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Gordon Chappell

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NARROW GAUGE OVER CUMBRES

by

GORDON CHAPPELL

Santa Fe, New Mexico



Shortly after 8:00 a.m. on Wednesday, September 2, 1970, the engineer on locomotive 483 pulled the whistle cord, notched the throttle back an inch or two, and a string of narrow gauge freight cars rolled westbound out of Antonito for the first time in nearly twenty-one months. In the month and a half that followed, train after train of historic rolling stock polished the rusty rails of what had been the Denver And Rio Grande Western narrow gauge main line, and wore down the weeds along a right-of-way, now ninety years old.

It was an historic reversal of a half-century old trend of discontinuance and abandonment which had robbed most Rocky Mountain towns of the railroads which had once served them. Indeed, the *Cumbres And Toltec Scenic Railroad*, a name adopted for the 64 miles of trackage from Antonito, Colorado to Chama, New Mexico, operated more trains over the historic line in two months than the D&RGW had run in two years. Once again the pungent aroma of coal smoke wafted through the lonely rooms of the abandoned section house at Cumbres, and the mournful wail of a steam whistle echoed down the canons of the River of the Pines.

Cumbres! To say Cumbres Pass is redundant, for "Cumbres" is Spanish and translates as "summits"; Los Cumbres—The Summits. But the name of this 10,015 foot mountain pass is really a word of many meanings. To the tough old soldiers who campaigned out west before the Civil War, Cumbres recalled the site of a bitter battle with Indians fought on its western slope. To an old retired section hand living at Juanita, it meant years spent spiking down rails and maintaining a steep mountain railroad. To hardy engineers such as Ben Greathouse and Bill Holt it recalled bitter winter cold with deep drifts of snow and the danger of winter avalanches which could sweep whole trains into the cañons below. Cumbres cannot days of diamond stacks on locomotives and diamond tiepins on gamblers and mincowners and the beauty of a summer thunder shower on the heights of the Conejos Range.

The story of rails over Cumbres began on October 24, 1879, when Construction Engineer Robert F. Weitbrecc huddled with Denver & Rio Grande Chief Engineer J. A. McMurtrie in the latter's South Pueblo office, and drew up a "Plan of Campaign" for the San Juan Extension—also sometimes called the Silverton Extension—in a little note-

book bound in red leather. That year the railroad stretched all the way from Denver to Alamosa, and had already been graded from the end of track at Alamosa southward down the San Luis Park to the Conejos River.

Early in November, Weitbrecc ran advertisements for bids in local newspapers: "Proposals will be received at the office of the undersigned until noon Nov. 20th, 1879, for the grading of the San Juan Extension of the Denver & Rio Grande Railway . . ." One day after the closing date, the San Juan Extension Company, which was in charge of construction for the railroad, signed contracts for grading and bridging from the Conejos westward to the Rio de Las Animas Perdidas, and the various subcontractors soon had their men at work in the wild hills west of the San Luis Park (later to be called the San Luis Valley).

On February 20, 1880, construction crews commenced laying track south from the railhead at Alamosa on the roadbed which had been built to the Conejos in 1879. From the railroad's new town of Antonito, a short distance south of the Conejos, the company planned simultaneously to build two lines: one southward toward El Paso, the other westward toward Silverton.

Labor was extremely scarce that winter, and the company had to search far and wide. In April, 125 men were shipped from Hayes City, Kansas, and others came from St. Louis and even Chicago. That same month the company advertised in Montreal newspapers for tie cutters:

De BONS BUCHERONS dispose a aller au Colorado gagner de \$3 a \$5 par jour, en coupant des ties en bois de pin blanc . . . peuvent obtenir un engagement signe par la "Denver and Rio Grande Railway Company" . . .

"Good wood cutters disposed to go to Colorado to earn from \$3 to \$5 a day cutting white pine ties . . . can obtain a contract signed by the Denver and Rio Grande . . ." Despite labor shortages that required recruiting as far away as Canada, the line was steadily if slowly driven westward, through winter snows and spring rains which turned the Conejos Range into mounds of mud.

The extension company, once rails were being laid, used a "boarding train" of about eight sleeping cars, three dining cars, one cook car, one commissary car, and one store room car. By stretching a point, one might consider this the first "passenger" train on the rails to cross Cumbres.

The line over Cumbres lay in extremely rough country, and construction took more than a year just to reach the Chama River. While most narrow gauge railroads in the Rockies followed streams and their canyons, this particular extension cut across from one watershed to another. From the Conejos it cut across to the Rio de Los Pinos, which it

followed awhile, and then over to the watershed of the Rio Chamita, or Little Chama River, by way of Cumbres—which Weitbrech initially referred to as the "Pinos-Chama Summit."

The eastern approach to Cumbres was on a gentle 1.42 per cent grade, but to the west the approach from the Chama River comprised fourteen miles of 4 per cent. Here, in the vicinity of Cumbres, were the two largest bridges on the line, each crossing an insignificant stream: Cascade Creek, eleven miles east of Cumbres, and Wolf Creek (Lobato, in Spanish), nine miles to the west. These deep ravines were temporarily bridged by spindly wooden trestles which were replaced with iron bridges within a year.

The railhead reached the Little Chama River on New Year's Eve, 1880. Here the railroad began a five-stall brick roundhouse, a frame station, and other permanent facilities, for Chama was to become a substantial lumber town, a railroad division point, and the base for helper locomotives needed for the steep grade eastward up to the pass. Track crews meanwhile worked to upgrade the newly completed track from Antonito and prepare it for operations.

On February 1, 1880, a month after the first wobbly rails had reached Chama, the track to that point was transferred from the Extension Company to the railroad, which began running passenger and freight trains over the new line. From Chama, passengers could take J. L. Sanderson & Company stage coaches on to Animas City, Parrott City, Silverton, Rico, and other mining camps in the San Juan Country. Heavy freight wagons, their teams struggling through the axle-deep mud, carried on a brisk commerce between the railhead and the mines.

The El Paso Extension had also been progressing south from the Conejos River towards Santa Fe, though it was destined to be halted temporarily at Espanola by agreement with the AT&SF Railway, and never to extend any further south than Santa Fe. From Chamita on that line, where the Rio Chama emptied into the Rio Grande, the construction engineers began laying out and grading another line to Chama, thus to form a triangle from Antonito to Chama to Chamita. But after forty miles of grading was completed, the project was dropped without rail ever having been laid.

Construction continued westward from Chama. In May the head of track had reached Amargo, 23 miles further west, and was quickly turned over to the railroad so it could get the business west of Chama that otherwise would benefit the Sanderson stages and the numerous wagon freighters.

Over on the Animas River, forty-four miles south of Silverton, the town of Animas City had sprung up in 1876 as a smelter and shipping town supplying the mining camps north and west. But true to its exploitive character, the Denver & Rio Grande had its own plans, and in September, 1880, surveyed a townsite a mile to the south of Animas City which it called Durango after the city of the same name in Mexico. Protest as they might, the citizens of Animas City could do nothing, and Durango took its place,

ultimately to absorb completely the pioneer town on the River of Lost Souls. Durango was born in the form of coins jingling in the Rio Grande's pockets.

Telegraph construction was proceeding apace with the railhead, and as the rails reached Arboles, the new wires were flashing news that President James Garfield had been shot by an assassin. Despite optimistic early reports on his condition, the President died. In September, members of the National Association of General Passenger and Ticket Agents held a memorial service alongside the new tracks in Toltec Gorge just east of Cumbres, and subsequently erected a stone monument which still stands near the west portal of Toltec Tunnel.

In June, Arboles, 37 miles west of Amargo, became the new operating terminus where passengers transferred from the little narrow gauge coaches to the stages. The schedule of the passenger train to this point, according to a timetable published on June 12, 1881, called for departure from Denver at 8 a.m. and arrival in Alamosa at 10:25 that night, after more than fourteen hours in the rocking little coaches. The train continued right on through the night, the little narrow gauge Pullman Palace sleepers swaying through the dark, past La Jara at 11 p.m., Antonito at 11:47, Big Horn at 4:55, Los Pinos at 7 a.m., Cumbres a full day after departure from Denver, and Chama an hour after that. The train reached Amargo, where passengers interchanged for Pagosa Springs, at twenty minutes before noon, and finally halted at the temporary operating terminus at Arboles at 2:35 p.m. It was a long, hard trip, even by rail.

The track reached the Florida River early in July, and the grading camp at that site was the scene of a violent gunfight over the ownership of a revolver, resulting in one dead, three badly wounded, and one slightly nicked. Sheriff Hunter from Durango arrested three of the participants—the wounded ones—but the others got away.

Rails finally reached Durango at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, July 27, 1881. That afternoon the assayer, F. A. Foin, had made a silver spike from ore from the Junction Creek Mines, and when the track reached G and Railroad Streets, the spike was driven in a little ceremony presided over by Mayor Taylor. But the big celebration was scheduled for August 5, with a special excursion train due to arrive from Alamosa and points east. The town madly threw itself into planning a program including a parade, races, a dance, speeches, a shooting match, and a baseball game between Durango and Silverton teams. Meanwhile, in the next few days a freight and pay train arrived, but there was still no passenger service over the new and still wobbly rails.

On the day of the great celebration, the parade marched up one street and down another, but still no train appeared. Finally, J. L. Pennington announced to the crowd that the train had been delayed by washouts, and the people had to go ahead without the excursionists.

Weather had seemed to conspire against the Denver & Rio Grande all during those two years of construction. It was not the snowstorms themselves that caused most of the trouble, but the melting snows of spring, coupled with spring and summer rains. On the line over Cumbres, fills

Big Horn



Famous William H. Jackson view taken during the eighties typifies early day operation over the Cumbres Pass line. The location is Big Horn, 17 miles west of Antonito, in the foothills. Here the track passes up the near side of the valley (foreground), loops around to the left and climbs the opposite side where the train is standing. After making another loop behind the hill, the track can be seen behind the train, still higher, on a third level. The train would appear to be a regular passenger during the period when Pullmans were not run beyond Alamosa; baggage-mail, coach and chair car are drawn by one of the three small 1883 eightwheelers of Class 42½. (State Historical Society of Colo.)

settled and cuts sloughed in over the rails. Swollen streams attacked new and untried bridges. A new railroad track undergoes a process of appreciation over a considerable period; the fills solidify and wild grasses cover bare earth and fight erosion. The track becomes more solid over a period of months before the counter process of depreciation sets in. The Cumbres line was still new and raw and unduly susceptible to the elements. The day before the great celebration in Durango rain fell heavily from noon 'till four southeast of Durango, and the Rio Navajo tore out one bent of the railroad bridge. Even then a train might have been run out of Durango to pick up passengers who could have crossed the stream on foot where the train could not, but four miles to the west, the same rains washed out a large fill, leaving a gap trains could not cover which was too great for passengers to walk. Durango's initial experience with the railroad was not exactly auspicious.

Durango was not the end of the line anyway; it was merely a stop on the extension to Silverton. Engineer Thomas Wigglesworth and a survey and grading party were already at work in the canyon above Rockwood, where his men were lowered over the cliff with ropes and scaling ladders to locate the line and drill and blast the rocks. Track-laying ceased temporarily at Durango and some workmen were transferred to the Gunnison Extension, but on October 3, 1881, crews began laying rails northward to Rockwood, which they reached December 11, before stopping for the worst of the winter.

Near the end of the following March the company resumed laying track north from Rockwood, but three miles into the canyon ran out of rail, and had to discharge the construction crews until more arrived. The Colorado Coal and Iron Company of South Pueblo had failed to deliver rails on schedule. These rails, first to be rolled in Colorado, were made on April 28 and 29, 1882, and finally reached the Silverton Extension late in May, when tracklaying resumed and reached Silverton on July 8.

Surveyors continued running their lines over canyon and pass, from Silverton to Howardsville and Red Mountain, from Hermosa to Rico, from Durango to Dolores and Rico, and wherever there seemed business for the tentacles of steel. But the Denver and Rio Grande had overextended itself, and it would be left to other companies to build further into the San Juan Mountains.

Now the railroad could run the passenger trains over the whole line from Denver to the silver camps on the Rio de Las Animas Perdidas—the River of Lost Souls.

On April 22, 1883, the railway issued its twenty-second employees' timetable. The new Alamosa-Silverton line was a part of the Second Division, administered by Superintendent Cole Lydon from Alamosa. The passenger train over Cumbres was Number 5 westbound and Number 6 in the other direction. Leaving Denver at 2:35 in the afternoon, it struggled over Veta Pass and reached Alamosa at 3:55 a.m. Continuing on down the valley, at 5:15 it was heading westward from Antonito, and by dawn it was climbing through the sagebrush toward the forested slopes of the Conejos Range. At 6:35 a.m., the little 4-4-0 locomotive pulled into Big Horn, where the railroad operated

a small eating house and the passengers had twenty minutes in which to step down and eat breakfast. At 6:55 the engineer whistled off and headed his train for Toltec Gorge and the pass. At 8:20 the engine was passing Osier, at 8:40 Los Pinos. At 9:20 it was at the summit, where there was a water tank, a station, and a snowshed-covered wye. Besides water, coal was available at Sublette, Osier, Los Pinos and Cumbres. Ahead lay Coxo, Siding No. 9, Lobato, and Chama. Chama had a roundhouse and shops; and the railroad's boarding and eating house, where the train paused for another twenty-minute meal stop, though it was yet only the middle of the morning.

Leaving Chama at 10:55, the passenger train went on through Willow Creek and Azotea and Monero, the coal-mining town. Three minutes after noon it was in Amargo; here was the connection with Pagosa Springs. At the Springs in those years was an army camp, soon to be moved to the new Fort Lewis west of Durango. The military operated its own stage service with the customary use of army ambulances as passenger vehicles. On specified days when Indians from the nearby Jicarilla Apache agency were to be issued their annuities, Amargo was a busy little camp with an ample supply of soldiers on hand, the yellow trouser strips of cavalry mixing with the light blue of infantry, and the Eugenie bonnets of curious officers' wives and daughters bobbing among the spectators. Old Christopher Carson, the famous "Kit" Carson, dead since '68, had whipped these Indians two decades earlier, and they were a pretty tame lot by the time the railroad came through.

But that could look menacing enough, and one engineer recalled the ominous crowd which had gathered around his work-train engine near Ignacio one day. Despite a spell of hot weather, he had locked himself in the cab, acutely aware of the Winchester which hung from the cab roof. But those dusky faces, so solemn and strange to him, signified curiosity more than hostility, and Indian troubles were about the only kind the railroad didn't face.

Westward lay Dulce, Navajo, Juanita, and Carracas, where at 1:25 the eastbound and westbound trains met and passed. The little train was now nearing the end of its run as it steamed into Durango at 4:25 p.m.

At Durango the passengers had a brief ten minute lay-over before continuing on toward Silverton. At Hermosa, eleven miles north of Durango, the passenger northbound passed a side-tracked southbound freight at 5:25. It took another half hour to climb through the pine-studded hills to Rockwood, a full hour to run from Rockwood through the canyon of the River of Lost Souls to Cascade siding. At 7:10 the little train was at Needleton, under the brooding spires of the aptly named Needle Mountains; forty minutes later coal smoke from the train was drifting through Elk Park and around Garfield Peak. Finally, at 8:20 p.m., the weary passengers could step down onto the wooden station platform in Silverton and board a horse-drawn hack for one of the hotels uptown. The engine would be put away in the little two-stall roundhouse which stood a couple of hundred feet south of the station, on the other side of the tracks.

Silverton, which had been a thriving mining camp since

the early 1870's, lay in a particularly beautiful setting. Baker's Park—"park" was frontier terminology for a high mountain valley surrounded by peaks—was a small flat meadow only a mile or so in diameter, ringed by towering peaks separated by four canyons. Two on the north and one on the west fed mountain streams into the park, and in the southwestern corner the precipitous canyon of the River of Lost Souls drained the glacial waters toward the San Juan. In the center of the park, amid alpine grasses, lay the dirt streets and the log, frame, brick and stone buildings of Silverton, containing a variety of Victorian hotels, saloons, druggists, assayists, wagon freighters, brothels, and all of the typical establishments of a frontier mining town. The arrival of the railroad was stimulating an already booming economy, and within two decades each of the four canyons which met in Baker's Park would boast its own individual narrow gauge. But in 1883 the newly completed Denver & Rio Grande Railway alone spit its fiery cinders of coal into the rare mountain air.

The passenger returning from Silverton to Denver had to be on the cars by six in the morning for the run down the canyon to Durango. Reaching the latter town at 9:35, the train paused but ten minutes, and then headed east to Arboles, where at 12:32 the passengers were given an 18-minute lunch stop. The train reached Cumbres at 5:48 in the evening and Alamosa not until 11 p.m. Then Denver-bound passengers would not reach their destination until a quarter after noon the next day. The Victorian opulence of the cars, both inside and out, hardly compensated for the fatigue of the thirty hour trip from Silverton to Denver.

The regular through passenger trains would operate under varied names down through the years. At first the westbound was called the *Durango Mail*, and the eastbound, logically, the *Denver Mail*, attesting to the importance of the federal postal contracts which played an important part in supporting the trains. At one time the westbound was known as the *Colorado, New Mexico and San Juan Express*, while in the other direction it was the *San Juan, New Mexico and Colorado Express*—the sequence merely reversed with direction. Around the turn of the century the passenger trains were called the *Colorado and New Mexico Express*, and then a couple of decades later, as the *San Juan and New Mexico Express*. In its last years, the passenger route was known as the *San Juan Express*.

The engines with their Russia-iron boiler jackets and gold lettering, and the little Tuscan red passenger coaches, varnished to a mirror-finish with gold-leaf striping and gold lettering above the windows, hauled a steady flow of tourists and travelers over the heights of Cumbres. In the earliest years little 4-4-0 locomotives hauled the "varnish," but they were soon replaced with heavier 4-6-0 passenger engines of the 160-174 series. Diamond stacks remained on most of the freight engines until about 1910, but the passenger engines lost theirs before the turn of the century.

In the later '80s, under the direction of its General Passenger and Ticket Agent, "Major" Shadrack K. Hopper, the Denver & Rio Grande began to advertise "Around the Circle" tours, and coaches were especially lettered for that service. There was at that date no complete narrow gauge

circle, but the gap, between Silverton and Ouray, was a small one. Out of Denver the traveler road to Pueblo, Walsenburg, over Veta Pass to Alamosa, over Cumbres to Durango, and north to Silverton. There he boarded one of the Watson stages for the jolting ride over spectacular Sheridan Pass (later to be called Red Mountain Pass) to Ouray. At Ouray, after 1887 he could again board the railroad to ride north to Montrose and then east over the main line from Salt Lake City via Gunnison, Salida and the Royal Gorge to Pueblo.

In succeeding years, the narrow gauge circle was modified by railroad growth in the San Juan country and in the San Luis Park. In 1887 toll-road builder Otto Mears began his Silverton Railroad which was in the 1890's to connect Silverton over Red Mountain Pass with Ironton, leaving but a nine mile gap between the latter camp and Ouray for Watson's stages to complete. In 1890, Mears began laying the rails of the Rio Grande Southern Railroad from Ridge-way (on the D&RG's Ouray Branch) to tap the mining camps of Ophir and Telluride. In the next two years, he completed the new line all the way south and east over Lizard Head Pass, through Rico and Dolores and Mancos and over Cima Summit to Durango. In 1892 the circle of narrow gauge rails was complete!

But of course the western end of the circle constituted 160 miles of railroad not owned by the Denver & Rio Grande, and the latter preferred not to give business to the new RGS if it could avoid doing so. Consequently Major Hooper's advertising pamphlets, while they did include the RGS, continued to feature the route via Silverton and the short Silverton Railroad with the connecting nine-mile stage trip from Ironton to Ouray.

A more important modification to the narrow gauge circle occurred to the east in 1890. From Mears Junction, on the main line from Salida over Marshall Pass to Salt Lake City, southward over Poncha Pass to Villa Grove in the San Luis Valley and on to the iron mines at Orient on its eastern edge, the railroad had in 1881 built a branch line to carry ore. Spurred by the possibilities of a great farming boom in the northern end of the broad valley, in 1890 the Rio Grande connected Villa Grove with Alamosa. The 53 miles of narrow gauge track was entirely straight between the two points, unique on the Rio Grande system. Upon its completion, this connection bisected the existing narrow gauge circle, creating for a brief period two narrow gauge circles, the one westward via the Rio Grande Southern and another to the east via Walsenburg and Pueblo.

The company meanwhile had been experimenting with standard gauge since 1888. By 1890 third rail (forming a dual gauge utilizing one rail in common) had been laid from Denver to Trinidad, and the company had already begun removing the middle rail which formed the narrow gauge on selected segments, leaving a standard gauge to replace the dual gauge. In 1891 the middle rail was lifted from the dual gauge between Pueblo and the town of La Veta (not Veta Pass), thus converting the eastern end of the old narrow gauge circle to standard gauge. And so after 1891, the narrow gauge circle was a smaller one connected from Alamosa to Salida on the eastern edge, rather



Two photos: State Historical Society of Colo.

Toltec Gorge

As the rails climb higher towards Cumbres, the valley below grows ever deeper, and the terrain more spectacular. Nearing Toltec, the line circles around raw volcanic rock outcroppings such as those at right—being smokily negotiated by diamond-stacked 2-8-0s nos. 43 and 202. A few miles beyond, after passing through the second of the only two tunnels on the entire D&RG narrow gauge, the line bursts out over the breath-taking precipice of Toltec Gorge. The two views here (one taken from a rock promontory only part way down into the Gorge) are probably of the same train, apparently a construction special at the time the line was being built. The precarious wooden trestle-work was later replaced by a substantial rock wall and fill.

than from Alamosa to Walsenburg, Pueblo, and Salida.

The immediate consequence of this change was the necessity of rerouting both the narrow gauge freight traffic and the passenger trains from Denver and Pueblo to the San Juan country, to go through the Royal Gorge to Salida and over Poncha Pass to Alamosa, rather than by way of Walsenburg and Veta Pass.

A timetable for January, 1896, showed the *Colorado & New Mexico Express* leaving Denver at 7:45 p.m. and arriving at Salida at 4:30 a.m., while the passengers were still asleep in their coaches or, in the case of the more affluent ones, in the Pullman Palace Car sleepers. After a fifteen minute layover in Salida, the *Express* headed up the grade to Mears Junction, where it turned south to cross Poncha Pass. The long, monotonous stretch of straight track in the semi-desert northern end of the San Luis Valley was crossed as dawn broke over the heights of the Sangre de Cristo Range, and indeed the red alpenglow of the first rays of the morning sun on the snows of Mount Blanca seemed to resemble the blood of Christ for which the Spanish conquistadors of a past century had named the peaks. At 8:15 the little train reached Alamosa, and its yawning occupants stepped down for breakfast. They had a brief 25 minutes in which to eat. From there westward the schedule was typical of earlier years to Durango, which the *Express* reached, if on time, at 6:45 p.m. These were years when the Durango-Silverton line was handled as a branch, and it was necessary for the passenger to stay overnight in one of the hotels before boarding the Silverton "accommodation" train at 7:30 the next morning.

That was not a good decade for the railroad. In 1892 the price of silver began a decline from which it never recovered; and the flood of mining ventures, which had impelled the railroad to throw out its octopus-like tentacles in every direction, suddenly evaporated, leaving the Denver and the Rio Grande high and dry. The financial crisis reached its zenith in the summer of 1893. The "Panic of 1893," as it came to be called, was in some respects the worst depression of the century, and lasted nearly four years. About eight thousand American businesses collapsed, and dozens of railroads went into receivership. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 was, oddly enough, permitting a disastrous drain of gold from the treasury, and a reluctant President Cleveland was forced to call for its repeal. Although friends of silver in Congress announced that "Hell would freeze over" before they repealed the act, Cleveland nevertheless forced the measure through, and in November the government placed a ban on the purchase of silver for coinage purposes. It was a blow from which many mining camps never recovered. Coming as it did a mere decade after the Denver and Rio Grande had reached most of the camps, its effect on the railroad was not much less disastrous. Visions of future earnings disappeared before the directors' eyes.

A new timetable of November 12, 1899, introduced yet another major change in the operation of the *Colorado and New Mexico Express*. An entirely new standard gauge line had been built over La Veta Pass, by-passing by many miles the old narrow gauge Veta Pass route. Now a stan-

dard gauge train made the trip from Denver and Pueblo to Alamosa overnight, providing coach and Pullman sleeper service; the narrow gauge train for Durango made an early morning connection. Initially Pullman sleepers continued to be provided on the narrow gauge portion of the journey, but as it was a daylight trip of reasonable length the sleepers were soon dispensed with—for all time. Actually, Pullman sleeper service on the narrow gauge had been rather flexible for the entire two decades. There is evidence that sleepers were run right through to Silverton for a few months after service was begun, but thereafter sleeper service seems to have been terminated at Durango. During the '80s Pullmans were in short supply on the narrow gauge, and for a great deal of this time no sleeper service was offered west of Alamosa, although "chair cars" were provided in such cases in addition to coaches. After the main line was standard gauged in 1890, Pullmans were available and were then operated through from Denver to Durango via Salida a great deal of the time. Even then—in 1894, for example—there were times when sleeper service was offered on a Denver-Salida and Salida-Durango basis, which certainly must have been inconvenient.

After dropping of the through train via Salida, the Valley Line north of Alamosa remained a part of the Third Division operated from Salida, and was served by a little mixed train. (The lines west of Alamosa were by this time known as the Fourth Division.)

By 1905 it seemed necessary to build a branch south from Durango to Farmington to preempt the grade, primarily in order to keep the Southern Pacific's subsidiary, the Arizona & Colorado Railroad, from building into S.P. coal holdings near Durango, as well as to capture the agricultural traffic of the Farmington basin. The Farmington branch was built standard gauge using equipment shipped dismantled over the narrow gauge main line across Cumbres and assembled in Durango. This was done in anticipation of building a standard gauge line into Durango; after all, the rest of the system was being progressively standard gauged, and inevitably, the management thought, this would happen west of Alamosa. Further steps in that direction were taken in 1909 when the bridges at Cascade and Wolf Creeks were replaced with steel bridges of standard gauge dimensions. About the same time, section crews began using standard gauge ties in the tie replacement program.

Another plan developed around 1915 contemplated by-passing Cumbres and building an entirely new standard gauge line from South Fork, west of Alamosa, over the mountains to Juanita, and standard gauging the line from Juanita into Durango. Including an estimated \$300,000 for improving shop facilities in Alamosa and Durango, the anticipated cost of the proposed line was \$4,800,000. Still another step recommended by the D&RG engineering department was the building of a standard gauge from Arboles down the San Juan River to Farmington, thence up the La Plata Valley through Mancos into the Montezuma Valley. But the railroad was beset with financial ills, due in part to the Western Pacific burden, and its management became preoccupied with economizing. The

Farmington branch remained an orphan standard gauge segment isolated by narrow gauge on all sides, until 1923. Following a petition from Farmington citizens to change the gauge in order to eliminate the interchange problem in Durango, the railroad management resigned itself to the fact there was no immediate prospect of building standard gauge from Alamosa to Durango, and one weekend had the Farmington line narrowed to conform with the rest.

These same decades witnessed continual modernization of equipment. Due to an interstate commerce law, the Rio Grande was required to have automatic couplers on its equipment by September, 1903; the railroad had neglected to do this, and was forced into a crash program to apply knuckle couplers to the freight cars. The passenger equipment had been built with Miller Hook Couplers, which qualified as automatic; however, it was necessary gradually to change the Miller to knuckle in order to standardize couplings on locomotives and to permit mixed train service.

The same economy drive that doomed extensions and relocations in the San Juan country resulted in changes to passenger color schemes. On October 22, 1912, the Superintendent of Motive Power and the Car Department, J. F. Enright, wrote from Burnham that due to the expense, the railroad had decided to discontinue striping the passenger equipment with gold paint. At the same time, he decided to phase out the use of imitation gold paint for the remaining lettering and to go back to the use of genuine gold leaf, as the additional expense for the real article was more than compensated for by the fact it lasted considerably longer.

Six years later the whole paint scheme was changed. On September 6, 1918, Enright's successor, W. W. Leman, wrote the division superintendents:

We have in the past, painted our narrow gauge equipment a Tuscan red, but as economy will result from the use of the Pullman [green] color, as we figure about 3 months longer service and \$1.25 per car less cost for material, wish you would arrange hereafter as narrow gauge equipment passes through the shop, to adopt the Pullman color as our standard.

Since this was to be done only as cars came in for other repairs, the *San Juan & New Mexico Express* soon assumed a mixed color scheme, with shiny, freshly painted Pullman green cars among faded and weathered Tuscan red coaches. Gold remained the color used for lettering.

What was it like to travel over Cumbres on the *San Juan & New Mexico Express* of say, 1919? Let's travel back in time and see.

The eight little passenger cars, some red, some green, await their customers at the Alamosa depot in the early rays of the morning sun. At 7 a.m., the engineer on No. 172 pulls twice on the whistle cord, eases back the throttle, and they are off and running. Ahead lies the 29 miles of nearly straight and level track down the valley, through the little towns of Henry, Estrella, La Jara, Bountiful, and Romeo. Arriving at Antonito at 8:20, the passengers spy another little 4-6-0 locomotive waiting outside the single-track,

two-locomotive capacity engine house, waiting for passenger coaches to be added to its freight cars so it can go about its business as the *Denver and Santa Fe Mixed*. A baggage-mail car and two coaches are cut out of the San Juan for the trip to Santa Fe, and will reach the New Mexican capital at 4:25 that afternoon.

The remaining five cars of the *San Juan & New Mexico Express* depart Antonito westward for the heights of Cumbres, where clouds are already beginning to gather for afternoon thundershowers. Ahead lies wild mountain country, with nothing along the railroad but a few section houses until the top of the pass is reached. Oddly, the Conejos Range is almost entirely devoid of mining ventures; timber remains its primary resource. The little engine puffs steadily up the moderate grade, spewing diamond-hard cinders of coal everywhere—into eyes, pockets, purses, carpetbags. The railroad climbs in and out of side canyons which pour their streams into the Los Pinos, not even pausing at the double loop at Big Horn, once the breakfast stop for passengers in the 1880's. A little further is the "Mud Tunnel," its insubstantial earthen walls reinforced with timbers, and the spectacular conglomerate needles of Phantom Curve towering above the little train. Finally the rock tunnel at Toltec looms ahead, and just out of the west portal the *San Juan* makes a five minute stop to enable passengers to gape at the thousand-foot depths and read the inscription on the Garfield Monument. Just out of the west portal of the tunnel the track originally crossed a short wooden trestle built on stonework foundations against the cliff wall; by 1905 the railroad had replaced this with a solid fill and safer, impressive rock wall.

Rolling down the track again, the train soon passes Osier, now nothing more than a section house and tank, but in construction days a roaring log-cabin town. The country ahead is green with wild grasses, but the hills are sparsely forested, never having recovered their growth after the disastrous fire which swept the Los Pinos area in 1879. The canyon has become a shallow valley, and soon the train is just a few feet above the River of the Pines. After crossing the little stream, the rails curve back in a huge horseshoe and begin the final climb up Cumbres Creek. Through another double horseshoe, a much sharper one called Tanglefoot Curve, the *San Juan* gains final altitude and is at the top. Here is a station, section house, a water tank, and a snowshed-covered wye. Members of the crew make an inspection of the airbrakes which will be sorely needed on the steep descent to Chama, and again the train is off and running. This afternoon on the return eastbound trip the *Express* will require a helper engine, probably a 2-8-0 locomotive of the 200 or 400 series, to climb this steep grade to the top.

On schedule, the train slows to a stop in Chama at one minute to noon, and the conductor announces a twenty-one minute lunch stop. The Chama yard is full of engines and cars, some locomotives switching, others waiting to make hill turns—hauling a small number of freight cars up the steep grade to the summit, where the cars will be set out on a siding and the double or triple-headed engines



West of Toltec Gorge, lies the lonely, windswept station of Osier. Here 478 has just made its station stop.

Osier

Osier is on the spectacular east approach to Cumbres. East of the station, looking across the chasm of the Rio de Los Pinos (right), the defile appears deceptively narrow; but as the train moves west along the side of the hill, some idea of the mammoth scale of the setting can be grasped. (All, R. W. Richardson).



will repeat the process until there are enough cars at the top to make up a train for the downhill run east to Alamosa. Chama in 1919 is a busy railroad and lumbering town, permeated by the pungent aroma of coal smoke, the hiss of steam, and the scream of whistles.

Westward from Chama the little train puffs over the Continental Divide near Willow Creek. Contrary to popular assumption, Cumbres, the highest point on the railroad, is *not* the divide, which is actually crossed in unimpressive foothill country that hardly seems to be the "crest of the continent."

Onward the train runs, through Azotea, past Biggs Spur, and into the coal-mining town of Monero. Monero is where the eastbound and westbound passenger trains meet and pass. Westward from Monero is Amargo, of little importance since the days when it was end of track, and Lumberton and Dulce.

At Lumberton, two other railroads joined the Rio Grande. In 1895, E. M. Biggs (who had operated a lumber railroad built three miles south of Chama in 1888, and extended another eleven and a half miles in 1896 to Ensenada) formed the New Mexico Lumber Company and incorporated the Rio Grande and Pagosa Springs Railroad to build north from Lumberton. The company had established its shops in a new town called Edith, after Biggs' little daughter, six miles north of Lumberton. The RG&PS was a typical lumber line whose branches wandered around the canyons of the Navajo River and its tributaries. Eventually its rails reached within five miles of Pagosa Springs, but by 1901 another railroad had already connected the resort town with the D&RG. Later, in 1903, the Chama lumber spur was torn up and the rail relaid south of Lumberton to El Vado for the Rio Grande & Southwestern, another new firm owned by Biggs, though it was built with D&RG assistance and the latter planned to absorb it as a part of a connection between Lumberton and Chama. The RG&PS, meanwhile, had been washed out by the great floods of 1911 and never rebuilt, and its equipment transferred to the Rio Grande & Southwestern. A spur to Gallinas Mountain, another seven miles, was added to the RG&SW's original 33 miles in 1918. A short distance westward, another lumber line ran south, this one from Dulce, operated by both Biggs' New Mexico Lumber and the Sullenbergers' Pagosa Lumber Company.

The *San Juan Express* might pick up a casual passenger or two from any of these connecting lines, but there are no scheduled trains waiting to meet it.

At Pagosa Junction, however, it is a different matter. The Rio Grande, Pagosa & Northern Railroad, incorporated by the Pagosa Lumber Company, had built north from this point in 1901, using D&RG rails and ties and their own labor. Later operations were taken over by the D&RG, and a mixed train connects with the *Express*—although the number company still operates lumber spurs stretching many miles into the woods. The *San Juan & New Mexico Express* is scheduled to arrive at Pagosa Junction, located on Cat Creek (Gato, in Spanish), at 2:35 p.m. Five minutes later the *Denver & Pagosa Springs Mixed* pulls out for the resort springs.

Westward lay the small farming and ranching towns of the San Juan River Valley, and the Ute Indian Reservation town of Ignacio, named for a famous chief. At 5:25 p.m. the *San Juan* pulls into Durango. Here the passenger could stay overnight and take the mixed train to Farmington on the standard gauge segment, known locally as the *Red Apple Flyer*. Here also the D&RG connects with the Rio Grande Southern, whose passenger train goes on to Mancos, Dolores, Rico, Ophir, Telluride, and Ridgway, to complete the west end of the narrow gauge circle.

Just after pulling into the Durango station a baggage-mail car and a coach are uncoupled, and the remnant of the train—a baggage car, a coach, and the parlor car, still constituting the *San Juan Express*—departs for Silverton, arriving at 8:35 p.m., and our trip of half a century ago is completed.

While the line from Durango to Silverton was considered a branch and had a daytime mixed train which would long outlast the *San Juan*, still the *San Juan & New Mexico Express* of 1919 was a through train from Denver to Silverton, and Durango was merely a 15 minute stop enroute, not the terminus.

The returning eastbound *San Juan* had to leave Silverton at 6:20 in the morning in order to arrive in Alamosa at 8:10 p.m. Trains frequently were late, delayed by weather or man, and even when on time it was a long, hard trip.

These were years of great variety in equipment used over Cumbres. The heaviest of the narrow gauge engines, the K-27 "Mudhens" built in 1903, provided helper service from Chama to the pass, after heavier second-hand 65-pound (weighing 65 lbs. per yard) rail had been laid on that fourteen and a half miles of the route in 1913. But they were outlawed east and west of that short segment of track by the 40- and 45-pound rail which remained. They had to be hauled to Chama dead, at the rear of freight trains, as the rails from Alamosa to Cumbres were too light to carry a K-27 loaded with coal and water. Most frequently used on the steep grade up Cumbres were some of the C-16 and C-19 2-8-0 "Consolidation" type freight locomotives, one of which, No. 406, a Baldwin product of 1881, was named "Cumbres."

In 1923 a passenger on the *San Juan* could observe even more widely varied styles of locomotive in helper service on Cumbres. A shop strike left the Rio Grande increasingly short of power as it was unable to effect necessary repairs, and consequently had to borrow engines from neighboring narrow gauge lines. On August 21, for instance, RGS 12 was to be seen struggling over Lobato Trestle with a haul of merchandise; in September and October Silverton Northern 34 was noted working on the west slope of the pass.

That same year the company completed relaying the whole line from Antonito to Durango with 70 pound rail. This permitted "Mudhen" locomotives of the 450-464 series to be used over the whole line, along with new 470-series "Sports Model" engines then being built by the American Locomotive Company. The "Mudhens" and the new 470-series engines were all of the 2-8-2 "Mikado" pattern and were of outside frame construction, offering

quite a contrast to the earlier and much lighter inside-frame 2-8-0's.

Similar relaying of rail on the Santa Fe Branch began at that time, but was carried out sporadically and in haphazard fashion, resulting in a mixture of 45, 52, 57, 65, and 70 pound rail installed in the late 1920's. Nevertheless, by 1934 the line had rail of sufficient weight to carry the relatively new 470-class engines. The two-stall engine house which protected Chili line engines at Antonito was torn down, and common practice from then until the line was abandoned in 1941 was to run the *San Juan Express* double-headed down the San Luis Valley from Alamosa, the train then splitting at Antonito to go in different directions.

The depression years were to be the beginning of a long decline in railroad service in the San Juan country. All over the Rio Grande system branch lines were pared away and service cut back. But this was not essentially a product of the depression, although the crash of 1929 undoubtedly aggravated the situation. As early as 1915 the automobile began making substantial inroads on railroad passenger traffic across the nation, and the rapid development of motor stages—as busses were initially called—as well as trucking firms, all cut into railroad revenues.

One of the Rio Grande's first answers to truck competition was to begin hauling "less-than-carload" freight—"l.c.l." in railroad parlance—in extra baggage cars on the *San Juan Express* in 1925. Hauling such freight on a passenger schedule permitted the railroad to compete more effectively with truck lines. An answer to bus competition was the modernization of passenger equipment. In 1937 the railroad rebuilt some of the original open-platform coaches into closed vestibule coaches, with electric lights replacing the original coal-oil lamps and with more modern sanitary arrangements. A stainless-steel kitchen and a dinette section were added to the parlor cars, and for the first time in its history, passengers could eat on the train. They could even make advance arrangements for special menus, steak for instance, and the steward would then purchase the necessary items for the specified day's trip. The *San Juan* steward also served as an ice cream vendor to children on the Indian reservations and in the little settlements along the line; the parlor car carried ice cream and a stock of cones on board, a very popular service along the border. The steward normally delivered newspapers all along the route. He could also be persuaded to buy small items, such as thread, for families living in remote country served by the railroad; local residents would give him money and a shopping list one day, and he would return with the merchandise on the next.

The vestibuled equipment was used only on the *San Juan Express*, however, and open platform coaches, little changed from the 80's, still rolled to Silverton and Santa Fe.

But at the same time the railroad was taking such constructive measures as hauling l.c.l. freight in baggage cars to compete with trucking schedules on the dirt road over Wolf Creek Pass and modernizing the passenger equipment to retain and attract business, the management was

adopting other policies which worked toward the reduction of the railroad's revenues in the San Juan country.

These policies were referred to as the philosophy of "total transportation." If the railroad could not compete with trucks and busses, so some executives reasoned, then it would go into the trucking and bus business also, and compete with the opposition on its own terms. What management overlooked was the fact that the company was undercutting its own rail lines by so doing.

It was in the late 1920's that the railroad began buying into trucking lines, and in April, 1930, several such firms were consolidated as the Rio Grande Motorway, Inc. Increasingly the new company scheduled truck and bus traffic in direct competition with the rail lines; indeed, during the early 1940's, Motorways President T. L. James admitted that one of the justifications for railroad ownership of truck and bus lines was "to substitute highway service on branch lines operating at substantial losses . . ." Branch lines could not be torn up without Interstate Commerce Commission approval, but by operating competing highway service the railroad could sap revenues from parallel rail lines, thus showing increasing losses as justification for abandonment. Freight intended to go by rail ended up traveling by truck, and the revenue went to fatten the Motorways' annual reports while the railroad line starved. A stockman would order a specified number of narrow gauge cars to haul his sheep to market; on the appointed day an equivalent number of Motorways trucks would appear instead. The Durango Chamber of Commerce protested such practices as early as 1941, and said that it felt the D&RGW was following "a well-organized scheme to abandon all narrow gauge railroad operations in southwestern Colorado."

The negative attitude of the Denver & Rio Grande Western toward narrow gauge passenger service in later years was often obvious. Some agents, particularly those in Denver, would even deny the existence of any such train as the *San Juan Express*, and would sell tickets on Motorways busses instead. Nor was the practice restricted to Denver. In 1941 one passenger had to argue with the Alamosa agent for a rail ticket to Durango. The agent insisted on selling him a Motorways bus ticket that he didn't want; finally the exasperated customer had to threaten to come around behind the counter and make out his own rail ticket before the agent would do it for him.

But the railroad was not alone in undermining the *Express*; equally disastrous for the passenger train from Alamosa to Durango was a 1938 action by the railroad labor unions. The brotherhoods at that time challenged the practice of handling l.c.l. freight in baggage cars, demanding extra pay for the switching involved. In 1939 the Railroad Labor Board awarded the train crews *ninety thousand dollars* in back claims from the railroad, and prohibited further l.c.l. shipment on the passenger train unless the railroad paid the crews freight handling salaries *in addition* to their regular passenger wages. That killed the l.c.l. business and made it impossible for the railroad to compete with truckers in l.c.l. handling. It was a blow from which the *San Juan Express* never financially recov-

ered. The railroad brotherhoods got their tribute, but in the long run they helped kill off the train and put many of their own members out of jobs, a scathing indictment of the shortsightedness of brotherhood leadership.

Meanwhile, the management had indeed drawn up plans for eventual abandonment of its narrow gauge lines. The ultimate goal of the railroad was to exist as a "bridge railroad," a railroad with no branches and no local traffic, hauling freight in carload lots from one end of the system to the other.

The first to go was the Pagosa Springs branch, abandoned and the track removed in 1936. Next was the "Chili Line" from Antonito to Santa Fe. Trucking, adverse freight rates, and the disastrous decision prohibiting handling of l.c.l. freight in baggage cars had taken their toll, and the railroad was able to prove a substantial loss. Despite bitter opposition, including a United States Senate hearing, the branch was abandoned and the track torn up in 1941. (Other connecting railroads had already disappeared; the Silverton Railway was discontinued in the middle 1920's; the Rio Grande & Southwestern was torn up in 1928 and 1929; the Silverton, Gladstone & Northerly had long since been absorbed by the Silverton Northern and eventually scrapped.)

World War II was the occasion for the shipment of seven of the ten large 470-series passenger engines to Alaska for service on the strategic White Pass & Yukon Route, where Army crews and severe Alaskan weather managed to ruin in three brief years locomotives whose sisters were still gallantly serving the Colorado Rockies more than two decades later. On some occasions after that, the Rio Grande would find it necessary to assign 480- or 490-series freight engines to haul the *San Juan* passenger train, if more than one of the three 470s was in the shop.

Despite often precarious track, the passenger trains suffered few wrecks through the years. The last was the most spectacular. Bill Holt was at the throttle of the *San Juan Express* eastbound between the two tunnels near Toltec on the afternoon of February 11, 1948. It was a cold day and, with the cab curtains drawn, noisy aboard the engine. Suddenly the airbrakes set up on emergency; a trainman riding the engine climbed down and went back to see what the trouble was. A moment later he came running back to the engine and shouted, "We got no train!" A snowslide had come down the mountain near Phantom Curve right behind the engine, carrying two coaches 300 feet down the mountainside and knocking over the parlor car, without even touching the engine. Surprisingly, no one was killed, and only a handful injured.

The twilight of the *San Juan Express* was at hand by the late 1940's. At the same time, the first break in the narrow gauge circle appeared when on August 29, 1949, the railroad filed an application with the I.C.C. to abandon the track from Mears Junction to Hooper in the San Luis Valley north of Alamosa.

The last act for the passenger train began on Wednesday, September 28, 1949, when the Denver & Rio Grande Western filed an application with the Colorado Public Utilities Commission for authority to discontinue the *San*

Juan. A few weeks earlier the railroad had filed for discontinuance on Sundays only, but changed its mind and decided to attempt complete discontinuance, claiming a loss of \$80,000 in 1948.

But the railroad did not wait for hearings to begin before it stopped running the train. Due to a nationwide coal strike, the I.C.C. had granted the nation's railroads permission to curtail service where necessary to save coal. With this excuse, the D&RGW discontinued the *San Juan Express* on January 9, 1950. But the paradox was that the mines serving the narrow gauge, such as those at Monero, were nonunion mines unaffected by the strike. Thus there was actually no shortage of coal in the *San Juan* country.

A week later hearings on the abandonment and on the subsidiary question of the "coal strike" discontinuance began in the La Plata County court room. It was brought out that the U. S. Post Office Department had offered the railroad an additional \$20,000 for handling mail on the *San Juan*, which would have cut the railroads' losses by a quarter. One Durango businessman described the railroad as "an arrogant . . . monopoly bent on self-destruction."

On February 6, the P.U.C. approved discontinuance due to the coal strike, however the question of final discontinuance was still undecided, and with the end of the strike, the D&RGW resumed running the *San Juan* on March 11. The State of New Mexico was holding similar hearings in Tierra Amarilla, and one of its members, disturbed at the apparent willingness of the Colorado commission to do the railroad's bidding, was bitterly outspoken in criticism of the Colorado P.U.C.

The situation remained in abeyance all summer and fall, but on November 30, 1950, the axe fell when the Colorado Public Utilities Commission authorized permanent discontinuance of the *San Juan Express*. Subsequent appeals failed to alter the decision.

On January 31, 1951, at 11:20 p.m., narrow gauge engine 488, its pilot plow covered with snow, pulled eight Pullman-green cars into the Alamosa station, completing the last run over Cumbres. The train had left Durango that morning behind Engine 484, which served as the helper engine from Chama to Cumbres, with 488 as the road engine for the final miles to Alamosa. Blizzards in the Conejos Range and the coldest weather in several years had delayed trains in both directions; it ended as it began, in the winter cold.

The New Mexico Corporation Commission, however, had refused permission to discontinue in that state, requiring the D&RGW to operate a stub local remnant of the *San Juan* from Chama to Dulce and return each day. Engine 473 and combination baggage-passenger car 212 commonly made the brief run. However, in light of the Colorado commission's permission for discontinuance, the New Mexico commission could see no further purpose in fighting the railroad, and even the abbreviated *San Juan* ceased to run after May 22, 1951.

In later years, the railroad also applied to abandon the Silverton Mixed, but a 1958 law had placed authority in the hands of the Federal Interstate Commerce Commis-

Cumbres Pass

High, beautiful, desolate, windy, Cumbres was a fitting climax to a ride on the San Juan. Here the little train, powered by the familiar 473, pauses for the station stop before beginning the 4% descent to Chama. Brakes were always carefully checked (right), and passengers could stretch their legs briefly. The drumhead sign on the rear of the parlor car lent a dignified touch—and on occasion the railfans were perplexed by the appearance of the drumhead from the long-discontinued Shavano (Salida-Gunnison) instead. During final days of operation (below), when snow and extra cars required two engines, the loneliness of Cumbres became even more marked because the familiar two-floor passenger depot had already been torn down in a fit of management cost-cutting. (All R. W. Richardson.)



Chama and On

Arrival of the train in Chama inevitably caused a brief flurry of activity; change of engine crew; roundhouse force to service the locomotive; a passenger, someone to meet the train, or just an idle trainwatcher drifted down from Kelly's Shamrock bar. (R. W. Richardson.)



Late on a summer's afternoon the San Juan presented a picture of relaxed, restful travel as it neared Coxo and the top of Cumbres Pass. Earlier it had been charging up the side of the valley near Cresco.



The little 470-series 2-8-2 barking defiance to the surrounding mountain ridges. (All, R. W. Richardson.)

sion, which would not accede to the railroad's wishes. Most important, the Silverton Branch had by that time attracted so much tourist traffic that the railroad had to admit it was making a profit. Permission was refused, and the Silverton Mixed Train today brings in increasing revenue each year.

In addition, each year there were one or more special excursions from Alamosa to Silverton, reminiscent of the old *San Juan Express*, so Cumbres was not entirely devoid of passenger service. These were usually run either in the spring, before summer service on the Silverton Branch commenced, or in the fall about the time the Silverton train was suspended for the winter. In 1951 the railroad had begun experimenting with a bright yellow paint scheme on the Silverton train, and within several years all the passenger cars were that color. Business Car B-2 was last to lose its Pullman green color, in 1963; it, too, appeared in the bright yellow which the railroad called "Rio Grande Gold." The gaudy color had originally been used on Combine 212 for the filming of "Ticket to Tomahawk" in 1950, and was a far cry from the varnished Tuscan red color of the original passenger equipment in the San Juan country. Motion pictures also suggested the use of fake diamond-stacks on the relatively modern 470-series engines, about as effective a disguise as converting a Ford Mustang to a Model T by adding brass-rimmed headlights.

The early 1960's witnessed an increasing schedule of special excursions over Cumbres using the yellow Silverton Train equipment, including the old closed-vestibule cars from the latter-day *San Juan Express*. When in 1962 the Rio Grande began to promote the Silverton Train as a tourist attraction and a Denver newspaperman was brought in to head the project, he considered resuming operation of a train from Durango to Chama and perhaps eventually Alamosa, but nothing came of it.

Then on January 6, 1967, the *Silverton Standard* carried a headline announcing that the Rio Grande would run no more excursions over Cumbres, because the track had become unsafe for passenger traffic. In the autumn of 1966, excursions had been so popular that they were run three weekends in a row, the last being the ESA trip to Cumbres on October 9, powered, ironically, by engine 484, which had hauled the last *San Juan Express* from Durango to Chama and had helped it to the summit at Cumbres. Now, it had hauled the last excursion special to the crest of the Conejos Range.

Declining freight traffic had led to economies in track maintenance, in turn leading to inevitable deterioration in the line's condition. The D&RGW management had harbored thoughts of abandonment since the early 1940's, and by now the staff of the company's main offices in Denver was drawing up exhibits to be filed with the Interstate Commerce Commission supporting an application to abandon the Alamosa-Durango-Farmington lines. On September 18, 1967, the railroad filed the application for a "certificate of public convenience and necessity" so long feared by the communities along the line. Interstate Commerce Commission Examiner Robert N. Burchmore conducted hearings on the application in Farmington, New Mexico during the last week of April, 1968, and in Durango and Alamosa during the first three days in May. Four months later, Burchmore recommended in his completed report to the Commissioners that the ICC grant permission for the D&RGW to scrap its lines through the San Juan Country.

But already citizens who recognized the historic and recreational values of the old narrow gauge line were taking steps to forestall the scrapping. On November 23 and 24, a Santa Fe group sponsored the operation of a two-day inspection run from Durango to Antonito for the benefit, among others, of National Park Service Regional Director Frank Kowski. But the National Park Service proved unable to move with sufficient speed to forestall demolition of the railroad in question, so that a remarkable show of cooperation the state legislatures of Colorado and New Mexico voted funds to preserve at least the most scenic portion of the historic railroad—the 64 track miles from Antonito to Chama which pass through Toltec Gorge and over the heights of Cumbres.

The Denver & Rio Grande Western operated its last freight westbound from Alamosa to Durango on December 5, 1968. Thereafter the tracks lay dormant until in the summer of 1970 the states of Colorado and New Mexico completed purchase of the line over the Conejos Range. Thus it came to pass that in the fall of 1970 steam locomotives again climbed the heights of Cumbres, and through the efforts of railroad enthusiasts and citizens aware of the importance of preserving this part of our frontier heritage, the diminutive narrow gauge line was prepared to begin its second ninety years of service in the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico.