

Narrow Gauge in a Wilderness

by George Turner

As each period of our history passes, circumstances have managed to provide trends for consuming the time of enterprising tycoons. Before the turn of the century, the ability of one to promote a rail venture was a definite status symbol. At a time when fortunes were being made in the western mining camps, those who were able to parlay this wealth into the Iron Horse could vision no end to prosperity.

Out in Nevada, the fabulous Comstock Lode was represented by the Virginia & Truckee, founded in 1868, linking Virginia City to Reno and the Central Pacific R.R. The post-civil war years saw other proposals for trackage in the area being germinated in many a pine-panelled office. One example was the charter granted to the Esmeralda & Walker River R.R. in 1864. This was to be a route to Aurora, an up and coming boom town. A later, similar venture was a plan by the Western Nevada R.R. Co. in early 1880 for a road to Candelaria.



Beginning of "nowhar;" the site of Mound House, Nevada. This where the Carson and Colorado Railroad began.

In those days, a fully equipped railroad could be ordered largely from builders' catalogs... which no doubt fueled the flame of many of these proposals. With very few exceptions the only track set down by these proposals were rail samples used for paperweights.

Getting down to reality, it took the astute promotion of William Sharon, know-how of Hume Yerington and the well-heeled assistance of Darins Mills to get things moving. One cannot overlook the logic here, as these same men controlled the V&T. The Carson Times of April 18, 1880 reported that the "Bodie Extension" was going to materialize, according to "sources believed to be thoroughly reliable." Twenty-two days later on May 10, the Carson & Colorado Railroad Co. was incorporated.

The route and destination of the newly formed C&C was hardly more than conjecture even as the first spikes were being driven at Mound House. It was generally accepted that the roads' title implied that it would connect the rivers of the same names, some 600 miles in all. Surveys to both Bodie and Candelaria had been made, but beyond this, it was anyone's guess as to where the rail might go.

Three foot gauge was established for the road as a matter of simple economics. There were to be no requirements for lavish Pullmans, posh coaches or other frills. After all, passenger service in a combine would surpass the stage. Remember also, most of the customers were gun-toting hombres on their way to roaring

mining towns . . . and this could prove detrimental to costly varnish being 'altered' by stray bullets and carefree cowboys. During negotiations for the initial right of way, a portion of the line traversed the Schurz Indian reservation. This resulted in an agreement to haul our original Americans for free. Like many of the early "benefits" bestowed upon the Red Man, this gratis transportation was furnished in the form of full view accommodations atop the coach or box car roofs.

Actual construction of the months after incorporation only . . . in ten months the line had posed no problem, as the right of country imaginable. Initial delays Comstock Lode was in a slump going rate for Chinese help was a \$15 a month for provisions.). This gambling, booze, women, etc., and ex-miners. Added to the labor arriving. Rails were imported from a real feat to get ocean shipments delivery. The railroad was virtually



Engine No. 3, the Colorado, awaits word as to departure time

railroad got off to a very slow start. Six three miles of track had been put down . . . progressed only 70 miles. The terrain way was routed over the most open arose over the use of Chinese labor. The which provided a surplus of men. The dollar a day for a 26 day month (less left little for life's essentials such as left even less incentive for the available quarrels, materials were slow in Europe to save costs and in 1880 it was within 3 to 6 months of promised waiting for its ship to come in!

A point at the south end of "terminus" . . . a tent city called Hawthorne. This location would serve the purpose for later decisions as to continuing either to Bodie or to Candelaria or both. To this end the Chinese workers were put, removing them as a source for squabbles at the Mound House section. The first train into Hawthorne arrived in the late Spring of 1881. It was of the excursion variety and was sponsored by the C&C to promote the sale of the local sandy real estate. This was quite natural, as the C&C brass owned the land! Today, Hawthorne remains as the largest city to have been located on the original route, whereas the large existing boom towns of the 80's have all but vanished.

A NEW RAILROAD.

CARSON AND COLORADO R. R.
 Now in operation to Hawthorne, Nev., 110 miles south of Carson, Nev.
 The direct, shortest and cheapest Route for Freight and Passengers to the following mining towns and camps:
Aurora, Bodie, Bridgeport, Belleville, Candelaria, Columbus, Benton, Montezuma, Silver Peak, Alida Valley, Bishop Creek and Gold Mountain.
 C. and C. R. R. trains make close connection at Mound House Station with trains of Virginia and Truckee Railroad, making close connections at Reno with East and West bound trains of C. P. R. R.
 Passengers leaving San Francisco and Sacramento on C. P. overland train arrive at Hawthorne and connect with U. S. Stage Co.'s line of Concord coaches at 2:45 P. M. of the following day, arriving at Bodie same evening.
 Wells, Fargo & Co.'s line of **Fast Freight** Wagons leave Hawthorne daily, delivering fast freight in Bodie within 36 hours from San Francisco.
 To insure dispatch by team transportation from Hawthorne shippers are requested to mark freight care of D. W. EARL & CO., Forwarders, Hawthorne, Nev.
 General Office, Carson, Nev.
H. M. YERINGTON, Gen'l Supt. **D. A. BENDER,** Gen'l Frt. and Pass. Agt.
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Walker Lake was established as the first construction of the road to Candelaria, Nevada. The adopted route required the building of two trestles on the approaches to the town. One structure was 200 feet in length and the other slightly shorter. In March of 1882, the railroad and also a water pipe line, both being well received, reached into Candelaria. From here the announced objective of the C&C was to push on to Mojave, California, passing through the Owens Valley. The roadbed was to eventually go through Montgomery Pass at an elevation of over 7100 feet... this was higher than the Southern Pacific crossing of Donner Summit. Descent into Owens Valley was made at times on gradients of 3.2 per cent and included a tunnel hewed from solid rock, 247 feet long.

News of the pending arrival of rail service into the Owens Valley was naturally eagerly anticipated by the residents. Several towns were well established and one can easily imagine their disgust to learn that the C&C iron would by-pass

them all. Consequently the arrival of the narrow gauge was hardly mentioned as it wended its way down the eastern portion of the valley floor towards Keeler, at the end of Owens Lake. Keeler was already located on the proposed route, due mainly to the expected revenue from the activity at the lofty Cerro Gordo mines.

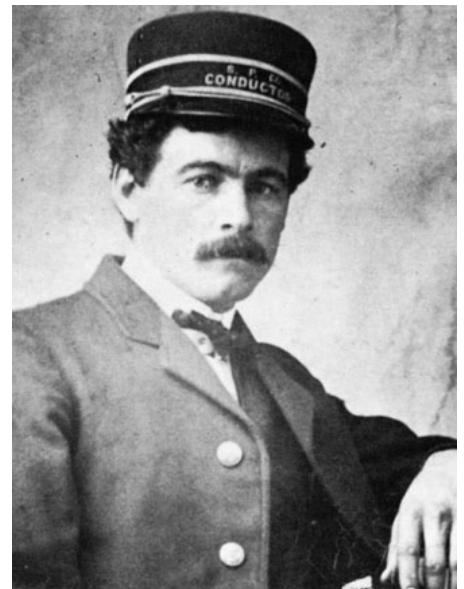
1882 saw 200 miles of rail in operation from Mound House, Nevada, to Benton, California. From a gross revenue of \$442,254 a tidy 25 per cent profit was realized during the first full year of business. By August of 1883 the rails had gone down to Keeler... and so did the profits, to the consternation of the management. With this turn of events, the subject of any further trackage was avoided by the front office. There were many rumors in the next few years of future expansion, but these never materialized.

Many attempts were naturally made to offset the continuing loss of revenue. Assistant Superintendent Laws imposed a salary reduction upon himself as one of the many means to improve the black side of the ledger. Productivity of the mining areas along the route was the key to the economic success of the railroad and by 1886, most of them had passed their peak. Occasional flurries of activity would flare up, but these were of short duration and the profit picture remained dim for the road. This condition resulted in a shuffling of the C&C deck in 1892, incorporating the "Railroad" into a "Railway." In effect, this was largely a 'paper' maneuver to reduce the accumulated debt, with no change in actual ownership. There were no operating losses as a result of the revised bookwork but the earnings for the next eight years were not enough to cover even a nominal interest for the investors. As 1899 came to a close, Sharon had passed away, Mills was in the East and Yerington had other more pressing interests that diverted his attention from the desert "loss leader."

After twenty years of experiencing everything but a favorable bank balance, the C&C officials were quite naturally ripe for a sale. It would be an understatement to say that they were "receptive" to the Southern Pacific offer in March of 1900 to the tune of \$2,750,000. The subject of a possible sale of the neighboring Virginia & Truckee was also kicked around, but an agreeable price tag wasn't negotiated. The V&T wasn't faring much better than the Carson & Colorado at the turn of the century but it was felt that conditions affecting the standard gauge line would improve.

No sooner had the S.P. check passed the clearing house, than Fate was at work on a surprise for the new owners that probably turned Sharon over in his grave. Two months after the sale of the C&C, an itinerate prospector, Jim Butler, tripped over a silver outcropping in the San Antonio mountains while looking for his pack mule. The rest is history... Tonopah was born. Needless to say, this turn of events and the subsequent gold discoveries at Goldfield in 1904 woke up the "Sleeping Princess." Unheard of traffic tie-ups began occurring at Mound House. Perishable goods were given top priority, of course. It didn't take long, however, for the fastbuck artists to label their gambling machinery "perishable"!

In a short period of time the S.P. realized the return of its original investment. It wasn't too much later that it became apparent that the dual gauge condition at Mound House needed a remedy for the continual delays. At the time of transfer of the C&C to the Southern Pacific, it was generally assumed that the line would be standard gauged. Obviously the prime reason for S.P. acquisition was for a connecting route from Ogden to Los Angeles... C&C profits could hardly be a consideration. So it came as no surprise when the cut-off connection front Churchill to Hazen w its built in



Decked out in the "uniform of the day," Fred Balzar typified the early day conductor. Mr. Balzar went on to greater things, becoming the Governor of Nevada in 1932.

1905, along with the broad gauging from Mound House to Mina. Hereafter, the 011] ly growth on the V&T was the weeds along its right of way.

Between 1900 and 1905, the Southern Pacific retained the Carson & Colorado Railway as I wholly-owned subsidiary. A new corporate structure was chartered in 1905 as the Nevada & California Railroad Company, also wholly owned by the S.P. With the construction of the Los Angeles aqueduct, demands for rail transportation increased and the long awaited rail connection to Mojave was started in 1908. The 144 mile "Jawbone Branch" from Mojave to the newly situated Owenyo connection on the N&C was completed in 1911. On the northern end, other activity was in the mill... Copper mining had been revived. The sounds of 'let's build a railroad' echoed in the Mason Valley and the Nevada Copper Belt emerged. This 38 mile short line connected with the N&C at Wabuska, Nevada and was operated by various interests until 1947.

Another paper shuffle was made in 1912 that removed the Nevada & California R.R. from the books. The accounts and property were then transferred to the Central Pacific for administration. Car lettering reflected C.P.-S.P. ownership for the next 48 years of operation. During this time the remaining 150 miles of narrow gauge trackage witnessed two nearby and unique projects get underway, both being located near Keeler.



This view looking west from the Saline Valley depicts the construction during 1912 of the tram towers.

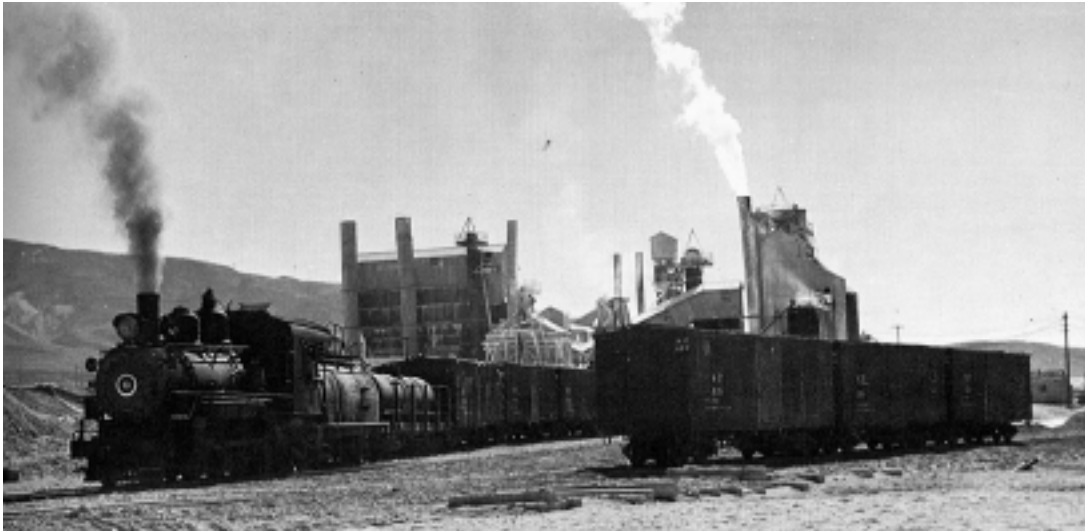
In 1911, construction was started on a 13.5 mile aerial tramway by the Saline Valley Salt Co., for transporting salt from the Saline Valley over the Inyo mountains to the Owens Valley railhead. The terrain was much too rugged for a rail extension other than a very costly circuitous route around the mountains. The first bucket of salt was discharged at the new terminus at "Tramway" on July 2, 1913, but the jubilant operators enjoyed only a brief smell of success.

Through an 'oversight,' the original specifications called for capability of handling dry salt. High brine content of the Saline Valley salt created such an overweight condition that the grips on the buckets would not hold on the very steep angles that the cables traversed. By partially filling the buckets, this problem was overcome... at the penalty of inefficient delivery rates and increased operating costs. This led to a short lived operation, as revised equipment would be needed, being both extensive and too costly when coupled with the existing expenditures. A portion of the Saline Valley train can still be seen standing idly by on the eastern slope of the Inyos, including towers, cables and empty buckets.

Next came the erection of the Cerro Gordo tramway in 1915. Although long passed its prime, enough zinc and silver remained at the lofty mine to make the tramway a profitable venture for a number of years. Operation of the tram was suspended in 1927 due to a combination of events... maintenance on the tram was ever increasing; good ore was thinning out, and the tram operator (and construction foreman for the Saline Valley tram) Mr. Harry Hilderman, passed away. Today, the remnants of the Cerro Gordo tram repose in several heaps

near the ghost town of Candelaria, Nevada... having been removed from the Owens Valley in 1960 by a mining promoter for an intended venture at the Candelaria site.

Aside from these activities, the 'Slim Princess' was relegated to a very relaxed schedule during her last 30-odd years of operations. As other narrow gauge roads under S.P. jurisdiction underwent either standard gauging or abandonment, most of their equipment found its way to the Mina yards for storage or occasional supplemental use over the desert trackage into the Owens Valley. With the removal of the rails over Mt. Montgomery, the equipment roster shortened accordingly. Agriculture diminished with the transfer of Owens Valley water to Southern California... mining towns along the line had long evaporated... and little attention was given to the S.P. slim rail feeder as it rattled on through sand and sagebrush to antiquity.



Representing the actual "end" of the S.P. narrow gauge was the Natural Soda Products Company, some two miles south of Keeler, California, in this photo taken in 1948.

Text excerpt from "*Slim Rails Through the Sand*"
by George Turner

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