



# C&TS Dispatch

Vol. 17 No. 3

FALL 2004

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## 1927—Bypass Chama for Willow Creek?

by Kevin Corwin

Map by Noreen and Roger Breeding

If you're reading this article, odds are pretty good that you're a member of the Friends of the Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad. And I'd wager that you have a special place in your heart for those namesake places along the railroad.

We all are aware of the problems the railroad has faced the past few years, and most of us heard scuttlebutt along the way that the railroad might close. Those problems and the rumors that flew around them made us all very aware of just how precious this piece of real estate is to us, and how easily it could disappear. Luckily, it seems the fortunes of the railroad are turning for the better, and we will be enjoying its history, beauty, and unique character for the foreseeable future.

Pause and reflect for a moment: what would your reaction have been if the line from Antonito to Chama had been torn up, removed, and eliminated? It almost happened! Plans were in the works to vacate the entire line, remove the tracks, and abandon Cumbres Pass and the Toltec Gorge. There was an alternative considered which would have kept the Cumbres line in operation, but it would have been converted to standard gauge! We can all thank our lucky stars for the stock market crash of 1929, because the plans to bypass or standard-gauge Cumbres were initiated by the railroad in 1927. The Great Depression is the

most probable reason that none of these plans came to fruition.

While researching another subject at the Colorado Historical Society, I happened across a file marked: "New Line, Volcano - Chama, New Mexico" (CHS file: MSS#513, Box#10, FF#270). The file contains correspondence among various railroad officials who were considering several alternate routings of the line between Antonito and Chama, and the standard-gauging of the line. The file is incomplete, but there is enough correspondence to clearly show that there was a strong desire to replace the Cumbres Pass line with one that would have easier grades and curves, less snow, and provide access to additional stock and lumber traffic for the railroad.

The first internal railroad memo in the file is dated July 15, 1927. It is addressed to Mr. A. C. Shields, D&RGW General Manager, and is signed by J. G. Gwyn and W. A. Balcom, Office Engineer. The first paragraph clearly lays out their assignment, it reads as follows:

"In accordance with your request the undersigned have recently completed joint examination of the country between the Santa Fe Branch, as far south as Tres Piedras and the Chama River. The object was to ascertain if there is a practical railroad route thru that part of the Rocky Mountains; and if found, its length, gradients, cost, etc. as far as can be determined without survey, in order that comparison can be made with the advantages presented in

the proposed plan to standard gauge the line via Cumbres Pass."

This tells us that there had already been work done to determine the cost and effort necessary to standard gauge the line over Cumbres. The memo goes on to describe the topography of the areas they examined, extolls the farming and forestry potential that the alternate lines would open up, and it paints a generally rosy picture of minimal bridging and grading work to build the alternative routes. On the second page we find a paragraph that presents the details of the proposed line:

"The proposed line would leave the operating track at Volcano (18 miles south of Antonito, and, at elevation 8,487 feet, the highest named point between Antonito and Santa Fe) and proceed in a general westerly direction with good alignment and maximum gradient not exceeding +1.65% without adverse, to the summit of the pass at M.P. 22. Thence with descending 1.8% grade it would follow the higher ground around the southerly side of the large meadow or 'park' at the head of Gavelon Creek and down the southerly side of that creek and of Brazos River into the upper part of Brazos Canon. As the slopes of the mountains are too high to be surmounted without undue loss of grade and it is impracticable to farther follow the perpendicular walls of the canon, it is proposed on the 30<sup>th</sup> mile to construct a tunnel through the point of the peninsula formed by the ridge separating Brazos River from a

See *Bypass*, page 4

## C&TS Dispatch

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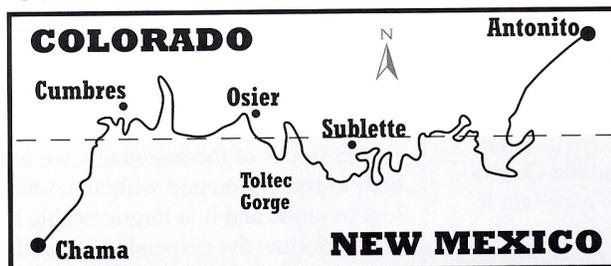
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The C&TS Dispatch is published four times each year by the Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, Inc., 6005 Osuna Road NE, Albuquerque, NM 87109. The Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, Inc., is a New Mexico nonprofit corporation.

The Friends is the official museum support group for the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, a 64-mile-long operating railroad and museum of railroad history and technology between Antonito, Colorado, and Chama, New Mexico. The railroad is owned by Colorado and New Mexico and is operated by the Rio Grande Railway Preservation Corporation. As the museum support group, the Friends is dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the railroad. The Friends is an Affiliate Member of ARM (Association of Railway Museums) and a Member of TRAIN (Tourist Railway Association).

Family membership in the Friends is \$25.00 per year; outside the USA membership is \$35.00. All contributions are fully tax deductible and will be gratefully accepted. Please write us in Albuquerque or call us at (505) 880-1311 for information about the Friends. The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad is both a National and a State Registered Historic Site.

### Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad



Denver & Rio Grande Railway—1880 to 1886  
Denver & Rio Grande Railroad—1886 to 1921  
Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad—1921 to 1970  
Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad—1970 to 2004  
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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



### Chama

*Of all the towns and cities I lived and worked in on the narrow gauge (and standard gauge), Chama was my favorite.*

—John B. Norwood, *Rio Grande Narrow Gauge Recollections*

Chama is a mountain town. A dusty, western ranching center with a Hispanic heritage. It's what

those who regret the gentrification of the West would call a *real* town. Tucked away, far from regional airport, interstate highway, or ski resort, it remains untransformed in culture and presentation. It is the antithesis of Aspen. Or Telluride. Celebrities looking for the newest *last great place* will build their trophy homes in Red Lodge, Montana, long before they stumble upon Chama. Not that they would be inclined to stay even if they did.

But of course there is another facet of Chama—something so definitive that the town's fundamental character is preserved in ways that zoning ordinances and land use planning could never accomplish on their own: it was and remains a *railroad town*. It was created over 120 years ago by the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad as a division point at the foot of the western slope up to Cumbres. Today, with the line to Durango but a 35-year-old memory, Chama's role has shifted to that of being the western gateway to the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, successor to the D&RGW.

There is a story occasionally told around Chama, and even downstate, about a prominent former New Mexico elected official who once passed through town unaware of the railroad. This apocryphal story (somehow the term *urban legend* just doesn't fit Chama) speaks more to the esteem the railroad holds in the hearts of the C&TS faithful, than it does to its obscurity. Its retelling is way of saying that anyone within a long day's drive that doesn't know that Chama has rail service ought to be ashamed of himself. But judging by the strong financial support the railroad is now receiving from the states of New Mexico and Colorado, the folks in the statehouses in Santa Fe and Denver have little reason to feel ashamed these days.

It would be impossible to think of the railroad without thinking of Chama. This, of course, is partly due to their historic connection. But it's more than that. Quickly, can you name any other town in the Rocky Mountains today that would look as right as a setting for the C&TS? Telluride? The sight of that box canyon still packs a wallop for first time visitors, but the notion of coal smoke wafting over high-speed quad chair lifts wouldn't do much for ambience. Aspen? Let's be serious. Durango? Maybe, but you'd have to turn back the clock. Besides, it's already taken.

No doubt about it, Chama is essential to the C&TS experience. It's a railroad town in a way that other towns with historic railroads can only approach. In an era when railroads are largely invisible to communities and the press uses the terms "train" and "locomotive" interchangeably, Chama residents are tuning into KFLH's weekly broadcast of *Stack Talk*. Where else in America, or for that matter the world, can you listen to a radio show that regularly discusses locomotive boiler flues and running gear? This is a railroad-savvy community with citizens sophisticated enough to understand the value that locomotive whistles add to both public safety and atmosphere.

Wander into the Chama yard at train time and stand near the enginemen after they've completed their run. Listen in on their conversations with other employees. It's a timeless scene. It's the talk of genuine railroaders you'll hear, not that of actors who've just performed a sort of historical stage play for the customers. The fact is that the C&TS, with its 64 miles of mainline and a mountain range to cross, is simply far too challenging a railroad for it ever to be seen as just a stage for running trains as performance art.

The sons and daughters of Chama, along with those of its sister city of Antonito, have always had a heavy hand in running this railroad, even when it went by its old name. They repair the 80-year-old steam locomotives, fabricating many of the parts. It's by their skill and experience that daily trainloads of passengers are safely taken down the four-percent grade on the western slope of Cumbres Pass. And in the evening, after the train arrives at the depot, the neighbors of these railroaders will see to the comfort of those same visitors in their restaurants, shops, lodges and motels. Chama is a long way from Hilton Head, but the northern New Mexico culture extends a warmth and courtesy to all visitors that care to learn the tempo of Mountain Time and don't require tennis courts.

So here's to Chama—the last mountain town in the Rockies and the *new* narrow gauge capital of the world. Long may its people prosper, and long may their grandsons and granddaughters run steam trains over Cumbres Pass. And here's to the future generations of Friends volunteers who will stand behind them.

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## NEWS FROM THE RAILROAD

Compiled from "Friends of the C&TS News," a feature of the Friends' Web site—[www.cumbrestoltec.org](http://www.cumbrestoltec.org). Please refer to the Web site for more coverage of the events summarized here, as well as other news. The webmaster of the Friends' site is Director Curt Bianchi.

**July 2, 2004: Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, Inc. and Friends' controlled affiliate, Rio Grande Railway Preservation Corp., announced today the signing of an agreement that will change the legal relationship between the Friends and the RGRPC. No**

longer will RGRPC be controlled by Friends. Bob Craine, Friends Director, stated, "The original purposes to be served by Friends' control of the RGRPC have been accomplished, and there remains no compelling reason why the Friends should continue to control, through the election of directors, the RGRPC. The Restructuring Agreement will allow the Friends to focus exclusively on its historic preservation and interpretation mission for the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad."

Bob Witter, vice president of RGRPC, noted that, "In organizing RGRPC to operate the railroad Friends played an important role in keeping the railroad running. Friends have always been very supportive of RGRPC, but the time has come for us to become an independent non-profit corporation."

The Restructuring Agreement contains a number of important conditions, which must be fulfilled before the separation becomes effective, including certain legal and tax matters. While both parties expect the conditions to be satisfied and RGRPC's status as an independent organization to be effective by the end of 2004, there remains some uncertainty that the complex issues involved can be resolved as contemplated by the parties.

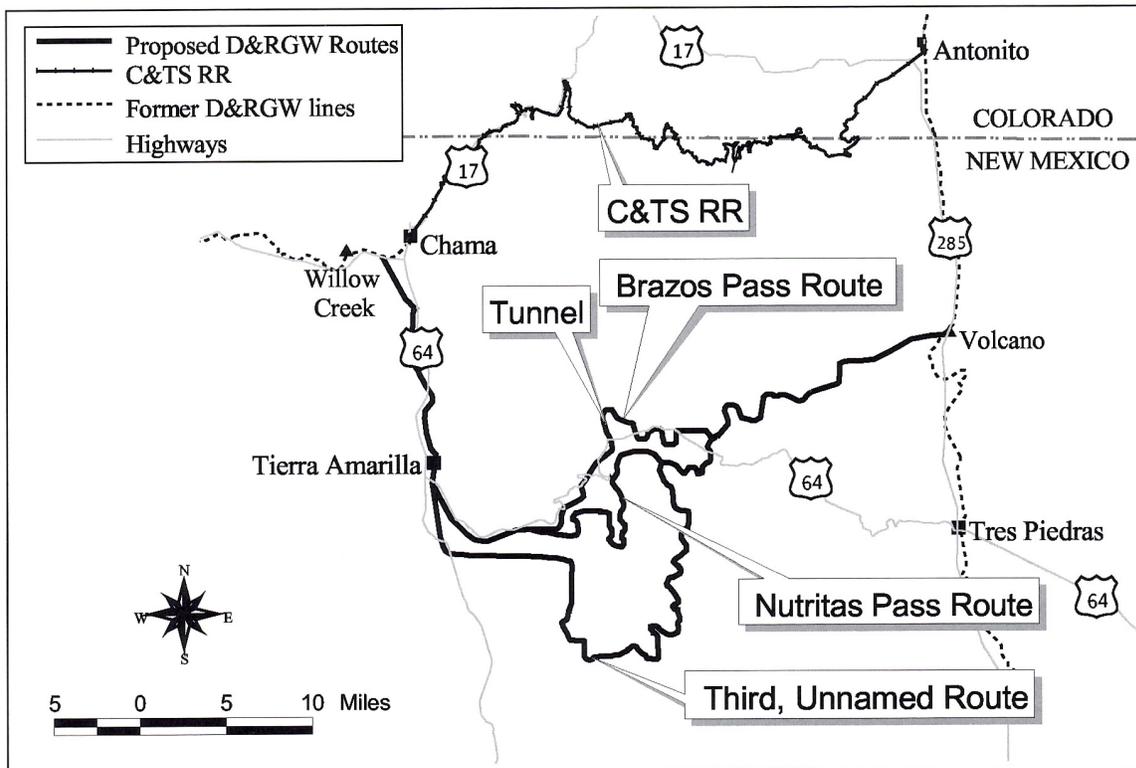
"Friends and RGRPC have an excellent and mutually supportive working relationship and we don't anticipate that will change in any respect," added Brian Shoup, Friends President and RGRPC Director. "We have kept commission officials apprised of our discussions and do not expect that this change, when effective, will have any effect on the Friends' or RGRPC's close relationship with the commission," Shoup stated.

**August 9, 2004: Curt Bianchi, webmaster of the Friends Web site, reminds readers of the C&TS Dispatch that the Web site includes an online roster of C&TS rolling stock.** The entries on the roster include historic and non-historic equipment. In addition, cars are listed that were once on the C&TS but are no longer there because they have been sold, traded, or converted to new cars. Photographs are included for nearly all current cars. You can access the database at <http://www.cumbrestoltec.org/rs.php>.

**September 2, 2004: This fall the Friends will erect a new 4,300 square foot car restoration facility (CRF) adjacent to the C&TS railroad yard in Antonito.** The building is designed to be a two-stall car shop with storage and shop capacity for up to four 30-foot freight cars. Although immediate plans call for only "dead" track into the structure for now, the track will eventually be connected to the balloon loop in the yard. The Friends Executive Committee has authorized a budget of \$70,000 for completion of the project in this calendar year. Friends director Ed Lowrance is the project manager.

Alcon Construction of Alamosa, Colorado, will be responsible for the poured foundation and for erecting the new facility on one of two adjoining lots owned by the Friends

*See News, page 6*



**Bypass, continued from p. 1**

tributary flowing into it from the south at this place. The proposed tunnel will be in hard sand stone about 3400 ft. in length on curve not exceeding 8°. Thence the line will be supported with 1.8% grade over comparatively favorable ground along the slopes of the mountains lying south of the Brazos River Canon to the forks of Nutritas Creek near M.P. 38. It will then proceed down the Nutritas Valley to Tierra Amarillo M.P. 52 (elevation 7537), and thence ascend Chama River Valley with maximum +1.00% grade to connection with the operated track near Willow Creek MP 350 (6 miles west of Chama)."

The memo goes on to state that "Willow Creek has been selected for the westerly connection instead of Chama, although the distance to Chama is less by one mile, because 6 miles of the existing track maximum adverse 1.42% grade can thereby be abandoned."

That's right folks, they planned to bypass Chama!

The memo also describes a second alternate route which would have utilized a pass seven miles south of the Brazos Pass route, which they arbitrarily named the "Nutritas Pass" route; and a third, unnamed route which would have been another seven miles further south in crossing the mountain range. Each of the more southerly routes created additional track mileage without significant benefit, thus they preferred the Brazos Pass route. The file in the CHS archives includes a large-scale hand-drawn map showing the three proposed routes. Sadly, it does not show the proposed Cumbres Pass route that would have included all the tunneling and rerouting.

Messrs. Gwyn and Balcom attached a cost analysis statement to their memo, outlining the distances, grades, costs, etc. of the various alternatives, including the Cumbres line. That statement is transcribed below in its entirety, so you can judge for yourself the pros and cons of each alternative they were studying. Pay special attention to the work involved in the Cumbres line option— it certainly would not have been the same line we all know and love. It appears they had proposed a complete rebuilding of the line, or at least 53.7 miles of it. The ruling grade in both directions on the standard gauge Cumbres line is shown as 2.00%, which would require a far different alignment than that used on the 4% out of Chama and the 1.42% out of Antonito. And notice the 7,000 feet of tunneling involved in the Cumbres rebuild. We can only speculate where the tunnel(s) may have been planned. (See Statement.)

Following the statement page is a summary which adds the following factors for consideration in line selection, aside from length of line, grades and curves:

1. The greater mileage of 25 miles on the Brazos line includes 18 miles of the present Santa Fe Branch.
2. Snow — It describes snow depth of 13 feet near Chama the previous winter, while the depth along the proposed Brazos line was only 4 to 5 feet. It attributes the difference to prevailing winds on the Cumbres line that are not experienced on other passes.
3. Brazos cost is less by \$750,000 to \$1,000,000 for construction.

STATEMENT

Showing Distance, Grades, Maximum Rate of Curve, Cost to Construct, Etc.

Various Suggested Line Changes between Antonito and Willow Creek near Chama.

Distance via Operated Track Antonito to Willow Creek 70 Miles.

	Antonito to Chama and Willow Cr. Cumbres Route	Brazos Pass Route	Nutritas Pass Route	Line around extremity of mountains
Distance Antonito to Willow Cr. Jct.	60.9	86	91	105
Distance Volcano to " "		68	73	87
Miles new construction	53.7	68	73	87
Max. rate of curve	12°	10°	10°	10°
Ruling grade against westbound trains	12 mi. 2.00%	10 mi. 1.65%	10 mi. 1.65%	10 mi. 1.65%
" " eastbound " "	16 mi. 2.00%	30 mi. 1.8%	23 mi. 2.00%	14 mi. 1.50%
Lin. ft tunnel	7000	3400		
<u>Estimate Cost to Construct:</u>				
Right of way	15,000	20,000	22,000	25,000
Clearing	23,000	45,000	50,000	90,000
Grading	1,892,000	1,410,000	1,550,000	1,825,000
Tunnels	740,000	375,000		
Bridges and Culverts	285,000	200,000	200,000	260,000
Buildings, Water Service, etc.	130,000	130,000	130,000	150,000
Track Material and Labor	634,000	800,000	860,000	1,053,000
Telegraph Line	35,000	40,000	43,000	52,000
Freight	80,000	80,000	80,000	80,000
Engineering, Supervision and Inspection	<u>140,000</u>	<u>150,000</u>	<u>150,000</u>	<u>220,000</u>
Total	3,974,000	3,250,000	3,085,000	3,765,000
Salvage Material Antonito to Chama Less Cost to Remove	<u>200,000</u>	<u>200,000</u>	<u>200,000</u>	<u>200,000</u>
	3,774,000	3,050,000	2,885,000	3,565,000

July 15, 1927

[signatures of J.G. Gwyn &  
W.A. Balcom]

*Note: On the original memo there is a large handmarked X under the cost column for the Brazos Pass route.*

4. Prospect of developing farmlands and concentrating shipment of stock centering at Tierra Amarilla. Only 242 cars of sheep (about 41,000 head) were shipped out of Chama the previous year, while there were more than 500,000 sheep in the district. Some of the sheep were driven to Antonito, but most were driven to the competing AT&SF Ry. A standard gauge track to Tierra Amarilla would allow stock to be moved directly to Pueblo or Denver without the transfer currently required at Antonito or Alamosa.

Mr. Shields' reply was much more succinct than the six-page report submitted by Messrs. Gwyn and Balcom. His letter, dated July 21, 1927, reads as follows:

"Mr. J.G. Gwyn: Your report of July 15<sup>th</sup>, covering reconnaissance between Volcano and Chama.

How long do you estimate it will take to make a preliminary survey of the Brazos Pass route and the Nutritas Pass route?"