

Carson and Colorado

By Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg

Neither romance nor sentiment could be assayed, strictly speaking, out of the personality of William Sharon. Darius Ogden Mills was widely and respectfully known as the frosty moneybags of the Coast, but whimsy was not one of the investments in his portfolio of profitable properties. Henry Yerington was strictly business, preferably in gold currency paid on the barrelhead. And yet these three towering tycoons of altogether realistic destinies paradoxically brought into existence two railroads notable for the romance that came to be associated with their names and the wistful fragrance that clings to their memories.



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One was, of course, the Virginia & Truckee; the other, the loneliest and most improbable of all short lines of the Old West, the Carson & Colorado. Both are now with the ages, one with the Concord coach and the Wells Fargo treasure chest, but their legend gathers and multiplies in many books, including this one, while their locomotives and cars ride to celluloid immortality in the devisings of John Ford and Cecil De Mille.

Perhaps it should not be said that the Carson & Colorado is wholly vanished, for its vestigial trace still operates in the Southern Pacific's seventy mile Owens Valley Branch between Laws and Keeler, but it is of the living dead, the zombie of narrow gages, for its motive power is Diesel.

The Carson & Colorado was, in its way, an end-product of the Comstock bonanzas. It never rode to the mighty fiddle music of riches that swept sonorously from Sun Mountain in the noontide of Hale & Norcross and Con-Virginia. Its goings were never orchestrated to the thunder of a thousand stamps that shook the Nevada night along the margin of Carson Water at Empire, but it had its great moments. Once and briefly it was a hilarious monopoly of transport to new and equally teeming Golcondas and made money comparable to that earned by its predecessor and parent. And its memory is an endearing one. For the Carson & Colorado was one thing the Virginia & Truckee never was: it was narrow gage.

The C. & C. had its origin in the absolute faith of William Sharon in Nevada's potential for precious metals. Hadn't his enduring belief in the Comstock even when most of its mines were sinking into apparently everlasting borrasca revived the destinies of Virginia City to make it the greatest producer until then in the history of precious metals? Hadn't his railroad, the V. & T., been the immediate and tangible agency, which made this glittering success story come true? Now the lights were growing dim in Virginia City. What the Bank of California needed was new bonanzas and in Sharon's book they were inevitably to be uncovered along the right of way of a railroad. That railroad would be the Carson & Colorado.

For many years now-the time was 1880-whispered intimations of spectacular leads and fantastic recoveries had been wafted in from the southern deserts. Somewhere in their limitless wastes of alkali was surely the Lost Gunsight Mine, the mystic and elusive Breyfogle. The Plutonian regions of Death Valley had already come up with two well-authenticated bonanzas, the seemingly bottomless Cerro Gordo high in the forbidding Cosos, and even more remote and inaccessible Panamint up the steep ascent of Surprise Canyon. These, to Sharon's mind, were only colors in the pan compared to what yet might be uncovered far to the south of the declining Comstock.

In a way Sharon was right, although he was not destined to see their sunrise.

Sharon presented himself one day in Mills' richly carpeted San Francisco office with its over-mantle of rose quartz from the Comstock heavily laced with veins of gold. He smoothed the tails of his broadcloth frock coat over the edge of his chair and laid the blueprint for the Carson & Colorado Railroad on Mills' fine mahogany desk.

It was to be a railroad whose every aspect was characterized by economy. To begin with, it was to be narrow gage, thus nearly halving construction and maintenance costs. Excepting only the ascent to Mt. Montgomery Pass between Nevada and California, it was to be practically a water-level railroad with no grades worth the mention, and even at Mt. Montgomery his survey showed a tunnel to penetrate the actual summit of the climb. Grading would be of a minimum and all construction crews were to be Chinese, the cheapest and most efficient in the labor market. The 500 miles, give or take a few, between Carson Water and the Colorado of its southern terminus, abounded in potential Comstocks whose riches would speedily be discovered once there was a railroad to serve them. How could so astute and perceptive a capitalist as Mills pass up so sure a thing?

Mills' thoughts at the moment were elsewhere. He was even then preparing to return with all his chattels and investments to his native New York where his ultimate extravagance in the form of a son-in-law named Whitelaw Reid was clamoring for worldly honors that Mills could buy for him, most conspicuous of these

being the post of American Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Reid also wanted Horace Greeley's New York Tribune and the block long Madison Avenue brownstone palace originally built for the speculative Henry Villard. To supervise the acquisition of all these fine things Mills would have to be on the scene to see that his son-in-law got value received, and he was leaving California for good.

Possibly Mills' mind was on these pressing matters when Sharon traced the locations for the Carson & Colorado on the geodetic survey map spread out on his desk. Perhaps he felt that, compared to sons-in-law with ambassadorial aspirations and a newspaper to compete with the New York Herald of the eccentric James Gordon Bennett, one more narrow gage railroad from nowhere to nowhere was a fairly minor extravagance. Twenty years later when the C. & C. was sold to the Southern Pacific for \$2,750,000, Mills regarded it as finding money since he had forgotten he owned the railroad. In any event he gave Sharon his absent-minded blessing and that energetic optimist had his business car hitched to the night train for Virginia City, reading "Timon of Athens" as far as Sacramento and then turning in its rosewood stateroom after a light collation of cold partridge and a split of Roederer.

The next day he and Henry Yerington got down to their mutttons and a week later quantities of light rail, ties, stub switch stands and such began to accumulate on the siding at Mound House. You ordered a railroad in those booming times from what amounted to a mail order house, in this case the Risdon Iron Works. Everyone was building railroads and from car shops like Barney & Smith and locomotive erecting works in the East, such as Cooke-Danforth and the Mason Machine Works, you could order from stock for immediate delivery. Railroad presidents and master mechanics at Christmas time received gorgeous lithographs of brass bound locomotives as next year's calendars, and diamond encrusted salesmen in ornate waistcoats and elegant silk hats made follow-up calls with catalogues showing the latest in switching engines, combines, refrigerator cars and machine shops. Diamond Jim Brady, the master equipment salesman of all time, never called on a general manager or president until he had visited their purchasing agents and was able to lay a full list of the railroad's needs before the top brass when he opened his order book.

Railroad presidents of the age were notably tough customers with the help, but their faces assumed far-off expressions of rapture at sight of a catalogue of Matthias Baldwin's eight-wheelers and they became positively dreamy when contemplating sketches of new business cars paneled in Honduran mahogany throughout and carrying gold dinner service from Tiffany.

Sharon and Yerington were not the big spenders among the equipment marts for 1880. Word that Charles Elliott Perkins had ordered ten new diners with six-wheel trucks and a lavender and gold-trim color scheme for the Burlington left them cold. They were unmoved by talk of the beautiful white mail cars Mr. Vanderbilt's New York Central was building for the fast postal run between New York and Lake Michigan.

All they wanted was something in narrow gage utilitarian all-purpose carriers where there was no call for electrically operated signal systems or the latest thing in vestibule parlor cars. Passengers for Candelaria and Belleville would be happy to ride in anything with a roof. Sometimes, too, the customers put their feet through the window glass and shot holes in the woodwork, so these must be no more than



serviceable. The C. & C. was going to be the most economically financed road you ever heard of. It was.

Over the noisy but ineffectual protests of Nevada "labor leaders" who were the leading merchants of race hatred of the era, grading with Chinese crews got under way out of Mound House in 1880 and headed for Dayton which was then an important milling community on the Carson, as well as entrepot for the nearby town of Sutro at the lower end of the great drainage tunnel. It then followed a water level along the river to Fort Churchill and Wabuska where it began to encounter the sage and sand which, save for a few of its overall miles, were to be the essential landscape of its being all the way to California. It went down the east shore of Walker Lake, paused briefly at Hawthorne and then headed south and west for the California-Nevada border where a disused water tower stands to this day at Basalt to mark its going. A stub spur out of Filben took care of Candelaria and the little mixed trains were hauled up it backward and left as God intended with headend revenue first, as the photographs show.

Once in California the C. & C. found itself more or less literally in clover. Most of its Owen Valley mileage, until it reached the neighborhood of Owenyo and Keeler, was through lush meadows where stands of cottonwood made travel pleasant even on the hottest summer day. It missed the city centers of such metropolises as Bishop, Big Pine and Independence, and stages met "The Slim Princess" when that train came into being. Much of the C. & C.'s right of way was enchantingly pastoral with daisies

and tall grass rippling to the passing cars at the ties' ends, but there were no bonanzas in sight, only farm produce of which Sharon took a dim view. "We'll get the mine -trade and heavy concentrates when we get to the Cerro Gordo," he told Yerington cheerily.

When, in 1881, the little line reached what was to be a temporary terminus at the margin of Owen Lake, still some miles shy of the Colorado of its corporate name, Sharon persuaded Mills to come up and ride over it, a trip which required two days with overnight layoff at Candelaria where the hotel accommodations were not what the old gentleman was used to at Millbrae. Mills viewed with alarm the soiled doves of Pickhandle Gulch as they solicited trade in the Switch Key Saloon, newly named in honor of the advent of his own steamers. The miners cast shooting gallery looks at his silk top hat. He hadn't heard such language since early times in Columbia on the Mother Lode.

Next day at Keeler, Sharon asked Mills what he thought of the railroad and the C. & C. then and there achieved immortality in the folklore of the Old West. "Either we have built the railroad 300 miles too long," said Mills testily, "or 300 years too soon."

For twenty years thereafter the Carson & Colorado was the orphan child of railroads. Half affectionately, half derisively, its daily passenger train became known along the line as "The Slim Princess." It carried few revenue passengers and those complained bitterly of the heat in summer, the cold in winter, the dust at all times, the drunken miners, many of them despised Mexicans and Chilenos from Candelaria who rode it, and the creeping pace of its progress across the desert.

Mills became a fixture in far-off New York where he bought a box adjacent to that of J. P. Morgan at the new Metropolitan Opera House way uptown at Fortieth Street. Sharon died. The lights of the Comstock grew ever dimmer and the once lordly V. & T. itself, though still the Dollar Princess of the Short Lines, was no longer what it once had been. The C. & C. continued to operate, a forlorn and wistful ugly duckling which no historian in its lifetime ever discovered. It was the recipient of hand-me-down equipment from other carriers, cabooses of no ancestry at all. Yerington was mean in the matter of replacements for switches and brake rigging and trains went in the ditch as a result.

But Fate was digging a mighty pitfall for Yerington-Mills & Co., and all the unfaithful who doubted the destinies of the C. & C. In 1900 the Southern Pacific, then as now astute in money matters, picked up the Carson & Colorado from the Mills Estate for the aforementioned \$2,750,000 and added it to the far-flung map of Espee properties under the name of the Nevada & California Railway Company.

By singular coincidence this took place in the same year that an improbably bowler-hatted prospector from Manhattan named Jim Butler discovered rich silver outcroppings at Tonopah in the Southern Deserts and precipitated the rush to that

spot and nearby Goldfield, the last great gold rush within the continental United States. Tonopah was only ninety miles east of the nearest point on the C. & C. There is nothing in the record to show that advance information of this last of the great bonanzas had been brought to the old Espee offices at Fourth and Townsend. On the other hand, its agents were considerably nearer the proverbial horse's mouth than those of Darius Ogden Mills who, in the same year, together with Henry C. Frick, the Estate of George Hearst, J. P. Morgan and Harrison McK. Twombly, were buying heavily into the Cerro de Pasco copper trust.



By 1901, Tonopah was leaping in the wildest sarabands of bonanza and, in its twenty-first year appropriately enough, the Carson & Colorado under its new name came of age. It constituted the only possible means of transport for the mining machinery, milling apparatus, portable homes, whisky, roulette wheels, mahogany bars and other fixtures essential to the establishment of a progressive mining community. True, the mine promoters, stock salesmen, madams and their handmaidens, monte throwers, craps dealers, bartenders, newspaper reporters and other personnel of a boom town, or at least the more daring of them might achieve the southern mines through the uncertain agency of the Apperson Jack Rabbits, Pope Hartfords and other automobile cars which were coming into vogue. These massive vehicles crowded with adventurers in Stetson hats, motoring goggles and

Norfolk jackets could be seen boiling their way across the trackless desert leaving mile-long trails of alkali dust, but they were subject to the imperfections of their time. Dust clogged the sprockets of the chain drives, tires exploded in the heat, water for radiators had a low boiling point and smelled, unaccountably, like hot chicken broth when it overflowed. As often as not the occupants of Appersons and Wintons abandoned their vehicles at the edge of the track and flagged down "The Slim Princess."

No heavy merchandise of any sort was available to the motor car. The Nevada & California had a complete monopoly of freight which it unloaded at Tonopah junction to be ferried the rest of the way in great mule drawn wains that had seen service decades before in rushes to the Reese River, to the White Pine, to Panamint and the Cerro Gordo. The available narrow gage cars and engines of the little railroad couldn't begin to handle the traffic and merchandise overflowed from platforms and freight sheds at Mound House where the V. & T. unloaded it for transfer to the three-foot carrier. Space on "The Slim Princess" was sold at a premium in Reno and Carson City. Caboose, ancient day coaches, decrepit combines, mail cars and miscellaneous rolling stock left Mound House with riders on the platforms. The road's single business car, No. 10, the Esmeralda, was requisitioned for bankers, mine owners, eastern millionaires and other passengers of importance. Day and night the cars rolled down the business track of the once orphaned carrier, now exalted to the dizziest heights of enviable opulence. The Southern Pacific cleared its purchase price in a single year of operations.

Inevitably, a connecting railroad was shortly projected out of Tonopah, the narrow gage Tonopah Railroad, to meet "The Slim Princess" on the mainline at Tonopah junction. Diminutive sleeping cars connected with the outer world and their compartments swarmed with names of great import in the destinies of Western mining: George Wingfield, Key Pittman, Harry Stimler, John Hays Hammond and Zeb Kendall. One night Tasker Oddie, later United States senator for Nevada, booked passage on the northbound sleeper. Tonopah was rough and tough at the time and Oddie, a man of great daring and probity, had enemies among the labor malcontents who followed prosperity into the new boom camp. A walrus mustached individual in slouch hat and neat dark suit who was lounging in the smoking room overheard two characters in an adjacent compartment planning to shoot Oddie through the partition as soon as the train got under way. Unceremoniously, he kicked open the door of their bedroom and told them the project was ill-advised and they had better leave the train while the going was good. To their inquiry as to just who the hell he thought he was, the answer was simply, "Wyatt Earp." The assassins left.

For four golden years the Nevada & California lived high on the hog and the V. & T. shared handsomely in its prosperity. Then the Southern Pacific, which had been

making overtures to acquire the V. & T. but had continually been outpriced, built a twenty-eight mile standard gage connection between its main transcontinental iron at Hazen and Churchill. The V. & T. was by-passed and in a few weeks Mound House, from being the teeming junction of two important carriers, was reduced to ghost town status with weeds growing between the team tracks and stub switches. Through traffic went over the Espee iron all the way now and the tracks were standard gaged from Churchill to Mina and then to Tonopah junction. Mina became the division point for all traffic north and south both to Tonopah and later Goldfield to the east and Owens Valley to the west. Its yards were an amazement of double gage tracks and switches, and narrow gage and standard gage traffic converged, merged and receded in a smoky pavan of life and motion.

Confounding the self-appointed experts who foresaw Tonopah and Goldfield as just one more of the flash bonanzas with which the story of the Old West in the nineteenth century had been so liberally illustrated, the southern mines shortly blossomed into proven camps and then into established metropolitan centers of life, recapitulating in microcosm the mightier saga of the Comstock far away on the northern horizon but now declining in what everyone recognized must be the terminal borrasca of its deep mines. By the end of 1902, the Director of the United States Mint in his annual report of mining districts was able to record that Tonopah boasted thirty-two saloons, six faro games, two dance houses, two weekly newspapers, a public school, two stage lines and two churches. Before the final curtain was rung down on its desert destinies, Tonopah was to enlarge these resources of urbanity ten times over and for good measure throw in the six story Mizpah Hotel, still a glory of the sagebrush to this day, all night stock brokerages with direct wires to New York and San Francisco and a dozen trains a day of solid Pullmans and coaches rolling over the right of way that Mills so long ago had remarked was built 300 years too soon.

Tonopah and its adjacent twin, Goldfield, lasted roughly for a decade before their shafts in turn began encountering country rock and Tex Rickard folded up his Northern Saloon for one last fling in the fly-by-night chimera of Rawhide before going on to greater things in New York where another quarter century of fame and wealth awaited him.

In time, when the construction of desert railroads in Nevada and California had reached its high water mark, it was possible for a railroad passenger to follow two separate and continuous inland railroad systems and their connections from Northern Nevada to the California southland. He could follow the Southern Pacific all the way from Reno over the Hazen branch, the Nevada & California across Mt. Montgomery Pass and down to Owens Valley to Owenyo and hence over the standard gage jawbone line to Mojave and Los Angeles. Or he might change to the Tonopah &

Goldfield at Tonopah junction, ride its Pullmans to Goldfield, change there to the Bullfrog & Goldfield to Rhyolite and hence to the mainline of the Santa Fe over the Tonopah & Tidewater. Beatty, handy to Rhyolite and the scene of three converging railroads in the desolation of the Amargosa, the Tonopah & Tidewater, the Las Vegas & Tonopah and the Bullfrog & Goldfield, hoisted a huge banner that proclaimed itself "The Chicago of the West" and built the two story Montgomery Hotel on this optimistic prospect.

Trailing clouds of dusty glory, "The Slim Princess" rolled on down the equally dusty years. Often enough its little passenger cars now set out from Mound House without a single passenger and head-end revenue included only ghostly souvenirs of gold and guns and girls in the noontide of its fortunes. So few and far between were passengers that for a time the train crew made a practice in summer of halting the cars by the edge of Walker Lake and taking a refreshing dip before continuing on to Hawthorne or Wabuska as the case might be. The practice came to an abrupt halt when they overlooked the presence one day of a narrow minded spinster lady who proved to be closely connected with an on-line newspaper editor and his printed account of main line nudism caused a sensation in conservative circles in Mina and Sodaville.

The year of doom for the Carson & Colorado's surviving vestiges was 1938, the same unhappy date that saw the last train of the Virginia & Truckee on the Virginia City run, a symbol of the end of many things and of the old days in Nevada. That year saw the closing of the link between Nevada and California when the fifty miles of three foot track between Benton and Tonopah junction were finally torn up. Now no trains at all converged on Mound House and the desert upland began reclaiming its own. All along the line from Churchill to Mina, the narrow gage third rail disappeared, but the Southern Pacific prudently retained its standard gage freight service and a daily mixed train with the mail as far as Mina. It was to move fantastic quantities of munitions in and out of the vast Naval ammunition dump at Hawthorne during the 1941 war and over its still standing connection with the Tonopah & Goldfield, tank cars gingerly hauled thousands of gallons of high octane aviation gas to Tonopah where an air field trained fliers for combat duty in the Pacific.

But in Nevada the Carson & Colorado was by now only a memory.

On the California side of the Big Hill at Mt. Montgomery things were different. Against all the laws of seeming probability, the narrow gage run over seventy miles from the northern terminus in Owens Valley down to Owenyo and Keeler remained a profitable feeder for the Espee's jawbone connection with Mojave. Various mineral concentrates in gondolas and the seasonal movement of vast numbers of sheep from one grazing range to another kept three steam locomotives running on borrowed time well past the turn of the half century. Nos. 8, 18, and 22 still provided a page turned

to yesterday and were sometimes called for appearances in Hollywood period epics being filmed in the photogenic countryside of Owens Valley. A wooden combine that might have been haunted by the characters of the world of Charles Addams flapped and rattled up and down the desert run in the shadow of the gloomy Cosos.

The lettering on its trucks showed they had been cast by the Virginia & Truckee at its shops in Carson City at some date now beyond the memory of living man.

Through the agency of default, the Southern Pacific's Owens Valley branch is in 1957 the last narrow gage common carrier outside the boundaries of Colorado of all the many thousands of miles that once operated for engines and cars of the three foot span. Gone from The Official Guide is the last of its peers west of the Utah-Colorado border, the Sumpter Valley which until but a few years ago ran beside the Powder River in Oregon and was locally known as "The Polygamy Central" for its financing with Mormon capital. The Sumpter Valley was famed for being possessor of the only narrow gage Mallet locomotives ever outshopped which had originally been designed by Lucien Sprague for service on the Uintah Railroad's five percent grades in deepest Utah.

Even as this is written the remaining narrow gage trackage of the Denver & Rio Grande Western in Colorado is diminishing year by year so that a single regularly scheduled narrow gage passenger run exists on the Rio Grande's time cards, the popular tourist-patronized Silverton Train whose coaches in summer are still filled to capacity on the spectacular haul between Durango and Silverton above the dizzying abyss of the River of Lost Souls.

In 1955, the Southern Pacific yielded to expediency and retired steam motive power for the last time on the Owens Valley run. Its place was taken by a specially built narrow gage Diesel all-purpose engine, but mercifully one steam locomotive, its paint and gilt trim carefully preserved against future contingencies, was stored at Keeler.

Like the V. & T. that had sired it, the Carson & Colorado in death achieved its apotheosis. Its gentle legend was crowned with the study and admiration of the faithful; its immortality is guaranteed by a full length book devoted to it, John Hungerford's handsome little monograph entitled "The Slim Princess." The present volume is, in part, another chaplet woven in its memory.

In its modest, wood burning way, the Carson & Colorado became part of the greater epic of the Old West of the riding years, one with the grizzled prospector, the brave engineer, the Wells Fargo route agent and the shining manners of the gamblers that peopled its little cars.

And when the wave of the past beats against the imagining, like Sierra winds against storm lanterns on long forgotten depot platforms, it is possible for true

believers to discern the markers of "The Slim Princess" mounting ever upwards through the darkness toward Basalt and Mt. Montgomery, disappearing at last in the long tunnel of time and in the night of all things.

Excerpt from the "Steamcars to the Comstock" by Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg