

An Historic Day at Owenyo October 16th, 1954

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During 1953, with its dieselization program speeding toward rapid completion, the Southern Pacific began to look at its steam powered, three foot gauge, Keeler Branch. Three forty-four ton 4-6-0s, built by the Baldwin Locomotive works in 1907, 1909 and 1911, were currently in service on the branch. Two of the three steam locomotives were in

relatively good condition, but all heavy repairs were handled at Espee's large Bakersfield Shops and with total dieselization of the standard gauge system, sooner or later, these large shops would no longer be able to handle full steam locomotive maintenance and rebuilding. Abandonment of the line would be unwise, and converting to standard gauge would be too expensive. Espee's only alternative was to dieselize.

In October 1953, the Southern Pacific placed an order with the General Electric Company for a narrow-gauge diesel-electric unit of fifty-one tons, which would allow them to retire two of the three steamers. The diesel unit was to be of an end-cab design (closely following the design of a series of locomotives built in 1951–1954 for lines in Panama, the Dominican Republic and for the United Fruit company in Central America) built around the Caterpillar type D-397 V-12 diesel engine, rated at 450 horsepower, driving four GE-747 traction motors through a GT-581 generator. She would weigh 102,000 pounds, and have an 11½:1 gear ratio. She would exert 24,500 pounds of tractive effort and be 32 feet long, 12 feet high, 9 feet wide, and would carry 250 gallons of fuel in her tanks.

When Southern Pacific management placed the order with General Electric for the new locomotive, they requested delivery by June, 1954, but the little "fifty-toner" was not shipped by GE until the 23rd of September. She was set up at Owenyo (after being pulled off a standard gauge flat car by ten wheeler No. 9) on Tuesday, October 12th, 1954.

In keeping with the narrow gauge tradition of low numbers, the Espee chose to number the new locomotive 1. The standard gauge Pacific Lines had never before used that number on a new diesel locomotive, and it had not been used on the narrow gauge since the SP sold Consolidation No. 1 to the Nevada County Narrow Gauge in 1933.

On the evening of Friday, October 15th, 1954, Southern Pacific GS-4 locomotives 4449 and 4447 backed into the Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal and coupled up to

a special ten car train of heavy weight passenger cars. At 9:15 p.m., the special train, with 161 members of the Southern California Chapter, Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, railroad dignitaries, and press people pulled out of L.A.U.P.T. and steamed past Mission Tower.

Extra 4449 East made a fast run through the San Fernando Valley, up the Soledad Canyon, and across the desert to Mojave, where the Jawbone Branch connected with the main line. At Mojave, the two 4-8-4s were cut off, turned and serviced. Two ten wheelers, numbers 2335 and 2350 were coupled to the train. The two 4-6-0s, under the expert hand of Traveling Engineer L. J. Franklin, were nursed across the already dieselized Jawbone Branch to Owenyo, interchange point with the narrow gauge Keeler Branch.

At approximately 10:30 a.m. on Saturday morning, October 16th, 1954, Extra 2350 arrived at Owenyo for the dedication ceremonies of diesel No. 1. (NOTE: Many times locomotive number 1 is referred to as "X-1." This, of course, is in error. In keeping with SP policy and tradition, and even though the narrow gauge steamers did not have them, diesel number 1 was equipped with train indicator boards. All movements on the Keeler Branch were handled as "Extras," thus, by Espee policy the "X" was carried in the number board displaying properly the train number as "X-1.") As the train pulled to a stop, the Lone Pine High School Band, in their Orange and Purple uniforms, greeted the passengers playing "California Here I Come," while the buildings of Owenyo were festooned with bright red, white and blue ribbons.

Standing quietly on a siding adjacent to the Owenyo Station was 4-6-0 No. 18. She had been cleaned up, for this special occasion, and her new paint gleamed in the morning sunlight and beside her on the main line stood diesel No. 1.



Some eight to ten yards from the pilot of the 18 sat steel flat car No. 209 that would serve today as the stage platform. There was a speaker's podium on it draped with SP Company banners.

After welcoming the L.A. Excursion, Robert W. "Bob" King, News Editor of Southern Pacific's Southern District Public Relations Department, introduced Walter Thrall, Jr., Chairman of the Southern California Chapter, R&LHS. Thrall thanked the Espee for making it possible to bring the members of the Society to Owenyo on the special train powered by steam. The next speaker was Jerry Hover, President of the Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce. Superintendent W. E. Eastman, San Joaquin Division, spoke briefly and was followed by Assistant General Manager W. D. Lamprecht, who proudly pointed out that of the four remaining narrow gauge railroad lines in the U.S.

only the SP, thus far, was modernizing its branch. Lamprecht announced that, pursuant to a company sponsored contest in which more than five hundred entries had been received, the name “Little Giant” had been selected. That name had been submitted by five people who would share in the Company’s \$100 prize.

The major product hauled from Keeler, sixteen narrow gauge miles south (railroad east) of Owenyo is Talc, so it seemed appropriate when Walter Thrall christened “Little Giant” with a cardboard “champagne bottle” filled with talc, the “champagne of the Owens Valley.” After the Christening, the guests were given an opportunity to inspect the diesel and tell No. 18 good-bye.

When the program was over, the No. 1 was backed up the main line to the locomotive storage area, at the north end of the Owenyo yard, and at 12:45 p.m., steam locomotive No. 9 pulled into the station with veteran Locomotive Engineer Walter Ferguson at her throttle. Fergie had been with the Espee for 32 years and on the narrow gauge branch for the past ten years. His Fireman was George Murray. The train’s “Skipper” was Conductor George Eppinger and his Brakeman was W. H. Finley. Behind No. 9 was a train of specially reworked flat bottom gondola cars to carry the three hundred guests attending the celebration.

Promptly at 1:00 p.m., the special train pulled out of Owenyo east bound to Keeler on the last official steam run on the narrow gauge. After stops for photo run bys, the train arrived at Keeler. Ten Wheeler No. 9 and Caboose 401 were cut off the train and turned on the wye at the south end of the yard then the No. 9 pulled up to the Keeler water tank and her tender was filled with water. The stop at



Keeler lasted about an hour and finally the “Slim Princess” left Keeler for Owenyo. At about 5:00 p.m., engine No. 9 pulled to a halt in front of the Owenyo Station. With the termination of the round trip from Owenyo to Keeler, the Southern Pacific’s narrow gauge Keeler Branch had officially dieselized. Locomotive No. 9 was cut off her train and run to the locomotive service track on the north end of the yard. Her fire was dropped, and she was “stored-serviceable,” awaiting the call for emergency stand-by service, when needed.

The standard gauge special, Extra 2350 West, departed Owenyo for Mojave shortly after the arrival of the train from Keeler. At Mojave, the two 2300 class ten wheelers were cut off and replaced with the two 4400s for the trip back to Los Angeles.

For the next six years, No. 1 supplied the required power for the narrow gauge operation. Steam locomotive No. 9 was operated several times yearly while the “One Spot” was being shopped at Bakersfield.

The desert climate forced No. 1 to be repainted twice in the six years of her service. The original Tiger Stripes with Aluminum ends yielded to Black with Orange trim. At her second visit to the paint shop, she received the same color scheme as her standard gauge sisters, Lark Gray and Scarlet.

In 1960, when the Espee was granted permission to abandon its slim gauge branch, the last revenue run was made by No. 1 on Friday, April 29th with the final trip from Owenyo to Keeler to Laws and return to Owenyo to tie up. On the 30th, all activity was confined to switching in the Owenyo Yard, and the Keeler Branch ceased operations.

But the One Spot would have one final duty to perform. She was leased to the scrapping company, L. B. Foster, to pull the train and equipment used to pick up the line. When that assignment was completed, she was returned to her owner, and the Espee placed her in storage at the Bakersfield Shops facing an uncertain future.

On Monday, April 17th, 1961, approximately one year after being placed in storage, “Little Giant” was sold to the Pan-American Engineering Company, a locomotive dealer in Dallas, Texas. Pan-American sold the No. 1 to the Compania Minera de Cananea, a copper mining company, once affiliated with Anaconda, in northern Mexico. She was assigned number 61-8 and put into service. She was later converted to standard gauge by widening her 33” wheels on their axles. While in service in Mexico, she was much the same in appearance as she was on that historic day at Owenyo, October 16th, 1954.

