

Colmor: The Cutoff that was Cut Off

Contributed by Bob Burton

Before the railroad, travelers on the Santa Fe Trail had an alternative to the long main trail through what would become La Junta CO and over Raton Pass. The other route headed southwest from near Fort Dodge and across the Oklahoma panhandle into New Mexico, rejoining the main trail near Wagon Mound.

The Cimarron Cutoff--so called because it ran alongside the Cimarron River for many miles--had been established in 1640, when French traders had wandered into Spanish Santa Fe, but had been closed ten years later due to Spanish paranoia.

Not until Mexico threw off Spanish rule in 1821 did the trail reopen. But troublesome Indians and the lack of usable water--sometimes so severe that men cut the ears from mules and drank the blood--caused the adoption of the longer route in 1832.

Railroad promoters projected lines on both routes, but only one railroad was actually built. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Rail Road constructed its line on the northern route. However, the Santa Fe did not ignore the Cimarron route. The route, eventually called the Colmor Cutoff, was considered for decades. The line ultimately constructed along this path came within only a few miles of completion before the project was cut off.

The February 11, 1859, charter of the Atchison and Topeka Railroad outlined a line "to such point on the southern or western boundary of <Kansas>, in the direction of Santa Fe, in the Territory of New Mexico, as may be convenient and suitable, for the construction of such railroad..."

At a convention on October 17 of the following year, the A&T was promoted with a map which showed a line closely resembling the Cimarron Cutoff.

A decade later, the renamed Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Rail Road was still interested in a southern route to Santa Fe, though not necessarily on the old Cimarron line. In 1870, John B. Ellinwood led a surveying party 80 miles southwestward from Wichita, which would have placed them near present Kiowa. It would also have placed them among the Kiowa Indians, which is why they went armed to the teeth and with a military escort.

Surveyor A. A. Robinson examined a Cimarron line in 1872 before rails were laid up the Arkansas River to the west line of the state.

There are a number of possible reasons for not using the cutoff at that time:

The Arkansas Valley was better populated and lead into land rich in timber, coal, and silver.

Several members of the Santa Fe's board of directors felt that the line should continue westward to a connection with the Central Pacific.

The New Mexican trade had been diverted to the Kansas Pacific Railroad in Colorado. By building up the Arkansas to Granada, the Santa Fe company could capture the trade just as it had earlier taken the Kansas cattle trade from the KP.

A deadline existed for reaching the border of Kansas. If it was not met, the Santa Fe would lose its land grant. Time was short and the Arkansas Valley offered the shortest, cheapest, and quickest means of beating the deadline.

Even had there been time aplenty, building along the Cimarron might have lost the land grant. The act of Congress that arranged for the land grant, penned in 1863 by the same man who had written the railroad's charter, called for the railroad to be built "to the western line of the state...." Most variations of the Cimarron Cutoff exited Kansas to the south.

Surveys continued for a southern route through 1874, but they left the Arkansas Valley from points west of Dodge City. The Santa Fe was not a wealthy company. Economy dictated that the southwestern line depart the already constructed line as far west as possible, to minimalize construction.

Also, at that time the railroad had an informal agreement with the Maxwell Land Grant and Railway Company. To reach the Maxwell holdings, the railroad had to build a line crossing the western part of the mountains that ran east-west along the Colorado-New Mexico border

A line was eventually built over Raton Pass. Robinson felt that this was the best line under the circumstances, but purely from an engineering standpoint, there was a better one.

"The shortest and probably the best," he wrote, "as far as distance and cost of construction are concerned, is to leave the Arkansas Valley on the line I surveyed in May 1872. We get a very easy line on this route, using grades of 40 feet per mile to the Western Boundary of Kansas near the southwest corner of that State; from that point southwestward to Wagon Mound the country is more broken and would require from 60 to 75 feet per mile--This portion of the route I have never surveyed or examined.

"This line is about 50 miles shorter than our present constructed line. The comparative expense of operating the two lines can only be determined by a survey and location. This line has several attainable lines which could branch from the Arkansas Valley line at several points between Dodge City and Aubrey, the one leaving at Aubrey being the one

farthest west which could have any practical value. The main route would be the shortest and I am quite confident the best."

Lines from west of Aubrey would have had to climb Cimarron Pass.

In 1878, Lewis Kingman was working on branches in Kansas when he was ordered to return to New Mexico. The rail line had not yet opened, so he made his overland journey by the most direct route, passing much to the south of previous surveys. The notes of this trip were later lost, but Kingman must have liked what he saw. A few years and promotions later he ordered full surveys and construction into the Texas Panhandle.

Kingman's principal man in the area, Phillip Smith, spent a good part of the 1880s criss-crossing Texas and New Mexico. Many of his lines, including the Belen Cutoff, were eventually built. One of Smith's favorite lines was projected from the end of a branch at Englewood KS to a main line connection at Springer NM. This line was not built. Another unbuilt Englewood proposal passed further south and terminated at Tecolote, south of Las Vegas. If any surveys were made of the Cimarron country during this period, the record has not surfaced.

With the new century came renewed interest in a southern main line. The principal project was a line through Amarillo, Texas, that connected with the main line at Belen. Another proposal was a jointly-operated Santa Fe-Rock Island route. Surveyors under F. M. Jones set out late in 1902 to lay out a line from Dodge City to Liberal on the Rock Island. The Rock Island would be used well into New Mexico, connecting with existing surveys to Belen. This quickly grew into an all-Santa Fe line from Dodge City to Belen that generally ran parallel to the Rock Island. The business panic--and probably rabid opposition from the Rock Island--put an end to the project. Jones, however, was proud of the line and, even after completion of the Belen Cutoff, interest continued.

With Jones busy on other projects, chief engineer W. B. Storey gave the route notes to J. W. Stewart. During 1910, Stewart made four reconnaissances between Dodge City and Springer. All followed Jones' line south to the Cimarron River. Three turned westward, passing near Folsom on their various paths to the terminal. The fourth line followed Jones' survey to the Beaver River in Oklahoma before turning west. Storey liked the latter route well enough to order a closer look.

For the first few miles out of Dodge City, the survey used the abandoned right of way of the Dodge City, Montezuma & Trinidad Railway. Officially, this short-lived company had planned to short-haul coal from the Raton Pass area, but its construction was actually rooted in Gray County, Kansas, politics. The towns of Ingalls, Cimarron, and Montezuma were involved in a struggle for the county seat. The first two towns were on the Santa Fe, but Montezuma was far from the sound of train whistles. The millionaire promotor of Ingalls proposed to build a railroad to Montezuma if that town would drop from the contest. Ingalls and Cimarron continued the protracted and bloody contest, but Montezuma got track from Dodge City. Unfortunately, the railroad was an impossible

loser. Ownership passed to the Rock Island briefly, but the rails were removed in the 1890s, scarcely five years after they had been laid.

Stewart advocated splitting off a line north of the Cimarron crossing so that farmers on both sides of the valley could be served.

The Colorado & Southern was crossed at Grenville NM and Gato, a few miles north of Springer, became the mainline connection. However, citizens of Clayton, a C&S station south of Grenville, demanded a survey through their town. Stewart found the Clayton line to be much better, although, to avoid some rough country immediately west of town, he advocated running northward parallel to the C&S to Mount Dora before turning west. Crossing the C&S that far south forced the mainline junction southward to Colmor. Thus the project became known as the "Colmor Cutoff."

Jones' location was on a 0.4% maximum grade, but in Oklahoma Stewart had to use 0.6%. As far as the future site of Felt, the grade was so easy to obtain that no definite survey was made at least as late as 1921. West of Felt, 0.6% was more difficult to obtain and the final five miles into Clayton and beyond had to be at 1%.

During the Colmor surveys, Stewart took time to examine lines southward from Sulzbacher, near Las Vegas. These were intended to provide a market for Raton coal in southeastern New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle. Stewart proposed that the survey to Vaughn be appended to the Colmor project so the 3% grade in Glorieta Canyon could be avoided. This suggestion was never followed.

Plans for constructing the entire cutoff were shelved, but on November 17, 1911, the Santa Fe-controlled Dodge City & Cimarron Valley Railway was created. This company was to aid in the development of land recently purchased by Santa Fe interests in Kansas. Construction began in spring.

Due to cost, the heavy construction Jones had laid out in the Arkansas and Cimarron Valleys was lessened by increasing the ruling grade. If eventually the mainline was built, the Santa Fe planned to come back and rebuild the original segment.

For the time being, this was to be only an agricultural branch running parallel to the Rock Island at about twenty miles distance. The Santa Fe Land Improvement Company purchased 245,000 acres along the line initially. This was sold only to genuine settlers, not speculators. This put the land immediately into development.

The project also involved the construction of a road. A strip of farm land lay between two forks of the Cimarron, but crossing the river to reach the railroad would have been a major problem. Therefore, a crushed-rock road some six miles in length was built northward from Elkhart through the sandy riverbed.

The 119.23 miles Dodge City-Elkhart opened the first of July 1913.

In 1917, F. M. Jones took a fresh look at the unbuilt portion of the Colmor Cutoff. There was some oil excitement and other developments in the area. Jones was unimpressed by the drilling, but believed that other developments were sure railroad bait. He advocated building to Clayton immediately before another railroad took the area.

He made a major change in the route west of Clayton. He believed that the gorge that Stewart had avoided by diverting via Mount Dora was hardly impassable and a direct line could be built.

During 1913, the Santa Fe had purchased the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific Railway. Jones considered using a line of this company from near Raton to Des Moines on the C&S as part of the cutoff.

In the end, however, Jones opposed it. The line had heavy grades. Also, routing through Des Moines would be longer than a direct line to Colmor. Since even connecting with the C&S as far north as Grenville would still be longer, the only alternative was a line directly east of Des Moines. That line was topographically impossible.

Jones also felt that the railroad should serve Boise City and Clayton and the area to the southwest. "The territory is bound to be served," said Jones, "and, if the Santa Fe don't do it, the Rock Island or El Paso & Southwestern will."

The Rocky Mountain company had been placed under Avery Turner's office in Amarillo and that gentleman stepped forward with what he called the "Taos Cutoff." This appendage of the Colmor line called for use of the Rocky Mountain company's line from near Raton westward to Ute Park, then new track beyond. The proposal went down narrow and deep canyons to Embudo, where a linkage could be made with the Denver & Rio Grande. After using that company's tracks briefly, the Chama River would be followed beyond the Jemez Mountains. Then a generally southwest course would bring a mainline junction at Baca, near the Continental Divide.

It would have taken much expensive work to produce a poor line through an unproductive region. The Taos Cutoff was forgotten.

In the face of the World War, any plans to act on Jones' opinion of the Colmor Cutoff were also forgotten.

Storey, now president, was still interested in 1921 and asked his chief engineer C. F. W. Felt for a reevaluation. Woodbury Howe was the field representative this time. Much of what had already been said was repeated, but the only action taken was construction of a line westward from Satanta. This was the line north of the Cimarron that Stewart had suggested over a decade before.

In 1924, William Baker, county agent stationed at Boise City, published a meticulous

report of area agriculture that came to the notice of Santa Fe officials. The impression was deep and railroad representatives took another look.

On January 12 of the next year, the Elkhart & Santa Fe Railway was formed to extend the Santa Fe branch. Citizens supplied the right of way and the 39.6 miles to Boise City and the additional 19.22 miles to Felt opened December first. The difficult construction beyond Felt was left for later.

Transcontinental traffic glutted the mainlines during the mid to late Twenties. Then oil was discovered in the Texas Panhandle and the southern route via Amarillo became clogged. Much of the line in Texas was quickly doubletracked, but the incident sparked renewed interest in the Colmor Cutoff.

By this time, new construction had to be approved by the Interstate Commerce Commission. Late in 1929, the Santa Fe filed for permission to complete the long-delayed project. Testimony indicated that the line would save 69 miles and avoid the heavy grades over Raton Pass. Also under consideration was a new Santa Fe line connecting Amarillo with Las Animas, CO, which would cross the Colmor Cutoff at Boise City. It was claimed that the proposed lines would provide new markets for Raton coal in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. The I.C.C. was agreeable.

The railroad, however, placed a low priority on the line and completed other projects before setting to work on this one.

As westward construction commenced, the Colorado & Southern decided that it did not want a Santa Fe line close to its own west of Clayton. Therefore, the C&S offered eighteen miles of trackage rights between Clayton and Mount Dora. The Santa Fe agreed and readopted most of Stewart's survey of 1910.

The C&S trackage spliced 23.62 miles from Felt with 35.64 miles to Farley NM, all of which opened for business November 15, 1931.

Only 35 miles remained to be completed, but they were the most difficult miles to build. In the face of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, the final spurt was postponed.

As an indication of intent, the line west of Boise City was assigned to the yet-untouched New Mexico Division. The eastern part remained in Western Division time tables. The Boise City-Amarillo line, which had opened May 15, 1931, was part of the Plains Division. The line northwards to Las Animas, which would open in 1937, owed allegiance to the Colorado Division. Thus Boise City became a rare junction of four divisions.

The Colmor project slumbered, though there was a slight disturbance during 1934-5. Transmission towers were erected at Boise City and an experimental locomotive ran to

Farley. The engine was supposed to operate on electricity broadcast through the air from the towers. No success came to the project and the Farley line slept on.

Elsewhere, other technology was more successful. Better locomotion and dispatching methods produced excess capacity on the two main lines.

As the second World War began, the heavy rails on the Farley line were needed elsewhere. On September 6, 1942, the incomplete line west of Boise City was abandoned, ending the long history of a line that had been planned from the very earliest days of the Santa Fe.

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