
Away From It All

Complete Beautiful Isolation

By PASQUALE MARRANZINO

I WISH we would stop being overexcited about those lucky trainmen trapped in the snow on the Cumbres.

I use the word trapped advisedly because those trainmen historically manage to get themselves isolated from the world a couple times a year. And they get time and a half for overtime doing it.



Marranzino

And I say lucky because there aren't many places left in the world where one can get the complete and beautiful isolation that one can get in wintertime on the Cumbres.

Now if the train had got snowbound in California or New York or Illinois, I would begin to worry about the boys. But narrow gauge railroaders are a different breed of men. They are rough and tough and have an understanding and patience that is born in mountain men. They respect the mountains and the elements and they know when to challenge both and when to pull in their horns. Three generations of narrow gauge railroaders have been sitting out this type of being trapped since the line opened in 1881.

BECAUSE when it snows on the Cumbres it snows big and long and heavy and high until the snow sheds creak under the load and the snow plows dig deep channels in the white cover that blankets the Rio Grande roadbed for 9 months out of the year.

There's always a winter cache of food in the section shacks and coal in the tender and big pot-bellied stoves that glow cherry-red and plenty of old Monkey Ward catalogs and some dog-eared playing cards and a few sacks of Bull Durham and the makin's.

The crummy of these narrow gauge trains is a virtual traveling hotel. There's a pot-belly stove and bunks and room for supplies and they can be as snug and warm as being under an electric blanket.

Then, there's the thin talking wire that loops through the telegraph lines from the tracks to places like Durango and Chama and Alamosa. And the narrow gauge boys are dit jockeys who can play a mean key and yell for help if they need it.

If I sound like I am describing their plight akin to passage on a slow boat to China, that's exactly what I mean.

THE high iron that runs the 200 miles from Alamosa to Durango over the Cumbres is really an incredible stretch of rails.

The Rio Grande got into a big battle in 1880 with the Santa Fe over which railroad could drive north and south through the Rockies. The Rio Grande lost. So it looked around from its terminus at Alamosa and discovered that there were silver strikes over in the San Juan Basin that could be tapped for service.

So they turned westward and began making their way to Durango. They chose to cross over the Cumbres which is a range that ties Colorado and New Mexico together.

The doggone railroad hemstitches the Colorado-New Mexico line in 28 different spots and probably is the snakiest stretch of road in the world.

WHEN they get a long train on the stretch there are points where the locomotive and the caboose are heading in the same direction while the consist at two points is driving in the opposite direction.

And along the line are a collection of little towns like Ignacio, Arboles, Juanita where the residents—Indians and station masters—are just as isolated as the train crews in the snows.

You climb to the summit of the Cumbres just past 10,000 feet at a rate of 211 feet a mile. To get there you have to thread on a ledge of Toltec Gorge where you look down 1000 feet to the Los Pinos River.

It is at this point where you worry most about things like an avalanche. But up at the windswept, bald crest of Cumbres the section shack and the snow sheds are safe and warm.