

FIRST DRAFT

Riding to the rescue

Galloping Goose slowed the demise of the Rio Grande Southern Railroad

Most passengers who rode the Galloping Goose motor bus on the railway line between Ridgway and Durango in the mid-20th century extolled the gorgeous scenery on the mountain excursion.

But some passengers had more exciting experiences. They were stranded in heavy snow.

Or stalled by washed out bridges. Or they were forced to leap from a runaway Goose when the brakes failed.

The brakes gave out in February 1942 as the Goose was descending the final 11 miles from Dallas Divide into Ridgway. The motorman ordered his passengers to “bail out,” and he followed them. They all landed “shaken but otherwise uninjured in a snowbank,” according to a railroad newsletter.

The motorman and passengers then hiked into Ridgway, expecting to see the mangled Goose off the tracks or buried in a snowdrift at every sharp turn. Instead, they found it parked “just as neatly as you please” in front of the Ridgway depot.

One newspaper account said, “The railroaders insist jokingly that perhaps the Goose was aware of the difficulties of its ownership and wanted to show it could run without a crew.”

How much this story was embellished is unclear. But one thing is indisputable: The Rio Grande Southern was always in perilous financial condition. The Galloping Geese — seven different automobiles-turned-motor-buses — were built to help alleviate its problems.

The Rio Grande Southern Railroad began operating in 1891, created by road builder Otto Mears primarily to haul ore from mines in Telluride, Ophir and Rico. But two years later, the Silver Panic of 1893 wiped out much of its business.

The railroad struggled on, hauling lumber, passengers, a bit of ore and, critically, the U.S. mail. But when the Great Depression began in 1929, the railroad went into receivership and the court-appointed receiver, Victor Miller, hit on the idea of using self-propelled automobiles to haul the mail, passengers

and small freight loads.

The self-propelled vehicles would require only one or two-man crews and would be far less costly to operate than steam trains, which could still be used for hauling large freight loads.

By 1931, there were commercial substitutes available for steam locomotives, including small electric engines and automobile conversions. But the

Rio Grande Southern couldn't afford them. Miller ordered the railroad build its own “motor cars” or “motor buses” at its shop in Ridgway.

The company looked at three different conversions based on a Hudson automobile, an International truck and a Buick car. It settled on the Buick and, led by mechanic Jack Odenbaugh, it began constructing Motor No. 1 in May of 1931.

No. 1 began service a month later, running 72 miles from Telluride to Dolores. It had one passenger seat, wide enough for the driver, or motorman, and two passengers. Its cargo area was an open-topped wooden box that looked like a cattle car.

Motor No. 1 proved successful and saved the railroad money. So, by July 1931, Odenbaugh was at work on Motor No. 2. It was also based on a Buick Master 6, but this time it had a passenger seat behind the front seat and a larger, covered freight area.

In September 1931, the railroad purchased the first of its Pierce-Arrow automobiles to construct Motor No. 3. The Pierce-Arrow had more horsepower, so a larger freight car could be installed. And there were seats for up to eight passengers in cramped quarters.

With No. 3, Odenbaugh established the template for the machines that would become known as the Galloping Geese: Motors No. 3, 4, 5, and 7. Motor No. 6 was a work vehicle, and did not haul passengers or mail.

At first, passengers sat in the body of what had been the Pierce-Arrow automobile. Later, most of that body was removed and replaced by a small, school-bus-type body for passenger seating, with the freight area behind it. Eventually, the 1920s Pierce-Arrow motors were replaced by more powerful General



BOB SILBERNAGEL



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J.R. McKay, a volunteer with the Galloping Goose Historical Society of Dolores, Colorado, stands at the entrance to Motor No. 5, the fifth of the Galloping Goose motor cars that was built by the Rio Grande Southern Railroad.

Motors engines.

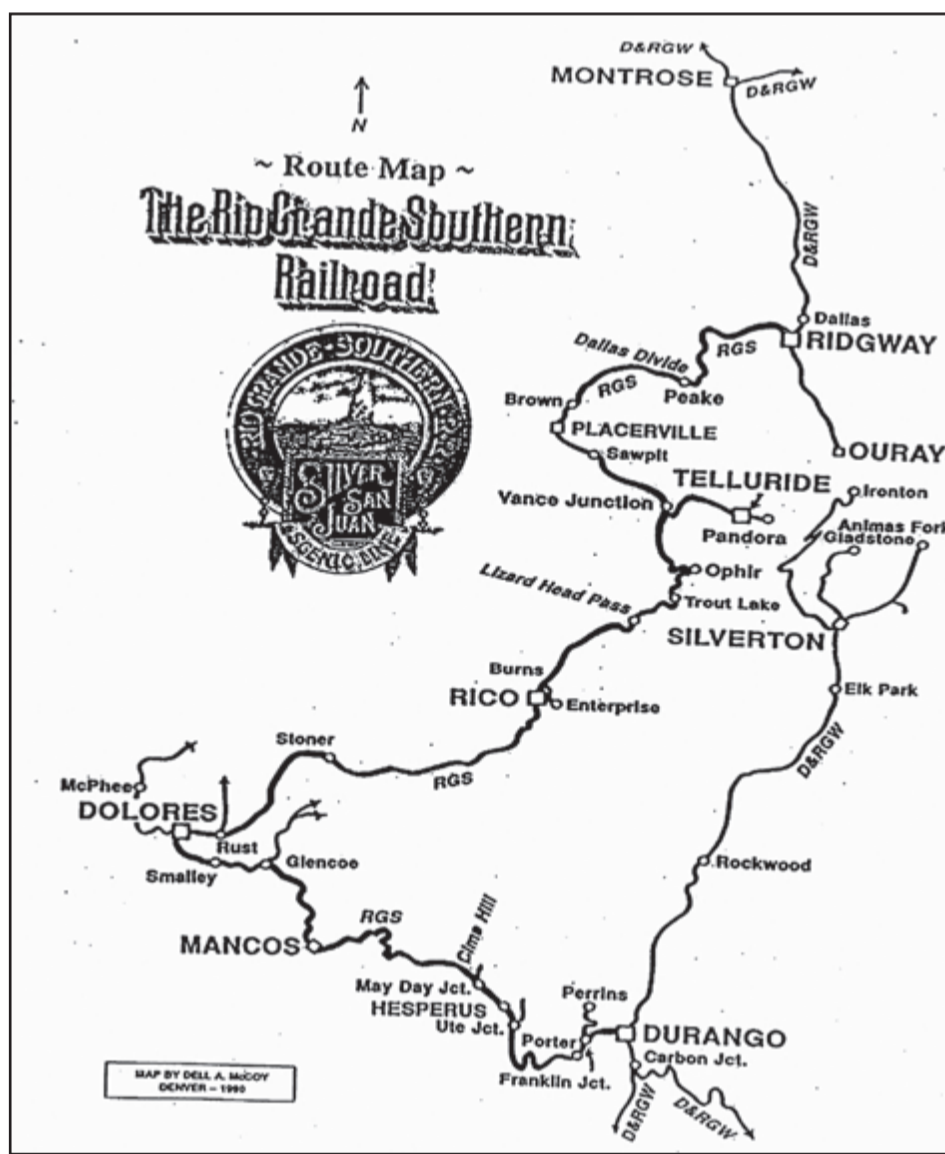
Sometime in the late 1930s, people began referring to each of the motors as “the Galloping Goose,” but the railroad didn't officially adopt that name until 1950.

Although critics often complained that the Geese were slow, uncomfortable and frequently delayed, they were popular — drawing passengers traveling between communities in the San Juan Mountains and tourists who rode just to enjoy the scenery and novelty.

However, 20th century economics, repeated mechanical problems and weather in the San Juan Mountains eventually spelled the end for the Geese and railroad.

Reports of snowbound Galloping Geese were frequent. One of the worst events occurred in March 1944, when six people — four in a Galloping Goose and two in a steam locomotive that was trying to clear snow for the Goose — were marooned in deep snow for three days between Telluride and Lizard Head Pass. Airplanes dropped food and clothing to the stranded travelers, and they all survived.

After Carl Fallberg rode the Goose in 1947, he cynically described the obstacles encountered on his trip as “mere routine” — a boulder on the tracks near Stoner, a rock slide at Ames and a derailment near Dolores.



THE GALLOPING GOOSE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF DOLORES

The bold line on the left shows the route of the Rio Grande Southern Railroad and its Galloping Geese motor cars, from Durango to Dolores, then northeast to Ridgway, with spurs running to Telluride and Ophir. The lighter line on the right marks part of the line of the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad, which connected at both ends of the Rio Grande Southern.

One passenger, after experiencing the rough ride of a Goose repeatedly plowing through foot-deep snowdrifts, reportedly said he now understood what “a person would experience going over Niagara Falls in a barrel.”

Additionally, the Pierce-Arrow engines often overheated, and brakes failed on several occasions.

Still, many people chose to experience the thrill of a Goose ride. So, in 1950, the Rio Grande Southern attempted to make the Geese tourist attractions, hoping that would help the RGS overcome the economic blizzards it faced.

Highway trucks were overtaking trains as the primary freight carriers. Mines in Telluride and Rico cancelled their contracts with the RGS. And the U.S. Postal Service, which long had been threatening to end the railroad's mail contract

because of repeated delays, finally did so in 1950.

The Galloping Geese chugged on. But it wasn't enough. In December 1951, the Rio Grande Southern ceased operations and the Geese stopped galloping.

Most of the railroad's assets were sold at auction and the Geese ended up in a variety of locations, seemingly destined for junk piles.

But over the ensuing decades, railroad buffs acquired all six of the still-running Geese and restored them. Also, a reconstructed version of Motor No. 1 was built in Ridgway based on photos and sketches of the original.

Today, Motors No. 1 and 4 sit in Ridgway. Motor No. 5 is in Dolores. Motors 2, 6 and 7 live at the Colorado Railroad Museum in Golden and Motor No. 3 operates at Knotts Berry Farm in California. All are work-

ing machines and carry passengers safely.

Galloping Goose No. 5, or Motor No. 5, is put into service several times a year on the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad and the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. A number of trips are scheduled for this autumn. For information, visit www.durangotrains.com or www.cumbrestotec.com.

Sources: “Tin Feathers, Wooden Trestles and Iron Men: The Galloping Geese of the Rio Grande Southern Railroad,” by Stan Rhine; Denise Bowyer, bookkeeper and office manager for the Galloping Goose Historical Society of Dolores Inc.; Ridgway Railroad Museum; historic newspaper articles at www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org and www.newspapers.com.

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This replica of the Rio Grande Southern's Motor No. 1 was constructed in the early 2000s from photos and sketches of the original Motor No. 1, the first motor car that was put in service by the railroad in 1931.