

North of Bishop

By Russ Leadabrand

There is a museum saluting the vanished Carson and Colorado at Laws, and north of this historic site is a drive along through some curious Indian petroglyph rocks.

Magpies patrol the upper Owens Valley. Brighteyed, alert, footlong scavenger birds, brilliantly marked in black and white with an exaggerated tail.

From their vantage points of fence posts and tree branches, they chart and call ahead your passage through this byway country north of Bishop out toward Laws, and on north into the petroglyph country that is one of Bishop's most unusual scenic attractions.

You're strictly on your own in much of the lonesome country north of Laws, up along the Chalfant Valley and Fish Slough except for the magpies.

In ragtag exuberances they'll be along with you, hiding behind a screen of willow, looking, watching.

And when you return in the evening, having drunk in the sights of the museum at Laws and the ancient rock writing of Petroglyph Canyon, the magpies will log you out and go back to other chores; finding food in the water-robbed land, listening to the sad songs of the Indian ghosts that live in places like Red Canyon and Chidago Canyon, counting deer that come down out of the Volcanic Tableland, watching the roll of clouds that whisper over from Tioga and boil up in bluster against the high ridge of the protecting White Mountains that screen California from Nevada.

It's four and a half miles north, then east from Bishop on U.S. 6 to the beginning of the Silver Canyon Road and on a short distance to the parking area adjacent to the false-front stores from an old movie set, and the Laws Railroad Museum.

To put the Railroad Museum in the proper perspective, it is necessary to understand what a railroad is doing in this remote area of Owens Valley in the first place. Surely not to haul passengers. From where? To where? Freight? What freight?



One of the reigning Slim Princesses of the Carson & Colorado.

Back in 1883 it was possible to ride the narrow gauge line from Mound House (near Virginia City and Carson City) for 300 miles south to Keeler at the edge of Owens Lake.

In those days they called it the Carson and Colorado, although Mound House was not quite Carson City, and the Colorado River was far away. But the Carson and Colorado it was and its affectionate nickname was "The Slim Princess," because it had a kind of regal sagebrushy charm. It chugged through Dayton, Wabuska, Schurz, Gillis, Walker, Hawthorne, Kinkead and on to Tonopah Junction, where the Tonopah and Goldfield Railroad took off. Below

Belleville, at Filben, there was a sidetrack to Candelaria. Then came Summit, Benton, Laws and down the Owens Valley to Zurich, Kearsarge, Manzanar, Owenyo, Mt. Whitney, Dolomite and Keeler.



It was an incredible railroad adventure, and the story is told in a number of fine volumes.

In *The Slim Princess*, a paperback by John Hungerford, the author relates an anecdote about building the line:

No sketch of the Carson and Colorado is complete without recounting D. O. Mills, financial wizard of the Bank of California, and his reaction during his first and only inspection trip over the line, probably just after its completion. The story and the remarks attributed to Mills are told by Gilbert H. Kneiss, eminent historian and student of western railroads. He relates how Mills, accompanied by U.S. Senator William Sharon, and H. M. Yerington, general superintendent and vice president of the parent Virginia and Truckee, rode behind the little locomotive in an inspection coach for two hot and dusty days and Mills talked of everything but the railroad. He had made his pile in the West and had decided to go back to New York, his early home which had always beckoned him.

Upon arrival at Keeler, Sharon came straight to the point and asked Mills what he thought of the road. It was then that Mills voiced the classic answer, 'Gentlemen, we either built it 300 miles too long or 300 years too soon.'

David F. Myrick's two-volume *Railroads of Nevada* says:

On May 10, 1880, the Carson and Colorado Railroad Company was incorporated to build a narrow (three-foot) gauge railroad.

... Two important Nevada rivers provided title for this railroad projected to run from Mound House on the Carson River (ten miles east of Carson City) to Fort Mohave on the Colorado River at the extreme end of the state. Included in the plans was a branch to be built to serve the mining towns of Aurora and Bodie.

While plans to build a spur into Bodie country came late, the Carson and Colorado at one time or another did try to service all mining camps. Of the spur line to Candelaria, a mining town of some prominence in those crazy days, Myrick comments:

Candelaria became the terminus of the original C&C (as projected). To accommodate the change in route, two new corporations were formed. The Carson and Colorado Railroad Company, Second Division, was organized to build through Nevada to the California state line, while the Carson and Colorado, Third Division, was incorporated in California, to construct from the state line to a point near Mojave station on the Southern Pacific Railroad.



Carson & Colorado water tower near Laws.

The road was built on to Keeler (called Hawley in those days). People wanted the track run on down toward Los Angeles rather than toward Fort Mohave, which had lost its charm. The railroad was extended in 1887 to Jiggerville (Bolard) two miles south of Keeler, the site of an old boat landing on Owens Lake. There it ended. When Tonopah came up a line was built east from Tonopah Junction. This was a standard gauge line and in the revamping of the rails Hawthorne was bypassed.

In 1910 a standard gauge Southern Pacific line came up from Mojave and met the C&C at Owenyo. This line was called the Jawbone. When all the mining glories died - Tonopah, Bodie, Candelaria and Cerro Gordo - and all the booms were over and forgotten and the C&C served a ghost region, it was decided to scrap the line. There was mild protest in the Owens Valley. The people were attached to the little railroad which by now ran only once a day from Keeler to Laws and back.

In 1960 the last train was operated over the line and then the tracks came up. One engine and some rolling stock were given to the city of Bishop and Inyo County. The museum at Laws came into being.

In January of 1965, the city secured permission to open the museum. On April 1, 1966, the Laws Railroad Museum opened to the public on a date eighty-three years from the day the first scheduled train arrived at Laws from the north - complete with U.S. mail, Wells Fargo Express and offering both freight and passenger service. Visitors are welcome to come today and take a "walking tour" of the Laws Railroad Museum.

First stop is the recreation center, one of the Sweetwater buildings, part of a movie set built for the 1965 motion picture, Nevada Smith. The recreation center is a small museum, with books on the area for sale. The museum staff explains the purpose of the museum and site, and you can see old No. 9, the remaining narrow gauge Baldwin locomotive, and the old Laws depot. A free brochure offered on the Carson and Colorado tells you:



Movie set at Laws.

Laws was once an important outfitting center for the farming and livestock industry as well as being a mining center during the early 20th century. Farm products, including livestock, poultry, hay, wool and honey, found ready market in Nevada boom camps of the day. Larger markets in San

Francisco also received fruits of the industrial efforts of the residents of the Owens Valley and Eastern Nevada - all shipped from Laws via the narrow gauge.

Laws was also the delivery point for merchandise from the outside required by the residents and businesses. The Mina to Keeler branch of the Carson and Colorado was originally built to serve the mines of the area, and ores and minerals consigned to outside smelters were an important part of the cargo.

The Laws-Keeler branch of the Southern Pacific was the last operating narrow gauge public carrier west of the Rocky Mountains and Laws was the northern terminus for many years.

At the depot there are museum pieces, as well as in the railroad yard - an intricate, knife-bladed cattle guard, and the old water tank which is still standing. The station agent's home has been made into a charming museum. The Bishop Museum and Historical Society, which manages the Laws site, can be contacted at Bishop, California 93514. If you cannot make the trip right away and would like to see the two brochures, write for them at the same address. Ask for the "Walking Tour Guide," and the "Carson and Colorado" guide.

Excerpt taken from *Exploring California Byways – Owens Valley*
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Russ Leadabrand, veteran Southern California newspaperman and magazine writer, has been authoring guidebooks and travel books for the Ward Ritchie Press since the early 1960s. He is also the travel editor of the Ward Ritchie travel and leisure paperbacks, busily at work on many new titles covering all sections of the West.

Leadabrand has driven and explored and researched all of the state of California and has described and photographed it for newspapers, magazines and his many travel books. He has traveled widely throughout the Pacific and Southwest states as well as many other parts of the world.