



In 1881, the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad's narrow gauge San Juan Extension reached Durango, Colorado (this location) on the Animas River and was completed to its final terminus at Silverton in 1882. The route of the D&RG San Juan Extension encounters the Animas River 4 miles south of Durango then turns north along the east bank of the river through Durango (this location), where the Silverton branch continues north along the Animas River to Silverton. In 1887, D&RG built its narrow gauge Ouray Branch, the terminus of which was only 15 miles as the crow flies north of Silverton, but the San Juan Mountains between Ouray and Silverton were too formidable for a railroad directly connecting the two towns. To bridge this gap, in 1889 Otto Mears, who had built a toll road between Ouray and Silverton, founded the Rio Grande Southern Railroad to go around the most rugged part of the San Juan Mountains. Construction of the narrow gauge line began in 1890 from a connection with the D&RG Ouray Branch (1887n) at Ridgway and ran southwest then southeast to a connection with the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) at Durango (this location); the RGS was completed and began operation in 1891 and enjoyed 2 years of robust traffic before the Silver Panic of 1893 closed most of the mines. In 1905, the D&RGW (D&RG successor) completed its Farmington Branch to access agricultural traffic in northwestern New Mexico; the line ran south from Carbon Junction, located 3 miles south of Durango on the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n), and followed the Animas River 47 miles to the agricultural center at Farmington. The Farmington Branch was built to standard gauge in anticipation of the standard-gauging of the entire San Juan Extension, so passengers and freight had to be transferred between standard- and narrow-gauge trains at Carbon Junction (or in Durango if the intervening 3 miles of track were dual gauged, but I could find no record of dual-gauging or of a standard gauge track to Durango). By 1923, it was clear that the San Juan Extension would never be standard-gauged and the D&RGW Farmington Branch (1905) was converted to narrow gauge; to my knowledge, the D&RGW Farmington Branch is the only railroad in the Southwest to be converted from standard to narrow gauge.

In the 1930's, the RGS survived the Great Depression by developing internal combustion-powered "motor" railcars that came to be known as the "Galloping Goose." The first Goose was built in 1931 from the body of a Buick "Master Six" four-door sedan and ultimately seven railcars were built between 1931 and 1936. In 1950, the railroad lost its mail contract in favor of highway mail carriers and the Geese were converted for tourist operations, with seating and large windows, but that lasted only 2 years before the Geese were used to salvage the RGS (1891n) rails in 1951. At the same time, the remaining narrow gauge trackage of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) -- the section from Antonito, Colorado (where the D&RG/D&RGW standard gauging program ended) west to Silverton -- was facing abandonment but was saved by an oil and gas boom around Farmington in the 1950's brought heavy traffic to the Farmington Branch and the narrow gauge track east of there to Antonito for about a decade. By the mid-1960's, this too had ended and the last freight moved over the narrow gauge line in 1968. By 1971, the entire line from Chama, New Mexico, to Durango and Farmington had been removed by the scrappers, but two sections of the narrow gauge route were preserved for tourist railroads: the Antonito to Chama line became the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad and the Durango (this location) to Silverton line became the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad.

In and around Durango, I could find no evidence on the ground or in satellite imagery of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) south of Durango or of the RGS (1891); the grades of these abandoned lines have been completely obliterated in and around Durango. The only railroad features are those of the currently operating D&SNGRR heritage railroad, which we will explore starting at the north end of the D&SNGRR railyard with this northward view of the D&RG Silverton Branch (1882n). Here, the first of many spurs branches off the mainline.



Southward view at the same location as previous, showing the mainline on the far left, the first branch off the mainline going into the D&SNGRR railyard in the middle, and an abandoned spur on the right. An 1898 topo map shows that the mainline is on the original D&RG Silverton Branch (1882n) alignment, including the curve to the left (east) on the other side of West College Drive. The topo map does not show either of the two spurs visible here.



Southward view looking through the gate at the north end of the D&SNGRR railyard. The Durango railyard has always been in this location but only the mainline -- the track on the far left -- is in the same location that it was on the 1898 topo map and presumably in its original 1881 location. In a 1963 topo map, spurs and a turnaround loop are present that were not on the 1898 or 1907 topo maps (of the same scale) and are all different than the current configuration, which presumably was built by the D&SNGRR. If you look down the right-hand (west) track as far as you can see in this view, that is just about the location where the RGS (1891n) came into the railyard from the right (west) and connected to the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) mainline farther south, according to the 1898 and 1907 topo maps.



Northward view of the D&RG Durango Depot, 600 feet south of the previous location. The Durango Depot was built in 1882 and has been preserved in its original form and original location adjacent to the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) mainline.





Southward view of the south end of the D&SNGRR railyard, 300 feet south of the previous location. The D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) mainline is on the far left and ends just beyond the stored car. South from there, the grade disappears. The Animas River is 300 feet beyond the line of stored box cars. The RGS (1891n) entered the area of the current railyard to the left (west) of this location and turned southeastward to join the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) about 400 feet south of the current end of track, according to historical topo maps. The curved track on the far right is a turnaround loop; as far as I can tell, the turnaround loop and all tracks in the railyard except the mainline were built by the D&SNGRR and are not historic.



Two D&SNGRR locomotives fire up for the day's duties in Durango.