



The Denver & Rio Grande completed its narrow-gauge San Juan Extension when it reached the mining center of Silverton, Colorado, in 1882. In the following years, three independent short-line railroads were built north from Silverton and all came to be owned by Otto Mears (builder of the Rio Grande Southern [1891]). These narrow-gauge short lines all started at the D&RG railhead in Silverton and headed north to reach mines high in the mountains; from west to east these railroads were the 22-mile-long Silverton (1889), the 8-mile-long Silverton Gladstone & Northerly (1899), and the 17-mile-long Silverton Northern (1896). By 1942 all three railroads had been abandoned. The narrow gauge D&RG (1882) route from Durango to Silverton became known as the Silverton Branch and is operated today as a heritage railroad, the Durango & Silverton.

A Durango & Silverton passenger and (faux) freight consist pulls out of Silverton on the D&RG Silverton Branch (1882n). The Silverton Northern (1896) went into the mountains visible behind the train.



A conductor checks things out as a southbound Durango & Silverton train heads down Animas Canyon to Durango. Note the modern highway in the background, which ascends a ridge rather than deal with Animas Canyon, which is downhill all the way to Durango and the best route of a railroad. The track that veers right between the viewer and the train is the north branch of a turning wye.