

# Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad

**Source: Cinders and Smoke, a mile-by-mile guide for the D&SNGRR  
by Doris B. Osterwald**

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## Introduction:

Welcome aboard the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. You are about to embark on an unforgettable narrow gauge steam rail journey along the spectacular and ever-changing Animas River. This somewhat nostalgic means of transportation is a relic of earlier times. If the first few flakes of placer gold had not been discovered at Silverton in 1860, and if the Denver & Rio Grande Railway had not decided to expand its narrow gauge system to the growing mining camp along the Animas River, your trip would not be possible today.

The Silverton generally follows the Animas River as it meanders back and forth across the lovely lower valley. But beyond Baker's Bridge this slow-moving character changes to that of a river running wild through an almost inaccessible gorge. Past the gorge, the track continues to follow the rushing, tumbling Animas to Silverton. The distinctive greenish color of the water probably is due to copper salts from mines in the Silverton area.

Beyond Rockwood, the only access to the canyon is by train, foot, horseback, kayak, or raft. The remote and incredibly beautiful, glacially carved peaks and cirque basins of the Werninuche Wilderness are visible from the train-if you look up. These 13,000 to 14,000 ft (3,900 to 4,200 m) mountain peaks are some of the most rugged and inaccessible of any in Colorado. As your train labors up grade, you may not be aware that these awesome, towering peaks stand at least one mile above the bottom of the canyon. Each mile of your journey brings forth vistas of the majestic snowcapped peaks, small, secluded mountain parks, vertical avalanche tracks, and the remains of former mines, all of which make for a memorable experience.

When gold was discovered in Colorado in 1859, only fine particles and flakes were recovered with placer mining. After more complex ores were located in lode deposits, it was necessary to separate the gold from worthless rock, using arrastras and stamp mills, before it could be shipped to eastern smelters. Pack trains could carry only the richest ores across the mountains on narrow, indistinct trails that had been used by animals and Indians for centuries. As new strikes were made, mining camps sprang up almost overnight. Trails gradually were improved and became narrow, rutted roads. Freight wagons, pulled by oxen or mules, made slow, laborious trips back and forth carrying ore, mining machinery, and other essentials to the growing communities.

By June 1870, when the Denver Pacific Railroad steamed into Denver from Cheyenne, Wyoming, mining camps all over Colorado starting dreaming of rail service to link their infant towns with Denver. The Denver Pacific connected with the recently completed transcontinental Union Pacific Railroad in Cheyenne. Railroads could carry passengers, heavy mining machinery, equipment, coal, lumber, ores, and other freight more efficiently than pack trains or wagons. Profits from such operations were expected to pay for construction and leave handsome dividends for stockholders.

The Denver & Rio Grande Railway Company (D&RG) was incorporated in the Territories of Colorado and New Mexico October 27, 1870, to build a railroad from Denver south to El Paso, Texas. The company also planned to extend rails to Mexico City, Mexico. The route to El Paso was to go south to Pueblo, west through the Arkansas River Canyon (Royal Gorge), across Poncha Pass and into the San Luis Valley to the Rio Grande River. Tracks were to follow the Rio Grande southward to El Paso. Six branches were planned to the mining areas of Colorado, and one branch was projected to reach Salt Lake City, Utah. The San Juan Extension was to be built to Silverton, a booming mining town in the San Juans. The route selected meandered back and forth along the Colorado-New Mexico border, past easily available coal and timber supplies, in which the Rio Grande invested and developed. President of this first narrow gauge railroad in

Colorado was General William Jackson Palmer, who served in the Civil War with distinction and came west after the war to work on the Kansas Pacific Railroad. This line reached Denver August 15, 1870.

The Rio Grande decided to build its railroad "narrow gauge" (rails 3 feet apart) rather than "standard gauge" (rails 4 feet, 8 1/2 inches apart) which was the standard on most other U.S. Railroads. The choice was made because narrow gauge construction was cheaper-equipment cost less and sharper curves were possible and thus it was better suited to mountainous terrain. The railroad was only 11 years old when Palmer and his associates realized they were bucking great odds with a narrow gauge main line operation. Consequently, by 1890, the major narrow gauge westward route via Leadville and Tennessee Pass had been converted to standard gauge. Portions of the original main line to Salt Lake City across Marshall Pass and through Gunnison, Colorado, remained narrow gauge until abandonment in 1955. Standard gauge rail was laid to Antonito in 1901, thus dual gauging a portion of the original San Juan Extension. The D&RG experienced years of financial turmoil and bankruptcy proceedings, and in 1921 it was reorganized as Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RGW).

The San Juan Extension managed to survive until the late 1960s, but The Silverton was the only portion of the route that showed a profit, as tourists and railfans discovered the pleasure of a leisurely rail journey along the Animas River to Silverton. In 1968, the Interstate Commerce Commission approved the abandonment of the narrow gauge between Antonito and Durango. The last revenue train left Alamosa westbound for Durango in Dec. 1968, with No. 473 pulling several coaches and dead K-36 No. 481. Through the efforts of many individuals, preservation societies and towns, the Colorado-New Mexico Railroad Authorities were organized, and by July 1970, the two states purchased the line between Antonito, Colorado, and Chama, New Mexico. This section of the narrow gauge operates as the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad (C&TS). The other portions of the San Juan Extension were abandoned in 1970.

On June 1, 1967, the National Park Service designated the Silverton Branch of the D&RGW Railroad as a National Historical Landmark. In March 1968, the Silverton Branch also was designated as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers. This award recognizes the tremendous part played by the civil engineering profession in surveying and constructing the branch through the difficult winter and spring of 1881-82. Then, on July 11, 1982, the National Railway Historical Society dedicated a beautiful granite monument at Cascade Canyon Wye. This dedication was made exactly 100 years after passenger service commenced on the Silverton Branch of the San Juan Extension.

The D&RGW continued to operate the Silverton Branch as an isolated segment of its once vast narrow gauge system until 1981, when the line was purchased by Charles E. Bradshaw, Jr. and renamed the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. The D&SNG expanded passenger service from the former two trains per day operated by the D&RGW to at least four daily excursion trains during the busy summer months.

In March 1997 the D&SNG was sold to First American Railways, Inc., headquartered in Hollywood, Florida. The railroad was sold again in 1998 to American Heritage Railways.

When the Silverton Branch opened for business in July 1882, those first travelers probably never would have thought it possible that 100 years later more than 200,000 people would travel along the same route each year. One wonders if those early passengers were as awestruck by the incredible beauty of this remote canyon surrounded by the magnificent peaks of the Needle Mountains and the Grenadier Range as are today's visitors.

***Note: This Introduction from Cinders and Smoke is intended as an inducement for the reader to visit Durango, CO and to embark on this most adventuresome journey into the past.***