

# HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

## Major Fires in SLO County



### **And then, it burned down**

Because of course, we needed one more thing. On top of the continuing effects of the Covid crisis and the record-setting heat dome, now we have the orange, choking skies of wildfire season. We at the History Center hope everyone is staying cool and protecting their lungs as best as they can.

As the last week has seen San Luis Obispo County impacted by the smoke from wildfires throughout the state, it is worth remembering that while wildfires in California have gotten bigger and more frequent in recent decades due to climate change, our society is no stranger to its impacts.

In this newsletter, we are going to highlight three major fires from our county's history, from 1886, 1926, and 1985.

### **The Andrews Hotel April 18, 1886**

When the Andrews Hotel was opened to the public on July 1, 1885, it was the largest hotel

in California outside of San Francisco, other than the famed Del Monte Hotel. Located on the corner of Monterey and Osos, it boasted 112 luxuriously appointed bedrooms, with electric bells to call for service, and gas fixtures providing lighting. There were 16 bathrooms, and while today that would be seen as a distinctly non-luxurious number, at the time it was a point of pride.

Just over nine months after it opened, the Andrews Hotel burned to the ground on April 18, 1886. In the words of the San Luis Obispo Daily Republic the next day, "The firemen responded promptly to the alarm with their apparatus...it needed but a glance to convince every beholder that the magnificent building was doomed." Those firefighters battled valiantly to save the rest of downtown. In the end, the Bank of San Luis Obispo, two adjoining buildings, the livery stable, the telephone office, and a warehouse were destroyed, and other buildings in the neighborhood were more or less damaged.



April 18, 1886, the Andrews Hotel burns down, nearly taking all of downtown with it.



## The Tank Farm Fire, April 1926

At one time, it was the largest oil storage facility in the world. Then, on April 7, 1926, a bolt of lightning sent flashing tentacles crashing into three of the million-barrel oil reservoirs on Tank Farm Road in San Luis Obispo. The three ignited simultaneously. Fifteen minutes after the initial explosions, another bolt hit an adjoining reservoir. After burning out of control for 17 hours, the emulsified oil in the four reservoirs boiled over, igniting a fifth reservoir and a row of steel tanks.

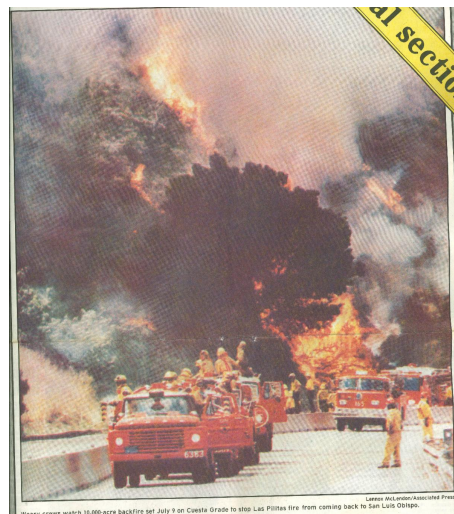
The series of fireball explosions that followed, the lava-like flows of oil that made storm-swollen San Luis Obispo Creek a stream of flame all the way to the ocean at Avila Beach, and the heat-generated whirlwinds that caused two deaths - altogether it was one of the most fearsome spectacles in area history. It burned for days and pockets of oil smoldered for months.

## The Las Pilitas Fire, July 1985

The first call came in at 1:00 pm on Monday, July 1st, a single plume of smoke rising over a ridge east of Santa Margarita. Over the next 10 days, 75,000 acres were burned and thousands were evacuated from their homes as the city of San Luis Obispo itself was threatened.

Bob Kuntz of the U.S. Forest Service said at the time "seasoned firefighters said this fire was scary. Citizens acted well. If the veterans say they're scared, you know the citizens were."

Mike Dolder, San Luis Obispo public safety director, told the City Council on July 8 that he "would've predicted the fire would have gone all the way to Johnson Avenue and taken out all the shake roof houses in the area."



The Telegram Tribune published a special edition featuring this photograph on July 16, 1985, just a day after the fire was contained.

In the end, thanks to the efforts of firefighters, only seven homes and 33 other buildings were lost. At the peak of the fire, 1,923 firefighters were on the lines or in the air.

What are your memories of the Las Pilitas Fire?

## Virtual Tours

We now have three virtual tours to choose from! You can visit the Dallidet Adobe, the Octagon Barn, and the Jack House live via Zoom.

For information or to register, [click here](#).



The Dallidet Family enjoy their garden with some, ahem, minor alterations

## Dallidet Gardens Open

Have you ever seen a Mongolian Sunflower? Or a 130-year old Avocado tree? Are you looking for some outdoor tranquility? Then you should visit the Dallidet Gardens.

Every Sunday through Labor Day, the gardens will be open from 11 am to 3 pm. The State's [guidelines for Outdoor Museums](#) will be strictly followed, so please bring your mask.

1185 Pacific Street, San Luis Obispo

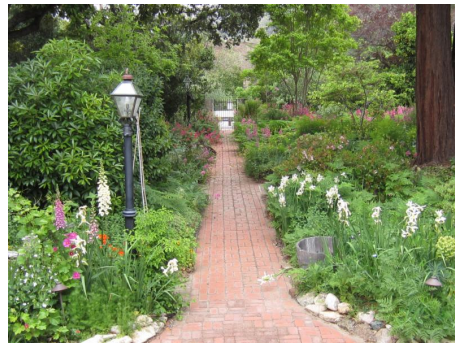
## Mindfulness in the Gardens

We are very excited to announce the return of guided meditation to the Dallidet Gardens. Engage your senses - sound, sight, touch - by sitting, walking and exploring in silent contemplation

Starting August 18th and continuing weekly through the end of September, your skilled guides will help you to enjoy this 1½ hour fresh, yet timeless, approach.

Safety protocols for Covid will be observed, which includes a limited number of spaces.

To learn more or to register, [please visit our website](#).



## Looking for more to do?

- Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#). With posts like Mystery Monday and Throwback Thursday, we'll be sharing photos from our collection.
- Take a [virtual walking tour](#) of historic San Luis Obispo. These video series feature short vignettes about significant local landmarks.

If you have any ideas of content you'd like to see, share it with us! And if you enjoy what we share with you, and if you are able to, would you please consider [supporting us](#)?

Thank you for being a part of our community. Everybody stay healthy and safe.

Sincerely,



Thomas Kessler  
Executive Director

**History Center of San Luis Obispo County**

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