



The development of the railway line that became the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad began in 1871 when the Union Pacific-controlled Utah Southern Railroad began laying track southward from Salt Lake City. The Utah Southern (1875) and a second UP subsidiary, the Utah Southern Railroad Extension, took up the work, completing trackage as far as Milford and the nearby mining town of Frisco, Utah, in 1880. By 1899, these and other lines had been absorbed into the Oregon Short Line Railroad, a larger UP subsidiary, and in 1899 the OSL extended the route to the Utah–Nevada border, with some grading completed into Nevada.

In 1900, William Andrews Clark acquired the struggling Los Angeles Terminal Railway and in 1901 reincorporated as the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad. Clark's forces began construction work southwestward from the OSL (1899) end of track along the existing OSL/UP grade in Nevada; a brief "railroad war" ensued before Clark and the UP called a truce in 1903. Their agreement called for Clark's railroad to acquire the existing UP tracks south of Salt Lake City (US [1875], USE [1880], and OSL [1899]) and the UP received a 50% interest in Clark's SPLA&SL. Construction of the remaining line proceeded rapidly through this location at Kelso to Daggett, California, where it connected to the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe mainline (SP Needles Branch [1883]). From Daggett, Clark negotiated trackage rights to Riverside, California, on the AT&SF's tracks over Cajon Pass (original California Southern [1885]). The complete Salt Lake–Los Angeles line was opened on May 1, 1905. Nearly the entire SPLA&SL route traverses rugged and largely unpopulated desert terrain, with no major population centers or markets between the railroad's endpoints. However, that changed as the city of Las Vegas began its rapid growth, which began with the coming of the SPLA&SL and the ability of southern Californians to ride the train to the closest legal gambling. By 1921, the name had been shortened to the LA&SL and the UP acquired Clark's half of the railroad. Following the UP take-over, the LA&SL constructed notable depot buildings, many of which were imposing structures in the Mission Revival architectural style. The largest such depot, at Milford, was razed in 1979, but landmark LA&SL stations in Caliente, Nevada, and Kelso, California (this location), survive today.

Kelso began when the SPLA&SL was built at the base of the Cima grade, where it was home to helper steam engines to assist trains up the grade to Cima, where the lead engine would detach and head back to Kelso. In 1923–24, the railroad constructed of the "Kelso Clubhouse & Restaurant." The Mission Revival styled depot included a hotel, restaurant, and gardens. The facility served interstate passenger and shipping traffic and the transport of ore from local mines, especially the Vulcan Mine. The depot was an element of the 1920's modernization of the UP stations to compete with the Santa Fe's Harvey Houses. The oasis-like landscape design and overall style and character of this remote station made it a popular gathering place for UP employees, passengers, and local residents. The original gardens featured Fremont Cottonwoods, Chinese Elms, and manicured geometric lawns, but these did not survive. The Kelso Depot contributed significantly during World War II and the Korean War, but then declined steadily with a decline in freight and passengers, diesel engines replacing steam, and closing of the Vulcan Mine. The last helper engine climbed Cima grade in 1959, the last passenger train stopped at Kelso in 1964, and the Lunch Room, as it came to be called, closed in 1985.

Northward view of the Kelso Depot, now the headquarters for the Mojave National Preserve.



In 1983, the UP proposed demolition of the then-unused depot. Efforts to preserve the building culminated in its 1992 transfer to the Bureau of Land Management. In 1994, the Mojave National Preserve was established, and the depot was transferred to the National Park Service. A historical restoration and adaptive reuse project followed in 2002. Since 2005, the Kelso Depot has served as the main Visitor Center of the Mojave National Preserve. The Lunch Room is open again along with a gift shop and museum to serve desert travelers.



Southwestward view of container cars stored on Kelso sidings one mile northeast of Kelso. The depot is barely visible among the trees in the right distance. The mainline is on the far right, the only track with welded rails.

Kelso is where I became interested in railroads. One day I visited the Mojave National Preserve and, having discovered this was the railroad from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, I wondered why it was there. Specifically, why is the railroad so far – almost 30 miles as the crow flies – from Interstate 15, which I thought was *the* way from Las Vegas to Los Angeles. Then I realized that the railroad had gone over Cima dome and through the Devil's Playground sand dunes to avoid the grades and grade changes along the I-15 route in this area, which are fine for cars and trucks but not for trains. With that insight I changed my way of thinking; I then thought of the railroad grade, not I-15, as *the* way from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, from the point of view of being the more topography-taming route. Then I started studying the other railroads of the Southwest, basically working outward from Kelso!



Now we've moved southwest of the depot and are looking northeastward; the depot is visible with palm trees to the left of the track. I could find no information on the tower to the right of the tracks. The mainline is on the far left (northwest) and there are five sidings. The trees lining both sides of the trackage are tamarisk, aka salt cedar, planted as a windbreak. The Kelso Depot and a few houses in Kelso are the only buildings for tens of miles around.



Northeastward view of the SPLA&SL (1905), 2,800 feet southwest of the Kelso Depot, where the outermost siding converges with the next siding.



Northeastward view of the SPLA&SL (1905), 4,600 feet southwest of the Kelso Depot, where the last siding converges with the mainline. Just beyond the foreground switch there is a switch to a track that ends at the pile of dirt on the far right; satellite imagery suggests that track may have once extended about 1,000 feet into the desert for reasons unknown to me.





Southward view of the SPLA&SL (1905), 1.3 miles southwest of the Kelso Depot, just past where the tamarisk windbreaks end. The Kelso Dunes are in the hazy distance.



Southwestward view of the SPLA&SL (1905), same location as previous.