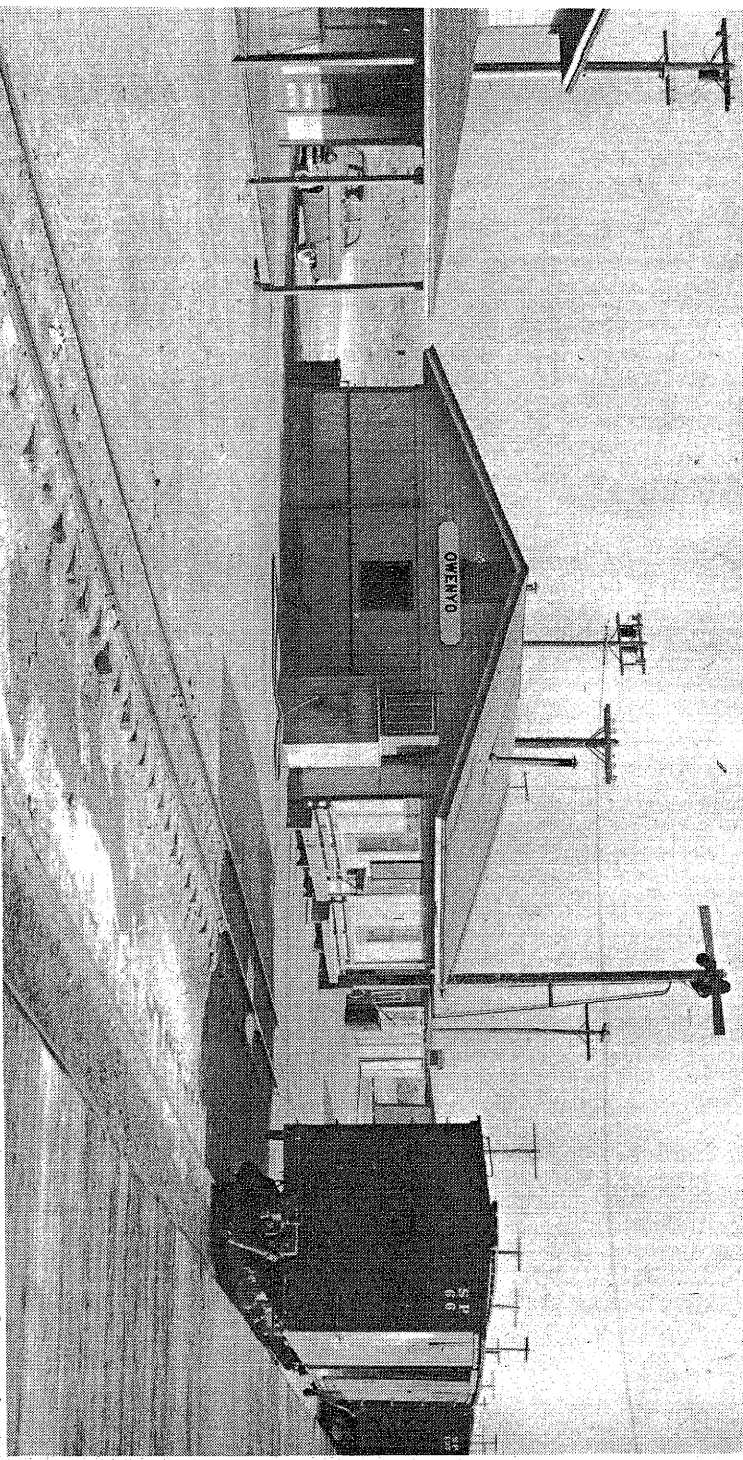


SP Narrow-Gage

by FREEMAN HUBBARD



Owenyo station on the slim-gage line. Hotel (pictured at the extreme left) is a railroad company dormitory and commissary. Nine photos by Southern Pacific Company.

WHEN the Steam Age reached its peak many years ago and almost nobody thought of traveling inland or shipping freight except by rail, the United States boasted nearly 16,000 miles of slim-gage track. This mileage had shrunk considerably by August '41 when *Railroad Magazine* published a feature by Linwood Moody entitled "Sunset on the Narrow-Gage."

"Dusk is falling on a colorful chapter of transportation history—the narrow-gage," he wrote. "Shadows lengthen along rusted rails that are spaced two or three feet apart as eternal night slowly envelops the group of audacious small roads which faced their dawn so hopefully in the 1850's, long before the Civil War, which basked in their brilliant noontide sun of the '80's, even challenging for a brief time the supremacy of standard-gage, and which, from then on, gradually passed into twilight."

At that time the country still had 15 common-carrier railroads or fragments of railroads with almost 1400 miles of

slim-gage track. Today, barely 115.6 miles remain—45.2 on the Rio Grande's Silverton line in the Colorado Rockies and 70.4 on the Southern Pacific's Keeler-Laws branch in the Owens Valley of southeastern California.

Both are single-tracked lines of 36-inch gage. The Silverton run is a mixed train—the last one left on the continent that we know of—while the Southern Pacific branch hauls only freight, mostly mining products outbound.

The latter originated 78 years ago as part of the 300-mile Carson & Colorado, which extended from Keeler, Calif., to connect with the now-defunct Virginia & Truckee at Mound House, Nevada. The Southern Pacific took it over in 1900.

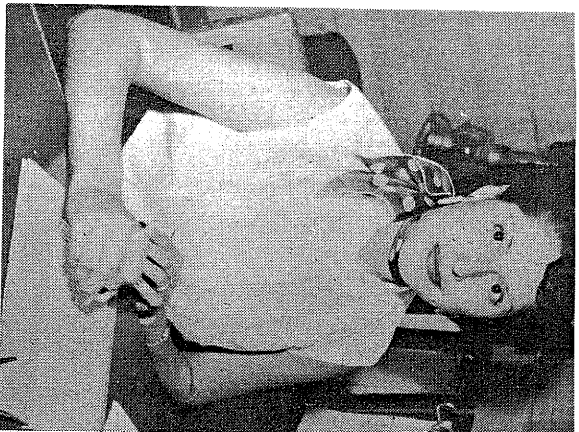
The C&C was built largely to serve gold and silver mines—hence the golden background in our front-cover painting—but as the veins of precious metal petered out, one portion after another of the line's northern end was abandoned. The lively passenger service, which included little yellow sleeping-cars, began

to decline with the building of a paved highway in 1925 and quit altogether in 1932.

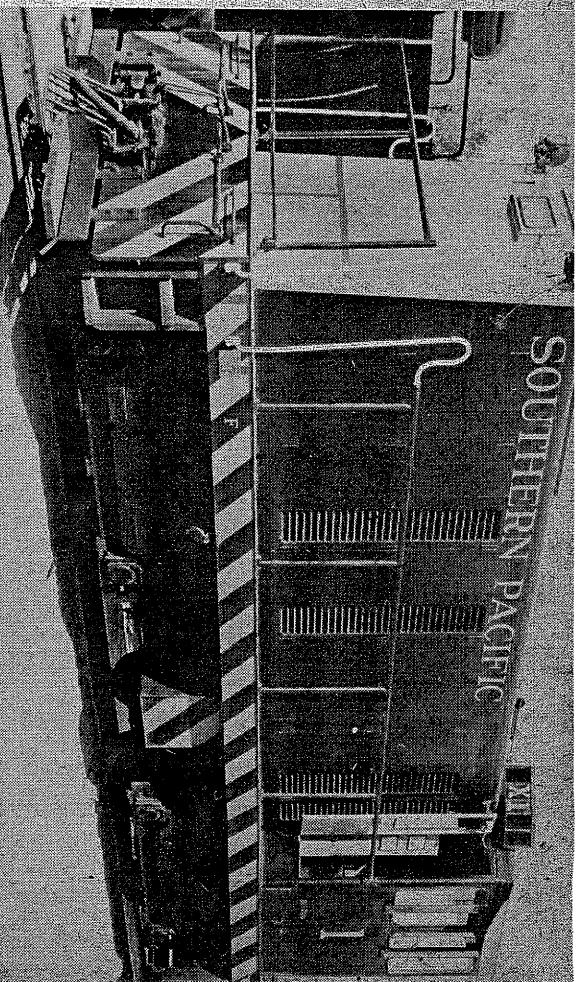
Owenyo, interchange point with the standard-gage SP, has no three-trail track. This is unusual in such operation. Slim-gage cars are spotted opposite conventional cars. A platform separates them. Their contents are moved by conveyor belts, hand trucks, or the backs of men.

One of the water-supply spots for locomotives, Aberdeen, had a tank which was filled by the action of a windmill, but in 1953 a storm blew down the windmill, and a gasoline-engine pump took its place.

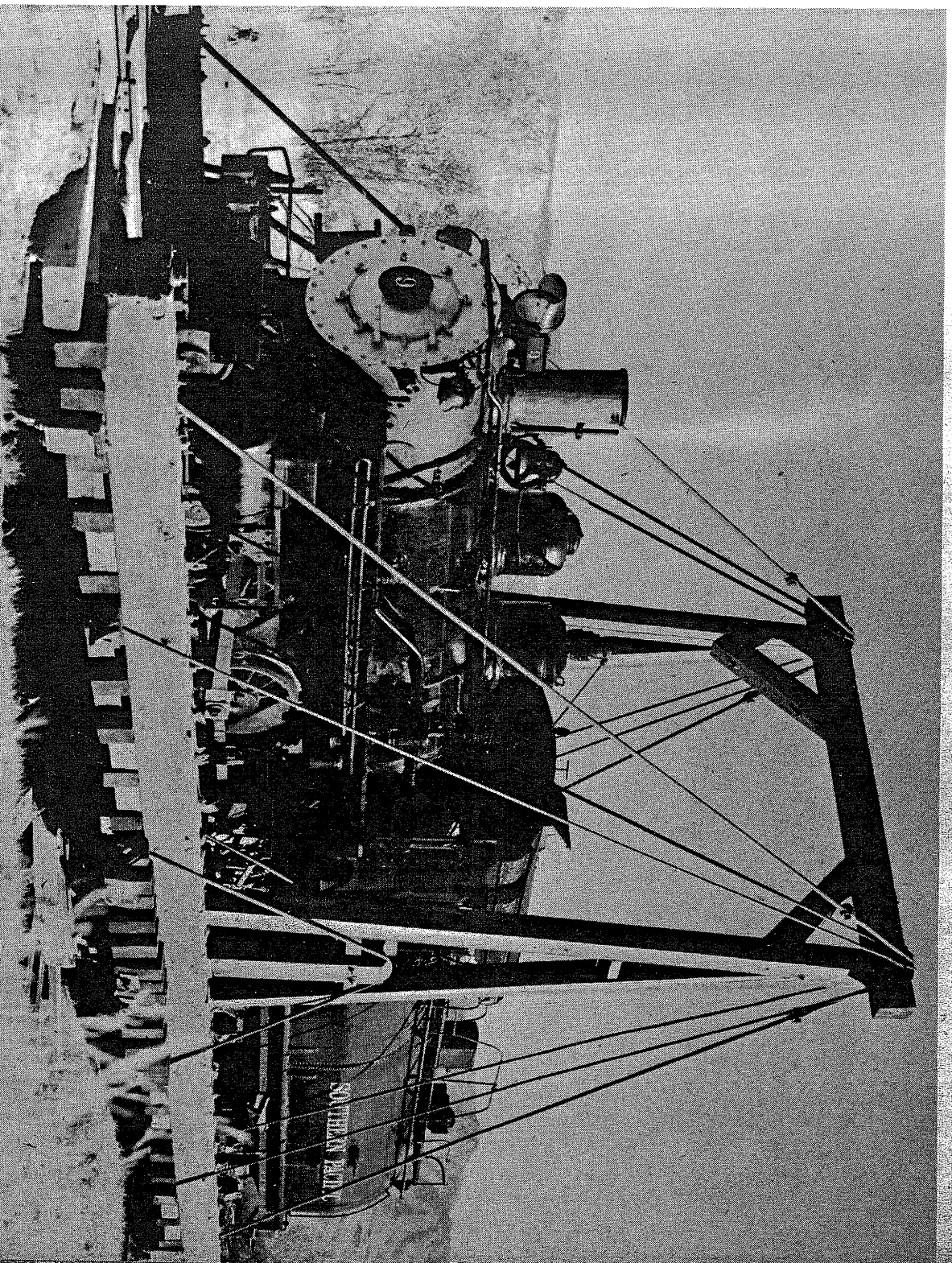
Keeler, southern end of the line, lies in the shadow of the White Mountains to the east; on the eastern side of Owens Dry Lake, on U.S. Highway 190, the only paved road that leads into Death Valley from the west. Keeler's population is about 75. Touching this end of the railroad in its early days was the wagon trail of "Borax" Smith, who hauled borax out of Death Valley with



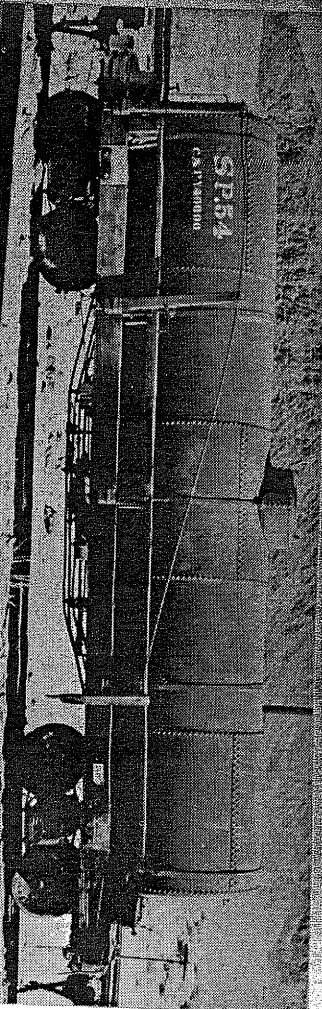
Josephine Cole, the only woman working for the Keeler branch, has been shifted to a main-line job in Mohave.



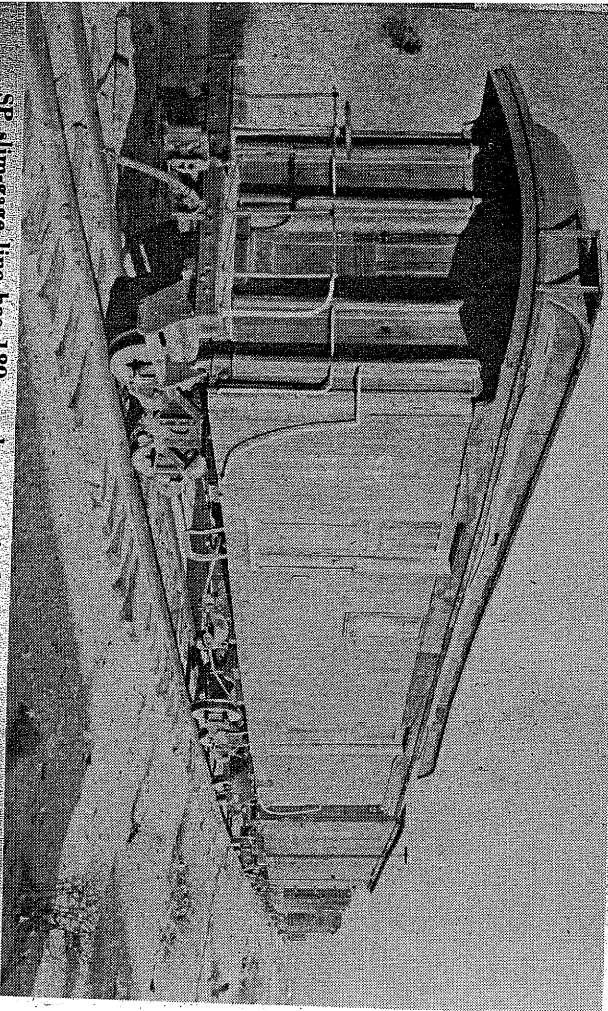
America's only narrow-gauge diesel locomotive, Southern Pacific No. 1, built by General Electric, has been doing nearly all of the freight work on the Keeler ranch since October 1, 1954. The same crew operates her and No. 9, a standby steamer.



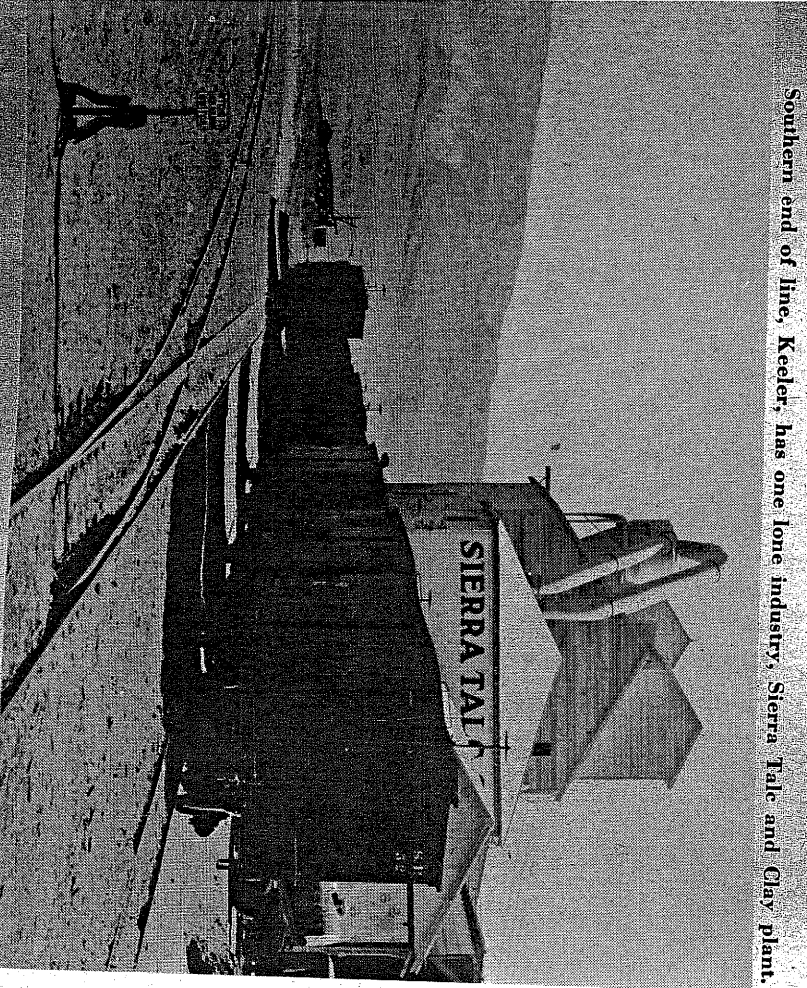
No. 9, shown on old hand-operated turntable at Lays, is used in standby service only but only on a few days of each year.
FEBRUARY, 1959



The Keeler branch has two of these water-tank cars, needs 'em in dry wasteland.



SP slim-gage line has 189 wooden cars, including the baggage car pictured here.



Southern end of line, Keeler, has one lone industry, Sierra Tale and Clay plant.

his celebrated team of twenty mules. In 1954 the SP branch acquired a new 45-ton, 450-horsepower, General Electric diesel, the only slim-gage diesel in America. She is standard in every respect except that her axles are shorter than those of conventional units.

The branch had been operating two Baldwin oil-burning steam engines. One of them, No. 18, built in 1911, was donated to Inyo County, Calif., and is displayed in the park at Independence, the county seat. The other, No. 9, built in 1909, is held for stand-by service and is used only a few days each year. Those days are the only times the old arm-strong turntable at Laws is needed. Ordinarily, trains are turned on the wye at Keeler.

Since 1954, the year of dieselization, the Keeler agency has been closed, leaving Owenyo to handle the business by phone, and engine maintenance has been transferred from Keeler to Owenyo, and 40 obsolete wooden cars have been scrapped.

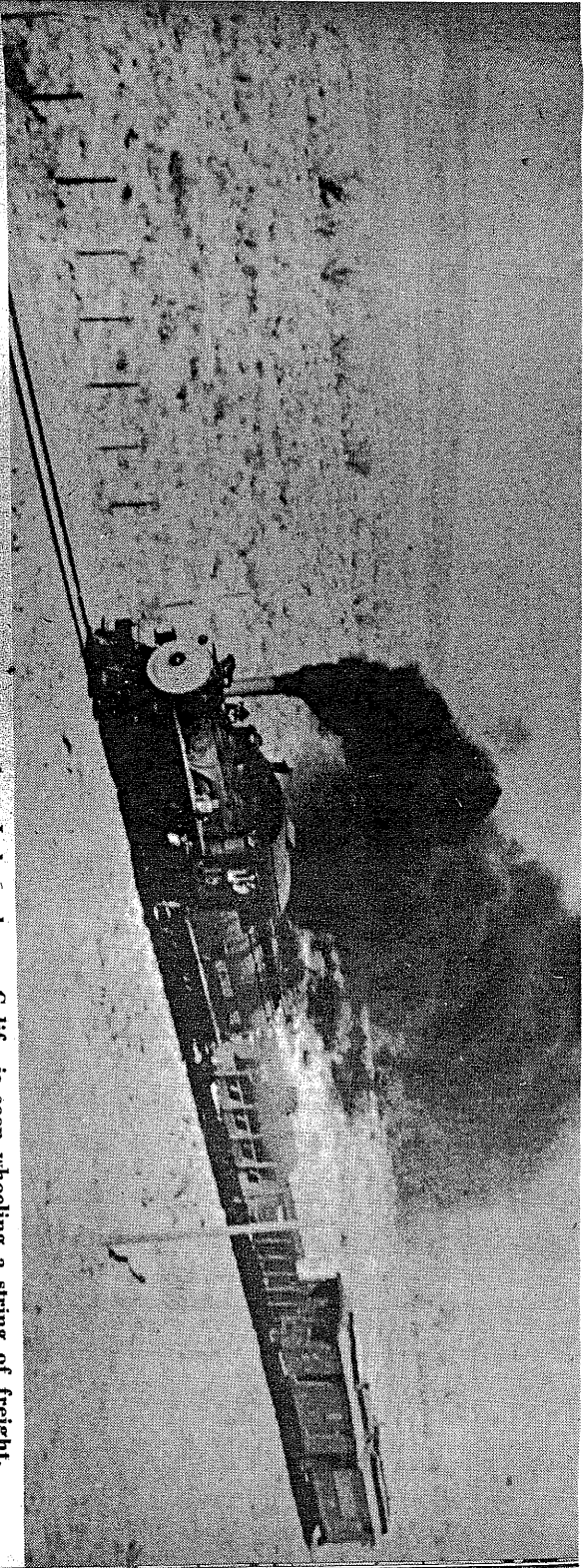
Today's equipment consists of 189 wooden cars, including boxcars, gondolas, stock cars, flatcars, two water cars, two oil tankers, one baggage car, and one caboose. There are 33 employees.

The annual railfan pilgrimage over the line on Memorial Day in a steam-powered special train has been discontinued because the old wooden flatcars, which were equipped with seats for the excursion, are considered unsafe.

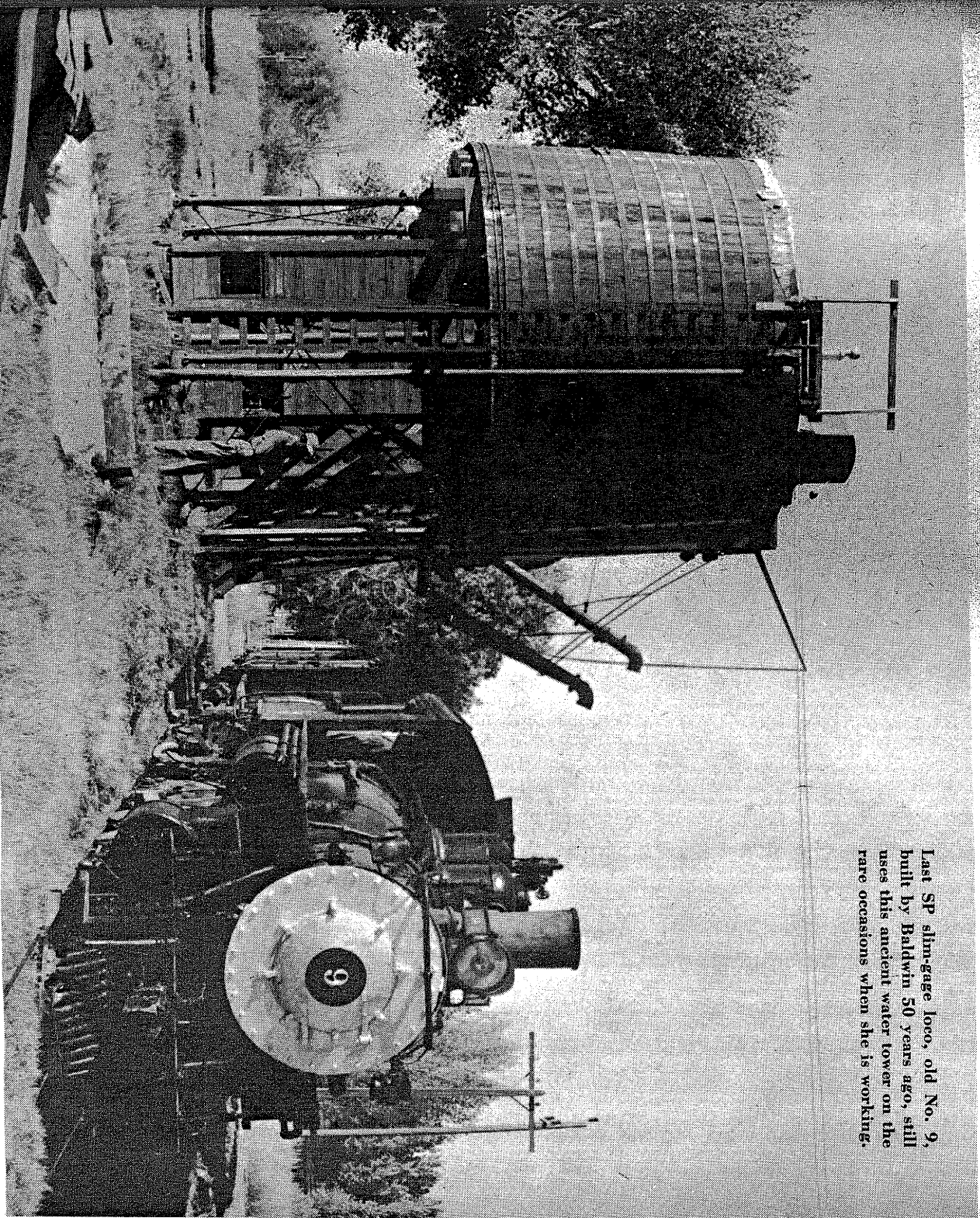
The regular narrow-gage train runs five days a week. Round trips are made between Owenyo and Laws on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday but between Owenyo and Keeler only on Tuesday and Thursday. This arrangement gives the train and engine crew a "long day, short day" schedule.

The rail consists of about 56 miles of 35-pound rail and 15 miles of 62-pound rail. (Some steel was imported from Holland in 1880.) Further details on this line may be found in a book, *The Slim Princess*, written and published by John B. Hungerford at Reseda, Calif., and selling at one dollar a copy. The book is well illustrated.

D. O. Mills, one of the directors of the 300-mile Carson & Colorado, said the road was built "300 years too soon or 300 miles too long." Nevertheless, part of that line, which goes "from nowhere to nowhere," still performs a much-needed service. Unlike narrow-gages in general, this one still has a future. ●



No. 18, now retired from the Keeleer branch to a public park at Independence, Calif., is seen wheeling a string of freight.



Last SP shun-gage loco, old No. 9, built by Baldwin 50 years ago, still uses this ancient water tower on the rare occasions when she is working.