

In and Out on the Salt Lake Route:

Winter, 1925, Kelso, Calif.

Waitresses preparing fancy place settings, their flatware wrapped with white cloth napkins, instinctively look up at the Standard railroad clock, in the alcove above the hallway overlooking Kelso's lunch room, when they hear the soft, low whistle blow from eastbound Train No. 4, the *Utah Express*, still distant but coming on strong down the track. It's 8:35 a.m. and No. 4's right on time for passengers to get a "Special Club Breakfast" of eggs 'n' ham, potatoes and toast for \$1.55, plus tax and tip, at the Kelso Club House. That's how the Depot is known and promoted to employees and customers of the railroad. After the train slowed to a stop, hungry passengers doubtless saw the blinking neon sign hanging from the building's arched colonnade outside, saying simply, "Lunch Counter."

Club House customers pay the cashier at the front desk, where you can also browse the plated-glass desk window for a cigar or candy to take with you. Crisp newspapers from Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas and Chicago stand ready for purchase on a rack in the corner, along with an array of popular glossy-covered magazines and two stands of comic books with the latest editions of *Tarzan*, *Gasoline Alley*, *The Gumps*, *The Merry Magazine*, *Bringing Up Father*, *Crown Comics*, and many more between tantalizing illustrated covers.

As soon as you walk in the Depot's front door you're hit with the ambient scent of fresh strong coffee brewing. Then you gradually come to realize that this is a peculiar depot smell you've experienced before -- if you're a regular train rider who has made morning meal stops: an elixir of pulp newsprint with their inked pages and cigar smoke, blended with the strong coffee aroma -- the latter emitted here from a three-piece set-up of six-gallon, nickel-plated coffee urns steaming on a stand behind the lunch counter. The place's two waitresses had just poured the hot black beverage all around, its steam rising from white china cups as the waitress passes. The white Carrara glass that tops the lunch counter, was specially made to keep any germ-contaminating crumbs from hiding, and the counter's

“sanitary” stools abetted that goal. The scare of the flu epidemic seven years ago still lingered in the minds of people, but out here, in the wide-open desert, there seemed little to worry about now.

Late-arriving customers swarm in looking to get a seat at the already full counter. The depot scent lingers in the thin morning air of the cavernous building, its redolent odors wafting on the currents spread by the electric ceiling fans, adding a genteel, civilized atmosphere to the place. Except for the occasional calls of waitresses to cooks, “Order up!” the diners at their places are quiet, absorbed in eating and coffee drinking. A few men smoke their cigars off to the side. Others, relaxing on elbows with their hands folded, converse socially in hushed tones, taking in their unfamiliar surroundings of the desert. Four hours later and it’ll be time to stop again for lunch in Las Vegas at its depot. On the railroad you’re taken care of, but everything, including hunger, is orchestrated, regimented by the passing minute.

Rumpled newspapers, dog-eared train schedules, stained and torn tourist flyers, smashed candy wrappers and stepped-on cigar butts left over from last night’s late dinner stop of Train No. 3, the *California Express*, still littered the horseshoe-shaped lunch counter and tile floors in spots. The Second Shift -- late in quitting for the night -- hadn’t time to clean up the mess completely. At 10:40 p.m., forty-six passengers had rushed in from the cold outside, the crowd’s breath steaming in the foyer as they look around, noticing the dark-stained staircase immediately in front of them, mysteriously leading to offices on the second floor. The would-be diners look for a place to sit down for a hurried 20-minute dinner. Tonight, the Special is chicken and dumplings, green peas, iced tea, and choice of dessert. In the kitchen, the cook and a waitress became “stuck in the weeds,” as they say, with too many orders at once, struggling to keep the details right and the big picture of customer satisfaction as well.

Too soon, the time came when the old conductor’s basso profundo was heard from the darkness out on the brick platform: “Boooaaarrrd!” Half-finished, more

or less, the diners hurriedly packed up and got in line to pay the cashier before heading outside to board.

Ten minutes later and outside the Depot the cold air was quiet, the platform deserted. Train No. 3 was clacking down the tracks toward Sands and more distant Crucero, isolated rail sidings amidst untracked sand dunes on the far edge of nowhere. For the train passengers the brief stop in the night at a place called Kelso now was but a distant memory behind them. Golden California was ahead.