

HISTORICAL SUMMARY
CUMBRES & TOLTEC SCENIC RAILROAD
A National Historic Site

*Site Significance*¹

Built more than 125 years ago, the C&TSRR (a successor to the D&RG) is arguably the most authentic steam-era mountain railroad in North America, representing a key segment of the United States industrial revolution historic era. The present-day C&TSRR operates on the original 64-mile narrow-gauge line between Antonito, Colorado and Chama, New Mexico – called the San Juan Extension. Its equipment, structures and vast landscape exist today as if frozen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The epitome of mountain railroading in North America, the D&RG operated the highest mainline rail line in the United States and served primarily as a transcontinental bridge line between Denver, Colorado and Salt Lake City, Utah. The railroad was a major transporter of coal and mineral traffic with a motto of “Through the Rockies – not around them.” At its height, around 1890, the D&RG had the largest operating narrow-gauge railroad network in North America.

The remarkable story of the D&RG began with a Civil War veteran, General William Jackson Palmer, a name that is inextricably linked with railroad development in the American Southwest. During the years just after the end of the Civil War, young officers such as Palmer migrated to the plains states and the Rocky Mountain West in search of economic opportunities in a land that was new and as yet relatively undeveloped. Some sought out the gold fields, while others became cattle or sheep ranchers. But Palmer cast his lot with the emerging railroad builders of this nation. He believed transportation was the key to success in the limitless stretches of the public domain beyond the Missouri River. Because he foresaw, quite correctly, that the West offered enormous opportunities for enterprising individuals, especially those who wanted to capitalize on eastern financial interests, he accepted a position with Union Pacific that eventually led Palmer and his team of surveyors to explore territories west of the Rio Grande River to the Pacific Coast in anticipation of a transcontinental route.

It was here that Palmer became acquainted with the American Southwest. He argued that a line built through a country with both agricultural and mining resources would be profitable, a view not shared by private banking interests or Congress, both of which declined to provide the necessary subsidies to build to the Pacific Coast. In the summer of 1870, Palmer cut himself loose from his employers and struck out on his own.

In 1870, General Palmer incorporated the Denver & Rio Grande Railway Company in the territories of Colorado and New Mexico and became its President, with the ambitious intent of building an international railroad from Denver south to El Paso, Texas and eventually to Mexico City. The route to El Paso was to go south to Pueblo, Colorado, west through the Arkansas River Canyon (now called the Royal Gorge), across Poncha Pass, and into the San Luis Valley to the Rio Grande River. Tracks were then proposed to follow the Rio Grande River southward to El Paso. Six branches were planned to the mining areas of the Colorado territory and one branch was projected to reach Salt Lake City, Utah. Three-foot narrow-gauge construction was chosen because it was more suitable for mountainous terrain and the costs were lower than standard gauge (4’8-1/2”).

¹ This section is a summary of research material acquired from the following sources: John B. Norwood’s *Rio Grande Narrow Gauge Recollections* (1962 – out of print); O. Meredith Wilson’s *The Denver and Rio Grande Project-1870-1901* (Salt Lake City; Howe Brothers, 1982); and Robert Athearn, *The Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad* (University of Nebraska Press, 1977).

The silver and gold discoveries in southwest Colorado at Silverton and the vicinity brought about some new plans that called for the railroad to be extended west from the San Luis Valley to the San Juan River. The new project was given the name of the San Juan Extension. The railroad laid out a town site of its own - called Antonito – which became the junction for the San Juan Extension to the west. Antonito immediately became relatively prosperous and many people of the area moved to the new community. In 1880, a line was driven south through Antonito over 10,015 feet Cumbres Pass, along the Colorado-New Mexico border, to Chama, New Mexico. Built in a mere nine months, this portion of the line has been designated as a National Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

The route from Antonito to Chama was one of the most difficult construction efforts of the entire D&RG era. Although there was urgency in pushing the line, labor and supplies seriously hampered these plans. Recognizing that work progress was well below D&RG productivity standards, the construction manager, R.F. Weitbrec, reported in the railroad's 1880 Annual Report: "The most serious difficulty we have had to encounter has been and is still the securing of sufficient quantity of good labor. Since November, 1879, there has been an average of at least 1,000 laborers per month shipped from Denver and Pueblo to the various grading camps." Most of these recruits deserted to the mines, returned home, or continued on to other parts due to the challenges of the rail construction project. Out of this problem of recruiting labor grew an important decision: the Rio Grande began recruiting local help, which meant "the brown, lean and ever-enduring Nuevo Mejjicano. Indeed, as the Rio Grande headed toward Santa Fe and the San Juan, it was advancing into the heart of the New Mexico country and culture." From that time forward, the "Nuevo Mejjicano" would assume a dominant role in the building of, and later the maintenance of, the roadway and tracks of the narrow gauge. Even with the "Nuevo Mejjicano", however, labor shortages remained the chief obstacle to progress on the D&RG. To further rectify this situation, and in the process, introduce another source of change, an agent in Utah was appointed to recruit Mormon workers. In the fall of 1880, about 2,000 were contracted and became another prime source of labor for this difficult construction effort. Indeed, to this day, Mormon communities dot the San Luis Valley.

The story of the people – the laborers and their families - who created and maintained this engineering marvel through some of the most challenging mountain terrain on the continent is yet to be fully told. The "Nuevo Mejjicano" would embody the history of a region that had witnessed a territory that was, and had been, home to numerous Native Americans; the influences of Spanish conquest and settlement; the territory and Mexico winning its independence from Spain; the Mexican-American War and increasing white settlements; and a currency of trade and bartering in a self-sustained agrarian society that would give way to dependence on commercial goods and a money economy with the mining activity and the coming of the railroad.

Palmer's original plans called for the railroad to push south from Alamosa to Antonito toward Santa Fe and the Mexican border. Two years later, these plans would be aborted by the Treaty of Boston, legally enforcing that portion of the line to terminate service at Espanola, New Mexico. The portion from Antonito to the San Juan Mountains would gain Palmer's full attention.

Early financial problems persisted with the D&RG main line from Denver to Salt Lake City. For transcontinental services, the Union Pacific's more northerly line was far less mountainous and thus much faster. The inability to interchange products hauled by narrow-gauge cars with other standard-gauge railroads led the D&RG to begin converting its mainline tracks to standard gauge in 1890. With the repeal of the Sherman Act (also known as the Silver Purchase Act) in 1893, and its devastating effect on the silver mining industry, traffic over the narrow-gauge San Juan Extension failed to warrant conversion to standard gauge. This brought a calamitous decline in the railroad's revenues. Subsequent economic "booms and busts" affected the railroad, and the diverse peoples and commercial entities that relied on it. Over the ensuing decades, the narrow-gauge portion of the D&RG became an isolated anachronism, receiving its last major upgrades in equipment and infrastructure in the 1920's. A post-World War II

natural gas boom brought a brief period of prosperity to the line, but operations dwindled to a trickle in the 1960's. The D&RG, such an important national economic and cultural force during the first half of the century, never recovered from the Great Depression and most of its narrow-gauge lines in the Rocky Mountains were scrapped during the 1950's.

In 1969, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) granted the D&RG's request to abandon its remaining narrow-gauge main line trackage, thereby ending the last use of steam locomotives in general freight service in the United States. Most of the abandoned track was dismantled soon after the ICC's decision.

Through the combined efforts of a resourceful group of railway enthusiasts from the region, the most scenic portion of the line was saved. In July 1970, the D&RG sold the line, along with its buildings, fixed structures and significant amounts of operating equipment to the States of Colorado and New Mexico for \$547,120. The railroad then became known as the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. The success of a small group of dedicated preservationists who literally saved the railroad for future generations to experience is an important piece of the history of narrow-gauge railroading in America.

Thus was born the current day C&TSRR, beckoning thousands of visitors from all over the world who are transported back in time to the historic era that was the American industrial revolution and through the scenic beauty of the Southern Rockies.