

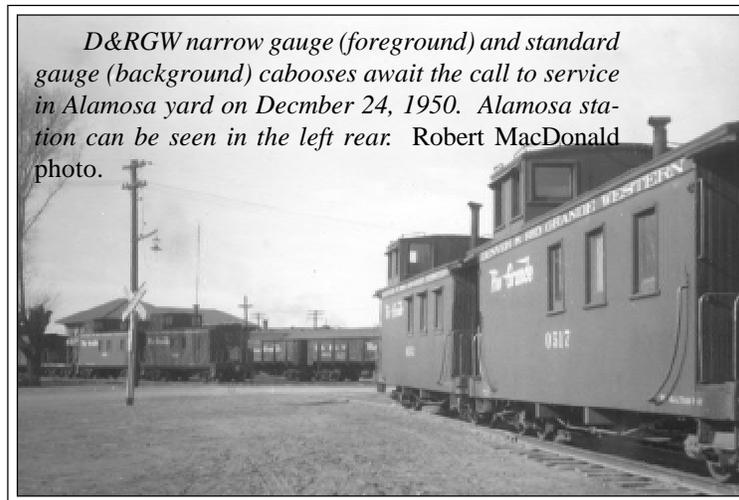
When construction of General Palmer's Denver & Rio Grande RR passed the Sangre de Cristo range of Eastern Colorado into the vast San Luis Valley in 1878, he established a terminal before further rail laying proceeded. This hastily-built railroad center contained car and locomotive shops, an enginehouse and other such terminal facilities and was called Alamosa. This is a Spanish derivative for "cottonwood" - groves of which are frequently found in this country. Alamosa would become the center for railroad construction in different directions, all to serve new locations for potential traffic from developing industries and mines.

From the north, a connecting line would be built, linking Alamosa with Salida. Another stretch would be built thirty miles down the San Luis Valley to Antonito, where construction would continue south to Santa Fe, NM, and west to Durango to tap the San Juan Mountains' mineral riches. Rails into Alamosa from Denver would eventually be widened as well as those for the Creede branch to the west. The line to Antonito would then have an added third rail to provide standard gauge capability across the flat San Luis Valley and at the same time, ensure narrow gauge through train service over the rugged mountainous terrain to the west. In the late 1960s, traffic would cease to move over the Alamosa-Durango line, then big changes would come to Alamosa with an end to its narrow gauge identity.

With the three-foot track gone, this marked finis to Alamosa's greatest fame of

being a highly-developed dual-gauge transfer center. The day before Christmas in 1950, on a narrow gauge circle tour of Colorado, I would devote most of the day to visiting the Denver & Rio Grande Western RR's Alamosa yards before exiting the state for home. It was the final gesture of devotion to the narrow gauge, after failing to find employment in the Denver area. The previous two days, I had the pleasure of riding the Rio

Grande's super deluxe passenger trains 215 and 216, the San Juan, in parlor car Durango, 200 miles each way between the two terminals of Alamosa and Durango. On the overnight between-trains' stop in Alamosa, I was the guest of Bob Richardson and Carl Helfin at their Narrow Gauge Motel on the



*D&RGW narrow gauge (foreground) and standard gauge (background) cabooses await the call to service in Alamosa yard on December 24, 1950. Alamosa station can be seen in the left rear. Robert MacDonald photo.*

edge of town. In the course of our late-night discourse at the motel, Bob warned me the foreman at the enginehouse was a stickler for enforcing the no trespass, no picture taking rule, emphasized by the seriousness of the conflagration in Korea at the time. But my arrival in Alamosa was on a cold, very bright Sunday morning, the day before a universal holiday few, if any, do not observe.

All I wanted for Christmas was a chance to look over the terminal as much as possible and take lots of pictures. Although the discovery and development of natural gas fields around Farmington, NM, would extend the life of the rails to Durango and Farmington for another decade and a half, even in 1950 the ultimate end of this

great dual-gauge transfer center could be anticipated. Already the Valley Line between Salida and Alamosa was slated to be torn up in a couple of months. This would remove the only narrow gauge connection between the two mainline systems, north from Salida over Marshall Pass and South from Alamosa over Cumbres Pass. A year earlier in 1949, rails were removed from the famed Black Canyon and Cerro Summit, thereby breaking the circle of narrow gauge rails. The San Juan daily passenger trains were scheduled to be discontinued by the early part of the new year, plenty of good reasons for making the most of this opportunity.

The city, itself, was like a ghost town on this Sunday before Christmas. This gave me a sense of freedom and release from fear of meeting railroad police or railroad personnel bent on keeping away railroad fans, especially with cameras. But I did feel squeamish around the large enginehouse and shops, which I avoided except to observe at a distance. Had I not been warned by Bob Richardson, I might well have been a bit more bold. My caution probably was wise-perhaps I avoided arrest and having my film confiscated. The seemingly inevitable end to this surviving narrow gauge terminal was belied by hundreds of newly painted freight cars, mostly box and cattle, on sidings by the car shop. Close to the shops was the Silver Vista, a glass-domed excursion car used on the Silverton

branch summer tourist trains. It would suffer total loss in a fire but would be replaced by couple of open excursion cars for that service. As freight traffic would gradually move over to truck transport, the summer passenger business would increase, thus pointing to the future appeal of narrow gauge lines in the Rockies as viable carriers. My efforts to cover as much ground as possible without being seen caused me to miss some aspects of the transfer facilities, specifically the stock transfer yards.

However, I think I must have exposed at least fifty 2-1/4 frames of 120 film with my reflex camera on the various transfer facilities to include tank, refrigerators, box, gondola and passenger cars. The bulk transfer ramp with track for both gauges,