

Venice Miniature Railway

A Brief History and Its Influence on the Billy Jones Wildcat Railroad



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Introduction

In a way, the Billy Jones Wildcat Railroad was derived from three elements: the Overfair Railway at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915, the late Southern Pacific Engineer Billy Jones, and the Venice Miniature Railway of the first three decades of the 1900s.

If one wants to argue that the essence of the Billy Jones Wildcat Railroad (BJWRR) is the 2-Spot, then we can trace the railroad's direct lineage to the Venice Miniature Railway (VMR), Venice's creator Abbot Kinney, and the 2-Spot's builder John J. Coit. Without ever knowing it, those three elements and persons were creating a legacy that still exists today, albeit no longer in Venice Beach, California.

The 2-Spot, now often referred to as BJWRR #2, is the last operationally surviving member of the VMR trifecta of locomotives that hauled passengers to and from the Gilded Age town after the dawn of the 20th Century. Yet the 2-Spot was one of three locomotives that took part in the business and pleasure of supplying Venice with its clientele and even a smaller part of the railroad's legacy and history.

BJWRR has its own unique history, not unlike many railroads throughout time. In a sense, that history and legacy is directly linked to the VMR and the people who influenced and operated it.

Cover Photo: A postcard of the Venice Miniature Railway from the 1900s featuring the VMR #2 (2-Spot) pulling passengers along one of Venice's many canals.

Chapter One: The Concept and Development of Venice, California

The town of Venice was the brainchild of developer Abbot Kinney.

Born in 1850 in New Brunswick, New Jersey to a family of politicians, Kinney was well traveled and educated by the late 19th Century. Kinney took an interest in his brothers' Tobacco Company during the 1870s and Kinney made a small fortune on the booming sales of cigarettes within the United States and abroad.

During an extended travel, Kinney found himself in San Francisco in late 1879. The winter delayed any easterly travel across the Sierra Nevada Mountains and Kinney elected to travel south towards Los Angeles as an alternative. Kinney suffered from asthma and had heard of a health resort called the Sierra Madre Villa Hotel located in the San Gabriel Mountains.

On his first night at the resort, Kinney was forced to sleep on a billiard table as there were no available rooms for his stay. When he awoke the next morning, Kinney was reported to be free of his asthma symptoms and vowed to stay in Southern California. The experience prompted him to purchase 550 acres of nearby land which he named Kinneloa.

The development was the first of Kinney's dreams to start a resort of sorts in Southern California. Inspired by the great resort towns of the Eastern Seaboard, Kinney wanted to construct something unique to the West Coast, yet maintaining an image of the "Old World." Yet Kinneola was not much to Kinney's first wife Margaret and the tandem elected to move to nearby Santa Monica. From 1886 until 1898, Kinney embarked upon a number of other development projects in and around Santa Monica before finally settling on a marshy, undeveloped portion of land north of the town.¹

Kinney's initial desire was to develop a parcel of land that would be used for art and culture. Yet this aspect was not favorable among the nearby populous who appeared more interested in some of the other recreational sites Kinney had established previously. Realizing his mistake and deciding to cash in on the "beach-going" populous of nearby communities, Kinney elected to develop his new location in the spirit of resort towns like Atlantic City or Coney Island.

In an interview conducted during his lifetime, Kinney described his vision for the new resort:

I acquired two pieces of property at the oceanside - one a long sand spit where Ocean Park and Venice now stand, the other, the bluff back of the long wharf at Port Los

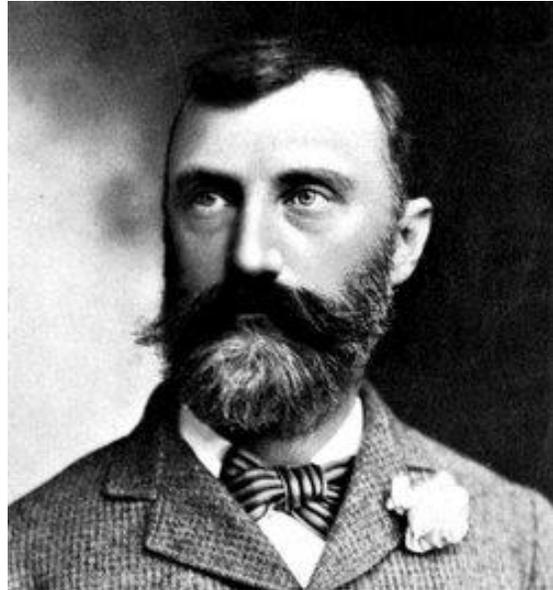


Figure 1: Abbot Kinney is credited with founding the city of Venice.

¹ Ingersoll, Luther A. (2008). *Ingersoll's Century History, Santa Monica Bay Cities*.

Angeles. (The bluff is now part of Pacific Palisades). In buying the sand spit, I had in mind such places as Sandy Hook, Atlantic City and a very popular resort near Alexandria in Egypt.²

Venice of America, originally named “Ocean Park” until 1911, opened on July 4, 1905 and quickly earned the reputation of being the “Coney Island of the Pacific.” Kinney would continue to develop his parcel of land in the style of Venice, Italy which comprised a series of canals and channels along with gondolas and ornate rides. There were Venetian-style businesses and a full-sized amusement pier to complement his development.³

One of those attractions was a miniature railroad that Kinney hoped would bring travelers in from Santa Monica and Los Angeles to downtown Venice.

Chapter Two: Eastlake Park and the Roots of the Venice Miniature Railway

If the BJWRR can trace its roots back to the VMR, then the VMR should have cited its creation thanks to the Eastlake Park Scenic Railway (EPSR).

EPSR was the result of work put in primarily by Johnson Machine Works master machinist John J. Coit who designed and constructed a 18-inch gauge miniature railroad in nearby Eastlake Park (now Lincoln Park). Coit had constructed a 2-6-0, 1/3-scale locomotive that weighed 8,000 pounds including its tender. The “1903” (later to become the 3-Spot) had a total length of 19 feet from pilot to the tender coupler and utilized a Vanderbilt-style boiler with a working steam pressure of 150 pounds.⁴

Coit had designed the 1903 with a number of new gadgets, one of which included a valve motion without eccentrics, greatly simplifying the valve setting and maintenance requirements.

Yet the EPSR did not last long after Abbot Kinney had learned about its existence.

Kinney had heard of EPSR and Coit’s success in running the scale railroad. He then decided that something of the sort would be required at Venice. Kinney then contacted Coit and invited him to construct a similar railroad that would help shuttle passengers in and around



Figure 2: The 3-Spot (1903) was the first of John J. Coit's 1/3-scale locomotives.

² Moran, Tom (2004). “In Kinney’s Own Words,” *The Venice Historical Journal*.

³ Alexander, Carolyn Elayne (1999). *Images of America: Venice*. San Francisco: Arcadia.

⁴ “A Miniature Scenic Railway,” *Locomotive Fireman’s Magazine* (October 1904).

Venice, especially towards the shops and attractions that generated so much revenue for the new town.

It is important to remember that Kinney was a businessman above all and saw the tremendous opportunity that a scale railroad would bring to Venice. While the railroad would succeed in such prospects, there were also a number of problems and issues that would soon arise. Both Kinney and Coit would be at the forefront of these controversies.

Chapter 3: Design and Construction of the Venice Miniature Railway

Counting on John J. Coit's success with the Eastlake Park Scenic Railway, Abbot Kinney set to work putting together all the pieces that would enable Coit to construct what would become the VMR.

Initial plans called for a mile and three quarter-long railroad that would haul passengers from the business district in downtown Venice along the perimeter of the line. The eventual line would run over 7,500 feet and would cross numerous canals and waterways which had been constructed in Venetian style.⁵ Yet securing the right-of-way proved to be an elongated process and Kinney and Coit both met numerous obstacles during the railroad's construction, most notably from Ocean Park's board of trustees who delayed the build.

In the meantime, Coit continued work in other areas. Realizing that his 1903 locomotive from EPSR was undersized and underweight for the nature of operations Kinney had foreseen, Coit ordered another, larger locomotive from Johnson Machine Works. The new locomotive was to be a 2-6-2 "Prairie" style, incorporating many of the same upgrades that Coit had installed on his 1903 engine. Like the 1903, the 1-Spot as it came to be known, was also an oil burner. Unlike the 1903, the 1-Spot was much heavier – 9,260 pounds compared to the 1903 which was only 8,000. The additional weight gave the 1-Spot better tracking power and would allow for more passenger cars.⁶

In addition, Coit ordered five ornate passenger cars which were to be painted royal blue and donned "lion heads" along the sides.



Figure 3: The VMR roundhouse was one of the first railroad facilities constructed in 1905.

Before the track issue had been solved, Coit also set to work building the railroad's storage and maintenance facilities on the corner of Lake Avenue and El Camino Real (now Venice Boulevard and Abbot Kinney

⁵ Line, Arthur W. (May 1909). "The Venice Miniature Railway," *The Model Engineer and Electrician*.

⁶ Ibid.

Boulevard respectively). There, he constructed a three-stall engine house, perhaps foreseeing the need for three locomotives, as well as a turntable located directly in front. Tanks for fuel and water were also built as was a storage shed for the passenger cars. A machine shop, capable of performing all the necessary maintenance, was also constructed in the same area.

Shortly after its construction, the board of trustees granted Abbot and the railroad permission to construct the entire line and loop around Venice and through the residential and financial districts. The route would eventually traverse from the yard at Lake Avenue and El Camino along Mildred Avenue and towards the business district where it would circle around the post office. From there, it paralleled the Mildred right-of-way before turning to the north along Riviera and across a series of the Venetian canals that had already been installed. It would eventually make a U-turn along Washington Boulevard to El Camino Real and head south towards the Lake Avenue station.

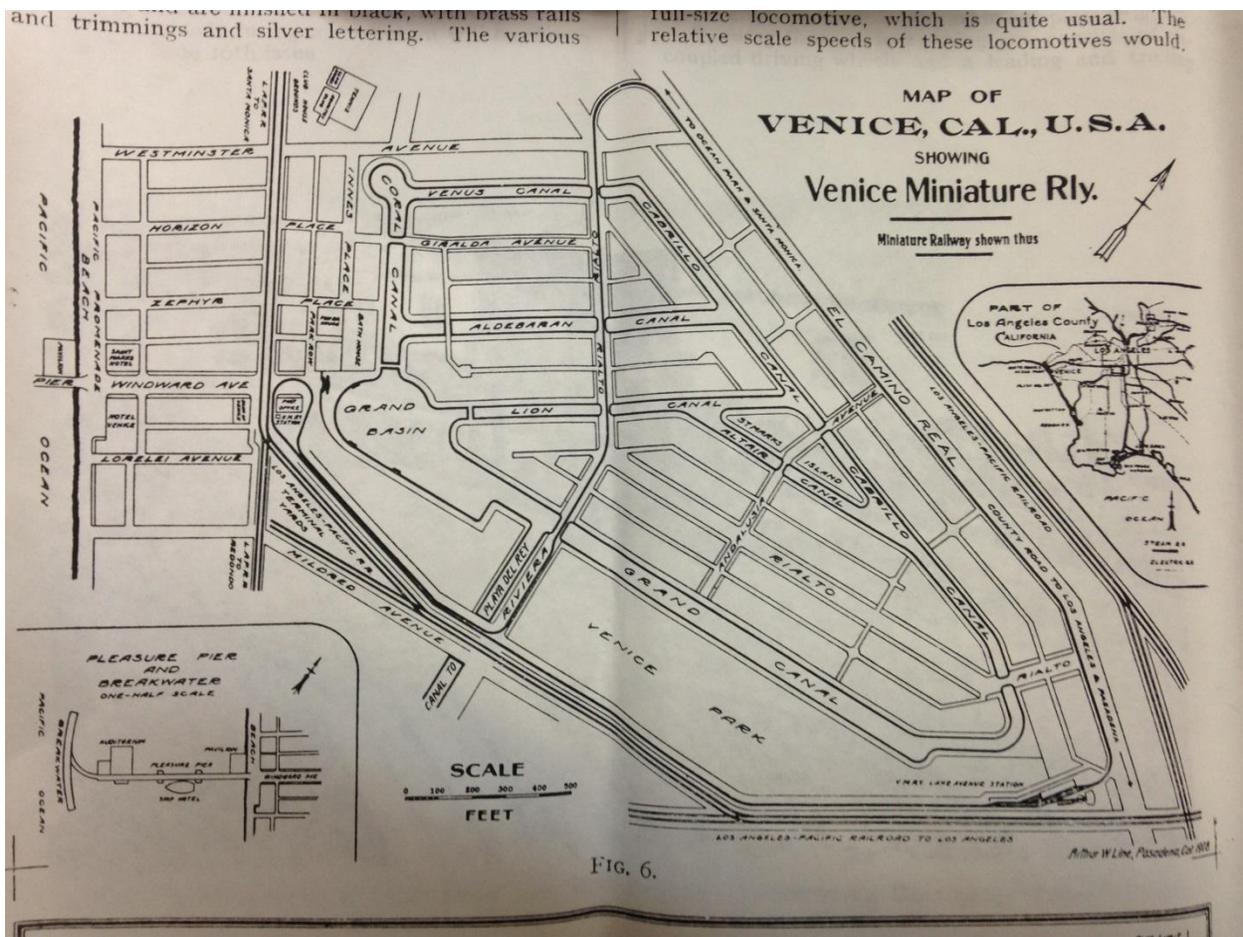


Figure 4: A 1909 map by Arthur W. Line depicts the VMR layout around Venice. The Lake Avenue station can be seen towards the bottom right corner.