



The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad had built branch lines to the mining towns of Silverton and Ouray in the 1880's, but the San Juan Mountains between Ouray and Silverton were too formidable to allow the building of a railroad directly connecting the two towns. The Rio Grande Southern was founded in 1889 by Otto Mears, and construction began in 1890 from Ridgway (north of Ouray) and Durango (south of Silverton) to go around the most rugged part of the San Juan Mountains and also reach the mining towns of Rico and Telluride. The narrow gauge line was completed in 1891, and enjoyed 2 years of robust traffic before the Silver Panic of 1893 closed most of the mines. The railroad struggled to survive through the Great Depression, and was finally closed in 1951. The route has two high points, Dallas Divide west of Ridgway and Lizard Head Pass north of Rico. The most famous structure on the route was the Ophir Loop, where the railroad was built up a narrow mountain valley and looped back up the other side to gain elevation over several tall trestles.

The northern approach to Lizard Head Pass is now a gravel road, but an old water tower remains. The high mountains in the background are the formidable heights of the San Juan Mountains that blocked railroad construction between Ouray and Silverton.



This trestle negotiates the Lake Fork of the San Miguel River, the last stream crossing south of Lizard Head Pass.



The same trestle over the Lake Fork of the San Miguel River, where narrow gauge steam and later the gasoline-powered Galloping Goose rattled over the San Juan Mountains.



The final approach to 10,222-foot Lizard Head Pass.