



The railroad that would become the Colorado Central Railroad was originally chartered as the Colorado & Clear Creek Railroad in 1865 by Loveland and other entrepreneurs in the town of Golden, which at the time was the capital of the Colorado Territory. Loveland and his partners planned a standard gauge railroad up Clear Creek Canyon to mining centers west of Denver, which was never realized. In 1866, the name of the company was changed to the Colorado Central & Pacific Railroad; in 1867, the company was reorganized with Union Pacific investors and the capital of Colorado was shifted from Golden 14 miles east to Denver; and in 1868, the company changed its name to the Colorado Central Railroad and finally began some actual construction on a line connecting Golden to Denver. The CC wanted to beat the Denver Pacific Railway to the UP mainline at Cheyenne, Wyoming, but the DP line was completed to Cheyenne in June 1870 while the CC was still working on its initial 14-mile line from Golden to Denver. The CC connected Golden to Denver later in 1870, thus becoming a 14 mile branch line connecting Golden to the national rail network at Denver, which by 1870 had the DP and Kansas Pacific.

Golden is located at the base of the Rocky Mountain front at the mouth of Clear Creek. In 1871, with a standard gauge railhead in place, Golden interests regained control of the CC from UP and by the September 1872, 150 men were at work in the mountains west of Golden to extend a narrow gauge line to the mining communities up Clear Creek. In October 1872, the CC line between Denver and Golden (14 miles) was converted from standard gauge to dual gauge to allow narrow gauge trains to travel from Denver to the mines in Clear Creek Canyon. By December 1872, the narrow gauge line had been extended 13 miles west from Golden up Clear Creek and another 8 miles up the North Fork Clear Creek to mines at Black Hawk. The battle for control of the CC between Golden and UP interests continued during the expansion into the mountains. By the spring of 1873, UP investors had contributed a large financial stake in the railroad, but the company was still controlled by Loveland. In 1875, UP controlled three-fourths of the company stock and opted to lease the company to the KP, then the CC board of directors repudiated the agreement on a technicality and re-established Loveland as president. On May 21, 1876, Loveland's forces seized physical control of assets of the KP, and in retaliation, the UP sued the CC, forcing it into receivership, during which time Loveland kept control through court proceedings. In February 1877, the UP relinquished control to Loveland.

In 1877, with Loveland control and with UP financial backing, the CC began expanding its lines once again. By June 1877, the CC built another 7 miles up Clear Creek (from its confluence with the North Fork and the Black Hawk branch line) to Idaho Springs and August 1877 built another 13 miles to Georgetown (shown here), which immediately became the "Silver Queen of Colorado." In 1879, a larger silver strike at Leadville prompted the CC to try to be the first rail line to reach Leadville, but that opportunity was lost in 1880, when the Denver & Rio Grande completed its line to Leadville. Nonetheless, the CC/UP wanted a piece of the Leadville traffic and in 1881, the UP organized the Georgetown, Breckenridge & Leadville Railway to extend the CC narrow gauge line west from Georgetown to Leadville. The route to Leadville from Georgetown required overcoming narrowing of the valley west of Georgetown and average grades over 6 percent (too steep for standard locomotives). UP chief engineer Jacob Blickensderfer devised a system of curves and bridges, including the Georgetown Loop, that reduced the average grade to 3 percent. In 1884, the first train arrived in Silver Plume, at the top of the difficult grade but only 3 miles as the crow flies up Clear Creek from Georgetown, and the GB&L stopped at Graymont, 3 miles past Silver Plume; the final GB&L was about 10 track miles to cover 6 miles as the crow flies. In the 1880's and into the early 1900's, Georgetown with its narrow gauge rail loop became a tourist center with seven trains a day running out of Denver at the height of its popularity. The last train from Denver to Silver Plume ran in 1938 and the line from Idaho Springs to Silver Plume was abandoned along with the Georgetown Loop. In 1941, the final miles of narrow gauge track from Golden to Idaho Springs were removed.

During the 1959 centennial celebration of the discovery of gold in Georgetown, the Colorado Historical Society started plans to reconstruct the entire length of the Georgetown Loop. Construction of the rail line began in 1973 after the UP donated track and ties, and rolling stock was gathered and bridges set in place. The first operating season of the new Georgetown Loop was 1975, using the small amount of completed track. In 1982, a grant from a board member of the Colorado Historical Society financed the final segment of reconstruction and in 1984 Governor Richard D. Lamm dedicated the completed reconstruction of the Georgetown Loop to Silver Plume. The Georgetown Loop Railroad reconstructed most of the original GB&L grade. Additional visitor amenities have been added and the Georgetown Loop is now a popular excursion railroad, as it was in the late 1800's.

Today, visitors thrill as they ride over the Devil's Gate High Bridge.





The Devil's Gate High Bridge is the key element of the Georgetown Loop. We are facing down Clear Creek toward downtown Georgetown. The track on the right ascends toward us, climbing upstream. The grade climbs another quarter mile from this point (behind the viewer), where it makes a U-turn and crosses the creek on a low bridge to the north side of the valley (left bank in this view). The grade climbs up the north side of the valley, passes us to the left of our view, and arrives at the left (north) end of the Devil's Gate High Bridge in this view. The bridge is curved and makes another U-turn to the south (right) end of the bridge, which is again heading upstream toward Silver Plume, like the track below it but at the higher elevation achieved by the loop.





The railroad either cannot turn locomotives, or it's difficult, I'm not sure, but the Shay locomotive faces uphill whether it is going up or down the grade. The locomotive is always at the front of the train, as it is here in this downhill (toward the left) run. When it reaches the lower end-of-track, it will use a siding to move to the opposite end of the train but facing the same direction (uphill).





The Shay locomotive “backs” into the Georgetown Station at the “head” of the train on its return trip from Silver Plume. The light is on the back of the tender and is heading toward us.





The siding to the left will be used to move the locomotive to the front of the train for the return trip up to Silver Plume.





Georgetown Loop Railroad Engine #9, a narrow gauge Shay. Unlike the horizontal cylinders and rods that push the driver wheels on a standard steam engine, Shay locomotives have three vertical cylinders on one side of the boiler that drive a horizontal shaft with gears that drive every wheel on the locomotive and the tender, but only on one side of the engine (the side toward us).





Another view of the Shay; note the glow from the firebox.





The Shay locomotive, just downstream from the Georgetown Station, switching to the siding so it can leap frog the to the other end of the train to pull it up to Silver Plume. Devil's Gate High Bridge in the distance.





The Shay switching to the siding.