



THE SNOWY RANGE ROUTE'S FINAL SUMMER

# Last Call for WYCO

BY TRAVIS DOUTHIT/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

**T**HE SMALL COMMUNITY of Centennial, Wyo., nestled at the base of the Medicine Bow Mountains, has not seen a train pass through in over 18 years. The railroad tracks crossing Highway 130 are long gone. In fact, the only signs that a railroad existed are located at the Nici Self Historical Museum, which preserved the original Laramie, Hahn's Peak & Pacific Railway depot and a former Union Pacific CA-4 caboose. In the summer of 1996, however, the railroad tracks were busy with activity, as the final summer of Wyoming Colorado Railroad's (WYCO) operation between Laramie, Wyo., and

Walden, Colo., came to a close.

I had just graduated from the University of Wyoming in Laramie that year. After a lucky encounter with a WYCO employee, he informed me the railroad would abandon the line in early fall. I quickly realized documenting the final summer of operation was paramount. My job search could wait.

Union Pacific's former Coalmont Branch had always fascinated me, but I never had the opportunity to photograph the line under UP ownership and missed most of WYCO's early years of operation. The branch had much to offer, from beautiful scenery to steep mountain

grades. The Albany switchbacks allowed the railroad to climb nearly 1000 feet out of the Centennial valley to reach Fox Park, Wyo., at an elevation 9050 feet, the highest point on the entire UP system. Railroad signs along the route included such names as Centennial, Albany, King's Cañon, Brownlee and Walden, adding to the mystique of the route.

The Wyoming Colorado Railroad, a subsidiary of Western Railroad Builders of Ogden, Utah, purchased Union Pacific's 92-mile Coalmont Branch in November 1987. On November 30, 1987, UP made its last run. Official operations for WYCO started on December 19, 1987, as

**OPPOSITE:** A rare late morning departure from Northgate, Colo., finds WYCO's eclectic mix of EMD locomotives tackling the 1.7 percent grade between Northgate and Camp with 16 loads in tow. **ABOVE:** As the evening sun slowly fades behind the Medicine Bow Mountains the crew has finally conquered the tough 2.5 percent grade at Windmill Hollow and is pulling the second cut loaded jennies past Miller siding on September 9, 1996.

the first revenue train ran from Laramie to Walden with a long cut of empty coal hoppers. The "Snowy Range Route" quickly became popular with the railfan community, as the primary power was a set of former Alaska Railroad F-units. The EMD covered wagons were leased from Mountain Diesel Transportation, and were later purchased outright by WYCO. The trio, consisting of FP7As No. 1510 and No. 1512, along with F7B No. 1511, provided a nice contrast against the stark Wyoming plains. And once the trio tackled the Albany switchbacks in the Medicine Bow mountains, it got even better.

#### Unstable Traffic

The traffic base consisted of coal, carbon dioxide, lumber, and wood chips, which originated from Walden and Brownlee in the North Park area of Colo-

rado. The Wyoming segment did not provide any traffic except a passenger excursion operation. Initially, the F-units were used in freight service, but crews quickly discovered they were no match for the steep grades. The first test for trains leaving Walden was a pesky 1.7 percent grade from Northgate to Camp, which allowed the railroad to climb out of the North Park area. WYCO turned to leasing Union Pacific six-axle power in the form of SD40-2s. The F-units

were still used on occasion with shorter freight trains, but were mainly confined to the summer and early fall passenger excursion service between Laramie and Fox Park, or in some cases further south to Walden.

The railroad struggled to find a consistent traffic base from the beginning. The Louisiana Pacific sawmill in Walden, which provided lumber and wood chip cars, shut down in 1994. The passenger excursion business did not provide the



**RIGHT:** On September 10, 1996, No. 6798 is leading 24 empty ore jennies to be loaded at Northgate, Co., as it drifts past Milepost 73, towards King's Cañon, Colorado.

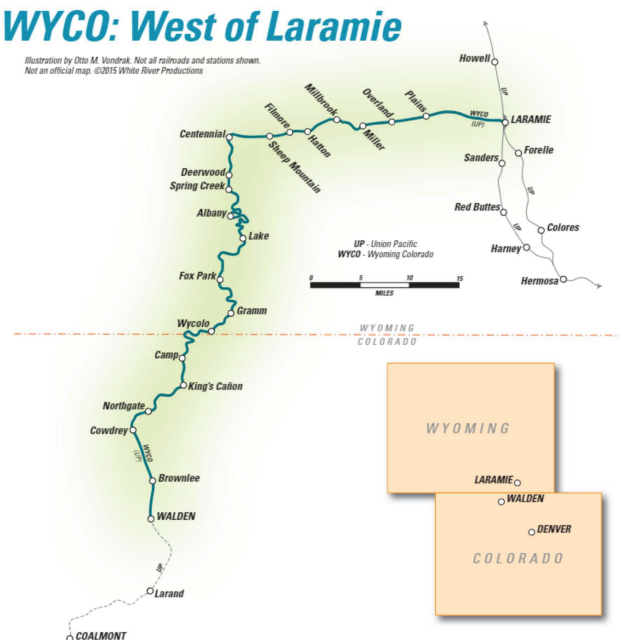
**BELOW:** At this point in time, all the fluorspar at Northgate, Colo., has been removed and the only task left is clean-up trains loaded with salvaged 133-pound jointed rail from the Walden to Northgate segment. Here, No. 6323 is approaching Miller siding on a beautiful October 11 day.



**ABOVE:** Today's train has picked up eight gondoles and eight ore jennies in the Union Pacific yard at Laramie, Wyo., and is about to pass under the Clark Street overpass on July 15, 1996.

## WYCO: West of Laramie

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all railroads and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2015 White River Productions



needed income to continue the operation and ended in 1995. The main source of revenue came from a surface coal mine located east of Walden where the Kerr Coal Company trucked the coal to a load-out in town and WYCO transported the low-sulfur and high-BTU output coal to the Mountain Cement plant in Laramie. Throughout the years, the surface coal seam had been extensively mined, which left only deep coal, expensive and economically unfeasible to mine. Thus, in late May 1996, the final 100 loads of coal were removed from Walden and the track between Walden and Northgate was dismantled. This left the Laramie to Northgate segment still intact.

#### A Good Chase

During my college years, I spent some memorable fall days hiking above the Albany switchbacks, waiting on the passenger excursion train, but I never managed to catch any freight action. All that changed when I spoke to the WYCO employee, who informed me the railroad was tasked to remove 600-800 carloads of U.S. government-owned fluorspar ore stockpiled at Northgate, just up the road



**ABOVE:** Brakeman Bob Johnson is protecting the reverse move as the trio of locomotives returns for the 16 loaded ore jennies that were left on the 2.5 percent grade at Windmill Hollow. The crew was forced to double the hill and leave the first eight loaded gondolas at Miller siding on September 9, 1996.

**RIGHT:** On July 19, 1996, the tandem of Nos. 6323 and 6798 departed Northgate at exactly 8:00 and is pulling a string of loaded ore jennies past the tiny community of Fox Park, Wyo., on a beautiful sunny morning.



from Walden. Fluorspar is used to manufacture products such as steel, aluminum, petroleum-based fuels, and refrigerants as well as many other everyday consumer products. This was my chance to really explore the line, while recording the final days of operation. Granted, the F-units were stored in Laramie receiving electrical work, but the railroad still offered an eclectic mix of locomotives to photograph.

The usual power combination for ore trains was ex-Fort Worth & Denver SD7 No. 853 (re-numbered 6083) in Burlington Northern Cascade green teamed up with ex-Southern Pacific GP35 No. 6323 and former CSX GP40 No. 6798. The Geeps were used throughout the summer, whereas the SD7 was also used on WYCO's Encampment Branch, which left the UP Overland main at Wol-

cott, Wyo., and headed 24 miles south to Saratoga, Wyo. The Encampment Branch managed to survive almost a decade longer than the Coalmont Branch, since the Louisiana-Pacific sawmill closed down in January 2003 and the branch was abandoned in November 2004.

Generally, the ore trains would depart at 8:00 a.m. during the weekday and make the one-way trip from Laramie to Northgate with empties, returning the following day with loads. Union Pacific

ore jennies and gondolas were used in the operation. In Laramie, the cars were interchanged with UP and headed east along the Overland Route.

My most memorable encounter occurred in early September, when I managed to catch an ore train making a rare round trip between Laramie and Northgate. The train departed Laramie at 4:00 a.m. and arrived at Northgate later in the morning. After setting out 26 empty ore jennies, the crew coupled to 24 loads



**LEFT:** The crew already has the trio of locomotives in Run 8 as it passes the namesake windmill at Windmill Hollow, just before tackling the 2.5 percent grade near Milepost 15 on September 9, 1996. On this day, the trio stalled on the grade, forcing the crew to double the hill and arrive into Laramie well after dark.

**BELOW:** On July 1, 1996, Nos. 6798 and 6323 are in charge of 12 empties bound for Northgate, Colo., as it rounds through the lower Albany curves at milepost 38. WYCO's SD7 No. 6083 is handling traffic on the Encampment Branch out of Saratoga, Wyo.

**BOTTOM:** The small community of Centennial, Wyo., is briefly interrupted by the passing of one of the last clean-up trains carrying salvaged 133-pound jointed rail from Northgate, Colo., on October 11, 1996.



and headed back toward Laramie. The late afternoon sun provided many memorable photos. Even though much of the track consisted of 133-pound jointed relay rail, the extreme curvature of the line and steep grades, required a very slow speed. In fact, I was able to hike into Harrison cut, near the town of Albany, and still had plenty of time to hike back to my vehicle and catch the train passing through Centennial.

I raced ahead of it to Windmill Hollow near milepost 15 between Centennial and Laramie, where I wanted to photograph the train with the namesake windmill in the background. As it rolled by my location and tackled the steep 2.5 percent grade, the train stalled on the short hill. The crew was forced to double the hill and pulled the first section of cars to Miller siding at milepost 14. Brakeman Bob Johnson tied the cars down and the crew retrieved the remain-

ing loads. By this time, the sun had set and I returned to Laramie.

#### End of the Line

The last ore train departed Northgate on October 1, 1996. WYCO ran several more clean-up trains hauling the 133-pound jointed rail, from the Walden to Northgate segment, using the lone ex-SP 6323 and five or six gondolas. I managed to catch two more clean-up trains, a few weeks after the last ore train. As quickly as it started, it was over.

The final chapter for the Snowy Range Route came on October 16, 1996, when the Surface Transportation Board approved WYCO's application to abandon the 66.16 miles, from mile 1.31 in Laramie to the state line at mile 67.47. Abandonment of the 27.03-mile segment from the state line to Walden at mile 94.5 had been granted in 1995. Track and ties

were gone by the end of 1999, leaving only traces of roadbed.

The F-units, along with all of the passenger equipment used in tourist train service, found new life on the Verde Canyon Railroad in Clarkdale, Ariz. The Geeps headed south to New Mexico to become part of the Southwestern Railroad motive power roster. F7B No. 1511 was stripped of usable parts and cut up in Laramie. A similar fate happened to SD7 No. 6083, which was reportedly scrapped on site in Saratoga.

A small gathering of people celebrated

the grand opening of the Medicine Bow rail-trail, at the Lake Owen trailhead in September 2007. The rail-trail covers 21 miles of railroad right-of-way, starting near the upper Albany switchbacks and ending at the Wyoming-Colorado border, near milepost 65. The Lake Owen trailhead is not marked by your typical Forest Service trail marker; rather, it is the home of ex-UP caboose No. 25170, now lettered as "Great Western" No. 3870. The caboose was owned by a WYCO employee with the intent of using it as a hunting cabin. It was later donated to



**RIGHT:** WYCO's F7's Nos. 1510 and 1511 are basking in the hot Laramie, Wyo., sun on a July 6, 1996. The duo spent the summer dead in storage, while awaiting their final and current destination of Clarkdale, Ariz., to pull passenger excursions on the Verde Canyon Railroad. **BELOW:** On October 2, 1992, WYCO's gorgeous matched set of red F7's are in charge of the excursion train as it slowly approaches Harrison Cut at milepost 41 in the heart of the Albany switchbacks.



**TOP:** When this photo was taken on September 5, 1999, all rail between Laramie, Wyo., and Northgate, Colo., had been removed. In this view looking west near Miller siding all that remains is a milepost sign and discarded ties.

**LEFT:** WYCO No. 6323 has five loads of 133-pound jointed rail, which will depart Northgate, Colo., the following day and arrive in Laramie in the late afternoon.

**ABOVE:** On September 9, 1999, ex-Union Pacific caboose No. 25170, now lettered as "Great Western" No. 3870, sits on a section of rail and has the distinction of serving as the Forest Service's Lake Owen trailhead. In the summer of 1996, this caboose was owned by a WYCO employee and sat on the wye at Fox Park, Wyo., before being moved to the present location.

the Forest Service and today sits peacefully on a short section of track, located at Lake Owen at milepost 47.

From the Laramie, Hahn's Peak & Pacific Railway in the early 1900s to the Union Pacific years starting in 1950s, time was running out on the Coalmont Branch. The Wyoming Colorado tried to operate the line in a profitable fashion, but the high cost of operating the line and lack of a customer base was more than it could handle.

In the heart of the Albany switch-

backs sits Harrison cut, known for massive snow drifts, as high as 15 feet in the winter months. It was a thorn for the railroads that operated this line. After nearly 90 years of battles, Harrison cut continues to stand guard, overlooking the beautiful Centennial valley below. As the fierce Wyoming wind begins to shape another massive snow drift within the cut, the battle is finally over for the railroad. The tracks are long gone and the Snowy Range Route is all but a distant memory now. ■