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SIXTY YEARS ON THE
DURANGO-AZTEC-FARMINGTON BRANCH
1905 - 1965

ELINOR M. MCGINN

TWO OR THREE TIMES weekly a Rio Grande narrow gauge steam locomotive pulling an average load of forty-five cars of oil pipe and drilling mud can be seen winding its way along 49.5 miles from Durango, Colorado, through Aztec to its terminus at Farmington, New Mexico.¹ This is one of the last narrow gauge lines in the nation. Paradoxically, it was one of the few lines of the Rio Grande built originally as a standard gauge of four feet eight and one-half inches² and later narrowed to a three-foot gauge. Though not so busy as it was during the oil and gas boom of the 1950's when long trains of ninety-eight cars ran daily, it remains an important link in the chain of industrial expansion of the southeastern portion of the Four Corners area.

The construction of the Farmington Branch line in 1905 climaxed several years of rivalries, rumors, and surveys among different rail companies. That the Rio Grande finally laid the line surprised the San Juan County residents no more than if the Southern Pacific, Rock Island, or Phelps-Dodge interests had. The local newspapers of three main areas, Aztec, Durango, and Farmington, continually carried stories of rail agent, engineer, and survey party activities. On June 30, 1904, the *Farmington Times* quoted a press dispatch from Wall Street that the Rock Island, at that time in Colorado Springs, planned to build 1,150 miles of new road to the Pacific Coast through San Juan County. "This would enable western New Mexico to put on the market a large supply of pine." And on July 14, this same paper further reported that Rock Island engineers were surveying in the Durango area.

During the same period, there were other curious and secret rumors of railroad activity. On June 18, 1904, the coal mining inspector visiting in San Juan County optimistically predicted that within twelve months there would be a railroad from Durango through Farmington to Clifton, Arizona.³ More reports about well-equipped groups of surveyors working for road grades to Farmington appeared, but the groups kept their identity secret.⁴ Mr. Dodge of the Phelps-Dodge Company and the El Paso Southwestern "raced by teams" from Gallup to meet his surveying party at Durango.⁵ Of course, the reports of possible rail activities were enlivened by the hopes of the fewer than two thousand residents that they would have a railroad. Many news accounts echoed the line of reasoning in the June 9, 1904, *Farmington Times*: "Because San Juan County is the greatest fruit and hay county on earth, there is a need for a railroad. Signs are pointing toward one now with engineers surveying in the area." Further evidence was that with "three rivers originating in southern Colorado and all converging a mile or so below Farmington, the advantages of a water grade are too manifest to escape the railroad engineers."

As late as January 19, 1905, the *Times* was still uncertain as to who would build, but suspected a secret agreement between Phelps-Dodge, the Santa Fe, and the Rio Grande. So much obvious surveying had been done that they predicted that grading work would begin within sixty days.⁶ Only two weeks later the big story broke when Agent William McQuade—"Confidential man" for the Kilpatrick Brothers, railroad contractors of Beatrice, Nebraska—arrived in Durango.⁷ He announced that his firm had had the "contract for a month" to do the grading for a Rio Grande branch line to Farmington. The grading would begin Monday, February 6, be finished by June 1, and the track laying would be completed by the Rio Grande on June 20. At the same time, the Board of Directors in New York announced that the cost of the Durango-Farmington Branch would be \$1,250,000.⁸

Further details of the project were unveiled by Mr. McQuade. A construction contingent outfit, including one hundred horses, a commissary, scrapers, and workers, were being hauled from

Nevada by broad gauge to Grand Junction where they would transfer to narrow gauge. Another company was proceeding from Beatrice, Nebraska. Top railroad wages of \$1.75 to \$2.00 per day would be paid and four to six hundred men would be employed.⁹ The contracts sublet for grading of the first fifteen miles south of Durango were announced as follows:

Miles	1, 2, 3	—Charles Warren of Boulder
Mile	4	—Frank Cherry of Denver
Mile	6	—J. W. Shea of Boulder
Mile	7	—W. A. Leonard of Lamar
Mile	13	—John Griffen of Boulder
Mile	15	—Steaon and Bowden of Boulder

Kilpatrick Brothers were to do the remainder themselves and J. E. Donley was to be in charge of the construction.¹⁰

Once the mantle of secrecy was taken from the Rio Grande's plans, there was a feverish anxiety for completion. It was almost as though the still-present rumors¹¹ of another line to Farmington might suddenly materialize. The vivid and detailed accounts of progress appearing in each issue of the local papers have recorded the importance attached to the "coming of the iron rails." Railroad agents reported that the farmers of Aztec and Farmington were cooperative and most of the right-of-way arrangements were quickly closed.¹²

When the railroad agent, a Mr. Nock, met with a group of Farmington citizens to ask that ten acres be furnished for the depot and yard site and \$2,500 be pledged in the event of excessive right-of-way charges, there was an almost immediate acceptance. The Blake Addition south of the town in the neighborhood of the canning factory was selected for the site. Working with Mr. Nock were W. N. Kight, W. A. Hunter, Dr. O. C. McEwen, S. H. Blake and Larkin Beck. The local attitude seemed to be: "Let us all pull together and make Farmington the one city of the Great Southwest."¹³

As the railroad building progressed, frequent reports appeared in the newspapers to inform the interested residents who were

not on-the-spot spectators. It does not require much imagination to picture the degree of interest that prevailed. One local pioneer recalls a blow on the cheek to return his attention to his books from the horse-drawn fresnos. But, he added, "This didn't keep me from watching those two-wheeled scrapers."¹⁴ The deep snows somewhat impeded the grading work, but by March 28 the grading camps were in San Juan County. The *San Juan County Index* reported that eight hundred men were working on the grade between Aztec and Durango.¹⁵ Rails, timbers, and supplies rolled rapidly into Durango as the Rio Grande rushed the pace of its bridge building.¹⁶ Five bridges over the Animas River and one over the Florida River were required.

Not even a threatened law suit halted the construction work. When the Colorado-Arizona Railway Company sought an injunction regarding a right-of-way dispute, the Rio Grande obtained permission to file an indemnifying bond of \$50,000 against any damages which the Colorado-Arizona might prove, and continued its southerly work.¹⁷ By July 20 the track was laid down to the first crossing of the Animas, about two miles north of the New Mexico state line, and all the grading was completed as far as Aztec. As the crews moved along, they were supplied with rails and ties from a track-laying car pushed by a locomotive. Two men laid the eight-foot ties, hewn by a broad ax in the San Juan forests, as they were dropped from a roller.¹⁸ The thirty-foot rails came over the Cumbres Pass from the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company of Pueblo¹⁹ and varied from sixty-five to seventy-five pound steel. A sixteen-foot surface was used on the grade, which never exceeded a two percent gradient.²⁰

While this branch line made front page news in Farmington and Aztec, Durango, long a rail center, relegated items about it to inside pages. Nevertheless, some items of interest were found. A smallpox case in one of the camps caused some fear.²¹ By July 20 the telegraph line had been built.²² The project was not without its fatalities, for three graders drowned when a raft overturned in the Animas River as they were moving down to another camp.²³ And economical readers were assured that the freight rate would

be about the same as from Durango to Silverton, even though it was ten miles farther, because the gradient was so much less.²⁴

At precisely twelve o'clock noon on August 24, the engine reached Aztec, and its citizens rejoiced at the prospect of welcoming train loads of visitors to their September 19th fair. Aztec was proud of its citizens, who had donated \$1,000 to buy the land from Colonel W. H. Williams for the depot site. A box car served as temporary quarters until the depot could be finished. The railroad offered to share expenses for a pumping station and reservoir if the city would build water mains;²⁵ however, this proposal came to naught and not even a well was dug at the depot. Although the city installed the water mains in 1927, the Rio Grande did not connect to the main until 1951.²⁶ Before the branch was completed, passengers were being carried "as best as they can" until the coaches arrived early in September.²⁷

For Farmington residents, the railroad became a reality at 10:03 A.M. on September 19 when the rail car passed into the town limits.²⁸ The summer fruit had not been hauled by rail as promised,²⁹ but the road was now completed after seven months of construction. No longer would it be necessary for a farmer to haul his fruit by team and wagon over dirt roads to peddle it in Durango, and San Juan fruit would reach many northern markets by rail.

The mixed train, soon popularly dubbed the Red Apple Flyer, ran a regular daytime schedule six days a week from 1905 to 1923. There were a number of excursions. One hundred people boarded the first excursion train from Farmington for the Durango Fair on October 19, 1905.³⁰ Destined for the State Fair, the first through train ran in August 1915, all the way over the Cumbres Pass and down to the then existing branch into Santa Fe. A large special train arrived in Aztec on November 5, 1921, to help celebrate the opening of the oil field which would provide fuel for commercial lighting and heating.³¹ In addition to fruit and beans, much of the freight on this mixed train was livestock.

From time to time, service was interrupted by washouts after heavy rains or snow blockades in the mountains. Mr. Bryan

Rhodes, section foreman, who spent eight days helping to free ten miles of track in the Bondad vicinity gave a vivid account of the ice blockade in February 1916. Snow was shoveled into the water tank to provide steam. A narrow gauge snow plow was adapted to a standard gauge flat car with an engine behind it for the push to cut the ice. The section men were spared much hand picking when a resourceful farmer used his horses and plow to help free ice for five miles. Although they sometimes walked two miles to the nearest farmhouse, the section men welcomed the food provided by the farmers. The Rio Grande later compensated the farmers for their supplies. When service was restored, the *Durango Weekly Democrat* wrote “. . . people all along the route cheered the train,” and “People in the dusty streets of the sunny salubrious winter resort welcomed railroaders in snow-bucking clothes.”³²

During the Branch operation one fatality occurred when a member of the bridge crew drowned during the repair of an overturned pier at the Cedar Hill Bridge in 1927.³³ There were two engine derailments during the standard gauge days. In 1929, a seemingly impossible collision took place between the only two locomotives on the Branch. Sheep being loaded in Aztec produced more tonnage than one engine could haul so a helper was ordered from Durango. As the first engineer was returning from Farmington to Aztec, the second engineer, confident that he could reach a siding five miles east of Farmington, failed to do so and the head-on meeting at the rate of six miles per hour broke both pilot plates.³⁴

Another highlight of these years occurred when the Aztec depot mysteriously burned, suddenly and completely, on November 9, 1914. A Mr. Jess Leeper noticed the smoke, fired his gun to signal the danger, and many gathered to help extinguish it. Because there was no water in the ditch, nearby cisterns were used. The C. S. Bailey warehouse, filled with apples, was threatened but saved.³⁵ The agent reported that he had left \$200 in the station when he went home early because of illness. The fire was mainly around the ticket window.³⁶ Certain facts soon emerged, revealing that the agent had been under company investigation for fund shortage, and he was immediately replaced.³⁷ The new

depot was completed in August 1915, and the two temporary box cars which had served as a station were hauled away. The plans of a local women's committee to beautify the grounds of this new station failed to materialize, and no lawn was ever planted.³⁸

As much as the Rio Grande Branch line had been desired and appreciated, there were several problems causing dissatisfaction with the service. The chief complaint was the delay caused by the necessary transfers of freight at Durango from one gauge to the other. According to Juan M. Jaquez, Aztec sheepman, "The Rio Grande stock cars are seldom behind schedule more than two months."³⁹ A couple of Durango cattlemen, driving a beef herd through Aztec enroute to Gallup to ship via the Santa Fe line, told a newspaper that "the Rio Grande is strictly on the bum and can't furnish anything but disappointment."⁴⁰

In August of 1915 the company changed the schedule of the Red Apple so that it departed after the arrival of the Eastern from Alamosa and could bring the mail down on the same day.⁴¹ An editorial expressed joy that at last the "D. & R. G. came to life" and replaced the old thirty-five pound rails on the Alamosa line with seventy-pound rails and more powerful engines.⁴²

A petition asking for a change to narrow gauge was presented to the railroad by Aztec and Farmington citizens in the summer of 1923. The hiring of Thomas H. Beacon as the new Receiver of the C. & R. G. seemed to improve relations and the petitioners were notified that the gauge would be narrowed.⁴³ A call went out for 500 men to help with the changeover.⁴⁴ During the last week of August, these men drove a row of spikes against which the east rail of the broad gauge track would be moved. The last standard train ran Friday, August 30. No train ran on Saturday, but the regular train arrived on the three-foot gauge on Monday, September 3.⁴⁵

This *broad* to *narrow* gauge change is the most unusual feature of the Farmington Branch. Had it been an engineering quirk of some magnitude that was originally responsible for a broad track, when the only connecting point, Durango, was narrow? For the answer, the early reasoning of General William Jackson Palmer,

founder of the Rio Grande, must be studied. The narrow gauge had appeared in the United States about 1870,⁴⁶ and General Palmer concluded that his area was particularly adapted to the advantages of the narrow gauge. His enthusiasm was based on the following reasons:

1. The cost per mile would not exceed one-half of broad gauge.
2. The expected railroad revenue was to come mainly from rugged mining regions, more practical for narrow gauge.
3. The maintenance was considered lower, the ratio of dead weight to pay load was reduced, and sharper curves were manageable.⁴⁷

In the late nineteenth century, Colorado had one-third of the total 16,000 miles of narrow gauge track in the United States. As is often the case, events did not transpire as General Palmer anticipated. Other railroads won eastern and southern connection points while he overexpanded on short, expensive mining town lines. The mining areas soon passed their heydays of lasting commercial value. Broadening the gauge and abandoning routes became necessary. Thus, by 1905, the Rio Grande, under different ownership, was thinking in terms of standardizing the gauge on the route from Durango to Antonito and of building south of Farmington, which would have made it sound engineering to use broad gauge.⁴⁸

But the pattern of events favored a deviation which, by 1923, culminated in the demise of the broad gauge. The death of the aggressive railroad magnate, E. H. Harriman, in 1909, ended the plans of the Southern Pacific to join at Farmington. The Madero Revolution in Mexico in 1913 ended all hope of trade in coal with Mexico.⁴⁹ Added to these was the San Juan County demand to be better served on a northern connection as long as there was no other outlet.

The advantages of narrow gauge became clear when the first iced fruit cars appeared. The first flour milled at Alamosa arrived in the same car in which it had been loaded.⁵⁰ The single deck stock cars were replaced with double deckers.

For several months the narrow gauge operated separate passenger trains, but it soon became a "mixed train daily" except Sunday. The last regular passengers served were C.C.C. boys who were removed from the Bloomfield area in 1940.⁵¹

With the growing interest in the Silverton excursions as well as the devotion of the railroad clubs to riding trains, groups have chartered special trains from Durango. The most recent was the Illinois Railroad Club, which paid \$1200 for 104 people to ride to Aztec and Farmington.

The character of the freight underwent a metamorphosis during the oil and gas boom of the 1950's. It has been many years since fruit, beans, or livestock have been shipped.⁵² The numerous long double-engined trains loaded with drilling equipment and pipe dwindled to two or three weekly.

In the diesel age, this is oldtime railroading of the vintage of the 1880's and 1890's, with a maximum hourly speed of 15-18 miles, and the fireman performing the work his title implies.⁵³ He has to shovel six to eight tons of coal on each run. The tender carries a 6000-gallon water tank which can be filled at the Durango, Bondad, and Farmington wooden tanks. The original ten steam locomotives, classified as 470's and K-28's on the railroad's roster, were made by the American Locomotive Company in Schenectady, New York, in 1923. Three of these are still used on the Silverton Branch, the last common carrier in the United States. Occasionally one of these "sports" models pulls the freight on the Farmington Branch which now has two of the heavier 480 or K-37 class purchased in 1925. Seven of the 480's were sent to Alaska during World War II.⁵⁴

For about six months during the winter of 1964-1965, no rail freight moved over the Farmington Branch because of snow. Rather than making an effort to clear the tracks, the Rio Grande hauled the freight in its trucks. This disturbed the local Chambers of Commerce because they feared that the Rio Grande might be making another attempt to close the line. In July 1965, H. F. Eno, D. & R. G. Traffic Manager, refused to discuss the profit-

ability of the Branch. His only statement was ". . . it enjoys the dubious distinction shared with the rest of our narrow gauge operations of suffering from a lack of freight tonnage."⁵⁵ Another oil or industrial expansion could occur in the area and the Branch would again become the busiest segment of the entire Alamosa-Durango-Farmington line as it was in the 1950's.⁵⁶

NOTES

1. Archival material relating to the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad is in the State Archives and Public Records, Denver. Although Robert Athearn's history of the Rio Grande Railroad, *Rebel of the Rockies* (New Haven, 1962) was based on thorough archival research, it contains no direct mention of the Farmington Branch. This article draws almost entirely on newspaper accounts and interviews with the following local railroad personnel and pioneers: George Bowra, publisher, *Aztec Independent Review*, July, 1965; Maurice Case, station agent at Aztec since 1915, summer, 1965; Pearl Martin, daughter of owner of land sold for Farmington depot, July, 1965; Bryan Rhodes, section foreman on the Farmington Branch for 45 years, July, 1965; Johnny and Jimmy McGinn, recorders of regular numbers of cars. Other materials used include: Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, *Rio Grande, Mainline of the Rockies* (Berkeley, 1962); James Marshall, *Santa Fe, the Railroad that Built an Empire* (New York, 1945); Josie Moore Crum, *The Otto Mears Passes* (reprinted from *Railway and Locomotive Historical Bulletin* No. 73, 1948); John B. Hungerford, *Narrow Gauge to Silverton* (Reseda, Calif., 1963); Rio Grande timetables; Rio Grande engineering maps of 1905 and 1919.

2. There are interesting accounts of the reason for the 4' 8½" broad gauge. Howard Fleming, *Narrow Gauge Railroads in America* (Oakland, 1949), p. 6, states that Stephenson's first locomotive fit 4' 8½". James Marshall, *Santa Fe, The Railroad that Built an Empire* (New York, 1945), p. 300, says that the width was arbitrarily decided by measuring the still visible Roman chariot wheel marks to settle a parliamentary debate.

3. *Farmington Times-Hustler*.

4. *Ibid.*, July 23, 1904.

5. *Ibid.*, Sept. 22, 1904.
6. *Ibid.*, Jan. 19, 1905.
7. *Ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1905.
8. *Ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1905.
9. *Ibid.* It was also stated that a number of Mormon sub-contractors were to come. However, the list includes only eastern Colorado men so probably none came.
10. *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1905.
11. *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1905, reports that Phelps-Dodge of the El Paso & Durango Railroad will build to Farmington. U. S. railroad building had been a rugged race for four decades.
12. *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1905.
13. *Ibid.* Mrs. Pearl Martin of Farmington, daughter of S. H. Blake, and the only available relative of any of the original committee, recalled that her father later felt that \$200 had not been sufficient compensation for his land.
14. Bryan Rhodes.
15. *Farmington Times-Hustler*, Mar. 31, 1905.
16. The roundhouse of Durango was to be improved at a cost of \$25,000. With its fourth branch railroad, Durango became the narrow gauge capitol of the U.S., although this branch was actually broad gauge, as will be noted later.
17. *Farmington Times-Hustler*, July 6, 1905.
18. Bryan Rhodes.
19. C. F. & I. was a Rio Grande child of General Palmer's days. Athearn, p. 115.
20. Bryan Rhodes.
21. *Durango Semi-Weekly Herald*, June 1, 1905.
22. *Ibid.*, July 20, 1905.
23. *Ibid.*, May 29, 1905.
24. *Ibid.*, Feb. 4, 1905.
25. *Ibid.*, Aug. 28. Reprinted from *San Juan County Index*.
26. Maurice Case.
27. *Durango Semi-Weekly Democrat*, Aug. 31, 1905. Four Division Superintendent statement.
28. *Farmington Times-Hustler*, Sept. 21, 1905.
29. *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1905; Mr. Nock.
30. *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1905.
31. *San Juan County Review*, Nov. 11, 1921. The Durango band and 2,500 persons attended this barbecue.
32. *Durango Weekly Democrat*, Feb. 11, 1916.

33. Bryan Rhodes.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Aztec Independent Review*, Nov. 13, 1914.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Maurice Case, the new agent, stated that this was his third replacement assignment after similar fund discrepancies. One green chest, still in the depot, was saved and a bill which had been paid and not accredited was found by Mr. Case.
38. *Aztec Independent Review*, Aug. 20, 1915.
39. Athearn, p. 245.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Aztec Independent Review*, Aug. 27, 1915.
42. *Farmington Times*, Sept. 14, 1923.
43. *Aztec Independent Review*, Aug. 24, 1923.
44. *Farmington Times*, Aug. 24, 1923.
45. *Ibid.*, Sept. 7, 1923.
46. John F. Stover, *American Railroads* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 95-97.
47. Herbert Brayer, *William Blackmore: Early Financing of the Denver and Rio Grande Railway* (Denver, 1949), pp. 34-37.
48. *Farmington Times-Hustler*, Feb. 16, 1905.
49. Lucius Beebe, *Mixed Train Daily, A Book of Short-Line Railroads* (New York, 1947), p. 167.
50. *Farmington Times*, Sept. 14, 1923.
51. Maurice Case.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Reference is made to the present trend of abolishing the job of fireman on other railroads.
54. Bryan Rhodes.
55. Letter from H. F. Eno, July 1, 1965.
56. *Railroad Club Newsletter*, Dec., 1960.