

March 24, 2005

## **WHEN HISTORY HITS HIGH TECH**

OPINION OF THE TRIBUNE

Want to know more about the history of San Luis Obispo County? Check out the Clerk-Recorder's Office. Every legal document filed with the county in the last 155 years is on microfilm in its archives.

Marriage, birth and death certificates dating to 1850? They're on file. Maps, subdivisions, patents and homesteads? Recorded and indexed. The archives are a virtual jigsaw puzzle of county families who settled the area and are now only known as street names.

In the early years, documents were recorded in Spanish and English, the writing so filigreed with swirling penmanship that it's difficult to decipher. Cattle brands were brought in on rawhide and then drawn for posterity and recorded.

Later, handwritten entries gave way to typed; type gave way to microfilm. And now the county's records are being moved off microfilm through newer technology -- digitization -- at a cost of \$144,000.

The process can scan millions of pages, which can then be downloaded by computer.

County Clerk Julie Rodewald ticks off the reasons the microfilm-to-digital exchange is worth the expense:

- \* Although microfilm is a stable way to archive material, it's outdated in its technology and is difficult to archive and retrieve through outmoded equipment.
- \* Putting archives on compact discs isn't feasible because no one can guarantee that CD technology will be long lasting.
- \* Digitization will give the North County clerk's office access to the archives.
- \* It's the least expensive method for converting and storing back files.
- \* It will make it easier to find information.

We don't always agree with the way the county spends taxpayer dollars -- the supervisors' private elevator in the new government center comes to mind. But when government spends money that increases efficiency while easing public access to records, a pat on the back is in order. Well done.