



In 1880, the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad quickly built its narrow gauge Leadville Branch. At the same time, the D&RG started its mainline west from Salida, on the Leadville Branch (1880n), over Marshall Pass on the Continental Divide to Gunnison in 1881, and in 1883 connected with the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad at aptly names Grand Junction, Colorado, completing a narrow gauge mainline to Utah. While the Marshall Pass Route was being built (1880-1883), a branch was built from it at Poncha Springs (then called Poncha Junction), on the D&RG (1883n) Marshall Pass Route 5 miles west of Salida. The Monarch Branch (or Monarch Spur) went due west 18 miles along the South Arkansas River from Poncha Springs to a dolomite and limestone quarry at Monarch (this location), at an elevation of 10,400 feet, just below Monarch Pass on the Continental Divide, where the line arrived in 1883. The Monarch Branch is shown on the Southwest Railroad History Map as part of the D&RG (1883n) because both were completed during the same episode of construction. The narrow gauge Monarch Branch was steep, reaching 4.5 percent and needing two sets of switchbacks.

The narrow gauge Marshall Pass Route west of Poncha Springs was abandoned in 1955, and in 1956 the 5 miles of narrow gauge line west of Salida to Poncha Springs, and the narrow gauge Monarch Branch west of Poncha Springs to the Monarch quarry (this location), were converted to standard gauge. The Monarch Branch hauled dolomite and limestone from Monarch through Salida and down the Royal Gorge to Pueblo until 1982, when the blast furnaces in Pueblo closed (so dolomite and limestone were no longer needed). In 1984, the tracks were removed from the Monarch Branch all the way back to the D&RG Leadville Branch (1880n) at Salida.

Southeastward view of the Monarch quarry from U.S. Highway 50. According to satellite imagery and historical topo maps, the road in the immediate foreground, partially obscured by trees, is old U.S. Highway 50. The low point with riparian growth just beyond old U.S. 50 is the South Arkansas River. The grade just beyond that is the grade for the D&RG (1883n) Monarch Branch, which enters from the left (northeast) and exists on the right. Just out of sight to the right, the alignment makes a U-turn across the South Arkansas River and heads northeast (left) to the location of the old mill (just right of center in this photo). The grade that runs through the mill and across the entire width of the photo is probably the Monarch Branch and the end of the line was just out of sight to the left.



Closer view of the old mill at the Monarch quarry. There are several grades; the Monarch Branch (1883n) is probably the grade that goes through the mill.