

An Early Colorado Gondola

BY JEAN M. GREINER

The bright yellow buckets moving steadily upward over a system of cables and trestlework from the southwest side of town to the top of the mountain and filled with exuberant, gaily dressed tourists were a familiar sight to the townspeople. Every day from 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. the gondola carried hundreds of Coloradoans and visitors from every part of the country to the summit of Sunrise Peak. Sunrise Peak? An old ski area? No, this gondola was in the mining town of Silver Plume and preceded those at the Colorado ski areas by over one-half century.¹

Insofar as it applied to transportation on a mountain, the word gondola was unknown in 1906, the year several Denver and Chicago businessmen organized the Colorado Mines and Aerial Tramway Company. Constructed at a cost of over one hundred thousand dollars, an aerial railroad, or tramway as it was called, in the mountains west of Denver would be an excellent investment—they believed.² The world-famous, four and one-half mile Georgetown Loop had been bringing tourists into Silver Plume since 1885. Certainly the three-hour and forty-minute trip on the Colorado and Southern Railway from Denver to Golden—then through Clear Creek Canyon with its spectacular scenery and rich ore-producing mines at Idaho Springs, Fall River, Dumont, Lawson, Empire, and Georgetown, capped by the breathtaking ride into Silver Plume—was an attraction that few Denverites or visitors to Colorado could afford to miss.³ Each summer thousands of tourists poured from the daily trains into the mining town of eight hundred. A ready-made market existed for their time and dollar.

¹ Interview with George Rowe, October 1972, a resident of Silver Plume since 1891; Cornelius W. Hauck, *A Journal of Railroad History in the Rocky Mountain West: Narrow-gauge to Central and Silver Plume*, Colorado Railroad Annual no. 10 (Golden: Colorado Railroad Museum, 1972), p. 106.

² Interview with George Rowe, October 1972; *Denver Times*, July 9, 1909.

³ Hauck, *A Journal of Railroad History*, pp. 76-80; timetables and promotional literature in Argentine Central Railway, Argentine and Gray's Peak Railway, and Sunrise Peak Aerial Railway files, Railroad Collection, Documentary Resources Department, State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver.



Already proposing to tap this market was the Argentine Central Railway Company, whose road had been under construction since 1905. Built both to serve the numerous mines in the East Argentine district, south of Silver Plume, and to carry passengers on an exciting, sightseeing journey to the wind-swept mining town of Waldorf and beyond to the top of Mount McClellan, the Argentine Central would not be running on Sundays due to the uncompromising religious convictions of its founder, a mine owner from Massachusetts and a Methodist minister as well.⁴ Understandably, the Colorado Mines and Aerial Tramway Company was optimistic about its venture.

The tramway line was surveyed to the top of Pendleton Mountain in the spring of 1906 and the owners named the 12,275 foot summit Sunrise Peak.⁵ The mountain itself had been named for the 1864 Democratic vice-presidential candidate George H. Pendleton. A higher mountain to the south, where the Argentine Central tracks were being laid, had been named in honor of the party's presidential candidate General George B. McClellan.⁶

Construction began in May under the supervision of Manager G. W. Skouland. The company was unduly optimistic, expecting the tramway to be in operation by mid-summer. By June the foundation of the lower terminal had been completed



"Where You Start Up," the base station of the Sunrise Peak Aerial Railway.

and the work crew was digging holes for the towers, which ranged in height from twenty to sixty feet. Still hopeful of a mid-summer opening the company put on a double shift in July, one working from 4:00 A.M. to noon and the other from noon to 8:00 P.M., with the result that by the end of the month all but the uppermost towers had been installed. Despite this almost around-the-clock activity, it became obvious that the tramway would not be able to capture even the September trade. Rocky terrain and bad weather caused more difficulties and delays than had been anticipated.⁷

Resigned to not opening until the next summer, the owners did want as much of the line as possible completed before winter set in, and the crew worked well into fall. Construction was expedited with the installation of one of the large cables that



⁴ Frank R. Hollenback, *The Argentine Central: A Colorado Narrow-Gauge* (Denver: Sage Books, 1959), pp. 9-53.
⁵ *Silver Plume Silver Standard* (weekly), April 21, 1906.
⁶ Hollenback, *The Argentine Central*, pp. 47-48.
⁷ *Silver Plume Silver Standard*, April 21, June 2, July 7, 28, 1906.

connected the lower and upper parts of the mountain. A cage was then used to carry men and materials to the top to finish building the terminal and power station.⁸

The *Silver Plume Silver Standard*, Silver Plume's weekly newspaper, had greeted the announcement of a tramway in its backyard with typical enthusiasm, calling it "another wonderful piece of work in this vicinity that will prove to be a great attraction to tourists and help to make Silver Plume famous throughout the country." The *Silver Standard* followed the construction of the line with detailed reports and unabashed boosterism. The tramway, declared the paper, would be a much greater novelty than the cog railroad at Colorado Springs. The view was certainly as magnificent as that from Pikes Peak but not so high that the tourist would experience the unpleasant effects that were so common on the attraction to the south! The *Silver Standard* also assured readers, lest anyone be afraid of heights, that tramway cars definitely would be deep enough to prevent passengers from falling out.⁹

The officers of the tramway company had a second idea in mind, one that they hoped to begin implementing as soon as construction was under way. Why not build a hotel and dancing pavilion on the top of Pendleton Mountain? The tramway would thus provide access to a truly unique summer resort.¹⁰ This was a grand dream but the realities involved in actually building the line caused the proponents to reevaluate the idea. By the spring of 1907 they had decided that a new hotel in Silver Plume would be more practical and would serve the same purpose. Tourists could travel on the Colorado and Southern in the afternoon, could spend a comfortable night at the hotel, and could ride the tramway at dawn the next day to see the sunrise. An important factor in this new plan was to induce the railroad to sell tickets good for the return trip to Denver on the second day as well as on the same day, which was current practice.¹¹

The *Silver Standard* naturally supported the idea of a new hotel in town, stressing the need to accommodate the masses of tourists who would be descending on Silver Plume during the summer. Besides the Georgetown Loop, which was a proven popular attraction, 1907 would mark the first full summer of operation for the Argentine Central. With the tramway due to open, "a nerve-trying experience which will no doubt prove

very attractive to . . . thousands of people," and with mining activities at a peak as well, Silver Plume was in for a banner year.¹²

As if all this were not enough, the *Silver Standard* suggested another profit-maker. A tunnel connecting the well-known Seven Thirty and Burleigh mines would enable tourists to see mining operations firsthand. Though an underground ride was the one kind of trip that Silver Plume did not have, the paper raised an objection—the mine owners might not want to mix tourism and mining.¹³

For whatever reasons nothing further was heard of the underground sightseeing proposal. The tramway company, too, canceled plans for a hotel, perhaps thinking that the three existing hotels in town, the Windsor, the LaVeta, and the City, were sufficient.¹⁴

After four months of work in the spring and early summer of 1907, the tramway was ready for the final, thorough testing. Each car was loaded with eight hundred pounds of rock and the line ran for several hours at full speed. Then, half the load was left on the cars, which remained suspended overnight. When no adverse effects were noted on the cables and towers, Manager Skouland pronounced the tramway ready for public use. First, however, an inaugural ride was arranged for company officials and their wives and guests on August 12, 1907, and later that week the populations of Silver Plume and Georgetown were invited to be the special guests of the company. A number of residents did not hesitate to take advantage of the free rides, and those who at first were reluctant to get in a bucket had second thoughts after seeing their friends safely making the round trip and after hearing their impressions of the ride.¹⁵

On August 20, 1907, "The World's Greatest Scenic Route" with a total of twenty-three steel buckets, each seating four people and exposed except for a slightly curved, raised metal covering, opened to the general public. Photographer George Dalglish was on hand to record the festivities as crowds milled around the base station and awaited their turns in the buckets.¹⁶

The crew of eighteen required to operate the tramway safely was responsible for locking and unlocking the door on the side of each bucket. While one bucket was loaded at the bottom an-

⁸ Ibid., April 6, May 18, 1907.

⁹ Ibid., May 18, 1907.

¹⁰ Interview with George Rowe, October 1972.

¹¹ *Silver Plume Silver Standard*, April 6, August 17, 1907; *Georgetown Courier* (weekly), August 24, 1907.

¹² *Silver Plume Silver Standard*, August 17, 1907; interview with George Rowe, October 1972.

⁸ Ibid., September 29, 1906.

⁹ Ibid., April 21, 1906.

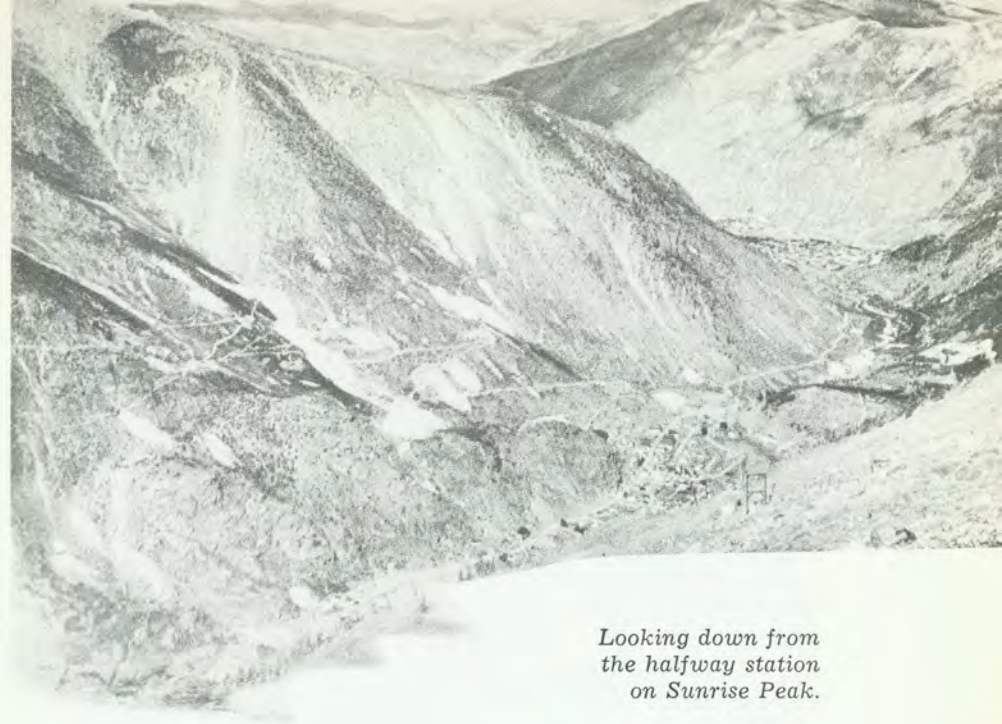
¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., March 30, 1907.

other was unloaded at the upper terminal. The two stations were connected by telephone and three tension stations were placed between them at strategic intervals. Here employees checked the equipment and the tension of the cables, designed to support 175 tons, and then rang a bell to signal that all was well.¹⁷ Not the least of their duties was reassuring nervous passengers as they rode by. To calm the more anxious, the company often would solicit the youth of Silver Plume to stand in the buckets.¹⁸

Sitting in an open bucket, which rose more than three thousand vertical feet in one and one-fourth miles and was at times several hundred feet above deep abysses, required an adventurous spirit. Thunder storms occurred regularly, snow was not uncommon, and power failures were frequent. The two by three foot metal covering above each bucket was designed for protection from oil drips, not weather!¹⁹ Judging from the num-

"On their way," an open bucket descending from Sunrise Peak to Silver Plume far below.



Looking down from the halfway station on Sunrise Peak.

ber of tourists who queued up at the station, however, the novelty of the ride and the prospect of magnificent vistas overcame most apprehensions. The twenty-five minute ride up the side of Pendleton Mountain not only delighted but also surprised most of the tourists who found, to their relief, that the buckets did not swing and sway. A Colorado and Southern tourist pamphlet stated that the tramway ascended as "softly as ribbon is drawn from a spool."²⁰

Passengers alighted at an elevation of 12,000 feet. Walking a few hundred feet to the summit, admiring the view of Clear Creek and Silver Plume far below and the mountains on all sides, enjoying the profusion of wild flowers, and spreading the contents of picnic baskets caused the time to go quickly. By mid-afternoon a line began forming. With everyone descending the company again called on Silver Plume boys, who were always eager for a free ride. The boys balanced the line by riding

¹⁷ Interview with George Rowe, October 1972; *Picturesque Colorado: A Story of the Attractions of the Wonderful Rocky Mountain Region Told in Pictures and Words* (Denver: Smith-Brooks Press, 1910), a Colorado and Southern Railway pamphlet.

¹⁸ Interview with George Rowe, October 1972.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Picturesque Colorado.*



to the top while the tourists, ready to catch the train back to Denver, came down en masse.²¹

Vigorous promotion in Denver and just plain hucksterism in Silver Plume soon made the aerial railroad a viable competitor. "No dust, no dirt, no smoke, no cinders, no noise," shouted young men with megaphones as passengers alighted at the Colorado and Southern terminal.²² The tramway base station, which housed the ticket office and repair shop, was only a few hundred feet from the terminal. The employees spared no effort in trying to attract tourists, much to the dismay of the Argentine Central partisans who continually tried to hush the competition.²³ The base station sold tickets for \$1.00 a ride as opposed to \$1.50 for passage on the Argentine Central; but those with foresight usually took advantage of the advertising at Denver's Union Station and purchased a special Colorado and Southern round trip ticket, which included a ride on the tramway, for \$4.00 during the week or \$3.00 on the weekends.²⁴ Not hesitating to resort to gimmickry, the tramway company installed fences on the mountain in the fall of 1907 to catch large accumulations of snow, which, hopefully, would stay on the ground during the



summer. A telescope also was placed on the summit. Photographs of tourists peering through the scope at 12,275 feet were good publicity, but the telescope was, in fact, an imitation.²⁵

For three months every summer during its short existence the tramway provided Coloradoans and visitors with a thrilling, memorable experience. Business was slow, however, during the final years of operation. Like so many other ventures of the time, the tramway, even in its early years, was never the sound investment predicted by its backers. A growing public apathy toward the novelty coupled with the general fear that the wooden towers were weakening; but, more important, interest in the train trip to Silver Plume began to wane.²⁶ The introduction of the automobile and the passing of mining's peak years were primary factors in the declining use of the Colorado and

²¹ Interview with George Rowe, October 1972.

²² Argentine Central, Argentine and Gray's Peak, and Sunrise Peak Aerial Railway files, Railroad Collection.

²³ Interview with George Rowe, October 1972.

²⁴ Argentine Central, Argentine and Gray's Peak, and Sunrise Peak Aerial Railway files, Railroad Collection.

²⁵ *Silver Plume Silver Standard*, November 16, 1907; *Picturesque Colorado*; interview with George Rowe, October 1972.

²⁶ Interview with George Rowe, October 1972.

Southern. Although the railroad continued service to Silver Plume on a modified basis until 1927, the tramway stopped running in 1914, followed by the Argentine Central three years later.²⁷

Today, the base station is gone except for the hand-laid rocks that mark its foundation. But, the terminal on Sunrise Peak still stands, weathered yet sturdy, and three of the wooden towers remain upright high on Pendleton Mountain, visible as stark, vestigial silhouettes from the town and the valley below.

JEAN M. GREINER, who received a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University, completed her master's degree in history at the University of Colorado in 1969.

²⁷ Hauck, *A Journal of Railroad History*, pp. 106-9; Hollenback, *The Argentine Central*, pp. 63-70. The Argentine Central was sold in 1909 and again in 1913. At the time of dissolution, it was known as the Argentine and Gray's Peak Railway.