



The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad built its narrow gauge San Juan Extension to serve the silver mining districts of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado. The narrow gauge line was built westward from the now-abandoned D&RG mainline at Cuchara Junction (6 miles northeast of Walsenburg, where a replacement line was built in 1911). In 1877 the line crossed the Sangre de Cristo Mountains at La Veta Pass to enter the Rio Grande drainage and in 1878 reached Alamosa. When grading southward from Alamosa began in 1879, the D&RG thought it was building to El Paso, Texas, and indeed by 1880 had completed track through Antonito, Colorado (pictured here) almost to Santa Fe, New Mexico, which became the Chili Line. The D&RG's original reason for building into the San Luis Valley was to reach the headwaters of the Rio Grande and then follow the river to El Paso, Texas. The route was built as an alternative to the main line that the D&RG hoped would reach the Rio Grande drainage via Raton Pass, a hope that was in question in 1876 when the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe arrived in the area and was dashed in 1880 when the AT&SF won a legal battle for Raton Pass. However, the Chili Line ultimately extended only to Santa Fe (in 1887) and the D&RG never reached El Paso.

With agricultural commodities coming out of the Alamosa-Antonito area, a third rail was added in 1901 for the 30 miles from Alamosa south to Antonito (pictured here). Dual gauge was maintained until the narrow gauge San Juan Extension was divested and abandoned west of Antonito in 1970 and the middle rail was removed, leaving the purely standard gauge track seen here. The line passed from the D&RGW to the Southern Pacific in 1988 and to the Union Pacific in 1996. In 2003, the La Veta Pass line, along with the rest of the San Luis Valley Lines including the Antonito line (pictured here), were purchased by RailAmerica and made into the San Luis & Rio Grande Railroad. In 2005, the SL&RG was sold to Iowa Pacific Holdings and Permian Basin Railways, but operations remain largely unchanged.

Antonito has more railroad history to see than any other place I've visited in the Southwest or elsewhere. We start here at the abandoned Antonito Depot, then we will explore the connection south on the D&RG Chili Line and finally the connection east on the San Juan Extension.



Southward view of the Antonito Depot. The line that goes straight south (to the left of the depot) is the D&RG Chili Line and the line that goes east (to the right of the depot) is the continuation of the San Juan Extension. The next photo is down the line to the left (Chili Line).



Southward view one mile south of Antonito (previous photo), where the standard gauge line ends at this chemical plant. Note the old platform on the right.



Northward view of the same chemical plant as in the previous photo, showing the southern end of the part of the Chili Line that the D&RGW converted to dual gauge in 1901 and to standard gauge in 1970.



Eastward view of the abandoned D&RG Chili Line, 3 miles south of the chemical plant and 4 miles south of Antonito. This fill grade for the D&RG's narrow gauge line was built in 1880.



Now let's go back to Antonito. The Antonito Depot is behind the viewer in this southwestward view, and the line that goes east (curves to the right) is the continuation of the San Juan Extension. The water tower in the distance is the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad.



On the way to the C&T, the standard gauge tracks pass a narrow gauge C&T locomotive on display.



A few steps southwest of the previous photo, with the standard gauge tracks in the foreground and the same narrow gauge locomotive as in the previous photo. The curved track in the upper right was built after 1970 and is the circular turnaround that marks the east end of the narrow gauge C&T tourist railroad. The standard gauge track in the foreground is on the original 1880 grade.





Northeastward view at the end of the standard gauge track, which is on the original narrow gauge grade of the San Juan Extension. About 300 feet behind the viewer (southwest), the C&T re-aligned the narrow gauge line off of this alignment, generally following branches in an old rail yard at this location, and built a new circular turnaround, which passes in front of the C&T Depot in the center distance.



The San Juan Extension west of Antonito, Colorado, was never converted to standard gauge, and two segments of the narrow gauge road are preserved today as heritage railroads. One of the segments is the C&T, which was originally built in 1880 and runs from Chama, New Mexico, to Antonito, Colorado (pictured here), via 10,020-foot Cumbres Pass, the highest point on the San Juan Extension. The C&T built a circular narrow gauge turnaround that starts with the curve in the distance.

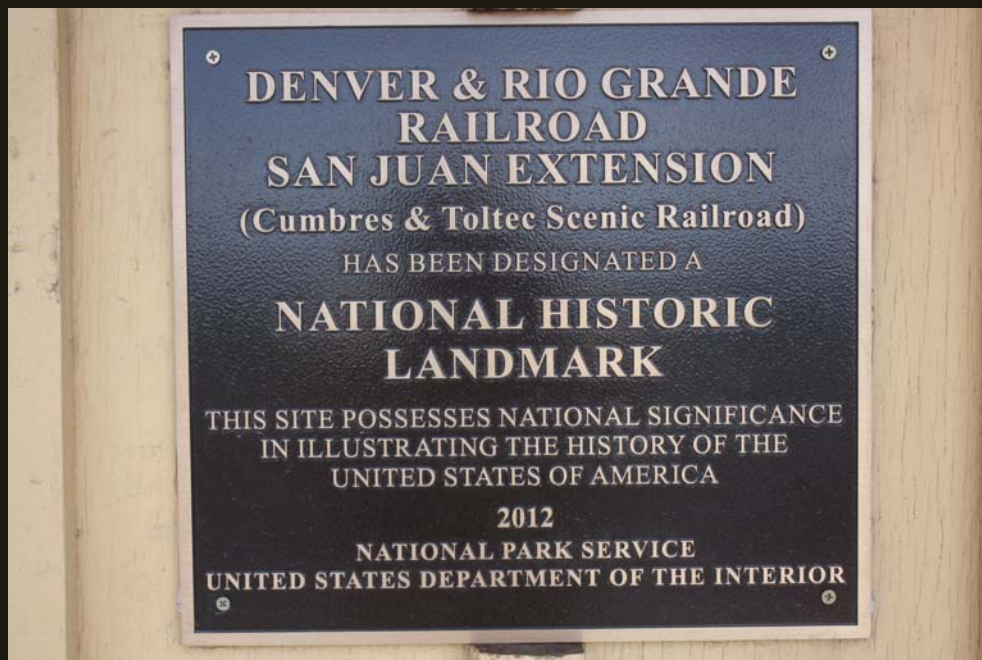




Dual gauge reached Antonito in 1901 and is preserved in the C&T (former D&RG/D&RGW) yard. I was thrilled to find dual-gauge rail still in place, with a parked standard gauge hopper.



A three-rail (dual gauge) siding and a water tower at the Antonito C&T yard. In the left distance, C&T #484 is moving some cars around the yard.





A third rail makes switches a lot more complicated. Note the narrow gauge track on the left.



C&T #484 takes on water for the trip to Chama, New Mexico. The day before, #484 was the second locomotive in a double-headed consist out of Chama. The lead "helper" had turned around at the wye on Cumbres Pass while #484 completed the run down to Antonito, where it spent the night.



C&T #484 with a narrow gauge switch in foreground.



#484 starts adding cars for today's excursion to Chama, as seen from behind the coal bin.





The west end of the C&T yard, facing northeast toward the yard. Note the rusty third (standard gauge) rail in the left foreground. The dual gauge track is on the original narrow- then dual-gauge grade and continued straight through the location of the person, truck, and building, and aligns exactly with the standard gauge track in a previous photo. The curve to the right is the C&T grade and is the general location of an old switch to the D&RG yard.



Southwestward view at the same location as previous. Standard gauge ends here and narrow gauge continues over Cumbres Pass to Chalma. At a time, one could ride this narrow gauge line all the way to Silverton.

So. Antonito has an abandoned depot on standard gauge tracks that were once narrow- then dual-gauge, it has the end of D&RG standard-gauging at the chemical plant, it has the abandoned narrow gauge Chili Line grade to the south, it has surviving dual gauge track and switches, and it has operating narrow gauge steam you can ride over a 10,000-foot pass! Where else can you find all that?