NARROW GAUGE TO NOWHERE

By Mallory Hope Ferrell

Imagine, if you will, a three foot gauge main line railroad running over seventy miles through the desert on 35 pound rail, serving no town with a population of over 300 souls, nor one with even a retail store. This same narrow gauge is operated by steam power, has no physical connection with any other railroad and its wooden equipment dates from the 1880's and 1890's. Add in a desolate, remote locale, harp switchstands on stub switches, a friendly crew and you have a glimpse of the Southern Pacific's Owens Valley line after World War II.

In its final decades, the SP narrow gauge was indeed the most unlikely narrow gauge on earth. Thrust across the American wastelands and run by sheer determination, the line ran into the Space Age on 1880 technology. Hauling talc and carrying its weight in alkali dust, the SP narrow gauge ran out her years in a vast and beautiful land, trapped by geography, economics and time.

Following the abandonment of the line to Mina in 1938 and the section to Benton in 1943, the SP narrow gauge became an isolated 70.4 mile road linking Laws with Keeler. Wedged as it were between the lofty peaks of the Sierra Nevada on the West, with the lower Inyo and White Mountains on the East, the line served the remote country on the "back side" of the Sierra. Inyo County not only contained the last narrow gauge in the far West, but also the highest point in the Nation (Mt. Whitney 14,495) as well as the lowest (Death Valley 282 below sea level).

Motive power on the SP narrow gauge after 1940 consisted of a trio of former Nevada-California-Oregon ten-wheelers Numbered 8, 9 and 18. They were built by Baldwin in 1907, 1909 and 1911 respectively and served the line as long as steam lasted. A former Florence & Cripple Creek 4-6-0, that had come to the line via the N-C-O, was held for a while as the standby engine at Keeler. This Schenectady-built tenwheeler was the only non-Baldwin locomotive on the roster and was a sister engine to the famous Rio Grande Southern Number 20, of Colorado fame.

World War II saw a great upturn in business over the narrow gauge, as previously undeveloped mineral resources were tapped for the war effort. Several reduction mills were built in the valley. The United States Vanadium Company built a mill at Laws, while a smaller plant was constructed at Zurich (Blue Star Grinding Company). Traffic increased to such an extent that there was talk of standard gauging the road. A plan was formulated by the government to retrack the old grade between Tonopah junction and Laws, to provide an alternate transcontinental route, should the Donner Pass crossing be threatened. However, this "emergency plan" was never put into effect due to the remote nature of the war with Japan. Not so distant, however, were the Japanese internment camps that were built in the Owens Valley during the war.

Keeler, at the southern end of the SP narrow gauge, was made the engine terminal for the entire line after the connection with Nevada was severed. The town itself was home to some 75 people. The sun shines an average of 360 days a year here and the summer daytime temperature frequently exceeds 110 degrees in the shade. Just across from the large depot, the Desert Club Bar was a popular "watering spot," featuring Lucky Lager Beer. About the only other cool spot in town was beneath the water spout of the Keeler tank.

The railroad facilities at Keeler were of the open air variety. Several carbodys provided storage for spare parts and tools, but the work was done outside in the desert heat that often approximated that of Hades. The thick clouds of dust from the nearby Sierra Talc Company gave a further impression of inferno to the scene. There had once been a single stall, wooden enginehouse here, with a Gallows turntable. The turntable was removed to Owenyo, when the standard gauge jawbone Line was completed in 1910. The enginehouse burned in 1946, and the turntable was dismantled at Owenyo in 1948. A wye at the south end of town served to turn the equipment in later years.

Just below the frame Keeler Depot was the Cerro Gordo Mines tramway terminal. The town of Cerro Gordo sits high up in the Inyo Mountains, to the east of town. It is reached by a twisting eight mile mountain road, with hairpin curves, switchbacks and 25 percent grades. The aerial bucket tramway had been built from Cerro Gordo to Keeler in 1908, during one of the brief-lived mining excitements. Up at Cerro Gordo the hoisting machinery is still kept greased and ready by a caretaker, who with his wife were the last residents of the camp.

Trackage as late as 1950 consisted of 56 miles of 35 pound rail, intermixed with some 15 miles of 62 pound steel between Keeler and Owenyo. Some sections of original 35 pound rail, rolled in Sheffield, England, were still in the track; while a few rails made in Holland in the 1860's were reportedly in use on some sidings. Harp switchstands and stub switches were in common use until the end of World War II and a few were still in place after that time.

Operations throughout the 1940's and early 1950's followed a similar pattern. Train service was usually run three days a week over the entire line on Monday-Wednesday-Friday. Extra trains were run as needed on other days. Two ten-wheelers were kept in steam at Keeler. One was used on the thrice weekly freights, while the other served as standby. One full crew was assigned to the "Keeler Branch," as the Southern Pacific referred to the former Carson & Colorado. However, in the fall, when large shipments of sheep were sent to the southern ranges; and in the spring when strings of aging cattle cars headed for summer pasture above Laws, it was not unusual to have three engines under steam. Extra crews were dispatched from the Sparks "Extra Board," and made the 300 mile trip from Reno via bus.

A typical run over the SP narrow gauge began in the early morning light at Keeler. In the shadow of the nearby Inyo Mountains, Engineer W.C. "Walt" Ferguson oiled-around the Number 18, as Fireman George Murry filled the tender, beside the Keeler tank. Back in the former combine, now used as a caboose, Conductor J.A. "Jim" Brennan looked over the waybills while brakemen Carl Hanson and Clyde Beckes loaded ice into the car's cooler.

Engineer Ferguson, known as " Fergie, " and Jim Brennan were long time veterans of the narrow gauge desert run. Both held enough seniority on the Salt Lake Division to "hold down" plush main line jobs, but they preferred the narrow gauge. While the crews came off of the Salt Lake Division, a carryover from C&C days, the maintenance of the line, its rolling stock and locomotives fell under the San Joaquin Division at Bakersfield.

After some switching at the talc plant, the short consist of sunburnred equipment started northbound on its 17 mile run to Owenyo. It was in this area that the Employees' Timetable warned: LOOK OUT FOR DRIFTED SAND BETWEEN MP 573 and MP 575. A brief switching move was made at Dolomite, where the mine had a few cars loaded and waiting. While the timetable listed Dolomite, Mock, Alico and Mt. Whitney as stations, they were actually only sidings in the desert that served as loading points for talc, pumice, soda, ore and other minerals.

After one hour across the desert, the train arrived at Owenyo, which was by far the largest rail yard on the narrow gauge. Owenyo is a contraction of the words Owens and Inyo. The settlement was established as the junction point between the standard gauge "Jawbone Branch," from Mojave and the narrow gauge in 1910. Most of the town's 74 residents were railroad employees or their families. Owenyo was unique for a narrow

gauge/standard gauge interchange point in that there was no dual gauge trackage. Narrow gauge cars were spotted across the platform and the loads transferred by hand. On the south end of the yards was the huge transfer trestle, which allowed the contents of narrow gauge cars to be dumped by gravity into waiting standard gauge cars underneath. Near the depot was a transfer gantry, of the Queen Truss design, that allowed heavy loads to be moved from three foot gauge to broad gauge equipment. Car repairs, formerly made at Keeler, were handled on the Owenyo "rip track," just south of the depot and hotel. Like the Keeler engine shop, the Owenyo car repairers had only a cobalt blue sky for a roof.

Extra 18 West pulled up to the Owenyo depot and the crew went inside for orders. Owenyo Agent W.F. Tommer was in charge here. He hired the platform labor, many of whom were Piute Indians, and in general ran the narrow gauge. Mr. Tommer came to the line back in 1924 and became such a fixture that locals referred to the road as "Mr. Tommer's Railroad." When Tommer retired in 1954, he had completed 52 years of service on the SP and had never missed a day due to illness. The office was full of the clutter of many years. There was a small rock collection in the window, while nearby was the hand crank telephone, with which Agent Tommer kept in contact with the agents at Keeler and Laws, the only other active agencies on the narrow gauge. The magneto powered telephone system was used to activate a series of bells, which signaled the other agents. Train orders were typed out on an ancient Remington, while outside, the order board was always in the stop position. Owenyo's depot also employed Josephine "Jo" Cole as freight clerk. Jo was the only woman on the narrow gauge payroll. The benches outside the depot were usually occupied by one or more retired railroaders at train time. The nearby Owenyo Hotel housed mainly railroad employees, who had bid the narrow gauge desert run. It was not classy, but it was clean. Most of the SP narrow gauge folks lived in nearby Lone Pine.

After switching a few gondola loads onto and off of the transfer trestle, Extra 18 West headed out of town in a plume of oil smoke. Headed northbound, the train contained eight empty boxcars for Zurich and a loaded high car for Laws. A water stop was made at Karsarge (MP 550.1), some 26 miles from Keeler. This now closed depot was once called Independence (in hope the town of Independence would move the five miles to the new site), and for many years was called Citrus. The classic structure stood near what were once groves of fruit trees. The trees were purchased and cut down so that their roots would not take the water away from the ever-thirsty Los Angeles Aqueduct system.

Heading north through Aberdeen, the tracks crossed the Owens River and skirted the edge of Tinemaha Reservoir. Passing through a deep rock cut and across a wooden trestle over the Owens River, the consist steamed through Monola, 51 miles from Keeler. At Zurich, a maj or loading point, several gondola loads of soapstone were waiting under a loading ramp. After some switching, "Fergie" dropped off the empty gondolas and spotted the loads so that they could be picked up on the return trip.

Laws, the northern terminus for the SP narrow gauge was reached at noon. With an elevation of 4,115 feet, it was quite different from Keeler. The countryside was dotted with farms and ranches and the grassy yards were lined with huge Lombardy poplars and cottonwood trees, planted there back in Carson & Colorado days for shade. The small Post Office served a population of 100, but only a handful are in town today. The grazing cattle hardly looked up as the Number 18 and her train of swaying cars smoked into the picturesque yards, past the water tank, oil tank and pump house and came to a halt near the depot. The yards here contained all that was necessary to keep the narrow gauge in operation. Nearby was the hand operated Gallows turntable, built in 1883 and still in use. Engineer Ferguson

and Conductor Brennan went inside the small frame depot to talk with Laws Agent J.S. Parrish about the switching to be done. The crew then took time out for lunch under the eaves of the depot.

After lunch, the crew did a number of switching moves at the mill, on the north end of town. The Huntley Industrial Minerals Company had six loads for Owenyo that day. After setting out the empty boxcars brought up from Owenyo, the loads were switched out and a load of farm produce was added. The 4-6-0 then eased down through the grassy yards and was carefully spotted on the turntable. Everyone pitched in to turn the ten-wheeler. Water was then taken from the Laws tank, before Extra 18 East whistled off southbound with seven highcars loaded with potatoes and potash. The time was 1:48 P.M.

The seven gondola loads of soapstone were picked up from the siding at Zurich. The 18 had some difficulty getting the 14 loads started out of town, but after some stack talk and wheel spinning, her 44 inch drivers got a hold on the light rail and the consist moved off in a picture resembling the burning of Rome.

On the SP narrow gauge, trains heading toward San Francisco were carded as Westbound (north on compass), while those headed away from San Francisco were Eastbound (south on map). It made little difference that there were no rails between Laws and Mina, the Laws depot nameboard still showed the distance to San Francisco as 506.8 miles. At Keeler the distance was shown as 576.5 miles.

A water stop was made at Aberdeen Tank. Here the tank was filled by a windmill powered pump. When the water table was low, or the wind did not blow, it was often necessary to carry along a water car, behind the regular tender in order to make it between water stops. After arrival at Owenyo, the loads of potash were spotted along with the potatoes next to the unloading dock. The soapstone loads were placed on a siding, as the jawbone local had not yet come in with the empties for these loads. A few switching moves were made up the transfer table and the Number 18 picked up caboose 401 for a "caboose hop" home to Keeler in the late afternoon sun. As the sun dropped below Mt. Whitney, the long shadows covered the valley floor, as the short train steamed southbound. The rapid cooling of the air was noticeable as the 18 was spotted on the Keeler ready track and the crew headed for their cars and a late supper. Looking back, you can see a picture of the SP narrow gauge in the twilight…

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