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## *The race for Raton Pass: how the Super Chief got to Trinidad and other stories of New Mexico railroad lore*

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## THE RACE FOR RATON PASS: How the Super Chief Got to Trinidad and Other Stories of New Mexico Railroad Lore

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In the late nineteenth century railroad fever took America like an epidemic with every city and town trying to attract a railroad or organizing a company to build a railroad of its own. Caught up with the fever, and realizing that steel rails would cause decline of the Santa Fe Trail, Trinidad especially desired a railroad to maintain its location on a major route of travel. It appeared that Trinidad's wish would be fulfilled in 1877 when the narrow gauge Denver and Rio Grande came building down from Pueblo. However, the directors of the Rio Grande, wanting to cash-in on land holdings, stopped four miles away to promote their own townsite at El Moro. Trinidad was furious.

In the autumn of that year the town found a new boon companion in the Kansas originated Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. Having realized a moderate profit by reaching Pueblo the previous year, the Santa Fe was now looking for the best route from Kansas to the New Mexico capital. After careful consideration, the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail through Trinidad was selected over the shorter Cimarron Cutoff in order to tap the Raton Basin coal field. This would necessitate entering New Mexico through Raton Pass, also the intended route of the Rio Grande on its way to El Paso and Mexico. There being room for only one railroad in the confines of the pass, a confrontation between the Santa Fe and the Rio Grande was inevitable, and the citizens of Trinidad were determined to influence the results.

The Rio Grande spent the fall of 1877 refining a previous survey into New Mexico, and spying on them every foot of the way was Ray Morley, a Santa Fe engineer disguised as a Mexican shepherd. By taking careful notes on the Rio Grande survey, Morley hoped to avoid running a survey of his own which would have exposed the Santa Fe's interest in the pass. Morley also developed a friendship with "Uncle Dick" Wooten, who operated a toll road and hotel in the pass. The Rio Grande surveyors, on the other hand, failed to even ask Wooten what he thought of the coming of their railroad, making yet another enemy for the narrow gauge line. To further aid the Santa Fe, the Rio Grande also failed to file a plat from their survey. On December 19, 1877, Morley wrote to Santa Fe chief of engineering, A. A. Robinson, that his survey was complete and that "Uncle Dick" would sell his road to the company.

Santa Fe President William B. Strong went to Santa Fe in January '78 to obtain a charter allowing the company to enter the New Mexico Territory. Strong soon learned that the Santa Fe had been outflanked by the Southern Pacific, which had only recently persuaded the legislature to pass a law effectively preventing any railroad but the Southern Pacific from entering the territory. But with the aid of Don Miguel Otero, Strong determined that this "California Act" had not yet gone into effect. In the short time available, he hired local lawyers and had obtained a charter under the general incorporation act by February 1878. Also, just for good measure, Strong and Otero

slipped through a law exempting New Mexico railroads from taxes for six years.

Now armed with a charter, a survey, and \$20,000 construction money from the board of directors, Santa Fe President Strong telegraphed his chief engineer in Pueblo on March 1st to go to Trinidad and occupy the Pass for the Santa Fe. But, the telegraph had been tapped by the Rio Grande, so when Robinson and Morley boarded the Rio Grande train to El Moro, they also found J. A. McMurtrie, the Rio Grande chief engineer, boarding a construction crew for the same destination. The ride to El Moro passed in anxious silence, neither engineer acknowledging the presence of his counterpart. Upon arrival at the Rio Grande townsite that evening, McMurtrie and his crew retired to a local hotel, secure in the knowledge that Robinson had no crew in the area. He failed to consider the animosity the Rio Grande had created in Trinidad.

Robinson and Morley watched the Rio Granders go to the hotel, and wasted no time in exploiting the break they had just been handed. Hiring a buggy, they dashed through Trinidad to Uncle Dick's road house at the pass. They arrived at the hotel near 10 o'clock, during a weekly dance for local youngsters. After explaining the situation to Wooten, they offered \$50,000 in cash for his toll road, but Uncle Dick thinking it was too much in one lump, asked instead for \$25 in groceries from the railroad commissary each month for life and a lifetime rail pass for his family. They shook on it. (This agreement was increased to \$50 in 1925, and to \$75 in 1930. It was terminated upon the death of Wooten's invalid daughter sometime after 1930. It cost the Santa Fe about \$30,000 in groceries and an unknown amount of transportation.)

As the engineers were talking with Wooten, a messenger arrived from Trinidad, sent by the townfolk to warn the Santa Fe men of the intention of the Rio Grande to begin work the next morning. Encouraged by this show of support, Robinson asked Wooten to gather a work crew immediately from local people. Uncle Dick roused sleeping teamsters and spoke to Trinidad youngsters up for the dance, offering each a few dollars if they'd help the Santa Fe beat the Rio Grande into the pass. With much enthusiasm, though it was 2 a.m., the crew set out for the hill, and by 4:00, Morley, using only his "borrowed" survey and memory, had laid out a rough gradeline without instruments. The makeshift crew promptly began shoveling earthwork up along the line, and the railroad began its entry into New Mexico.

About half an hour later more lights and voices disturbed the pre-dawn calm as McMurtrie's crew approached from town. When the Rio Granders found the Santa Fe crew already at work, a short argument developed between Morley and McMurtrie. The latecomer said the pass was his because of his earlier survey. Morley stubbornly refused to move. McMurtrie raged for a while, then said he knew a better route off to the west anyhow, and left.

Thus Trinidad finally got its railroad, as the Santa Fe tracks arrived from La Junta in September 1878, and the hated Rio Grande was thwarted in reaching New Mexico for many years.

### EPILOGUE

The line over Raton Pass was considerably more difficult to construct than any of the prairie tracks that the Santa Fe had laid previously. A tunnel was started at the summit, but to hasten arrival into Raton (then Willow Springs), a bypass was built completely over the top on grades as steep as six percent (six ft of rise in 100 ft of run). This bypass was finished in December 1878, but was so steep that the normal locomotives of that time could haul only 33 tons (less than a loaded boxcar today). Therefore, the Santa Fe ordered a special engine, which was then the heaviest and most powerful on earth, to haul trains from Trinidad to Raton. To increase the traction of its eight drive wheels, the engine carried its water in a tank slung saddlebag style across the boiler, rather than in a trailing tender. It was so heavy that it had to be shipped to Trinidad in pieces. It was appropriately named "Uncle Dick," after Wooten. The tunnel was completed in July 1879, reducing the grades to 3.7 percent maximum from Trinidad to the summit, and 3.3 percent from Raton to the summit. With the bypass now closed, "Uncle Dick" was rebuilt into a conventional type engine without saddle tanks.

Even with the reduced grades, helper engines had to be

added to most trains to assist them over the pass. The growth of traffic and the movement of helpers downgrade at the completion of their duties caused considerable congestion on the line. Therefore, a second parallel track was added, as well as a second tunnel. The presence of these helper engines, along with the crews to operate them and the round-house forces to maintain them contributed to the prosperity of both Raton and Trinidad until the coming of the diesels.

In planning the route south and west from Raton, the Santa Fe engineers proposed to establish a main division point at Bernalillo, then one of the largest towns in New Mexico. However, the landowner at Bernalillo, Don Jose Leandro Perea—a descendant of the Conquistadores—didn't care for any damn-yankee railroad, and priced the land at \$425 an acre, 17 times the going price. So, the Santa Fe went on down to the small village of Albuquerque and bought all the necessary land for a handful of trade dollars.

Since its completion, the line over Raton Pass has been an operational problem for the railroad with the expenses incurred by helper service on the steep grades. Therefore, the Belen Cutoff was constructed to the south, avoiding the mountains, and in 1908 the Santa Fe's freight traffic between California and the east began flowing by way of Amarillo and Clovis. However, the Santa Fe maintained freight service over the pass to move Denver and western Kansas traffic to El Paso and the west coast. Nearly all of the Santa Fe's considerable



*Figure 1. Santa Fe train #20, the eastbound Chief, ascending the 3.3% grade of Raton Pass in New Mexico during World War II. The two lead locomotives are helpers which were added at Raton, and will come off at the top of the grade on the New Mexico-Colorado state line. The third engine, #3780, is a 4-8-4 Northern type locomotive; it started the Chief from Los Angeles the previous evening and will finally be replaced at La Junta in about two hours. (Santa Fe Railway Photo)*

passenger traffic utilized the more scenic northern New Mexico route. As recently as 1967 there were 10 passenger trains daily over the pass carrying the names of the Super Chief, El Capitan, Chief, Grand Canyon Limited, and Fast Mail. Today, Amtrak operates the Southwest Limited twice daily over the pass with a schedule and quality of service not far removed from the Super Chief.

The coming of diesels eliminated helpers on the pass, and jets and Interstate highways eliminated most passenger trains, allowing the Santa Fe to remove one of the two tracks on parts of the pass and to close one tunnel at the summit. A diesel locomotive seldom needs a helper like a steam engine of similar horsepower because a diesel's electric transmission and dozen or more driving wheels can produce three to four times the tractive effort of a steamer at slow mountain speeds. Only long-term heat build-up in the electric components on a long sustained grade can limit the diesel's lugging capability.

The Santa Fe has recently pioneered the use of radio controlled mid-train slave locomotives for freight trains operating between Albuquerque and La Junta. By placing the slave engines about two-thirds of the way back, a train may be made longer and heavier without freight damaging slack action becoming excessive on the undulating profile between the two division points, and the weight limitation of the couplers and drawbars is not exceeded on the steep grades of Raton Pass. Also, being radio controlled from the lead engine, no additional crews are necessary as with steam helper engines.

The Santa Fe's original decision to follow the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail has always been questionable because of the high cost of getting trains over the grades of

Raton Pass, but recent developments in large volume coal mining have changed the economic picture of the line. In 1967 Kaiser Steel began shipping coking coal by Santa Fe unit train from York Canyon near Raton to Fontana, California. This train, made up of eighty-four 100 ton capacity cars, shuttles continuously across the 1082 miles, moving 8400 tons of coal from mine to mill every three days. (The 37 mile spur line from the main line at French to the mine contains one 21 mile long continuous welded strip of rail—the longest in the country.) This coal train, plus potential coal shipments to other destinations in response to national energy needs may finally vindicate the routing decision made by Robinson and Morley nearly a hundred years ago.

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