

# FIRST DRAFT



SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Denver & Rio Grande Railroad trains stopped at the Grand Junction depot early in the 20th century. Passenger cars such as these were used for the Potato Train.

## Potato Train, aka Spud Special, taught farmers in the early 1900s

When word reached the Western Slope in the spring of 1908 that the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad's Potato Train would be visiting, people were enthusiastic.

"Let every farmer up and down the Uncompahgre Valley turn out to this meeting," the Montrose Daily Press wrote on March 20, 1908. "It is the opening of a new era in the history of potato cultivation and should be taken advantage of."

The Potato Train, also called the Potato Special, Potato Institute, Spud Train and the Spud Special, was a joint production of the D&RG and Colorado Agricultural College, which later became Colorado State University. It provided education on wheels, offering free classes on potato growing to anyone who wanted to attend.

At most of the stops, two passenger cars served as classrooms, in which six instructors from the Ag College gave potato lectures to those who attended.

A baggage car carried equipment farmers needed to obtain the best harvest: "Sorters, seed cutters, planters, special cultivators, ridging and ditching machines and diggers" were on display, wrote the Fort Collins Courier the week the train was scheduled to embark for the Western Slope and San Luis Valley.

Fruita was one of the stops for that first train, but Grand Junction wasn't included until two years later. Over several days, the Spud Special also visited Eagle and Gypsum, Glenwood Springs, Carbondale, Aspen, New Castle, Silt, Rifle, Parachute and De Beque. Then, after an evening stop in Fruita, it continued to Delta, the North Fork Valley, Olathe, Montrose, where two sessions of classes were presented. The following day, it was on to the San Luis Valley. Several hours were spent in each community.

The D&RG provided the special train at no cost, but its motives weren't entirely altruistic. It hoped farmers in the San Luis Valley and on the Western Slope would significantly boost their potato production and thereby increase the amount of potatoes they shipped by rail.

As the Fort Collins paper noted, The Western Slope "marketed in 1907 less than 2,000 cars of potatoes. Potato experts believe that when its advantages for potato growing are thoroughly appreciated and the best methods used, that 35,000 cars of choice potatoes should be marketed from this



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Saskatch train: Interior of a classroom car on a demonstration train used in Saskatchewan in the early 1900s.

section annually."

The visit of the 1908 Potato Train was something new for the Western Slope and San Luis Valley. However, it wasn't a unique idea. For decades, economic leaders throughout the United States searched for a means to teach rural growers the latest and most scientific farming techniques. Many ideas were tried, from farming journals to the first college agriculture classes.

"But all of them found it difficult, if not impossible, to convince farmers of the value of science," wrote Roy V. Scott in his 1970 book, "The Reluctant Farmer." What was needed, he said, was a system "capable of proving to farmers that 'book farming' was not a joke and that agricultural science, properly applied, would produce a better life for them and their families."

Railroads got involved early, even before the Civil War, offering free passes to those attending lectures at colleges, providing free farm publications and even offering test plots for different crops.

However, "of all the extension techniques employed by railroads ... none was more

popular or more widely used during the decade before 1914 than the educational or demonstration train," Scott wrote. The D&RG's Potato Train, was one such demonstration train, and it was immensely popular.

"Stopping at twenty-three towns, the train attracted some 5,000 persons to its meetings," wrote author James E. Hansen II in his 1977 history of Colorado State. "Businesses were closed during the lectures, and at Alamosa and Montrose special excursion trains were run to bring in spectators from outlying communities."

Moreover, farmers around Montrose paid heed to their local newspaper's urging. There, and in a few other communities, "crowds were so large that additional meetings had to be held on depot platforms or in local town halls."

Speakers for the Potato Institute classes included H.M. Cottrell and E.R. Bennett of the Agricultural College's Experiment Station and Agricultural College Board Member Eugene Grubb, who had a Carbondale farm that raised potatoes.

Occasionally, other farmers joined the presentation, such as R.A. Chisholm of Del Norte.

He was touted as "the man who had grown 847 bushels of potatoes to the acre."

Based on its success in 1908, the Potato Train rolled through western Colorado and the San Luis Valley again in 1910, this time stopping at 27 communities, including Grand Junction and Fruita.

But by 1912, the trains had apparently stopped. Colorado Agricultural College held a Farmer's Institute in Montrose that February, with a heavy emphasis on potato growing. But the classes were all held in the county courthouse. Newspaper accounts made no mention of the Potato Train.

There were likely several reasons for this. For one thing, the earlier potato trains had already achieved some of what the D&RG was seeking. From 1910 to 1911, the acres of potatoes grown in Montrose County alone increased from about 1,700 acres to more than 5,000.

Additionally, nationwide there was a growing sentiment among academics that the demonstration train had "about reached the limits of its efficiency," Scott wrote. To really improve agricultural production, most farmers needed to be able to observe the latest agricultural techniques in practice. Hence the efforts of the Colorado Agricultural College to expand the number of its Experiment Station sub-stations around the state.

Moreover, some critics of the demonstration trains saw them primarily as propaganda to benefit the railroads.

But the final straw for most demonstration trains came with passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. The act set out to encourage agricultural extension services throughout the country, and to provide federal money to help land-grant colleges create or expand their extension programs.

However, the act also stated that "No portion of the federal funds could be expended for the promotion of educational trains," Scott wrote. Most of the agricultural demonstration trains in the United States halted after that. The D&RG's Potato Special had rolled to a stop several years earlier.

Sources: Colorado Historic Newspapers; "The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914," by Roy V. Scott;

"Democracy's College in the Centennial State: A History of Colorado State University," by James E. Hansen II. Special thanks to Kathy Heicher with the Eagle County Historical Society.

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