

Exploring a Ghost Railroad

By Gary B. Speck

For 77 years, the Carson & Colorado Narrow gauge Railroad line ran along the east side of Owens Valley, in California's beautiful Inyo County. It was lined with busy railroad stations, small towns, and faded mining camps. The railroad was built from Mound House, Nevada south to KEELER, which it reached on August 1, 1883.

By 1900 the Carson & Colorado was sold to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company (SP). Due to a disagreement with the Virginia & Truckee RR, the SP shifted the northern terminus from Mound House to Fallon. In 1910 they built a new standard gauge line north from Mojave, California. The Jawbone Branch jogged around the west side of Owens Lake, meeting the narrow gauge at OWENYO.

By the mid 1920s, a major decrease in rail traffic caused the northern section from Fallon to BENTON STATION, California to be abandoned, and by the start of WW II, the line shut down all the way to LAWS. (NE of Bishop)

The 70.4-mile stretch between KEELER and LAWS remained open, but by the 1950s it was more a nostalgia line than a profitable railroad. On April 30, 1960 the last train rumbled north from Keeler to Laws. Within a year the rails were pulled, and the old Carson & Colorado was history.

Our first stop along this ghost railroad is KEELER, the southern terminus, on the northeast shore of Owens Lake. Keeler today is a small dried up desert community that looks fondly on its past. It actually predates the railroad, starting in the 1870s with CERRO GORDO LANDING. Here the lucrative silver bullion shipping trade was stolen from the small town of SWANSEA, six miles northwest.

In 1880, the Owens Lake Mining & Milling Company purchased the holdings of the Union Mine Company at CERRO GORDO. At the site of Cerro Gordo Landing, a 42 square block silver-milling town named HAWLEY was designed and laid out by Julius Keeler. It was designed to be the center of the Owens Lake region's mining activity. All seemed rosy for the company.

Unfortunately, their recently refurbished steam ship *Bessie Brady* burned. It was to be their transportation showpiece, and its destruction put the brakes on the company's grand goals. Hawley still remained a milling center, although on a much reduced scale. On August 1, 1883, the narrow gauge Carson & Colorado Railroad reached the small community. A post office, train station and freight depot were established, and soon KEELER (as it was now called) ended up as the southern terminus for the busy little railroad.

Around the end of WW I, a number of soda-ash processing plants were built along the drying lake's shore, and through the 1920s and 30s Keeler was a major soda-ash processing town, as well as a busy railroad repair facility.

In 1938, with the closing of the northern part of the line, traffic slowed, and in 1943 the KEELER railroad repair shops closed and were moved to OWENYO. In 1960 the trains stopped running.

By 1994, KEELER was just a quiet skeleton of what it used to be. The hulking Sierra Talc mill still (1995) dominates the town's "skyline", and a number of abandoned structures still stand. The old school is behind chain link fence, the wood frame Keeler Store still caters to townsfolk, the post office is still open, but the train depot, auto body shop, gas station and many abandoned buildings stand in mute testimony to the past. Today (1990 census), 135 residents live in this town located on the southwest side of SH 136, 13 miles southeast of Lone Pine.

Just 3.3 miles northwest of KEELER, is the old site of SWANSEA. On the south side of SH 136 a squat rock cabin and the rock remains of an old silver smelter remain. On the north side of the road is an occupied ranch with several old structures. The early 1870s silver smelter town was already dead by the time the railroad passed by its bleached bones.

Somewhere between SWANSEA and TRAMWAY was the old station of MOCK. Its site is long lost.

A mile northwest of SWANSEA is the site of TRAMWAY. Here was the lower terminus for the 13-mile long electric tram that hauled silver/zinc ore from CERRO GORDO in the 1911-1920 period. In the 1970s several wooden structures remained, including the tram house, and four cabins. In 1994 all that remained were the foundations for the tram terminal, and a visible tower high up the mountain slope.

Next to the northwest is the old marble mining town of DOLOMITE. The marble was originally discovered in 1862, but mining didn't begin until 1883 with the establishment of the railroad siding. At the mine, a small camp was developed. By the early 1900s the town was dead, and in 1959 the site was purchased by Premiere Marble Products, who restored the town and built a number of new buildings. The whole complex was then used as a movie set.

In the 1970s, the movie set and remaining buildings were open to the public, but in 1994 renewed marble mining operations had put this interesting old ghost behind "Keep Out" Signs. The buildings are still visible a half mile north of the highway.

About 1.2 miles northwest of DOLOMITE is the barren site of ALICO. In 1976 there were still a few rusty cans and broken glass marking the site, but in 1994, I couldn't locate it.

The old railroad grade swings north here, and in five miles reaches MT. WHITNEY STATION, another barren site.

Just a mile and a half west is LONE PINE STATION, northern terminus for the now abandoned standard gauge Southern Pacific Railroad. 1.6 miles west of that is the town of Lone Pine.

3.5 miles north of MT. WHITNEY STATION (6.5 mi N. of Lone Pine) is the rubbled site of OWENYO. OWENYO was originally established around 1900 as a small Quaker farming community and shipping station. A post office was established on March 20, 1902, and after two moves was discontinued on November 30, 1905. In 1905 the Quakers sold out, and in 1910 the station became an important junction with arrival of the standard gauge Southern Pacific tracks. They ended along the west side of the station platform and the narrow gauge passed by on the east. During the booming 1920s, there were railroad repair facilities, a restaurant and hotel.

In 1960, after the narrow gauge shut down, the station closed, and the northern terminus shifted south to LONE PINE STATION. By 1975 nothing remained but scattered rubble, rusty cans and broken glass.

4.6 miles north of OWENYO is the site of MANZANAR STATION. MANZANAR started around 1900 as a small agricultural community surrounded by apple and peach orchards. A station was established for fruit shipping, and in 1911 a general store run by a Mr. Ira Hatfield opened. The post office was established On May 13, 1911 with Hatfield as postmaster. During the 1920s the town faded, and on December 31, 1929, the post office shut down. MANZANAR was also the location for the Japanese-American MANZANAR RELOCATION CENTER during WWII.

5.2 miles north of MANZANAR STATION the railroad grade road intersects with the Mazourka Canyon Road 4.5 miles east of the county seat of Independence. On the southeast corner of that intersection is the barren site of KEARSARGE STATION. This was Independence's station, and the third Owens Valley location with the name KEARSARGE. This is also the end of the easily followed route of travel, as north of here, the railroad grade has badly eroded, and is quite hard to follow.

On the northwest corner of the intersection, and stretching both north and west is the site of the 1860s mining town of BEND CITY. At its peak this town was home to a couple hotels, five stores, several saloons, a library, newspaper (*The Owens River Herald*), and a couple dozen houses. In 1888 when the state geologist passed through, there were the roofless remains of 33 adobe buildings.

A couple miles north of BEND CITY was its twin town, SAN CARLOS.

15 miles north of KEARSARGE STATION was ABERDEEN STATION. Here a water tower supplied water to

the steam powered locomotives. It was located on the grade, about one mile east of US 395 at Aberdeen Station Road.

1.9 miles east of Big Pine, is ZURICH STATION. Again, not much remains but rubble and memories.

Our last stop is the station at LAWS. Here was another major railroad repair facility and yard. It was also the station for Bishop, and was as busy as KEELER or OWENYO. After the system shut down, some of the rolling stock and a number of buildings were moved to Laws. In 1966 a railroad museum opened here. The buildings have been used as a movie set, and the museum is one of the best in the state for folks who want to see what an old western railroad town looked like.

The railroad continues north through Mono County, passing a number of stations, the first of which is CHALFANT, a quiet residential community of 300 or so people. Its biggest claim to fame, other than being named after the Bishop writer/newspaper baron, W. A. "Willie" Chalfant, is the old clapboard false-fronted Chalfant General Store that once stood in the old farming town. Then somewhere between CHALFANT and the upcoming HAMMIL were the sidings of DEHY and SHEALY, both of whose sites are forgotten.

Next up the road is the siding and station at HAMMIL, which is no longer shown on maps. Today, the site is the location of a tiny, loose-knit ranching community. Just to the east of HAMMIL was the rural post office of MOCALNO. Nothing remains of it either.

The next station on the line was at BENTON STATION. From there the railroad continued up the valley and crossed over into Nevada.

Today, the old route is nearly forgotten by all but those who seek the old that Ghost Town USA has to offer.