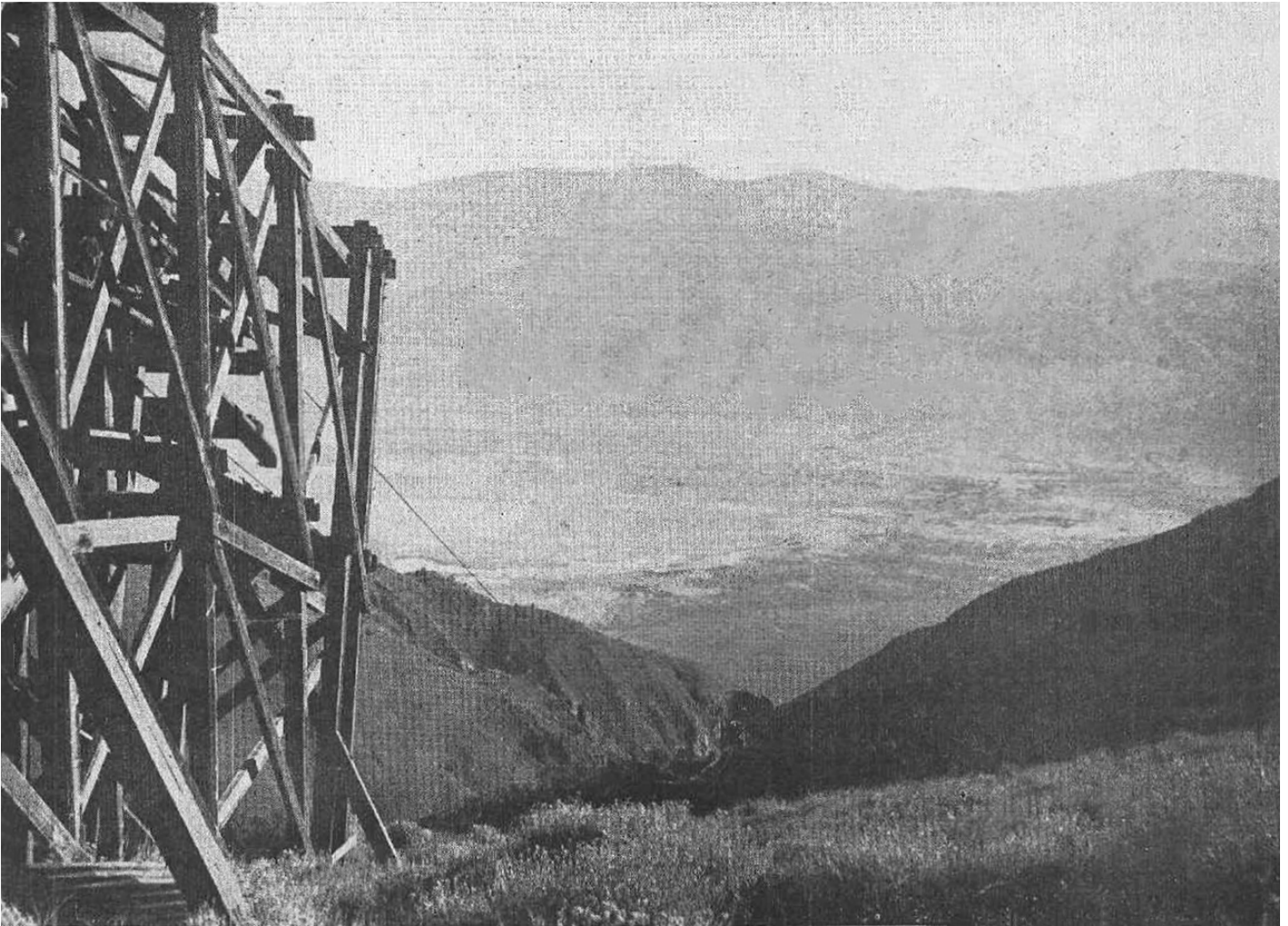


We Hiked the Inyo Bucket Brigade

By Robert O. Greenawalt
Desert Magazine – August 1959



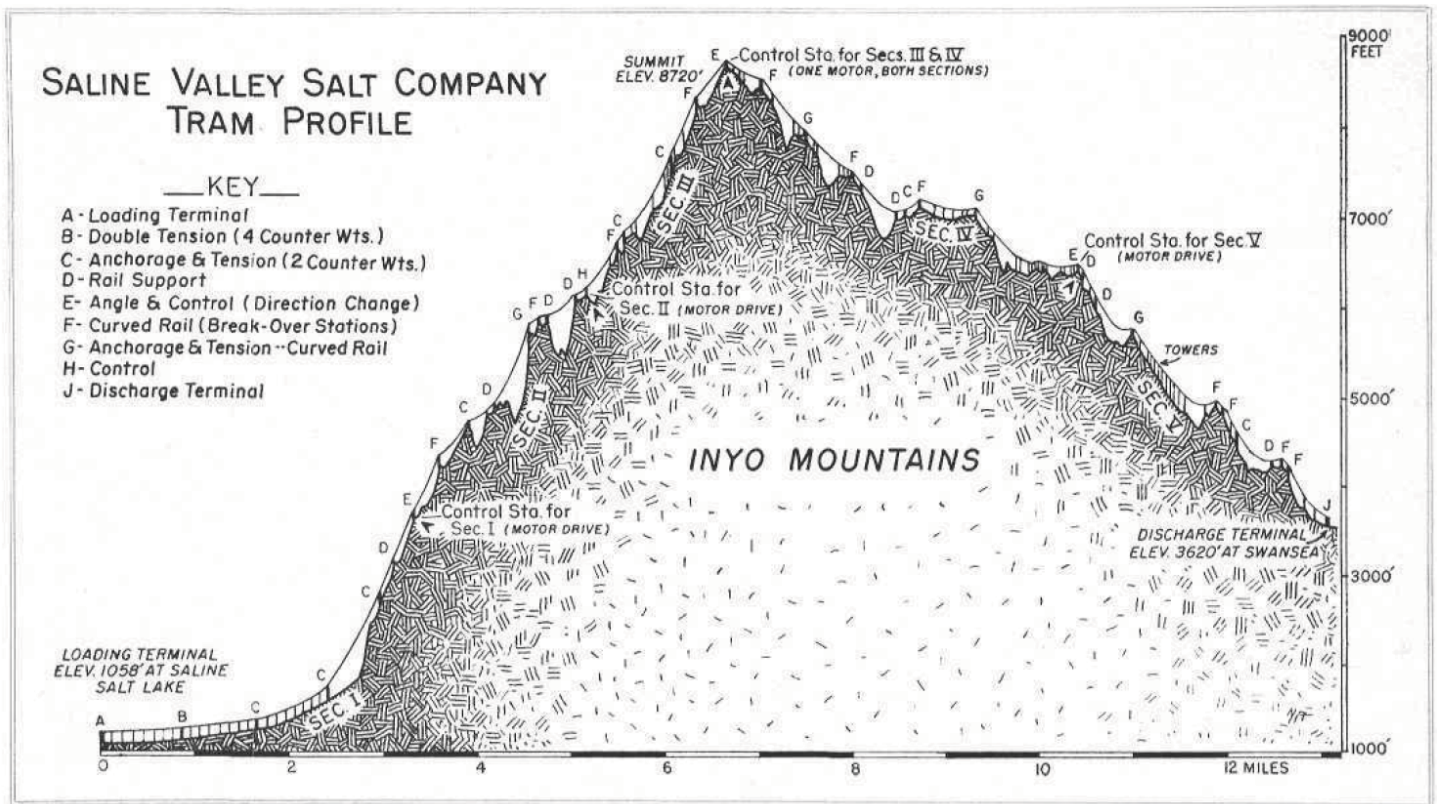
The Saline Valley tramway on California's Mojave Desert was a bold mining venture -- 13 miles of steel cable over the rugged Inyo Mountains.

VALUE OF the extremely concentrated salt deposit in Saline Valley, a raw desolate trough west of Death Valley, was early recognized by mining men -- but between the salt lake and a transportation outlet to the waiting markets of Southern California was the massive barrier of the Inyo Mountains. This rocky ridge abruptly rises 7,000 feet above the lake.

The Saline Valley Salt Company engineers made bold plans: a 13.4 mile tramway over the Inyos to a discharge terminal near Swansea, historic eastern shore port on Owens Lake when that lake held its due share of water.

After two arduous years of mule-powered construction, the system began operating in 1913. Capable of hourly transporting 20 tons of what local residents claim is still "the purest salt in the world," and cutting four arrow-straight swaths in its right-of-way over the mountains, the line was routed from the salt lake's south shore up precipitous Daisy Canyon, across the summit saddle between 10,668 foot New York Butte and 9,705-

foot Pleasant Mountain, and then down across a series of brushy canyons past pock-marked striated cliffs to the floor of Owens Valley. The discharge terminal was connected with Keeler by the Southern Pacific narrow gage railroad line, the posted stop of "Tramway" adequately handling the salt trade.



Not only did the multiple steel strings supported by heavy wooden frameworks represent one of the world's longest tramways at that time -- 13 miles of cable line in the year 1913 -- the salt tram provided the highest lift, and few would dispute the fact that the tram traversed a finger of the most rugged terrain on earth.

For 17 years of intermittent operation by several companies the salt tram's nearly 300 buckets made the slow round trips from loading terminal to discharge terminal. In 1930 the Depression -- and competition from better sodium chloride deposits -- wrote an end to the mining venture.

I have long been interested in this project. Last summer I hiked along the bucket brigade, heeding the advice of a number of long-time Owens Valley residents who answered my queries concerning the present condition of the tram with: "Can't tell you much about it, you'll have to go up the mountain and see for yourself."

The daybreak hour of a Saturday morn found five companions and me huddled around a campfire munching breakfast. We had camped off Highway 190 near the several weathered cabins that mark Swansea and the discharge terminal site. Only numerous concrete footings, a small pile of dust-laden salt, and the ruts of an uprooted railway spur give evidence of the discharge terminal's position. Before shipping, the stockpiled salt was crushed at this site.

Our party was split into two teams: hikers and drivers. The hikers, Don Minassian, Fred Duerst and I, would make our ascent of the western face of the mountain that day. The drivers, Hugh Parshall, Andy Kocela and Rolly Shehyn, were to take our vehicles over a 16.5 mile roundabout jeep trail and set up camp at the tram summit.

With a "See you before dark, and have supper ready," we were on our way. We climbed the near ridge hand over foot and soon reached our first massive framework. It stands several hundred feet above the highway, but is barely visible to passing motorists. The cables were supported along the 13 mile up-and-down-hill route by 39 such major structures. Between them, 123 80-foot-high intermediate towers kept the cargo off the ground along the parallel slopes and more shallow canyons.



THE AUTHOR AND ONE OF THE SALINE VALLEY TRAM BUCKETS. STEEL CONTAINER HELD ABOUT 800 POUNDS OF SALT. ITS TWO-WHEEL CARRIAGE RODE THE STATIONARY SMOOTH TRACK CABLE WHILE THE AUTOMATIC GRIP BELOW ATTACHED ITSELF TO THE MOVING TRACTION ROPE.

Carted off Wood

All of the structures within easy access of roads, including both terminals, have long since been carted off—easy prey of the wood gatherers and junk dealers. Used lumber can be very precious on the sparsely populated desert. The stout 10 x 10s are especially prized. But because most of this jagged range is inaccessible, especially the eastern slopes, the mountain will be as reluctant to give up its tram as it was to receive it.

The morning climb was rugged, and the panorama of the broad expanse of Owens Valley became more impressive at each new height. Into view on the far side of the lake came the ribbon formed by the Southern Pacific's "Jawbone" broad gage. The construction of this railroad north from Mojave in 1911 was largely responsible for the tram's creation. The broad gage joined the narrow rails at Owenyo.

Near one of the towers we found a small rattlesnake shading itself near a corner footing. In the higher country we came across four remote operators' cabins, a couple in the same condition as they were when their inhabitants left them for the last time.

Bleached White

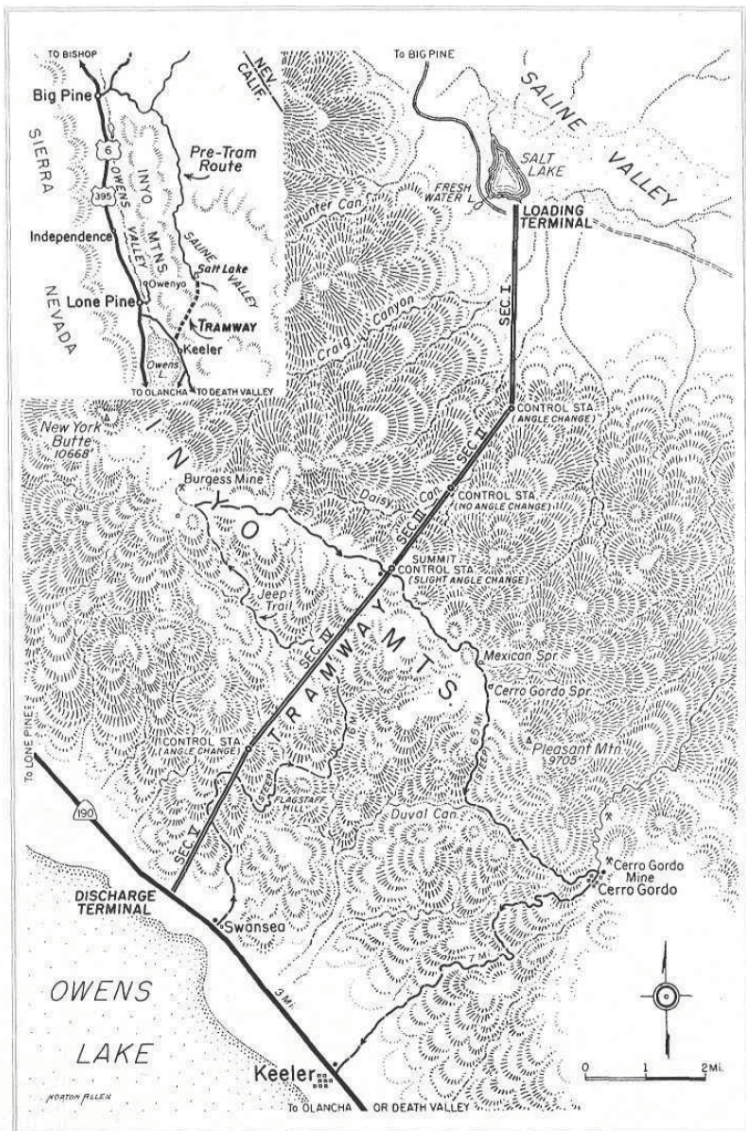
The western slope's towers, some void of cables, are bleached a dull white. Many of the steel buckets that

formed the brigade still cling to their steadfast cables high over deep canyons. Other wire ropes, victims of vandals' hacksaws, lie limply on the ground as their twisted containers rest half-buried in churned-over cloudburst debris.

Near the 7,000 foot contour friendly pinyon pines began to appear, and joined by juniper and mountain mahogany, they accompanied us to the summit.

We were well spent as we approached the crest. Within whistling distance of camp, a shout from one of the drivers enlightened our spirits. Dinner was ready, as promised, and the sleeping bags were layed out on the pleasant veranda of the summit operator's six-room house. This is an impressive campsite – 8,700 feet in altitude, surrounded by a beautifully fragrant forest, and far below the sight of creeping headlights of Sierra motorists.

The sparkling night was void of all sound, but it was not this way when the tram was in operation. This was a busy place with a bucket of Saline salt raising its head over the eastern crest almost ever minute. From the opposite direction an empty bucket would come jogging through the pines, and then disappear.



Control Points

The summit station motors drove two of the five sections that formed the continuous circuit. Each station housed equipment for controlling the electrically-driven traction ropes that provided the thrust for the two-hour journey.

The parallel stationary track cables were eight feet apart, and the buckets, holding 800 pounds of salt and suspended from two-wheel carriages, rode the smooth track cables. Automatic grips attached the buckets to the moving ropes.

The Last Leg

The three drivers left early in the morning, their destination the same as ours: the salt lake on the floor of Saline Valley. Their route was along the crest of the mountains to the old mining camp of Cerro Gordo, back to the highway at Keeler, and then a 50-mile J-loop around the mountains to the lake. We hikers took the shorter, but far more difficult, direct route to the lake. It was almost straight-down hiking which can be as arduous as climbing. We entered Daisy Canyon on a poor trail. Here the wooden tram structures were seasoned to a rich reddish hue, reflecting the difference in exposure received on this side of the mountain from that of the western slope.

If the view from the summit station westward across Owens Valley is superb, the view eastward down the dizzy slopes of Daisy Canyon and across forbidding Saline Valley, 7000 feet below, is sensational.

Keeping us company along the way were several coveys of chukar partridges. They had far less trouble than we in following the dim trails down the canyon. The tram line made three wild broadjumps over the gorge, and how the engineers ever pushed this project through is nothing short of incredible.

Three Lakes Below

We stopped to rest at the Section I control station on the lower mountain slopes. From this vantage point the Saline Valley lake became three lakes: the dry playa, the salt lake, and to the west a fresh water lake. The latter body of water is frequented by many birds. A black speck on the shores of the salt lake indicated the position of our transportation.

At this control station, whose stable still contains a supply of straw, the cables turned a sharp angle for a beeline northward to the loading terminal which we reached in late afternoon. The dock is marked today by small pieces of lumber rent into grotesque shapes by salt action. We joined the birds for a dip in the fresh water lake, and much refreshed we settled down for an evening around a cheery campfire.

Behind us, hidden by night, was the half-million dollar monument to a marvelous project that wasn't worth its salt financially. -END