THE OLD SOUTH PARK

Or how Mr. Gould won and lost it, how it rose to fame and glory only to fall to the depths of bankruptcy, and other stories to the present day.

By A. C. Kalmbach.

"ENGINE 76 run extra Leadville to Climax and return to Leadville on last trip of narrow-gauge operation. Pick up at Climax and handle to Leadville all narrow-gauge cars. E P. S." This train order, dated August 25, 1943, was patently padded for public consumption; and well it might be, for this trip was an occasion. The Associated Press was there, as was the mayor of Leadville. Albert Fenn, of *Life* magazine, took pictures; and Robert Rice, vice-president of the Colorado & Southern, passed a box of cigars. They were honoring the memory and mourning the passing of a onetime great railroad. This was the last run of the narrow-gauge best known as the Denver, South Park & Pacific, once the most spectacularly successful railroad in all the West.

This was the route of the fish trains and of the narrow-gauge Pullmans. It was the short line from Denver to Leadville, crossing the Continental Divide twice on the way. At high Alpine Pass on the way to Gunnison, it had still a third crossing of the Divide in a tunnel at an altitude of 11,596 feet. In a short half-dozen years of its fabulous career it skyrocketed from a gross revenue of $23 a day to $10,000 a day!

At its greatest expanse, just after the turn of the century, the old South Park was a 341*-mile system. Its three-foot-gauge track ran southwest of Denver, following the South Platte River up the canyon into the front range of the Rockies. At South Platte, 29 miles out of Denver, the line turned west, still following the water-level grade along the north fork of the South Platte. The railroad was now well into the Platte Canyon, a rocky chasm with a rushing stream in its bed and a friendly rival in its beauties to the better-known Clear Creek Canyon. The railroad twisted and turned, its roadbed fitted ingeniously into the narrow space between the bed of the stream and the towering rock walls.

As the canyon bed gained elevation, the valley flattened out until the railroad found itself at the foot of the sharp climb up Kenosha Pass, where, at 9991-foot elevation, the line crossed over into the northern extremity of that broad, high valley called South Park, from which the railroad took its name. To the south was the extensive beauty of the park. To the north lay the heights of the Continental Divide.

At Como, 88 miles from Denver, the line divided, one stem going to Gunnison and the other to Leadville, the two-mile-high mining city with resources of lead, gold, silver, zinc, copper, iron, bismuth, and manganese. Leadville lies on the Atlantic side of the Continental Divide, but the old South Park swung north from Como, crossed the Divide at Boreas Pass onto the Pacific Slope, and then again crossed the divide at Fremont Pass to reach Leadville. It was here that railroad men were up against some of the toughest of operating problems. The grade between Como and 11,494-foot Boreas Pass was 4.49 per cent. It was on this terrific climb that Barnum's elephants once obligingly helped push a three-car circus train when

* This does not include the Colorado Central narrow-gauge lines in Clear Creek Canyon, which started separately but wound up along with the South Park as part of the C&S.

the engine stalled. It was Boreas Pass and the 4.2 per cent eastbound grade up Kenosha Pass which contributed most heavily to the South Park's average of twice as many engine-miles as train-miles. Here, too, were snow troubles, with 11 snow sheds up the east slope of Boreas and four engines to a rotary in Winter.

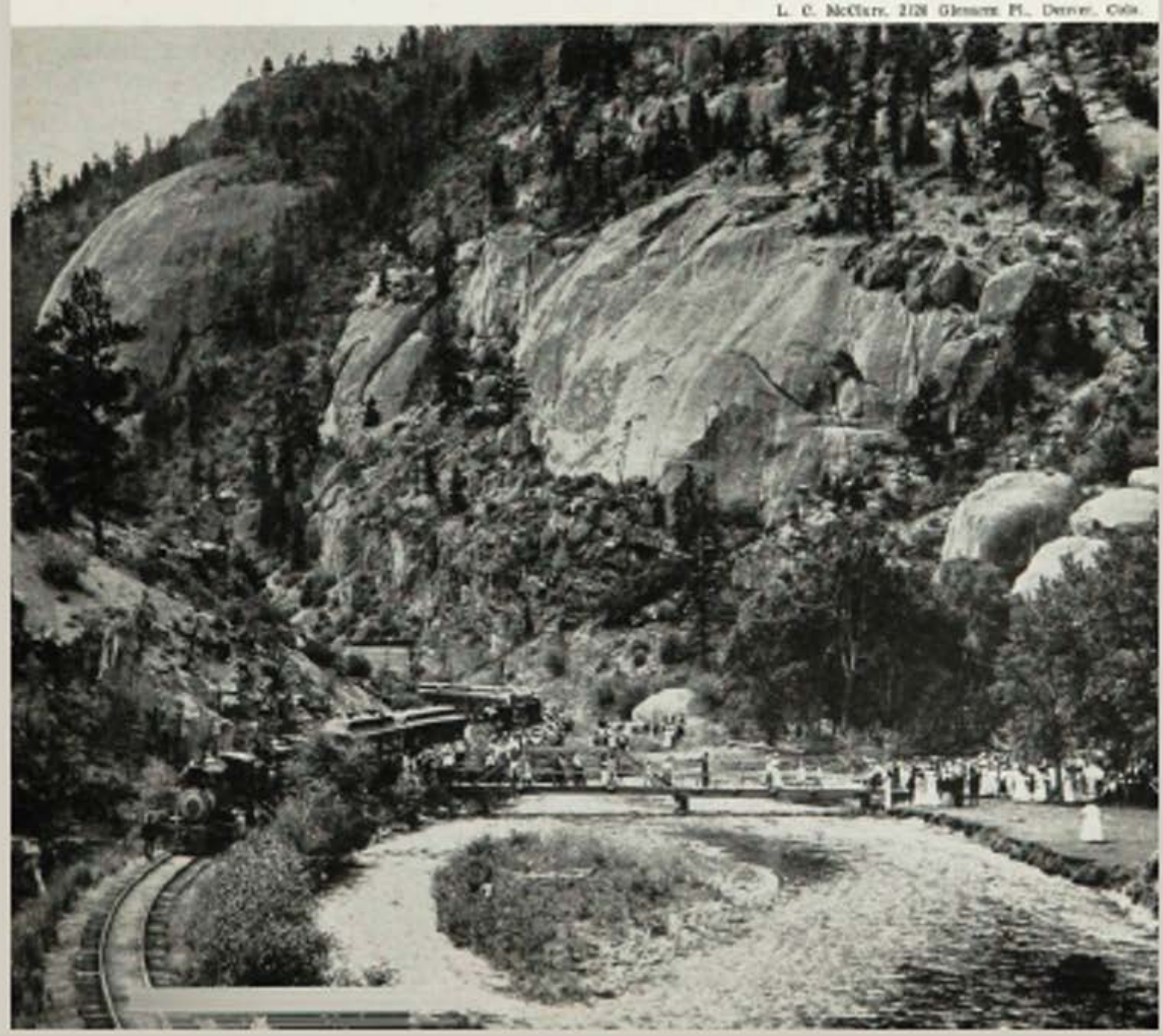
From Boreas Pass can be seen great areas of both the Atlantic and Pacific slopes. To the north and the west stretches the great, broad valley of the Blue River, shadowed by the ponderous Ten-Mile Range. The railroad loped easily down one fork of the Blue and up the other fork for nearly 20 miles before starting the climb over 11,320-foot Fremont Pass to regain the Atlantic side of the Divide and reach Leadville. The short line to Leadville, yes; but it climbed over three high passes to get there.

Back at Como, the line toward Gunnison (which was at first the main line of the South Park) struck southward along the comparatively level country of the valley and finally crossed the Park Range into the Arkansas Valley at low (9460-foot) Trout Creek Pass [also used by the Colorado Midland; see May 1943 TRAINS].

Here, at Buena Vista, 25 miles north of Salida on the Royal Gorge Route of the Denver & Rio Grande Western, lay an important source of tourist traffic. High on the eastern slope above Buena Vista, the Colorado Midland once ran. In the bottom of the valley is the Rio Grande main line, close by the river, which it follows from Pueblo almost to its source near Fremont Pass. Towering to the west is the high wall of the Continental Divide, featuring the College Peaks—Mount Harvard, Mount Yale and Mount Princeton—all more than 14,000 feet in height. It was just south of these peaks that the old South Park Line swung bravely west from the Arkansas Valley to climb the canyon of Chalk

Below is a picnic crowd of years ago arriving via [illegible]P at Dome Rock in the Platte Canyon.

L. C. McClure, 2128 Glenarm Pl., Denver, Colo.



Creek through St. Elmo* to Alpine Pass, scenic highlight and operating headache of the South Park. The ride over this summit to Gunnison was probably unequaled. The train wound around the base of the mountains, climbing ever toward the top, until it crossed under the Divide through Alpine Tunnel. From the west end of the tunnel it emerged onto the beautiful Palisades, a shelf carved along the edge of a sheer granite cliff. This engineering made passengers' spines tingle with awe. Construction through here cost the railroad as much as $160,000 per mile. Downward it wound its way along the valley of Quartz Creek until it met the Rio Grande's Marshall Pass line, which it paralleled into Gunnison.

Probably the best-known trains ever to run over this road were the fish trains, which were inaugurated in the '90's. Fish train No. 75 ran out of Denver daily except Sunday at 5 p. m., going as far as Grant; and on Saturday there was still another, No. 73, at 2:05 p. m. Through the Platte Canyon, trout-fishing was good, and available right off the ends of the railroad ties. Outbound, the fisherman would pick his spot and ask the conductor to stop the train. By early next morning, his creel full of choice Rocky Mountain trout, the fisherman had but to get up from the end of the tie at the sound of the approaching train, and wave his handkerchief for the inbound fish train to stop. These trains often ran in two or three sections.

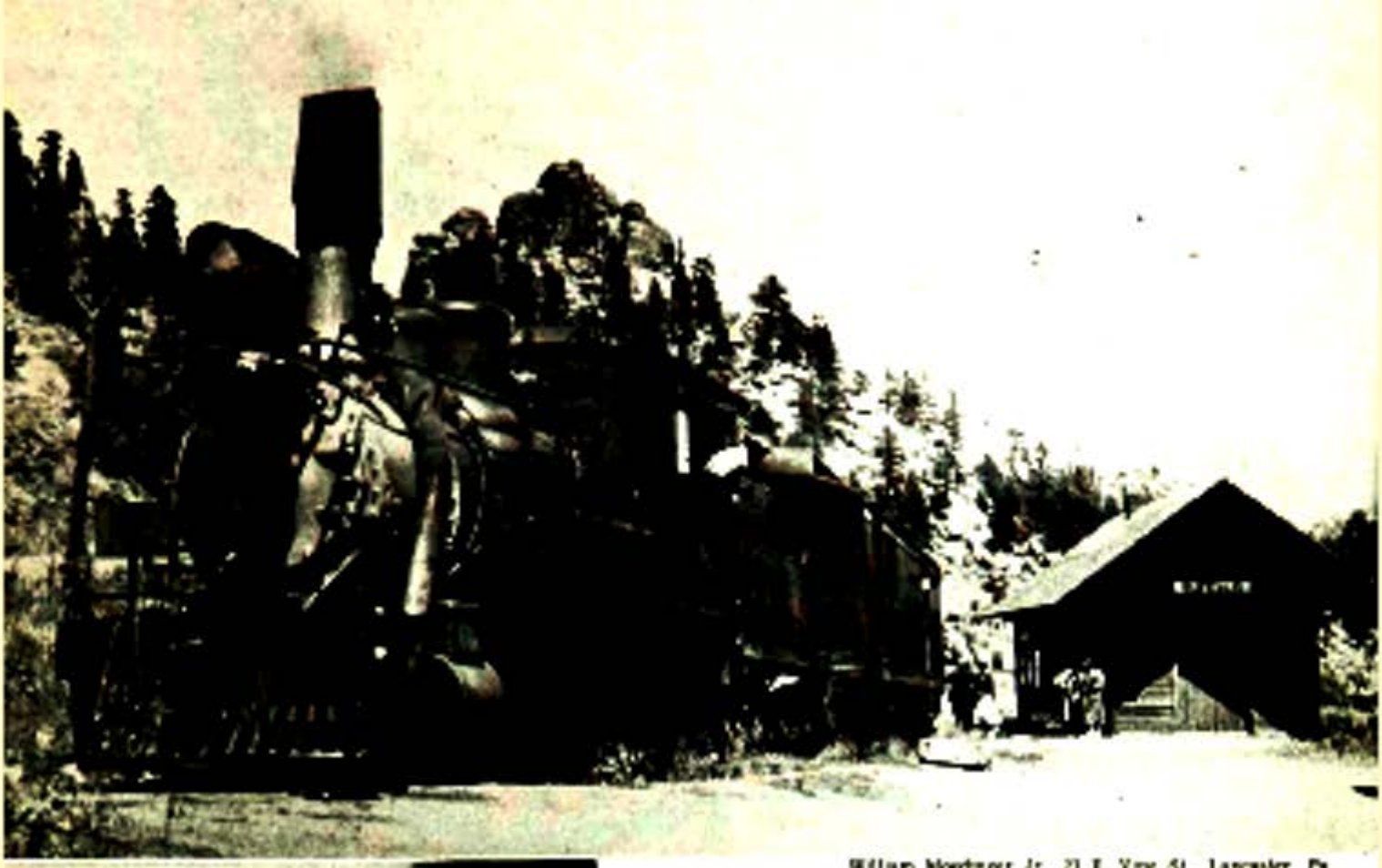
The regular train service in the big years included a day-train to Leadville and a night-train splitting at Como for both Leadville and Gunnison. Both dining-cars and sleepers were operated. The usual train to Como was as much as five cars, but beyond the junction only three cars could be handled.

In the late '70's, when the end of track was nearing Kenosha Hill, the departure of the morning passenger train from the little station in West Denver was a busy and colorful scene. Many of the passengers were miners, and almost all carried cumbersome bundles of everything up to complete prospecting outfits. Just before train time a carriage was likely to come dashing up with a Personage, perhaps the editor of the *Rocky Mountain News* or vice-president W. A. Chessman on an inspection trip. The con-

* "The Western stage line runs daily stages from St. Elmo to Aspen and Glenwood Springs in connection with through-sleepers from Denver to St. Elmo."—Old timetable.

In Platte Canyon. Following the route of the fish trains of a generation ago is this Leadville-bound freight of the middle '30's climbing the Platte Canyon below Grant, Colo.

R. H. Kindig



William Bloedinger Jr., 23 E. Vine St., Lancaster, Pa.

L. C. McClure
L. M. Wescott
H. H. Kittle

Above is the last passenger train, stopping at Buffalo on April 10, 1937. When that train reached Denver the old South Park was officially abandoned. At left is a South Park train in Denver Union Station, the desolate Como of today, and a narrow-gauge freight.

ductor knew them all. "Good morning, Mr. Wood," he would say to the eminent Leadville miner and metallurgist. "No need to hurry. Plenty of time." The passenger equipment included several reconditioned secondhand coaches from the New York Elevated. [This sounds like 1943!—*Ed.*]

The little Mason hogies which pulled the first trains were soon replaced by some fine little Cooke Moguls and by the turn of the century the road was using some 62 engines, including quite an array of Consolidations.

Thus, then, was the Denver, South Park & Pacific, later more aptly renamed the Denver, Leadville & Gunnison. In the beginning, as with most railroads, the idea was vastly different. The road was incorporated March 8, 1872, as the Denver, Georgetown & Utah. The intention was to build southwest from Denver to Morrison and then northwest past booming Georgetown and the Clear Creek Canyon, over Berthoud Pass, and then to follow the

Courtesy Earl Bradley and C&S

Sometimes a steam shovel was needed to dig out snow slides so the rotary could get through! These slides came tearing down the mountainside, rolling up trees and boulders until the mess they left across the tracks would ruin or stall the toughest snow-cutting blades.

Colorado River to Utah. A branch was proposed to go by way of the South Park to Buena Vista and the Gunnison coal fields. But W. A. H. Loveland almost immediately pushed a narrow-gauge extension of his Colorado Central up Clear Creek Canyon toward Georgetown, planning to cross the Divide at Loveland Pass with an extraordinary bucket-and-tram system. The financial panic, Loveland's extension and withdrawal of promised Kansas Pacific aid caused an abandonment of the South Park's Georgetown idea and a reorganization of the corporation as the Denver, South Park & Pacific. The western terminal was then set at Fairplay, on the Arkansas,* where many wagon trails met.

The South Park road was the dream and realization of Governor John Evans, first president of the company—a great railroad builder and Denver booster, and the second territorial governor of Colorado. Among the original directors was a slim, far-seeing New-York-born man who, as treasurer of the Denver Pacific, was already leaving his impress upon the railroads of Colorado. His name was David H. Moffat Jr., and he was later to become one of the great men of Western railroading.

The line was completed to Morrison Springs, 16 miles from Denver, by June 23, 1874. On the first of the following year the directors issued their first annual report. In the typical style of first annual reports, it was sublimely optimistic: "It is believed that no route for a railroad of 150 miles in extent in this country has ever offered such abundant sources of local business throughout its entire route." Among the men-

* Quoted from first annual report. Actually, the Park Range is between Fairplay and the Arkansas.

tioned sources of potential traffic were suburban business ["Denver businessmen will wish to live along the line away from the dirt and grime of the city"]: lime, made from limestone deposits along the line; coal; sandstone for building purposes; timber—and here the report went into considerable detail—including ties for use of the line and other railroads; trout fishing; salt; silver; lead; gold; iron; galena; corn, hay, and other farm products; machinery; merchandise; and pleasure travel.

Since the proposed line had nothing but wagon roads for competition, and any kind of a railroad could better the wagon haulage costs, the estimates of revenue were based not on comparable railroad rates in other locations but rather on the cost of producing materials along the line compared with the selling price of similar materials in Denver. The road expected to be able to absorb most of the difference in freight charges. Using this naive basis and assuming that the road could furnish most of the lumber, most of the railroad ties, and much of the stone, coal and other materials for Denver, an original estimate of annual revenue along the line for the first division to Buffalo Creek was prophesied as follows:

Lumber	$80,000
Merchandise, coal, coke, machinery, etc.	45,840
Ores, bullion	12,000
Mail and express	5,760
Passenger fares	54,000
Total	$215,600

After setting up this estimate of gross revenue, the directors proceeded to say that their operating costs would be low because most of the traffic was in the downgrade direction, and hence they should be able to haul this traffic for a cost of only 40 per cent of the revenue, for an annual net profit of $135,360! The actual earnings on the first 16 miles of line in the third quarter of 1874 were $1511.82 net. This, in itself, wasn't bad for a beginning. The road had eked out this income by such ingenious traffic solicitation as hauling Sunday-school excursions to Morrison Springs, and it had earned itself the nickname of "Sunday-School Route."

The success of the Denver & Rio Grande was quoted as proof for the practicability of using the narrow gauge. This was at the height of the

Scenic and engineering marvel of the old South Park were the Palisades west of Alpine Tunnel. The large photo shows the line when it was still in service; the inset, today. Notice the track doubling back far below in the valley.

Otto C. Perry, U. S. Rail Dealer, Ohio

L. C. McClure

narrow-gauge boom. In the 1870's many a railroad thought that if the Rio Grande could scale the Rockies with narrow gauge, narrow gauge could do anything, and by 1879 there was a total of 4188 miles of narrow-gauge railroad in 34 states.

The directors aggressively solicited business, especially immigration to points on the line; and annual passes were offered to new settlers. Still the railroad didn't go forward. Capital was lacking, and even the supreme energies of Governor Evans could not secure the wherewithall to extend into South Platte Canyon and the mountains.

THE beginning of the Leadville silver boom in 1877 changed all this. The embryo road had a goal offering rich traffic for any railroad which could connect it with Denver. The Rio Grande tried to get into South Platte Canyon first in order to build itself a shortcut to boomtown Leadville; but just when things seemed darkest for the South Park and Governor Evans had been asked to resign because of his inability to get capital, he disappeared and later turned up with a carload of rails and the announcement that more were on the way from the East. He had secured a loan from a Cincinnati bank, and the South Park started up the canyon which it was to occupy exclusively for 60 years to come. By 1878 the rail head had reached Bailey's, within economical wagon-hauling distance of Leadville, and a considerable portion of the Leadville traffic started to flow over South Park rails. This ended the road's financial difficulties.

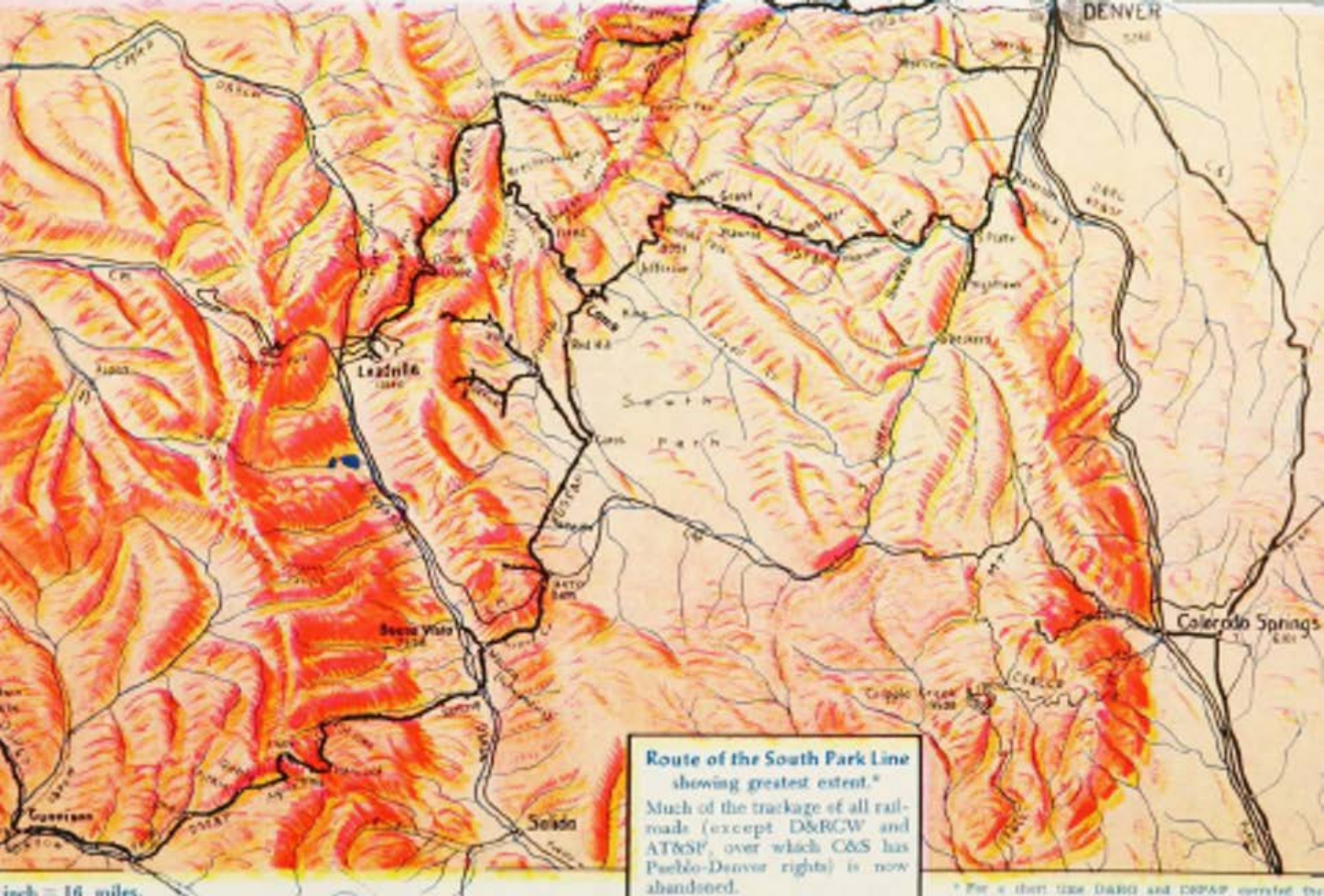
Governor Evans was right on the job, riding up and down the right of way on horseback and traveling the trains over the finished portions. Colonel C. W. Fisher, onetime general superintendent of the South Park, tells the story of an inspection trip with Evans: The two were riding on the cow catcher of a locomotive, just above Bailey's. As they rounded a curve both men saw a girl on the track. It was too late to signal the engineer to stop. Evans calmly let himself down to the bottom brace of the pilot, holding on to the link coupler with one hand, and with the other hand he pushed the girl off the track, out of the way of the locomotive. He then pulled himself up and reassumed his place on top of the cow catcher and continued his conversation with Fisher.

On February 10, 1880, the road reached the Arkansas River and ran a line into Buena Vista from which it intended to branch north up the Arkansas Valley to Leadville. The main line was continued west over Alpine Pass in 1880 and into Gunnison by 1882.

It was in the late '70's that a new but familiar figure entered the story, just as he did most railroad stories at about that time. The first narrow-gauge sleeper out of Denver had come west over the line, and from the platform stepped Jay Gould, his black derby firmly set on his ample cranium and his fine full beard neatly trimmed. He made a cash offer for an interest in the South Park, and though at first turned down he soon had an interest in not only the South Park but also the Rio Grande, which built into Buena Vista a short time later. Gould fathered a permanent joint-ownership and pooling arrangement for the present Rio Grande track between Buena Vista and Leadville. The South Park, under this arrangement, was assigned 40 per cent of all freight traffic between Leadville and Denver. Additional Leadville business also flowed to the South Park by wagon train over the direct route to Como and then via railroad to Denver. It was in those palmy days that the South Park averaged $10,000 a day, making even the rosiest prophecies of its founders sound like old-fashioned peanuts.

From the cab, last run of the narrow-gauge.

A. C. Kalmbach



Route of the South Park Line
*showing greatest extent.**

Much of the trackage of all railroads (except D&RGW and AT&SF, over which C&S has Pueblo-Denver rights) is now abandoned.

* For a short time D&RG and D&RGW operated the

A. C. Kalmbach.

Narrow-gauge Consolidation No. 76, which pulled the last narrow-gauge train on the old South Park, is shown at Leadville.

But Jay Gould was not content with only the revenues from the railroad. He had bigger schemes. Perhaps he planned to compete with the Union Pacific and perhaps he didn't, but at any rate he made it look as if he were going to join his Kansas Pacific and the South Park into a transcontinental line roughly paralleling the Union Pacific. The UP became alarmed and in 1889 bought the Gould interests in the Kansas Pacific, the Denver Pacific, and the Denver, South Park & Pacific.

First act of the new owners was to cancel the perpetual joint-interest in the Buena Vista-Leadville line and to substitute for it a trackage lease agreement which was cancelable by either party on six months' notice. General Palmer of the Rio Grande waited only until the next day to serve his six months' notice of cancellation of the lease. The South Park was thus deprived of its entrance into the fruitful Leadville territory, and the only course was to build its own line. Construction was begun almost immediately on the roundabout line from Como over Boreas Pass and Fremont Pass, and this trackage reached Leadville in 1884. Because of the heavy grades, the South Park could never again successfully compete on a profitable basis for the Leadville traffic.

Not only did the South Park increase its operating costs into Leadville, but the traffic itself began gradually to fade away. The fortunes of all the Colorado narrow-gauge railroads have always been inextricably bound up with the mines. The big smelters were originally at Denver; but smelters and reduction mills were later built close to the mines, reducing the transportation of ore. The South Park started to lose money—first a little, then more—until the bonds were in default; and in 1889 the road was sold to another Union Pacific subsidiary, the Denver, Leadville & Gunnison. This, in turn, went into receivership in 1894 and was acquired by the Colorado & Southern in 1898, along with the Clear Creek Canyon narrow-gauge lines of the Colorado Central. It was shortly thereafter that the Colorado & Southern acquired a half interest in the Colorado Midland, and the South Park line had its last chance to become part of a real transcontinental routing. There were plans afoot to use the Colorado & Southern line down into South Park as a Colorado Midland shortcut from Denver, to standard-gauge it and to connect it up with the Midland west over Hagerman Pass and into the valley of the Colorado. This fell through, and the South Park continued its way as a division of the C&S, which was in turn acquired by the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy in 1908.

The first important shrinkage in mileage came in 1910, when serious cave-ins in the Alpine Tunnel and washouts along Trout Creek made it necessary to discontinue through-service between Garos (just south of Como) and Gunnison. A short portion of the line below Buena Vista was operated independently until 1925, and the D&RGW operated a portion of the line west of the Alpine Tunnel until the same year, but the old South Park was through as an artery of traffic to Gunnison.

It was pre-ordained that the Gunnison line would be the first to go, because the operating expenses over Alpine Pass were tremendous, and the Gunnison traffic, like that of Leadville, was subject to D&RGW competition. While operating expenses on normal narrow-gauge lines are roundly three times as much as on standard-gauge, the operating expenses over Alpine Pass were probably five times as great.

The trains have not gone through the tunnel for 33 years, but hundreds of railfans still make annual pilgrimages to the spot, looking for old

spikes or pieces of Union Pacific rail which they carry off as souvenirs. The enginemen of a generation ago would have grunted disgustedly at such goings-on. To them, Alpine Tunnel was but an incident in getting the trains over the division—a big incident, to be sure, and sometimes a troublesome one. Often an engineer on a train up from Gunnison confidently cut off the helper at the west end of the tunnel, went on alone in seemingly good weather, and found fast-drifting snow when he emerged from the east portal. Many a train got stuck near Alpine Pass. This was costly to the management, but it undoubtedly added to the romantic aura which today hangs about the place.

The Leadville line, in spite of earlier abandonment petitions, continued in service until the last train left Leadville for Denver on April 10, 1937. In 1931, at the time of an earlier abandonment petition, the C&S offered to give the Leadville line to Victor A. Miller, who has made such a success of operating the Rio Grande Southern on slim revenue. Miller proposed to operate daily motor trains similar to the famous *Galloping Goose* of the RGS, homemade from handcar parts and Pierce Arrow autos. Towns along the line objected violently. They felt they had better chances of keeping an unprofitable line in operation if it were owned by a big corporation than if it were owned by an individual. Perhaps they were right temporarily; but the line is gone now, and who knows but what Miller, with the ingenious methods and the freedom of action which only an individual can attain, might have made a success of the old South Park?

After the abandonment of service in 1937, attempts were made to organize a local company to take over; but the offer to give the road away no longer held. The price of junk was too high. The South Park Railroad Company was organized on April 14, 1937, and the district court of Leadville awarded it temporary possession of the line between Fremont Pass and Waterton, almost to Denver. Seven engines at Leadville were supposed to return to Denver on April 14 with most of the cars, but the railroad held them because beyond Climax they would be in no-man's-land, and the Summit County sheriff threatened to stop the returning rolling stock.

By May, 1938, all of the legal entanglements had been cleared up, however, and the junking began. All that remained were the small section from Denver to Waterton, which has since been standard-gauged, and the 14-mile two per cent grade from Leadville to the molybdenum mines at Climax, atop Fremont Pass. It is this 14-mile grade at Climax which has just been standard-gauged, ending the history of the narrow-gauge South Park. The conversion not only allows one engine instead of two to handle the traffic to Climax, but it saves the expense of reloading all freight from standard- to narrow-gauge cars at Leadville. This traffic, incidentally, is mostly upgrade—food, coal, and other supplies for the mines. This again illustrates that trend of mining which has taken away so much of the traffic which formerly kept the Colorado narrow-gauges busy and prosperous: If all of the molybdenum ore were shipped via railroad to reduction mills, it would be 18,000 tons a day of traffic; but as it is, the reduction mills straddle the Continental Divide right in front of the mines, and a few box cars a day carry the molybdenum concentrate down to the main line in barrels.

The Denver, South Park & Pacific lives only as 14 miles of grade occupied by standard-gauge rails. The heavy Consolidation locomotives pulling the freight up to the Climax mine are quite different from the little Mason bogies which hauled the Sunday-school specials from Denver to Morrison Springs nearly 70 years ago.

A. C. Kalmbach

The end of the South Park. The caboose of the last narrow-gauge train swings over a three-rail switch into Leadville.