



The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad built its 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 (1876n) mainline at Cuchara (south of Denver) and reached the town of La Veta, Colorado, in 1876. In 1877, the D&RG crossed the Sangre de Cristo Mountains at La Veta Pass to enter the Rio Grande drainage and in 1878 reached Alamosa (this location). In 1881, the narrow gauge San Juan Extension was completed to Durango via Cumbres Pass and in 1882 reached its terminus at the silver mining center of Silverton.

In 1894, standard gauge rails were extended west from the D&RG mainline at Cuchara Junction to La Veta and in 1899 a new, lower-grade route was completed over Veta Pass, 9 miles south of the original La Veta Pass and about 100 feet lower at 9,242 feet above sea level. The standard gauge rails were extended west through Alamosa (this location) then south to Antonito, Colorado, where the D&RG's standard-gauging program ended. The narrow gauge route over La Veta Pass was abandoned in 1900 and much of the track and the summit turntable were moved to the D&RG Crestone Branch (1900n), which was under construction at the time. The line passed from the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad to the Southern Pacific in 1988 and to the Union Pacific in 1996. In 2003, the Veta Pass line, along with the rest of the standard-gauged trackage west of the pass, including the line through Alamosa (this location), 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.

We will explore the D&RG lines in Alamosa from east to west, starting at the east end of Alamosa with this eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n). These tracks were converted to standard gauge in 1899. The sidings for car storage extend 1 mile farther east, where they coverage to a single track toward Veta Pass.



In 1881, the D&RG constructed a narrow gauge branch line southward from a junction (Mears Junction) with the D&RG Marshall Pass mainline (D&RG 1883n) over Poncha Pass to the town of Orient (D&RG Orient Branch 1881n). In 1890, the line was extended south to this location on the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) and became known as the Valley Line (D&RG Valley Line 1890n). In 1930, the section of the D&RG Valley Line (1890n) from Alamosa (this location) north 20 miles to Hooper was converted to dual gauge. The third rail was removed in 1951 when the remaining narrow gauge section of the D&RG Valley Line (1890n), from Mears Junction south to Hooper, was abandoned. The standard gauge Hooper Spur, the 20 miles Alamosa (this location) north to Hooper, was abandoned in 1959.

Southeastward view a few steps northwest of the previous location, with the same sidings for car storage on the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) in the upper left. The gravel in the foreground is the ballast for the abandoned east branch of the wye for the Hooper Spur (former D&RG Valley Line 1890n). This was a narrow gauge line from 1890 to 1930, dual gauge from 1930 to 1951, and standard gauge from 1951 to 1959, when it was abandoned.



Northwestward view, 450 feet northeast of the previous location. The gravel in the foreground is the east branch of the wye for the Hooper Spur. The track in the middle distance is the west branch of the wye. The north tip of the wye was located at about the farthest right track that is visible. For future reference, note the white building beyond that of the wye.



Northward view, 100 feet north of the previous location at the north tip of the wye; note the same white building in the distance. The single section of rail is all that remains of the east branch of the wye.



Northward view, 200 feet north of the previous location, north of the north tip of the wye; note the same white building in the distance. The rails continue north under the grass.



Southward view, 1,600 feet north of the previous location, at the north end of the remaining track of the Hooper Spur (former D&RG Valley Line 1890n). Note the block of wood on the track behind the white sign. Look carefully and you'll see that that block of wood is on two tracks; this is dual gauge track!



Closer view of the dual gauge track at the north end of the remaining track of the Hooper Spur. Note the same block of wood as in the previous photo.



Another view of the dual gauge track at the north end of the track of the Hooper Spur (former D&RG Valley Line 1890n). In this view we can see the south (farther) end the center rail, which may have been the south end of narrow gauge operations, and the block of wood may have been used to prevent narrow gauge rolling stock from going south of this point, which would cause a derailment. I am not sure why any dual gauge track remains, because the center rail was reportedly removed in 1951.



Northward view from the same location as the previous photo. In 1959, the Hooper Spur tracks were removed, including removal of the crossing of U.S. Highway 160, which is the east-west road just behind the yellow pole. The original narrow gauge D&RG Valley Line 1890n was once in the center of this view and continued north through what is now the center of the street in the distance (with the car on it, directly behind the yellow pole).



Now we are back at the north tip of the wye for the Hooper Spur (former D&RG Valley Line 1890n) looking southwest. The spare rail to the left of the track was seen in a previous photo and is all that remains of the east branch of the wye and the still-intact trackage is the west branch. The D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) mainline is barely visible in the distance.



Southwestward view of the west branch of the wye for the Hooper Spur, 500 feet southwest of the previous location. The D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) is in the distance.



Now we are back at the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) looking west; the abandoned east branch of the wye is just out of sight to the right and the west branch track is visible across the entire photo in the distance. The line of loose ties on the ground to the right of the mainline track are the remains of a siding for the wye.



Eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 400 feet west of the previous location. The abandoned siding for the wye is in the foreground. The rail cars stored on sidings at the east end of Alamosa (first photo) are in the left distance.



Southwestward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) at the same location as previous. Both rails of the abandoned siding are still present here. Note the line of loose ties just beyond the intact rails.



Westward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 150 feet west of the previous location. The line of loose ties is the same as in the previous photo and are remnants of the abandoned siding for the wye for the Hooper Spur (former D&RG Valley Line 1890n). The west branch of the wye is the track just beyond the line of loose ties.



Eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 350 feet west of the previous location. The intact track in the right distance is the San Juan Extension mainline. The track with one rail in the foreground is the west branch of the wye for the Hooper Spur. Note the very long ties in the foreground, much longer and needed for two rails. This was the switch where the siding, indicated by the line of ties to the right of the utility poles, joined the west branch of the wye.



A slightly different eastward view just a step or two south of the previous location. The intact track in the right distance is the San Juan Extension mainline and the curved track to the left is the west branch of the wye for the Hooper Spur. The long ties in the foreground once supported the switch where the siding, indicated by the line of ties to the right of the utility poles, joined the west branch of the wye.



Eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 50 feet west of the previous location. The intact track in the foreground is the San Juan Extension mainline and the long ties extending to the left of the mainline rails were for the switch, now completely gone, for the siding for the wye for the Hooper Spur. The track for the west branch of the wye is visible in the left distance and the line of ties that represent the siding is in the middle distance, between the mainline and the utility poles.



Westward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 100 feet west of the previous location. The bridge carries the mainline over the Rio Grande. The town of Alamosa is on the other side of the bridge.



Eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 2,400 feet west of the previous location. A SL&RG diesel locomotive with D&RG livery and a consist of passenger cars is on the mainline in the Alamosa yard.





Another eastward view, a few steps north of the previous location; the passenger train on the left is the same as in the previous photo. There are three sidings to the right (south) of the mainline (with a passenger train). The rightmost siding has a switch with a curved track to the right, which is the west branch of a turning wye, now used for rolling stock storage. A steam engine is visible on the east branch of the turning wye.



Northwestward view of the mainline and D&RG Alamosa Station, now a welcome center, 1,200 feet west of the previous location.

Site of this sign:

By 1890, and for the next half-century, Alamosa was the absolute center of narrow gauge railroading in America. From this depot, passenger trains arrived and departed for Denver, Durango, Santa Fe, Salida and Creede. Freight trains arrived with supplies and left carrying the resources of the Valley: ore, lumber, cattle, sheep, and other agricultural products.



Rusting cars in the Alamosa yard.



Northeastward view the Alamosa yard, 1,500 feet west of the Alamosa Depot (previous photo). Note the diesel engine in the red livery of the Carolina Southern Railroad.



Eastward view a few steps north of the previous photo; note the same diesel engine in red Carolina Southern livery. The train on the far left, pulled by the diesel engine #8537 with its headlight burning, is the same passenger train featured in the three photos prior to the depot photo. That train is now at the west end of D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n). The track that veers to the right (south) just in front of the train and just on the viewer's side of the Carolina Southern engine, is the beginning of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n), which is the continuation of the San Juan Extension to Durango. When construction southward from this point began in 1879, the D&RG thought it was building to El Paso and by 1880 had completed track almost to Santa Fe, New Mexico, which became the D&RG Chili Line (1880n). That is as far south as the D&RG ever got. With important agricultural commodities coming out of the Alamosa-Antonito area, a third rail was added in 1901 south from this point 30 miles to Antonito. Dual gauge was maintained until the remaining narrow gauge track on the San Juan Extension west of Antonito (Cumbres Pass route) was divested in 1970, when the middle rail was removed, leaving the purely standard gauge track seen here.

The track that continues straight in front of the train and exits the left side of the photo is the D&RG Creede Branch, which was started in 1881 from the switch just in front of the train (actually, the narrow gauge predecessor of that switch). The closest switch in the immediate foreground and far left is a siding on the Creede Branch. The branch reached the base of the San Juan Mountains and the end of the agricultural valley at South Fork in 1881 and by 1883 had been extended westward to Wagon Wheel Gap with the intentions of reaching the Creede mining district. However, the D&RG was financially over-extended due to the rapid expansion during the early 1880s and so postponed further construction. David Moffat, president of the D&RG, realized Creede's mineral potential but was unable to convince the Board of Directors to push the rails west to Creede. In 1890, Nicholas Creede found a rich vein of ore that became the very productive Holy Moses Mine, which was immediately purchased by Moffat. Moffat resigned his position with the D&RG and formed the Rio Grande Gunnison Railway Company to build the ten miles from Wagon Wheel Gap to Creede, where the narrow gauge tracks arrived in 1891. Operations on the new line were contracted out to the D&RG, and once construction costs were recouped (in only four short months), the extension was sold to the D&RG in 1892. The narrow gauge line was converted to dual/standard gauge in 1901-1902 and D&RG trains continued hauling ore out of Creede until the last mine closed in 1985, but the rails are still in place.



Northeastward view 200 feet southwest of the previous location. The un-rusted (active) track on the left is the mainline of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n), the rusted track on the right is a siding that joins the mainline behind the viewer, and the same diesel engine in red Carolina Southern livery is on a siding between the two. The D&RG Creede Branch (1883n) is barely visible in the upper left.



Southwestward view at the same location as the previous photo, showing the un-rusted D&RG San Juan Extension (1881n) where it is rejoined by its rusted siding and curves southward toward Antonito.