



The story of the Denver & Rio Grande Westcliffe Branch begins in the late 1870's when silver and gold were discovered and the townsite of Silver Cliff was established. The D&RG planned a narrow gauge branch line that started at just about the end of track of the D&RG (1874n) at Canon City at the west entrance of Royal Gorge. The branch line followed Grape Creek southwest from the Arkansas River/D&RG (1874n) mainline for 30 miles, all the way to the Silver Cliff area. But instead of building to Silver Cliff, officers of the railroad bought up land less than a mile west of Silver Cliff and in 1881 completed the line to the new town of Westcliffe. Land prices went up as businesses vied for locations next to the railroad terminus and the investors made a large profit. A storm in 1881 wiped out 33 of 35 bridges and 18 miles of track of the D&RG Grape Creek Branch (1881n). After reconstruction, another heavy storm in 1889 meant abandoning the line and the valley was left without rail transportation until 1900. In 1900, the D&RG built its standard gauge Westcliffe Branch southward from its newly standard-gauged D&RG Leadville Branch (1880n) at the town of Texas Creek about 20 miles up the valley of Texas Creek to Westcliffe. Trains ran to Westcliffe until 1939 when the line was abandoned.

Westward view of the fill grade of the D&RG Westcliffe Branch (1900) 8 miles northwest of Westcliffe. A few pilings are still visible where the alignment crosses a small drainage. Texas Creek is just out of sight on the other side of the fill grade. The snowcapped Sangre de Cristo Range forms the divide between the Mississippi and Rio Grande drainages.





Closer view of the pilings and fill grade of the D&RG Westcliffe Branch (1900).



Northwestward view of the fill grade of the D&RG Westcliffe Branch (1900) one mile south of the previous location.





Westward view of the breached fill grade (just in front of the white building and trees) of the D&RG Westcliffe Branch (1900) 6 miles southeast of the previous location and 1 mile northwest of Westcliffe. The backdrop is the 13,000-foot Sangre de Cristo Range.





Now we are at the end of the D&RG Westcliffe Branch (1900). Artifacts of the Westcliffe Branch are preserved by All Aboard Westcliffe, Inc., which “is dedicated to telling the story of the railroad and its impact on the economic development and social fabric of the Wet Mountain Valley, specifically through preservation, restoration, education, and display” (from AAW’s website). The information about AAW’s displays is from its website, starting here with the D&RG’s Westcliffe Depot, which was built in 1901, the year after the tracks arrived. After the railroad discontinued service, the building served as businesses and a residence until it was obtained through a collaborative effort of the Colorado State Historical Foundation, AAW, the Town of Westcliffe and concerned individuals in 2013. A full restoration of its 1920’s decor was completed in 2018.

As far as I could tell, AAW preserves the history of the standard gauge Westcliffe Branch (1900) and has no artifacts or records of the original narrow gauge line to Westcliffe. Additionally, I could find no evidence on the ground or in satellite images of the D&RG Grape Creek Branch (1881n) grade between Westcliffe and Canon City. The narrow gauge railroad that existed for only 8 years, from 1881 to 1889, has apparently left no trace.







This former freight warehouse serves as AAW's headquarters and a community meeting space. The adjacent 1901 engine house (the building just beyond the warehouse) is a museum.







Some track along a loading dock on the other side of the warehouse. This track is on the same north-south alignment as the track next to the depot, which is visible through the trees in the center distance.



Closer view of the 1901 engine house.





D&RG (actually D&RGW) rolling stock on display on the AAW grounds.





Closer view of the diner and sleeper car.