



In 1887, the Denver & Rio Grande completed its narrow gauge Aspen Branch, which was built northward from the end of the D&RG Leadville Branch (1880n) over the Continental Divide at Tennessee Pass to the Colorado River at Dotsero, then west along the Colorado River to Glenwood Springs. The alignment then turned southeastward up the Roaring Fork River to the new mining center of Aspen (this location), where the tracks arrived in late 1887. Meanwhile, in 1883 the Colorado Midland Railway was founded to build a standard gauge line across the Rockies to compete with the narrow gauge D&RG. The CM plan was to link Colorado Springs with the mines of Leadville and with the national rail network at Ogden, Utah. In 1886, construction started on two segments of the route. One segment started at Colorado Springs (where it connected with the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific 1888) and headed west over Ute Pass then down to the Arkansas River, where it crossed the tracks of the Denver, South Park & Pacific (1882n), and turned north to follow the Arkansas River and parallel the Denver & Rio Grande Leadville Branch (1880n) to Leadville, where the CM arrived in 1887. The other segment started at Leadville, using both DSP&P and D&RG trains to haul CM rails to Leadville; from Leadville, CM construction headed west over the Continental Divide at Hagerman Pass, then down to the Roaring Fork River at Basalt. At Basalt, CM construction headed in two directions: a branch line was built southeast along the Roaring Fork River and parallel to the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) to reach Aspen (this location) in early 1888, and a mainline was built northwest along the Roaring Fork River and parallel to the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) to reach Glenwood Springs in 1887, 2 months after the D&RG. In 1888, the CM continued westward along the Colorado River toward Utah but with the line only 12 miles west of Glenwood Springs the CM decided to not fund the route to Utah and the CM stopped building. In 1890, the CM and D&RGW cooperated to build the Rio Grande Joint Railway along the Colorado River to Grand Junction; using this shared line and trackage rights over newly standard-gauged D&RG tracks, the CM reached Ogden, Utah, via the newly standard-gauged Denver & Rio Grande Western (1883n).

In 1900, the D&RGW gained control of the CM, which was difficult to operate because it had little level track and crossed three summits with grades up to four percent. CM business dropped off toward the end of World War I so the CM ceased operations in 1919 and was scrapped in 1921. In 1995, all operations ceased on the D&RG Aspen Branch (south of Glenwood Springs). Around 2006 the 42-mile grade from Glenwood Springs to Aspen (this location) was converted into a rail-to-trail called the "Rio Grande Trail" in honor of the D&RG.

Northward view of D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the terminus of the Rio Grande Trail in Aspen. Barely visible in the distance is a footbridge over the Roaring Fork River; that footbridge replaced the D&RG bridge over the river. An 1893 topo map shows that the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) entered Aspen on the northeast bank of the Roaring Fork River and the CM (1888) entered town on the southwest bank of the river. On the east side of town, the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) turned south, as seen here, and the CM (1888) turned north so the tracks met to form a loop along the east side of the town of Aspen. However, other than the rail-to-trail, I could find no vestiges of either railroad in Aspen.