

# Rail Service for Brookside

By Sue Cochran

The first rush of people coming to Colorado were looking for gold. These hordes of prospectors arrived starting in 1858 and continuing into the early 1860s. The influx would undoubtedly have continued if not for the Civil War. When war broke out in 1861, thousands of Colorado miners and other early settlers went “back to the States” to serve with their friends and brothers in the war, slowing our rampant growth.

The next big wave of settlers came to Colorado chasing the railroads. Many men were needed to survey, design, and build the spreading web of rails. As the rail system reached community after community, travel into those areas was greatly simplified. What had been a slow, tedious trip across the plains could now be made in days. And travel into the mountains .... well, there was just no comparison.

The population in Colorado Territory tripled between 1870 and 1875. Besides the railroad construction, mining and agriculture were also booming.

Growth in Fremont County mirrored this. First came the prospectors and the merchants who supplied their needs. Then came the downturn during the Civil War. Then came the railroads, who needed coal, and the miners who could produce it.

The first rails to reach Fremont County came to Coal Creek for coal. Those rails were a narrow-gauge line owned by the Denver and Rio Grande Railway, and they reached Florence in 1872 mainly because Florence was lucky enough to be along the route to the mine at Coal Creek.

Canon City had complained bitterly that they, as the county seat and trade center, needed rails. General William Jackson Palmer, creator of the Denver & Rio Grande, was a master at enticing communities to finance his own business dealings. Canon City approved a \$50,000 bond and Pueblo approved \$100,000. Palmer sent his henchmen back to ask for more. Pueblo reluctantly approved another \$50,000 to bring the narrow gauge to their town. Canon City balked. They thought Palmer would give in. They were wrong.

For two long years, the lines ended at Florence and the mine at Coal Creek. The citizens of Canon City finally approached the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad about running a line into Canon City. This spawned the famous Royal Gorge War between the DRG and the ATSF over who would be allowed to build through the canon of the Arkansas River west of Canon City where there was room for only one set of rails.

From Brookside’s point of view, the important thing is that the Santa Fe did build a line to Canon City. It was the first standard gauge line to come into Fremont County, and it ran along the south banks of the Arkansas River parallel to the DRG. Standard gauge rails were placed 4 feet 8½ inches apart. The rails were heavier and stronger, but also more expensive to build. DRG narrow gauge lines in this area were only three feet apart. This made sense in the mountainous part of the state. The smaller engines and cars could manage narrower cuts in the rocks, turn more sharply, and were, as were the rails themselves, cheaper and lighter in weight.

The standard railroad line built to Brookside in 1888 allowed larger train cars to carry more coal. That was a good thing most of the time. However, when the Brookside mine had the opportunity to sell coal in Cripple Creek, the Florence & Cripple Creek was narrow gauge. All that coal had to be moved from the Santa Fe’s standard size cars into the F&CC’s smaller narrow gauge cars. The solution was to add a third rail so that the rails would accommodate coal cars of either size.

Remember that early maps show the Brookside rails as the Pueblo & Arkansas Valley Railroad, which was a subsidiary of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe.

Rail lines frequently followed rivers and streams because water follows the easiest path downhill and because the streams tend to level the land even more as they flood and recede, flood and recede in wet times and dry. In good weather, the construction and maintenance of rails in the more level river bottoms is a smart move.

Wet times, however, can be a problem. One of those wet times happened in June of 1894. News out of Florence tells us that at least ten miles of the Santa Fe's tracks were washed out between Pueblo and Canon City. Some long sections were actually washed into the Arkansas River and buried there. The Rio Grande suffered too, but not as severely as the Santa Fe. Both companies used the quickly patched together D&RG tracks to gain access to the most-damaged stretches. The newspapers reported that even with teams working from both the east and west it would take ten to fifteen days' hard work to get the lines open. Mines at Rockvale, Brookside and Canon City stood at the ready, waiting for the railroads to be repaired.

Canon City newspapers reported in 1899 that the mine at Brookside was shipping forty-five or fifty carloads over the Santa Fe every day. In 1901, the mines were idled because of the railroad's inability to secure enough coal cars. The CF&I reported the problem in their December newsletter, but didn't explain what caused the shortage.

After the devastating Pueblo flood of 1921, caused by days of heavy rain and the failure of a dam above Penrose, the Santa Fe did not even attempt to completely rebuild their tracks. They leased the right to use the D&RG tracks instead.

I've found conflicting dates for the closure of the Brookside line as well as conflicting information about our depot. If anyone can shed some light on these issues, we'd be grateful.

Brookside never had a fancy depot and we never had formal passenger trains, because we were a coal line that ran to a dead-end at the mine. The primary purpose of each and every train that came to town was to deliver empty coal cars to the mine and to pick up full ones and carry them away.

The Santa Fe did run what they called mixed trains, however, so that there might be a car on any train that could bring in freight, whether for the mine or for the company store. They would also allow passengers to ride out on the Brookside train to a depot that did have passenger service. Did they provide seating in the caboose? It doesn't seem logical that they would provide an actual passenger coach when there would only be a passenger or two, if any at all.

I've been told that the depot was simply an old box car set off the tracks to be used as a freight depot. Some sources say it was in the area that is the Town Park today. Others remember it being located further down the hill "in Pat Burns' pasture" about straight west of where the Brookside school sat. Does anyone have a photo that shows the depot? Which location is correct? I suppose it could have been at both places at different times. Old maps and aerial views don't answer this question.

I found dates of closure of the line to Brookside listed as 1933 and as 1947. It certainly could be that both are correct, if the Santa Fe closed it once during the depression, thought better of it at a later time and re-opened it for a few more years during World War II. Who remembers more details about this?

*Anyone with further information is invited to contact Renee at Town Hall or to call Sue Cochran at 276-0577 or email her at [sscochran@yahoo.com](mailto:sscochran@yahoo.com)*

**P.S.** *The Canon City Museum found an old photo of the **Brookside Ball Team**. If you think you could help us identify anyone in the picture or tell us what year it was taken, please stop by Renee's office and take a look. Thanks.*