The Impossible Dream

As Governor John Evans traveled on horseback through Colorado’s majestic landscapes, his entrepreneurial spirit saw timber and minerals in the trees and mountains. Excited by the potential of these and other economic resources just waiting to be tapped, he envisioned a railroad that would begin at Denver, cross the Rockies, open the rich San Juan region, and reach the Pacific.

Almost everyone considered the vision an impossible dream. Although some stage and freight companies proved transportation to remote settlements, the proposed railroad route crossed canyons where wagon roads and even foot trails seemed unlikely. Excessive grades and treacherous winter weather would require tunneling through tons of solid rock to achieve a functional rail line. Still undaunted by the challenge and convinced that the benefits would outweigh the costs, Evans and a group of Denver’s leading businessmen formed The Denver South Park & Pacific Railway Company in 1872. Although 335 miles of track were eventually laid and the DSP&P became the largest narrow gauge railroad system wholly contained within the state, the original dream was never fully realized.

The Company is fully alive to the advantages to be gained by the early completion and opening to traffic of their various lines, and fully realize the vast resources, the immense trade, and the quickening influence of railways upon industrial development—all of which will be assured by the speedy completion of their lines. The South Park road will open to Denver a new empire, whose resources, industries, and commercial importance will add untold wealth to Colorado, and new glories to its chief city—“Denver.”

(Denver Daily Times – March 18, 1880)
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Connecting Denver to the booming mining camps of South Park was the driving force to get the DSP&P underway. Railroad investors eagerly bought railroad bonds expecting to share in the fortunes hidden in mineral resources at Fairplay, and later Leadville and Gunnison. After three years of intensive and expensive engineering studies led by the DSP&P engineers, Leonard Eichholz and H.R. Hobrock, actual construction began in 1874.

In many places they have been obliged to let their men down with ropes secured to overhanging masses of rock. A drill hole would be made with great difficulty, and the drill left within; then another a few feet away, then a tie would get loaded upon the projecting drills, and a footing was thus secured for the men to put in the first blast. Thus they worked down through many feet of the hardest granite, the powder and (nitro)glycerin and dynamite rending away the rocks, and thus half tearing from the solid mountain wall, half stealing from the river's bed, a pathway for the iron horse.

Thus for weeks and months there were these fearless and energetic men laboring within a few miles of our city. The ringing of the steel upon their anvils, the clanking of the drills, the steady stroke of the hammer, the sharp bang and sullen roar of the blast have not indeed been heard, but their results are to be seen all along the great mountain gorge, and the work has so far progressed that its chief difficulties may be said to have been overcome, and that which remains to be accomplished is but a small part of what has already been completed. “The backbone of the canyon is broken,” complacently remarked Mr. Bartlett, as he stood looking at one of Chatfield’s sixty-foot rock cuttings, and pointed the canoe to where some of Wood’s gang were hanging by their eyelids to a precipitous cliff (Rocky Mountain News – October 12, 1877).

The DSP&P was truly an engineering marvel without parallel. Grades ranged from 60 feet per mile to 137 feet per mile. The cost of each mile required separate estimates. Grades could indeed be heard; but their results are to be seen all along the canons and mountains, and the work has so far progressed that its chief difficulties may be said to have been overcome, and that which remains to be accomplished is but a small part of what has already been completed. “The backbone of the canyon is broken,” complacently remarked Mr. Bartlett, as he stood looking at one of Chatfield’s sixty-foot rock cuttings, and pointed the canoe to where some of Wood’s gang were hanging by their eyelids to a precipitous cliff (Rocky Mountain News – October 12, 1877).

The passing of the South Park narrow gauge line ended an era immortalized in the poem “South Park Mogul”.

Today, some portions of the famous DSP&P have been preserved by local railfans, local governments and the US Forest Service. As you view these records of Colorado’s past, listen carefully — you may hear voices of the past whisper on the wind. . . voices of the men who risked life, limb, and fortunes to build a dream, passengers in search of better lives, or the engine itself straining to make the grade.

The DSP&P was not alone in its endeavor to connect the mining camps to the outside world. The Denver and Gulf known as the Colorado and Southern Railway, the C & S narrow gauge train, engine #5. Photo by Otto Perry, Denver Public Library, Western History Department.

Making the Dream Come True

Although famously quoted as “damned slow pulling and pretty rough riding”, the DSP&P showed a considerable profit during its first five years of operation. After 1883, the railroad failed to generate revenues to meet the interest on outstanding bonds. The bust of the Colorado mining boom was a major factor. As aptly put by Union Pacific (then the owner of DSP&P) President Charles Adams, “The chief source of revenue of the road was in carrying men and material into Colorado to dig holes in the ground called mines, and until it was discovered that there was nothing in those mines, the business was immense... when the mining craze broke down, and these mines and villages were deserted, of course the business left the road.” The DSP&P went through several reorganizations and changes of ownership during the sixty years of operation:

1880 Union Pacific purchased the Denver South Park & Pacific.
1889 The line was bankrupt and reorganized as the Denver, Leadville and Gunnison Railroad. It was then combined with Union Pacific, Denver and Gulf known as the Colorado and Southern Railway.
1910 Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad purchased the Colorado & Southern.
1937 The railroad petitioned to close operations, was finally accepted, and track was torn up in 1938, thus ending an era.

The Dream Lives and Dies

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Resurrecting the Dream

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In plumes of black and silver She crashed the canyon gate She bored past mountain cliffs She smothered where hell awaits The Courts have taken up her rails She ruts in Denver town; From tender and from car stop Her homesteads are down. Busses now roar between the peaks Where once her smokestack swayed, But still I see the old Goliath Go rumbling up the grade. (E.B. Turnbull, in Railroad Magazine – January 1938)

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Visit the interpretive site at the former grade. St. Elmo is home to local residents – be respectful of their privacy.
Visit the historic ghost town of St. Elmo, now a museum. The east entrance to the St. Elmo tunnel is a 2.5 mile hike from the parking area. Vehicles can access the west side of the tunnel via Woodstock and Pitkin.
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