

An American Story

by

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I have had a love affair with railroads and cowboys for as long as I can remember. Perhaps growing up with steam locomotives in an industrial city in the South in the 1940s and 1950s had a lot to do with it. My dad worked for the railroad as a book keeper, but had little connection with the constant movement, smoke, and noise that thrilled me as a kid. His employer gave our family free passage on any of the passenger trains of that railroad and I got to use and know them well. During college I worked for that same railroad, doing engineering and surveying work. It was nice to finally work around trains, but somehow the early thrill was not there, and my early enthusiasm waned as I became older and more sophomoric (a wise fool) in the original sense of the word.

I recently decided to spend some time in the high country of Colorado, home of the romantic and long-gone narrow gauge railroads that were plentiful in that area over a century ago. As a model railroader (some call it grown men playing with trains) I had studied and become fascinated with a particularly unique and historic railroad called the Rio Grande Southern. The RGS ran a mere 170 miles between Durango and Ridgway in Colorado, passing through some of the highest, harshest, wildest, and most

beautiful terrain that exists in North America. As a civil engineer, I was astounded that men, hand tools, and blasting powder could build in the 1890s a railroad through such a challenging area. Not only that, it was thrilling and a bit scary to imagine operating trains in the snowy winter months at elevations above 10,000 feet. So I set out to travel to the extent possible that same route by automobile – not difficult since highways usually followed the railroads' routing when accessing those areas in the 1920s. Prior to that time, railroads were usually the only way to travel into and out of the remote mountainous regions of southwestern Colorado, except by horseback or wagon.

One chilly Colorado morning in October, before the mountain roads were closed by snow, I started driving from the southernmost terminal at Durango (still occupied by smoking steam locomotives and hordes of tourists there to ride the refurbished antique trains) to the northern end at Ridgway. Within two hours I came onto a broad plain and entered the town of Dolores. Historically the economy was supported by mining silver and harvesting lumber, but now is the center of a large farming and ranching area on a mile high plateau. Although the present tourist railroad (named Durango and Silverton) no longer passes through Dolores, nevertheless there was an old depot and museum (replicated exactly from the original from a century earlier) along the main road and I stopped there to take some photos.

I tried to imagine what it was like a century earlier with the old steam trains, the miners and the drifters, and even the cowboys and horses, all together in a thriving community. I asked around as to where I could get breakfast, and the volunteer at the depot's museum pointed across the street to the

Southern Hotel, and highly recommended it. I walked over and into the front door of this quaint stone two story building, and it seemed as if I had walked onto a movie set of one of the old western movies. I almost expected to see John Wayne standing at the bar, but instead I encountered a small dining area off the lobby. As a kid growing up, John Wayne had represented to me and my friends the archetypical American male (for better or worse), and most of us looked up to him, considering him our hero because of the characters he played in the movies.

I hurriedly took a seat and studied the small ornate menu. After placing an order with the friendly waitress/ owner, I continued reading the story of the history of the inn. It was originally constructed in the 1890s to service travelers through Dolores on the RGS (dubbed "The Southern" by the locals), hence the inn's name. As I continued to read, it was amazed to see that Zane Grey (famous author of many western short stories, the most well-known of which was "Riders of the Purple Sage") had stayed several weeks in a room directly above where I was seated, and while there he wrote a substantial portion of his iconic American story.

Gradually, the whole experience I was having shifted, and I imagined what it was really like back "then", and how the authors in that era (from about 1860 through the 1920s) actually defined - with the help of some inventive embellishment - what we now think of as the Old West. Zane Grey was the acknowledged master of that craft, and much of how we remember that era is shaped and defined in popular culture by those short novels and written stories from long ago. When motion pictures came along, "the western" was always a popular topic, and those stories were made "real" on the silver screen, resulting in a whole generation of people growing up with the belief that those were realistic

portrayals of the essence of our growing young country. "The Western" has been described as the "great American morality play," and existed as such until the 1950's when more realism and a deeper look into the psychology of the characters became more prominent.

So I began to see how the railroads and the American west were intertwined in the national consciousness of that period, and this helped explain my love of both topics. The saga of the lone rugged individual pressing forth against impossible odds, or the railroad engineer fighting to keep the train on the rails in a devastating snowstorm or flood, or the sheriff of the small town keeping order as best he could while surrounded by threatening danger and chaos – all these were common themes of these stories. They most often emerged in the books and movies of The West, and whether true or not, shaped those of my generation who revere those concepts and love those stories.

As I continued my drive, I crossed several mountain ranges that the railroad builders and cowboys needed to conquer with great difficulty, and I could not help but admire the grit and determination (and fear, loneliness, hunger, and danger) they encountered as they did so. Most of the old railway roadbeds are still there, and even walking on them – which I did – had its dangers and thrills after so many years.

In the afternoon I came into Ridgway, the northern terminus of the old Rio Grande Southern. Standing at the very small railroad museum near the main crossroads in that town and wondering what it was like a century before (apparently not much different from now, according to the docent in the museum), I looked across the town square and saw a small café named "True Grit Café." Then all of a sudden it hit me – this was the town

where the classic western "True Grit" was filmed, resulting in John Wayne's one and only Oscar.

As I crossed the square, I saw the remnants of the old railroad depot (now a converted private home) and the place where the three "bad men" were gruesomely hanged in the opening scenes. The True Grit café had been constructed since then, but looked as if it was at least a century old, and I recognized most of the other buildings from the movie. I went in, sat down, and all the walls had memorabilia of the filming of True Grit, including many photos of John Wayne at the time (he was 69 and it was his next to last movie) hanging on the wall. The bartender (it was after all a "western" café) looked at me, looked at the photo on the wall behind me, and told me I looked exactly like John Wayne in that photo. Amazed, I turned around, and surprisingly saw that he was right. I did look like him (using a little imagination), warts and all. I managed to do a poor imitation of "saddle up, I'll missy" in my best John Wayne voice, to the smiles and groans of the other patrons.

Later I drove along the old gravel road several miles out of town to where the climactic scene and gunfight was filmed. Down the road was the old farmhouse – still standing - that represented the homestead scene at the beginning and end of the movie.

It was getting late, and so I drove more directly to Durango south over Red Mountain Pass (too difficult for even the railroad to cross). It had been quite a day for this aficionado of all things western, and although I realized that many of these feelings and emotions I was experiencing were simply stories and legends, they had been starkly real for me as I had traveled through time that day. In some ways my personal story had paralleled the American Story that I had vicariously experienced that day.

It was a good experience and a great day.