

# SLIM PRINCESS

By Mallory Hope Ferrell

**N**owhere else was there anything quite comparable to the Carson & Colorado's narrow gauge line. Steeped in the traditions of the Old West and the glimmerings of gold and silver bonanzas, it steamed through the beautiful land of barren contrasts, far outliving its reason for being and its equally narrow counterparts to become the last slim gauge common carrier in the far west.

The story of this line in its early days provides an insight into a spirited era of overnight fortunes, limitless enthusiasm and wild schemes that abounded in the Great Basin and rose and fell like the sparkle in a prospector's pan.

As early as 1871, a Carson City (Nevada) newspaperman had written, "Let us have a railroad from Carson City to the Colorado." In the seventies a lull in mining activity had settled upon the Comstock and Virginia City, but to the south reports of rich strikes filtered in from the sagebrush. Down in California, the Cerro Gordo and others in the Panamint Range near Death Valley stirred the imaginations of visionaries and promoters alike.



By the late 1870's several surveys had been made by the Virginia & Truckee Railway for a line south from Carson City. The first of these was made in 1876 for an extension to Genoa, and another to Wellington and on toward Bodie. No construction work was done on these plans. In 1878 preliminary surveys were made for another line to Bodie and detailed work was started the following year.

In January, 1880 the Virginia & Truckee sent out a survey crew from Mound House to run a line along the Carson River to Fort Churchill, south through the Mason Valley to Walker Lake and on to Bodie.

Ambitious William Sharon, who had risen from Virginia City agent for the Bank of California to become a United States Senator and one third owner of the V&T, with winning persuasion convinced moneybags Darius Ogden Mills, bank president and major owner of the V&T, to build a narrow gauge railroad south to tap the mining camps that most surely would spring up like double eagles on a faro table.

The Carson & Colorado Railroad Company was incorporated on May 10, 1880. Henry Marvin Yerington was named President and General Manager, while Duane L. Bliss was Vice President. Bliss had been Sharon's Bank of California cashier at Gold Hill and was already associated with Yerington in the highly successful Carson & Tahoe Lumber & Fluming Company, which supplied timbers, finished lumber and cord wood to Carson City, Virginia City and other building towns from the Lake Tahoe cutting areas. The C&TL&F firm utilized its own three foot gauge railroad from the mill at Glenbrook to the top of Spooner Summit, where a spectacular flume was built down to the Virginia & Truckee's wood yard in Carson. The directors of the new road included, in addition to Yerington and Bliss, D.A. Bender of the V&T and S.P. Smith, who was D.O. Mill' agent. Neither Mills nor Sharon were directors of the new narrow gauge, but it was common knowledge that they, together with Nicholas Luning, controlled all but a few shares of the stock.

The C&C was a financial success, despite the lack of thriving communities along its line; the road was turning a profit. By the end of 1882, gross revenues totaled \$442,254, with a net profit of \$111,103. Both Bodie and Candelaria were at their peak. Candelaria's major producers were the Northern Belle, Mount Diablo and Argentum Mines, which yielded \$1,205,457 in silver ores the year the narrow gauge arrived. At Bodie the Standard Consolidated and the Bodie Consolidated Mining companies were the major producers. The town could count more than 1,500 people with more arriving daily. By the end of 1881 the mining camp had its own railroad, The Bodie Railway & Lumber Co. It is not surprising to find none other than Henry Yerington was behind this narrow gauge logging line that supplied lumber and timber to the riproaring camp made famous by Bret Harte's "Bad Man From Bodie".

No public notice had been given by the Carson & Colorado as to its intended final destination. There had been speculation for many months that the line would be extended into Southern California, but nothing official. However on December 1, 1881 articles of incorporation had been quietly filed in California for an extension of the line from the state line to Mojave on the Southern Pacific's line between San Francisco and Yuma. When the C&C reached Candelaria, the company announced that the line would not build beyond this point for "some time", but would eventually build branches to Bodie (from Hawthorne) and into Mono County, in the northern part of the Owens Valley.

On March 25, 1882 General Freight and Passenger Agent D.A. Bender announced that the C&C would build over Mt. Montgomery Pass and into the Owens Valley, toward Mojave. Bender went on to say that the road was profitable and had great potential for both mining and agriculture. It is interesting to note that the railroad was not ignoring farm traffic at this early date, as has been suggested by some historians. It is safe to assume that the quick profits and overnight bonanzas associated with silver mining made better "copy" than hay and grain shipments.



The mining camps in the Inyo Mountains, which border the Owens Valley on the east, had already created some excitement, namely at Panamint just west of Death Valley and at Cerro Gordo, high on the mountainsides above Hawley (soon to be renamed Keeler). The Darwin Mines were also producing silver, lead and zinc. Additional traffic was to be found in the soda and potash deposits near Owens Lake. High freighting costs had prevented their development in previous years.

As early as 1864, Francis Marion "Borax" Smith had been mining borax at Columbus (near Belleville), but he abandoned these operations in 1875 because of a lack of dependable transportation. In 1867 salt was being recovered from Teels Marsh and shipped to Virginia City by camels that had been imported from Africa. Despite Smith's failure with the Columbus operations, he later went on to greater glories in the borax business and built the narrow gauge Death Valley Railroad, the Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad, and played a major part in the development of the "Great American Desert."

In order to construct the Carson & Colorado into Owens Valley, two new companies were formed: Carson & Colorado Railroad, Second Division, which would build from Belleville, Nevada to the California state line and the Carson & Colorado Railroad, Third Division, to build south from the state line. Both companies were wholly owned by the original railroad and all trackage was operated under lease.

The extension was started in the spring of 1882, leaving the existing line two miles south of Belleville at a point called junction (later Filben). The line was built on the gentle slope which opened onto Teels Marsh, and climbed a rocky canyon before beginning a winding three percent grade to Mt. Montgomery Pass. The Pass\* was crested at 7,138 feet - higher than the Central Pacific's crossing of the Sierra at Donner Summit. Heading downgrade on the south side of the pass, a 247' tunnel was bored on the 2.3% grade down to the valley floor.

Benton station was reached in January, 1883, and served the nearby mining town. The tracks then dropped down into the Hammil Valley and on a gradual descent into the Owens Valley at Laws. Laws station was built to serve the nearby mining supply and farming community of Bishop Creek (now Bishop) on the west side of the valley. Laws was reached in mid-March, and was named for Robert C. Laws, the C&C's Superintendent.



Construction work south from Laws went at a rapid pace, with some 400 men on the job under the direction of Chief Engineer James T. Oliver, who had been placed in charge of all C&C location work south of Belleville. Workers spiked-down three-quarters of a mile of track per day and an excursion was run from Mound House to the end of iron on July 4, 1883. At the end of track, near Lone Pine, the excursionists went by wagon to Independence for the celebration. The locomotive's tender was reported to have carried "a dozen gaudily painted Indians" on the trip down from Hawthorne. The C&C depot serving Independence was named Citrus (later Kearsarge).

The remaining 70 miles of trackage from Laws to Hawley on the shore of Owens Lake was completed in July 1883. This line did not pass through a single established town between Belleville and Hawley (143 miles).

No explanation was given by the C&C for the route selected through the Owens Valley. It seems likely that the decision was based on economic factors. The populated western side of the valley was also bisected by numerous small streams that flowed down from the nearby Sierra. By locating the trackage on the east side, much bridging and grading was avoided and there would be no threat of washouts. Water had been a problem on the northern part of the line, where Carson River flooding around Dayton had put the line under water on several occasions.

Lone Pine had been hit by an earthquake in 1872, which had killed 26 people and opened up a large void in the valley floor. But, whatever the reason for putting the tracks on the desolate east side of the valley, the people in the established towns were not happy about it! Of the existing communities (Lone Pine, Independence, Big Pine and Bishop Creek) only Lone Pine was to ever see rail service. A line was graded between Laws and Bishop Creek, but tracks were never spiked-down. Likewise a line from Benton Station to Benton was talked about, but never built.

As completed, the Carson & Colorado Railroad extended 293 miles from Mound House, Nevada to Hawley, California; with a six mile branch from junction to Candelaria. The line had been built at a minimum cost, a maximum distance in a short period of time. Heavy grading had been avoided as much as possible. There were but two large trestles, on the Candelaria branch and only one tunnel, just south of Mt. Montgomery Pass. The maximum grade of 2.77 percent had been reached just north of Belleville, while the crossing of the summit was made with a 2.30 percent gradient. (Grade on the twisting Candelaria branch had been held to 2.33 percent.) The road boasted eight wood burning Baldwin 4-4-0s, six wooden passenger cars, and 138 freight cars.

Upon completion of the line, an Inauguration Special was run the entire length of the road on July 12, 1883. Aboard the special were Henry Yerington, accompanied by Darius Mills, William Sharon and other officials of the C&C. After riding through desert heat from Mound House to Hawley, Mills is quoted by both Kneiss and Beebe as turning to his companions and saying: "Gentlemen, either we built this line 300 miles too long, or 300 years too soon."



Regular train service was begun on August 1, 1883. At Hawley a new enginehouse, turntable, and depot were under construction. Captain James M. Keeler started steamboat service on Owens Lake in order to deliver cordwood from the Sierra foothills to the mill at Hawley. The C&C management was impressed enough to rename the end of the line Keeler. High up in the Inyo Mountains above Keeler, the Cerro Gordo was producing silver ore and could now afford to ship lower grade ores over the C&C to Belleville's mills.

The managements of the Virginia & Truckee Railway and the Carson & Colorado Railroad were closely interlocked. Henry Yerington was general manager of the V&T and president of the C&C. D.A. Bender was general passenger and freight agent for both roads and the C&C shared the Carson City main office with the V&T. Robert L. Laws, the superintendent of the C&C, was not an employee of the V&T and his office was in the narrow gauge road's Hawthorne depot. Of course, D.O. Mills, William Sharon and Nicholas Luning owned most of the stock in both roads. It is interesting to note that while Yerington and Bliss sat on the boards of both roads, (and Mills after 1892) that no other person sat on the boards of both lines.

The directors of the C&C upon its completion in 1883 were:

Henry M. Yerington (also president)  
 Duane L. Bliss (also vice-president)  
 W.D. Tobey (Bliss' brother-in-law)  
 Lloyd Tevis (president of Wells Fargo Bank)  
 John Forbes S.P. Smith

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The line was extended that year [1887], but only two miles south of Keeler to the old Cerro Gordo boat landing. (Jiggerville) This construction was necessary to comply with the original charter, but caused a brief flurry of rumors that the C&C was building toward Mojave.

In 1887 a long spur track was built five miles north of Keeler to Israel Luce's Inyo Marble Works. The only major business provided by this addition was 200 cars of white marble shipped out in 1890 for construction of the Mills' building in San Francisco.



In 1888 an enginehouse and turntable were constructed at Belleville, the result of a brief upturn in mining.

In 1890 the only major addition to the Carson & Colorado was constructed. On August 17th, beginning with an extension to the Hawthorne wye track, crews started the 7.30 mile Cottonwood Branch. The line was completed that fall and began to haul cordwood for both the mines, mills and the railroad itself.

The C&C was reorganized in 1892, with the capital stock left intact, but the funded debt reduced from \$4,380,000 to \$2,000,000, and the interest rate reduced from six to four percent. It was at this time that the three companies that built the road were consolidated as the Carson & Colorado Railway. Darius O. Mills became a Director, replacing Duane L. Bliss. George Whitell, another Tahoe lumberman became Vice President, while Yerington, Bender and Smith stayed in their previous positions. New members to the C&C board were: W.M. Randol, J.M. Allen, John W.C. Maxwell and W.S. Wood. This reorganization was essentially a financial maneuver as Mills still owned the road, Sharon was dead and operations continued unchanged under Superintendent Laws.

The Carson & Colorado itself reflected the steady decline in mining and resultant loss of traffic, constantly losing money after 1885. Revenues continued to decline through the 1890's. While operating expenses were being met, no interest was being paid on stocks and bonds. Maintenance was neglected and the company made do with the original equipment, as funds were not available for new cars and locomotives. By 1897 the road took in only \$131,096, less than a third of its 1883 earnings. The decline of silver prices as result of the Silver Panic of 1893 did not help the V&T nor the C&C.

No directors' meetings were held between May, 1896 and March 1900. Mills was in his New York office trying to forget he ever built the C&C.

So, as the century ended, the Carson & Colorado Railway continued to struggle through the desert - illogical, improbable, ill-conceived and unlikely, it traveled its yard wide trackage and awaited the big bonanza.

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