

The Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad

By Ernie Little

In May, 2017 the wife and I found ourselves visiting relatives in the state of Colorado. Of course, we took the opportunity to take a five hour drive from Colorado Springs through the San Juan Mountains to a little town called Durango, Colorado the home of the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad.

The Durango and Silverton is a narrow gauge railroad that stretches forty-five miles from Durango, Colorado to Silverton, Colorado along the Animas River through one of the many scenic areas of the state. The mineral riches of Silverton, located deep in the San Juan Mountains provided the need for the construction of a railroad to transport materials between Silverton and Durango. The line was constructed as the Silverton Branch of the Denver & Rio Grande Railway starting in 1881 and completion to Silverton in July of 1882. At the time the Denver & Rio Grande was headed by General William Jackson Palmer who was very involved with the development of the narrow gauge railroads in the area. The Silverton line was the first to use steel rail versus iron rail on the Denver & Rio Grande. In 1981 Charles E. Bradshaw, Jr., a fruit grower and business man, purchased the line and rolling stock of the Silverton Branch. The name of the branch was changed to the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge. The line was sold again in 1997 to First American Railways, Inc., and shortly thereafter in 1998 it was sold to the current owners Carol and Al Harper who are the founders of American Heritage Railways. The Harpers also own The Great Smoky Mountain Railroad in Dillsboro, North Carolina.



Last Spring we had made on-line reservations to ride the train Presidential Class which meant that we would ride in a car named Cinco Animas. This car is limited to passengers age 21 and over and has Casey, a Durango native, as the porter and tour guide. This car was originally built as a 30 passenger immigrant sleeper car with overhead Spartan bare plank bunks in 1883. After many restorations and conversion to a business car in 1943 this car was restored in 1963 by five individuals who comprised the Cinco Animas Corporation. Now the car, in the picture to the left (picture 1), is half coach/sleeper and half tables and chairs with a large rear deck.



Our ride on the train took place on a Tuesday and we found ourselves at the Durango (picture 2) at 7:30 AM with a departure time of 8:00 AM. The Cinco Animas was the last car of the train making that deck area I spoke of earlier a very appealing place to sit or stand to see the scenery and take pictures while enjoying the train ride. From Durango and then Hermosa, the line follows the Animas River for most of the route. The setting offers many spectacular sights which include waterfalls (picture 3) cascading from sides of canyons, wildlife, abandoned silver mines, and many areas where the rail right-of-way drops off significantly to the river below. The river normally flows at a rate of around 400 cubic feet of water a second in the month of April to a high of 5,000 cubic feet of water a second in June when the snow runoff is underway. Due to the topography of the route



this allows for a view of gentle water in the flat areas and raging rapids where the river drops rapidly in elevation. Durango and the immediate surroundings are on an area of level plain from which the route continues uphill to Silverton. For approximately the first four to five miles the route followed what appeared to be a lazy river in a valley with beautiful mountains on both sides. Then the climb to Silverton started and in place of the varied grasses in the valley, rock cuts and many different species of trees came into sight.



We then came to Rockwood Station, (picture 4) a depot on the Durango Silverton Line. Here is where the railroad keeps its' maintenance of way equipment and other track related supplies. The Durango keeps firefighting equipment and staff here due to the fire danger created by possible sparks from the steam locomotive. They patrol the line in a small two person speeder following the train as it proceeds along the line. It was here that we noted that there was a helicopter following the train also which Casey told us the company had an observation helicopter that also patrolled the line for fires. This is also the last time we will see a highway until we get to Silverton as most of the rail route is at least 1 to 2 miles from the road from Durango to Silverton. If you want to see wilderness it is here from Rockwood to Silverton on the rail.



We proceed through the first of many rock cuts (picture 5) that are just a little wider than the train and cross the Animas River for the first of five times on the route. The picture to the left was taken after we went through the first railroad cut, approximately 40 feet deep, just outside Rockwood.

About 20 miles into our trip, we see the Tacoma power plant, a turbine electric producing plant built in 1904 that originally was built to supply power for the mining operations in the Silverton area, but still operates providing power to the residents. Casey told us that the plant got its' name due to the foreman of the construction company that built the plant. When the turbines arrived from the factory, by rail, the shipping boxes they had been shipped to Tacoma at one point. He deduced that therefore the power plant had to be the Tacoma Power Plant.



Next, about 25 miles out of Durango, we see the Tall Timber Lodge, (picture 6) a resort, only accessible by the Durango and Silverton, where until recently you could ride to, stay in a five star resort, and then return to Durango. The resort has operated for at least 24 years as a five star resort, but now is a site where you can soar through the trees on one of many zip lines that have been installed in the trees. The owners now offer you the opportunity to stay there and learn how to ride a zip line and have zip lines have different degrees of difficulty to ride. You can find more information at www.soaringcolorado.com.

At approximately the 28 mile point we encountered the first of two wyes that the Durango and Silverton have on the line. The Cascade Canyon Wye was constructed in 1981 due to allow the company to turn the train around on the wye and proceed back to Durango during the winter season snowfall. The train

may not be able to get to Silverton due to the amount of snow that the area experiences. From this point to Silverton there are several areas that are avalanche prone and the railroad will not operate to Silverton when the avalanche potential is present.



Continuing along our way we come to one of the water tanks (picture 7) along the route at Neddleton where we stop to allow the steam engine to take on water. After which we proceed to Silverton and the end of the line. And I mean the end of the line as there are no bumpers, warning signs, no nothing at the end. The tracks just end in the middle of the road!



The picture to the left (picture 8) was taken after the train backed down to the Silverton Wye to be turned around for the trip back to Durango. The town was got its' name from the main industry that was located there. That industry was Silver mining the primary reason the Silverton Branch was constructed. While we are exploring the town the train backs up to the Silverton Wye and is turned around for the trip back to Durango. Silverton is located in a valley between mountains at an elevation of a mere 9,218 feet above sea level. Durango, where we started is at an elevation of 6,512 feet above sea level so we have gone up 2,706 feet. Durango has one paved street, the rest are gravel or dirt. Not much different from the days it was bustling with activities and other things we won't talk about here. Our tour guide, Casey, told us that the graduating Senior high school class last year consisted of 4 students. If it wasn't for tourism Silverton would not be able to survive as the last operating mine, Sunnyside, shut down in 1991 due to the mineral prices on the market. The town is going through a change from a silver mining town to a ski town.



The wife and I explored the town and found that there were a couple of bars, grills, ice cream stands, craft and other retail buildings, and restaurants like you would find in an old town. There is also a museum, a jail, and a heritage center. We ate at the Shady Lady Grill (picture 9) on Blair Street and found out that it was located in the structure that housed the last operating bordello in town. At around 1:30 PM the train pulled back into town and sounded the whistle calling all those who were going back to Durango to board and depart.



Riding behind the steam engine shown in the picture to the left, (picture 10) the wife and I thoroughly enjoyed this scenic train ride. We left Durango at 8 AM went to Silverton and returned to Durango at approximately 6 PM. The train went about 15 to 20 miles per hour most of the time. Our porter and tour guide, Casey, was a young woman who had worked for the train company for about ten years and provided a significant amount of history about the railroad and the car we were riding in. We were served soda and light snack foods on the while traveling in both directions and if you wanted the porter had a well-stocked bar and was capable of making just about any kind of drink you could ask for. The scenery was awesome and in

combination with the interaction with the others passengers made for a day we will not forget. More information regarding the Durango Silverton Narrow Gauge Train can be found at www.durangotrain.com.