



The narrow gauge Denver & Rio Grande mainline over the Rocky Mountains, known as the “Royal Gorge Route” or “Marshall Pass Route,” was completed in 1883, when the D&RG building west from Pueblo, Colorado, and the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railway building east from Salt Lake City through this location at Mack, Colorado, met at Grand Junction, Colorado. In 1890, the D&RG and D&RGW completed a standard gauge route, the Tennessee Pass Route, which supplanted the narrow gauge Marshall Pass Route as the primary route from Denver to Salt Lake City. This new route involved a cooperative effort between the Colorado Midland Railway and D&RGW to build a standard gauge line, the Rio Grande Joint Railway, along the Colorado River west from Rifle to Grand Junction and standard-gauging of the D&RG Leadville Branch (1880n), Aspen Branch (1887n, which included the crossing of the continental divide at Tennessee Pass), and Rifle Extension (1889n), and the D&RGW (1883n) trackage in western Colorado and Utah. The standard-gauging of the D&RGW (1883n) was almost entirely just a matter of replacing the tracks, but there was a major realignment of the route along the Colorado-Utah border. The realignment extended from Mack, Colorado (this location), where the 1883 narrow gauge route left the Colorado River to head west across the Utah desert to Salt Lake City, to Whitehorse, Utah, in the desert 9 miles northwest of the Colorado River. The tracks for the narrow gauge route were removed during the 1890 standard gauging effort.

The Uintah Basin of eastern Utah contains seams of asphaltum, a hydrocarbon solid, that mined starting in the 1860’s but was of little use. The asphaltum was named Gilsonite after Samuel Henry Gilson, who began using the material in 1886 as a varnish and as electrical insulation. Gilson built a manufacturing plant in Salt Lake City and began mining operations in 1888. The plant was purchased by a group of Missouri investors who formed the Gilsonite Asphaltum Company. For more than a decade, Gilsonite was hauled from the mines in horse-drawn wagons to be loaded aboard railway cars at Price, Utah, on the D&RGW (1883n). In 1904, the Gilsonite Asphaltum Company built the Uintah Railway; the line was built to narrow gauge due to the very windy and steep route. The line started from the D&RGW (1883n), which had been standard gauged in 1890, at Mack, Colorado (this location), and headed northwest along West Salt Creek on the abandoned D&RGW (1883n) grade for 5 miles. From there, the UR continued north along West Salt Creek to the new town of Atchee, at which point the alignment headed northwest over 8,473-foot Baxter Pass on the divide between the Green and Colorado river drainages, then continued north to the mines at Dragon, 53 rail miles from Mack. In 1911, the railroad was extended 10 miles farther north to Watson, Utah, and a 4-mile branch was built southwest from Watson to the Gilsonite mines at Rainbow. The UR was famous for its steep, winding grades, especially the 5 miles of constant 7-1/2 percent grade with hairpin turns to negotiate the climb from Atchee to Baxter Pass. Traffic waned in the 1930’s due to the Great Depression, playing out of the mines, and competitive pressure from trucks that hauled Gilsonite to the railhead at Craig, Colorado, at the west end of the Denver, Northwestern and Pacific (1913). The last UR revenue train ran in May 1939 and removal of the rails and the towns along the 67-mile route was completed in early 1940.

Satellite image on the west side of Mack. The D&RGW (1890) leaves the D&RGW (1883n) alignment in the lower right corner of this image. The D&RGW (1890) curves across the image to follow the Colorado River (which is 2.5 miles southwest of this image). A foundation is present which appears to be the transfer facility for Gilsonite and supplies from narrow- to standard-gauge trains. There is a grade that enters the top of the photo and appears to split, with an eastern branch that curves eastward into the presumed transfer facility. There is a siding of the D&RGW (1890) that runs along the south side of the presumed transfer facility; standard-gauge trains were loaded on this siding, which was still present in a 1962 topo map (the oldest I could find). The D&RGW (1883n) and UR (1904n) join just north of the area of this photo, but all evidence of that intersection has been obliterated.



Northwestward view of the D&RGW (1890) where the alignment begins a turn to the southwest to follow the Colorado River. The presumed UR transfer facility is in the flat area to the right of the tracks. The D&RGW (1883n) and later the UR (1904n) continued straight northwest to the area of the trees beyond the building in the center distance.



Southwestward view of the D&RGW (1890) from the I-70 overpass 1 mile west of the previous location, where the line follows Salt Creek to its confluence with the Colorado River 2 miles down the line.



Now we are 3 miles northwest of Mack, looking northwestward at Old U.S. Highway 6/50, which closely follows the abandoned D&RGW (1883n) and was supplanted by I-70. The UR (1904n) and the D&RGW (1883n) grade upon which it was built ran parallel to and about 50 feet northeast of (to the right of in this view) Old U.S. Highway 6/50 from here to Mack. The highway turns left (west) while the D&RGW (1883n)/UR (1904n) alignment continues to the northwest but the railroad grade is largely obliterated by more recent development in this area. The UR (1904n) leaves the D&RGW (1883n) 2 miles to the northwest, where the D&RGW (1883n) turns southwestward and rejoins Old U.S. Highway 6/50 5 miles west of here. The UR (1904n) was still in place and running narrow gauge trains when U.S. Highway 6/50 was built in the late 1920's.



Northeastward view of Old U.S. Highway 6/50 at the same location as previous. The linear pile of dirt that runs across the image just in front of the house is the D&RGW (1883n)/UR (1904n) grade but has been significantly reworked.