

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 No. 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 No. 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.

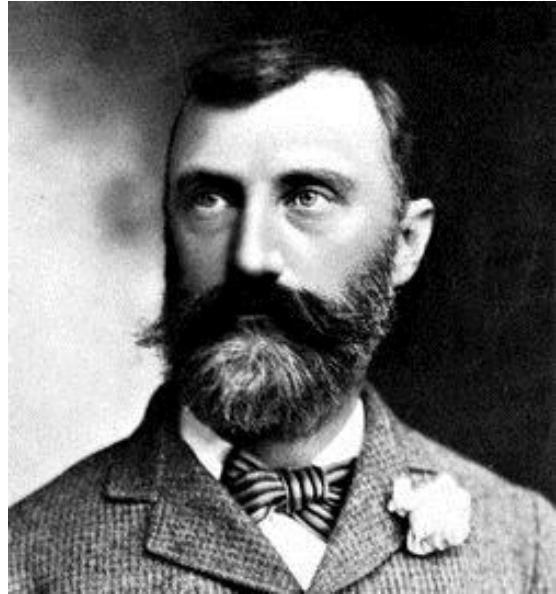


Figure 1: Abbot Kinney is credited with founding the city of Venice.

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

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 an 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 Three: 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.

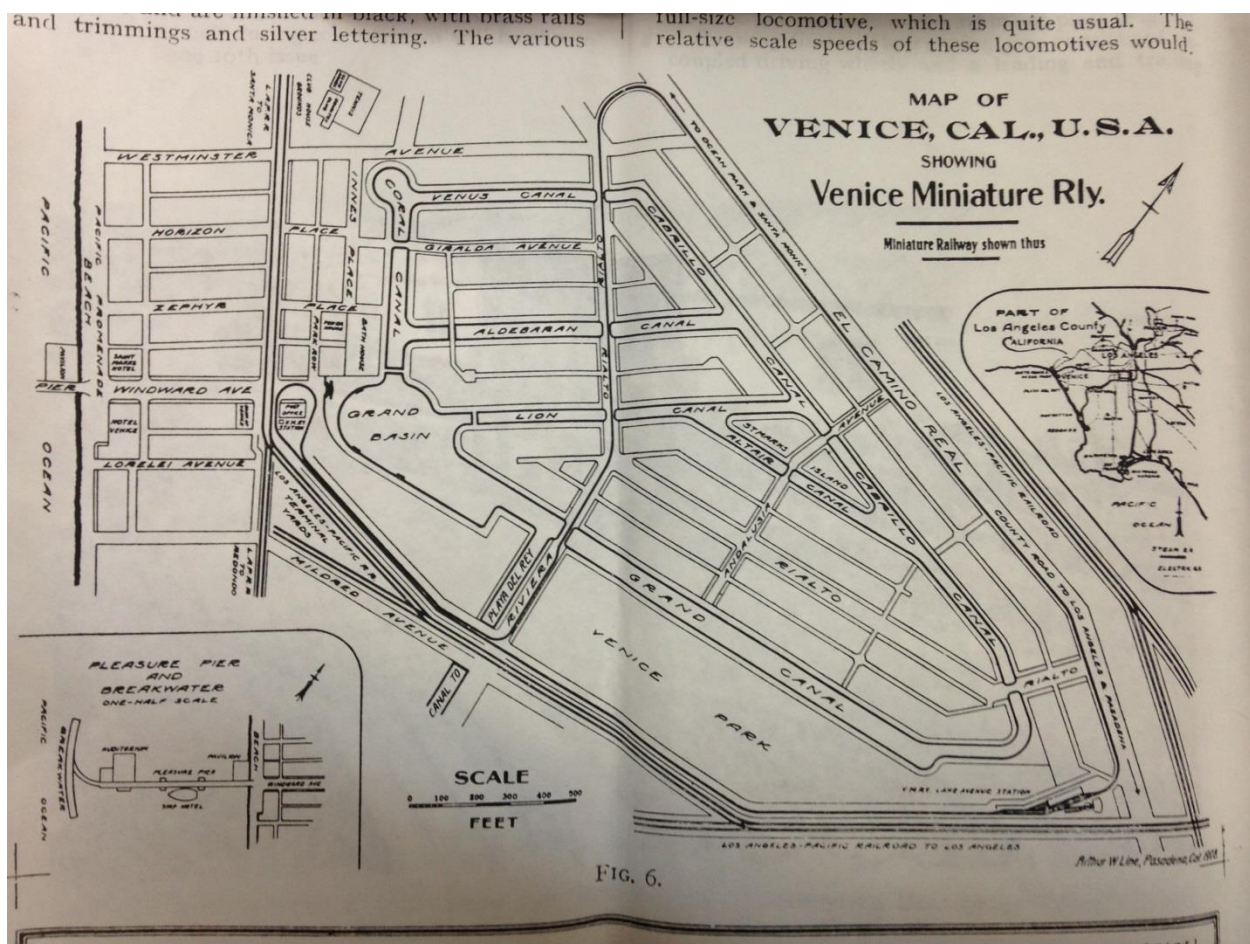


Figure 4: A 1909 map by Arthur W. Line depicts the VMR layout around Venice. The Lake Avenue station can be seen towards the bottom right corner.

Coit recognized the necessity of having a second locomotive similar in design to the 1-Spot. The nature of Kinney's vision, which called for multiple trains to haul passengers to-and-from the business district, required more than just one locomotive. As a result, Coit placed an order for another 2-6-2 "Prairie"

style locomotive from Johnson Machine Works along with an additional seven passenger cars that would bolster the VMR's roster.

Yet Johnson Machine Works was delayed in getting the second locomotive out and would not have it built until June of 1905. In the meantime, Coit closed his operation at Eastlake Park and transferred his 1903 locomotive and cars over to Venice to make up the difference. Eventually the 2-Spot would enter service late in the summer of 1905 and the VMR would feature three steam locomotives on its roster.

Chapter Four: The Designs and Specifications of the VMR, Its Locomotives and Rolling Stock.

All information courtesy of Line, Arthur W. (May 1909). "Venice Miniature Railway," The Model Engineer and Electrician unless otherwise specified.

Once completed, the VMR consisted of about 7,500 feet of right-of-way track and nearly two miles of track, including the sidings and switches inherent in the railroad's operation. The majority of the line experienced very few grades with the exception of a number of canal grades which saw trains ascending and descending over a very steep manner. The steepest grade was on the Lion Canal Bridge which measured 11 percent.

Both the 1-Spot and 2-Spot were virtually identical in design and appearance; the only noticeable difference being the number markers and a "crescent" shape on the cab window of the 2-Spot compared to the rounded "box" shape on the 1-Spot. Each locomotive weighed 9,260 pounds and featured the Walschaerts valve gear which allowed for the regulation of steam-flow to the locomotive's pistons. Coit had made some additional modifications to simplify the maintenance and operation of the valve gear.⁷

Both locomotives cost \$4,510 each to manufacture and were finished in black with brass trimming and silver lettering. In addition, the design and small drivers that were installed allowed a fast-moving train at speeds up to 30 miles per hour. Contrary to popular belief, Coit did not actually build the locomotives himself, rather he designed both of them and had the work outsourced to Johnson Machine Works. The boilers on both the 1-Spot and 2-Spot were constructed by Pacific Coast Boiler Works in Los Angeles and were set to operate at a working pressure of 175psi.

In contrast to the 1- and 2-Spot, the 3-Spot (or 1903 as previously recorded) was primarily used as a helper engine on longer trains or as a maintenance engine for various railroad projects along the VMR.

All of the VMR passenger cars, which cost \$400 each, were originally fabricated by J.G. McLain Company with the trucks being assembled by Johnson Machine Works. Each of the passenger cars were ornate in design and fit in well with the Venetian style of buildings in and around Venice. The second set of passenger cars, which did not arrive until late-1905, were painted "cherry red" in contrast to the royal blue color that the first five cars displayed. Typically, each color of cars would be joined together in a

⁷ "A Miniature Scenic Railway," *Locomotive Fireman's Magazine* (October 1904).

train so that matching colors would make the length appear more pleasing. The cars could be fitted with rooftops during inclement weather or removed for passengers who wished to enjoy the coastal sunshine. In addition, each car could seat as many as 12 passengers.

In addition to the ten passenger cars, the VMR also featured two flat cars and one tank car.

There was some flexibility on operations on the railroad. Typically, there would be two trains with one of the two primary locomotives pulling a train of five cars. Longer trains were often assembled however and it was not uncommon to see double-headers either consisting of the 1-Spot and 2-Spot or the use of the 3-Spot in some instances. Yet the 3-Spot's tenure in Venice was short-lived and it returned to its East Lake Park operation sometime after the 2-Spots arrival.



Figure 5: One of the VMR double-headers with the 2-Spot in front and the 1-Spot directly behind.

Chapter Five: Conflicts between Abbot Kinney and John J. Coit and the Decline of the Venice Miniature Railway

On the surface, the VMR appeared to be a wonderful collection of European antiquity and Venetian architecture with American business and technology. Guests to Kinney's Venice of America reveled in the ability to take a scale train to and from the business district as well as having an easy means to enjoy all of the resort-town's attractions.

Yet it was not long after the railroad's creation that problems arose between Venice's creator and the principle man behind the VMR.

Kinney's initial relationship with Coit was businesslike and while Kinney recognized and appreciated Coit's success with the Eastlake Park Railway and the establishment of the VMR, he also knew that Coit's creation had to be solely beneficial to Venice and nothing else.

One of the first instances that stained the relationship between the two men was the fact that Kinney was adamant about involving his two young sons in the railroad. His youngest son Carleton, aged nine, was named VMR president and his other son Innes, aged twelve, was given the title of Chief Engineer.⁸ While everyone involved in the railroad's business knew that Coit was the man who actually ran VMR, the installation of Kinney's sons into important positions must have been a slap-in-the-face to Coit.

The situation worsened in 1906. Kinney, who was no stranger to micromanagement, became increasingly involved in Venice's business operations and wanted to gain even more control over all the various aspects and companies that made up Venice of America. The VMR was not excluded.

Kinney made numerous attempts to take over the railroad from Coit. One effort included shutting down the railroad during summer for a period of six months citing that one of the wooden canal bridges needed to be replaced with a concrete structure.⁹ Coit, who had signed a five-year contract with Kinney and Venice of America, felt that Kinney was intruding on the railroad's operation and attempting to force Coit out of the picture altogether.

Coit initially tried to reason with Kinney and initially wanted him to accept their share in the railroad and its operation. Yet Kinney refused and again attempted to take control of the railroad in November while Coit was out of town. Enraged by the blatant act against the five-year lease, Coit returned and wound up removing a number of key components from each of the locomotives before again departing. As a result, and without qualified personnel to machine new parts, the VMR was essentially closed for the remainder of the year.

Kinney pressed charges against Coit and the matter ended up in a Los Angeles County court on November 20. Yet Coit and his associates were deemed "not guilty" of any vandalism and property-theft charges much to Kinney's dismay. Yet Kinney turned to civil court and an arbitrator ruled in favor of Kinney on January 19, 1907 which forced Coit to settle the agreement by paying reparations and returning the stolen parts.¹⁰ The VMR was able to resume operations shortly thereafter.

After the incident, Coit was essentially dismissed from the VMR and fades from history. Kinney was able to find other individuals who could run the railroad effectively and the VMR remained a popular attraction for almost twenty more years.

Yet in the early 1920s, the railroad's lore had lost its luster. By this time, automobiles had become a more popular means of traveling to Venice and the necessity of the VMR diminished. In addition, new merchants and businesses that had begun to emerge along much of the VMR line regularly complained about the railroad's noise and interference with clientele.

⁸ Stanton, Jeffery (1998). "Venice Miniature Railway."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Abbot Kinney passed away in November 1920 and his adopted son Thornton tried keeping the railroad open for a few more years before he eventually decided upon closing the VMR on February 23, 1925 following an ordinance that would have prohibited its operation any further.

Thus, the VMR had its reign on Venice for the better part of 20 years. It had seen the transformation from an artsy Venetian resort into a popular tourist trap. There had been a number of scandals and incidents that clouded its history, yet the overall feel of the railroad still boasts the Gilded Age.

Chapter Six: Aftermath of the Venice Miniature Railway and its Direct Influence on the Billy Jones Wildcat Railroad

After the VMR's closure in 1925, there remained questions regarding what to do with the equipment.

With Kinney gone and little sentimental reason to keep the railroad close to Venice, a number of various entities involved themselves in acquiring bits and pieces of the railroad itself. The 1-Spot eventually wound up in a Vernon scrapyard before being purchased by a man named Al Smith.¹¹ Smith restored the locomotive and ran it at numerous locations in San Gabriel and Pico Rivera well after World War Two. After Smith died, the locomotive was eventually purchased by Don McCoy who, along with his sons, restored and operated the 1-Spot in the Whittier Narrows Recreational Area from 1972 through 1978. After the railroad closed, the 1-Spot became a private heirloom in the McCoy family and still resides in a private collection in Southern California.

The 2-Spot's history before 1939 is much more clouded.

Somehow, the 2-Spot found its way into a San Francisco scrap yard. In 1939, a Southern Pacific engineer



Figure 6: The 2-Spot was in bad shape when Billy Jones discovered it in a San Francisco scrapyard in 1939.

named Billy Jones was on a layover in the city and noticed the rusty locomotive hours before it was to be loaded on a scrap-metal ship bound for Japan. Without hesitation, Jones purchased the locomotive from the scrap dealer and transferred it to his ranch in Los Gatos where he hoped to make some use of it.

When the United States entered World War Two in December 1941, Jones' two sons entered the service. Billy decided to build a railroad on his ranch centered

¹¹ This is not Al Smith associated with Orchard Supply Hardware, Billy Jones Wildcat Railroad, or Swanton Pacific.

on his recent purchase with the hopes that his sons would have something to do when they returned from the war. Sadly both sons were killed, yet Billy continued development of what would become the Wildcat Railroad.

That Wildcat Railroad would go on to forge its own unique and storied history in the Town of Los Gatos and surrounding communities.

There are plenty of remarkable facts and stories that parallel the inception of Venice, the VMR and the locomotives that would become a part of miniature railroad history. In a sense the BJWRR owes its existence to more than just Billy Jones himself. Had Abbot Kinney not been delayed in his trip back to New York, he never would have taken the excursion to Southern California. It was there that Kinney fell in love with the temperate climate and decided to put his development skills and expertise to use.

Kinney never would have conceived Venice of America and would have never known of John J. Coit or his Eastlake Park Railway. Subsequently, Coit would have likely never ordered the sister locomotives, 1-Spot and 2-Spot. The VMR never would have existed and neither locomotive would have been in scrapyards for Smith or Jones to purchase.

The area now known as Venice would have eventually been developed into the suburban sprawl that encompasses the surrounding areas. Yet without the aforementioned circumstances that enabled its creation, none of the subsequent events would have ever taken place and BJWRR, as we know it today, would never have existed.

Fortunately, all of these events did happen and in the correct order. Venice of America and the VMR did develop into a successful business for nearly twenty years and thankfully, for BJWRR sake, the VMR did not last into the 1930s, allowing the 2-Spot to find its way into Jones' hands.

Without this course of events, the BJWRR would not be here. The writer would not have this job, and countless thousands of children throughout the years would have never known the sound of that lonesome whistle echoing through Los Gatos on a beautiful Sunday afternoon.