



# FRIENDS OF THE EASTERN CALIFORNIA MUSEUM

*Preserving Inyo County's Past for the Future*

*FECM is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization*

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## NEWSLETTER Spring 2021

### **UPDATES: WHAT'S NEW**

#### **Museum Update:**

The Museum is still closed to the public. When the County moves to the Red Tier, the Museum will open the indoor exhibits with 25 percent capacity, taking Covid precautions for visitors and staff.

#### **In this issue:**

In this issue, we publish Lynn Johnson's article on the Saline Valley Salt Tram. In a special section, our report about the completion of the Charcoal Kilns Preservation Project and related article triggered a wonderful recollection from a family who gave us insight into Molly Steven's contributions in her own right to community life, separate from her father's activities. We share this in one of the inserts.

#### **In Memoriam: Kathy White**

We are very saddened to advise our membership of the February passing of Kathy White, long-time supporter of the Eastern California Museum and the FECM and a tireless contributor of her time, talents, and energy to a very long list of community efforts in Independence and Inyo County. There will be a memorial on the Eastern California Museum lawn on May 15, 2021 at 2 p.m.

#### **Annual Board Meeting:**

We are still planning to hold our first-ever annual meeting via Zoom. Cindy Pridmore will present her much-anticipated lecture on the Ridgecrest Earthquake Sequence July 2019: Insights from the California Earthquake Clearing House. When we are closer to the date, we will email an invitation to members for whom we have email addresses. As we continue to move forward, please let us know what you think of the process and whether we should consider holding webinars in the future, regardless of whether we are able to host in-person meetings.

**Election:**

We had a very good turnout for the 2020 Board of Trustees election and thank all the members who sent in their ballots. Our new Board is as follows:

Officers (To serve a one-year term from March 2021 to March 2022):

Mary Roper - President  
Manuela Cerruti - Vice President  
Jean Crispin - Treasurer  
Linda Hubbs - Secretary

Trustees (To serve a two-year term from March 2021 to March 2023):

Tina Biorn  
Jennifer Duncan  
Lynn Johnson  
Richard Potashin

Active Trustees (To serve until March 2022):

Roberta Harlan  
Catherine Kravitz  
Pat McLernon  
Bill Michael

Past President:

Dave Wagner

We welcome our two new Board members, both of whom bring extensive experience to our efforts:

Tina Biorn is a Cultural Anthropologist and Archaeologist with deep experience in the Owens Valley. As Caltrans' statewide Native American Coordinator for 20 years, she developed policies, procedures, and training on best practices in consulting with Native American individuals and tribes on cultural resources of significance to them. The Society for California Archaeology presented her their 2015 award for Excellence in Cultural Resources Management.

Richard Potashin, whose deep knowledge of Owens Valley and Eastern California history is demonstrated by his oral history work with ECM, numerous lectures and historical programs he has presented, and his time as a park ranger at Manzanar National Historic Site.

Many thanks to our outgoing Board members: Alina Berry, who has been a Trustee for roughly 25 years, and Deena Davenport-Conway, on the Board since 2018.

## SALINE VALLEY SALT TRAM

By Lynn Johnson © Lynn Johnson 2021

Ko'ongkatün, the name for Saline Valley in the Timbisha Shoshone language, is a deep desert basin east of Owens Valley containing a large deposit of some of the purest salt in the world. Used for millennia by Indigenous People and comprising one of their most important trade items, salt from Saline Valley was, and still is, prized.

Euroamericans entered the Eastern Sierra region in the mid-1800s in a quest for gold and other precious metals. In due course, their attention turned to deposits of salt, borate and other evaporate minerals, including those in Saline Valley, the homeland of the Ko'ontsi (people of the Saline Valley village of Ko'on). In 1864, a farmer from Big Pine used horse-drawn teams to scrape salt from the surface of the Saline Valley salt marsh and transported wagonloads over the Inyo Mountains to Owens Valley where the salt sold for \$20 a ton. Business was brisk due to the excellent quality of the salt, but the venture was abandoned as hauling the product to market from this remote area was difficult and costly.

In late 1888 or early 1889, Indigenous men were hired to build an 18-mile road across the Inyo Mountains to a deposit of borax on the west side of Saline Valley. A small reduction plant was built at the Conn and Trudo Borax Works and local teamsters, including R. J. Schoeber and White Smith, were hired to transport processed borax. The borax was eventually taken via Waucoba Canyon to the narrow-gauge railroad at Alvord, two miles northeast of Big Pine. Transportation costs were always an issue and the borax works eventually shut down. In 1902, J.L. Bourland incorporated the Saline Valley Salt Company, and the salt fields were once again worked on a small scale. The salt continued to be transported by wagon teams. White Smith, who had moved from Tennessee to the Owens Valley when he was a young man, had become an attorney in 1895 and set up practice in Bishop; however, he never forgot the vast fields of salt he had seen while working as a teamster for Conn & Trudo. Bourland died in 1905 and a few years later Smith and several of his brothers acquired the Saline Valley Salt Company. They and others, including W.W. Watterson, a relative of White Smith's wife, filed 71 claims amounting to 1480 acres and made plans for a large-scale operation.

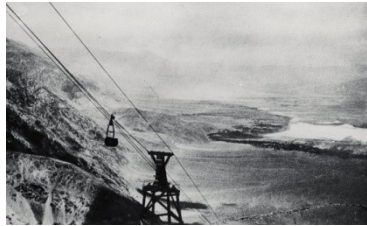
Various proposals for transporting salt from Saline Valley were considered, including the construction of a railroad into the valley from the south, as well as piping salt in a brine solution over the Inyo Range. The former proposal was found to be prohibitively expensive due to extremely steep grades, and the latter was rejected because it did not provide a way to transport supplies back to Saline Valley. Because of the difficulty and cost of transporting the salt to market from this remote valley, which is completely ringed by mountains, exploitation on a large commercial scale had heretofore been elusive. White Smith and his partners determined the best solution would be to build an electric aerial tramway, which would not only carry salt out of the valley, but transport needed supplies in the other direction. Surveys preparatory to construction commenced in 1908, but the final route was not selected until May 1911.

The tramway would rise 5100 feet from the narrow-gauge railroad siding at Tramway on the east side of Owens Lake to the crest of the Inyo Mountains, and from there descend 7600 feet to the floor of Saline Valley via precipitous Daisy Canyon. Trenton Iron Company, one of the world's leading manufacturers of trams, was awarded the contract. Financial backers in Tennessee provided capital to build the tramway, which reportedly cost \$500,000. To build the 13.5-mile tramway, 1.3 million board feet of lumber, 650 tons of metal bolts and braces, more than 50 miles of cable, 5,000 large sacks of cement, and many tons of machinery and other materials were shipped on the railroad to sidings at Tramway and Alvord. From there, teams and packtrains had the difficult task of transporting everything over steep trails built to

access construction sites along the tramway's route. At the time the tramway was constructed, it was the largest and most elaborate tram in the world.



Wagon team\*



Daisy Canyon\*\*



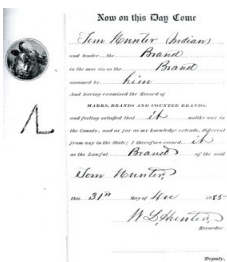
The Zig-Zag Trail\*\*\*

\* Wagon team transporting sacks of salt from Saline Valley.

\*\* The tramway descending precipitous Daisy Canyon to Saline Valley, 7100 feet below. The Saline Valley Salt Tram is reportedly the steepest tramway ever constructed in the United States. The white area on the right side of the photo is the salt marsh.

\*\*\* The "Zig-Zag Trail" was constructed in 1912 for mules to transport construction materials and supplies up the steep eastern scarp of the Inyo Mountains. Hoyt S. Gale, a USGS geologist working in Saline Valley that year, described it as "a remarkable rock-cut trail, picturesque in the extreme from its ruggedness and the precipitous gorges and rocky slopes it discloses."

Johnny Hunter, an Indigenous man from Ko-on, who had gone into business raising horses and mules with his father, Tom, was one of the packers who helped haul materials to build the tramway. The Hunter and Caesar families had two 80-acre Indian homesteads on the floor of Saline Valley, not far from the salt fields; however, they continued to utilize their vast homeland and retained their traditional culture despite the Euroamerican presence. The Ko'ontsi constructed an elaborate irrigation system to convey water from nearby Hunter and Beveridge canyons to their agricultural fields, where the soil was exceptionally fertile. Crops such as alfalfa, wheat, barley, onions, pumpkins, cabbage, squash, corn, beans, and melons, as well as several varieties of fruit, including figs, were grown on what became known as the "Saline Valley Indian Ranch." The borax and salt companies purchased fresh produce grown on the ranch to feed their workers. Watermelons were especially prized. Both companies needed water to operate their businesses. Rather than commandeering the Ko'ontsi's irrigation system, as was typical of those times, the companies respected the Indigenous water rights and paid the Ko'ontsi well for use of their traditional water sources. Both companies relied on Indigenous workers to harvest borax and salt. In addition to those living at the Saline Valley Indian Ranch, Indigenous men from the Bellas and other Owens Valley families also worked in the salt fields. To get to work, some of the men hitched a ride over the Inyo Mountains in the tramway's buckets, a harrowing journey, especially during high winds.



Left: Tom Hunter's brand registered in 1895.

Right: Men harvesting salt and shoveling it into piles. Each man was capable of piling 8 - 10 tons of salt a day, not an easy feat in temperatures that could reach 120° F. Indigenous men made up a large part of the workforce.

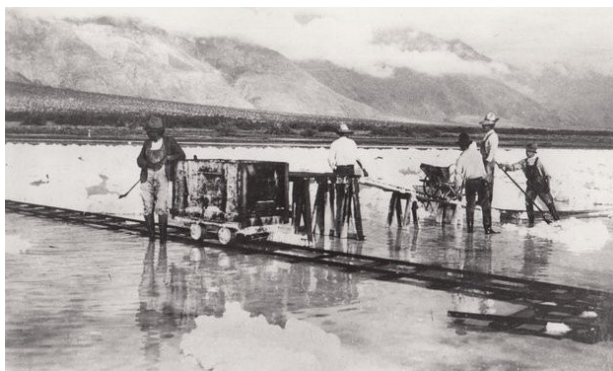




Catching a ride in a salt tram bucket was the quickest way to get to and from the job site, but some workers considered it too dangerous. For those choosing this transportation method, it must have been a relief to make it to the floor of Saline Valley without incident.

The salt was taken to the loading terminal where the tramway's 286 buckets were filled. These large buckets could carry 20 tons of salt per hour to the discharge terminal at Tramway. The first load of salt was delivered to Tramway on July 2, 1913. In addition to harvesting salt in Saline Valley, Indigenous workers were also hired to sew sacks, fill them with salt processed at the mill, and load them into railcars. By February 1914, the Saline Valley Salt Company was shipping 9 to 15 railroad carloads of processed salt per week. However, the Saline Valley Salt Company was unable to turn a profit and by 1915 the operation was leased to the Owens Valley Salt Company which, also beset by financial difficulties, ceased operations in 1918.

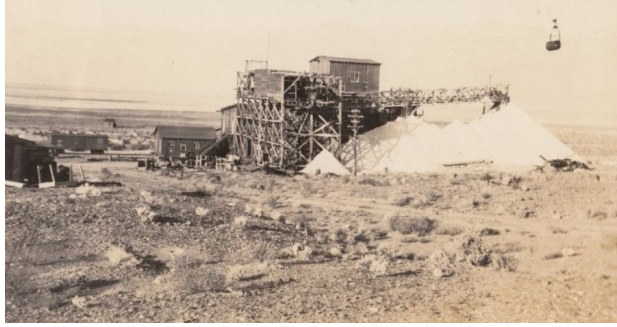
US Steel, which now owned Trenton Iron Company, was sued for money still owed on the tram. In 1920, US Steel took over ownership of the tram and salt fields and leased them to Taylor Milling Company; however, the tram lay unused. Between 1924 and 1926 White Smith was hired to construct a road to Saline Valley via San Lucas Canyon, with the County of Inyo contributing \$20,000 toward the cost. Unfortunately, using trucks to transport salt also proved unprofitable. In 1928, the Sierra Salt Company purchased and refurbished the tram and was soon transporting salt to Tramway at a rate of 60 to 100 tons per day. The Sierra Salt Company also experienced financial difficulties and ceased operations in 1933. Although Saline Valley salt is exceptionally pure, its monetary value was never enough to offset the high cost of transporting it to market.



Piles of salt were loaded into carts that ran to the loading terminal on rails.



Truck hauling sacks of salt out of Saline Valley in the 1920s, via the San Lucas Road. This road is highly susceptible to washouts and is no longer passable by motorized vehicles.



The discharge terminal at Tramway, on a spur of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Here, the salt was processed in a 70-ton mill where it was dried, ground, and sized into five grades ranging from rock to fine table salt before being sacked and loaded into narrow-gauge railcars.

### **Epilogue**

The Saline Valley Salt Tram was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. The tramway and affiliated structures have been ravaged by vandalism, but what remains of what Mary DeDecker refers to as “White Smith’s Fabulous Salt Tram” is a testament to one of the most remarkable engineering achievements in the Eastern Sierra.

The Saline Valley Indian Ranch was abandoned in the 1950s due to conflicts with a man from Los Angeles over their Indigenous water rights. Many descendants of the Indigenous men who helped build the salt tram and worked for the salt companies still live in the Owens Valley.

According to White Smith’s only child Margaret, the financial backers, including her father, lost everything they had invested in the tramway. White Smith’s wife, Margaret Emily Watterson, died in Los Angeles in 1916 and he in 1927.

**Photograph attribution:** Tom Hunter's brand registration is courtesy of the Inyo County Recorder's Office; all other photographs are courtesy of the Eastern California Museum (ECM). The Wilson (WIL) photo collection of 150 black and white photographic prints (Accession No. 1981.53), copied from a photograph album loaned to the ECM by White Smith’s daughter, Margaret Smith Wilson, was recently digitized. Some of the images in this article are from the Wilson collection. Others are from the Lillian Hilderman collection (HILD).

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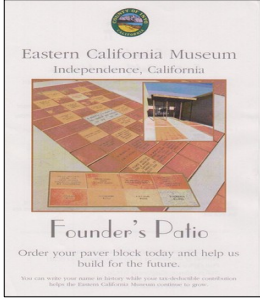
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## Join the Friends of the Eastern California Museum

The Friends of the Eastern California Museum work to promote, preserve and protect the important collections and memories that make up Inyo County's only regional museum. The Friends raise funds and contribute time and work to help maintain and improve the Museum's buildings and grounds. We support special exhibits and arrange for speakers, field trips, and programs that inform and entertain Inyo County residents and visitors who come from far and near. We have partnered with the Carson and Colorado group to display and promote the restored Slim Princess steam engine. We also provide funds to maintain the Museum's collections and enhance its permanent exhibits. Every March we hold our Annual Meeting, with a potluck dinner, silent auction and guest speaker. We invite you to join with us to support the Museum. FECM is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Members receive a newsletter, email invitations to special events, programs and field trips, and a 10% discount at the Museum Bookstore.

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