

FIRST DRAFT

RAILWAY WAR

Fight over the Royal Gorge helped determine Colorado’s railroad future

The first confrontation in the Royal Gorge Railroad War occurred not in the Royal Gorge, but near the top of Raton Pass in February 1878. No shots were fired that day, but there may have been some fisticuffs. The war between the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, usually called the Santa Fe, ended two years later in a courtroom. Before that occurred, however, shots were fired, two men were reportedly killed and dozens of others joined the fray, including Bartholomew “Bat” Masterson and John Henry “Doc” Holliday.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

Both rail lines had reached Trinidad by the winter of 1878. The Santa Fe line came east from Kansas while William Jackson Palmer’s Rio Grande line came south from Colorado Springs. Both were eager to lay their tracks over Raton Pass and south into New Mexico.

Legal precedent at the time reportedly gave the right of way to whichever line laid the first track over the pass.

When a construction crew from the Denver & Rio Grande left Trinidad for Raton Pass on Feb. 27, and arrived near the top of the pass on Feb. 28, they found three sections of track already laid over some of the most difficult portions of the pass by crews of the Santa Fe Railroad.

Members of the rival crews confronted each other. Words flew fast and furious. Some shoving occurred. A few punches may have been thrown. But there was no sustained battle. The Denver & Rio Grande crew withdrew, leaving the Santa Fe with a clear path into New Mexico.

That might have been the end of the railroad war if it weren’t for one thing: the silver boom in a high mountain town that was named for its lead ore. Although silver ore had been discovered in the Leadville area in 1877, word of that discovery didn’t become widespread until 1878, and the boom was on by 1879.

Both rail lines wanted to take advantage of that boom, but to run tracks to Leadville, they had to go through the Royal Gorge, west of Cañon City, where Palmer owned the right of way but had leased it to the Santa Fe Railroad. In 1879, he claimed the other railroad had violated the lease, therefore it was void.

Palmer wasn’t caught by surprise this time. He had his Denver & Rio Grande crews build small forts in the gorge to block the rival railroad

from constructing track there. The Santa Fe responded with its own militia, and it was impressive. About 70 men were hired in Kansas, led by Dodge City Sheriff Bat Masterson and his friend, Doc Holliday. They headed west on a special train in late March 1879.

They found the entrance to the Royal Gorge blocked just outside Cañon City by the D&RG men. Rather than try to force their way through, Masterson and his men retreated, first to Pueblo, then back to Kansas.

Meanwhile the Royal Gorge war continued, in the courts and in the newspapers. Throughout Colorado, newspapers reported on the latest legal developments as well as the arrival of armed men representing both of the railroads. But two newspapers, the Rocky Mountain News and the Pueblo Chieftain, carried the word for the opposing companies.

On April 12, 1879, the Chieftain ran a lengthy question-and-answer article featuring W.B. Strong, then vice president of the Santa Fe, who became president of the railroad in 1881. In the article Strong said his company had complied with all the terms of its lease with the Denver & Rio Grande, and with all court decrees.

Strong also declared that his railroad was rapidly building track through the Royal Gorge and promised, “We will reach Leadville by September 1.” Six days later, under the headline “A True Statement of the Present Railroad War,” the Rocky Mountain News published a lengthy response from William Jackson Palmer of the D&RG, disputing every claim made by Strong in the Chieftain article.

The same edition of the News printed copies of legal documents and telegrams that the News said proved the D&RG’s case. “Their position in the contest is one which should be upheld by every fair-minded advocate of law and order,” the paper proclaimed. Meanwhile, Masterson and his armed contingent returned to Colorado in June, along with more men who came from Raton Pass and Pueblo. They took up positions near Cuchara, where the D&RG line went over La Veta Pass, at Trinidad, Colorado Springs and at the railroad roundhouse in Pueblo.

On the morning of June 11, the private army of the D&RG attacked the armed



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William Henry Jackson took this photo of the railroad tracks snaking through the Royal Gorge in 1886, six years after the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad won its court battle and completed its tracks through the Gorge and on to Leadville.

men hired by the Santa Fe railroad on multiple fronts. Exactly what occurred that day is disputed.

“Two men were killed and more wounded at Cuchara, and sharp fighting occurred at Colorado Springs,” wrote Gary L. Roberts in his biography of Doc Holliday. “But the Dodge City force [which included Holliday and Masterson] held its ground in Pueblo.”

Others, however, say no shots were fired and there were no casualties in the great Royal Gorge War. The Pueblo Chieftain reported one man shot at Cuchara, but said he survived.

The Rocky Mountain News published a sarcastic column after Gov. Frederick Pitkin received alarming telegrams from Santa Fe Railroad officials.

“By that time, the number who had been remorselessly slaughtered at the Cañon and Pueblo had reached several hundred,” the News said, tongue firmly in cheek, “and the walls of the Royal Gorge were said to be splattered

with the blood of brave and fallen” Santa Fe men.

Pitkin had considered sending the national guard to the gorge, but relented when he realized no gun battle occurred. Still, Masterson, Holliday and 50 armed gunmen were in the Pueblo roundhouse, surrounded by armed D&RG forces.

The standoff ended when R.F. Weitbrec, an officer of the D&RG, approached the roundhouse unarmed, and asked to speak to Masterson. He showed him a court order that temporarily gave custody of the Royal Gorge line to the Denver & Rio Grande.

Masterson abandoned the roundhouse, and by June 13 he and his men, including Doc Holliday, were back in Dodge City.

The legal wrangling was far from over, however. In July, Palmer was required by court order to turn ownership of the line through the Royal Gorge to officials with the Santa Fe Railroad. He did so without any physical altercation, but vowed to continue his fight in court.

In March 1880, the Rocky Mountain News carried an article with the headline, “Over at Last,” describing the legal end to the Royal Gorge War. The Colorado Supreme Court had decided in favor of the D&RG.

In mid-1880, the D&RG completed its tracks into Leadville, and the first train arrived in the silver boomtown. Among the passengers was former President Ulysses S. Grant.

By the following year, Palmer’s crews had pushed their line over Marshall Pass and into Gunnison, the first railroad to reach the Western Slope.

Sources: “Doc Holliday: The Life and Legend,” by Gary L. Roberts; “Doc Holliday, Bat Masterson & Wyatt Earp: Their Colorado Careers,” by E. Richard Churchill; “Royal Gorge,” by Colorado Encyclopedia, <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/royal-gorge>; Historic newspapers at www.colorado-historicnewspapers.org.

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William Jackson Palmer, the founder and president of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad during the Royal Gorge War.



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William Strong, also known as W.B. Strong, the vice president of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad during the Royal Gorge War. He became president two years later.



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Bartholomew “Bat” Masterson, sheriff of Dodge City, Kansas in 1879, when he led a party of armed men to Colorado to fight on behalf of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad.