

When San Luis Obispo Last Hosted a President—And Heard a Milestone Message

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In the historical context of California, San Luis Obispo has a relatively long history, going back at least to the founding of Father Serra's mission here in 1772. Yet over this long arc of time, San Luis Obispo has hosted only two United States presidents: William McKinley in 1901 and Theodore Roosevelt two years later. When we look back at that second presidential visit in 1903, it proves to be a powerful lens that brings into focus a key moment in the evolution of this small hamlet as it entered the exciting span of the twentieth century. In that brief hour shared with Teddy Roosevelt in 1903, we can find a touchstone for the fierce spirit of environmentalism that has inspired every battle between the opposing forces of exploitation and those who wish to protect this unique landscape. Succeeding generations—including our own—would follow Teddy Roosevelt's clarion call in efforts to preserve landmarks like Morro Rock, the Nipomo Dunes, and the Carrizo Plain. Roosevelt saluted the imminent launch of a fine agricultural college in his speech, even as its boundaries were being surveyed; we have nurtured and developed Cal Poly into its current reputation as one of the best overall teaching universities in the world. Within five years of his appearance here, Roosevelt would sign into law the creation of the various national forests that would be consolidated into the Santa Barbara National Forest, now Los Padres, protecting the scenic mountains and watersheds that embrace the Central Coast like the knuckles of a gentle glove.

Let's revisit the moment a US President visits San Luis Obispo, 112 years ago:

It's 5:30 in the afternoon on Saturday, 9 May 1903. The sun is glinting off the hillsides sheltering the small town of San Luis Obispo, population three thousand. At least half the county's population of twenty thousand has turned out at the Southern Pacific Railroad Station, coming from as far as a hundred miles away.¹ President Theodore Roosevelt and his entourage are just arriving on the Roosevelt Special, six opulently appointed railway cars provided by the Pennsylvania Railroad.²

1. "Delighted Thousands Gather at San Luis Obispo," *San Francisco Call*, 10 May 1903: 1.

2. Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009): 507.

When Teddy Roosevelt came to town in 1903, it was almost exactly at the midpoint of his Great Loop tour that covered 14,000 miles by rail, 25 states, and over 250 speeches from April 1 through June 6. His journey had already taken him to Yellowstone National Park to camp out with famed naturalist John Burroughs. In fact, Roosevelt would take time on this tour to visit with several Western naturalists who knew him not so much as president but a renowned observer of and passionate advocate for birds, wildlife, and geology. Following his brief one-hour stop in San Luis Obispo, Teddy and his train would go on to spend the night and most of a leisurely Sunday on the Monterey Peninsula, three days in San Francisco, and four days in Yosemite with John Muir. The tour would then take him north to Portland and Seattle before returning west across the Cascades, the Rockies, and the Great Plains before he returned to his wife Edith and their six children in Washington, DC.

As the train rumbles to a stop in San Luis Obispo, the County Band begins playing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Roosevelt is greeted by local leaders Judge R. P. Unangst and Mayor McD. R. Venable, who usher the president onto the rear platform to see the hushed crowd of thousands at the station. They hesitate at first to offer a cheer. Most of those awaiting the president have read the announcement in the previous week’s newspaper of a special request by Roosevelt’s personal secretary William Loeb that “no fireworks or firearms of any character whatever be exploded during President Roosevelt’s visit. Anyone who violates or attempts to violate this regulation will be promptly arrested.”³ It was barely twenty months ago that an anarchist with a pistol assassinated President William McKinley in Buffalo, New York—the tragic act that vaulted Roosevelt into the presidency as the youngest man ever to serve in that office.

Among the strangely silent crowd this warm May afternoon at the SP Depot was Mrs. Annie L. Morrison, a schoolteacher and mother of four. Here is Morrison’s account from a 1919 article:

With the crowd we were standing on the pavement near the station. Strange as it may seem, no one cheered. Not a single “Hurrah” broke a sort of tenseness that enveloped the people. Probably, almost certainly, a fear of some act of violence held the crowd in thrall. I waited for someone to cheer. I felt as if our president were being mortally insulted, and with no idea but to honor our chief I sprang on the curb, threw up my right arm and yelled—plain yelled—“Hurrah for Roosevelt! Three cheers for Roosevelt!”

3. “Special Notice,” *Morning Tribune*, 7 May 1903.

That started it: The street rang then with loyal cheers.⁴

The Chief Executive steps directly from the train onto the first of nine horse-drawn carriages festooned with bunting.

Mrs. Morrison continues her recounting of the visit:

The carriage was then just opposite me, and I was only a little middle-aged country school teacher from the hills, but “Teddy,” who I am sure sensed the whole situation, rose straight up from his seat, swept off his silk hat, showed all his teeth in one big smile, and facing me bowed low and waved his hand. Then we all howled and howled and turning went in one big stampede for Mitchell’s block.⁵

The presidential caravan rattles along the dusty streets—the City has suspended its first macadam paving of Monterey Street for the president’s visit—and proceeds several blocks through town to its destination, the Mission San Luis Obispo.

At the mission, the *Morning Tribune* picks up the scene:

[W]ith uncovered heads, after an introduction of the president to Father Aguilera at the threshold, the whole party admiringly and reverently strolled through the sacred edifice. . . . President Roosevelt asked many questions, which were answered by Father Aguilera. He was shown the whole church—the original confessional built in the eighteenth century and the sacristy. Mrs. Judge Egan, who is an authority, showed the president the character of the work, the gold embroidery, etc. The old vestments and records were examined, and the president evinced great interest in everything. Just as the mission bells tolled the hour of six, as they have done for more than a century, the party reappeared and began the drive via Broad and Higuera Streets to the stand.⁶

The stand is a 20- by 28-foot wooden platform, surrounded by railings and festooned with a floral roof and a raised decking, four feet above the sandy open lot known as the Murphy

4. Annie L. Morrison. “Roosevelt’s Visit in This City May 9, 1903, as Viewed by Mrs. Annie L. Morrison.” *San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram*, 11 Jan. 1919

5. Annie Morrison was writing this account on the occasion of Roosevelt’s death. By that time, she had distinguished herself as a schoolteacher, journalist, and co-author with John Haydon of a 1917 “mug book” about San Luis Obispo pioneers. For more on the intrepid Morrison, visit Lynne Landwehr’s History in San Luis Obispo County at historyinslocounty.org/Annie%20Morrison%20Text.htm.

6. “President Was Most Successfully Entertained,” *Morning Tribune*, 12 May 1903.

block, bounded by Osos and Santa Rosa, Pismo and Buchon Streets.⁷ Roosevelt speaks for fifteen minutes, enthraling Annie Morrison and her four children and the crowd that may well exceed ten thousand—many of whom have arrived using “special excursion tickets” on the SPRR just to see and hear the president.⁸ As he closes his speech and the last cheers and applause recede to the accompaniment of the band playing “America,” Roosevelt and his entourage return to the depot, and the special train continues its journey north.

The full text of Roosevelt’s speech is available in a number of published sources and was printed in the newspapers of the city in the following days.⁹ It was delivered entirely without notes, and most of the themes were those Roosevelt had used to exhort the crowds throughout his tour over the past six weeks, with crowds



FIGURE 1. Roosevelt in Santa Barbara, 9 May 1903. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

that had regularly exceeded ten thousand, even reaching fifty thousand in Omaha, Nebraska (Brinkley 510).

Such was the drawing power of America’s “strenuous” young president, the hero of San Juan Hill, triumphantly traveling the breadth of the continent on much the same route taken by his predecessor, William McKinley, in 1901. Both McKinley and Roosevelt were champions of “Manifest Destiny” and saw the future of the still-young republic stretching even beyond the shores of the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii, the Philippines, and beyond. This would be Teddy’s first visit to America’s Pacific shore, and he had planned it meticulously.

Roosevelt’s speeches were faithfully recorded for each city on this two-month odyssey, from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on April 1, to the West Coast, and back to Springfield, Illinois on June 4. His remarks

7. This entire block would later be purchased from Frank C. Mitchell by the San Luis Obispo School District and is now Mitchell Park, the city’s most popular downtown open space after Mission Plaza. Roosevelt’s platform probably stood along the south side of today’s Mitchell Park adjacent to Osos Street.

8. “Excursionists Tickets on Account of President’s Visit—Will be Sold May 8th and 9th on Certain Trains to San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara,” *Morning Tribune*, 8 May 1903.

9. Alfred Henry Lewis, ed., *A Compilation of Messages and Speeches of Theodore Roosevelt, 1901–1905* (New York: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1906).

typically included a gracious acknowledgment of his hosts and a specific “tip of the hat” to veterans of the Spanish–American War and of the Grand Army of the Republic, many wearing their uniforms with pride. His rhetoric soared to the rafters as he praised the basic morality of the American people, “honesty, decency, clean living, fair dealing, patriotism, citizenship, courage, and common sense.” At each town, he pointed out signs of its prosperity, industry, and fertility.

In San Luis Obispo, Roosevelt said he was “glad to learn that the State of California is erecting here the Polytechnic Institute for giving all the scientific training in the arts of farm life. More and more our people have waked to the fact that farming is not only a practical, but a scientific pursuit, and that there should be the same chance for the tiller of the soil to make his a learned profession that there is in any other business” (Lewis 355).

During the course of his Great Loop tour to the American Far West, the magnificent landscape triggered a new and significant theme in the soul of the president that led to a shift in his rhetoric. In the eastern states, his themes were largely those cited above—hard work and industry, wisdom, and spiritual betterment. After his weeks in Yellowstone with Burroughs and his all-too-brief glimpse of the vast sandstone canyons of the Colorado River from the south rim of the Grand Canyon, something stirred in Roosevelt. All of his subsequent speeches emphasized conservation of the nation’s resources and preservation of its spectacular wilderness, the landscapes that he had witnessed for the first time in Yellowstone and in the Grand Canyon.

Douglas Brinkley, in his fine book *Wilderness Warrior*, recounts this transformation as Roosevelt gazes over the ledge of the Grand Canyon:

It is not hyperbole to say that Roosevelt’s jaw dropped in disbelief. ... He had long suspected that the Grand Canyon was the premier natural wonder in America, and now his hunch had been confirmed. ... Staring over the ledge of the Grand Canyon made the heart stop at the immensity of it all. ... To Roosevelt, the Grand Canyon was beyond debate ... : it must become the exclusive property of the United States to be saved for future generations. Roosevelt immediately resolved to make it a national park following the 1904 election ... [and] vowed to make sure that Arizona’s developers never drilled an inch of the Grand Canyon. He hoped his presidential visit would start a widespread grassroots movement to preserve it all—every damn acre in the 1,904 square miles—for perpetuity. “I want to ask you to do one thing in connection with it,” Roosevelt urged the crowd of Arizonans. “In your own interest and the interest of all the country, keep this great wonder of nature as it now is.

I hope you won't have a building of any kind to mar the grandeur and sublimity of the canyon. You cannot improve upon it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it. Keep it for your children and your children's children and all who come after you as one of the great sights for Americans to see." (526–29)

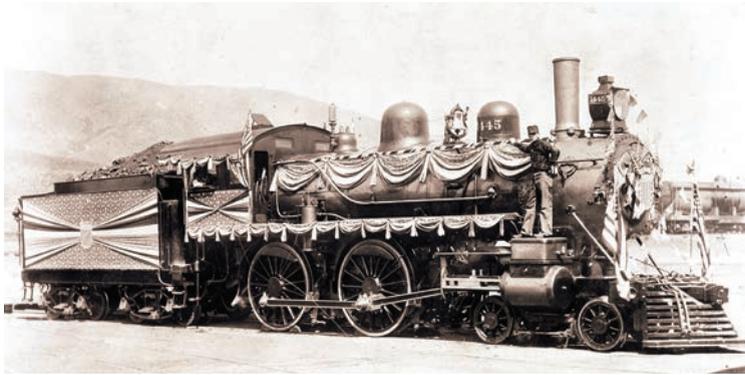


FIGURE 2. Southern Pacific Engine 1445, which pulled the Roosevelt train from San Luis Obispo over Cuesta Grade. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

Brinkley rhapsodizes on the effect that this experience must have instilled in Roosevelt as he spoke to the Arizona delegation at the Grand Canyon that day, 6 May 1903:

This speech ... marked the beginning of Roosevelt's ceaseless determination to save the canyon from destruction. Overawed by its immensity ... Roosevelt was in rapture. ... What was becoming clear from the looping 14,000-mile railroad journey was that the beauty of the American West—the real West—once again had Roosevelt spellbound. From the Grand Canyon onward, all of Roosevelt's speeches promoted, with intense vitality, the holy trinity of irrigation, forestry, and preservation. (529)

By the time Roosevelt arrived in San Luis Obispo a few days later, this “holy trinity” of conservation had been fully integrated into his speeches. Indeed, the conservation sentiment stands out in these robust lines from his Mitchell Park speech on May 9:

[T]he legislation of the country must be shaped in the direction of promoting the interests of the man who has come on the soil to stay and to rear his children to take his place after him. We have passed the stage as a nation when we can afford

to tolerate the man whose aim it is merely to skin the soil and go on; to skin the country, to take off the timber, to exhaust it, and go on; our aim must be by laws promotive of irrigation; by laws securing the wise use in perpetuity of the forests, by laws shaped in every way, to promote the permanent interests of the country. Our aim must be to hand over our country to our children in better shape, not in worse shape, than we ourselves got it. (Lewis 355–56)

Roosevelt's train left San Luis Obispo as promptly as it had arrived, 6:30 pm on the dot, now pulled by the more powerful SP Engine 1445. He would



FIGURE 3. Roosevelt at the Big Tree Grove in Santa Cruz, 1903. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (cat. no. 2010647443).

spend the night at the Hotel Del Monte on the Monterey Peninsula and then go on to Santa Cruz and Santa Clara Counties. Roosevelt's journey would proceed to leave a mark on the landscape of the American imagination.

During his visit to the Big Tree Grove of redwoods in Santa Cruz on Sunday, May 10, Teddy would ask for some private time alone in the towering grove to receive its reverie. Discarding his prepared remarks, Roosevelt paid "the highest tribute I can to the State of California, to those private citizens and associations of citizens who have cooperated with the state in preserving these wonderful trees for the whole nation" (Lewis 360). He did,

however, admonish his audience to remove the placards they had nailed on the giant trees with names such as Giant, Big Pete, Old Fremont, and Uncle John.

All of us ought to want to see nature preserved; and take a big tree whose architect has been the ages, anything that man does toward it may hurt it and cannot help it; and above all, the rash creature who wishes to leave his name to mar the beauties of nature should be sternly discouraged. Take those cards pinned up on that tree; they give an air of the ridiculous to these solemn and majestic giants. To pin those cards up there is as much out of place as if you tacked so many tin cans up there. I mean that literally. You should ... take down the cards at the earliest possible moment; and do keep these trees, keep all the wonderful scenery of this

wonderful state unmarred by the vandalism or the folly of man.

As Roosevelt wandered alone deep into the redwood forest, his secretary William Loeb led the crowd in taking down the signs that had desecrated the trees. When Roosevelt returned from his hike, he accepted the honor of having a redwood named after him but insisted that no sign ever be posted on the tree to identify it as the Roosevelt Tree.

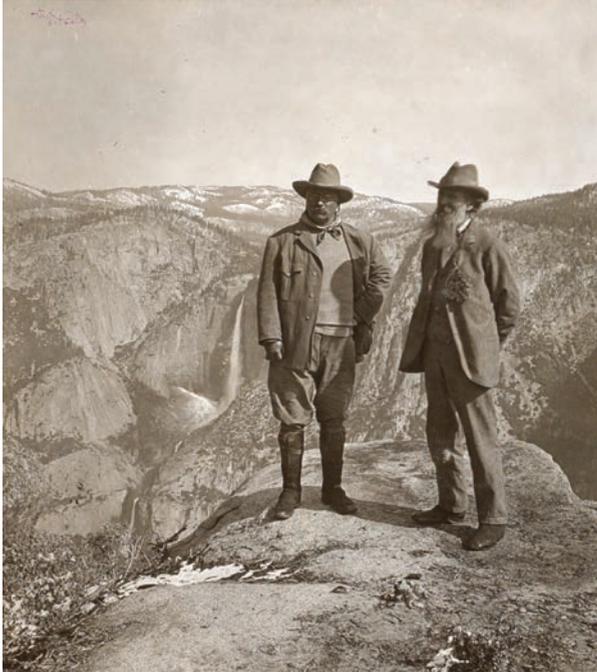


Figure 4. Roosevelt and John Muir at Glacier Point, Yosemite Valley, 1903. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-DIG-ppmsca-36413).

In San Francisco, Roosevelt dedicated the monument to Admiral George Dewey at Union Square and led a long parade throughout the city, escorted by the famous 9th Regiment of US Cavalry, African-American troops who had served with him in Cuba.¹⁰

Leaving San Francisco on May 15, Roosevelt's train picked up the Sierra Club's John Muir, who would accompany Teddy into the Range of Light to see the giant Sierra redwoods in the Mariposa Grove. At that time, the grove was the only part of what is now Yosemite National Park to be owned and protected by the federal government. After three days with Muir, Roosevelt was resolved to bring the entirety of the Yosemite Valley into

the park. Roosevelt "fairly fell in love" with Muir, having reveled in the presence of this self-described "poetico-trampo-geologist-bot, ornith-natural, etc, etc, !-!-!"¹¹

Throughout his Presidency, Theodore Roosevelt would continue to capture the imagination of all Americans with his youthful energy and his tireless advocacy for "the strenuous life." His advocacy for conservation of natural resources is the stuff of legend—and his actions speak louder than words. In his seven years and sixty-nine days as president, Theodore Roosevelt designated eighteen national monuments,

10. Youtube, Library of Congress, "TR in San Francisco, 1903." Accessed 4 August 2015. youtube.com/watch?v=McO5zOhYu9c.

11. Bart O'Brien, "Earthquakes or Snowflanders: The Controversy over the Formation of Yosemite Valley," *The Pacific Historian*, vol. 29, nos. 2 and 3: 35.

signed the Antiquities Act into law, cajoled Congress to create five new national parks, created or enlarged one hundred fifty national forests, and created fifty-five national bird reservations or game preserves (now called wildlife refuges).

Altogether, Roosevelt is credited with saving over 260 million acres of land in the United States—a record that has never been matched and is likely never even to be approached in its scope, magnificence, and transformational vision.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, it seemed that divine forces had been at work when the helm of power fell into the hands of such a determined, principled, and passionate young man. Roosevelt would not live, however, more than ten years after leaving office in 1909. He spent enormous energy on a lively but unsuccessful bid to win the presidency back from his successor, William Howard Taft, in 1912, but most disastrous to his health was a near-fatal jungle trip through the unforgiving wilderness of the Amazon in 1914, during which he tried but failed to convince his son Kermit to leave him behind to die.¹²

It's been 112 years since Teddy's visit, and the people of San Luis Obispo haven't witnessed such a spectacle in all that time. Sadly, this city has not been visited by a sitting US president since his 1903 stopover.¹³ We have hosted visits by soon-to-become-presidents, most recently by George W. Bush in his 2000 campaign; by Ronald Reagan as governor; by Richard Nixon in his 1962 campaign for governor; and probably by the late Gerald Ford after his short term in office (his son Steve Ford has a residence near Pismo Beach).

It is high time that San Luis Obispo hosted a president again. What would it take to entice another commander-in-chief to spend even an hour in San Luis Obispo? An idea presents itself: Let's consider, as a community, erecting a statue of our most recent presidential visitor in Mitchell Park. It would be a fitting tribute to this clarion-clear messenger of environmental wisdom—and to Roosevelt's message. Let's engrave some of the words of his 1903 speech on its pedestal. Perhaps it would be enough to stir the interest of another president in visiting the "Happiest City in North America," especially in these unhappy times in Washington. 

12. Candice Millard, *River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey* (New York: Random House, 2005).

13. David Middlecamp, "Photo from the Vault: Teddy Roosevelt in San Luis Obispo," *Tribune*, 29 June 2009.