

Owenyo – Where the Narrow Gauge Met the Standard

By Mary Frances Strong
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THE LITTLE, narrow-gauge train clattered down the tracks from Manzanar, smoke stack belching soot-filled air and steam clouds billowing from beneath the engine. It matched the Indian's description of "Fire Horse." To the residents of California's Owens Valley, the train was a lifeline to the outside world and they affectionately named her the "Slim Princess."



Short section of the narrow-gauge track near Dolomite is one of the few left of the Carson & Colorado Railroad which once ran through Owens Valley.

the many mines and communities along its route through Nevada and the Owens Valley of California. However, as the mining booms began to fade and commerce on the line declined, all plans for an extension to Mojave were cancelled.

In 1905, the Southern Pacific purchased the Carson & Colorado and three years later began construction of a standard gauge line from Mojave to the Owens Valley. Keeler, however, would not be the connecting link. Instead, the new line ran along the western shore of Owens Lake and joined the C & C four miles north of Mt. Whitney Station. The junction was named Owenyo. Dignitaries and residents held a joyous celebration on October 18, 1910, when a silver spike was driven to join the "Slim Princess" and "The Jawbone" lines.

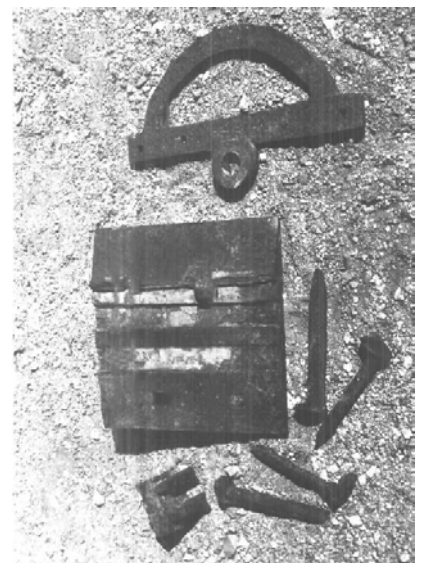
But joined, they really were not. Two lines of rails, one narrow and one standard – lay side by side in the Owenyo yards – each with an adjoining loading platform. The new station had a gallow-type turntable to rotate the engines for their return trips. Owenyo was also the main communications center.

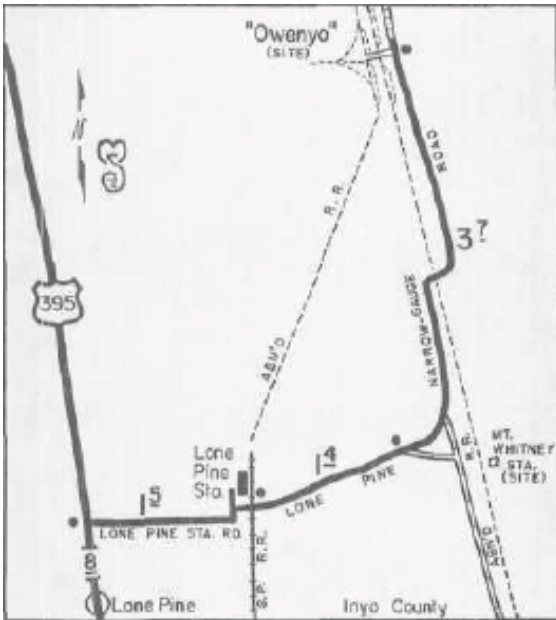
"Owenyo, next stop," called the conductor. The passengers traveling south for connections with Los Angeles or San Francisco, gathered their possessions and prepared to depart.

Owenyo was the point where the narrow-gauge rails met the standard gauge. This had not always been the case, since Owenyo came into existence some 30 years after the birth of the Carson & Colorado Railroad. The C&C planned to span a 600-mile distance from Mound House, Nevada to Mojave, California – providing a rail link between Reno and Los Angeles.

These ambitious plans, as is often the case, encountered many difficulties and in July, 1893, the "end-of-track" was Hawley (later known as Keeler) situated on the mid-eastern shore of Owens Lake.

The Carson and Colorado was busy the next two decades delivering ores and hauling supplies to





The procedure for handling through passengers was simple and reportedly unpopular. This was especially true with passengers from the south. They were required to dine and spend the night at the Owenyo Restaurant Hotel, boarding the Slim Princess the next morning. Eventually, night runs were added which omitted layovers and improved the service.

While not a town, Owenyo developed into a sizeable station with a considerable population. A number of workers were required to operate the yards, station, hotel and restaurant, and consequently many brought their families to Owenyo.

The golden years of the Slim Princess were from 1923 to 1929. Nearly 2,000 carloads of sheep, several hundred of cattle, many carloads of hay and fruit plus an assortment of mineral commodities were shipped annually.

The decline of mining in Nevada, the acquisition of the valley's water by Los Angeles, and the depression caused abandonment of many sections of the narrow-gauge line in Nevada.

The year 1938 saw the section from Tonopah Junction to Benton abandoned, followed by the Bento to Laws section in 1943. The route of the Slim Princess was now confined to a 70-mile stretch through Owens Valley with stations only at each end-of-track and Owenyo. Few passengers were carried and Owenyo's days as a main terminus were over.

Improvement of the highway through Owens Valley and the subsequent loss of shipping to trucks, sealed the fate of the Slim Princess. Keeler Station was closed in August 1957 followed by Laws in February 1959.

Owenyo remained as the only station on the narrow-gauge line. Finally, on April 30, 1960 the Slim Princess made her last run. Owenyo was abandoned and the terminus of the standard gauge from the south (Southern Pacific) was changed to Lone Pine Station. Thus, an era ended.

Owenyo was unique in having had the only semaphore on the entire Owens Valley section of the narrow-gauge railroad. Crews communicated via pole boxes located at intervals along the route. Unusual too, is that the little railroad, though part of the Southern Pacific, was operated by one man – W. F. Tomer, from 1921 to 1954. He was the "King" of the Slim Princess line with complete authority in the handling of his empire. This he did with utmost efficiency for three decades.



Remnants of child's grave at Owenyo.

Though the rails are gone, except for one short section at Laws, and in the pavement at the crossing of the old highway near Dolomite, the old railbed of the Slim Princess remains. Trail bike enthusiasts should enjoy riding along the old bed which is readily discernable. It is strewn with spikes and rotting ties.

Owenyo, too, has faded from the scene but there are many reminders of her glory days. Cement foundations, piers, spikes and the decomposing parts of railroad paraphernalia mark the site. Bottles must have played an important part in the life of visitors and workers, as hundreds of broken ones lie about.

Diggers find a whole one now and then though, they are circa 1910 to the present. Interesting items, now called memorabilia by hobbyists – dishes, pots and pans and other household items – have been found in recent years.

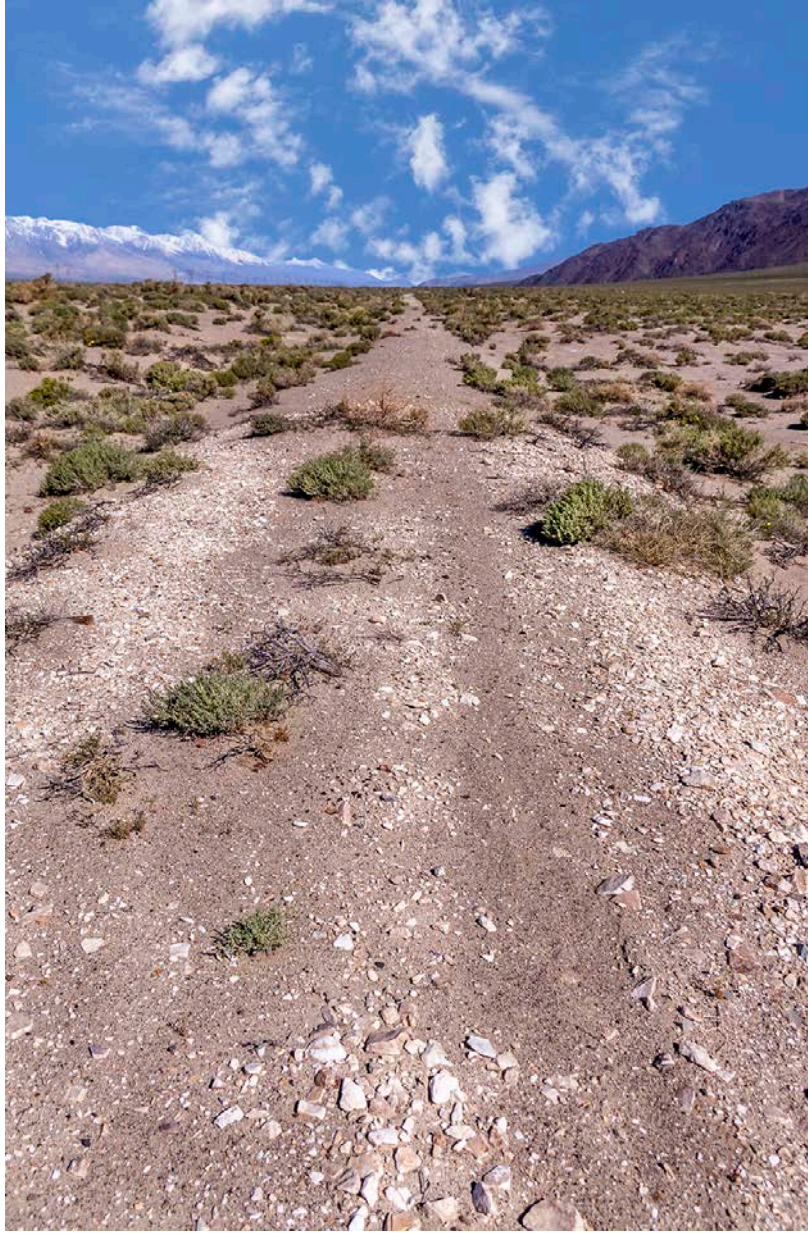
The tamarisk trees, which once provided shade, still flourish and, on one of my visits, I found three great-horned owls sleeping in each tree.

A very interesting underground tank is still intact. It has a dome-shaped roof with a protruding pipe. I have long speculated as to its use without coming to any conclusion.

Near the main road, hidden under the dense foliage of tamarisk, I found a small grave. It must have been that of a child. The coffin has been removed but the decorative wooden fencing remains.

I have a special feeling for the little train that was held in such affection by the people of Owens Valley. Though not a valley resident, I had the pleasure of seeing the Slim Princess on one of her runs near Owenyo in 1956. Diminished to almost toy size by the grandeur of the Inyo Mountains, the little train seemed to have a definite personality as she proudly chugged along.

Camped at Owenyo, one is far removed from the sights and sounds of civilization. It takes awhile for the evening moon to come over the Inyos and light the Valley. Shadows are emphasized and the old railbed stands out like a shimmering white ribbon. Listen awhile to the sounds of the night. Isn't that the faint whistle of the Slim Princess? Sure it is, for her spirit will never die!



Remains of the standard-gauge railbed at Owenyo – 2017. Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea.



Remains of the cross-over trestle at Owenyo – 2017. Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea.



Where the Narrow-Gauge met the Standard-Gauge at Owenyo – 2017. Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea.