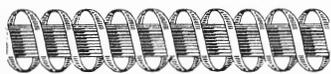


DSP&P



Alpine Tunnel



11,608 feet high and 1,800 feet long

By John Norwood
Photos courtesy of the
Colorado Historical Society
Illustration by Tonnie Draper

During the first three decades of railroad building in Colorado, there was a lemming-like aspect to the suicidal tendency of the builders to start at a point on the Front Range and pick a point on the Western Slope to which they intended to go. Then they started laying down track toward it.

He! and high water or the highest, roughest terrain of the main Rocky Mountain ranges could not stop them. Cost of building? No one worried, for there was a whole new empire

out there to haul goods to, and gold, silver and coal, cattle, sheep and lumber for the backhaul.

The D&RG led the way and set the stage by opening the Rio Grande segment, the San Juan, Grand River Valley and Utah. Mining of all types boomed, farmers flocked in and cattle or sheep raisers were already there or coming.

NO LOGIC USED

Each of these began immediately to demand railroads and starry-eyed railroad magnates listened without applying any logical engineering or economic standards to their decisions to give the people what they wanted. What did it matter that each of these newly opening areas was just beyond or encircled by the high barren peaks of the Con-

tinental Divide? So they forgot the old mountain dwellers' axiom, "Never climb over anything you can go around."

These magnates were optimistic gamblers. They believed the resources of the new empire would last forever.

Eight great "backbones" were either pierced or grades laid over them at exorbitant costs, gauged by the value of money at the time. New and novel engineering and construction methods were devised as each new problem arose. Each new area reached by rail produced enough revenue during the first decade after arrival to pay the building costs.

But after the first exuberant activity, the resources began to be depleted and profits for the railroads became less year by year. Event-

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This 1975 photo of the DSP&P Alpine Tunnel shows about 300 feet of the interior from the first big rock fall toward the apex of the tunnel and the east portal beyond.

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ually the rails were pulled up and the once prosperous communities they served deteriorated to ghost town status.

These eight cloud-busting rail lines that competed for the honor of claiming theirs was the highest were:

- D&RG, Cumbres Pass - 10,015 feet. (The Cumbres and Toltec Scenic still operates a subsidized passenger attraction during the summer and early fall. Its future is uncertain.)
- D&RG, Marshall Pass - 10,856 feet.
- Silverton Railroad - Sheridan Pass - 11,113 feet.
- Colorado Midland - Hagerman Tunnel - 11,500 feet.
- DSP&P/C&S - Boreas Pass - 11,482 feet.
- DSP&P/C&S/DRG (Blue River Line) - Fremont Pass - 11,320 feet.

- DSP&P - Alpine Tunnel - 11,608 feet.
- Moffat Road (D&NW-D&SL) - Corona (Rollins) Pass - 11,680 feet. (Hagerman Tunnel and Corona were standard gauge, the others were narrow gauge. Moffat Road was Johnny-come-lately. Corona was not topped until 1904.)

Building and operating the Central Pacific portion of the first transcontinental railroad was heroic, but there were features related to the eight in Colorado that equalled or surpassed those of the CP.

The Alpine Tunnel was one such. As 1880 neared, there was intense rivalry between Palmer (D&RG), John Evans/Jay Gould (DSP&P) and the AT&SF RR for access to Leadville. (The D&RG and AT&SF had a second contest going involving the Pueblo-Denver route and Palmer's drive to Santa Fe. The Tri-Partite Treaty solved the latter contest.)

A settlement was reached whereby the D&RG was conceded Leadville. DSP&P was granted the Pitkin-Gunnison (Colorado) country. The AT&SF had lost the Royal Gorge War and John Evans primarily wanted the Pitkin-Gunnison area. As a reward for beating the Santa Fe at Royal Gorge, Gould went along with the D&RG having priority to Leadville. The D&RG was building toward California Gulch (Leadville) and granted DSP&P trackage rights from Nathrop (on Arkansas River) to Leadville.

D&RG entered Leadville in July, 1880. DSP&P was creeping from Nathrop on a shelf above Chalk Creek westward. It reached St. Elmo in December, 1880 and paused there awaiting work on the Alpine Tunnel. John Evans had started work on this tunnel in 1879. Romley and Hancock were reached in August 1881.

Drilling of Alpine Tunnel was in charge of an engineer, James A. Evans (no relation to John), an old friend of General Dodge from KP and D&RG days. One of his first tasks was building a wagon road to aid construction. The contractor who built the road was one of the tunnel contractors. He spent \$25,000 on the road and \$50,000 for tunnel supplies, then went bankrupt.

Location of the tunnel was under Altman Pass (12,124 feet). This pass was found by a stage driver, "Colonel" Henry Altman while hunting for a wagon route from St. Elmo to Pitkin.

CONSTANT ATTENTION

The east portal located two miles from Romley at an elevation of 11,600 feet was presumed to be in a geologic structure that would have had the tunnel bored through solid rock. This proved inaccurate, for the tunnel on completion was in a structure that was 95 per cent deteriorated granite and loose stone. A flow of water through the structure was also present. Due to the short length of the tunnel, this flow presented operating problems by ice accumulation during winter months. It also made constant attention and maintenance of the track structure mandatory.

The unstable nature of the structure required importation and use of 12" x 12" red-wood timbers and lagging. The tunnel, 1,800 feet long, was 12 feet wide and 17 feet high. The apex at the center point was at an elevation of 11,608 feet. When train operation began, and as the tunnel was used, a bright red light was kept burning at the apex to serve as a marker to locomotive engineers to know when the apex had been reached. A total of 11,608 feet at the apex represented a record achieved by any American railroad until the Moffat Road topped Corona (Rollins) Pass.

The West Portal was at the headwaters of Middle Quartz Creek near Brittle Silver Basin at the foot of Tomichi Pass on the trail from White Pine. To reach the tunnel, the railroad climbed vertically 4,500 feet from the Arkansas River in a distance of 21 miles. At the West Portal was a snow-shed 650 feet long; at East Portal was one 150 feet long. No ventilating system was required, as a strong, constant

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ABOVE. The rear car of this passenger train just clears the snowshed located at the east portal of the Alpine Tunnel. The train was stopped here on April 30, 1896 for a brake test before starting the descent on the steep grade to Hancock. **BELOW.** Hancock, Colorado, shown here in 1888, would become a ghost town with the last train run out in 1926.



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wind kept it clear of smoke. However, one locomotive engineer, "Dad" Martinez, did die, apparently of carbon monoxide fumes on his engine while it was stalled in the tunnel.

This death, plus the death of 45 miners due to a premature firing of explosive materials, and several other deaths from rock falls or shifting timbers, did result in a legendary story of bad luck in the tunnel—"The Curse of the Alpine".

Alpine Tunnel was holed through December 21, 1881 at a cost of \$242,090: a great sum at that time for building just one-third of a mile of railroad track. But John Evans was not losing any sleep; he sold the DSP&P to Jay Gould on November 9, 1880. It had taken 699 days to put a hole under Altman Pass.

The first train run through the Alpine Tunnel reached Woodstock on the Western Slope in June, 1882 and Pitkin in July. The DSP&P reached Gunnison September 1, 1882, more than a year behind the D&RG which laid rail into Gunnison on August 8, 1881.

ADD TO LEGEND

The first train added to the legend of "The Curse of the Alpine." Twenty DSP&P officials and wives riding in a Pullman sleeper behind Engine No. 11, the *Ouray*, had to "join the bird gang" and jump from the car when it became evident the engine and car was going to "run wild". There are no details, except DSP&P Chief Engineer L. H. Eicholtz suffered a broken arm and leg. The balance must have landed in a cushioning snowbank.

The Alpine Tunnel was one of the more notable features in the history of the DSP&P which began in 1872. From 1880 until 1889, after being acquired by Gould from Evans, it continued building toward other mining booms, Leadville and Breckenridge, and the Baldwin coal fields. It was sold to the Union Pacific in 1881 but continued operating as the DSP&P. The operating title was changed in 1890 to the Denver, Leadville and Gunnison Railway. Corporate stock and management was vested in an entity consisting of the UP and the Denver Gulf Railway. The Colorado and Southern acquired ownership in 1898; the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy in 1908. The last two owners used a C&S insignia but for its entire life railroaders and others always called it the South Park.

Hancock was a focal point for operations involving Alpine Tunnel. Large crews worked continuously in winter fighting snow. There were many snowsheds but much plowing and hand shovelling was still required. Snowslides were frequent, often burying or derailing trains. One snowslide buried 13 men, women and children under 30 feet of snow. Eastward trains arrived Hancock with wheels and brakeshot hot and smoking, for the grade from the east portal to Hancock required heavy and severe braking. Mark Twain, a passenger on one train arriving at Hancock, remarked that the ride was one of the most awesome experiences of his life.

The last train ran through Alpine Tunnel in 1910. But in 1926 a train was run out of

Hancock eastward to carry the last remaining miners and their possessions away. Hancock became a ghost town. A few crumbling cabins and a mine up behind the city is all that remains, plus the scars on the mountains of the railroad grade.

ST. ELMO

St. Elmo was called Forest City when the tunnel was being drilled. It was so incorporated in 1880 and was the biggest and most colorful city in the district. The U.S. Postal Service demanded a name change, and St. Elmo was the result. It was an active station and community, and flourished during the 80s and 90s. Population varied depending on mining activity from 1,500 to 3,000.

Romley was built around the Mary Murphy Mine which was discovered in the mid 70's. This one mine contributed greatly to the activity and prosperity of Hancock, Romley and St. Elmo. With the arrival of the DSP&P, mining activity boomed. For a while the com-

munity was called Murphy's Switch. A telpherage system 5,000 feet long moved ore from mine to rail side.

Alpine Tunnel station was necessary to accommodate the employees it was necessary to permanently assign there. In addition, train and engine crews during the winter months had to be housed and fed during snow blockades or for other reasons. There was a stone enginehouse with coal bins and water tank, a bunkhouse and quarter for an agent, a telegrapher and a watchman, whose duty it was to patrol the tunnel and approaches.

There was a company eating house operated by a robust type woman who bragged she cooked and served the best antelope steaks west of the Mississippi. DSP&P people, while talking to her agreed, but among themselves commented, "I wish all the antelope in South Park would die and disappear so we did not have to eat it **every day**."

Sn3

A doubleheader freight train with helper locomotive at rear pauses on an undisclosed section of the Alpine Tunnel route. Note the airhose on the pilot and the link and pin coupler.

