

A Philatelic Trip on the Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad

By James Weigant



Above: The author's family riding the rails!

Figure 1.

This story begins in the 1950s when my wife's grandfather purchased land along the Rio de los Piños in far northern New Mexico, in northeastern Rio Arriba County. The property is buried deep in the Kit Carson National Forest near the Toltec Gorge (Figure 1). The nearest town is Antonito, Colorado, but you must traverse a rough single lane mountain road to get there. Four-wheel drive is highly suggested. The family even has a tradition of stopping off at the "Drinking Tree" to have a stiff libation before one makes the harrowing trip down into the cabin.

The cabin itself is of a log and stucco construction, built using local rough hewn timber (Figure 2). There is a well and electricity, but the outhouse and wood-burning stove could convince you that you are living in the 1880s. This illusion is reinforced twice a day when a tourist train puffs through the top of the canyon. The steam whistle echoes through the valley and it really does take you to a different time.

For four generations now, it is a tradition to hike up to the tracks, put a penny on the rail, and wave as the train goes by. You also get a neat view of the cabin down below (Figure 3). In all the years of going to the cabin with her family, my wife never rode that tourist train until recently when we made a family trip out of it.

True to form, I found something philatelic on our mountain rail journey and another small collection was started. A docent mentioned that one of our stops along the line used to have a post office. The history and romance of the steam train combined with my wife's family's connection to the area and postal history? That needed further investigation!

The Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad began as the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad's San Juan Extension from Alamosa, Colorado to Durango, Colorado. This narrow gauge track was constructed from 1880 to 1881 to support the mining operations in the area (Figure 4). In the 1890s the silver production started to slow and by the the 1950s the line was in jeopardy of being closed. In 1969 the Interstate Commerce Commission allowed the Rio Grande to abandon the line. The track from Chama, New Mexico to Durango, Colorado was then removed.

In 1970, a group of rail enthusiasts stepped in and convinced the states of Colorado and New Mexico to purchase a 64-mile scenic section of the line from Chama, New Mexico to Antonito, Colorado and operate it as a tourist attraction. The Durango to Silverton section of this same line was constructed in 1882 and it was also saved and continues to operate as a tourist train.

The Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad takes its name from the Cumbres Pass and the Toltec Gorge, two points along the way (Figure 5). During tourist operations, steam trains leave Chama and Antonito each morning. Both trains meet in Osier, Colorado where everyone gets off for lunch. Riders then have the option to continue on to the end of the line on their same train or return to the original station of departure by a the other train.

Our philatelic trip starts in Chama, New Mexico (Figure 6).



Toltec Gorge

Figure 3.

Figure 2.



Figure 4.

Chama's post office opened right along with the railroad in 1880 and continues to operate to this day. Not only can you find interesting items connected to the line (Figures 7-8), but as a living museum of rail activity, philatelic covers related to trains abound from Chama (Figures 9-10).

As our train leaves the Chama Station, elevation 7,871 feet, we travel up into Colorado to Cumbres Pass, elevation 10,015 feet (Figure 11). It was common to need the assistance of another locomotive to get a train up over the pass and the railroad town of Cumbres was established as a turn around spot for these helper locomotives, as well as providing water and other services for the line. The post office of Cumbres, Colorado was open between 1889 and 1937. The postcard in Figure 12 was mailed in 1939 after the post office was closed and has an Alamosa & Durango RPO cancel on the reverse showing it was posted on the train (Figure 13).

Having reached the highest point on the line, the train now eases down to Osier, Colorado, elevation 9,637 feet (Figure 14). The post office of Osier opened in 1882, a little after the rail line was completed. It then closed in 1928. The cover in Figure 15 was mailed from Osier to New York in 1894. This cover was previously part of the Ray Newburn collection of Colorado postal history.

After lunch we get back on our original train. The train then leaves Osier and winds back and forth between Colorado and New Mexico, past the Toltec Gorge, past the family cabin, and down to our destination of Antonito, Colorado, elevation 7,890 feet (Figure 16). The post office in Antonito also opened with the line in 1881 and is still in operation today (Figures 17-18).

At the completion of our journey we have traveled 64 miles on the original Alamosa and Durango RPO line, traveled back and forth between New Mexico and Colorado 11 times, gone through two tunnels, several trestles, and 4 post office locations. All of this history and beauty inspired the country of Grenada to issue a \$6 stamp in 2004 for the line (Figure 19). I can't blame them.

This philatelic trip along the Cumbres and Toltec was an adventure. I often find myself longing to load up the family and head west to the cabin. Opening up my cover album and taking a philatelic trip can now tide me over until we can get back to New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment. ✉

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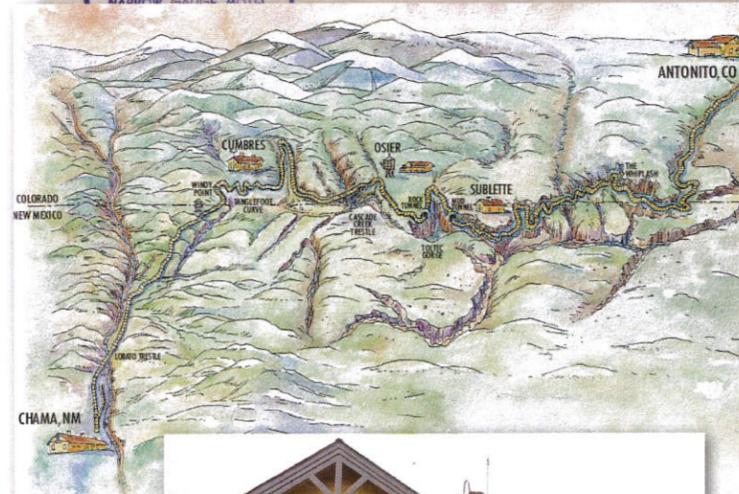


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

Figure 7.

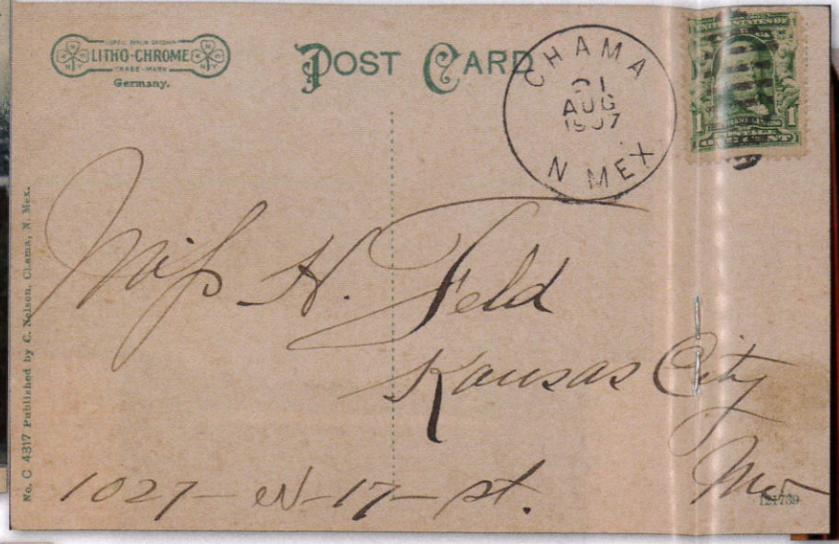
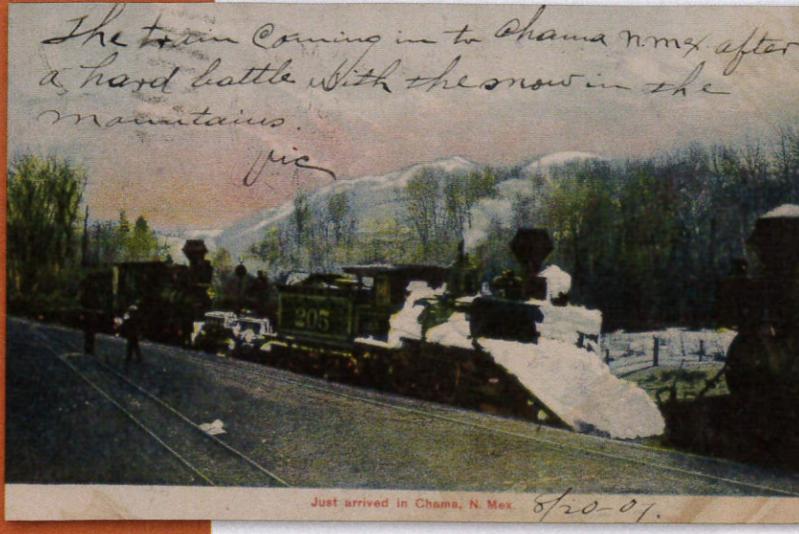


Figure 11.

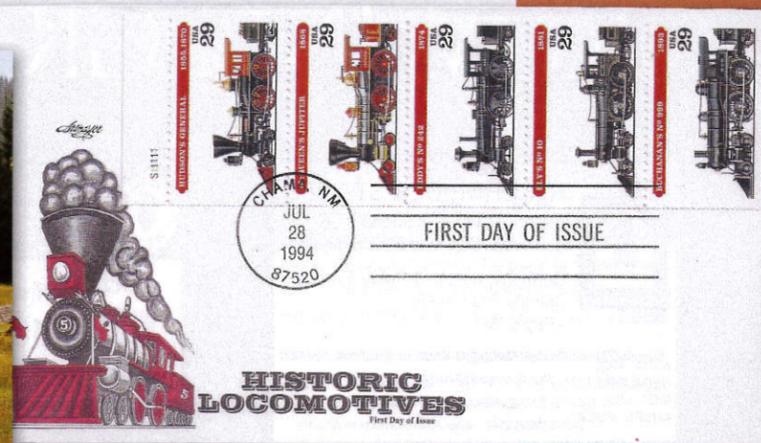
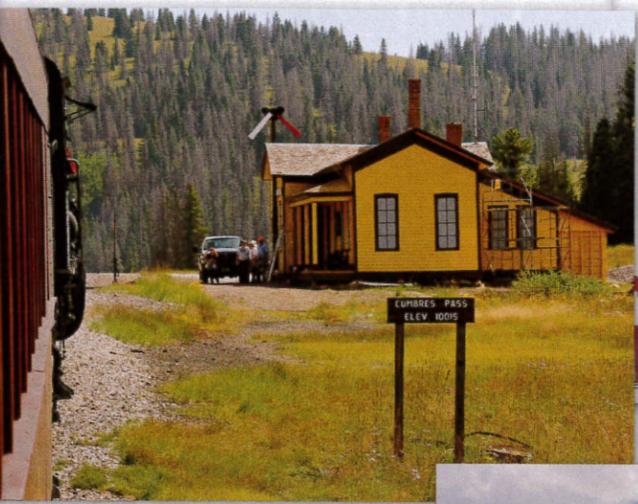


Figure 9.

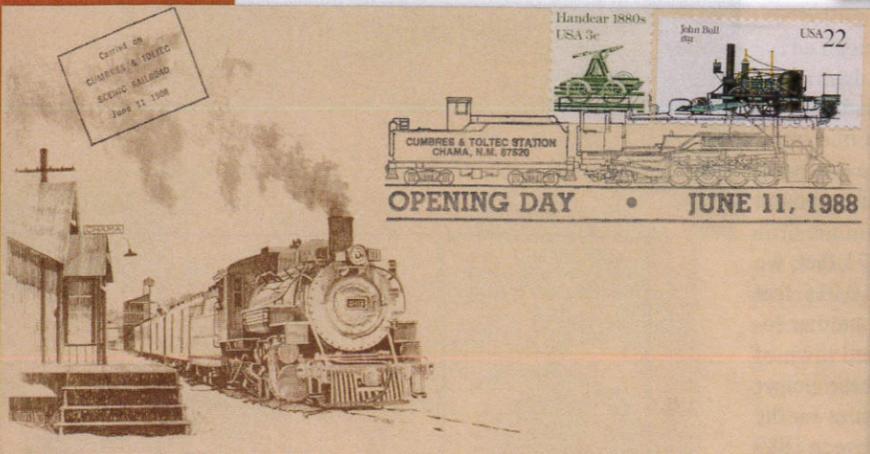


Figure 10.

Figure 8.

Figure 12.

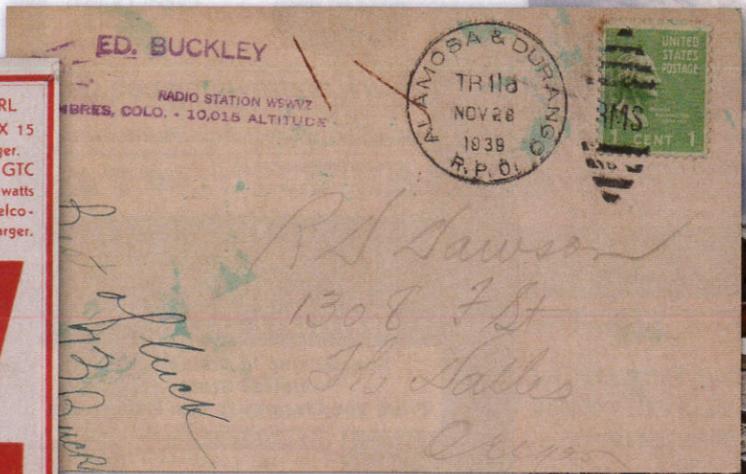
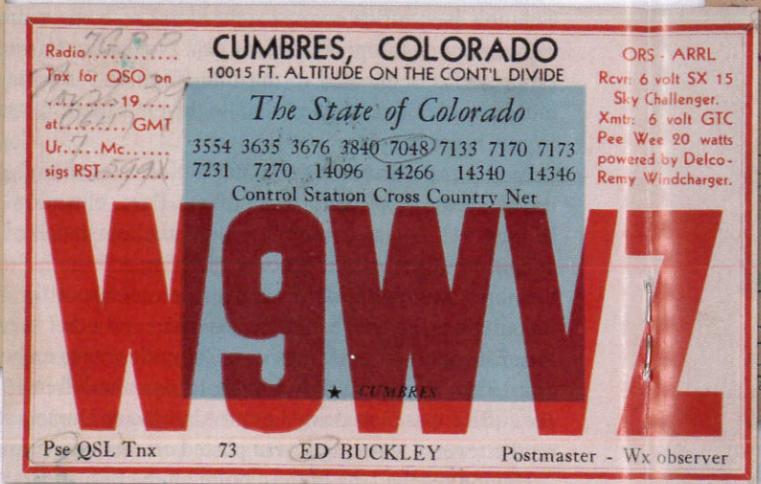


Figure 18.



Figure 14.

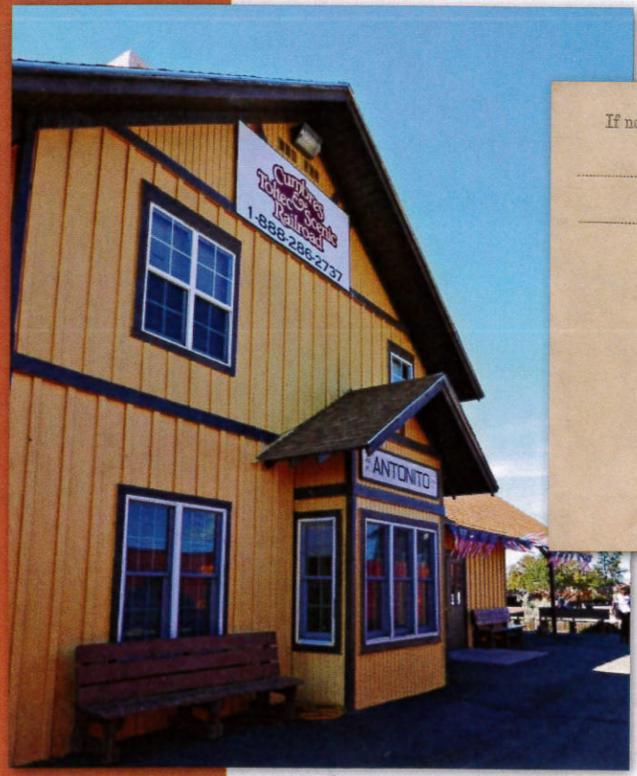


Figure 16.

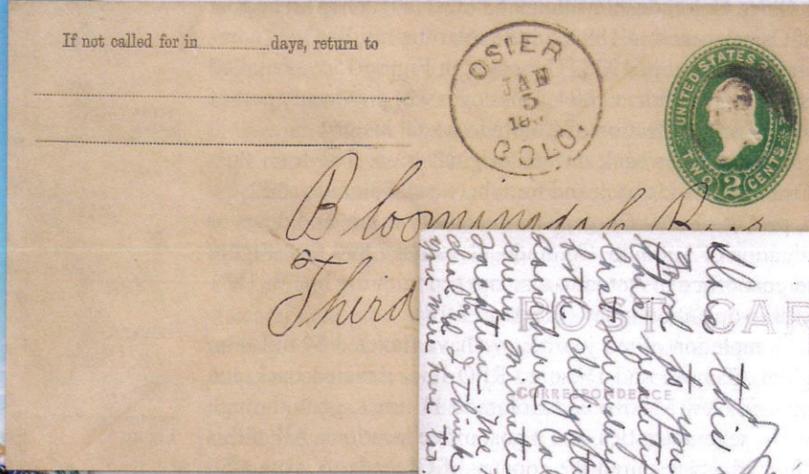


Figure 15.



Figure 17.



Figure 19.

