



One of the most famous railroad “wars” occurred in 1878-1879 between the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway and the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad for access to Raton Pass and thus to Santa Fe, the Rio Grande, and ultimately El Paso, Texas, Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean. The AT&SF got Raton Pass, and in exchange the D&RG got the Royal Gorge (Arkansas River) route and became the mountain railroad. The AT&SF built over Raton Pass and entered New Mexico under the name New Mexico & Southern Pacific Railroad, which reached Onava, New Mexico (this location), in 1879, and met the Southern Pacific at Deming, New Mexico, in 1881. After 1908, the Eastern Railway of New Mexico (1908), together with the AT&SF’s Atlantic & Pacific Railroad (1883), became the AT&SF’s (now BNSF’s) primary transcontinental route through New Mexico; thus, the NM&SP (1881) was relegated to secondary status. In 2006, the State of New Mexico purchased the segment of the NM&SP (1881) line between Raton Pass and Belen (where the ERNM [1908] crosses the NM&SP [1881]), including this location at Onava), with the BNSF retaining operating rights. Amtrak leases passenger service over the line for its Southwest Chief trains between Chicago and Los Angeles.

Eastward view of the NM&SP (1881) 4 miles northeast of Onava, which is on the drainage divide between the Rio Grande to the southwest and the Mississippi River to the northeast. The crossing of this divide is very gentle and the railroad grade required no tunnels or major earthwork or even any significant curves. I could find no evidence in satellite imagery or historical topo maps that there was ever a turning wye at the grade summit.



Southeastward view of the NM&SP (1881) at the same location as previous. There is a bit of a fill grade to cross a small gully, tributary to the Sapello River and ultimately the Mississippi River.