

The “Chili Line”

By Antonio Duran

The Denver and Rio Grande Narrow Gauge train ran from Alamosa, Colorado to Santa Fe, New Mexico. This railroad was built in the latter part of the 18th century. It followed the course of the Rio Grande, thus its name.

The railroad was built through the mountains and valleys. The purpose of this line was to connect the Denver line with the standard gauge railroad that came to Santa Fe from the main line at Lamy. There was a passenger train that went through Embudo, NM at 11:00 AM, heading south and another that went northeast at 2:30 PM, every day. At one time, when passengers were plentiful, two locomotives were used to pull the coaches up the steep grades going northeast towards Antonito. At Antonito the coaches from Santa Fe merged with the ones from Durango and a single locomotive pulled the coach cars on to Alamosa which was the end of the line. From here on to Denver the railroad was a standard gauge.

Most of the merchants and farmers from the Espanola Valley and surrounding mountain villages used this train to transport their merchandise and farm products. Many of the farmers raised red chile to market in Colorado and used the train to transport, so the train was nicknamed the “**Chili Line**”. This train also served as the mail train. The postal clerks had a difficult time pronouncing some of the local names, for example they would call Embudo, “Emburro” and Taos, “Teas”. Some minerals from the Harding and Copper Hill mines were also shipped on this line as this railroad the only means of transportation out of the mountains. Embudo was the stopping point for people of the northern mountain villages. The railroad was the modern transportation of the day since the only other mode of getting around was horse and buggy.

When I was old enough to ride a horse I would make trips to Embudo to meet my father (Jose Rafael Duran) who had been working in Colorado or Utah. Some of the memories are very vivid—I would get up early in the morning and saddle the horses and I would be on my way to the station to pick up some relatives who were coming by train. I had to gallop all the way in order to meet the 2:30 PM train. When I got there I would feed my horse grain or hay which I carried in a sack and anxiously wait for the train to arrive. I would go into the depot and look at the clock to see what time it was. Because the clock had Roman numerals I could not tell what time it was so I would always ask someone there. I usually had plenty of time to wait since the train was never on time, so I would amuse myself by playing on the rails, always keeping my ears open for any kind of noise that would tell me the train was arriving, and give me time to get off the tracks. To me the locomotive was such a monstrous engine and when the train arrived I would inspect it from one end to the other and was so amazed as to its greatness. I even peeked into the firebox to see that there were no horses pulling the train. The train would stop long enough to let passengers off and deliver the mail to the different mail carriers who would pick up the mail for the local communities – here again I would amuse myself by listening to the mail clerks pronouncing the local names – Chismal or Chamiso, instead of Chamisal.

There were no restaurants for the people to eat in so they had their lunches along and would eat them under the trees along the Rio Grande. Some of the people who arrived on the train were shepherders who had been herding sheep in Wyoming or Nevada and would go to the depot agent check and see if their bedrolls had arrived. The first time I rode the train was when I was about 16 years old. I went with my brother to herd sheep in Colorado. We went to the Embudo station with the mail carrier who by then was using a truck to haul the mail to and from the villages. We bought our tickets to Pueblo and waited. It was thrill to ride the train and to be going away from home to work like the other men did.

The Chili Line did not operate very long after the 1930's. The bus companies and trucking firms took most of the business away from the line. When one of the railroad agents came to my store in Dixon and asked me if I was getting my merchandise by truck or by train, and I told him it was by truck he told me they were planning on discontinuing the train because they were losing money.

Our country lost a bit of romance when it lost that historic old train. It had been the life line to so many persons for so many years. The hills had become silent as there were no more trains tooting their whistles at every curve or cow it would come to. My wife (Dorothy Barnes) rode on one of the last trains (1938) that came to Embudo when she came to teach school in Dixon. She talks about her experience riding such a small train with such hard seats and dusty coaches, and how she would look out the window and see the hills and rivers below. When she finally arrived at her destination she was met by the missionaries from the mission school. When I would show my children where the railroad depot had been and how their mother made her first trip to New Mexico on that little train, I would also tell them that the reason they took the train away and sold it to China was because I told the railroad company to sent it far away that their mother would not have a chance to go back home again.

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