

Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, June 25, 1982, Durango, Colorado,  
by Robert W. Delaney, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College



Center of  
Southwest Studies

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**DELANEY:** This is the transcription of an interview with Mr. Alva F. Lyons of Durango, Colorado, on June 25, 1982. The other person talking is Robert W. Delaney, Director of the Center of Southwest Studies at Fort Lewis College. What we are mainly trying to determine are things regarding railroad and especially the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, which ordinarily do not appear in the records. The first thing that I'm going to try to get down is some personal background of Mr. Lyons.

**DELANEY:** Mr. Lyons, do you want to go through this first, when you were born, your parents, your family, in other words.

**LYONS:** Well, Robert, I was born February 28, 1897 at Durango, Colorado. My parents were Isaiah John Lyons and Margaret Ann Gabbe. The Gabbe family were pioneers in this area, come here in 84, my grandfather worked on the railroad.

**DELANEY:** Alva, that Gabbe is spelled G A B B E.

**LYONS:** Yes, they were pioneers and also my father was here in the early days in 1892. He first arrived in Leadville and worked for the D&RG in 1884. He resigned there and moved to the Oregon shortline that run from Ogden to Anaconda. He worked there until 1896 when he was dismissed because the engineer run over a (?) and derailed the engine.

**DELANEY:** And they blamed him, is that right.

**LYONS:** That's evidently what they did. He was dismissed with prejudice.

**DELANEY:** Tell me what that means.

**LYONS:** That means that any employee that is discharged, they blacklist him so he can't get a job on another railroad.

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**DELANEY:** Is this why people changed their names so that blacklist wouldn't apply to them. They would go some place else and get work on another railroad, is that right?

**LYONS:** That is right.

**DELANEY:** Or another mine in case of a mine. But he was dismissed without prejudice, which meant that they would have hired him back had there been a position.

**LYONS:** Yes, he then went to work for the Montana Railroad which run between Butte and Anaconda, started in as a night yard master and then he was in just a few years appointed general railroad master over both the Anaconda and Butte yards. He then turned around and resigned that main position and went to work as a conductor.

**DELANEY:** Tell me, what are the duties of a yard master, what's he in charge of?

**LYONS:** He's in charge of all the yard operations, switch engines, making up trains, how to do it, when to do it and call the trains and send them out in the right direction.

**DELANEY:** He's likely to work all night.

**LYONS:** Well, he worked 12 hours a day.

**DELANEY:** Twelve hours, then there's somebody else that takes over.

**LYONS:** Usually they have the day yard master takes over and the night yard master. After he quit the Montana railroad then he come back to Durango, and I always thought, he never did say so. He arrived here in 1892 and he started in as the yard master in Durango, and I always thought because of the smelter in Leadville, evidently he had problems with the ore that came in and could never be switched at the right place at the right time, so that was why he evidently came to Durango.

**DELANEY:** Because he had some knowledge.

**LYONS:** He had some way how to do it. My history of my father is that he was a very good wrecker.

**DELANEY:** What do you mean by wrecker?

**LYONS:** Well, rerailing cars.

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**DELANEY:** Rerailing them, putting them back on.

**LYONS:** And things like that. The other thing he was good at was public relations with people he worked with as well as the customers of the railroad because they would....normally you would bill through the agent in the freight house and he would put out an order for the yard crew to do this. Well here in Durango, as far as I can remember, the customer went to my father, and he would tell them when he would be there. After all in Durango at that time, we had the passenger train east, we had the one that come from Silverton, that section of the train that went east didn't need to be turned, but the other cars in the train had to be turned on the turntable because there was no wye or circle to complete the round trip or the turning of the train.

**DELANEY:** There was no wye down there; each individual car had to be turned on that turntable that's still there.

**LYONS:** It's still there. Well he did that for many years. He was a joke; he had lost one of his fingers in Lincoln pin coupling.

**DELANEY:** Is this the coupling between two railroad cars?

**LYONS:** Between two railroad cars, they have a joint with two pins that go down into them.

**DELANEY:** And that's why so many railroad men had a thumb gone or a finger gone.

**LYONS:** That's right.

**DELANEY:** What was the standard procedure if you got a finger cut off, claim against the railroad? Do you know how much they paid?

**LYONS:** Not very much. Sometimes they would send them to a doctor, and sometime they might pick up the claim and sometimes not, depending on who you were and where. The other thing, he had an eye injury at some time, so he had a glass eye. Well, he was always betting the fellows that he could look at the sun longer than anybody else, and I can always remember Ellis Roberts, who was an engineer who lived a block from where we did on Fourth Avenue, he bet him \$5 that he could....and he did. He could look at that sun with that glass eye and Roberts couldn't see for two days after he looked. Well, that was just one thing, another thing he was very handy with a snowball, a soft snowball, and some of those stuffed shirts would come out of the depot, if he happened to be around and the snow was just right, he would pitch a snowball

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over and either hit them on the back of the neck or on top of those derby hats. It was really laughable all those years.

**DELANEY:** Good,

**LYONS:** I actually followed in the same footsteps of my father because I was always in trouble in school, the same way. I was that kind of a fellow. I went to work on the railroad, he joined the Masonic Lodge, I did, and he was interested in all the other things that I have been. As a labor representative, he was with the Order of Railway Conductors in Durango at that time which covered the Rio Grande Southern Railroad, why he was the president of the division here. He took care of all the cases, things of that kind.

**DELANEY:** Did your careers with the D&RG overlap?

**LYONS:** No, not necessarily except for a short period of time. From 1915 when I went to work until he died in 1923.

**DELANEY:** Your father died in 1923.

**LYONS:** We had three children in that family, myself, as the oldest and my sister Mary next in line and then sister Gladys. Gladys was the only one who worked in the railroad, because father became sick somewhere at that point around '21, and he didn't do very much work, but she worked in the roundhouse as a typist and clerk.

**DELANEY:** Are your sisters still living?

**LYONS:** Just one in Colorado Springs

**DELANEY:** What is her married name?

**LYONS:** Her married name is Roberts, B. R. Roberts; he was a salesman for (?) supply.

**DELANEY:** Mrs. E. R. Roberts, and do they have children?

**LYONS:** They had a boy and a girl.

**DELANEY:** What are their names?

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**LYONS:** Well, Eddy Roberts was the boy and the daughter was Barbara Roberts, she was in school work, but she died of cancer several years ago. My own family, we had one child, the wife and I, that's a daughter, Martha Ann.

**DELANEY:** Where does she live?

**LYONS:** She lives at Cincinnati at the present time, a wife of professor of chemistry at the University Cincinnati and they were both graduates of the Antioch College at Yellow Springs, Ohio. They both had the experience of working while they were getting their education. She worked for the army, evaluating tests for recruits or people to become officers and such like as that and also worked for an insurance company in Chicago as an actuary which she was.

**DELANEY:** Okay, now, your own education, you were born in Durango and went to school in Durango.

**LYONS:** I was born in Durango and went to school in Durango, the same as my mother, my wife and my daughter.

**DELANEY:** So four generations of your family has gone to school here in Durango, graduated from high school.

**LYONS:** I then took one year at the University of Colorado studying mechanical engineering, but due to World War I coming along, I expected to be called. I was working at the railroad; I had seniority all this time. When I came back to Durango, I expected to be called to the army, so I didn't go back to college. In fact, I was earning my own way to go to school anyway. I worked then that year and then in 1918 in the early fall either August or September, they called me in August. In September I was inducted back....

**DELANEY:** Where did you go to be inducted?

**LYONS:** I went to Camp Riley in Kansas and I got the flu there and two days after I got out of the hospital they transferred me to Indianapolis to .... I got the flu and I couldn't carry a pack, I shouldn't have been going anyway. I was that way for about a week, friends carried the pack for me, I went to Camp (?) and then across to France.

**DELANEY:** In France, what unit were you a part of?

**LYONS:** I was with the 35th engineers in France.

**DELANEY:** Would this be what we call combat engineers today?

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**LYONS:** No, we were car building....

**DELANEY:** Railroad car building, so your old railroading caught up with you.

Alva: Yeah, caught right back into it. I expected to be in the train service, being a trainman. It seemed like the people that were office people or worked in the roundhouse or around the car shop were all laborers, well they went to trainmen, I was....

**DELANEY:** It's a wonder they didn't make a cook out of you.

**LYONS:** Well, they could have, but it was something that I was handy with because I always studied manual training, so I fit in there right away right quick.

**DELANEY:** You weren't in any actual battles; that wasn't your function.

**LYONS:** No

**DELANEY:** And when did you return to the United States?

**LYONS:** In May of 1919.

**DELANEY:** Did you join the American Legion over there in Paris, Post No. 1 or here when you came home?

**LYONS:** No, I didn't join the American Legion until 1928.

**DELANEY:** I know you've been an officer in the Legion, we'll get back to that a little later on. I don't have your wife's name on this tape.

**LYONS:** Her name is Mercedes.

**DELANEY:** Getting into the railroading, tell us why you think and I think it's necessary to make this tape.

**LYONS:** Well after my long experience of trying to convince and explain to local people, and what I mean by local people, is the shippers on the railroad, must fight to protect their interest in the service they use provided by public carrier. This would apply to stock raisers, farmers, smelters, gold and ore mines and the general public represented by council or organizations or public officials. I found this necessary because a reporter from Good Morning

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America could not understand why I was so interested in doing this very thing. So that's where, I couldn't explain to him, that if the management of the railroad was interested in their main line operations rather than in a branch line service particularly when it's marginal like it was in this area.

**DELANEY:** So your point is then that the D&RG, the management of the D&RG was interested in that main line and through the Arkansas Valley and out that way and not so much in these so called branch lands or feeder lines, whatever they might be. Because as you say, it was a marginal maybe operation.

**LYONS:** In the early days when Palmer started here, that was what he was building, feeder lines so he could possibly extend those feeder lines south into New Mexico or clear west or even north because they would have liked to have a better route to the west coming down through Pueblo.

**DELANEY:** Your point is too that a lot of things that the management wanted in abandonment procedures, in bankruptcies and things like that, don't appear in the official records.

**LYONS:** Well if they do they go into an attorney's office or they go into the ICC or the PUC and there's nobody going to go into those.

**DELANEY:** People then doing research on railroads and looking strictly at management's records are not going to get absolutely the true story.

**LYONS:** That's absolutely right.

**DELANEY:** Now, I would like to go back to your early years of railroading. Let's take the first ten years. You started in 1915, you had some time out, a little bit of college, and you had a war in there, what else transpired in that first ten years of your career as a railroad man because your seniority goes back to 1915.

**LYONS:** That's right. Well, I started working for the railroad the day I graduated from high school as the B & B helper.

**DELANEY:** What's a B & B helper?

**LYONS:** Well you do all the hard work on a bridge gang, shoveling....

**DELANEY:** When they say hey you that's....

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**LYONS:** Hey you, you jump in there, you are on the wrong end of a saw all the time.

**DELANEY:** What does B & V stand for?

**LYONS:** Bridge and building

**DELANEY:** Oh, B & B, and you started on that on a work crew.

**LYONS:** I started on that, and right here in Durango there's one section of a bridge there, they have the same one span on the north end of the bridge crossing the Animas River that we built there. While I was in there, those were replaced, and they were strictly timbers, and we sawed the....the carpenter measured them out and we sawed them out, and (?) them all to fit, ordinarily they do that in the sawmills now, and they come here already set up, so it was a good experience for me to see how this thing was done.

**DELANEY:** Did you go out every morning, come back every night ordinarily?

**LYONS:** Why we were working in Durango on these bridges we did that. I stayed in town and I went out with the crew every morning. The minute that we moved to Hermosa, we put in that bridge up there, the same kind and those two cement piers are still there since 1950, and I shoveled a good share of that cement, mixing it by shovel on the platform. We moved from there to the Florida and I built a bridge at Oxford that the engineer McCabe run into on the passenger train, and it was badly damaged, so we had to fix that up.

**DELANEY:** I see, why did he run into it?

**LYONS:** Well, couldn't see it I guess.

**DELANEY:** After your start there as a work man n the work crew building bridges and buildings, how did you get into actual train operation?

**LYONS:** I went to college that fall, and when I came back next spring, I started out as a brakeman right away.

**DELANEY:** Tell me what a brakeman does?

**LYONS:** He does the flagging, if he's a rear brakeman, he flags the train and in other words he's the guy that works the field, like in a switching operation, you have the three men. The head man handles the engine. He takes the engine on and off the train or takes it to ...cars. The field



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man does the other work, set the hand brakes and such things as that. I worked then all that next summer. What I was doing is going back to college because I won't be going to the army so....

**DELANEY:** Did you work right here in these yards?

**LYONS:** I worked here in these yards, and a lot of the work I did was on the Silverton branch because they were rebuilding a snow shed up there, a slid shed.

**DELANEY:** Where

**LYONS:** That's at 492 1/2 this side of Silverton. I didn't like to work up there. There were older men that would ordinarily be on passenger, so I got on as an extra man. I kept up there and up there working on that train because we would bring rock that was loaded on the side of the hill there. We would shove the flat cars with rock into Silverton and then the next morning we would have to bring them down in back of the passenger train and spot them in this section of track there where they were building the shed, use the rock then to build a crib. They didn't like that, so I was on the Silverton there with Jim Feeney for a month or so, and one day I come back from Silverton, they called me to deadhead east to Alamosa, I got to Alamosa that night...

**DELANEY:** Tell me what you mean by deadheading.

**LYONS:** Just ride the train over there, that's what they call a deadhead trip. We got paid for those trips. We got to Alamosa and I was called within an hour to go with a freight train to La Veda standard gauge. I was in a passenger uniform, no clothes, and not a sign of anything else, well at the time (?) Erick left the store, Nathan Erick store and started one of his own over there. He was down at the depot, I saw him and I knew him very well so I went up and got some overalls and supplies, gloves and one thing and another so I could work. I worked over there for two weeks. I finally got tired and told them I was going back home because I didn't have enough clothes, and I did, but I worked over there on standard gauge all that time.

**DELANEY:** What else happened in 1915 and 1925?

**LYONS:** Well, there was a lot of things that happened during that year. The railroad was in a very precarious position because of using the revenue that was generated by particularly the narrow gauge at that time with ore shipments and other things. It was used to build the Western Pacific, so the maintenance of the rolling stock on our railroad here was going down hill.

**DELANEY:** Now, the Western Pacific was owned by the same people that owned the Denver and Rio Grande at that time, and they were trying to build up the Western Pacific and they are

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running down the Denver and Rio Grande in order to build up, they are taking the rolling stock, motive power and things like that.

**LYONS:** They didn't take anything like that because they used their own over there, yes.

**DELANEY:** Okay, but they just let this run down. By the way, was the Denver and Rio Grande under the control of the United States during World War I, the same as the railroad authority.

**LYONS:** Yes, they had a number of vice presidents come in about that time and Brown and Baldwin were the two receivers, Brown being the president before the receivership, Baldwin came in then to help him, then is when the Reconstruction Finance Corporation took over and operated all the railroads in the United States. That's when we got the eight hour day instead of the ten hour day. We got a wage scale that was better. They arranged it so that it was a 100 miles a day for freight and 150 miles a day for passenger.

**DELANEY:** Ordinarily how long did that take, the 100 miles lets say on freight?

**LYONS:** In our place 100 here with freight would probably take about ten hours.

**DELANEY:** And passenger, of course, much less.

**LYONS:** About 10 hours from Durango to Alamosa.

**DELANEY:** Was that a ten hour trip? A lot of people imagine that 100 miles, you know, it doesn't sound like much. It sounds like featherbedding, you see, to a lot of people. I just wanted to get that in. It was under the United States under that Railroad Authority, so this receivership, was this because of bankruptcy at all?

**LYONS:** They were all bankruptcy proceedings because they had to keep the railroad in tact, then they had to go bankrupt at that time. That meant then that the creditors of the railroad were getting in the driver's seat and things commenced to change then.

**DELANEY:** So they would goad bankruptcy to keep the creditors from selling whatever had been put up as collateral. It's true that the railroads put up part of the rolling stock property, things like that as collateral for loans. If they didn't have the money to pay, the bankers could sell this.

**LYONS:** That's right.

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**DELANEY:** Now, these bankruptcies then, you see, that explains a lot. Do you know owned, who were the controlling interests of the Western Pacific and the Denver and Rio Grande, what family?

**LYONS:** The Gould family

**DELANEY:** The Gould, of the old J. Gould, okay.

**LYONS:** They were, of course, in competition with the Harrimans and I forget who it was down in the Southern Pacific.

**DELANEY:** Well Huntington and Crocker, I've forgotten the other, Hollis P. Huntington, same people who built the Central Pacific out to meet up with the Union Pacific. Of course, he's interested in building up the Goulds now, is interested in building the stock of the Western Pacific Railroad, so it will sell higher, and to do that he's just letting the Denver and Rio Grande go down hill, okay, all right.

**LYONS:** Well Baldwin then turned around and was president right after the receivership went under the reconstruction finance turned back the railroad to private ownership.

**DELANEY:** I see, all right.

**LYONS:** Then Young came in, I think he was the next president, and he tried to do something. In fact, a lot of the things that were going on here, particularly the surveying of the new right-of-way for the railroad from Alamosa to Durango to get away from Cumbres Pass and some of the other bad spots on the railroad like coming in to Durango from Bocea up at the top of the hill on Florida Mesa, down from Minero down to Lumberton, they expected to take a canyon further north of there and bypass those places.

**DELANEY:** And how were they going to come into Durango.

**LYONS:** Well, the survey finally would have come in at Bondad and then they would have joined up with the Farmington branch there and come into Durango.

**DELANEY:** Okay

**LYONS:** See, now they were surveying for a standard gauge railroad, not narrow gauge.

**DELANEY:** Do you know when that survey was made or who the main surveyor was?

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**LYONS:** Well, I've forgotten his name, but I was a good friend of him. I think who it was was Gwyn?

**DELANEY:** Looking back at the records, the date would probably be the easiest day. Do you remember when that survey was made about?

**LYONS:** In the 10s probably up to 24 or something.

**DELANEY:** All right, and they are just trying to straighten out some of the curves and get a better grade and so on from Alamosa over here, standard gauge railroad.

**LYONS:** Yes

**DELANEY:** Did they intend to take that standard gauge clear up to Silverton?

**LYONS:** No

**DELANEY:** They intended to keep a narrow gauge.

**LYONS:** Probably to keep it narrow gauge

**DELANEY:** Because at that time the Farmington branch, I want to get to that later, had become a narrow gauge.

**LYONS:** In 1923

**DELANEY:** In 1923, so at the time of the survey, but they were going to keep part narrow gauge...

**LYONS:** It was before the Farmington branch was turned over to a narrow gauge, you see, they gave that up.

**DELANEY:** All right

**LYONS:** So that still comes in at the time period there.

**DELANEY:** Yes, that's still in our ten year period that we are talking about. Can you think of anything else important that happened to this area right in here in the Denver and Rio Grande, say before 1925?

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**LYONS:** ....getting a lot of stock off the reservation, sheep.

**DELANEY:** Business was booming.

**LYONS:** Well ....from Farmington to Durango and standard gauge equipment, so the logical thing then would be asking the New Mexico PUC to rescind the order and let them change the rail to a narrow gauge.

**DELANEY:** You changed it completely, you didn't just put in a third rail.

**LYONS:** No

**DELANEY:** It wasn't so you could put standard gauge....[end of side one]...Farmington branch right now and you just made the point that they just moved the rail in to make it a narrow gauge. That was finished in 1923, is that correct.

**LYONS:** That's correct.

**DELANEY:** As long as we are in that period, do you know when that was started, and why, the Farmington branch and where it came to here in Durango. Do you want to talk about that a minute?

**LYONS:** Well, the Farmington branch was started in 1903 out of Carbon Junction.

**DELANEY:** And that's right south of Durango, down here by KIUP.

**LYONS:** Yes, they started hauling stuff in here then and they had teams working and crews already. I guess they had been surveying already, knew where they were going. So by 1905 the railroad was ready to operate. They had shipped in part of the engines and had them ready and they were using the standard gauge cars that they had shipped in, transferring at what we called grubs, that's directly behind the sales barn. Then the switch crew here in Durango would haul all the equipment and material and everything in from Durango where the crews would be it here and take it down to Grubbs, the narrow gauge track was up on the high side and the standard gauge below, so that it was easy to transfer right straight across.

**DELANEY:** I see, from one flat car to another.

**LYONS:** To another, or a box car, whatever.

**DELANEY:** Okay, the rails were that close.

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**LYONS:** After 1903, they started regular service, mixed train service, they had two coaches.

**DELANEY:** Two passenger coaches

**LYONS:** Two passenger coaches, one of them was half coach and half baggage or express mail.

**DELANEY:** Tell me, why did they start that line, what were they hauling and what do think the reason for starting that line was?

**LYONS:** Well somewhere in the years prior to that, there were surveyors that come up the alley between Main Avenue and Second Avenue east here. You know, Durango was not a very big town in those days.

**DELANEY:** That alley isn't very wide today.

**LYONS:** I can remember distinctively that survey team coming up through there and they told us that they were surveying for the Southern Pacific, and the reason for that was they had coal ground at Hesperus and up at Porter.

**DELANEY:** The Southern Pacific did.

**LYONS:** The Southern Pacific and they were coming up here to get that coal, so to keep the Southern Pacific from coming in here and fouling up the Durango yards. I don't see in the world when you look at the territory how a railroad could come out there and cross over to the north side across the river and go up on Crestview and out toward the cemetery and out that way up around Hesperus to get to....

**DELANEY:** To get to that coal at Porter and at Hesperus

**LYONS:** I just don't see how they could get out of there.

**DELANEY:** Why would they be doing that when the Rio Grande Southern already had a railroad beginning in 1890 out to Porter and Hesperus.

**LYONS:** They wanted their standard gauge railroad, they wanted their own railroad.

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**DELANEY:** I see, all right, so to keep the Southern Pacific from getting in here, the D&RG did certain things, one of the things was to build this Farmington branch....

**LYONS:** Built the Farmington branch, that's right.

**DELANEY:** Okay, and what did they haul?

**LYONS:** Well, the Farmington area was a great fruit area in those early days. We didn't haul much stock because there was no way to the stockyards, and then in Durango big enough to hold all the stock, and they had no stockyards, so they hauled fruit and the supplies from the east, merchandise, such as that back to Farmington, but we used to stop at every railroad crossing, and they were all named from Riverside, Cedar Hill, Johnsons Crossing one on either side there, on down Perry's, Flora Vista and all of those stops, so coming back, we would load fruit in those in the fall.

**DELANEY:** Did you ever run that?

**LYONS:** I don't think I ever run as a conductor because I wasn't promoted at that time, come to think about it. I wasn't promoted until 1922, so I didn't run the standard gauge, but I rode on there a lot.

**DELANEY:** Getting back to that Southern Pacific, there wasn't any danger of the Santa Fe, which was a closer railroad getting into the Denver and Rio Grande area was there?

**LYONS:** Not likely because of the agreement that they made over the pass at Raton.

**DELANEY:** In the 1870s, where Santa Fe got the right-of-way through Raton Pass and the D&RG got the right-of-way through the Royal Gorge and out the Arkansas River area to the west and that was an agreement that was kept by both roads, and they agreed not to go into an area and compete.

Alva: That's right

**DELANEY:** But that didn't apply to the Southern Pacific

**LYONS:** No, that didn't apply to the Southern Pacific

**DELANEY:** Just the Santa Fe and the D&RG

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**LYONS:** After the disagreement was made, the Rio Grande built as far as Espanola, south down on the Chile line, then they had to have....

**DELANEY:** The Chile line went from Santa Fe....

**LYONS:** Santa Fe to Antonito, well they built from Antonito to Espanola, the Rio Grande did. Then they had another company with the stockholders in Santa Fe built the railroad from Santa Fe to Espanola and the Santa Fe and Rio Grande was able to operate over that track in Santa Fe. Eventually it finally was owned by the D&RG.

**DELANEY:** That explains some of the finagling that went on, looking back, where was the Southern Pacific going to take that coal had they mined it at Porter and at Hesperus.

**LYONS:** They were going to take it where it would connect with the Rock Island some place, or from there on south because there would be no other way it could get down there.

**DELANEY:** So they could have gone either in to California with that coal or as far up as Chicago with that coal. Getting back to this Farmington branch, they laid the standard gauge there and it opened in 1905. Was there a pretty good business, do you remember it pretty well?

**LYONS:** We had a lot of passengers. You've got to remember that the highways were not like they are today, they were just old country roads, farm roads, you might say. So the railroad then was very handy for people coming from Farmington, Durango to catch the train, go on to Denver on the train, that's where the business was all coming from.

**DELANEY:** Yes, and if you wanted to stop at Cedar Hill, you could get off at Cedar Hill.

**LYONS:** Any place, so it was a good deal for the railroad because they eventually picked up a lot of....

**DELANEY:** You mentioned from here to Alamosa was ten hours, how long was it from here to Denver?

**LYONS:** Well, you left here in the morning and it was overnight, you arrived in Denver the next morning. Over the years they shortened that time up considerable because we didn't leave here until 11:30 in the morning and got into Denver at 7:30 the next morning.

**DELANEY:** Okay, how many passenger trains a day in 1925, the end of the period we are talking about, how many passenger trains a day came into Durango.



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**LYONS:** We had one from Silverton, one from Alamosa, one from Telluride, one from Farmington.

**DELANEY:** The Telluride one was actually on the Rio Grande Southern, but they used the same depot, actually during a large part of the time that the Rio Grande Southern was in operation, it wasn't it or a large part of the stock was owned by D&RG, so rolling stock....things like that were likely to be interchanged.

**LYONS:** They were interchanged or they were loaned or leased. In fact, they had many ways of covering up their financial transactions, so that the Rio Grande Southern actually if it went broke, or they gave it for collateral for loans, but they didn't give up the property of the Rio Grande.

**DELANEY:** Sure, sure, yes, I understand that. Did you ever meet Otto Mears, who is the one that started the Rio Grande Southern?

**LYONS:** Yes, I met him in Silverton in the early days.

**DELANEY:** Of course, General Palmer was long since dead. I don't when, but I'm sure he was.

**LYONS:** Anyway Geoffrey took over, I think, as president....

**DELANEY:** When General Palmer died?

**LYONS:** They were in financial trouble at that time and they went into receivership and I'm sure that Geoffrey must have been the receiver because that was the practice of promoting the receiver as president if he was doing a good job.

**DELANEY:** It makes sense because he probably knew more about it didn't he than anybody alive at that time, so it made a little bit of sense as far as the ICC or somebody like that's concerned because that would be the agency that would appoint the receiver is that not true?

**LYONS:** Not necessarily, the court would do that.

**DELANEY:** The bankruptcy court would appoint a receiver, okay. Well, can you think of anything else up to 1925, you already mentioned the Farmington branch was changed to narrow gauge in 1923. What did they do with the standard gauge rolling stock that they had? Do you know.

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**LYONS:** I think they sold it off to farmers along the way.

**DELANEY:** Oh, that's why a lot of these box cars are....

**LYONS:** Well, that's probably gone by this day.

**DELANEY:** There's still a few sitting around the countryside.

**LYONS:** Maybe a few sitting around

**DELANEY:** If they put them on a decent foundation, and they used them for corn cribs or storage of all kinds.

**LYONS:** I don't know where those engines went to from here. They evidently disappeared while I was not working out of Durango.

**DELANEY:** Do you know what type of engine they were, they didn't have to be very heavy did they.

**LYONS:** I believe one was 556 or 58, and 528.

**DELANEY:** They only had two or three, I suppose because it was a pretty short run.

**LYONS:** They had to have one in repair and one in reserve, so if you got stuck or derailed or something to go down there and pull it off.

**DELANEY:** Were there any terrible wrecks that you can think of up to 1925.

**LYONS:** As far as I know, the Farmington branch never had any on the standard gauge.

**DELANEY:** Okay

**LYONS:** The minute we started hauling oil and the traffic was heavier then, then we had plenty of derailments.

**DELANEY:** Is it because of deterioration of the tracks and the ties and the roadbed and not enough ballast or what because one of those tank cars full of oil is pretty heavy.

**LYONS:** The two times I was on the Farmington, running the Farmington branch train, we had a derailment with ten cars of oil at Bondad, just over the highway crossing that's there, and

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the next one was down here at what we call Lodo (?), just before you come into the cuts. We used to call the slate cuts....

**DELANEY:** Down south of town where you can see it, Moving Mountain and that general area.

**LYONS:** A little further south

**DELANEY:** A little further south, the shale....

**LYONS:** Those are the only two real bad accidents where we had to have a....

**DELANEY:** Were there many times, up to 1925 when traffic on the railroad was completely shut down because of snow in the winter time.

**LYONS:** No

**DELANEY:** They kept it pretty well open

**LYONS:** One year they had trouble with the snow on the Farmington branch because they didn't have snow equipment and they had a little trouble, but I couldn't tell you what time or what period.

**DELANEY:** How about from here to Silverton.

**LYONS:** We've had many snow slides blocking the railroad.

**DELANEY:** And block it for two or three months.

**LYONS:** Three months easy

**DELANEY:** When did they develop that rotary snowplow to put on the narrow gauge? Was that built right here?

**LYONS:** No that was built in Alamosa, probably in Burnet(?) was where it was made, rotaries that were used here. However, I think the Rio Grande Southern developed that idea when W. D. Lee was superintendent over there. Sometime between when he went over there, it should have been around 1901 or 1902, something of that time.

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**DELANEY:** In this time, at one time in there, for a short period of time, Durango was a general office of the railroad. Is that not true, what does that mean?

**LYONS:** The general office, they had a general superintendent, they had more officers here. That's when they owned all the stock of the Rio Grande Southern because then it was all one railroad operated from Durango. My next door neighbor up there was George Densmore, was a traveling engineer on the Southern from Durango here. We had another one from Durango east of Chama and he also took care of the Farmington-Silverton branch.

**DELANEY:** A general office, it's not the headquarters, but it's higher than a regular depot.

**LYONS:** Just above the superintendent's level.

**DELANEY:** Okay, all right, was part of that in order to get into New Mexico and keep the Southern Pacific from coming up.

**LYONS:** It probably was, in the meantime, somewhere along those periods of times, the new Mexico Central was built.

**DELANEY:** Where did the New Mexico....

**LYONS:** From Santa Fe, south, I don't know where they tapped on south of there, but anyway, it was either close to the Southern Pacific or close to the Rock Island and McAtee, who was the federal agent and also the train master or assistant superintendent in Durango during the same period. He was to get business moving from Durango and down over that railroad. They expected to have a lot of coal business. This W. D. Lee was also superintendent or manager on that railroad at one time.

**DELANEY:** I see

**LYONS:** Also was superintendent of the Alamosa division and also over at Salida. I knew his son, Elliott Lee, was a banker at the Guaranteed Trust in New York. He was a great friend of Neil Camp's

**DELANEY:** Yes, president of the First National Bank here. Part of the reason then, this man in the general office, he was supposed to get freight and everything like that, moving into New Mexico so that the D&RG can expand and keep the Southern Pacific out or anybody else as far as that goes.

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**LYONS:** Well, Young was just before the time of Pyeatt, it went into receivership shortly again then Pyeatt took over as president. During this era in there between 1922 and 25 is when they started ordering engines, they ordered the 470s first. Then they ordered 100 refrigerator cars, six feet longer than the narrow gauge cars, 100 stock cars, the same length. You get about four head more cattle in these cars.

**DELANEY:** They were really building up the rolling stock.

**LYONS:** They were building up the rolling stock.

**DELANEY:** And you say new locomotives

**LYONS:** New locomotives, 1926 then they ordered another bunch of heavier locomotives, the 480s. They were built by Baldwin.

**DELANEY:** They are using some of those at the present time.

**LYONS:** Still using some of those at the present time. Then the Rio Grande converted what they called the little 1000s into the 490s, and we have some of those here working on the Toltec and Cumbres Railroad, and we have several here that Mr. Bradshaw is using on the Silverton branch.

**DELANEY:** Okay, do they pull passenger trains and everything....

**LYONS:** They are just as good as the small engine, yes. They used the smaller engine for passenger because it was easier to get over the hill and saved running a freight train or flanger in front of the passenger train over Cumbres in stormy weather.

**DELANEY:** Were there any attempts at abandonment before 1925, abandoning part of this road in this area?

**LYONS:** I don't think there was any attempt of abandonment of the actual road. There was attempts to change schedules and time removed railroad or changed, they ran a passenger train from Silverton to Farmington, with the headquarters in Farmington, they stayed overnight.

**DELANEY:** And that's where it ended and that's kind of silly because they had to come right back here to Carbon Junction.

**LYONS:** That was to provide service for the passenger train from Durango to Denver.

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**DELANEY:** Were there many boardings there?

**LYONS:** I don't think it proved satisfactory because it didn't last very long.

**DELANEY:** Was this part of the scheme of some kind to get more boardings in New Mexico and prove the need....

**LYONS:** Everything that the railroad did was a scheme for something, ordinarily the public didn't know about it. That's why it was blind for the public to actually go in and protest these things when it was detrimental to their business as well as everybody working for the railroad.

**DELANEY:** Sure, but were there attempts to get rid of passenger service up to 1925.

**LYONS:** There were some attempts to get rid of passenger service.

**DELANEY:** And do nothing but haul the freight....

**LYONS:** That's right

**DELANEY:** Because that's what railroads are very, very good at.

**LYONS:** After this passenger train from Silverton to Farmington, they wanted to get rid of the passenger trains from Durango to Silverton, and they did and they made it a mixed train.

**DELANEY:** Okay, it was a mixed train which means they got all kinds of cars.

**LYONS:** Freight cars as well as....

**DELANEY:** And a caboose on the end

**LYONS:** Well, I guess they had a caboose on the end.

**DELANEY:** Do you suppose?

**LYONS:** I don't think they did, I think they just used a coach.

**DELANEY:** When did you become a conductor?

**LYONS:** I was promoted in 1922.

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**DELANEY:** And tell me what a conductor does.

**LYONS:** Well, the conductor has charge of the train and the engine and all the crew members.

**DELANEY:** He's in charge, what he says goes, if he says stop, you stop.

**LYONS:** You stop, if the engineer doesn't want to stop, you have an air valve on the caboose that you can stop the train with.

**DELANEY:** That's that rope that goes through.

**LYONS:** Or a valve in the caboose on the freight train.

**DELANEY:** What did that valve do?

**LYONS:** Well it stopped the train, set the air brakes.

**DELANEY:** Set the air brakes all over the train, not just on the caboose.

**LYONS:** All over the train

**DELANEY:** That would stop him.

**LYONS:** That's happened many times.

**DELANEY:** The conductor is in charge.

**LYONS:** He's really in charge and he keeps all the records of the freight, delivers the freight and sees that it's unloaded at the right stations, keeps track of the cars and where they are moved and where they are set up.

**DELANEY:** Sells tickets if anybody gets on and doesn't have a ticket.

**LYONS:** Sells tickets

**DELANEY:** You kept all this in your little conductor's bag.

**LYONS:** Kept it all in the....

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**DELANEY:** And your little typewriter that you donated to the Center out here.

**LYONS:** Yeah, all those things were used.

**DELANEY:** And you had tickets that you could make out for any place and every place, and you had to account for all the money.

**LYONS:** You had all the tickets, cash fare tickets, no other kind, they were just cash fare, conductor only. He picked up all kinds of tickets, maybe a ticket that was good to New York, going over 10 or 11 railroads. You had to punch your coupon that was the end of the trip on this railroad or punch it so that they could get their credit.

**DELANEY:** Yeah, because each railroad is going to get their part of that, so he keeps all the records of that train and he's in charge of that train. That is your seniority as a conductor then beginning in 1922. When did you retire from the railroad?

**LYONS:** I retired in 1966.

**DELANEY:** So you had 40 some years then as a conductor. All together you worked for the railroad for 51 years. Taking that next ten year period of 1925 up to 1935 and where you get into the depression, what's the main thing you think about when you think of the railroad during those years. You were a conductor by that time.

**LYONS:** I was working as a brakeman

**DELANEY:** You got bumped every now and then.

**LYONS:** Yes, you bet you did. They were still following the footsteps of evidently the same board of directors....

**DELANEY:** As the 1920s

Alva: The 1920s of the Young period there from 20 to 22, so all these improvements were still going on all this time, and there was many changes then, trying to consolidate the (?) runs or change schedules, before all this happened we had all these freight trains were scheduled out of here, 451 was the one coming from Chama, 452 going out, up to Silverton is 461, 462. They had to get rid of all those because those were regular salaried positions for the month, so they got rid of those and put (?) irregular freight service, maybe everyday while the business was here,

**DELANEY:** But they didn't have to when the business wasn't here.



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**LYONS:** Yeah, they didn't have to pay anybody....

**DELANEY:** Gave the money with a lot more flexibility

**LYONS:** We made a lot of concessions and gained a lot during those periods of time right in there.

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**DELANEY:** We're talking about that period from 1910 to 1935.

**LYONS:** Now there's the start of building up the business and then we have different management, not the president, but new managers of the railroad. As they come on, they see a different idea so they want to change things, not only rules but conditions of the railroad, where you will pick up the business and all that kind of stuff, so that caused many hearings.

**DELANEY:** Before what agencies?

**LYONS:** Before the PUC primarily because....

**DELANEY:** Public Utilities Commission

**LYONS:** Then the state of Colorado, so that was where I started attending these hearings to find out what was going on, curiosity.

**DELANEY:** Were most of these held in Denver?

**LYONS:** No, they were held in Durango, in fact, they all were held in Durango concerning the narrow from Chama west.

**DELANEY:** And you got interested in it to find out what was going on, wondering what was going on.

**LYONS:** During this same period of time, our local brotherhoods conceived the idea of having clubs in Alamosa, railroad clubs, one in Durango, and we to promote business.

**DELANEY:** Promote business for the railroad

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**LYONS:** Because we could see what the railroad was doing when they were buying up the truck and bus lines, and we wanted the people that were providing the business to use rail service rather than truck and specified so.

**DELANEY:** The reason they were buying up truck lines and bus lines was what, why were they doing that?

**LYONS:** Primarily, I suppose they thought they could do away with some of the train service, cut down their expense, primarily there was a lot of expenses they wanted to get rid of.

**DELANEY:** Right, if they could get rid of a certain passenger train or something like that, they could save money. At the same time they were carrying the passengers or the freight either on trucks or on buses.

**LYONS:** All during that period of time, up until 1935, I think it was 1935 when they had the hearing here over the Pagosa Springs branch, and Perlman come right out and told them that they were going to get rid of the passenger because it wasn't making money.

**DELANEY:** Who was Perlman?

**LYONS:** Well he was the general manager of the railroad company. He was the primary spokesman here although we had others we had Eno. Well it wasn't Harold Eno, he was the assistant in command at that time. I can't remember the name of the general passenger agent at that time, Wadley, he was down here then to take the passenger side. They had all this stuff all prepared, each one of those, the freight man, the passenger man, general manager, plus their attorneys. They had statistics to show the business was going down. They didn't need certain things any more.

**LYONS:** That's right

**DELANEY:** But part of the reason business was going down was the ownership of the bus and the truck. They were doing this deliberately in order to have some kind of a cause for abandonment or cutting down schedule or whatever. You mention these railroad clubs, who belonged to these railroad clubs started by you trainmen.

**LYONS:** All of the employees, section men, roundhouse employees, train and engine men, all part of the club business.

**DELANEY:** What activities did you engage in....

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**LYONS:** Sent out questionnaires to the people, the shippers, and asked them what they would consider better service to their business or if they would continue to ship on the railroad, to keep track of their records.

**DELANEY:** Then you presented these findings from these questionnaires and other information to these hearings before the PUC.

**LYONS:** Actually we kept a copy of all of that, most of it we sent to the railroad for their information to show we were working for the railroad. We always had copies.

**DELANEY:** Did the railroad present these to the PUC?

**LYONS:** Not always, they had plenty of statistics of their own, but they didn't use them.

**DELANEY:** Sometimes these were in conflict, weren't they, what they wanted and what these questionnaires would show.

**LYONS:** Yes

**DELANEY:** So sometimes they might not want to present those to the PUC. You belonged to the one here in Durango, were you president of it or anything?

**LYONS:** No, I never was president. I think Whalen Bruce was president here. I was pretty active in promoting all the things, writing up the questionnaires, one thing and another.

**[end of interview]  
[end of tape]**

*[Note: This audiotaped interview was transcribed by Catherine Conrad, Administrative Assistant for the Center of Southwest Studies, and was formatted and partially edited by Center Archivist Todd Ellison on March 13, 1997, and further on February 7, 2008, including conversion to PDF file format for online access on the Center of Southwest Studies website.]*

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