

Grandpa Was a Gandy Dancer

By Dennis Payton Knight

The Denver & Rio Grande Railway was incorporated by General William Jackson Palmer, and construction started in 1871 out of Denver. It was a narrow gage road with tracks only 3 feet apart, compared to what is now the standard gage of 4 feet, 8½ inches.

Palmer originally planned it to go all the way to El Paso, but it had only gotten to Santa Fe when Jay Gould acquired and changed direction of the railroad. Under his management, the D&RG got in 1883 to Salt Lake City, but they found the narrow gage configuration was a serious drawback at its main terminuses, including Denver, Santa Fe, and Salt Lake where it had to interconnect with other carriers.

The railroad upgraded most of its routes to standard gage, and by 1890 it was in high demand as an efficient means of getting goods over the Rockies. Its fortunes grew when the Western Pacific connecting Oakland to points east fell into bankruptcy in 1921. A new railroad would emerge from the rubble called the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad.

In conquering the rugged Colorado Rockies, one of the D&RGW's greatest accomplishments was the six-mile-long Moffat Tunnel, completed in 1928, bypassing Rollins Pass. It cut transit times in that section from several hours to mere minutes.

In 1949, the D&RGW and the Burlington railroads combined forces to create the California Zephyr, taking passengers through some of the most stunning scenery in the world. The Zephyr became so popular Amtrak has kept it in service, not hesitating to take it on when the nations' railroads weaseled themselves out of the passenger business.

Will Knight, my grandfather, was born in Missouri in 1853 and already a young man when the D&RG was created. He had become a successful bar owner and family man in Missouri when, in 1888, he and Grandma Kate moved in a covered wagon with their first three children to Colorado. Will, through his brother, had gotten a job on the D&RG as a gandy dancer to maintain track.

Gandy dancing describes workers using a bar called a gandy to force tracks into alignment. Over twenty years, Will became a section foreman, and the couple bore eight more children, ending with Dad's birth in 1907.

Grandpa Knight ended his career managing a section on what is now perhaps the most famous piece of the original D&RG. It remains in service today as a narrow gage railway taking thousands of tourists from Durango up the hill, forty-five twisting, treacherous, scenic miles, to Silverton, Colorado.

The snow would get so deep in winter, it is said, they had to go in and out of the section house from a second-floor window. We heard tales of other adventures from our Dad, aunts, and uncles. It was a way of life, things didn't always go smoothly, and their stories almost always end with the expression, "It's a hell of a way to run a railroad."