



Kelso Depot Visitor Center



A Railroad Through the Desert

Kelso Depot seems like a quiet anomaly in the middle of the desert—but for the Union Pacific Railroad, it was a thriving necessity. Since its inception in 1862, the Union Pacific (UP) wanted a foothold on the west coast. After reaching Portland, Oregon, UP turned its attention to the rich California markets and the ports around Los Angeles. To get there, it needed to construct a railroad across the Mojave Desert. Kelso was crucial to reaching that goal.

San Pedro, Los Angeles, & Salt Lake Railroad

In August 1900, Montana Senator William A. Clark, a wealthy mine owner, bought a small railway in Los Angeles. With this purchase, he then started construction on what would become the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad. In 1902, UP purchased half the stock of the railroad from Clark before it was even completed.

Construction of the line, known as the Salt Lake Route, began at the two ends near Salt Lake and Los Angeles and spread across the Mojave Desert in between. By 1905, the route had grown to nearly

235 track miles and reached Siding #16. The site gained its present name when two warehousemen put their names into a hat along with that of a third worker, John Kelso. They drew out a name and Siding #16 was renamed “Kelso.”

By the end of 1905, the track stretched from the west coast port of San Pedro to Salt Lake City, giving UP access to markets in southern California. Later, UP persuaded Senator Clark to sell his stock in the Salt Lake Route, giving UP full ownership of the line.

A Railroad Town at Kelso

The steep two percent grade from Kelso to Kessler Summit (later renamed Cima) meant that “helper engines” would need to be stationed nearby to assist locomotives up the 2,078 foot ascent. Additionally, steam locomotives of the era desperately needed water. Kelso had a reliable water source from a spring in the Providence Mountains, so it became the site of the “helper engine” station.

The first depot at Kelso opened in 1905, followed a few months later by a post office, an engine house, and an “eating house” to serve railroad employees and passengers on trains without dining cars. Over time, the town grew as more workers were needed and their families moved to Kelso to join them.



The original Kelso Depot was relocated to serve as housing and office space after the current depot was built.

The Kelso Club House & Restaurant

In the early 1920s, the Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad began planning for new depots, restaurants, and employee facilities at several towns, including Kelso. The railroad chose to design these new buildings in the Spanish Mission Revival style. Inter-railroad competition was lively, and UP was determined to put up buildings that would rival the Harvey Houses of the Santa Fe lines. The style would, as UP Chairman Lovet wrote, “add very little to the expense but a great deal to the appearance of the place. It is a dreary country and the lack of anything of this sort contrast very conspicuously with the Santa Fe.”

Railroad civil engineers in Los Angeles drew up plans in 1923, labeling the drawing “Kelso Club House & Restaurant.” For UP, a “Club House” was a company rooming and boarding house with recreational facilities (in later years the building was commonly called the Kelso Depot). The building would have a conductor’s room, telegraph office, baggage room, dormitory rooms for staff, boarding rooms for railroad crewmen, a billiard room, library, and locker room. Construction started in 1923 and the depot opened in 1924.



The lunch counter was rebuilt in its original U-shaped configuration.

Originally, the restaurant (sometimes called “The Beanery”) and telegraph office were operated around the clock. This continued through the boom years of the 1940s and ‘50s, when Kaiser’s Vulcan mine contributed to Kelso’s growth. In those years the population grew to nearly 2,000. When the mine closed, and diesel engines replaced steam, jobs and families moved away from Kelso. The depot function ended in 1962, although the restaurant and boarding rooms remained in use. In 1985, with a dwindling need for crew members to eat or stay overnight, UP decided to close the Kelso Depot.

Life After Closing

Believing that the now-empty Depot would become “a target for vandalism, unauthorized entrance, and a legal liability,” UP Division Superintendent G.R. Jenson made plans to raze the building. Local residents and others across the region heard about the proposed demolition and began to publicize the building’s plight.

The group organized the Kelso Depot Fund and set about saving the building. After successfully halting demolition, however, they found the costs of restoration too expensive and turned to local politicians and the federal government for assistance. At that time, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) already managed much of the land around Kelso as the East Mojave National Scenic Area—it made sense for the BLM to gain ownership of the Depot. Members of Congress from the area went to work and, by 1992, the BLM had the title to the building.

With the passage of the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, the East Mojave National Scenic Area became Mojave National Preserve, and the Depot passed into the hands of the National Park Service. Renovation began in 2002. Kelso Depot reopened to the public as the primary visitor center for Mojave National Preserve in October 2005.



Counter in the ticket and telegraph office before (above) and after restoration (below).