

FEELING THE PONCHA JUNCTION BUNK HOUSE

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We thought we heard railroaders rolling out of their bunk house one sunset as we were enjoying the patio of Vino Salida. You could almost see the old Poncha Junction bunk house in the blowing dust. Since 1881 that dust has lingered.

Not much is known about the D&RG railroad bunkhouse, though it is pictured in a few blurry old photographs. Poncha Junction was near the section house in what is now Poncha Springs (called Poncho Springs on some old maps). It was a busy section house serving at least twenty trains a day.

William Jackson Palmer had to keep his railroad ahead of the competition. He couldn't lose Poncha Junction. True, the "treaty of Boston" gave Palmer some breathing room. That had cost him 1.6 million dollars. But the Santa Fe Railroad was still always nipping at his heels. Jay Gould had taken interest in the Denver and South Park R. R. Aggressive fare wars could be expected there. Everybody wanted a piece of Palmer's "baby railroad." It was always a fight.

It was a pleasure to walk down to actually inspect the bunk house recently. Some rail fan must have done quite a bit to save the old structure. The roof looks good. The building is moved back from the obvious right of way and set on concrete blocks. Typical Rio Grande railroad soft yellow in color and faced with their usual board and batten, it can't be missed. Definitely Rio Grande in every way it is.

Another day our tour could have followed the road bed up hill. At Meres Junction the routes divided. Rails went either to Gunnison on Marshall Pass or on to Villa Grove. Over Marshall Pass to Gunnison and on south it passes the iconic Curucanti spire (logo of the Rio Grande Railroad). South the line went on to Alamosa and merged with another line eventually to Salt Lake City. At Antonito the line became narrow gauge to Durango. There were various mining hamlets served also like the Orient. Eventually there would be a huge ore tram way to Bonanza. It was a rich country.

If you do visit you'll get a feel for Poncha Junction. It's an important part of our history. At one time General Palmer put his "baby railroad" on the line there. He spent big money, roused big energy, and likely saved the railroad by 1882.

Historians debate how well the D&RG did in the long run. When Palmer did retire there was enough cash on hand for him to give a gift to each and every employee. That's hard to imagine in our hard capitalism today. Over all we have to think he'd rate the route a moderate success.

The bunk house itself faces an uncertain future. It's in quite good shape for its age and could be renovated. The property the bunk house sits on is for sale and may be sold by the time this issue comes out. There has been talk of making it into a visitor's center or part of such a center proposed for the junction of highways 285 and 50.

Poncha Junction was focus for some incredible railroad energy. You may be able to feel it. For now though it's enough to sit back and imagine what it all must have been like as crews were roused out of the bunk house in the snow or the flood or on a sunny summer morning.