



In 1881, the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad constructed a narrow gauge branch line from a junction with the Marshall Pass main line at Mears Junction. The line crossed over Poncha Pass into the San Luis Valley to the town of Orient and its iron mines. Orient was active from 1880 through 1932 and was the largest producer of iron ore in Colorado. Nearly a decade later in 1890, the line was extended south from Villa Grove to Alamosa, where it connected with the existing narrow gauge lines of the San Juan Extension. The long, straight stretch across the northern San Luis Valley became known as the Valley Line. Once La Veta Pass was realigned around 1899 and standard gauged, the Poncha Pass route became the only way that narrow gauge equipment could move between the southern narrow gauge system (Chili Line and San Juan Extension) and the D&RG narrow gauge mainline over Marshall Pass. In 1900, a second branch was added off the Valley Line from Moffat to Crestone. In 1930, the short section from Alamosa north to Hooper was converted to dual gauge, with the third rail added on the west side of the line. The route from Mears Junction south to Hooper was abandoned in 1951 and the standard gauge Hooper Spur was abandoned in 1959.

The bare ground in the foreground is the grade of the narrow gauge D&RG Valley Line, which was abandoned in 1951. The 13,000+ foot Sangre de Cristo Range, which bounds the eastern side of the San Luis Valley, is in the distance. Note the light colored sandy soil which covers large areas of the northeastern San Luis Valley, culminating in the Great Sand Dunes National Monument, located 15 miles southeast of this location.



Southeastward view at the same location as previous. The grade of the narrow gauge D&RG Valley Line is the linear grade at the far end of the visible sagebrush plain. The Sangre de Cristo Range is in the distance and in between is a sand storm at the Great Sand Dunes National Monument.