

MAREK MOUNTAIN RAILROAD

A Branch Line off the Denver & Rio Grande Western

Founded in 1879, by great grandfather Marek, the son of a prosperous rancher in West Texas. Late one fall, he traveled to Colorado to look for new ranch land and to hunt elk. While hunting in the mountains in southern Colorado, north of the D&RGW rail town of Cumbres, he was caught by a snow storm. He took shelter in a small cave.

As the storm raged outside, he used the time to explore the cave. With a torch, he explored the hole and soon found a rich coal ore deposit. Using ore chips, he was able to keep a fire burning, eat his fresh elk meat and melt snow for water. A week and a half later, he made his way to the town of Antonio, rode the train to Denver and bought the land from the state. A small mountain range crossed thru the land, and it was soon named after its new owner.

By the summer of '82, the large Marek Mountain Ranch was established and cattle were moved up from Texas. Although cattle was the main business, mining operations were soon underway. The coal ore proved to be a good grade for use by local businesses and the railroad. By the spring of '84, coal ore was being hauled out on a daily basis by ox drawn wagons. A second vein was found, a second mine opened, making the supply of coal ore abundant.

Cattle were thriving on the green mountain grass and the two small coal mines were booming. It wasn't long before a small mountain town popped up. Between the mines and ranch house was the mountain peak of Loma Alta, a lone peak with a spring flowing year round. The mining settlement was built there and soon after, a general store, saloons and a school followed. The town of Loma Alta, Colorado formed almost overnight.

It wasn't long before the idea of a rail head was the talk of the town. But, the D&RGW had pushed hard for Silverton and was not interested in the small community. A couple years past by and the need for rail service grew. Everyone knew the railroad would be the natural evolution of the town, or lack of it could be its downfall. Mr.Marek had several meetings with railroad officials, and it soon became obvious the only way a branch line would be built was if he built it!

In the spring of '87, he commissioned a survey for a short branch line to connect with the D&RGW at Cumbres. Although a shorter route to the railroad, it would be the hardest to build because of the terrain and bridges needed. An alternate route was found, which would connect in the Los Pinos valley. Although it took less bridges and trestles, it was a bit longer and would need a 5% grade to reach the mine. When this route was presented to the D&RGW in the fall of '87, their minds were still set against building the branch line in to Loma Alta.

Mr.Marek was a stubborn Texan, with Bohemian decent. All winter he grumbled and argued, he knew the railroad must be built. All during this time, the ranch continued to prosper and the mine produced as much coal ore as could be hauled out by wagons. A small lumber mill was built to service the town and a wood craft company planned to located here. Now more than ever, the need for rail service was obvious.

The spring of '88 came to the mountains, and so did a new spirit! Both the townspeople and nearby ranchers wanted the railroad. They convinced Mr.Marek to build the branch himself. With the details worked out, track right-of-ways given freely, and contracts with the D&RGW to lease equipment and to build a junction at Los Pinos, the branch line was started.

By the fall of '88, a connection was built on the D&RGW in the Los Pinos valley. Before winter set in, 10 miles of track were laid in to the mountains towards Loma Alta. On July 4th of 1889, the first train arrived at the mines. This was a national holiday and a local event that drew people from all around. There was free passenger travel from Los Pinos, open mine tours, and a bar-b-que and dance. Soon after, three days a week, a train load of coal ore departed the mines.

Because of the grade and terrain, the railroad went below the town of Loma Alta and not directly thru it. By means of a switchback at the mines, the train would back in to town and the station. On September 27th, 1889, the first train rolled in to town! Because of the confines of the mountains and lack of a turntable, there was no way to turn locomotives. The first train ran backwards all the way from Los Pinos to the switchback at the mines, so the engine could lead the train in to town. At the throttle was Mr.Marek. It consisted of a combine and two chair cars.

After the first train arrived, many more soon followed. Although coal was the primary revenue, there were regular shipments of beef from the ranch, plus the seasonal cattle trains. A steady flow of supplies came in to the town and products were shipped from the town and lumber mill. Often, special weekend excursion trains would bring loads of area "flatlanders" up to the mountain town.

The rail connection at Los Pinos produced a new settlement and a town followed. The D&RGW worked regular freight service in Los Pinos and spotted cars for Loma Alta. A turntable, engine house, and office for the railroad was established there. And at the mines, a turntable was built on the switchback.

Over the years, the branch line added a couple spurs and the switchback was extended to service new cattle shoots. The mining operations never grew, yet did continued to furnish a steady flow of traffic. The wood craft company did locate and establish a shop. Both towns continued to grow. Because of the grade and tight clearances, the railroad always ran smaller locomotives and short trains. A daily mixed handled most of the traffic and connected with the D&RGW's "San Juan" for passenger service to and from Denver.

Footnote: This "story" was written up by Frolin Marek, in December of 1994. It was written for my previous Gn3 layout, that was built in the living room of a rented duplex (see pictures in the 'Past Layouts' section). It tells a tale how that model railroad might have come about in real life, in Southern Colorado. In reality, it was started in the Fall of 1991 and was dismantled in January of 1996.

Maybe it's time for a re-make of this story to match the new layout...