trees and raise sheep or cattle. He also grew corn, beans, chili peppers, pumpkins, and melons.

Pico's only choice for housing was to make bricks of mud combined with straw (adobe) for the walls. The roof was made from sticks or poles, and bunches of reeds for thatch. The floor was packed earth and there was a cowhide flap that served as the door. Because it was adobe, the house was cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

Around 1831, a Spanish soldier by the name of Jose de la Guerra y Noriega, Comandante of the Presidio in Santa Barbara, bought the Pico land grant. The existing Simi adobe continued to be occupied, as the American period began and ownership passed into new hands.

In Scotland (1874), the health of a young man named Robert Perkins Strathearn determined that he should move to a warmer climate. He knew the outlook in California was good, as relatives already lived in Santa Barbara. He began ranching in Piru, and eventually he purchased about 15,000 acres of land from Simi Land and Water Company (1889). Strathearn and his four sons raised cattle.



Unwilling to waste or demolish the existing adobe, they repaired the adobe, using the two rooms as the kitchen and dining room. The new “Victorian” farmhouse was added to the front in 1893. Be sure to check out the thick adobe walls, obvious though they have been modernized a few times! The last time was 1959.

Have you ever considered owning a pre-fabricated house? At Strathearn Park we have examples of the very first pre-fab house, possibly the first in the nation!



How would you have liked to live in a two-story, two-bedroom (no bathroom) pre-fabricated house (pre-cut and partially assembled) from 1888? Twelve of these homes were loaded on railroad cars in Chicago bound for Saticoy, the closest rail point at the time. From there they were hauled by wagon to Simi. They were assembled and formed the nucleus of the new little town, which they called Simiopolis!

Come see the only two remaining Colony Houses on the property at Strathearn Park. First is the Haigh-Talley Colony House (blue). The second is the Printz-Powell Colony House (yellow). These homes were named after the families who previously owned them. The Printz-Powell home was not only the residence for the Printz family, it also served as the U.S. Post Office from 1904 till 1941. Rosa Arabella Printz was postmistress. This Colony House was also the telephone central when phone service first came to Simi. Rosa's daughter Bessie worked for the phone company long after the system of connecting folks to each other was updated.

Now that you had a roof over your head, the next priority was for school and church. (And one of those colony houses was used for both purposes for a while—and a dance on Saturday night!) These two locations were the basis of most community activities from the beginning of the Simi Colony.

Did you know that as late as 1963, parishioners in Simi stood outside listening to services on loudspeakers, because there was no room in the church?



St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church held Mass in this tiny building from 1910 until 1964. In the 1940s the old 60-occupant building was enlarged to seat 160, which helped as the congregation rapidly grew. But by 1963, folks spilled out onto the sidewalks surrounding the church and those who were late arriving to church found themselves on the outside looking in and listening to mass from the loudspeakers.



Do you know about the first purpose-built local library of the Ventura County Library System? The citizens of Simi decided they would like a library building of their own. Beginning in 1916, the local facilities of the Ventura County Library system had been housed in a corner of the Methodist Church. Several families from Simi raised the money

to buy property next to the old Simi School lot on Third Street in the Colony, and Ventura County built this tiny library. Later it was leased to the Simi Valley Historical Society for use as a small community museum before being moved to its permanent spot on the Strathearn Park grounds. Many Simi Valley memories are based on this favorite spot.

Where could you buy embroidery thread and patterns, and if you were a kid, some penny candy? There was a local store!

It was first known as Dora Beach's little general store in the early 1900s. The building was located on Los Angeles Avenue, between Third and Fourth Streets. As you can imagine, a building that old can have a varied past. Women bought their sewing notions there, and children went there for good old penny candy. Between the time Dora ran her general store and 1958, the building served many purposes, including Ted Greathouse's fledgling chiropractic office. In 1958, Manuel Bañaga, Jr. turned the building into a barbershop, which he continued to operate there for 50 years. This building has always been a part of "downtown Simi."

When development of the city began, the ranches and farms slowly disappeared and neighborhoods were built. But where did the barns from the Wood Ranch disappear to?

As more developments continued to be built in the city, more ranches like the Wood Ranch disappeared. It was in the 1890s that a man by the name of Charles B. McCoy purchased the land. He later sold the land to the Wood family and that property is what we know today as simply Wood Ranch. The closed barn was cut into three parts and the open barn into two. They came sailing down Madera Road (Did you know that Madera in Spanish means wood?), and traffic was stopped in all directions. Then they were moved across empty fields, into the back of Strathearn Park--to be used to house our growing collection of farm implements. The closed barn is used for miscellaneous exhibits, and the large open interior is used for events such as wedding receptions.

There are other buildings at Strathearn Park just waiting for your visit. We have a Strathearn garage that was converted into our Simi Store, a playhouse enjoyed by the Montgomery children and grandchildren, and an apricot pitting shed loaded with agricultural equipment. Of course; we would like for you to come see us in person but you also have the opportunity to visit Strathearn Historical Park and Museum by taking a virtual tour of our buildings by downloading a QR code.

We look forward to welcoming you to our park soon! Visit us at www.simihistory.com or www.facebook.com/Strathearnpark for park updates.



Depot At Its Present Location

The Santa Susana Railroad Depot and Museum

6503 Katherine Rd
Santa Susana, CA 93063

When the Southern Pacific Railroad first proposed a Coast Line Route in 1888, the tracks were laid from the Bay area south toward San Jose thru the Salinas Valley into San Luis Obispo.

This would be the halfway point on the coast line, and is still a crew change point for Union Pacific and Amtrak train personnel. The tracks continued south along the Coast through Santa Barbara and into Ventura.

When the American Sugar Beet Factory opened in Oxnard in 1900, the tracks continued through the Oxnard plains into Moorpark and finally Santa Susana. This would be the end of the line coming from the North until 1904.

Communities grew up around train stations. They were usually the first Post Office in town so all shipping and receiving was done at the Depot. The early years of communication meant that all telegraph and telegrams were wired at the train station and where locals congregated to hear the latest news.



Depot in the Early 1900's



Depot After Blizzard in 1949

The Santa Susana Depot was completed in 1903 and located 550 feet East of Tapo Street and Los Angeles Avenue.



Businesses appeared across the street as the community of Santa Susana started to grow. The "Crinklaw" Building, a General Store, was the first to open in 1908.

The Depot became the hub for the shipping of agricultural products for many years. It was also the headquarters for local freight shipments.

In the Depot's prime years, transportation was quite different. Passenger trains would stop and people would get off and be greeted by family members driving early automobiles that were started with a hand crank. Crated equipment

ordered through mail order companies would arrive and be carted off by horse drawn wagons.



Agent's Office

The docents at the Depot will share with visitors the many responsibilities of Agents, including, the handing up of train orders as the train crews passed the Depot at 40 miles per hour. Mail trains traveling at 70 miles per hour would yank outgoing mail sacks off a mail crane located in front of the Depot. During the early years, Agents also lived upstairs in living quarters that included two bedrooms, living space and kitchen.



Kitchen



Bedroom

Roscoe and Laura Sims lived and worked at the Santa Susana Depot. All rooms are decorated in mid-30's to 40's décor, giving us a chance to see and feel what it might have been like to live through that time period.

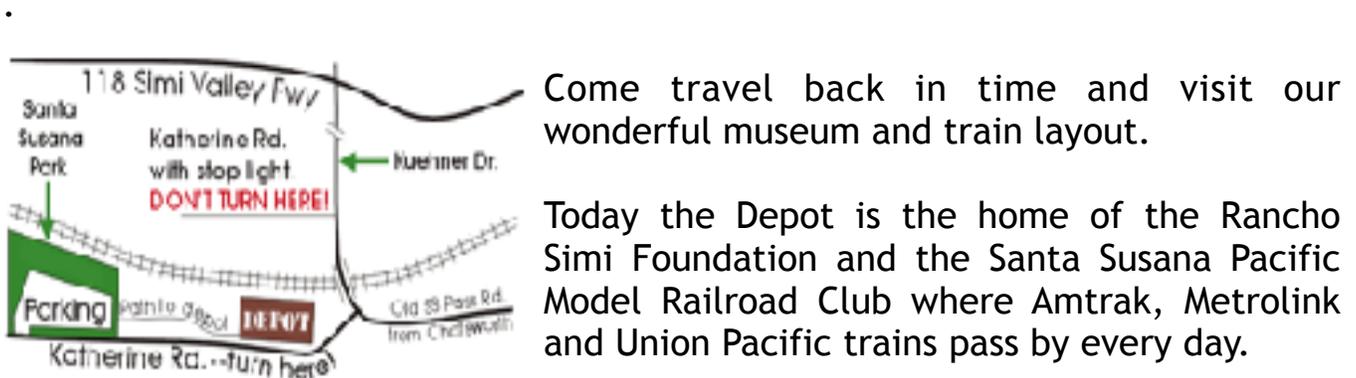
The last passenger train carrying daily mail ceased operations in 1965. The Depot remained open until 1974 so the Agent could hand up train orders called flimsies by Railroaders. They provided official instructions to the train crews.

The Southern Pacific Transportation Company announced its plans in the early 1970's to abandon and demolish the Santa Susana Depot. There was community interest to save the Depot as a reminder of Simi Valley's early days.

The Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District purchased the building for \$1.06 with the understanding the Depot would be moved off of Railroad property as soon as possible.

On May 9, 1975, the Depot was cut into 3 sections and was slowly moved down Los Angeles Avenue to its present location at the base of the Santa Susana Pass Road. It sits next to the same main line it serviced for almost 75 years.

Funds and Grants were needed in order to restore the Depot. In 1999, the Depot opened to the public, sharing this wonderful Chapter in Simi Valley's history. Many displays have been created over the last two decades enhancing railroad operations from a bygone era.



The Depot is open Saturday and Sundays from 1 to 4 pm. Group tours are available by appointment.

Located at:
 6503 Katherine Rd
 Santa Susana, CA 93063
 Phone: 805 581-3462
 Website: <http://santasusannadepot.org/>

Do you have a comment, story or photo you'd like to share?

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