

THE UNKNOWN RIO GRANDE

Subdivision 5 of the Utah Division

PHOTO STORY / MARK W. HEMPHILL

I HAD DRIVEN to Sagers Sid-ing before dawn, turning from the old highway onto a path across the desert. The truck had groaned and creaked through the mud. It snowed out here a week prior, then the snow had melted, turning the desert into a dark brown goo, frozen on its surface and rimmed with frost crystals, and liquid beneath.

I had called the dispatcher in Denver at about 4:30 this morning.

"Let's see . . . the first thing you'll have at Sagers is the 101. He'll be there . . . oh, about 6:05."

It's 6:15 now, still before dawn, and no train or sound of an approaching train. I stand at trackside, shivering, thinking . . . Where's the train? Why am I out here instead of sleeping late on weekend mornings like a normal person? It is too cold to talk, too cold to be out here.

A slight noise. I hold my breath, listening for the train—but the noise comes not from down the main line to the east, but from the south, from a westbound 18-wheeler several miles away on I-70. The sound of his diesel is clear but faint across the desert; I listen to him drop a gear for a small rise

and watch red and amber lights disappear into the darkness, followed minutes later by a soft rumble fading into silence.

Several minutes pass. Several small, puffy clouds turn from slate gray into blue tinged with pink, then to gray and white. The sky at the eastern horizon turns from gray to fuchsia to bright yellow.

The dawn comes quickly. A gilded sunrise flares out, flashing across me from out beyond the desert, beyond the Uncompahgre Plateau over in Colorado. The splendor of the sunrise is heightened by the contrasting bareness of the desert. Nothing competes with its brilliance, no building or trees or power lines block its sweep of the desert arena.

The sun does nothing as yet for the frigid cold.

Still no 101!

When I was young, 6 or 7, someone told me that "You can tell when a train is coming by putting your ear on the rail." I tried it several times, but all I got was dirty ears. I never heard one train.

No Tonto impersonations today, I

decide. My ear would probably freeze to the rail.

Finally, from the east, a very low-pitched hum. I feel it as much as I hear it. The hum grows insistent, deeper, louder. I stare down the main line to the east, toward a curve where the track vanishes.

There it is: headlights reflecting on the rails, competing with the sun in intensity. The train sweeps around the curve, driving toward me with astonishing speed, locomotives wound up to ear-splitting revs, piggyback trailers golden in the sunrise.

The diesels blast past; their exhaust washes over to the side, warming me momentarily. The train follows, carrying with it an arctic windstorm, freezing me anew. The piggyback trailers bounce and rock, the flanges ping and keen on the rails, the couplers squeak and slam in a deafening symphony of shrieking steel. The caboose hisses past; brakeman and conductor wave from the cupola. The caboose's rear glows tangerine, alight in the new day's sun; 101 goes over the horizon, chasing the dawn west.

This is the way railroads are

meant to be. If all that makes railroad-ing grand could be boiled down to one moment, this, for me, would be it. The Rio Grande, at dawn, on the desert.

On the "Desert Division," read Subdivision 5 of D&RGW's Utah Division, 176.4 miles from Grand Junction, Colo., to Helper, Utah.

WATER . . . it determines where people live. Where people live, a railroad goes. The Denver & Rio Grande Western's first bondholders must have viewed eastern Utah with dismay, for they had invested in a railroad through a desert where people were scarce and water a curiosity.

Rio Grande is a desert railroad, in kinship with all of the great southwest-

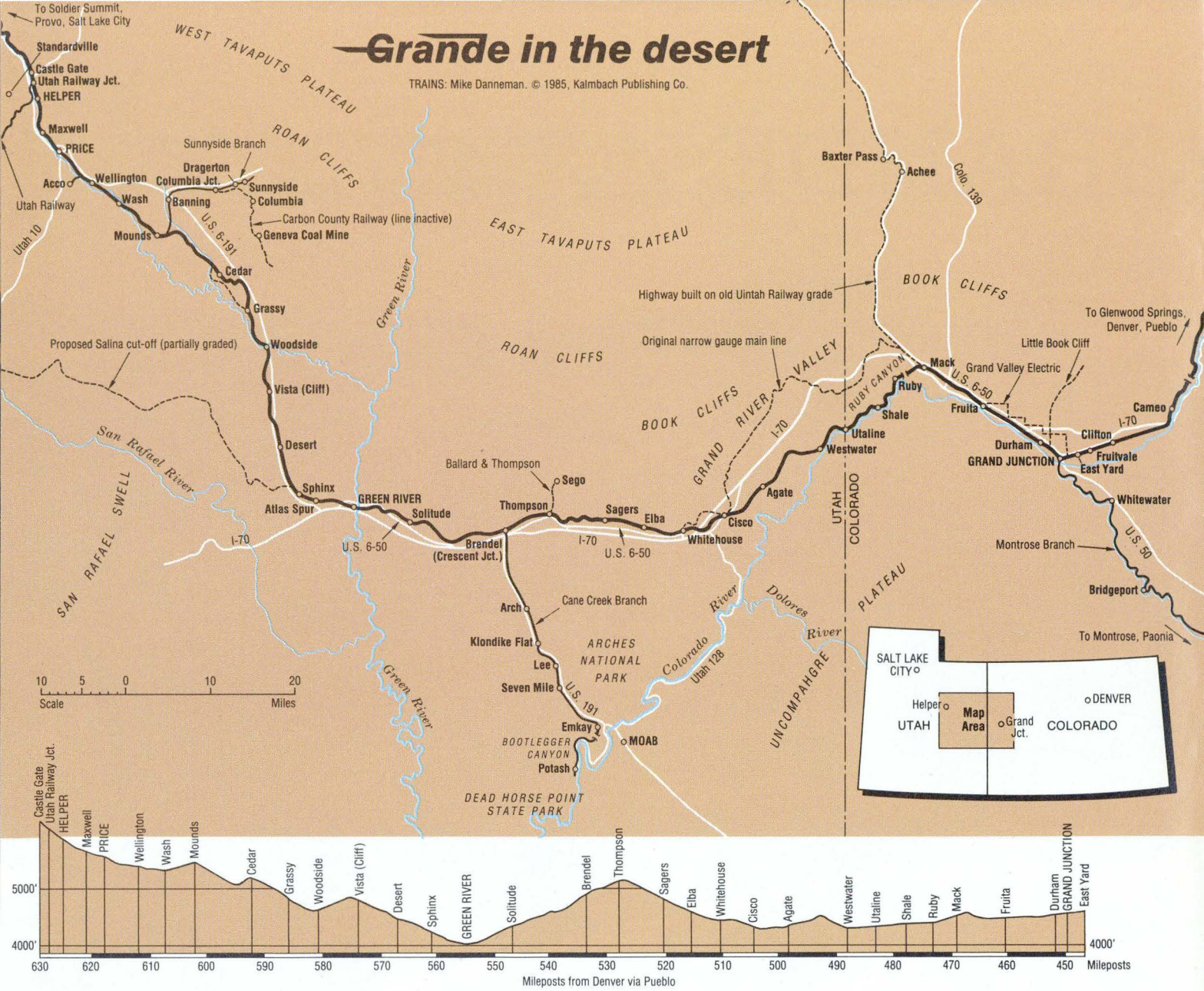
ern railroads. West of the Rockies, the D&RGW's main line is mostly in arid terrain. The Mormons were no fools; they settled in an oasis, Deseret.

People? Deserts tend to be uninhabited. A handful of ranchers live in the bottomlands along the Colorado River. Cisco really isn't a town anymore; Woodside is dead. Several hundred souls cling to a desperate sort of gas-pump and hamburger-deluxe existence in Green River. Crescent Junction, where the lonely highway to

Moab branches off, has five families and the best cafe in Utah. Thompson leads a charmed life, thanks to railroad and highway department wages. Moab, Wellington, Price, Sunnyside: mining towns. If the mines close, towns clustered around their portals dimin-

Grande in the desert

TRAINS: Mike Danneman. © 1985, Kalmbach Publishing Co.



ish or vanish, as Sego, Dragon, and Standardville have. Beyond these meager outposts of man? Total, absolute, unpeopled desert.

This desert is bounded by unyielding rock barriers. It's no accident that Rio Grande runs through the desert, for there are only two routes for east-west travel through the eastern half of Utah. The middle of the desert is one; the other is 100 miles north, where U.S. 40 follows the survey David Moffat drew for his Denver, Northwestern & Pacific.

The Book Cliffs monopolize the landscape at the northern edge of the desert. Rising sheer for 1200 feet, they are a 150-mile wall from Helper to Grand Junction, a wall that has been surmounted by one railroad, the Uintah, and only two roads, one of them built on the Uintah's 7.5 per cent grades. Behind and on top of the Book

Cliffs, the Roan Cliffs rise to the 9000-foot-high Tavaputs Plateau, 5000 feet above the desert floor. All of this is a chaotic array of cliffs and canyons dotted with scrub juniper and populated only with mule deer. No people.

The desert's western border is the Wasatch Plateau, which runs north, smack into the Book Cliffs. This confluence in the mountains is their weak point—cut by a steep, narrow canyon. In the canyon, railroad and highway parallel the Price River on a grinding 2.4 per cent climb to Soldier Summit. It's the only practical way west out of the desert.

Between the Plateau and the railroad is the San Rafael Swell, a huge dome with its top eroded off. Some grading was done across the swell for the proposed Salina cutoff, a railroad line surveyed from Green River to the town of Salina on the Marysvale

Branch (isolated in April 1983 by the Thistle mudslide). There were thoughts of extending this route west to meet Senator Clark's abuilding San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake, but then Edward H. Harriman showed up with LA&SL's reins in hand and the idea was quickly forgotten. Its alignment was pretty bad anyway. Just to the south, a two-lane I-70 (four would be ludicrous) repeats the idea, connecting Green River and Salina.

To the south, the barrier is a 1000-foot-deep moat. The Colorado, Green, Dirty Devil, and Dolores Rivers all descend cataclysmically to a beautiful but deadly labyrinth of slickrock and spires, dead-end canyons and quicksand. In this upside-down wilderness, rivers aren't natural transportation routes; they're unbridgeable chasms.

To the east is the Uncompaghgre Plateau, cut by the Colorado River in



LIKE soldiers marching as to war, black hood units lead No. 648 through Sphinx, Utah, against a curtain of the Beckwith Plateau.

Ruby Canyon, the railroad's eastern entrance to the desert.

In the center of this empty world of tan and gray silt is a black streak, the last-built segment of the Denver & Rio Grande Western—once the country's only narrow-gauge transcontinental . . . completed March 10, 1883.

Mack, the town of memories

SOFT, overgrown snowflakes of a spring storm out of the west tumble down, sticking to the cool ballast but not the warm ground. This is Mack, and a pause to wait for train 236.

How many of Mack's current residents remember the Uintah Railway, with its 7.5 per cent grades and 66-degree curves? Once it ran 63 miles north into a desert frontier, child of an era when short lines sprouted like fast-food franchises at an Interstate Highway off ramp.

There were other short lines in this desert . . . the Little Book Cliff Railway, a Shay-powered narrow gauge which ran 12 miles from Grand Junction to a coal mine at the base of the cliffs; Grand Valley Electric, an interurban that kinked its way along section lines from Grand Junction to Fruitvale; and the Ballard & Thompson,

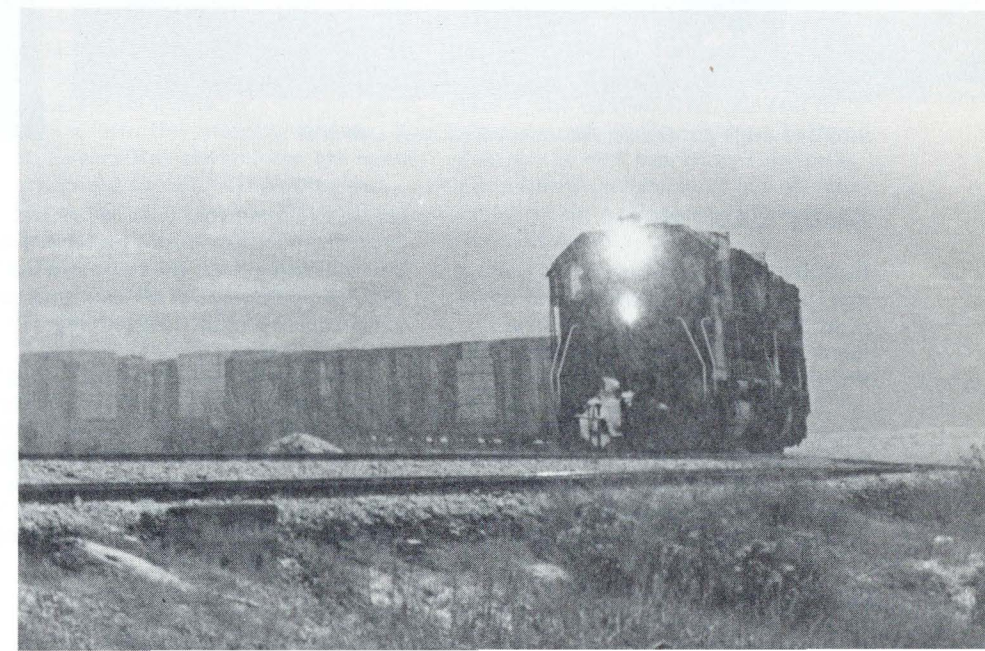
which ran north from Thompson to the company coal town of Sego.

Each of these railroads is little more than a memory. Never again will the U.S.'s only narrow-gauge articulateds attack Baxter Pass, or drift down to the interchange track at Mack with flat cars of gilsonite. Never again will a 600-class 2-8-0 rattle up to the tipple at Sego. Faint grades on the

desert floor will be blanketed by time more surely than this afternoon's snow shower will blanket Mack.

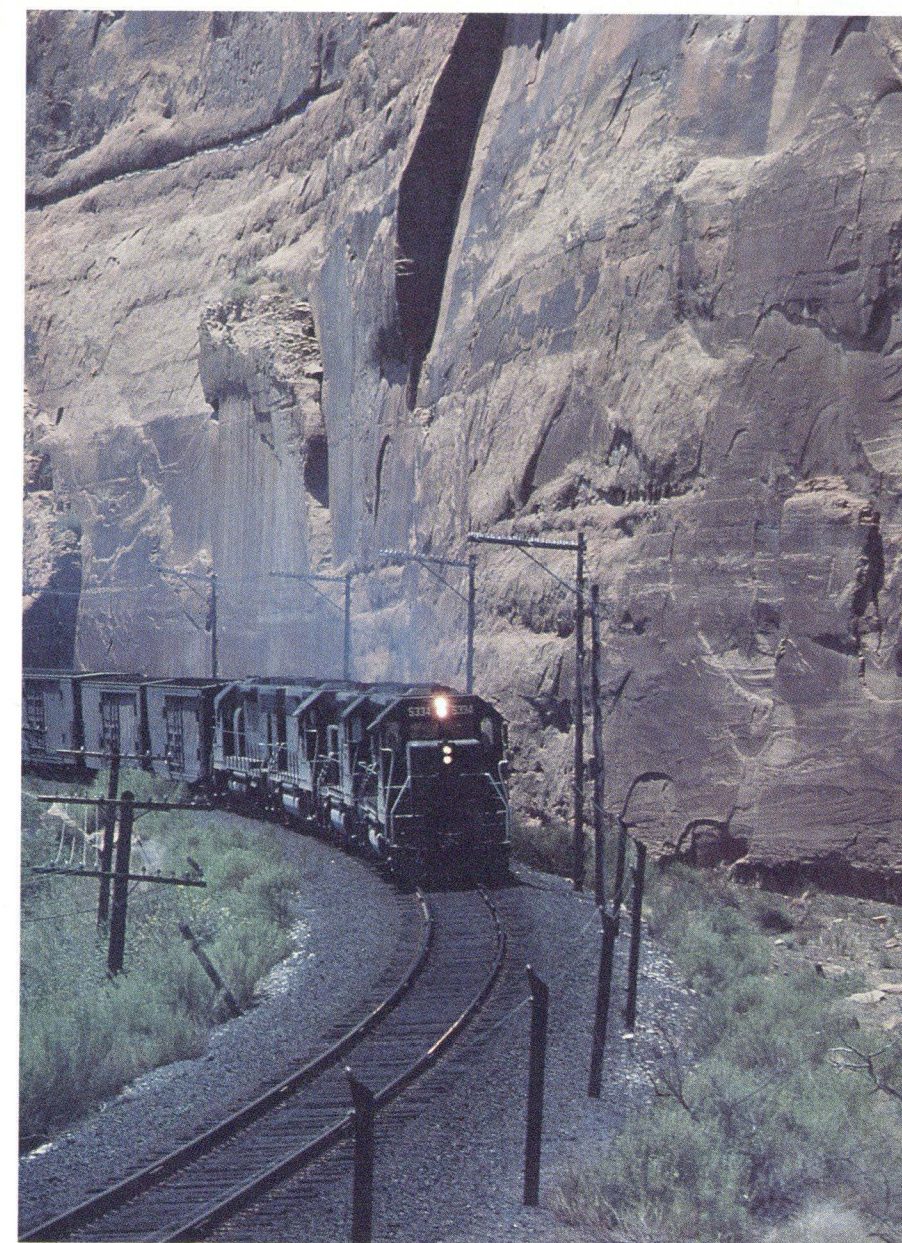
Now, Rio Grande makes memories for today. After a while, 236 can be heard working up out of Ruby Canyon, climbing the last grade before Grand Junction. A few minutes pass, and 236 appears, its SD40T-2's muted by the snow.

SNOW-MUTED SD40T-2's work out of Ruby Canyon through Mack.





SRS 144 sniffs for trouble, then races for a meet with 100.



SLIDE fences above, SD45 5334 leading train 136 below.

Ruby Canyon

IN Ruby Canyon the passer-by finds a nude planet. River. Rocks. Sun. Railroad. Each is absolute, so unornamented as to delight the physicist and the philosopher.

By noon on a hot summer day, the canyon becomes a sun-fired kiln, powered by the earth's own thermonuclear reaction, baking anyone foolish enough to be there. The canyon's walls almost glow with the sun's heat

stored in them (from yesterday? last year? last century?). Add together the heat radiating from the rock and the hell fire boiling out of the sky, and the temperature climbs past 100 degrees . . . 110 degrees . . .

The inferno comes from all sides. It soaks through the soles of your boots and the top of your hat. The heat snug-gles up to your skin in a delicious hot embrace. It invades your pores, then cooks your flesh. Thirsty and dazed, you might drink from the river. If you

have previously been repelled by the muddy, roily water, it might be too late. You might be so far advanced into heatstroke and dehydration that the river water may be rejected by your body. In this country, it is prudent to carry the minimum: a gallon of water per person per day. Without it, you might have what the park rangers quaintly term a survival problem.

A water obsession comes with the territory. If you can ignore it, you might notice the rock. It is high above

you, next to you, everywhere around you. Bare rock. Glorious rock. There is sandstone in every shade from bone-white to delicate pinks to iron-stained ruby red, in walls polished lovingly by the river, in jumbled, jagged heaps that parted from the canyon walls in some ancient paroxysm.

At the base of the rocks lies the railroad, on a narrow bench sandwiched between escarpment and river. The railroad: rusty, greasy black-brown rails, polished bright on top;

sun-broiled ties, oozing sticky, smelly creosote puddles; red-black ballast from the abandoned silver smelters of Leadville. The railroad lies supine, waiting for its trains.

On a Saturday morning in July 1981, Sperry Rail Service car 144 heads away, going east slowly, sniffing out faults in the rails. Its twin Caterpillar diesels surge, die down, then idle, like a garbage truck at 7 a.m. Its track time runs out. Lights on, the Sperry dashes back west to Utaline siding. Two minutes pass. A deep rumble echoes from behind the canyon's bend . . . around the corner, train 100 emerges. It slips past the Sperry Car at Utaline, then stretches languidly out to the east. Delaying 100 is unpardonable, for it's the hottest eastbound on the railroad, allowed only 3½ hours for the 176.4 up-

and-down miles from Helper to Grand Junction.

Later that day, train 136, with SD45 5334 leading, brushes past the base of the canyon wall, 300 feet of sheer smooth sandstone from ballast shoulder to cliff top. Ruby Canyon's indomitable environment is well illustrated by the horizontal slide fences *above* the train.

The desert

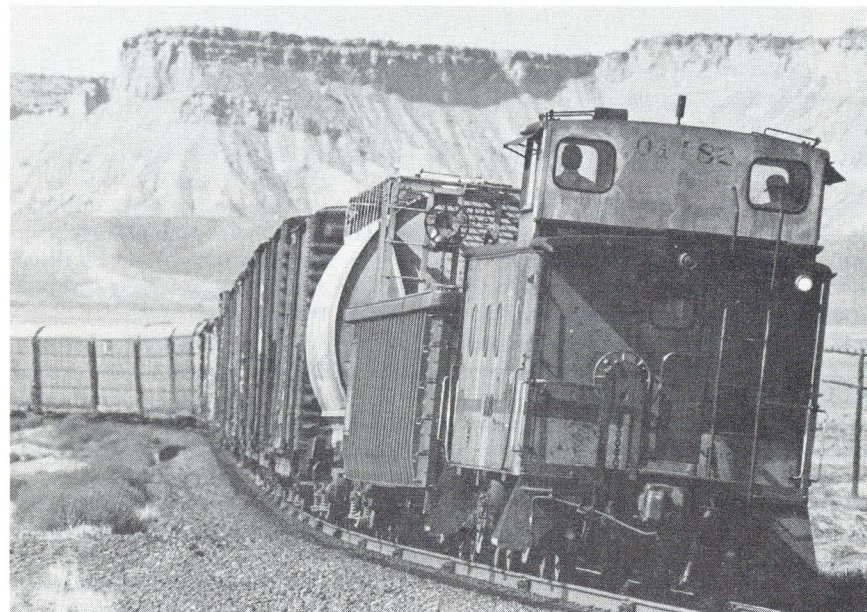
THIS is the land unknown. It is untouched, untrod, untrashed; also unfenced, untamed, unsubdivided, uninhabited, and, best of all, unexplored. Where else can you step out of your car, walk 50 yards away from the highway, and speculate that no person has ever set foot on that particular



TRAIN 154 rustling dead saltbrush and dry sage east of Thompson, Utah.



LIKE a demented centipede . . . and a brakeman thinking of mad dogs and . . .



spot before? There are reasons for your solitude: the desert is blazing hot in summer, freezing cold in winter, and inhospitable all the time.

On a winter sunrise, the east switch at Sagers is awash in a sea of stillness, the only sound the rhythmic clicking of CTC relays. The signal masts stand black, remote, aloof . . . a steel Stonehenge to the desert sun god. Around them is nothing but desert and sky and an empty railroad.

Another winter morning dawns unpromisingly. Low gray clouds scud silently across the sky, like an opening scene in an Edgar Allan Poe novel. Train 154 growls past, tunnel motors heeling on the high fill just east of Thompson. The wind of its passage rustles the dead saltbrush and dry sage.

Summer is the opposite of winter, but in the desert both are equally hostile. On a July afternoon in Crescent Junction, everything is motionless. The gas station attendant is hiding in the dark cool recesses of his service bay. The town's other residents have retreated to their swamp-cooled trailers. In the cafe, the truck driver regulars down their burgers and walk nonchalantly out into the inferno. Like tough men, they stride across the soft asphalt as if the heat means nothing to them—but their rigs are air-conditioned.

Every so often a carload of tourists roars down the off-ramp from I-70 and screeches to a stop at the gas station. Engine and air-conditioning are left running. The tourists pop out of their chilled iron boxes like gophers from a hole, scurry across to the soda machine, and chunk in 75 cents. Their salvation arrives in 12-ounce bottles. Liquid prizes in hand, they zip back to their Electras and Vistacruisers. The cars accelerate back onto the highway and vanish in the haze.

East of Crescent Junction, the track S-curves continuously, corresponding neatly to the sentinel line of cliffs. Heat swims up from the track in great translucent sheets. In the distance the signal line poles waver like weeds in a breeze.

Train 271 shows up, silently, not in the immediate foreground but at a distance of several miles. The desert floor's humps and hollows hide the track from ground-level view, but not the train; it esses across the landscape like a demented centipede until it finally wavers around the curve just to the east. The volume increases from nil to a roar, the sound no longer blocked by the turbulent air. The locomotives bellow past. The rear-end brakeman turns, watching the photographer wave like an idiot. He's probably thinking of something along the lines of mad dogs and railfans.

Into the canyonlands

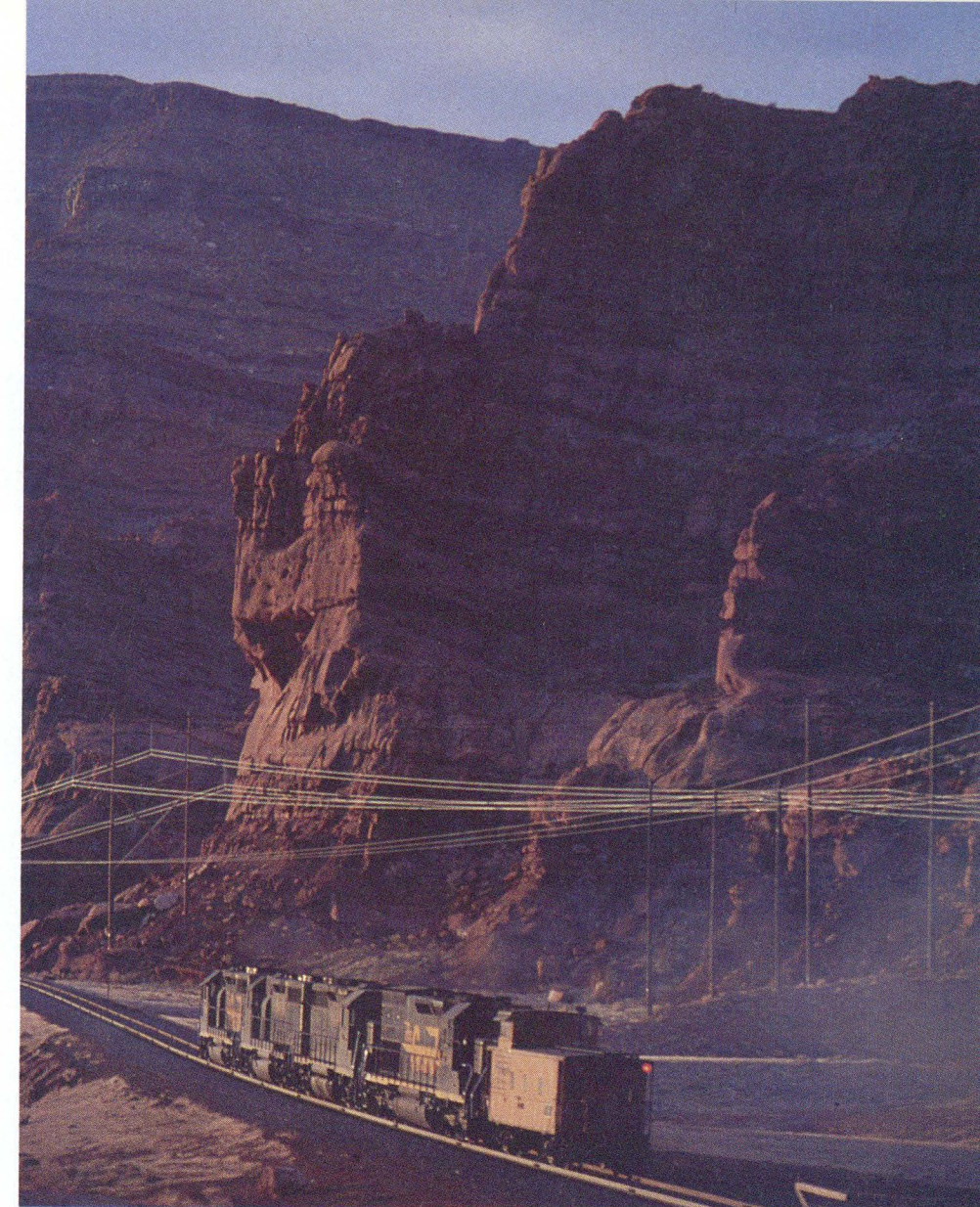
At Brendel, tracks peel off the main, heading south into a wilderness of sandstone: the Cane Creek Branch. At the end of the branch is a potash mine, down in the Colorado River canyon. The mine is a large operation. Its storage bin looks like a hangar in search of a blimp.

The branch is recent, built in 1962. Its traffic, of course, comes from the potash mine, which ships considerable tonnage. Some comes out in spot orders, amounting to a handful of carloads; most comes out in big export movements of 300 to 400 carloads, demanding several train movements on succeeding days. Naturally, these trains are called "Potash Turns," and the branch is usually referred to as the "Potash Branch." No one seems to have any idea where Cane Creek is.

On the morning of February 26, 1982, Potash Turn 647 meets the sunrise at Seven Mile siding. Today's train, led by 3099, consists of three GP40's and one tunnel motor, an empty L&N box, and a caboose. At Seven Mile, 647 sets out the L&N box for ore loading. The sun rises, shining vividly between clouds and horizon—the sandstone cliffs blaze vermilion. Set-out complete, 647 leaves. Farther to the south, the turn drifts past the base of 1000-foot-high cliffs amid power lines from Glen Canyon Dam.

The following morning brings another 647 out of Grand Junction for a continuing export order for delivery to Stockton, Calif. This train has 65 empties, the yard at Potash being a little looser after the previous day's movement. At Thompson, the only open station between Grand Junction and Helper, Agent Burt Chacon has been up since 6 a.m. typing the turn's waybills.

The 647 arrives at 9, making its presence known to Thompson's late sleepers as it climbs the hill just east of town. The train appears at the far end of town. The diesels shut off. The train brakes to a crawl past the station. The head-end brakeman comes out onto the front porch of the lead unit and hands Burt a slip—his and the hoghead's lunch order. The 647 continues to roll past the station. Burt checks off car numbers; his dog stands vigilant. The train brakes to a stop with the caboose opposite the station. Conductor Wayne Davis swings down and is met by Burt's dog dancing and yapping enthusiastically at his feet. A big unflappable man in his mid-30's, Wayne smiles at the dog, greets Burt, and gets down to business. He gives Burt's waybills a cursory glance, then launches into his and the rear brakeman's lunch order.



AT sunrise, train 547 rolling south of Seven Mile on a "recent branch."

"Make sure that's double meat to those sandwiches," he instructs.

"We aren't cheap like that head-end crew."

The 647 runs up the main to Brendel, then turns south onto the branch, and climbs leisurely up Klondike Flat. Behind it are the Book Cliffs, spread out in an imposing vista.

At Seven Mile, the branch drops down Courthouse Wash toward Moab, which is sort of the hot spot of eastern Utah. Moab was established in the last century by Mormon pioneers who thought they would have a quiet riparian future in watermelons and cataloupes, peach trees and frame white houses. They hadn't planned on uranium. As it turned out, Moab was at the center of the uranium mining belt. When the atomic age dawned in the 1950's, the town was invaded by miners, prospectors, and geologists.



CONDUCTOR . . . agent . . . dog.



ROLLING south of Brendel down the Cane Creek Branch: train 647.



DRAGGING 8300 tons at 5 mph into a 1.3-mile tunnel—punctuated by caboose.



The branch never gets to Moab. Just as the town comes into view, the track turns and dives into the cliffs it's been clinging to, burrowing under 1000 feet of cliff cover in a 1.3-mile tunnel that opens out on its west end to a slickrock paradise: Bootlegger Canyon. In Bootlegger Canyon, Rio Grande lies in a scene that looks like it was created expressly for the pages of *National Geographic*. To the south and west are Dead Horse Point State Park and Canyonlands National Park. To the northeast is Arches National Park. The arches aren't all inside the park's borders. In this canyon are two: one looks like a vase handle, the other like a Paul Bunyan-sized one-holer.

A 647 will spend an hour switching the mine yard and assembling its train before changing its number to 648 and

heading north to canyon and tunnel.

The winter day is serene—warm, still, the sunlight indistinct. After a while, a deep bass with a high turbo scream echoes and re-echoes in the canyon: 648 grinding up the man-carved ledge out of the Colorado River Canyon.

Out of the Canyonlands, the four diesels on 648 of February 26 are at notch 8, moving the train at 5 mph are right at their limit of 8300 tons. They crawl past, leaving a cloud of spent fuel, a stream of powdered sand, and enter the tunnel. Their clamor is sliced off sharply, as if the diesels had shut off, but the 1.2 per cent grade continues for another 8 miles. They'll be running out of the short-time portion of the ammeter when they crest the grade at Seven Mile.

Loaded hoppers roll quietly past, creaking softly, swaying gently. The caboose trails, leaving a soft haze of coal smoke from its stove. The caboose vanishes. The tunnel swallows everything but the pleasant aroma of coal.

The town on the forsaken highway

THE trails of men's journeys are everywhere on the desert. Some are in use, many lie abandoned. Erosion works slowly in the desert. Unless someone carves it up into shopping malls and retirement communities, this history of transportation will remain incised into its silt for centuries.

From the clifftop repeater site between Brendel and Floy is visible something not evident from ground

level: the original narrow-gauge main, crossing and recrossing today's line. What breed of traveler could have endured this railroad in 1885? Who actually paid money to ride its hot, cinder-ridden coaches on unballasted track that sinuated for what must have seemed an eternity across this desert? However awful the experience seems now, it must have been deemed a vast improvement over stages. Or walking.

In the 1920's and 1930's, a multitude of Americans emigrated west across the desert—some in search of a new start in California, others just seeing the land. They left their spoor by the sides of the two-lane highway: motels with omnious neon signs (STEAM HEAT . . . MODERN ROOMS); chrome and linoleum lined cafes with SEPARATE SECTIONS FOR TRUCK DRIVERS; and, of course, gas stations. These were the camp followers of the generation that forsook tourist Pullmans for Studebakers.

In Green River, a sign advertises the Uranium Motel. It's a relic of a now shunned American ambition, from an age when the atom was the fuel of future prosperity and Green River was the front door to the Uranium Country.

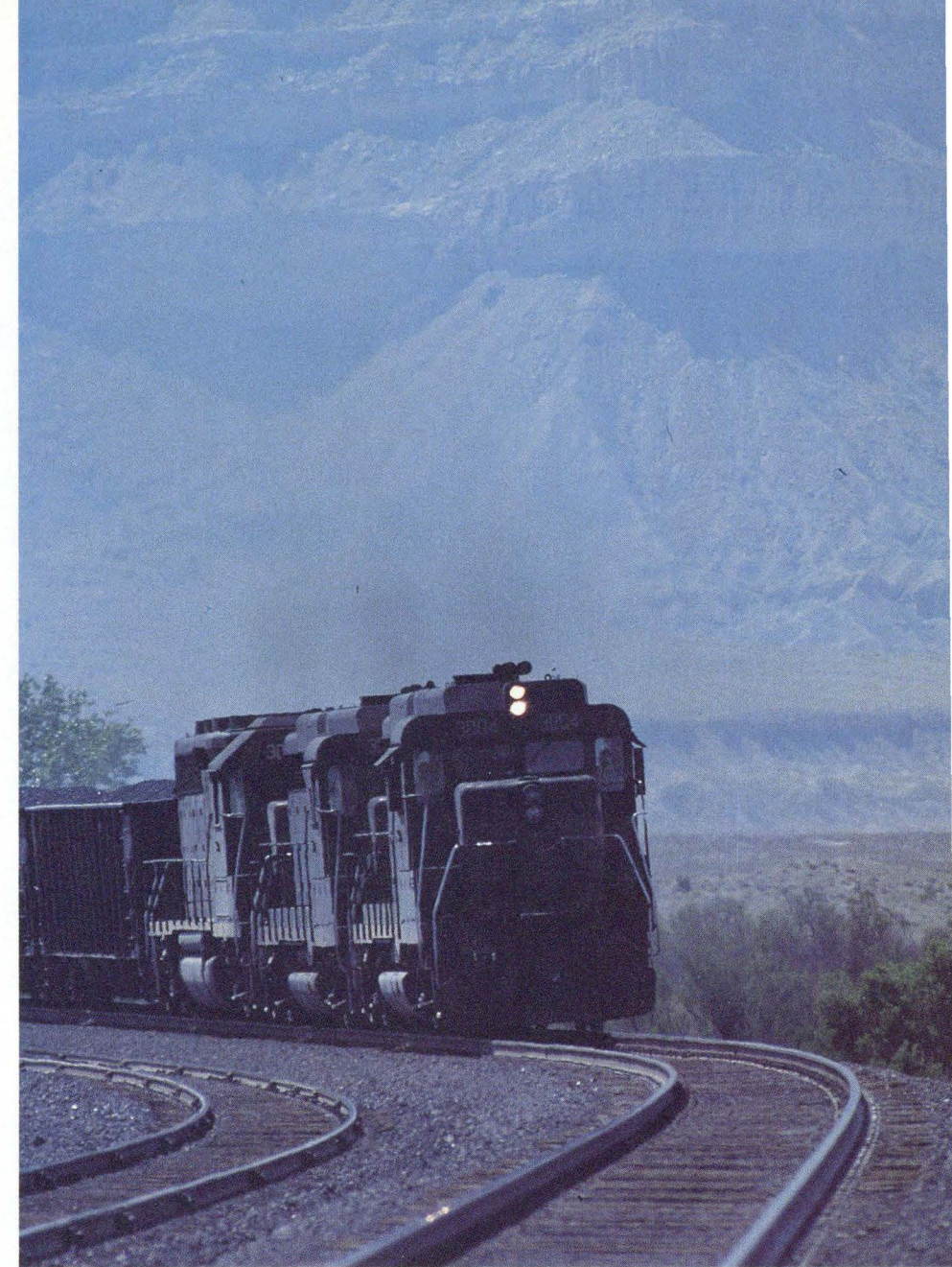
At the eastern edge of Wellington, a gas station advises motorists to FILL UP—DESERT AHEAD. It's almost 60 miles to the next one, at Green River. The Interstate and 727 have bypassed the desert towns, leaving them to decay slowly in the sun. Want to explore one? East of Wellington 32 miles is a defunct Chevron station facing the highway. Turn off the pavement, go around the station, and drive past the vacant ticket booth: you're at the entrance to the only reason for existence Woodside ever had—the FAMOUS WOODSIDE GEYSER.

The story I hear is that Rio Grande picked the edge of the Price River here as a logical locomotive water hole. The railroad drilled what it presumed to be a well but instead discovered (really, created) the Woodside Geyser. I stopped and stepped carefully to the hole, perhaps 10 inches in diameter. I looked in. It gurgled. I jumped back, expecting the imminent arrival of great jets of water and steam.

More gurgles. I waited patiently at a safe distance, for an hour or two . . . no geyser. I was beginning to understand why no one was around to sell me a ticket.

Old U.S. 6 runs just 50 feet to the west of the geyser, its 8-foot lanes overrun by saltbush growing through the cracks. It's a dead highway through a deader town. The remains of Woodside aren't much to look at.

A roofless cafe, strategically spotted between the brink of the geyser's basin and the highway . . . if the customers didn't see the geyser erupt, was their lunch free? To the west, a couple



THE only action in Woodside . . . 647 storming down the hill from the east.

of empty block houses. A '54 Pontiac, a '67 Ford wagon, each riddled with more bullet holes than a cartoon bad man. A deserted Standard station, facing the old highway, late afternoon sun glinting off the broken glass in its smashed windows. No ghosts call out from inside.

Rio Grande provides the only action in Woodside. On a May 1982 morning, 647 storms down off the hill from the east and rounds the curve, GP30's and 35 hunting back and forth, pedal to the metal, turbos screaming, diesels bellowing. The Rio Grande created Woodside, and, in the end, outlasted it.

Cedar Hill

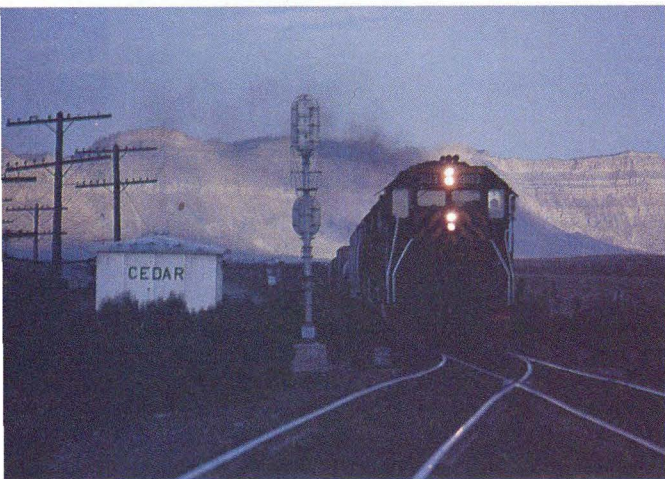
FOR the railroad, the desert is anything

but flat. Westbound trains must climb from the 4580-foot elevation of Grand Junction to 5806 feet at Helper, but this is punctuated by the steep valley of the Green River. At 4066 feet, the river bridge is the lowest point on Rio Grande's main line. And in between Grand Junction and Green River is a modest climb to Thompson, elevation 5146. In terms of net feet climbed, westbounds hike 3428 and eastbounds 2181, so it's no wonder that the trains are so heavily powered. The worst of the hills on the desert is Cedar; it taxes trains in each direction. A major track alignment is planned for Cedar Hill, even staked out, but the work has yet to begin.

West of Grassy, in sight of U.S. 6-50, is where the hill begins. The trio of



UNDER thunderheads that will bring no rain to the desert: train 148.



NO. 171 at Cedar (above), and beside U.S. 6-50 (right).



tunnel motors spliced by a GP30 on train 171 take deep breaths and make a hard swing to the left. Train brakes—set for the 6-degree curve—release. Diesels notch up to Run 8 for the 1.1 per cent. To the right, the highway solves the same problem directly; if you're going downhill on this desert racetrack, watch out for a Utah Patrol

car that might be skulking at the base. On another early summer 1982 day, under thunderheads that will bring no rain to the desert, eastbound 148 crosses Grassy Trail Creek, gathering speed for the west side of the hill. Narrow-gauge trestle bents still jut out of the creekbed between here and Grassy siding. When the Rio Grande

Western (the "W" in today's D&RGW) was standard-gauged, its engineers selected the grades and curves of Cedar Hill in preference to the washout-plagued alignment along the creek.

At sunset, another day's 171 tops the grade at the east switch of Cedar in a display of smoke, steel, and noise. By morning it will be in Salt Lake City.

The railroad town

At Mounds, the desert changes. East of here it is wide open, made up of mud flats and hummocks, cut at its extremities by deep red sandstone canyons. The desert towns are minute and far apart. The railroad is a bridge road, its only significant traffic source the mine at Potash (a giant coal loader at Atlas, its Brobdingnagian bulk looming on the desert like a mysterious machine on an alien planet, is long out of use). The trains are all just passing through, coming from somewhere, going somewhere else.

At Mounds, Rio Grande enters an industrial metropolis in the wilderness, an area defined and underwritten by coal. The desert changes. It becomes wetter. Juniper and salt cedar gain a foothold. Tan sandstone and gray shale cliffs dominate the horizon. The towns grow close together—the newer ones choked with the mobile homes, jacked-up/fat-tired/light-festooned four-wheel-drive pick-ups, pizza restaurants, and supermarkets of their modern-day miner residents. Price (population 9086) is the commercial center of this enclave of din and energy, but Helper (2724) its rail center.

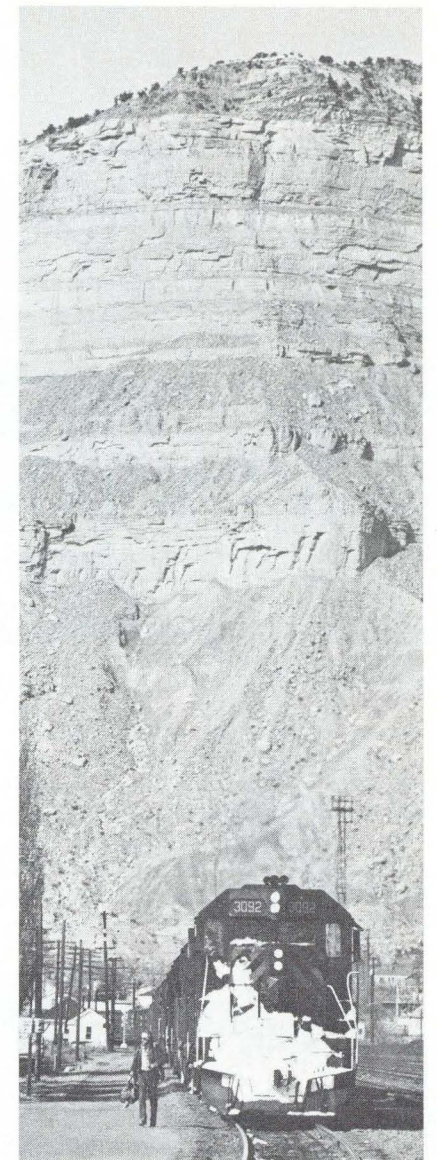
Helper is the quintessential railroad/mining town. Rio Grande occupies the only reasonably flat piece of real estate between the cliffs that envelope Helper on three sides. The Utah Railway, being the second-comer, built its pocket yard on the side of the canyon wall—the only place left. Up every side canyon are the coal mines, served by tentacles of Rio Grande; Utah; and Carbon County Railway (moribund since October 1982). The town itself is squeezed between the railroad and the cliffs, its streets steep and narrow; its houses small wood bungalows on tiny lots; its business district old, brick, Victorian. The biggest building in town is the Miner's Union Hall. Everything is uniformly tinged coal-dust black.

In the age of the world's heaviest coal-fired Challengers and three-cylinder Mountains, Rio Grande crews had a short walk from the station to a choice of hotel accommodations: the Rio and the Rail Road. Both are boarded up now, vacated in favor of the railroad's own new hotel, a two-story steel affair identical to the ones in Minturn and Bond, Colo.

The trains do not linger in Helper. Westbound manifests get one or two pushers behind their cabooses, usually GP40's. The coal trains, which can run up toward 15,000 tons, need four, six, sometimes even eight mid-train helpers to boost them up the 2.4 per cent to Soldier Summit. The eastbounds roll through, seldom stopping, crews changing on the roll.

On a spring 1983 afternoon, a blizzard assaults the threads of transportation on the Summit to the west. Chains on U.S. 6-50 are mandatory. In the last few hours, six semis have wrecked. The remains of a double-trailer Garrett rig that slid into the Price River by Castle Gate sit as a twisted warning at highway's edge.

Rio Grande is feeling the storm. The signal maintainer does a human icicle act at Colton, trying to resurrect some semblance of a working signal system. Soon, the trains are being "P.C.'d" past each signal (*i.e.*, a permissive card issued by the dispatcher granting a train permission to pass a signal), all of which have gone dead. At Soldier Summit, a front-end loader is working, trying to clear out access roads so the section gang can get its truck in. It's a futile task; the snow drifts back across in minutes. The section gang shovels out the upper switches in Gillully, only to return to the lower switches, which had just been cleared. By mid-afternoon, the plow-flanger is called out of Helper. To everyone's amazement, this snowstorm will climax in a spring melt that will culminate in the mudslide at Thistle, which will block the main line for



BRAKEMAN unloads through snow.

nearly three months. "Lake Thistle" will cut the railroad in two until July.

At Helper, it's sunny, a spring day. The cottonwoods lining the banks of the Price River have all budded out. Train 136 whines down into town, carrying its taste of battle; the head-end brakeman has to kick his way through the densely packed snow on the platform of GP40 3092 before he can drop off. In seconds, the next crew will climb on.

Ahead of the train is desert and sunshine. The snowstorm and the summit behind it might as well be in a different world, a world to be explored another day on the Rio Grande. I

MARK W. HEMPHILL, 26, moved to Alaska two years ago from Colorado with his wife, two dogs, and two trucks "because it was a wild idea." He manages construction on a large project for an Anchorage architectural firm.

edited / DAVID P. MORGAN

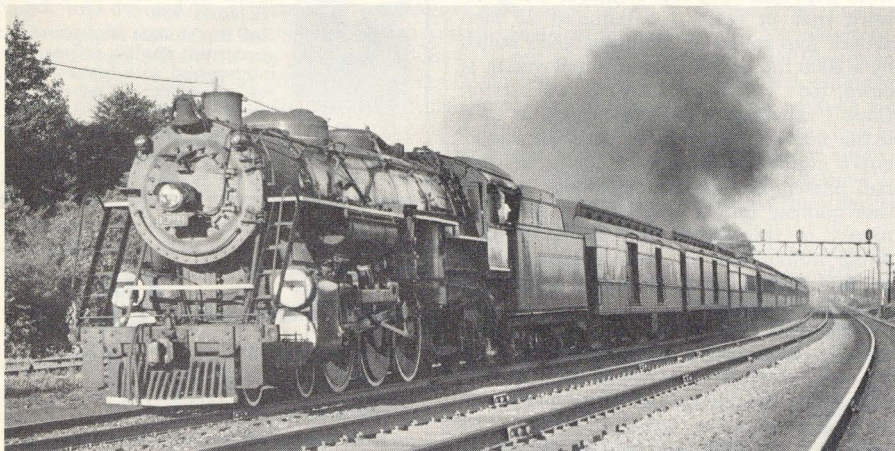
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NEWS & EDITORIAL COMMENT

Ps-4 1391, GP38 2072, SURVIVAL



Richard J. Cook.

SR 1391: 1.4 million railroaders were working when she hosted the *Crescent* in 1944.

WHAT does the headline mean? The Southern Railway 4-6-2 and the Burlington Northern Geep are pictured on the cover of a slender (26 pages), little (5½ × 8½ inches) booklet issued by the Association of American Railroads last January. But we were fearful that if we alluded to its full title (*Railroads and Productivity: A Matter of Survival**) early on, you might have dozed off, turned the page, or presumed what followed. So we resorted to what the journalism trade calls a grabber.

You'd rather read about a graceful Pacific and/or a green, black, and white EMD B-B? So would we. You're thinking, perhaps,

*Available free from the AAR, 1920 L St. N.W., Washington, DC 20036.

that when the AAR ropes in that word "productivity," the translation is "we need more gives from labor"—and you're right. But if we're thinking this: include us out of any intramural management/labor wrangling, we would rather be out train-watching . . . well, we could be playing the see-no-evil/hear-no-evil/speak-no-evil game at our own peril.

Another grabber—the 16 of the 4491 words (exclusive of its 56 footnotes of documentation) in the booklet that most riveted our attention: ". . . traditional lines of business may be insufficient to support even a spartan network of main lines." Is the author (Frank N. Wilner, AAR economist/spokesman and occasional "TRAINS Turntable" contributor) saying that railroading, per



TRAINS: Harold A. Edmonson.

BN 2072: 566,282 were employed when it initiated 1970 Burlington Northern merger.

NOBODY EVER ASKED

A LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEER we know says any grade-crossing accident is followed by the need to repeat answers to police, coroner, tower operator, dispatcher, and railroad officials: What speed were you doing? Headlight on bright? Bell ringing? Horn being blown? What throttle position? How far did the train move after the impact? Names of witnesses? (The police always ask to see his driver's license.) If anyone is killed, even if he was intoxicated or drove around a crossing gate, and the train was 2 mph over the speed limit, somehow it is the engineer's fault. Our friend adds: "No one ever asked me if I felt OK. I still see the last second of four people before the impact that sent them to eternity. But nobody asked how I felt."



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