

History of the Carson & Colorado Railroad (With Dayton Emphasis)

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“The road that began nowhere, went nowhere, ran 300 miles through the desert to get there, and was built a hundred years too soon.”

This was expressed by Fanny G. Hazlett and Gertrude Hazlett Randall in their 1921 “Historical Sketch and Reminiscences of Dayton, Nevada.” Various versions of this sentiment were expressed by many and became the unofficial “motto” of the C&C—the little line that could...cheaply and, for most of its life, profitably.

As described by Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg in *Steam Cars to the Comstock*, the C&C came into existence because of the inspiration of Bank of California’s Nevada agent William Sharon. Sharon was one of the founders of the V&T and, while for the most part a ruthless businessman, nonetheless held an absolute faith in Nevada’s potential to produce precious minerals. By 1880 the Comstock ores were playing out and Sharon was looking for a new bonanza. Wonderful reports and rumors were coming from the southern deserts, with many districts waiting for less costly transportation than the 5-cents per pound charged on the freight roads. Sharon saw this as a new bonanza that was ripe for profits.

According to Beebe and Clegg, Sharon brought his dream to one of his V&T co-founders, San Francisco financier Darius Ogden Mills. Like all the partners, Mills had gotten even richer from the success of the V&T. The new railroad would link the V&T/Central Pacific and the many powerful mills of the dying Comstock bonanza to the southern mining regions all the way to the Colorado River. The railroad would be tailored for economy, and profit—it was to be narrow gauge, which slashed both construction and maintenance costs. For most of its route it was to be a “water-level” railbed with almost no grades. Construction crews were to be Chinese, and it would link numerous infant “Comstocks.”

However, Sharon as the driving force is not the only version of the inspiration for the C&C. David F. Myrick (in *Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California, Vol. 1, The Northern Lines*, 1962) claims that the man with the inspiration was Mills himself. But the actual story may have started in 1875 when M.C. Gardner, who operated the Camp Richardson standard-gauge railroad, tried to get a charter for a narrow-gauge railroad in the area. At the time Henry Yerington was a lobbyist at the Nevada legislature, and he

wrote Sharon to ask his and Mills opinion on the concept. At the time they weren't encouraging, so Yerington helped oppose the charter, which was defeated. Later Sharon rethought the idea, but then had a very hard sell with Mills, who had been hardened by financial events into "The Frosty Moneybags of the West."

Eventually, however, it is clear that the unsentimental Mills agreed to fund the new railroad and soon Sharon was hurrying back to business-minded Henry Yerington—another V&T partner—to get the narrow-gauge construction project going. Soon the railroad was incorporated, with Yerington as President, timber baron D.L. Bliss (the fourth V&T founder) as Vice President, Mills owning two-thirds of the stock, and Sharon owning the rest. The C&C was different from the V&T in name (and incorporation papers) only.

In this heyday of railroads you could order a railroad almost on "mail order." Rail came from the Risdon iron works, cars from Barney & Smith, and engines from Cooke-Danforth or the Mason Machine Works. Not that Sharon and Yerington spent that much—they bought utilitarian stock and surplus from the standard-gauging of many other lines. The ever thrifty Yerington, however, only bought Baldwin engines—Yerington is quoted as saying, "For dead hard work and ease of maintenance, I would rather pay \$12,000 for a Baldwin than \$9,000 for a locomotive from another maker." The railroad primarily would move freight; passengers for the rough and ready camps would be happy to ride in anything that had a roof...and would not be that gentle on cars anyway. The C&C was going to be the ultimate in economy.

Once the line had been pushed through from Mound House to its eventual end at Keeler, Sharon invited his friend and partner Mills—a man accustomed to the finest things of life—to ride the little railroad from its origin to its terminus. The trip took two days, arriving in Keeler on July 12, 1883, after an overnight stay in the rough boomtown of Candelaria. In Keeler Sharon asked Mills what he thought. Mills' reply was a classic and came to define the railroad: "Gentlemen, it seems to me that either we have built this railroad 300 miles too long or 300 years too soon." It was a thought that was repeated by many, added to and amplified, but never really contradicted by any in the years to come.

While this was not the only trip Mills made on the line, soon he moved back to New York where he was a fixture in social circles. Nonetheless, in 1885 when Sharon died—in the midst of a scandalous lawsuit—in 1885—Mills acquired full ownership of the railroad. In spite of this, when the C&C was sold to the Southern Pacific for \$2,750,000, Mills considered it "found money"—he'd almost forgotten that he owned it! Nonetheless, although he forgot the C&C he remained active in the leadership of the V&T until his death in 1910—the same death year as Henry Yerington.

The first name for the railroad—at least in the press— was "the Bodie Extension" of the V&T or "the Bodie Road," since it was in part designed to connect Bodie to the mills in the north and the rail lines of the nation. (At first the railroad was intended to have a spur into Bodie and Aurora but this plan was soon abandoned and the railroad

instead simply connected with the Bodie freight road.) But the official name was to be the Carson & Colorado, since the plan was to connect the Carson River—and all the mines in between—to the Colorado River at Coleville, 600 miles away.

But first, in spite of rapid initiation, the construction of the line became paralyzed by a variety of problems. The financial and incorporation plans went ahead rapidly, but there were delays in getting track and nails and later equipment and then there were even more significant delays in getting labor. The powerful labor unions—many of whose members had been put out of work by the slowly dying Comstock—stoked anti-Chinese sentiment. Eventually, the V&T principals gave up and hired Occidental crews, and the construction began.

According to David F. Myrick in volume 1 of *Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California*, Dayton in 1880 had declined from its peak population of 2500 to only 200 residents. However, U.S. census results disagree with this assessment—the census showed 78 people enumerated in 1860 in Dayton precinct, about 640 in 1870, and 475 in 1880. Whatever the population, after the January 1880 surveys began, Dayton received the news of the coming railroad with excitement. Dayton had the mills, and the little narrow-gauge would bring them the ore to process. In February 1880, as soon as the rumors of a railroad began to take form, Dayton citizens donated land to the V&T for a depot. Their faith was rewarded—by 1890 (when no copies of the U.S. census for Nevada survived a devastating fire) the number of registered voters in Dayton showed the largest increase since the 1870s.

Work began on May 31, 1880, with a train of 80 workers (mostly unemployed miners), a foreman, some officials, and a few visitors. Even though Yerington had commented, "If I had to use all white labor I would not have thought of driving so much as a pick into the ground," after strong protests by locals and the Comstock miner's union and contrary to Yerington's plans, grading in the Dayton area used 300 Occidental workers. Much grading was accomplished by June, but what was not obvious to the public was that 200 Chinese workers had been brought in by a circuitous route to work on grading in Churchill Canyon. Nonetheless, as newspaper articles of the day confirm, as far as the people of Dayton and the Comstock knew the railroad was being built completely without Chinese labor!

Mills and Yerington hired Robert James Laws as foreman of C&C construction and assistant superintendent. His oversight in building the railroad was recognized in naming the Laws station, in California.

Another labor issue occurred soon after. The men were only paid \$1.75 a day, with 75-cents held back for board. The miners were used to being paid \$4 a day. A strike started and significant protests occurred. The railroad replied by firing 60 of the strikers. Soon the others were back at work for the lower wage.

The line from Mound House to Dayton passed through Daney Canyon, on a bridge over Birdsall's Ditch, and then over a 200-foot trestle across the Carson River.

From there it went on across the Dayton Valley, into Churchill Canyon, and on to Wabuska, Schurz, and east of Walker Lake to Hawthorne.

When the line was laid out to Wabuska, the Mason Valley town of Pizen Switch had just changed its name to Greenfield. An apocryphal story states that the residents felt that they needed to persuade the railroad to come into their town instead of the planned route through Schurz, so they quickly changed their name again—to Yerington. Mr. Yerington was quite flattered...and proceeded to go on past as originally intended. However, according to Nevada State Archivist Guy Rocha, since the town's name was not changed until April 1, 1894, it is clear that the town was named to honor Yerington, not persuade him. (The real reason for the name change was that the U.S. Post Office indicated that there were too many Greenfields already in existence.)

By the end of September 1880 the graders had reached the north end of Walker Lake. In October they were in Hawthorne. That month rail-laying started from Mound House and on October 27 Engine No. 1, the Candelaria, was placed on the tracks at Mound House.

By November 14 three miles of track had been completed from Mound House and by November 30 seven miles of track, through Dayton, had been completed.

On January 8 the railroad ran an excursion line from Mound House 29 miles, 22 from Dayton, to the end of the track in Churchill Canyon. For a couple of months residents could enjoy riding the rails for free—and many took advantage of this, traveling back and forth through Churchill “just for fun!” (There were a few implied complaints about this from railroad officials in newspaper articles of the time.)

Then, in a few days in January-February 1881 Dayton was under water. The C&C was tied up for 12 days, with both trains and all construction halted. Nonetheless, on March 1 the rails reached Walker Lake. On March 10 the C&C RR began charging passengers 10-cents a mile to ride the train. (More implied complaints were found in newspaper articles—this time, however, from residents!)

At this point there were three engines on the line: No. 1, the Candelaria; No. 2, the Belleville (passenger), and No. 3, the Colorado.

On April 7 they reached Hawthorne, 100 miles from Mound House. Hawthorne was founded by the railroad to be a division headquarters so passenger and freight depots, a unique dual enginehouse, and shops were to be constructed. Connections would be made to the boom towns of Aurora and Bodie. On April 14 the railroad sent a free excursion train to Hawthorne—whose purpose was to sell lots in the new town. More than 800 people arrived, dusty and hot, to a few tents and no drinking water cool enough to drink. But clever businessmen and several tent saloons were ready—with plenty of beer (but no cool water). Not surprisingly, many people overindulged, some of whom did not feel well enough to make the return trip the next day. Other entrepreneurs addressed the needs of both sober and not-so-sober visitors with tent accommodations, and other clever folks provided transportation by wagon to other towns where at least some type of slightly more luxurious accommodation existed. In spite of the primitive

nature of the adventure, and the hangovers incurred, 35 lots were sold. The town of Hawthorne was on its way!

The plan at this point was to push on into the mining districts of Silver Peak, Lida, and others. However, a C&C planner visited the Cerro Gordo mines above Hawley (soon to be renamed Keeler after its founder) and the plans changed. The railroad now would head over Mt. Montgomery Pass, using a 247-foot tunnel to miss much of the climb, and would descend directly into the Owens Valley.

Meantime, on December 17, 1881, the first attempt at an intentional train wreck was thwarted. A pile of timbers was placed on the tracks in Churchill Canyon, but was detected before it could derail the train. The likely reason for the attempt was quickly deduced—the manifests indicated that the C&C on that day was carrying a carload of bullion.

By early 1882 the railroad was pushed through to the big silver camp of Candelaria, which was reached by a spur that passed over a very impressive trestle, and then on into California. The 247-foot Mt. Montgomery Pass Tunnel, the only one on the line, was created to reduce the grades required for the precipitous descent into the Owens Valley. The distance from Candelaria to Benton was only 43 miles but the cuts and fills and late shipment of rail from England delayed the arrival in Benton until January 1883.

The line pushed on to Hawley/Keeler, but soon after the plans for an extension to the Colorado River were abandoned. The price of silver had fallen, and so had the potential profit from extending the line further. Instead, the line stopped at Keeler, where it would handle extensive shipments of borax. No direct connection passing any further south occurred until 1910, when the SP opened the standard-gauge “Jawbone branch” from Mohave to the C&C in Owenyo. The completed C&C was 293-miles long.

In February 1892 the line was reorganized as the Carson and Colorado Railway to consolidate three separate divisions and refinance accumulated debt.

In spite of a few derailments and wrecks at first the railroad lived up to expectations and became increasingly profitable. But then, as the years went by, profits began to decline. The inspired Mr. Sharon was dead and the remaining founders had gone on to other interests and concerns. Trying to figure out how to keep the little railroad profitable was less and less of interest to them. As mining profits declined, the receipts of the C&C did not even cover the interest on its debt.

However, another railroad was interested in the C&C. The Southern Pacific Railroad saw the railroad as a desirable addition to its system, especially since it also had ambitions of acquiring the V&T and using the combined system to augment its growing empire. In March 1900 the Southern Pacific purchased the C&C for \$2,750,000. Ironically, this purchase was followed almost immediately, in May, by the famous Tonopah silver strike followed soon after by the Goldfield bonanza. Soon the economical little C&C was very profitable once again—though not for its founders but for the SP, whose initial purchase price was repaid in one year.

As the line became increasingly busy transferring freight in Mound House from the standard-gauge V&T to the narrow-gauge C&C became a terrible bottleneck.

Thus in 1904 the SP began to standard-gauge the C&C, bringing in a load of Japanese laborers to do the work. This, of course, produced its own bottlenecks, with the freight-transfer point moving ever southward. By July 1905 the planned task was completed. The line was standard-gauged from Mound House to Tonopah Junction, with the last section from Mina to Tonopah Junction being equipped with a third rail for dual operation. (The section through the more mountainous country to Candelaria, over Mt. Montgomery Pass, around tight turns and through the tunnel, and into the Owens Valley was never standard-gauged.)

This standard-gauging effort brought sorrow to Hawthorne. In 1902, after the locomotives were converted to coal, the 7.3-mile Cottonwood branch out of Hawthorne, built to access fuel wood, had been abandoned, and Hawthorne knew that there was less and less justification for the difficult curve that led the railroad to its passenger and freight depots. In 1905 standard-gauging was completed with the line shorted by 6.6 miles by bypassing Hawthorne. The town the railroad had founded with such fanfare now found that the siding of Thorne—today on the Hawthorne Army Depot—was the closest approach to Hawthorne itself.

In April 1905 the Southern Pacific organized and incorporated the Nevada and California Railway Company, and in May the C&C officially became part of that line, all of whose capital stock was owned by the SP. However, it appears that in spite of the N&C name appearing on boxcars and various paper ownership changes between the N&C, the SP, and the Central Pacific, until its closing the northern portion of the former C&C was still routinely referred to—especially by locals—as the Carson & Colorado.

This became the great days for the renamed C&C. Its little cars, repainted in SP yellow, became caravans with plush coach seats carrying stock sellers, gamblers, prize fighters, geologists, and entertainers of all types, bound for a connection with the Tonopah & Goldfield Railroad and the excitement and luxury of the boomtowns at its end. Roulette wheels and fine wine were among the stock carried.

However, also in 1905 as this boom was occurring to the south, the beginning of the end was insured for the Mound House section of the C&C. Rejected in buying the V&T and tired of the vagaries of trying to work with that line, the SP pushed through 28 miles of standard-gauge track from Churchill to the Central Pacific at Hazen. Suddenly the V&T, and thus the Mound House to Churchill section of the C&C, was no longer critical to moving freight and passengers to the Central Pacific. (This miscalculation by the V&T, which was holding out for much more money, led to its eventual end. The V&T went into receivership soon after Mills died in 1910, but struggled in spurts and starts, with a brief stint as a tourist railroad, until it closed down completely in 1950.)

The northern line managed, nonetheless, to hang on until the 1930s. However, the Mound House-Fort Churchill branch was relegated to the role of mail carrier, running only one accommodation train during the day. Subsequently the service was shortened so that the route ran between Mound House and Wabuska, and this only tri-weekly. Eventually both passengers and mail fell off to near zero. The eventual end was inevitable, and the Great Depression finally brought it on. In June 1932 the SP requested the line's discontinuance from Mound House to Wabuska.

Reno Evening News; Thursday, June 2, 1932; page twelve:

Linked closely with the history of railroading in Nevada since 1881, when the Carson & Colorado railroad was completed, the rail service on the branch line between Mound House and Wabuska may be discontinued during the latter part of this month if an application to this effect presented yesterday to the public service commission by the Southern Pacific Company that has owned the road for many years, is not pretested before June 20. Falling off of business on the line is given as the basis of the request.

Mound House, Dayton and Wabuska are three points chiefly affected, and if the application is passed upon favorably, Dayton will have no railroad for the first time in more than half a century....

Almost two years of protests ensued, by the Reno Chamber of Commerce, mining companies, and others, and the Nevada public services commission recommended that the Southern Pacific petition for abandonment be denied. Nonetheless, in March 1934 the interstate commerce commission approved the petition and on April 25, 1934, the Dayton depot was closed and the track from Mound House to Churchill was abandoned.

Reno Evening Gazette; Friday, April 6, 1934; page eight:

DAYTON RAILROAD STATION WILL BE CLOSED

DAYTON, Nev., April 6.---(Special).---The Southern Pacific Company station at Dayton will be abandoned on April 25, it was announced by the station agent here following receipt of orders from company headquarters. The move will follow the abandonment of the company's weekly train to Dayton.

Closing up of the station may mean a severe loss to Dayton and may result in the closing of the Dayton high school, it was believed today. The school is supported largely on revenue from Southern Pacific Company taxes. mail and express formerly hauled here by train is being handled by the Virginia & Truckee railroad six days each week.

Nevada's public service commission refused to permit the company to abandon the railroad through Dayton, deeming that rail service was still a necessity to the town, but the interstate commerce commission reversed this ruling and permission was granted to abandon the line from Mound House to Churchill through Dayton.

In her diary for that year Emma Loftus of Dayton recorded, "April 25, 1934: The Depot closed here today for the last time – the first time there will be no depot since about 1880."

In 1936 the track was removed. Soon after the depot was sold and converted to a private residence.

At the same time as filing the petition to abandon the Mound House line, SP asked to abandon the line from Mina to Keeler, but that request was denied. Subsequently SP again file to abandon various portions of this line, and finally, while the standard-gauge line from Hazen to Mina remained, in February 1938 SP got permission to abandon the line from Mina to Tonopah Junction and then the line to Benton, California, a few days later.

Hard times caught up with the V&T at the same time. In 1938 the railroad was given permission to abandon the line from Virginia City to Carson City. (The line from Carson City to Reno hung on, however—largely as a tourist railroad—until May 31, 1950.)

In the north an era had come to an end. The southern line, however, hung on. In February 1943 the line from Benton to Laws was abandoned but the Keeler branch to Laws of what was now called the Southern Pacific Narrow Gauge remained as a mine railway.

This remaining little no-nonsense railroad, vestige of a bygone era, at first derisively was called “The Slim Princess,” but admirers of the line loved the name. Soon “The Slim Princess” became its affectionate nickname.

The standard-gauged section from Hazen to Mina still operated, and is still in operation today to just past Thorne to serve the Hawthorne Army Depot. For years the 71.5 miles from Laws to Keeler, operated as the Southern Pacific Narrow Gauge, also remained in service, the only narrow-gauge component of SP’s extensive system. It carried mostly freight, connecting at Owenyo to the standard-gauge Jawbone branch at Mojave. However, it also accommodated passengers, and was especially popular among narrow-gauge enthusiasts.

Lucius Beebe in a 1947 article described the SPNG, the remaining vestige of the C&C. “Envision, if you will, a narrow gauge railroad operating over a single track of 35-pound rails imported from Sheffield in the ‘80s. Every item of its rolling stock is of wooden construction built on wooden underframes, and its air brakes are something less than a model of a triple valve modernity. Its single train is operated over its entire mileage three times a week, and the largest community it serves directly has a population of 300. Its two functioning turntables are hand operated; a single train crew is on duty 10 months of the year and its principal water tank supply is actuated by a windmill.”

In the late 1950s various publications marveled that the little narrow-gauge was still in service and encouraged railroad aficionados to enjoy it. In 1959 John Hungerford extolled, “Although the old Carson & Colorado has shrunk from its original 300 miles to 70½, its direct successor—the Southern Pacific Narrow Gauge—remains both unique and remarkable. It is unique in that it is the only narrow gauge common carrier west of the Rockies. It is remarkable in that it has lasted as a three-foot pike and continues to be a profitable investment for its owners. It is also remarkable in that with the coming of the Diesel Age this little line was important enough to follow the parade toward internal combustion power, evidence in itself that there is hardly any immediate likelihood of the road’s vanishing into the narrow gauge twilight.”

Perhaps Hungerford’s knowledgeable enthusiasm really masked hopeful thinking. Whatever the reason, seemingly fulfilling a counter-prophecy, in April 1960—within a

few days of 80 years after it had began—the last service from Laws to Keeler was discontinued. The little railroad that could, the “Slim Princess,” was no more.

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