Mono Mills to Bodie

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SITUATED IN A tranquil setting on the desert side of the Sierra Nevada, Mono Lake has been referred to as "the Dead Sea of America." This large brackish body of water contains a high percentage of sodium sulphate, two small islands, no marine life, and very little vegetation on its shoreline. The soil of the surrounding terrain is largely volcanic sand and pumice which barely supports the growth of sagebrush, and in places, is devoid of any growth.

The paradox to this picture is the forests of Jeffrey and Lodgepole pine a few miles south of Mono Lake. It is surprising that this country could bear trees, and incredible that they would mature to four feet in diameter. However, the country does, and 'the trees did, and therein lies the birth of a railroad.

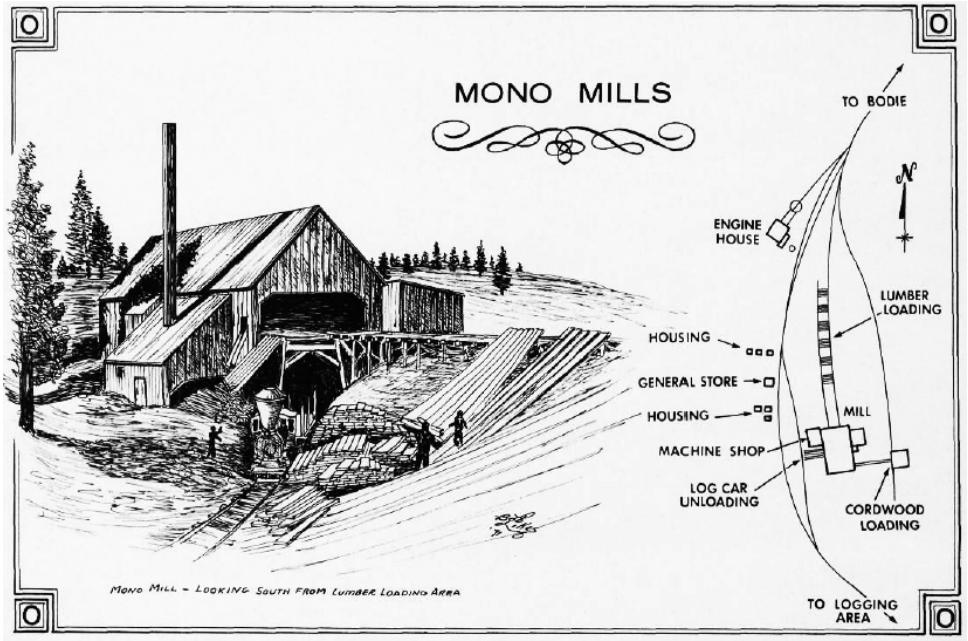
Often called "the Dead Sea of America" Mono Lake, California, has no marine life and is surrounded by weird formations as shown in this color photo by David Muench, Santa Barbara, California.

Huddled in the sagebrush-covered mountain, 30 miles north of Mono Lake, was the brawling, 'boisterous, gold mining town of Bodie, California. With a soaring population of nearly 12,000, the town's need for lumber to build homes, timber for shoring mines, and wood for fuel was tremendous. Teamsters could pot begin to

meet the enormous appetite Bodie had for consuming wood. The stage was set for the obvious answer to the problem – build a railroad to the large timber stands south of Mono Lake.

The Bodie Railway & Lumber Co. was organized on February 18, 1881, and shortly afterwards, J. T. Oliver surveyed the route from Bodie to the mill site five miles south of the lake. When completed, the proposed 31.7 miles of roadbed was to descend the 2,000-foot drop in elevation and traverse the alkali flats on the eastern shore of Mono Lake. Thomas Holt, an engineer, was selected to ramrod the project. In addition to this task, Holt was operating a five-ton steamship and several barges on which materials and supplies were transported across Mono Lake to the railroad construction crews.

While the sawmill was being built, grading for the roadbed was started at the top of Bodie Bluff in May, 1881. With the aid of two switchbacks, many cuts, and a 260-foot trestle, the steep and circuitous grade down to lake elevation was accomplished, and by mid-July, the first 20 miles of roadbed had been graded.



The first shipment of rails arrived in August, and as they were being spiked into place, the final five miles of grading was completed to the new mill. In all, some 2,000 tons of rails, spikes and other supplies were used. The total cost of the road reached $450,931. In addition, $81,390 was spent for equipment that included 4 engines, 12 service cars, 51 flat cars, and one caboose. The "last spike" was driven on November 14, 1881, and a two-car lumber train arrived afterwards to officially open the road.

The following weeks saw the new railway quite active with a scheduled train leaving Bodie each day at 6:30 A.M. and arriving at Mono Mills at 10:00 A.M. The train departed the mill at 2 o'clock each afternoon, and arrived back at Bodie by 6:00 P.M. The ten-to twelve-car train was broken up into three sections prior to the final approach to Bodie in order to negotiate the switchbacks and 3.8% grades. In addition to the problems caused by the sharp turns and steep grades, the rolling stock was not equipped with air brakes. Two brakemen were kept busy hopping from car to car setting the hand brakes whenever the train began to gain momentum. There were many derailments, but no fatalities among the crewmen were ever recorded.

The southern terminus at Mono Mills, while not a large settlement, was a busy one. There were 200 men employed in the wood and lumber business, and the aroma of fresh sawdust was everywhere. Two large boarding houses and six smaller dwellings were located near the mill. The single store supplied all the necessary goods required by the residents, and was operated by Gilchrist, Sharp & Company, who also had 40 mules packing wood, and two large ox teams hauling logs to the mill.

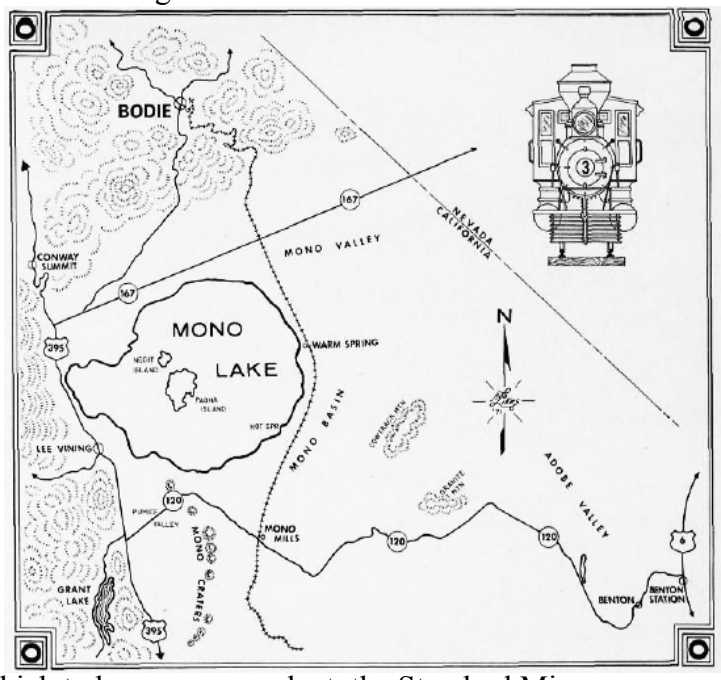
The well-equipped mill was one of the best in the state. Located in a small ravine, the second floor was level with the surrounding country so the heavy logs could be easily rolled into the mill where 54- inch circular

saws quickly reduced their size. One 44-inch "pony" and two smaller cut-off saws completed the task of transforming logs to lumber. The machinery was powered by a steam engine, and water was obtained from springs and transported to the mill by 2-inch pipe. The mill had the capacity for turning out 80,000 board feet every ten hours.

The greatest portion of Mono Mills output was in cordwood. This relatively poor quality of wood was used as fuel to produce steam power for the hoists and stamp mills at the Bodie mines. This demand kept the flat cars loaded to capacity and helped offset the low yield of only 8,000 board feet per acre for construction lumber. The "last run" of the season was made on January 7, 1881, after which the railroad closed down for the winter.

While the snow covered all traces of the railroad, its board of directors were evaluating the future. It was decided that conditions were good enough to start expanding. A new line was to be graded into Benton, California, with hopes of connecting to the forthcoming Carson & Colorado narrow gauge. With this connection to the outside world in mind, the name of the railway was changed to the Bodie & Benton Railway & Commercial Co., and the following spring brought renewed activity.

On May 12, 1882, grading for the "Benton Branch" began at the Warm Springs station, midway between Bodie and Mono Mills. During the same month, four more miles of track was added south of the sawmill to help facilitate the logging operation. Turntables were installed at both Bodie and Mono Mills. They were the Armstrong "gallows" type, and required man-power to "walk" the engines around.



After nine miles of grading through Adobe Meadows had been completed, work on the Benton extension was suddenly called to a halt. Although no reason was given at the time, it could have well been an early warning of future conditions, for toward the winter months of 1882 and during 1883, many of the mines at Bodie closed down, and the railroad was operating only intermittently. The entire railroad, including the timber acreage and sawmill, was leased in 1884, and for the next six years operated on a “as required" basis only. By 1890, conditions at Bodie reached a low ebb, and the railroad was inactive for three years.

Tom Legett, superintendent of Bodie's biggest producer, the Standard Mine, convinced the owners that electric power would greatly reduce their operating costs. Since Bodie did not have a stream on which to base a power plant, the Standard Mine purchased the necessary ground on Green Creek, fourteen miles away. Although crude 'by today's standards, the Green Creek plant would develop 6,500 volts and was the "shot in the arm" Bodie needed to get back on its feet. In 1893, Legett turned on the main switch and the electric motors at the Standard Mine began humming.

The sleeping town of Bodie woke with a shout, and once again the railroad was doing business as usual. Two years later, a new cyanide process was developed to recover gold from the huge mounds of tailings formerly thought worthless. This operation further aroused activity in the area and nine such plants were

constructed in short order. By the turn of the century, Bodie's population had leveled off at 500, and mining activity became steady without the ups and downs of the "boom years."

Charles Knox of Tonopah, Nevada, and Jim Cain of Bodie, formed a syndicate to purchase the railroad in 1906. This time the railway was doing business under the name of The Mono Lake Railway & Lumber Co. The new company acquired additional timber lands, bringing their holdings to 23,000 acres. The stockholders expected to do a flourishing business as contracts for large quantities of wood and lumber were already signed. Many propositions for an outside rail connection were made over the next few years, but the only rail expansion was more trackage into the woods.

Mining activity in Bodie suffered a steady decline after 1912. The grand-daddy of them all, the Standard Mine, closed down in 1914 after contributing to an estimated 90 million dollars in gold extracted from the district. By 1916, the population of Bodie had decreased to 200, and it was becoming apparent that the town was soon to join the ever-increasing list of "ghost towns."

The story of Bodie's narrow gauge to nowhere came to end in 1917, when the railroad was sold for scrap. The town that the B&B Railway helped build is today preserved as a California State Historic Park. On a hill overlooking this relic of California's bonanza era, stands the old railroad station, a weathered marker for this chapter in the fabulous history of narrow gauge railroads.

Site of Mono Mills near the shores of Mono Lake – 2015. Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea