

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)



This brochure was made possible through a partnership between the Pike National Forest, Park County, and the Colorado Historical Society. For more information about the Denver South Park & Pacific Railway, contact the Colorado Railroad Museum in Golden or the Colorado Railroad Association in Denver, or check your local library for the following references:

The South Park Line: A Concise History by Chappell, Richardson & Hauck; published by the Colorado Railroad Museum, Box 10, Golden CO 80401

Denver South Park & Pacific by M.C. Poor; published by the Rocky Mountain Railroad Club, PO Box 2391, Denver CO 80201

Pictorial Supplement to Denver South Park & Pacific by R.H. Kindig, E.J. Haley, and M.C. Poor; published by the Rocky Mountain Railroad Club, PO Box 2391, Denver CO 80201

USDA policy prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, or disability. Any person who believes he or she has been discriminated against in any USDA-related activity should immediately contact the Secretary of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250.

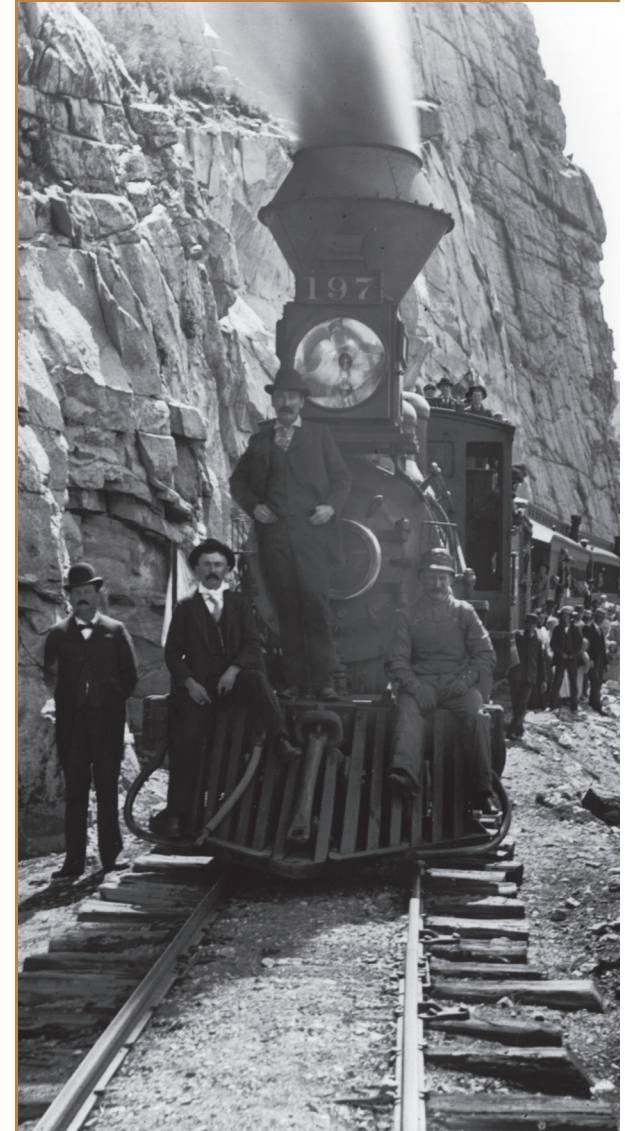


Part way up Boreas Pass. Photo by Dick Jackson, Colorado Rail Annual No. 12.

THE

Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad

HISTORY

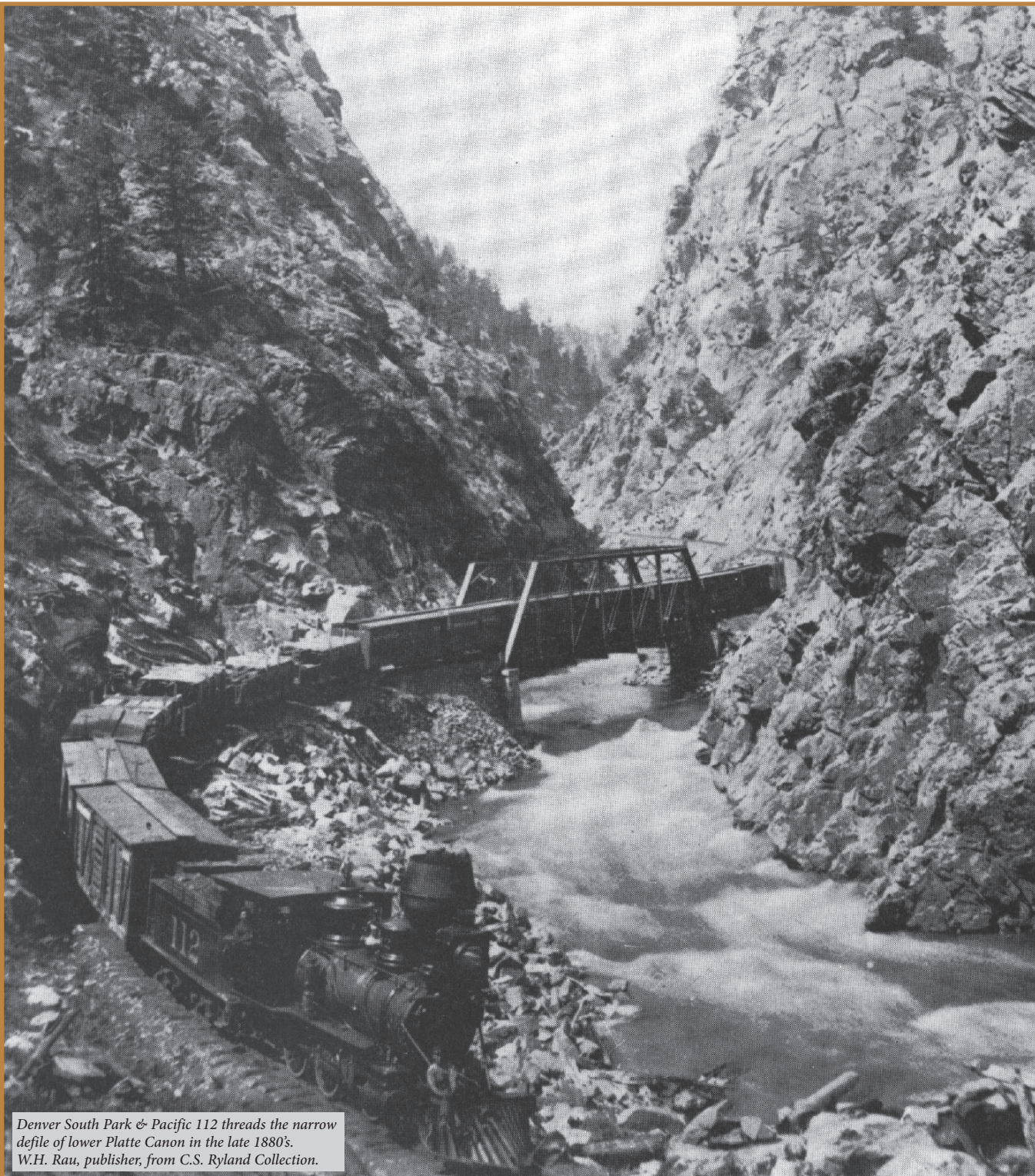


The old South Park Line, locomotive #197, Courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History Department.

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.



*Denver South Park & Pacific 112 threads the narrow defile of lower Platte Canon in the late 1880's.
W.H. Rau, publisher, from C.S. Ryland Collection.*



A passenger and cargo train of the Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad pulls away from the Nathrop Station, by Joseph Collier, courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History Department.

Making the Dream Come True

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 Eichholtz and H.R. Holbrook, 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 lowered 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 have these fearless and energetic men labored 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 canon is broken," complacently remarked Mr. Bartlett, as he stood looking at one of Chatfield's sixty-foot rock cuttings, and pointed up the canon 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 since the variations in topography meant prices could range from \$4,000 to \$18,000 per mile.

By 1884, the construction firms hired by the DSP&P had completed work on all main routes operated by the railroad. The narrow gauge tracks ran from Denver through the Platte River Canyon and over Kenosha Pass at nearly 10,000 feet into South Park. The rails branched at Como, with the southern route going to Garos and then to the Arkansas Valley via Trout Creek Pass. This branch then traversed Chalk Creek Canyon to the great Alpine Tunnel, under the Continental Divide (at 11,600 feet), dropped into Quartz Creek Valley, through the town of Pitkin ending in Gunnison. This branch was ultimately extended to the coal mines at Baldwin, fourteen miles north of Gunnison.

Access to the thriving "magic city" of Leadville and its mining enterprises became a reality with a branch line extending north from Como. From here, the line crossed the Continental Divide at 11,482 foot Boreas Pass and dropped into Breckenridge. This branch continued through the canyons of the Blue River and Tenmile Creek and over Fremont Pass ending in Leadville.



Passenger train of the DSP & P near the east portal of the Alpine Tunnel. Photo by Joseph Collier, Denver Public Library, Western History Department.

The Dream Lives and Dies

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 went bankrupt and reorganized in 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.



With the "end of the line", a scrap train crept along with a winch on the first car used to pull the rails up a ramp and onto the flat cars. Photo by R.H. Kindig, Colorado Rail Annual No.12.

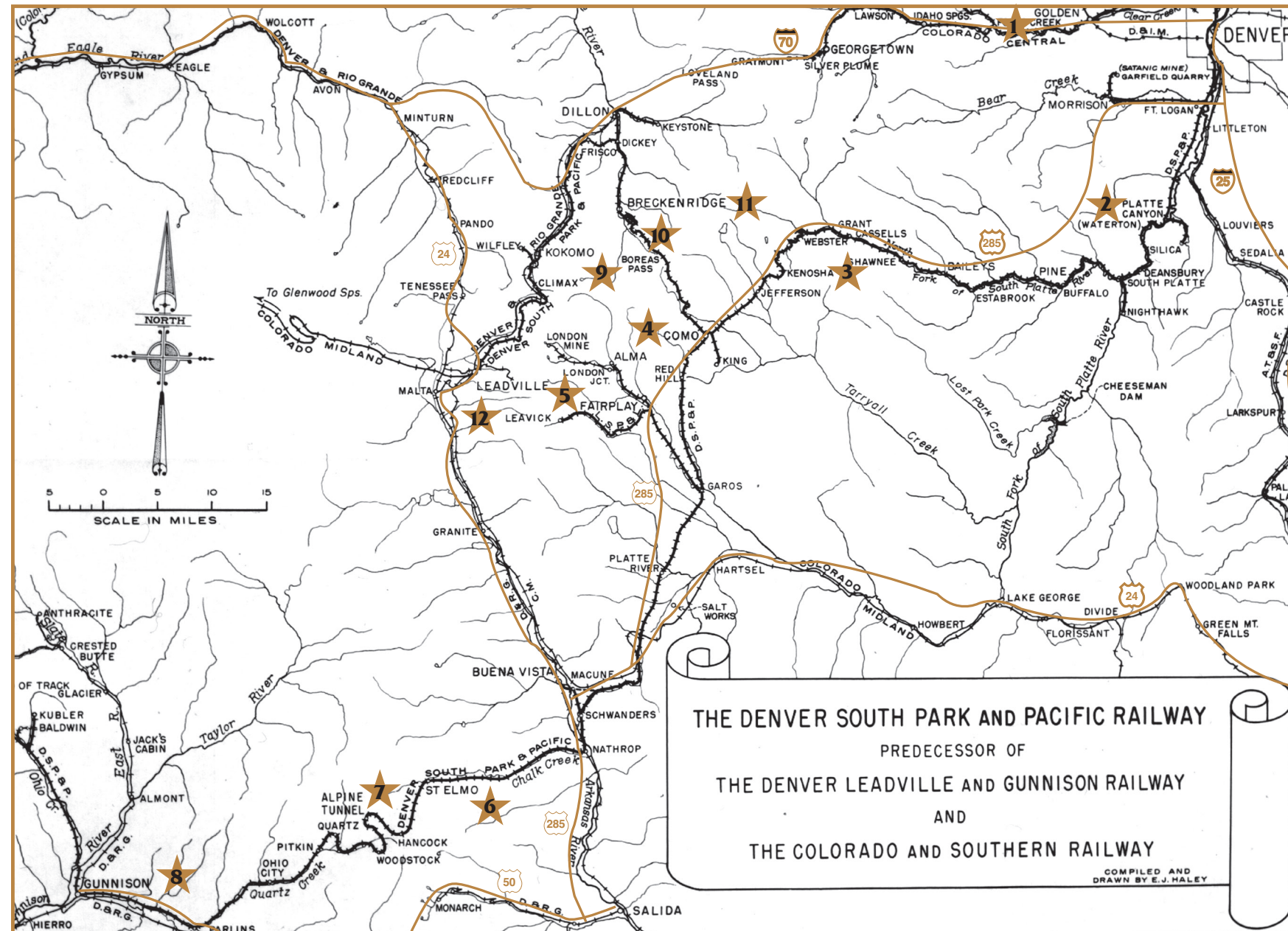
The passing of the South Park narrow gauge line ended an era immortalized in the poem "South Park Mogul".

*In plumes of black and silver
She crashed the canon gates,
She labored past mountain cliffs,
She snorted where hell awaits.*

*The Courts have taken up her rails,
She rusts in Denver town;
From tender and from car step
Her homesick men are down.*

*Busses now roar between the peaks
Where once her smokestack swayed,
But still I see the old Gal's ghost
Go ramming up the grade.*

(E.B. Turnbull, in Railroad Magazine - January 1938)



★ **Golden:** Visit the Colorado Railroad Museum and see one of the original DSP&P locomotives.

★ **Platte Canyon:** County Road 96 is the old DSP&P bed. The Westall Monument commemorates an engineer killed in a train wreck at the site.

★ **Kenosha Pass:** Visit the interpretive site on the east side of the pass and walk the restored railbed and wye on your way to the wetlands.

★ **Como:** See the roundhouse and restored hotel, now a restaurant and B & B.

★ **Fairplay:** Stop in at this historic town and railroad destination. Purchase the audio CD or pick up the free brochure for traveling the Boreas Pass route at the National Forest office located on Highway 285.

★ **St Elmo:** This historic ghost town is located on the DSP&P route. A county road is built on the former grade. St. Elmo is home to local residents - be respectful of their privacy.

★ **Alpine Tunnel:** The east entrance to the tunnel (from St. Elmo) is a 2.5 mile hike from the parking area. Vehicles can access the west side of the tunnel via Woodstock and Pitkin.

★ **Gunnison:** The terminus of the southern branch is located in Gunnison where a locomotive and rolling stock cars are on display.

★ **Boreas Pass:** The road follows the old grade where tracks can be seen. The section house at the summit is restored.

★ **Baker Tank:** A preserved water tank and picnic area exist at this site.

★ **Breckenridge:** See Rotary Snowplow Park with a snowplow and other rolling stock, including historic Engine No. 9.

★ **Leadville:** Visit the original depot at the terminus of the northern branch and travel the public Mineral Belt Bicycle Trail that runs partially on the historic grades.

Resurrecting the Dream

Today, some portions of the famous DSP&P have been preserved and restored by railroad enthusiasts, 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.



C & S narrow gauge train, engine #5. Photo by Otto Perry, Denver Public Library, Western History Department.