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RAILROADS OF THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

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The Denver and Rio Grande Railway (D&RG) pushed its 3-foot-gauge track over La Veta pass in the spring of 1877, reaching the new town of Alamosa on July 10, 1878 (Athearn, 1962). The isolated residents of the San Luis Valley (Fig. 1) could now travel the 130 miles to Pueblo in eight hours, or 250 miles to Denver in only 14 hours (Anderson, 1963, p. 405). More significantly, the convenience of rail transportation quickly made Alamosa the business and mercantile center of the San Luis Valley, a position that it still holds today. The position of Alamosa at end-of-track also made it the terminus for stage lines and wagon freight to the mining districts of the San Juan Mountains, supplanting the previous terminal towns of Garland City (4 miles east of Fort Garland) and La Veta. The railroad moved on to Chama in 1880, to Durango in 1881, and to Silverton in 1882, but the growth of the San Luis Valley was sufficient to support Alamosa, while Garland City became a ghost town and La Veta became a small farm and ranch center (Athearn, 1962).

The Denver and Rio Grande Railway was incorporated on October 27, 1870, by General William Jackson Palmer and several associates. The route of the main line was described as: from Denver via the South Platte, Plum Creek, Monument Creek, and Fontaine qui Bouille to the Arkansas River at or above Pueblo, thence to Callon City and through the Big Cañon of the Arkansas (Royal Gorge) to the mouth of the South Arkansas, thence via Poncha Pass and the San Luis Valley to the Rio Grande and along it to El Paso in the state of Chihuahua, with authority to connect with and operate a railroad from that point to the city of Mexico (Anderson, 1963). Seven branch lines were also described. This description was fairly typical of railroad incorporation papers of the period, starting with a detailed description of a short line (Denver to the site of present-day Colorado Springs in this case) and then becoming progressively more vague. However, this plan was more specific than many, with a definite goal of El Paso. El Paso in 1870 could mean either the growing town in Texas or El Paso del Norte, Chihuahua, which became Ciudad Juarez in 1888 (Lister, 1966).

General Palmer was a Civil War veteran who went west at the end of the war to seek his fortune (the Rocky Mountain states were largely settled by such men, seeking adventure and opportunity). Palmer had been with the Pennsylvania Railroad before the war as a private secretary to the president, and thus looked to the new transcontinental railroad for employment. He joined the Union Pacific Eastern Division in 1865 as treasurer, and in 1869 became manager of construction for the newly renamed Kansas Pacific Railway, completing the connection from Kansas City to Denver in August 1870. While acting in this capacity, he either personally surveyed or directed the survey by others of most of the early route of the D&RG. Palmer thus used the D&RG to complete some of the unfulfilled plans that he had developed with the Kansas Pacific. The drastic difference was in the adoption by Palmer of 3-foot-gauge track for his new railroad, as contrasted to the 4-foot 8/2-inch "standard" gauge. This choice of "narrow gauge" was made to allow for easier and, most importantly, cheaper construction in the Colorado Mountains. It was based at least partially on the experience of the 2-foot-gauge Festiniog Railway of Wales (Anderson, 1963).

The financial arrangements of the D&RG were typical of 19th-century railroad building. Palmer and his associates sold stock in the railroad company, being careful to hold enough stock to maintain control. The company then sold bonds to obtain money for construction. The construction job was then contracted to a separate company, the Union Contract Company, wholly owned by Palmer and his associates. The actual work was then normally done by subcontractors. The construction company operated with an enormous profit margin, and Palmer and his friends soon become millionaires. It is not surprising that the bonded

indebtedness of the Railway Company soon outstripped its earning capacity. The first default on bond interest payments occurred in 1877 (Athearn, 1962). Another lucrative source of profit came from the practice of creating new towns on the railroad, on land conveniently owned by Palmer's group. These townsites were then sold as town lots to businessmen wishing to benefit from the new railroad. If a town

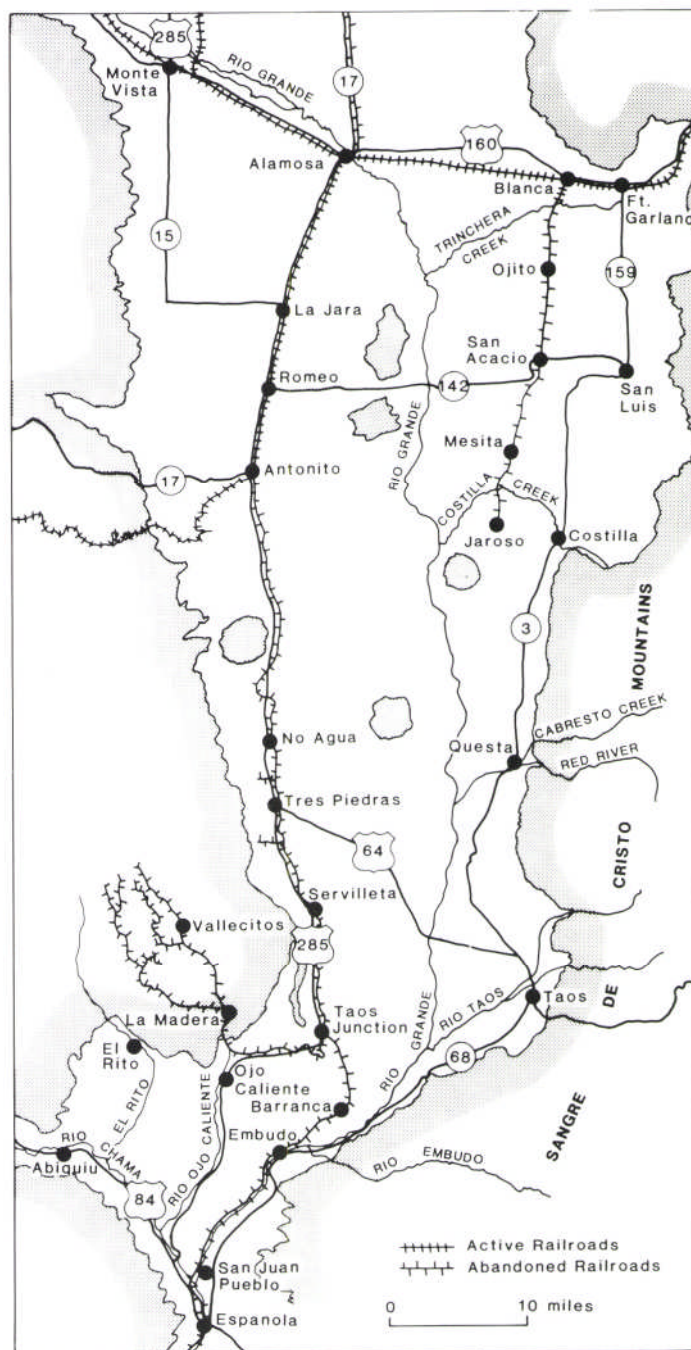


FIGURE 1. Map of active and abandoned railroads of the San Luis Valley.

already existed in the vicinity, it was simply bypassed, and it either declined or disappeared. Alamosa was such a company town, rising at the expense of Del Norte (Elston, 1954), which recovered only partially when a branch line arrived in 1881. Similarly, the railway bypassed Conejos to build the town of Antonito, but Conejos, which was an old Mexican farm village, managed to survive. La Veta and Garland City were also company towns that were not allowed to decline until after the town lots had been sold.

With the arrival of the railroad at Alamosa, on the bank of the Rio Grande, the corporate name of the Denver and Rio Grande had been fulfilled. This was an unusual accomplishment during a period of fanciful railroad names, most of which included "Pacific," even though they were often planned as short feeder lines. But Palmer wanted his railroad to go to El Paso, and he now had two possible routes available, one going south from Alamosa and the other crossing Raton Pass from El Moro (the company town near Trinidad, reached in 1876). When the Santa Fe railroad won the race to occupy Raton Pass in February 1878, however, this route was effectively closed to the D&RG (Athearn, 1962), and Palmer returned to his originally proposed main-line route from Alamosa to Albuquerque. Grading was completed to about 10 miles south of Antonito during the summer and fall of 1878, while the surveyors pushed on, looking for a good route off the Mesa Prieta to the Rio Grande (Chappell, 1981).

The Royal Gorge war with the Santa Fe railroad and the subsequent pressure to build the line up the Arkansas River to Leadville delayed the work south of Alamosa. Construction was started early in 1880 by the Rio Grande Extension Company, a new construction company owned by Palmer and friends. A separate line over Cumbres Pass towards Durango was being graded at the same time. The track was completed to Antonito on March 30, 1880, bypassing Conejos. Meanwhile, the grading contractors were working in separate sections to the south and by June were grading into White Rock Canyon. However, a legal agreement or, alternatively, a peace treaty, had been reached in Boston on March 27 between the D&RG, Santa Fe, and Union Pacific railroads that in effect banned any competitive overlap between the three roads. This has been described as the Tripartite Agreement or as the Treaty of Boston. As a part of this agreement, the D&RG was not permitted to build south into New Mexico more than about 90 miles for a period of 10 years. This ended any hope of a main-line connection to Albuquerque and El Paso. Thus, after a significant delay, all work south of San Juan Pueblo was stopped and the remaining line was ordered to be built as cheaply as possible. This meant taking the most direct route to the Rio Grande at Embudo, with the 4% grade on Barranca Hill, and abandoning a more expensive route to the east with a gentler grade. The track reached the new company town of Espanola at the end of 1880, and ended there (Chappell, 1981). The Albuquerque extension had been reduced to the Espanola branch.

The city of Santa Fe had expected to be on the new D&RG route, although it would probably have been on a branch much like the Santa Fe railroad connection. But when the rail line stopped at Espanola, a 30-odd-mile gap was left to be bridged by Barlow and Sanderson stages. The merchants and businessmen of Santa Fe incorporated the Texas and Santa Fe Northern Railroad in December 1880 to build a connecting road from Santa Fe to San Juan or Santa Cruz, and incidentally to other, more faraway places. After years of delays, the connection with the D&RG at Espanola was made in January 1887. This short-line railroad was reorganized as the Santa Fe Railroad in 1889, and again as the Rio Grande and Santa Fe Railroad in 1895. Joint operation of through trains between Antonito and Santa Fe was begun in 1893, and the D&RG leased the shorter line from 1896 to 1908, when the short line was made a part of the D&RG (Chappell, 1981). It is interesting to note that the 1893 schedule of the Santa Fe Southern shows a 40-mile trip from Espanola to Santa Fe (Allen, 1893), while in 1916 the D&RG required only 34 miles to make the trip over the same tracks (Chappell, 1981). The scheduled time was approximately two hours over both distances.

The D&RG rail net in the San Luis Valley slowly grew over the two decades after the completion of the Espanola branch. A line was built from Mears Junction (on the Marshall Pass line) over Poncha Pass to Villa Grove and Orient in 1881 as a mining spur (Athearn, 1962). The

line from Villa Grove to Alamosa was completed in 1890 (Wilkins, 1974), and through traffic from Denver to Santa Fe and the San Juan was then routed via Pueblo and Salida over the new line (Hauck, 1974, pp. 14-18). A mining spur from Moffatt to Cottonwood was added in 1901. The line west from Alamosa was completed to Del Norte and South Fork in 1881 and to Wagon Wheel Gap in 1883 (Wilkins, 1974). The mining boom in Creede brought an extension to North Creede, built by the Rio Grande Gunnison Railway Company in 1891, but operated by the D&RG, with transfer of ownership in 1908 (Hauck, 1979). Meanwhile, conversion to standard gauge had begun with the addition of a third rail between Denver and Pueblo in 1881 (Athearn, 1962). This had become absolutely necessary to facilitate interchange of traffic with the rail lines from the east. The 3-rail or dual-gauge trackage was extended first to Trinidad and then up the Arkansas River to Leadville. As the through trains became standard gauge, the conversion of main lines to standard gauge was speeded up. All track south of Pueblo was converted to standard gauge by 1891, including the line from Cuchara Junction to La Veta. The line over the Culebra Range was relocated in 1899 to a slightly lower pass seven miles south, which was renamed Veta Pass, and the line was made standard gauge to Alamosa. The line from Alamosa to Antonito was converted to dual gauge in 1901, and the line to Creede was converted to standard gauge in 1902 (Wilkins, 1974).

The names of the passes over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains give rise to some confusion. If we follow the names on the Army Map Service map, Trinidad section, we see that the original D&RG narrow-gauge route was over La Veta Pass. The standard-gauge realignment in 1899 used Veta Pass (formerly Wagon Creek Pass), and the old route became first a wagon road and then a paved highway which still exists, although it is badly deteriorated. The highway was relocated in the 1960's to the present route over the North La Veta Pass. The old wagon road over Sangre de Cristo Pass was about two miles further north (Koch, 1980). The D&RG timetables, however, seem to consistently show the narrow-gauge route crossing at Veta Pass, and the present standard-gauge route as La Veta Pass.

The completed D&RG San Luis Valley system thus had a north—south narrow-gauge line from Poncha Pass to Antonito, with extensions to Santa Fe and Durango, and an east—west standard-gauge line from Veta Pass to Creede. Two more short-line, standard-gauge roads were added as farm-produce feeder lines. The San Luis Southern Railway was built from Blanca (5 miles west of Fort Garland) south 31 miles to the New Mexico border in 1910 (Griswold, 1980). The San Luis Central Railroad was built in 1913 from Sugar Junction (2 miles east of Monte Vista) north to Center, a distance of 13 miles (Ormes, 1963). Standard-gauge lines were projected to Durango, over either Weminuche Pass or Wolf Creek Pass, and routes to Taos were projected from the end of the SLS and from points on the "Chili Line" (Athearn, 1962). But the period of great railroad expansion was over, and Taos never got a railroad and Durango never got a connecting standard-gauge line.

The early D&RG passenger service was run as through trains from Denver to Durango with a section for Espanola split off at Antonito. With the completion of the Valley line in 1890, these trains were rerouted via Salida and Poncha Pass. The 1893 timetable shows the narrow-gauge Colorado and New Mexico Express leaving Denver at 8:00 p.m. and arriving at Espanola at 2:05 p.m. the next day, and at Santa Fe over the Santa Fe Southern at 4:05 p.m. The alternatives for a Denver to Santa Fe traveler were to go to Trinidad via the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway or to La Junta via the Santa Fe, stop overnight, and take the Santa Fe train the next day. Soon afterward, the D&RG cut their train back to a daily from Salida (Allen, 1893). After the conversion to standard gauge at Veta Pass, the service became an overnight standard-gauge train from Denver to Alamosa, with a connecting narrow-gauge train leaving in the morning for the daytime run to Durango and Santa Fe (Hauck, 1974). The Alamosa to Santa Fe schedule fluctuated between seven and ten hours at different times over the years (Chappell, 1981).

The railroad promoters of the 19th century would typically build a

road, making their money from the construction as described above, and then get out, leaving for others the job of trying to operate with a profit. Revenues could be derived from passengers, still a significant factor at the turn of the century, from freight, and from mail service. The mail contracts were an important source of revenue, and also a compelling reason for running daily trains on a regular schedule. The standard argument for building a railroad into an unpopulated region was that the presence of a good transportation system would encourage and support development of the region, with an ensuing rise in business for the railroad. It was also often necessary in the west to traverse empty regions in order to reach good sources of business. The D&RG extension into the San Luis Valley was based on the prospects of reaching the San Juan mining districts, of extending a through line to Albuquerque and El Paso, and finally of benefiting from the development of the valley. The San Juan extension was profitable for several years, but with the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893 this business began to decline. The Cumbres Pass crossing also made this line an expensive one to operate in the winter. The diversion of the New Mexico line to Santa Fe reduced its value as a through line, and it soon became an unimportant branch line. Only the development of the San Luis Valley led to a stable, long-term railroad operation, which is reflected in the trackage that remains today.

The "Chili Line," as the route from Antonito to Santa Fe came to be called, traversed a particularly empty region. There were small Mexican farming villages such as Ojo Caliente, La Madera, and Petaca along the Rio Ojo Caliente and its tributaries. These were groups of isolated subsistence farmers, clustered where irrigation was feasible. There was also some farming, both by Pueblo Indians and by Mexicans, in the Espanola Valley (Swadesh, 1974). The largest farming community in the area was Taos, located some 20 miles off the rail line, and it still had a population of less than 1,000 people in 1912 (Williams and McAllister, 1981). Some sheep were grazed on the Mesa Prieta, but mostly on a small scale. A stage line ran from Santa Fe to the San Luis Valley starting in 1858, following the Rios Ojo Caliente and Tusas (Williams and McAllister, 1981). This stage line was of course eliminated by the coming of the railroad. Taos was connected by stage line, first to the Barlow & Sanderson Overland Stage at Rayado, then to the D&RG at Fort Garland, and then by various routes to different points along the "Chili Line" (Williams and McAllister, 1981). John Dunn ran the Taos stage from 1902 to 1938, first from Servilleta and then from Taos Junction, eventually using automobiles (Evans, 1959; Gjevrev, 1969).

The only type of major freight shipment originating on the "Chili Line" was lumber (Chappell, 1971a). R. W. Stewart and Company set up a sawmill at Tres Piedras in the mid-1880's, and a spur line was built up Canon de Tio Gordito (4 miles south of Tres Piedras) in 1888 to haul logs to the mill. The spur was moved to a point 3 miles north of Tres Piedras in 1890, and lasted for two more years. Both switch points were called Stewart Junction. The Hallack and Howard Lumber Company set up a large sawmill and lumber camp at La Madera in 1914, and paid the D&RG to build a branch line from Taos Junction. This line followed one of the old survey routes for the main line to the Rio Ojo Caliente, then ran upstream to La Madera. The lumber company then built its own logging railroad up into the timber. This line ran first up Canon La Madera with short spurs into the timber, for a total of 20 to 30 miles. The logging spurs were repeatedly torn up and moved to new cutting areas. The central line was moved in 1922 to the Rio Vallecitos to tap new timber stands near Vallecitos and Canon Plaza. By 1926, however, the supply of good, cheap timber was gone, and the lumber company moved out in 1927. La Madera reverted to being a sleepy village, and business on the branch line dropped to nearly nothing. The track was removed in 1932.

Although the branch-line track to La Madera was removed over 50 years ago, much of the grade is still identifiable. Looking south from Taos Junction along the main-line grade, the branch line can be seen curving off to the west just south of State Highway 96. It then crosses U.S. Highway 285 twice, swings to the south about 1/2 miles, and then curves to the west, crossing the highway three more times as it loops back and forth to avoid steep grades. Some of this portion of the grade can be driven by car, but only with care. The route leaves the

highway on Forest Road 97 and then swings west toward the Canada de los Comanches, crossing the arroyo and meeting State Highway 96 about a mile north of the intersection with U.S. Highway 285. Much of the grade from there to La Madera has been obliterated, but it can probably be found in places. It is fairly easy to recognize the grade when you are on it—usually a narrow, poor-surface dirt road with cuts and fills. The major difficulties in driving on the grade arise at culvert and trestle sites. The timbers are often either rotted out or completely gone. It should be an interesting exercise to look for traces of the lumber-company railroad northwest of La Madera. Logging railroads were usually laid with a minimum of grading and in random directions as they headed for the timber-cutting areas. At least some of the Hallack and Howard Lumber Company grade was used later for wagon roads.

The trains ran over the "Chili Line" for 60 years with minimal difficulties (Gjevrev, 1969). Snow was rarely a problem and the grades were gentle, with the exception of the 4% climb from Embudo on the Rio Grande up Comanche Canon to Barranca. The steam locomotives became bigger and more powerful, and heavier rail was laid to accommodate them. The 90-mile run from Antonito to Espanola was scheduled to take from four to six hours, with no obvious pattern. The D&RG management obviously decided that the Santa Fe branch was not important, for all the major lines were converted to standard gauge by 1910. After the Hallack and Howard Lumber Company shut down, freight business on the entire line dropped severely. With the company, by then reorganized as the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RGW), in serious financial difficulties (at least partly from the Depression), normal maintenance on the "Chili Line" was curtailed. This policy of "deferred maintenance" was a standard predecessor to abandonment. The line was shut down on September 1, 1941, with scrapping commencing almost immediately. It has been speculated that the work at Los Alamos, starting only one and half year later, would have provided enough business to make the line profitable again. I am inclined to doubt that this would have happened. In my opinion, it would not have been worthwhile to transfer freight from standard to narrow gauge in Santa Fe for the 20-mile run to Otowi and then load it onto trucks for the climb up the hill. It was cheaper and faster to make a single transfer to trucks in Santa Fe. Furthermore, only a limited amount of freight would have moved south from Alamosa over a route that would have required extensive repairs.

The decline in business for the railroads began in the 1910-1920 period with growing competition from autos and trucks. The railroads owned and maintained their right-of-way, and usually paid substantial taxes as well. The county and state governments then used some of this same tax money to build and improve the road system for the competition. The end result was preordained; gradual decline in business and eventual abandonment of the marginal rail lines. The railroads often contributed to their own difficulties with ridiculous rate schedules and indifferent service over poorly maintained track. The lines that survived were mostly the ones with long hauls of bulky freight.

The San Luis Southern Railway (SLS) was incorporated on July 3, 1909 (Griswold, 1980). Construction started at once, and a 31 miles long, standard-gauge line from Blanca to the New Mexico line at Jaroso was completed on November 6, 1910. This road was built by the Costilla Estates Development Company (CED) to further a large land-development scheme. The CED proposed to build reservoirs and then sell a portion of the Sangre de Cristo land grant as irrigated farm land. The railroad was intended to supply transportation and supplies for the farmers and to haul their produce to market. The CED created the towns of San Acacio, Mesita, and Jaroso along the railroad as farm-supply and shipping centers. The Mormon farming community of Eastdale, near Jaroso, had been settled years before. It soon faded and disappeared, as did the older Mexican villages of Old San Acacio and Plaza de los Manzanares. The town of Blanca, founded in 1908, was also the result of another land-development scheme. The railroad was easy to construct, with nine gentle curves, a maximum grade of 0.8%, and eight bridges of which the one over Trincher Creek, or Rattlesnake Canyon, was the only large structure, 190 feet long and 46 feet high. The straight, level track, coupled with only light snowfall, made op-

erations on the SLS very easy, especially in comparison with most railroads of the Colorado high country.

The SLS started operations bravely with two locomotives, two passenger cars, and 10 freight cars, all purchased second-hand, with the standard short-line schedule of one mixed train daily, running on a two-hour schedule between Blanca and Jaroso (sometimes listed as Jarosa). Land sales were slow, business was slower, and the railroad showed an annual operating loss. Bankruptcy was inevitable under these conditions, and the road was reorganized in 1927 as the San Luis Valley Southern Railway (SLVS). The new company made definite plans for an 18-mile extension to Questa, with an implied continuation to Taos. The railroad was heralded for several years as "The Taos Route," but the Great Depression intervened, shutting off all possibility of financing the Taos extension that had been discussed periodically since the inauguration of the SLS. The SLS had purchased a new Baldwin locomotive in 1919, and bought four antique locomotives from the D&RGW between 1919 and 1947. But the irrigation system for the CED slowly declined, and farming operations decreased rather than showing the expansion that the railroad needed so desperately. The stage line from Jaroso to Taos provided some business, but by 1949 the SLVS was petitioning for abandonment.

Two local businessmen, William McClintock and George Oringdolph, took over the railroad and reorganized it in 1954 as the Southern San Luis Valley Railroad (SSLV). The operation was continued primarily to serve the Mizokami vegetable sheds and the Colorado Aggregate Company (CAC), both located at McClintock, a railroad siding 1/2 mile southwest of Blanca. The railroad had started gasoline railbus operation in 1924 for normal daily service, and discontinued regular daily service in 1946. The SSLV then built its own diesel locomotive (named the D-500) from various odds and ends, and soon discontinued all steam operations. The railroad continued to haul scoria from the CAC quarry at Mesita and some occasional farm produce until 1958, when the entire road south of McClintock was abandoned and removed. The remaining 1 1/2-mile section of track remains today as one of the nation's shortest operating railroads, moving loaded freight cars from CAC, and occasionally from Mizokami, over to the D&RGW siding at Blanca. Some of the excess side track is also being utilized as an off-season parking lot for San Luis Central boxcars.

There remains today a modest railroad freight system in the San Luis Valley. The D&RGW maintains the Creede branch, from Veta Pass to Wasson, just short of Creede, with a branch from Alamosa to Antonito. The San Luis Central continues its shipping of farm produce from the region north of Monte Vista, and the SSLV is still functioning at Blanca. But the narrow-gauge operations of the D&RGW are long gone. The Cottonwood branch from Moffatt was abandoned in 1926, and the branch from Villa Grove to Orient went in 1942. The northern part of the Valley Line, from Villa Grove to Hooper, was abandoned in 1950, and the remainder from Hooper to Alamosa was removed in 1959 (Wilkins, 1974). The "Chili Line" south of Antonito was abandoned in 1941, as mentioned before. The passenger train on the San Juan extension (San Juan Express) was discontinued in 1951, and the line from Antonito to Durango and Farmington was abandoned in 1968 (Chappell, 1971b). The three-rail operation between Antonito and Alamosa included mixed-gauge freight trains, which were an astonishing sight for me. The narrow-gauge line from Antonito to Chama was retained as the Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad (CATS), which still is in operation for summer excursions. Many of the grades of the abandoned lines are still visible today, but very little else remains.

The buildings are almost all gone, and the ties have been removed for firewood. The water tanks at Embudo and Tres Piedras are still standing, but I doubt if they will hold water. The "Chili Line" stations of Servilleta, Barranca, and Taos Junction have vanished, while the SLS towns have become virtually ghost towns. But there are still enough remnants to show us a little of the extensive railroad structure of a half-century in the past, and the CATS trains are living relics of that period.

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