



The Denver & Rio Grande built its San Juan Extension to serve the silver mining districts of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado. 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 Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, which was originally constructed in 1880 and crosses 10,020-foot Cumbres Pass, the highest point on the San Juan Extension.

Cumbres Pass is one of those “chimneys” on the “roof” of the continental drainage pattern. Although the pass is the high point of the San Juan Extension, it is not the crossing of the continental divide. To the contrary, the San Juan Extension crosses the continental divide at 7,718-foot Sargent Pass, a topographically subdued area about 10 miles west of Chama. Cumbres Pass is on the crest of the southern part of the vast San Juan Mountains, but both the east and west slopes drain to the Rio Grande.

Here C&T #489 leads a double-header excursion train from Chama, chugging up the last few chugs to Cumbres Pass.



Now the #484 is in view.



Coming to the top of 10,020-foot Cumbres Pass, the track crosses a stream that drains a glacial lake, known geologically as a “tarn.”



The consist arrives at the pass, where the lead locomotive will detach and turn around using the wye constructed for that purpose. What a treat to see narrow gauge steam turn at a wye on a Rocky Mountains Pass! Let's watch.



The train comes to a stop to water the second locomotive.



The second locomotive, the #484, gets watered first, with the lead engine still connected.



With the #484 watered, the double header pulls forward to decouple the #489.



The lead engine is decoupled.





The lead #489 pulls to the far end of the wye.



The lead #489 is backing into the wye and clears the mainline for the #484 to pull the train forward toward San Antonio.



The lead engine backs into the snow shed at the end of the wye.



The lead engine has now turned at the wye and the switch is thrown to allow #489 onto the mainline, now heading west for the lonely trip back to Chama.



The thirsty #489 finally gets its water before heading home.



Meanwhile #484, the original second locomotive, coasts down the eastern approach to Cumbres Pass to the delight of its passengers.



This scene is probably not much different from the same scene in 1890, when D&RG trains worked this horseshoe bend down the valley of Rio de los Pinos.



Under a desert moon, a BNSF consist delivers empties back across the southern California desert to LA ports on the SP-built Needles Branch grade. The sparsely vegetated foreground is the edge of Bristol Lake, one of the hundreds of playa (dry) lakes in the Great Basin.