

# Sierra Siesta for a Slim Princess

By Joan Gleichman

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*Old Hawthorne No. 61 pulling several cars along the Carson & Colorado, stops at the California-Nevada state line so passengers can pose for this picture in 1887. Photo courtesy of T. H. Hagemann.*

BISHOP, CALIFORNIA in the Eastern High Sierras, 270 miles north of Los Angeles, has long been known as a prime hunting, fishing and recreation area, but not many people know a "Slim Princess" lies sleeping less than five miles from Bishop. No regal crown encircles her brow, and her "eye" has lost its gleam, but she is a princess none the less.

Travelers driving north from Bishop on Highway 6 to Laws, California will enjoy a visit back to the 1880s when the Slim Princess reigned in her heyday.

The Bishop Museum and Historical Society's Railroad Museum at Laws attracts tourists and railroad hobbyists from all over the United States and the world. Since its opening on April 1, 1966, more than 20,000 visitors have toured the 11-acre complex at Laws.

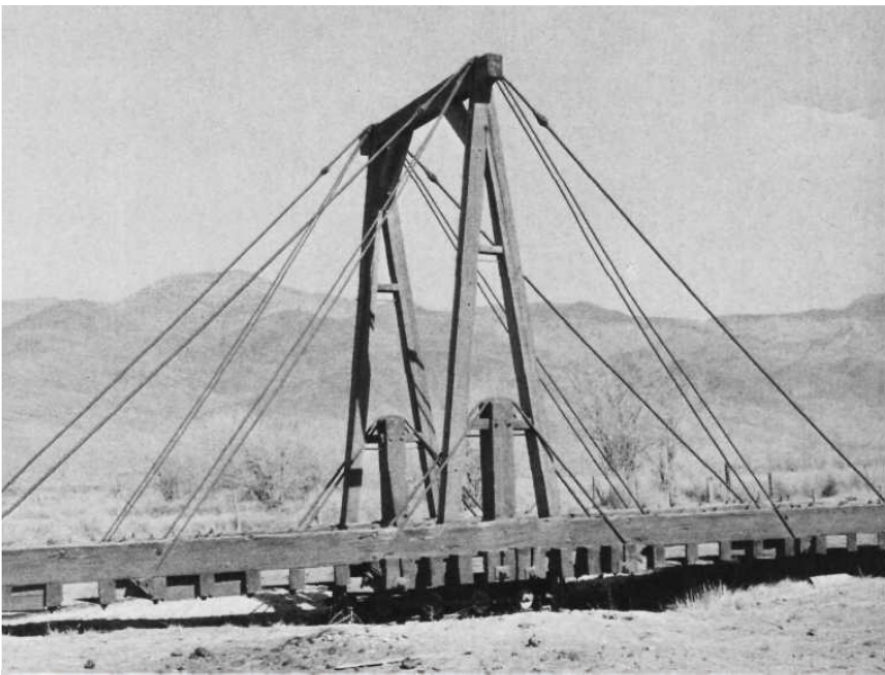
Origin of the nickname, the Slim Princess, has been hard to trace. It is not known whether old-timers were referring to the sleek, slim lines of the narrow gauge 36-inch rails or to the train itself, but today the name has become synonymous with the train, a ten-wheel Baldwin built in 1880.

The Laws-Keeler Branch of the Southern Pacific narrow gauge, formerly the Carson & Colorado, was the last public carrier operated west of the Rocky Mountains. The Slim Princess is no longer a public carrier. As

the tourists climb aboard her engine she sleeps on, perhaps dreaming of the days long ago when a tender loving, yet strong hand held the throttle and guided her smoothly along the narrow track.

Her siesta began on April 30, 1960 when she arrived at Laws for the last time, her services no longer needed. The expense and time consumed in the transfer of shipments between the narrow gauge and standard gauge cars could no longer be justified. Locomotive No. 9, a string of cars, the Laws Station building, and the surrounding railroad installations were formally transferred from the Southern Pacific to the City of Bishop and the County of Inyo in the form of a gift.

Old-timers chuckle when they recall a story about the conductor and the bull elk. The railroad was operated very casually in those days. Herds of elk often roamed the area around Tinemaha Reservoir and at times crew members carried rifles in the caboose of the train and did a little hunting along the way. One day while they were switching at Aberdeen, one of the not-so-friendly elk took a dislike to the conductor and chased him for several car lengths before he managed to scramble up the ladder of a boxcar to safety.



*Hand-operated turntable, ( above) built in 1883, was used to turn train around for return trip from Laws to Keeler. Looking as though she was ready to head down the track, the Slim Princess (right) rests on her narrow gauge track since she started her siesta in 1960 .*

In the good old summertime, the crew of the Slim Princess often took a dip in Walker Lake after leaving Hawthorne, Nevada. On this particular day, after they were out of sight of town, they decided to go for a swim. This time they were caught with their pants down, so to speak, when the wife of a local editor got off the train and discovered, to her horror, the reason for the long delay. This refreshing habit was discontinued when the railroad made a new ruling after a searing editorial appeared in the paper denouncing the lack of decorum among the crew members.

As you climb down from the cab of the Slim Princess and continue your tour of the grounds, you will discover that the Bishop Museum is more than just a Railroad Museum.

Visiting hours are from 10 :00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. daily. Your first stop on the tour will be the Reception Center in the Sweetwater Building. Other buildings on the grounds, not a part of the original railroad facility, were part of a western setting built by Paramount Pictures and used in filming the movie *Nevada Smith* starring Steve McQueen.

In the depot Waiting Room you will find many items of interest. A railroad post office collection includes a copy of a letter mailed November 12, 1887, carried by the Carson & Colorado Railroad and cancelled "M. House & Keeler Railroad Post Office." An old sign standing in a corner advertises Dusey's Store For Men, Bishop, whose slogan reads, "Everything for Men -- except Wives and Whiskey."

At the end of the depot is a five-room residence with a fenced yard which was the Station Agent's residence and has been restored with items in keeping with the period when the Narrow Gauge played an active part in the life of the community. Continuing on past the Station Agent's house there is a water tower and a hand-operated gallows type turntable built in 1883 and used up to the last day of the train's operation to turn the train around for the return trip from Laws to Keeler.

The Water Tower, which provided storage for both human and locomotive consumption, is now a permanent part of the Laws exhibit. Prospectors and people living along the line used to bring their empty barrels to be refilled by the train crews. Tenders were also fitted with spout and hand valve so the Indians could help themselves to water.

There are those who remember the days when the Slim Princess flew along the rails with a sparkle in her "eye" ... the retired engineer who kept a steady hand on her throttle, the elderly couple remembering the day a youthful bride-to-be was met at the station, the soldier who waved goodbye as he left for war . . . all must feel a sense of serenity and satisfaction when they see their Slim Princess, at last, receiving a long over-due recognition.



*Engine No. 9 in the Laws railroad yard.*