



The Leadville, Colorado & Southern

Article / Fralin Marek

The last section of Denver, South Park & Pacific (DSP&P) track still in use runs north from the town of Leadville, Colorado. One could also say it's the last section of Colorado & Southern (C&S) track still in use, since the C&S was the successor of the DSP&P. Today, the Leadville, Colorado & Southern Railroad operates a tourist line over the original trackage, a section of track referred to by the DSP&P as their "High Line."

The Leadville, Colorado & Southern (LC&S) operates a modern railroad for excursion service. The railroad is based in Leadville and runs up the Arkansas River Valley to the mining area of Climax. By the way, the LC&S is the fifth of five tourist railroads in Colorado to be covered by *LGB Telegram*—the other four (the Cumbres & Toltec, the Durango & Silverton, the Cripple Creek & Victor and the Georgetown Loop) were featured in the recent "Colorado Narrow Gauge" series.

Unlike those lines, however, the LC&S operates diesel locomotives instead of steam—and the trains run on standard gauge track. Plus, the LC&S still "connects" to the outside world via an interchange with the modern Denver & Rio Grande (now the Southern Pacific). But like those other four tourist railroads, this "branch line" got its start with steam and narrow gauge.

Leadville and Climax

Although mining for gold was the original venture around Leadville, silver is where the miners' success came. While sifting for gold, miners often found a coarse black sand. It was discovered that this was a carbonate of lead (thus, Leadville) and that it was rich in silver.

The township of Leadville was formed in 1878 and was soon the second largest city in Colorado. Leadville was given the nickname

Take a ride on the old Denver South Park & Pacific Railroad's "High Line"

The South Park offered more romance and beauty than comparable narrow gauge lines.

"Cloud City" because of its 10,152-foot elevation. At one time, Leadville was also a candidate for the state capital.

The repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893 caused the price of silver to drop and brought the end to almost all mining around Leadville. Although the town had other businesses, now historical structures and sites, it was the silver mines that made this town.

Near Leadville is the mining town of Climax, which was home to the world's largest open-pit molybdenum mine. Molybdenum is an alloy used to strengthen steel. Like many Colorado mountain towns, both Leadville and Climax owed their existence to nearby mineral wealth.

The South Park

The discovery of silver in Leadville set off a heated race among these railroads to reach the town. The Denver, South Park & Pacific (DSP&P), the Georgetown, Leadville & San Juan (GL&S) and the Denver & Rio Grande (D&RG) all wanted the revenues associated with transporting silver from the mines.

The DSP&P was formed in September of 1872, with plans to run south from Denver, across the South Park, down the Arkansas River Valley, towards the new mining areas of Silverton, then to the Pacific coast. Construction began in 1873.

Tracks were built south from Denver, through Platte Canyon and up South Platte River, over Kenosha Pass to Como, and continuing south towards Fairplay and Buena Vista. The tracks then traveled through Hancock Pass by means of the Alpine Tunnel, ending up in Gunnison.

On July 20th, 1880, when the first train reached Leadville, it was from the D&RG. But because of lease agreements, the D&RG was able to run trains to Leadville over D&RG track from its interchange in Buena Vista. In 1881, the DSP&P started construction of its own line to Leadville from Como. It was completed in February of 1884. Later, in the summer of 1887, the standard gauge Colorado Midland pulled into town.

After the "Leadville Extension" split off at Como, it headed north over Boreas Pass to Breckenridge, up to Dillon, then west and south to Kokomo and over Fremont Pass, down through Climax, ending in Leadville.

This more direct route brought rail service from Denver in 150 miles, where the D&RG route was 275 miles. Although the direct route cut 125 miles off the D&RG route, slow mountain speeds meant that the travel time was reduced by only two hours—from 14 hours on D&RG trackage to 12 hours via the DSP&P (and that's if it wasn't snowing).

The "South Park," as it was often called, seemed to offer more romance and beauty than other narrow gauge lines. No two views were the same, and each was as spectacular or unique as the other. The terrain the trains traversed made this possible—mountain passes in excess of 11,000 feet and canyon runs meandering along rivers.

A pioneer in some ways, the South Park tried things other railroads avoided—like a new design of locomotive, the famous "Mason Bogie." These were similar to Forneys, but their biggest engine was a 2-8-6T! It looked like a 2-8-0 with half of a tender built onto the back of the cab. But the Mason Bogies did not last long and were soon replaced by common 2-8-0 Consolidation engines. By the way, the original fleet consisted of 2-6-0 Moguls, much like the LGB 2028D!

Conquering mountain passes was a major feat and tunnels helped. But they were expensive, troublesome and usually a big risk. The Alpine Tunnel was at nearly 12,000 feet elevation and it was 1776 feet long! Located northeast of Gunnison, the Alpine Tunnel was the most impressive railroad tunnel in Colorado in its day. It had a railroad camp, engine house and turntable on one side.

Today, each end of the Alpine Tunnel is caved in, but tracks remain inside. I enjoyed my second visit to this historic site in 1994. It is easily accessible by family car, over the old DSP&P roadbed. If you are in the area, I suggest a visit!

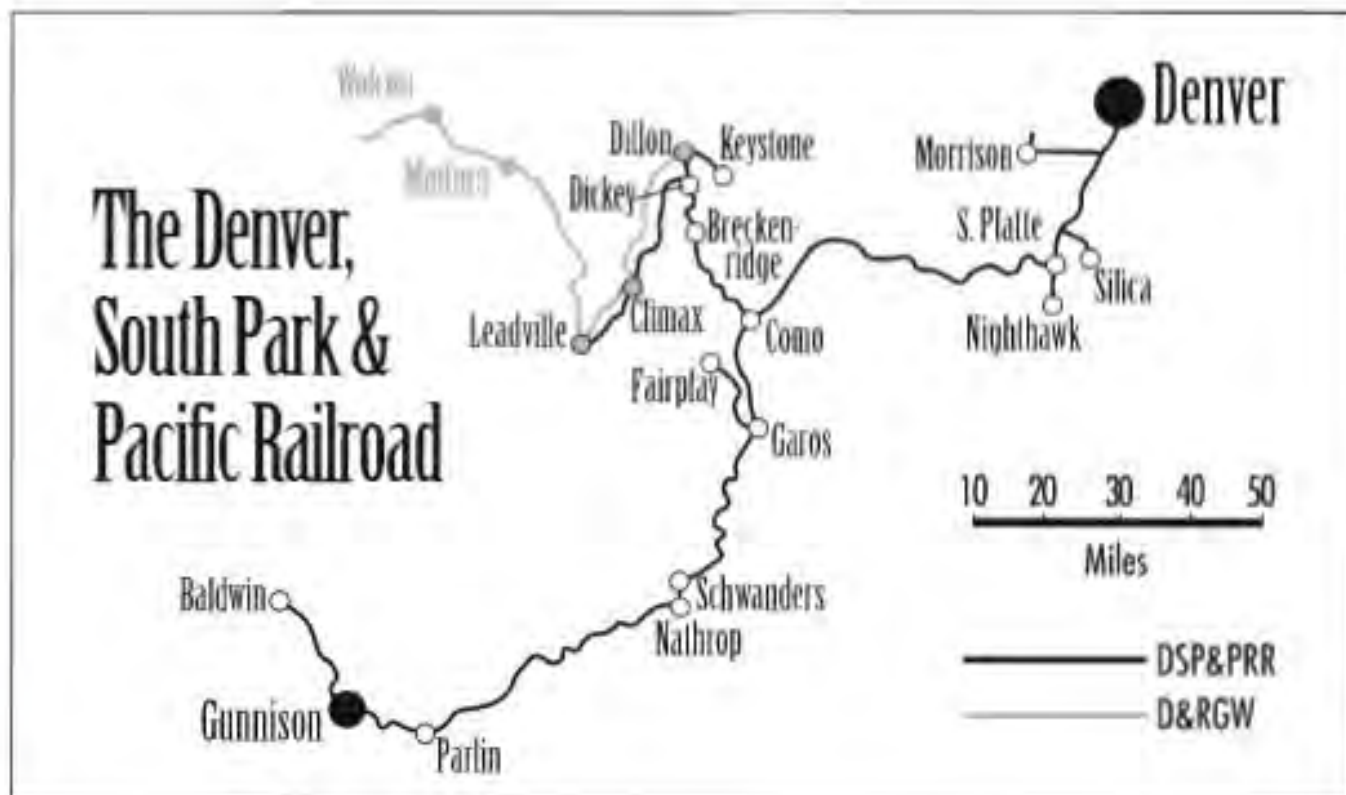
Hard Times

In 1881, the Union Pacific acquired enough DSP&P stock to take control. During the 1880's, the DSP&P became unprofitable. Bad luck and bad management were blamed by many for the railroad company's decline.

Under UP management, the DSP&P was re-structured as the Denver, Leadville & Gunnison (DL&G) in 1889. Then in 1890, the D&RG converted its narrow gauge line to Leadville into a standard gauge line, leaving the DL&G as the last narrow gauge in town. Yet the DL&G was still running four passenger trains a day from Denver to Leadville.

In 1893, the Union Pacific went bankrupt and the DL&G was placed into receivership. By 1898, the bondholders of the former Union Pacific lines formed the Colorado & Southern, which took over the DL&G and the Colorado Central narrow gauge lines.

In December of 1908, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy purchased the Colorado & Southern, but still operated it under the C&S name. In 1915, the C&S tried to abandon the DSP&P lines from Denver to Leadville, but the Interstate Commerce Commission refused.



Abandonment was sought again in 1928, but refused once more by the ICC. Again in 1935, an abandonment application was filed, but only to abandon the line from Denver to Climax. So the Climax mine's rail access from Leadville was to be spared.

Interstate Commerce Commission approval for abandonment came in 1936. The last C&S passenger train ran from Leadville to Denver in April of 1937. Only a handful of narrow gauge equipment was left on this 14-mile branch of the old DSP&P "High Line."

The "High Line" was converted to standard gauge in 1943. This eliminated the road transfer from C&S narrow gauge to D&RG standard gauge in Leadville. The last narrow gauge train ran on August 25th of that year, bringing an end to "C&Sing."

Standard gauge steam power took over immediately. But in September of 1962, the last steam engine ran over the line, replaced by an SD-9 diesel. Today, steam engine No. 641 is on display at the LC&S depot. This was the last regularly operated steam-powered Class 1 railroad in the United States.

The Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroads were merged in 1970 to form the present Burlington Northern (BN). The branch remained in operation under the C&S name. The Climax mine all but shut down in 1982, and the BN stopped regular service on the C&S branch. So techni-

cally, the last Colorado & Southern train to run was in October of 1986, from Climax back to Leadville.

Today's Railroad

In December of 1987, this branch line was saved when Stephanie and Kenneth Olsen bought the line from the BN. A new railroad called the Leadville, Colorado & Southern was formed—a new name for the old line.

How did this change come about? During the mid-1980's, the BN was rethinking some of its operations. Part of that meant selling off some smaller, less used, branch lines. Because the BN was eager to sell this branch line, they speeded up the deal.

Enter the Olsens—in the right place, at the right time. The BN package included the 14 miles of track, a small yard, two GP-9 diesels, five cabooses, four boxcars, eight flatcars, a hopper and flanger, extra rail and ties and the old C&S three-stall roundhouse. All for a price tag of...\$10! That's right, ten dollars. In a separate purchase, the Olsens bought the depot and Engine No. 641 from the city.

The couple now operates this line for tourist excursions. This is a husband and wife operation—he is responsible for track maintenance, she runs the depot and the train operations. After some track repairs, the line went back in service on Memorial Day of 1988.

Today, two big 1750 horsepower diesel serve

The map above shows the DSP&PRR network, along with a small portion of the D&RG empire.

A ride on today's LC&S offers a glimpse into Colorado's narrow gauge history.

as motive power. Diesel No. 1714 was built in 1955 and No. 1918 in 1957—both are GP-9's (General Purpose) built by the EMD (Electro-Motive Division) of GM (General Motors), for the Northern Pacific.

Normally, only one engine is used on the daily train. A diesel snowplow is mounted on the No. 1714. The two diesel locomotives are often required to plow snow and open the line themselves each year.

The LC&S took flatcars and built some very impressive excursion cars. And a buscar converted into a concession car looks great! The LC&S equipment has a very nice paint scheme and is well maintained. Because the right-of-way was originally narrow gauge, curves are still sharp. You won't find any 80-foot Pullman coaches on this route!

Plus, unlike the other four Colorado tourist railroads we've featured in *LGB Telegram*, the Leadville, Colorado & Southern is not isolated! You see, the D&RG (now the Southern Pacific) interchange connection is still there. So, if the Climax zone were to reopen, the LC&S stands ready to service it! Imagine riding a "daily mixed" of freight and passenger cars on this line!

The Train Ride

Today, you can ride the "High Line" over almost 12 miles of track on a two-and-a-half hour trip beginning at the LC&S depot in Leadville.

The depot was built by the D&RG in 1893, and sits at an elevation of 10,200 feet. The train crawls up the 2% grade to Talus Slope, the current end of the line. Here, the track elevation is 11,120 feet. This makes the LC&S the highest operating standard gauge railroad in the United States—and it's even higher than most narrow gauge lines.

When the train departs the depot, you travel past the old DSP&P red-brick freight house, built in 1884. At the edge of town, you pass the round-house and wye track. In the distance, you see some of the "fourteeners," Colorado's famous 14,000-foot mountains. Several 11,000- and 12,000-foot peaks come into view along the ride as well. A few miles away, you can see beautiful turquoise Lake.

As the train climbs the 2% grade, it makes its way along a shelf on Prospect Mountain, with a peak at 12,675 feet. Looking closely, you can see the abandoned D&RG roadbed through the trees. Over several high fills, you cross the Evans, Birds Eye, Dutch, English and French Gulches (to name the big ones).

At the end of the line, your panoramic view ranges from the big Ajax Company's molyb-

denum mine, to Bartlett Mountain at 13,555 feet, Fremont Pass at 11,318 feet and the upper Arkansas Valley with the river (or stream) down below.

Watch for wildlife while you ride the train. I saw several deer and other critters. Plus, at the right time of the year, you might have snow on the ground. On the way back, the train stops at the French Gulch water tank, where you can get off, walk around and enjoy the view. This narrow gauge tank was moved across the tracks to better serve the standard gauge engines. The mountainsides are covered with greenery and colorful plants.

The LC&S is located about 110 miles from Denver. Take I-70 west from Denver (past the Georgetown Loop), turn south on Highway 91 to Leadville. The LC&S 1995 season runs from May to October. There are often schedule changes during the season, so I suggest a call to the LC&S at (719) 486-3936 for more specific information.

In the depot, you'll find a small gift shop and the office for the LC&S. In the gift shop, you can buy a very nice book called *High Line to Leadville*—it provides great reading about the history, the line and the present day operation.

The LC&S in your Garden

Not all LGB fans are into narrow gauge, not everyone is into steam. If I've just described you, perhaps you should consider modeling a modern tourist operation!

Take an LGB 2055-series diesel (such as the White Pass & Yukon engine or the Rio Grande engine), put a long string of the new LGB 31260 DSP&P excursion cars behind it and add a matching LGB 40710 WP&Y or 42710 Rio Grande steel caboose at the end. Now you have a modern excursion train! And it would look similar to the Leadville, Colorado & Southern train (LC&S paint scheme optional).

Hey, not every railroad turns around, either. Are you limited to running on a shelf in the house along the ceiling? Or maybe just along one side of the back yard? Well, this line doesn't turn around on each end, so it's perfect for end-to-end LGB operation.

The same of those neat LGB EPL switching circuits. Try out a time-delayed reversing bumper. Let your train run out on the line, stop and enjoy the view, and then back up to the station. You could base your railroad operation on this real, modern-day diesel excursion line!

If you're one of those incurable steam engine fans, you could always model the old Leadville-to-Climax narrow gauge line. Use those new LGB 31260 DSP&P excursion cars with the good


old 2028D Mogul for a great circa-1885 tourist railway. For more realism, make up a freight consist with a re-lettered 40760 hopper car, a 40730 gondola, a 40660 log car and a 43650 C&S Bobber Caboose.

Conclusion

To quote an old railroad passage, "Everything comes from the Earth...even trains." Legends are not born, but become legends through their actions. The Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad is such a tale.

In the days of the DSP&P, the "West was Won," but there were still Colorado mountains to conquer. Although operating costs and Mother Nature fought it most of the way, DSP&P tracks covered many of those mountain miles. In the end, the Colorado & Southern carried on the battle, the freight and passengers.

Today, you can still enjoy a little bit of that history, that country, that travel by train. The modern Leadville, Colorado & Southern carries on that journey with its passenger excursion service.

So the next time you run your diesel passenger train, maybe you'll remember the "South Park" line...the mountain air, the beautiful scenery, the smell of diesel fuel, the smoke rising from the GP-9. Enjoy all of this as your train travels the fabled High Line—an Colorado or in your backyard! 

Right, the LC&S brochure promises patrons a spectacular train ride!



These three Frolin Marek photos show a sampling of LC&S sights and equipment.



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