



The Carson & Colorado Railway was incorporated in 1880 with plans for a 600 mile, narrow gauge line to connect the Carson and Colorado rivers and access the mining country along the route. The line started from a connection with the standard gauge Virginia & Truckee Railroad at Mound House, Nevada, and reached the mining town of Hawley (now Keeler), California (this location), in 1883, at which point the owners realized they'd built "300 miles too far or 300 years too soon." The C&C hung on for 20 years and then sold to the Southern Pacific. The sale was well timed for the SP; only months later there was a mineral strike at Tonopah allowing the SP to quickly recoup its investment. In 1905, the SP-controlled Nevada & California Railroad standard-gauged the line from Mound House to Mina, Nevada. The remaining N&C narrow gauge route, from a connection with the standard gauge line a few miles south of Mina to this location at Keeler, operated until 1943, when the N&C shut down the line from Mina to Laws, California. This reduced the narrow gauge line down to 70 miles between Laws and Keeler, detached from the rest of the N&C; it survived for 17 years on sparse local traffic and transfer of ore and cargo with the outside rail network via the SP's Jawbone Branch (1910) at a juncture 15 miles north of Keeler called Owenyo. The last train ran from Keeler to Laws in April 1960 and the tracks were removed in 1961.

The history of the C&C end-of-track at Keeler goes back to 1869, when a smelter was built at a location called Swansea (named for the mining town in Wales) on the eastern shore of Owens Lake 2 miles north of (future) Keeler. The Swansea smelter processed silver ore from the nearby Cerro Gordo mines in the Inyo Mountains east of Keeler, and a pier was built to transport the resulting ingots across Owens Lake by steamships then by wagon the remaining 200 miles to Los Angeles. In 1872, the Lone Pine earthquake damaged the smelters and uplifted the shoreline, rendering the Swansea pier inaccessible to Owens Lake steamships. As a result, the operations moved to Hawley (future Keeler), about 2 miles to the south and on the then-current lakeshore. A new pier was constructed and in 1880, the Owens Lake Mining and Milling Company built a new mill, and Julius M. Keeler, the company agent, laid out the town. The steamship "Bessie Brady" brought ore from Hawley across the lake to the town of Cartago for only 2 years, when in 1882 the ship was destroyed by fire. When the C&C arrived the following year, Julius Keeler purchased the Hawley Mill and the town was renamed in his honor. The success of the Cerro Gordo mines caused Keeler to boom until silver prices plummeted in the early 1890's. In 1885, the Inyo development Company began shipping evaporate minerals from Owens Lake via several narrow gauge spurs that connected with the C&C at Keeler. A second boom of zinc mining in the early 1900's brought new activity and a tramway was built in 1908 to bring the ore from Cerro Gordo to the Keeler mill and railhead. There were small surges in the mining of silver, lead, zinc, talc, and limestone, but by the 1950's mining had virtually ceased and train service ended in 1960.

Southward view of the mill at the end of the line in Keeler. The narrow gauge tracks of the C&C/N&C/SP line ran just to the left (east) of the building and continued another hundred yards or so for car storage. As far as I know, this has been the location of the primary mill in Keeler since the 1880 Hawley Mill. There were several sidings and the open buildings on the right may have housed rolling stock.



Northwestward view of the mill at the end of the line in Keeler. The morning light illuminates John Muir's "Range of Light," the 14,000-foot Sierra Nevada.



Southeastward view of the mill at Keeler. The viewer is on the narrow gauge alignment of the C&C/N&C/SP, which ran just to the left (east) of the mill. A remnant of a trackside structure is in the foreground, one of many in Keeler. Just behind the viewer and 70 feet northeast is the beginning of Railroad Avenue, which is built parallel to the C&C (1883) alignment and T's into Cerro Gordo Street just northwest of the mill (below).





Northwestward view of a trackside loading structure in Keeler, 600 feet northwest of the mill. The track ran just to the left (southwest) of the loading ramp and continued just to the left of the building in the right distance, which is the Keeler station.



Northward view of the C&C/N&C/SP Keeler station. A siding ran just on this side of the building in the overgrown area and the mainline ran about where the pavement is cracked in the foreground.



Northwestward view of ties at Keeler, 1,500 feet northwest of the mill. The ties are partly paved over and extend 200 feet from the C&C alignment and run northwestward on the west side of the mainline. I am guessing this track was the Inyo Development Company line, for two reasons: first, it is on the Owens Lake side of the C&C alignment, where the evaporate minerals were produced, and second, the ties may have been preserved because the IDC tracks were abandoned in the 1950's and may have been paved over prior to the salvaging of the SP (former C&C) trackage in 1961.



Westward view of the IDC(?) tracks at Keeler. Dry Owens Lake is in the distance; it's hard to believe steamships once plied water that were in this view. The lake began drying up in the 1910's after the LA Aqueduct, constructed with support from the SP Jawbone Branch (1910), began diverting water from the Owens River.



Desert people are a different breed, and one of them re-purposed a SP passenger car. This is just across Railroad Avenue from the IDC(?) tracks





Southeastward view of the C&C (1883) grade, 2,200 feet northwest of the mill, visible in the distance. The railroad crossing sign to the left of the alignment is the same one visible in the previous photo.



Southward view of the C&C/N&C/SP narrow gauge grade, 9 miles northwest of Keeler.



Northwestward view of the C&C/N&C/SP narrow gauge grade, same location as previous. The snowcapped Sierra Nevada, the westernmost normal fault of the Basin and Range geologic province, towers in the distance, and the Inyo Mountains foothills are just visible to the right.



My interest was piqued recently when a professional/geology acquaintance, Dr. Darrel S. Cowan, indicated an interest in abandoned railroads, I was thrilled when he told me that when he was a kid his dad had taken him to see the C&C before it was abandoned, and I was flabbergasted when he sent me photographs taken at Keeler (this location) and Laws in 1957. The upper left photo is looking southward at box cars on the SP narrow gauge tracks, and the mill is in the far-right distance and signed "Sierra Talc Co." The lower left photo shows box cars in front of the now-gone terminal of the 1908 tramway; the tramway is visible in the center distance of the upper left photo. The two photos on the right show box car in front of the Keeler station.