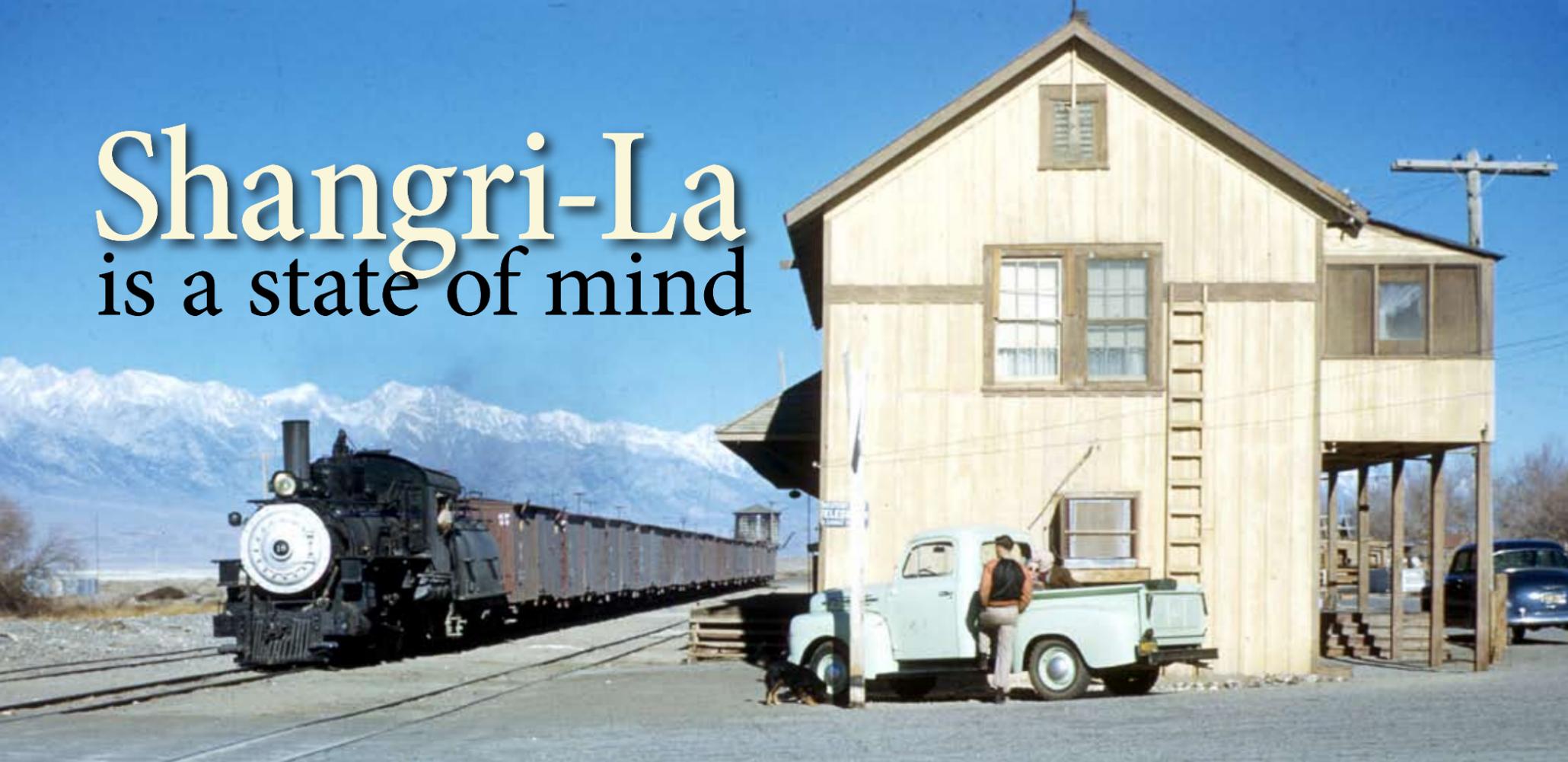


Shangri-La is a state of mind



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 "Lost Horizon." Conway survived an airplane crash in the Himalayas only to be rescued by members of a Tibetan monastery known as Shangri-La, where he finds peace, tranquility, and happiness. In the chaotic world Conway left behind, few people believed Shangri-La existed; even his friends who never saw him again were skeptical. Maybe they would have felt differently if they had known about

California's Owens Valley.

A sparsely populated area in the east-central part of the state bisected by State Highway 395, it's but a long steer skull's toss to western Nevada. With few exceptions, the Owens Valley has usually been a place to drive through on the way to elsewhere. But for those who know this place, at the base of the high Sierras, it is a land rich in political intrigue, steeped in Hollywood movie-making tradition, and an area of fascinating narrow-gauge railroading that once was — and in some spots, still is.

Once the southern end of the 3-foot-gauge Carson & Colorado Railroad (later part of the Southern Pacific) today's Owens Valley is home to small but earnest groups of homegrown fans and historians seeking to bring railroading back to life.

The steam engine in the park in Independence provides proof.

That's all fine and good for those who choose to live there, but for the rest of us, of all the ripped-up railroad spots in the world, why would anyone want to make this place a destination? Just to look for relics and pieces of yesterday along a narrow gauge right-of-way abandoned nearly half a century ago? The answer is more complex than you might think.

The Owens Valley, by the luck of its geographic proximity to Hollywood, has been a fixture in hundreds of movies and television shows, sometimes with railroad scenes, other times not, since the beginning of the industry.

A few of the many notables include almost half of the 66 Hopalong Cassidy movies with actor William Boyd playing "Hoppy;" "Gunga Din," based on Rudyard Kipling's poem of British soldiers in 19th century India; "Charge of the Light Brigade" with Errol Flynn; many of Gene Autry's movies and TV shows; "High Sierra" with Humphrey Bogart; and "Nevada Smith" with Steve McQueen.

When it wasn't a great place to film movies, it was part of the plot. Fictional private investigator Jake Gittes was trying to figure out where someone in Los Angeles was stealing water from and why in "Chinatown." The answer to where was the Owens Valley.

4-6-0 No. 18 arrives at Keeler in Owens Valley in 1953. Bill Poole, Carson & Colorado Railway Inc. collection

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 audience didn't care what the railroad was, but for the rail enthusiasts among us, no matter how they were lettered, it was easy to spot one or more of SP's trio of whaleback tendered 4-6-0s hauling a mix of wooden freight and passenger cars.

Owens Valley: the prequel

At its height in the early 1900s, the fledgling Carson & Colorado was a 300-mile line operating from Mound House, Nev., about 20 miles from Reno, down to Keeler, Calif., near nowhere to the south. Just after C&C became part of the Southern Pacific, the northern part was either standard-gauged or abandoned.

By World War II, the slim gauge was down to just the 71-mile segment in the Owens Valley, with Laws, near Bishop, the northern terminal. A standard gauge interchange at Owenyo, an easy walk for the most out-



Independence group poses with No. 18: (counterclockwise) Doug Mull, Joe Andrews, Rick Cromer, Lynn Cromer, Dave Mull (smokebox), Larry Kraus, and Bob Ennis. David Lustig

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 disappearing as nature moved to reclaim its own.

An auction got rid of most of the wooden freight cars, some of which found new lives as detrucked storage facilities on nearby farms. Others were burned to salvage their metal. The buildings and other structures at Owenyo were quickly flattened, save the station, which was donated and moved to Keeler to become the home of that hamlet's volunteer fire department near the town's own, now privately owned, station. After being leased out to a scrapper to pick up the rails, the diesel was sold to a steel mill in Mexico.

In 2009, due largely in part to two dedicated historical groups, the [Carson & Colorado Railway Inc.](#) in Independence and the [Laws Railroad Museum and Historic Site](#), a number of pieces of equipment are not only still intact, but are slated to return to duty when the groups bring narrow-gauge rail-

roading back to the Owens Valley.

The Laws group has completely refurbished a J.G. Brill gas-mechanical that occasionally operates on the museum's limited track, joining the now operable No. 18, which SP had donated to Independence when the GE arrived. The only problem with the Ten-Wheeler is that it's still in a city park unable to move. But that too may be changing.

Lone Pine-born Dave Mull heads the Independence-based group, the official protectors of 4-6-0 No. 18. He and a small hardcore cadre of locals have steadily replaced boiler tubes, rebuilt the firebox, cleaned off bird droppings, greased axles, repaired holes in the tender, and regularly skinned their knuckles, since the nonprofit organization was formed in 2000.

One of the group's best days was Jan. 25, 2001, when members Randy Babcock and Dale Tetley, both certified steam locomotive engineers, began carefully breathing life back into the 18 with small amounts of No. 2 diesel fuel. The needle on her original Ashcroft steam pressure gauge began moving for the first time since she was placed in the park in 1954, creeping up to 10, then 20, and finally 45 psi. This was only about one-quarter of its normal operating pressure, but for a first test, that was just fine.

The group was ecstatic with its progress but also realized the work still ahead: Members hope to relay 15 miles of ex-SP right-of-way between Kearsarge (near Independence)



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Brill motor car No. 5, originally built for the Death Valley Railroad in 1927, operates on June 27, 2008, at Laws. Four photos, David Lustig



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

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. 9, 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 building 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 J.G. 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 maybe 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 interurban to connect Laws with Bishop in the early 1900s is still visible.

"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 moseying off into the distance. Like Mull, who optimistically talks about operating his group's 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 create 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 undefeatable army of Owens Valley volunteers? Not me, and certainly not Robert Conway. **I**



Max Cox (left) and Jim Morow, president of the Laws historical society, stand outside the Laws Railroad Museum and Historic Site.



Owenyo station was moved to Keeler and serves as the city's firehouse and also houses vintage fire trucks.

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 decided to them from former owner Union Pacific, land the railroad inherited when it absorbed the SP. The 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 has been 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