Shangri-La is a state of mind

California’s Owens Valley, where the narrow gauge once ran, is simmering with people who want to see it do so again.

by David Lustig

In a part of California long devoid of railroading, an old locomotive sits in a park as a small group of people informally toast its success. For the first time in decades, there is heat in this 4-6-0’s firebox. Someone pulls the whistle cord and a faint memory rekindles in the hearts of locals. A live Southern Pacific steam engine echoes in the remote Owens Valley. Maybe Robert Conway was right, after all.

Conway was an important British diplomat in James Hilton’s 1933 fiction best-seller Shangri-La, where he finds peace, tranquility, and happiness. In the chaotic world Conway crash in the Himalayas only to be rescued by a state of mind kept in the audience didn’t care what the railroad was, for but for the rail enthusiasts among us, no matter how they were lettered, it was for nature moved to reclaim its own.

Whenever appropriate, and many times it was, the 3-foot-gauge line that seemed to bypass almost every town in the valley would play a supporting role. Sometimes it was just moments (John Wayne’s “3 Godfathers”) other times it was part of the entire plot, like “The Ransom Cross” episode of “The Gene Autry Show.” Most members of the prequel, with Errol the audience didn’t care what the railroad was, for but for the rail enthusiasts among us, no matter how they were lettered, it was for nature moved to reclaim its own.

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In 2009, due largely in part to two dedicated historical groups, the Carson & Colorado Railway Inc. was formed in 2000. One of the group’s best days was Jan. 25, 2001, when members Randy Babcock and Duke Tetley, both certified steam locomotive engineers, began carefully breath shape employee, near Lone Pine connected the narrow gauge with the outside world.

Despite being dieselized in 1954 with a custom-built General Electric end-cab 50-ton switcher, the inevitable end to SP’s narrow gauge operations came April 29, 1960. After an official “spike-pulling” there was a land and equipment donation to the newly formed museum at Laws, including 4-6-0 No. 9 that had been held as standby for the diesel (ironically, the GE had to haul the Ten-Wheeler dead to Laws as it failed its last boiler inspection). Predictably, much of the line began quickly disappear as nature moved to reclaim its own.

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These remnants rails off of California Highway 136 just north of Keeler are the only ones left outside of the Laws Museum in Bishop.

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south to Lone Pine and obtain enough freight and passenger cars to operate a tourist train.

Narrow gauge: backstage

To date, the Carson & Colorado has acquired 280 sticks of used 70-pound rail (enough for 3,432 feet of track), 12,000 used ties, a former Denver & Rio Grande stock car, SP boxcar No. 6, heaps of tools and spikes, and a couple of donated metal buildings that the group moved to Independence in order to successfully work during the bitter cold winter months. But the group freely admits it needs more. A lot more.

“We need air, water, electricity, a safe and secure pit, more machine tools, strong workbenches, hoists, jacks, and pry bars,” says the bearded Dave Mull, who looks like he would fit right in as a member of the “ZZ Top” rock band.

“We’re also looking to eventually locate our facilities on the site of the old Kearsarge station [a few miles east of Independence],” he adds, which was recently deeded to them from former owner Union Pacific, land the railroad inherited when it absorbed the SP’s Los Angeles Department of Water & Power, however, owns most of the right-of-way the group wants to use. Mull says simply, “We’re talking,” adding that the group is applying for state grants to help finance their plans and county supervisors are supportive.

Even with official backing, Mull points out that such grants can take up to five years to move through the approval process. But, he adds, that is not dampening the spirit of the group, which has a couple of dozen hands-on volunteers, plus financial support from a loose-knit group of nationwide members, many of whom occasionally make the trek to the Owens Valley to see firsthand the progress that has been made.

On the northern end of the valley, just east of Bishop, is the museum at Laws, which has without a doubt, the largest collection of former SP narrow gauge equipment still in existence anywhere.

When the Southern Pacific pulled rail service out of the Owens Valley in 1960, it donated 11 acres that quickly became the nucleus of the Laws Museum. Besides the station, a fuel oil storage tank, the agent’s house, a water tank, and a turntable, the museum also owns 4-6-0 No. 5, caboose No. 401, a couple thousand feet of track, including what was the main line, a small assortment of freight cars, some tools and, not to be forgotten, a couple of outhouses.

“Now, almost 50 years later, a whole ‘western town’ including the buildings that housed the last Laws post office, has sprung up. Although the original water tank collapsed and a new one has been erected, the Laws station still has the feel of an open railroad facility. In addition, a corrugated metal ‘barn,” once a hay storage facility, has been moved onto the property and two tracks run into it. “That’s where we do our rebuilding, maintenance, and repair work,” says museum board member Max Cox, who understands the need for a first-rate indoor facility if work is going to continue throughout the year.

That barn has paid off handsomely for the museum. Its protection from the elements has enabled volunteers to comfortably tackle an ambitious project: the four-and-a-half-year, 7,000-man-hour restoration of a narrow gauge H1 Brill motor car originally built for the Death Valley Railroad as its No. 5, in 1927. The DVR went silent in the early 1930s and the car, along with other equipment, was purchased by U.S. Potash and moved to its facility near Carlsbad, N.M., for continued service. Retired in the mid-1950s, it sat in The Land of Enchantment until its donation back to California in the 1960s.

Motor car No. 5: motion capture

“It was in horrible shape,” Cox says of No. 5. “The roof had failed, it was leaking, and all the wood was rotting.”

Not having a working locomotive in its stable (SP No. 9 will probably never steam again) in 1998 the museum decided to rebuild the rare Brill.

“We stripped it down to bare metal,” Cox says. “The entire exterior below the windows is new 10-gauge steel.”

During its restoration, Cox adds, seven volunteers used 5,000 hot rivets, rebuilt the roof, installed new glass windows, and installed a brand new Cummins ISB 195 6-cylinder Tier 2-compliant diesel. “We still have the original engine,” he says, “but we felt it was beyond practical repair. If it becomes necessary, however, we can update the new engine to Tier 3 compliance. The No. 5, looking as good as new and probably sounding even better, is taken out for display during holidays and sometimes putters around the limited confines of the museum when a group of fans calls ahead and coordinates a time, Cox says.

Would such a vehicle be suitable for a planned expansion of the museum and may be a tourist operation, perhaps into nearby Bishop, less than five miles west?

Cox smiles and says that he and others have forever thought it would be nice to go into Bishop. But for the immediate future, that’s not in the cards. The most serious obstacle is the Owens River, even though much of the original right of way for a never-to-be-laid interchange to connect Laws with Bishop in the early 1900s still viable.

“It’s been a problem since they originally built the railroad,” he says. “We’re on the wrong side of the river.”

When asked about the future of the museum, Cox has the same cautious enthusiasm as Mull does farther south in Independence.

“We’re hanging in there,” he says, looking south past the edge of the museum to the trackless right-of-way moneying off into the distance. Like Mull, who optimistically talks about operating his groups 4-6-0 to Lone Pine, Cox says sometime in the near future passengers will again board at the Laws station for a trip along the narrow gauge.

In a place where the likes of actors John Wayne, Gene Autry, and William Boyd once rode the narrow gauge or used it as a backdrop to drop into celluloid dreams of redemption and the success of the good guys, who would dare take bets against the dreams of Max Cox, Dave Mull, and the small but indefatigable army of Owens Valley Volunteers? Not me, and certainly not Robert Conway.

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