

Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College



Center of
Southwest Studies

This interview forms part of the Southwest Oral
Histories Collection at the Center of Southwest
Studies, Fort Lewis College

© 2008 by Fort Lewis College Foundation, Center of Southwest Studies account
This and other publications are available at cost from the Center of Southwest Studies,
Fort Lewis College, 1000 Rim Drive, Durango, CO 81301

Email archives@fortlewis.edu

Website <http://swcenter.fortlewis.edu>

Alva Lyons papers at the Center of Southwest Studies: <http://swcenter.fortlewis.edu/inventory/Lyons.htm>

This oral history tape is being made under the auspices of Fort Lewis College, the Center of Southwest Studies. The interviewer is Rae Haynes; the narrator [is] Alva F. Lyons, date of the interview, September 20, 1989; and the location is Mr. Lyons' home, 777 7th Avenue, Durango, Colorado.

[Editor's note: bracketed texts are comments made later by Martha Lyons McDaniel, daughter of Alva Lyons, when she edited the transcription in 1991. Comments followed by the letters *rph* indicate that the correction was made by Rae Haynes. Center of Southwest Studies Professional Archival Intern Renee Morgan entered these notes in the transcription on February 6, 2008.]

HAYNES: Mr. Lyons, before we get started I want you to know that I have listened to the tapes that you made with Dr. Robert Delaney back in 1982, and I have some questions about those tapes as well as some of our talks earlier this year. You told me at one time that your father worked as a yard master in Durango and that he did some switching at the smelter. Would you elaborate on what your father's job was and what your involvement was there with him when you were a youngster?

LYONS: Well my father first come to the Rio Grande in '84 at Leadville, and then he quit there and went to the U.P. on the Oregon Short Line up to a, working between there and the Anaconda and he was then because the engineer run the engine off the short rail on the ground, why they fired my father without prejudice which in those days if they'd a had prejudices against him, why he wouldn't have been able to get a job. So he immediately hired out for the Montana Railroad as the yard master at Anaconda, and he worked with that and finally hired his brother as a yard master also for the same job, while he resigned that job and took a job as conductor on the train. He run the passenger train then between Anaconda and Butte.

HAYNES: This was your father, or your father's brother?

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: Well that would have been my father did that; he was a conductor then, too.

HAYNES: And he came to a...

LYONS: He came to Durango in 1894, and he was hired here as a yard master for the same reason and hired his own switchman which was unusual because he didn't have a contract. He was what you would call a semi official, and they were having trouble at the Smelter with bringing the ore up there in the right system because the engines would only handle three cars from the scale house that was right close to the Lightner Creek here up to the, where they unloaded the ore at the top of the Smelter and everyone of those three cars had to match on four different tracks so that they could get through from one with their carriages and dump that ore into the bins at the Smelter.

HAYNES: And your dad drove the train himself to do this?

LYONS: Well, all he did was made up the train in Durango down here on between, you might say, 9th Street and 7th Street. He made up the train there that went over to the Smelter and then he would take that train over to the Smelter, park it on the side track over there and pick up the empties off of the other engine, the other switch engine he had brought down from the Smelter so that these cars could go up there in their place.

HAYNES: Now you once called him an artist at doing this. Would you tell me what you mean by that?

LYONS: Yes, he was able to do that switching in his head without a lot of paperwork. In fact, the Smelter gave him a list of the cars and how they were to be placed and that's then, of course, you had to place them that way in the train down on the Rio Grande property here before it ever went to the Smelter.

HAYNES: Now I think you sometimes rode with him when he was doing this.

LYONS: In the summertime I always went over there when they took the ore over there and rode back with him from there, and they took those empties then to the west end of the yard up about 12th there and that was around where old Safeway was there and switched the cars so that they had to take the bad orders out of the good cars, and so forth so that they could be used again.

HAYNES: So the yards were a lot larger then than they are now?

LYONS: Yeah, there was more tracks.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: They extended down to what street?

LYONS: Well they extended from that, from 12th Street all the way down to the depot. In fact, we had three tracks on each side of the main line, the present main line, those nearest the Main Street were merchant tracks, they brought the cars from the east with can goods and such stuff as that were parked and unloaded at those warehouses.

HAYNES: And the warehouses were located exactly where?

LYONS: They were right the buildings on Main Street.

HAYNES: And what block would that have been?

LYONS: All the way from 12th Street down to 6th Avenue or 7th Avenue, 7th Street, let me get that right.

HAYNES: 7th Street, if I remember correctly, you told me that sometimes you got to get your hands on the controls...

LYONS: Well, when they were doing the switching up there ... engineer always let me run the engine switching the cars.

HAYNES: Now was this just when your father was engineer or did...

LYONS: No, he was the yard master, he didn't have anything to do with the engines.

HAYNES: I see, and so you actually ran the engine down.

LYONS: I ran the engine and obeyed his signals.

HAYNES: Your father's signals.

LYONS: Yeah, when he cut the cars off to run, to kick them into the various size tracks.

HAYNES: But the engineer was there looking over your shoulder all the time.

LYONS: Yeah, well he was setting right in front of me on what they called a little box there, grub box, they used to put their clothes in it.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: And how old would you have been when you were doing this?

LYONS: I was about 13 years old, between 10 and 13, somewhere in there.

HAYNES: Can you tell us anything else about the early makeup of the yards or your experiences down at the yards when you were a real young boy.

LYONS: Well on the west side of the main line, the present main line, there were three tracks there. The first one was called the upper house because it joined the freight house there on, down here between 8th Street, 7th Street and 8th Street and the next track was the middle track, the one furthest away was the back track, all had names, all the tracks around the town had names.

HAYNES: And what was the significance of these names and these tracks?

LYONS: Well people that are using the railroad to ship things on would have certain places they wanted to have cars spotted, and so then the freight office would always mention where they were to be spotted, on what tracks, because they knew what the names of the tracks were.

HAYNES: Did this practice continue after you were employed by the railroad?

LYONS: Oh, yes

HAYNES: But this system was in place when you were a youngster as well?

LYONS: It was in place until well, oh until, as far as I know, until the railroad quit handling freight and passenger or freight on rail cars, freight cars because we brought in all of the high grade stuff that went through the freight house, and the passenger crew then would bring that, those baggage cars up and set them into the freight house so they could be unloaded.

HAYNES: You say this continued until they stopped having freight cars and that would have been about what time?

LYONS: Well, I couldn't say about what the date is.

HAYNES: But then after that date the yard contracted in size, they stopped using that...

LYONS: Yeah, well, the city wanted to take over all of those tracks, all of that on the main line there, and it took, I don't know, it took a couple of judges, had to go to Washington, to get it straightened out so the city couldn't take it over.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: But still some of those side tracks were torn up, so they don't exist today.

LYONS: Yeah, that's why you have a street up there, Narrow Gauge Avenue, on the east side of the main line, they wanted the tracks on the other side, ask brother Rank, he was the city manager. It took him, we had to have an awful time with him to tell him that he couldn't take it over. In fact, I think Jack Rentroe, who was the supervisor in Durango, told him that he couldn't have those tracks, because they had to have tracks themselves to park their own cars, freight cars.

HAYNES: I'm not sure I understand exactly what you are saying. Can you explain it better for the layman, laywoman?

LYONS: Well, what they had to do, when you come in from, with a train of cars that have more than one track would hold, then you had to double over to over to another track. Well coming from Silverton with the ore cars we always had what was called the upper house and left the ore cars there. Does that explain it?

HAYNES: Well I realize that you needed storage on these side tracks, but what was the city intending to do with this?

LYONS: Well, they were going to make another street just like on the Narrow Gauge Avenue on both sides.

HAYNES: So they wanted it for a road then.

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: I see, and Narrow Gauge Avenue, did it itself ever have track right on it?

LYONS: Yes, it was full of tracks, those tracks held all of the, for the unloading of freight into the warehouses, those grocery stores or grocery warehouses, there was three of them were involved there. Let's see we had, my mind's not functioning good here right now, but we had three grocery warehouses there, Wood and Morgan building, the one that built down where the, up across from the present post office that burned down, why they, that's where the bank of Durango has a parking lot there. That was one big warehouse there. Wood and Morgan handled...

HAYNES: Where the parking lot is now?

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: I see.

LYONS: And Morey Merc was down in where the Palace Hotel is, they had that building and we had a little spur then off of the main line when you come up by the a, the track had actually left the depot there and went up all the way close to the buildings, all the way up, right close to the ice plant there behind the Strater Hotel, there was the building that the Strater uses for a garage was the Ball Foundry, and they had the engines there that they repaired, rebuilt, just like Jackson does down at the...

HAYNES: I see.

LYONS: Roundhouse now.

HAYNES: Where was this ice house?

LYONS: The ice house was right there where on the street, 6th Street, between the railroad and Main Avenue. It was right on the alley there, that building is still there. It's been converted now into a, a restaurant in there now.

HAYNES: It's on the opposite side of the street from the Palmer House.

LYONS: Right across the street from the Palmer House.

HAYNES: Uh huh, I see, when were these tracks torn up where Narrow Gauge Avenue is now?

LYONS: Well, it could be in the '60s some time.

HAYNES: As late as the 1960s.

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: And so there was no road back in there until...

LYONS: No, there was no road back there.

HAYNES: Until the track was torn up.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: Do you want to add anything to that, or shall we move on to the next question?

LYONS: I think we will move on; we may be able to come back and talk about it some...

HAYNES: All right, in earlier times you've indicated to me some anecdotes, some personal experiences of yours on various trains. One that I remember was when you were involved with a snowplow train near Minero. Would you tell me about that again please?

LYONS: Yeah, well the passenger train, 116, going east got stuck at just about a mile east of Minero station, and they called for a snowplow to clear the track because it was snow and it was blowing pretty hard, and it drifted across in front of the train. Well when the snowplow arrived up there, we drove, went up as far as the passenger train, but we didn't talk to anybody on the train, because the conductor, Ben Durr had a little feud on with the conductor of the passenger train, so we backed up to the depot and headed the snowplow engine into the side track and then started back with the cabooses and the other engine. We had two engines with a flanger between them, and we went just a, the water tank is at the east end of this side track, so we took water and then when we went around the curve there, a curve against the cliff...

HAYNES: Now you are going backwards?

LYONS: No, we are heading east, and here when we got to this curve we couldn't see it because it was so close to the cliff. Here was the passenger train right there, that's when I jumped out of the window, I was in the engine with the fireman, on his side of the engine and there was no way for me to get back out of the way because he was standing, so he could step back in the deck of the engine, so I had to go out through the window, and I landed then on the side of the track.

HAYNES: In a snow bank.

LYONS: Well there was snow there, yeah.

HAYNES: And what happened to the rest of the crew and the train?

LYONS: Well, it didn't hurt anybody, we had one man in that parlor car, he was a salesman for Morey Merc, Harry Dickson, and what we did was we shoved the cars together and broke the platforms.

HAYNES: But no one was injured.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: No one was injured.

HAYNES: Now did the engineer and the fireman stay in the locomotive?

LYONS: Yes, all the crews stayed on their position on the locomotive.

HAYNES: And there you are out in the snow by yourself.

LYONS: And I was out in the snow bank, yeah. I just thought of that engine going through those wooden coaches.

HAYNES: And you didn't want to be caught...

LYONS: And I didn't want to be caught in there.

HAYNES: Anything else you can tell us about that incident, or does that pretty much cover it?

LYONS: Well, that just about covers it, we finally hauled the coaches, pulled them apart and were able to get enough rigging together in the drawheads, pull 'em out because they were pushed into the wood.

HAYNES: Now I think I understood you to say that the other train actually had freed itself and it was backing toward you.

LYONS: Yeah, it wasn't stuck, it was free, we thought it was stuck.

HAYNES: Uh huh, so you were on a collision course for sure.

LYONS: We were on a collision course for sure.

HAYNES: And about when would this have been?

LYONS: Well that was in the '60s I guess, oh it was long before that, it was in the '30s.

HAYNES: 1930s?

LYONS: Yeah.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: Going back a little further, you told me that you had an injury to your foot back about 1923, just about the time you were promoted to conductor. Would you tell us about that?

LYONS: Well, I was the rear brakeman and we'd made a turn, a Lumberton turn out of Chama, and we picked up a train load of coal at Minero and on our arrival back in Chama why it's always the custom to cut the caboose off first and then let the train go up so it can back in on the side track, cause we then, and while they are doing that why I happened to be the rear brakeman, I was sitting on that rear car and the a, when I took a swing at it, why the brake was bad order, and it wasn't fastened tight on the platform, we had a platform there, just below the deck.

HAYNES: Now this is the last car in the train.

LYONS: It was the last car in the train.

HAYNES: The caboose is already detached.

LYONS: The caboose was already off on the main line, and when I swung on it, why it gave way and I swung out, I guess that was [?] to be outside the rail on this side, but this foot.

HAYNES: Your left foot?

LYONS: Yeah, my left foot evidently got caught in under the by the rail or by the car coming back, the wheel on the car and because there was about an inch and a half between the flange and the rail, why it didn't cut the foot off. It just mashed it, the rail, the wheel mashed it.

HAYNES: Broken bones?

LYONS: It didn't seem to break any bones outside of the...

HAYNES: Just smashed it flat?

LYONS: Mashed it flat, it was just like the palm of my hand, it was just about like that. Well the doctor come, we had a medical doctor there, worked with the railroad and he come down and pushed it together like that, and the dentist in Chama, he gave me the antiseptic why he was doing it.

HAYNES: The antiseptic?

LYONS: Then Bruce, who was the head brakeman, why he said we'll take him to the

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

hospital in Durango. They wanted to hold me in Chama and take me over to Salida, but he wouldn't stand for that, and so we went to Durango on a, turned right around and went right from there to Durango, and I laid in the caboose.

HAYNES: They took you on the train to Durango?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: And you actually were in the hospital then?

LYONS: Yeah, I was in the hospital for three days and the doctor that we had here, he was another railroad doctor, he said there wasn't a thing he could do with it, at all, and he said it was best to leave it go that way to see what happened.

HAYNES: I see.

LYONS: That's why I have a high arch on this side.

HAYNES: And what has happened, were you troubled with that off and on over the years?

LYONS: Never was, I laid off; the insurance department ordered me to go back to work, and I told them no that I wasn't going back to work. I was sparking my wife at that time, and that I was going to take a leave of absence and see that this foot was clear in shape before I ever went back to work again. Cause I wasn't going out and run around like we had to in those days, from one job to another and one place to another and have trouble with this foot, and so that's the way it was.

HAYNES: So you were in the hospital thirty days and then a thirty day leave of absence?

LYONS: No, I took, I was off all year.

HAYNES: I see.

LYONS: I went to California, went to San Diego and got me a job selling vacuum cleaners and Maytag washing machines.

HAYNES: But meanwhile your seniority continued to accumulate?

LYONS: My seniority continued, yes.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: I see, and then you came back to the D&RG when?

LYONS: Well when they, when the, well we got married, my wife and I, and before she was going to the University of California to get her degree at Berkeley, and, of course, what happened we had a child on the road...

HAYNES: I see.

LYONS: So it was better that I come back to Durango rather than to try to work in San Diego, and that's what we did.

HAYNES: And you came back to Durango in what year?

LYONS: We came back to Durango about 1924, we lived in a little shingle house here on the alley in '25, and I built this house here in '26.

HAYNES: The one we are sitting in here talking in today.

LYONS: Yeah, yeah.

HAYNES: I know you are having some trouble with that foot, do you attribute that to your earlier injury?

LYONS: Well, I don't know whether that's, it could be, but it a, what they call an ulcer developed on this, on the top of this foot and I've had to have medical attention now every week for that until it's clearing up and getting new skin on it now.

HAYNES: But there's no real evidence that, that's a result of the injury so many years ago?

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: I see. You also told me about a time that your train got into the flooded San Juan over southeast of here. Would you tell me that story again?

LYONS: Well, we were, they run us out of Durango in the night in a bad rain storm, knowing that the rivers were high...

HAYNES: Now this was what year?

LYONS: What year, that would be, that would be a,

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: The same year the Animas was so high.

LYONS: '26 I think, some where in there, '26 or '27, it was one of those times when the Silverton washed out at that time.

HAYNES: Okay, excuse the interruption, go on.

LYONS: Yeah, we had a meet there with a west bound train.

HAYNES: You say there.

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: At what point on the track?

LYONS: Well they were about a mile east of where we were on the side track.

HAYNES: And this is the side track--which side track?

LYONS: We could see their headlight over there. We were on the side track see, we got in to clear.

HAYNES: I'm just trying to figure out which side track it is.

LYONS: Well the side track was on the right side of the main line, right next to the river. We had a train that would go into the side track, is why we went in to clear, because the other train had too many cars and they would have to [?] if they would have been able to make it at that point.

HAYNES: You could see their light, but they weren't coming for their meet?

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: And you didn't know why?

LYONS: We didn't know why.

HAYNES: But you found out later?

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: We found out the next morning, the conductor walked from his train down to our train and told us what happened, that the track had washed out ahead of him. The whole bank had caved in there.

HAYNES: And so they weren't able to come through at all?

LYONS: They weren't able to move from there, yeah they had to back up and put their train where it wouldn't fall in the river, and they killed the engine and rode to Durango in a car.

HAYNES: And what was the condition of the train that you were on?

LYONS: Well there was nothing wrong with the train, we just decided that we would have to get out of there, we couldn't leave it next to the river there, so we backed up and put part of our cars on the main line and come back through the side track and backed out and reached up on the main line and got a hold of those cars, brought em back and put it onto a spur track that was next to the buildings there at Arboles.

HAYNES: Arboles, now was the water over the track where you had parked the train during the night?

LYONS: Yes, the water was, we were in water there.

HAYNES: About how deep?

LYONS: Oh just short of the, up on the step anyway of the caboose, that would be about twelve inches over the rail.

HAYNES: So this was actually the San Juan rising?

LYONS: The San Juan rising.

HAYNES: And so it came up and actually covered the track there at that point?

LYONS: Yeah, well we went from there to Allison and backed in on the side track there, what cars we had left, and we stayed there then for five days because a bridge, the approach to a bridge at La Boca on the Pine River had washed out and that had to be fixed before we could go to Durango.

HAYNES: So it was five days before they got things fixed and trains could go ahead and finally complete that meet or whatever, go on with it, anything else about that incident.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: Well, we lived on good chicken dinners there, fried chicken with gravy and mashed potatoes.

HAYNES: And where was this you had the good chicken?

LYONS: At Allison, they had a boarding house there and sort of a hotel. It was a private house and was right close to the railroad track.

HAYNES: And you lived on fried chicken for five days?

LYONS: Yeah, we lived on there, I was just trying to think of the woman that run that, she made the best gravy of any...outside of my wife.

HAYNES: Down in that same area, when the Navajo Dam and lake were built, I understand they had to reroute the track. Can you tell us about that?

LYONS: Yes, the lake was to extend clear up to Carracos, about five miles from Arboles, and then it had to be rerouted at Arboles so that they could build a bridge across the upper end of the Piedra River and that made a new track from there up to the top of the hill which was a little spur track called Darlington. That was all new track.

HAYNES: But this was a new bridge across the Piedra?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Upstream from where the old bridge was...

LYONS: You see that, actually the lake would reach that far when it got full.

HAYNES: And about when was this?

LYONS: What time did I say, I don't know.

HAYNES: You said it was before you retired.

LYONS: Yeah, it was long before I retired.

HAYNES: You retired in 1966, correct?

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: It must have been in the '40s sometime, '40s, '50s.

HAYNES: On the tape that you made with Dr. Delaney, you mentioned that one of the movie companies had camped at Pinkerton Springs during the filming of one of its movies.

LYONS: Yes.

HAYNES: Which movie was that?

LYONS: That was "Across the Wide Missouri" with Clark Gable.

HAYNES: And is this in the vicinity of present-day Pinkerton siding, or just where was that?

LYONS: Just right there, yeah.

HAYNES: Would it be covered by the new road now, or does that camp site still exist?

LYONS: That Pinkerton building is still there, it's a camp right now.

HAYNES: Is that part of that KOA campground down by the river?

LYONS: Yeah, that's right. [Probably not; probably the present Timberline Academy, rph]

HAYNES: I see, well was this a public campground at that time?

LYONS: Yes.

HAYNES: I see, and so the new highway being built there didn't really affect it?

LYONS: No, no, they had cabins on the side of the highway, the highway went right through the grounds there, originally.

HAYNES: So there were cabins on both sides... [of the highway?]

LYONS: There were cabins on both sides. And they, the family man that used to live here, McGreagor by name- he had a sister here, Augusta McGreagor, that worked at the court house, he bought that and ran it for quite some time, then he sold it.

HAYNES: Now I'm a little confused. I don't know whether you mean the cabins that are now part of the Timberline Academy.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: No?

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: Actually where the KOA Campground is?

LYONS: That was a KOA, yeah. [It is doubtful, in retrospect, that Mr. Lyons knew that the “cabins” had been turned into a school. Thus the “camp” was probably the cabins that are name Timberline Academy. The KOA Campground is a little farther north, and is probably more recent, rph]

HAYNES: Okay, not too far from there towards Durango is Trimble Hot Springs and no doubt you went by there many, many times and saw construction and fires and what have you. What can you tell us about Trimble Hot Springs?

LYONS: Well, I saw the original buildings there from the time I went to work, because the passenger train always stopped there and picked up passengers for Silverton, the miners come down there for the baths there, and we'd always stop going both ways, of course. At that time, why they had the great big brick building, hotel, and then they had the bath house covering the pool with the hot pool also under that on the north end and across the street they had a two story dance hall with a dance floor on both floors.

HAYNES: Is there anything remaining up there today of these buildings?

LYONS: No, not a thing left, eventually, when the hotel burned, they moved the dance hall across the street and put rooms upstairs and the restaurant downstairs and the Piccolis used that for a long time.

HAYNES: Now when you say across the street, you mean across what is now County Road 203?

LYONS: No, that was the main, yeah

HAYNES: Across the main road?

LYONS: Yeah, yeah. It was the main road at that time.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: Did you ever go out there yourself to swim, or to soak?

LYONS: Yeah, we used to. We had a club here in the early days, and we loaded all the Rio Grande employees on the train and took them to Pinkerton for a picnic lunch and sports and one thing and another that you do like that.

HAYNES: And the train stayed on the siding there? [Trimble siding presumably. Pinkerton siding was built in the 1980s, rph]

LYONS: The train stayed on the siding.

HAYNES: While you had your picnic?

LYONS: Well we always stayed on the siding because there was no turntable so we had to run the engine around the train and pick it up and back the engine into Durango with the train.

HAYNES: When was that siding at Trimble removed, do you remember?

LYONS: I don't know when it was removed, but I think it was removed after Bradshaw come here and bought the railroad.

HAYNES: Which would have been in the 1980s.

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Can you describe anything else there at Trimble, were there any other buildings on the east side of the road except this dance hall?

LYONS: Well they afterwards built when the hotel burnt down and they, both hotels let's say, then they built some cabins, a row of cabins from the depot or what used to be the depot on up the road, the highway.

HAYNES: So it would be between where the track is today and where County Road 203 is today?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Was that landscaped, gardens and paths or anything like that?

LYONS: Well they had a walk, it was grass all through there, but they had a walk right

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

from the station down there, right up to the hotel, so that the people coming with the train, you know, could get up there, they could wheel up their baggage. If they stayed, sometimes they stayed there for weeks on end.

HAYNES: Have you been out to the new Trimble Hot Springs?

LYONS: No, I haven't.

HAYNES: They renovated it.

LYONS: They tell me it looks pretty good.

HAYNES: Can you think of anything else about that area that might be of interest?

LYONS: Well, I don't know as there's much, much I can say about anything, but we used to get a lot of green vegetables and fruits from Hermosa and take it to Silverton on the train as express, that is the passenger train.

HAYNES: So they grew fruits and vegetables that supplied the miners up north?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: When and under what circumstances did you first meet Otto Mears?

LYONS: Sometime in the early '30s.

HAYNES: And where was this?

LYONS: It was in Silverton.

HAYNES: And how did this meeting come about?

LYONS: Well I knew his son-in-law and he introduced the train troop to Otto Mears there at that time.

HAYNES: And then did you get better acquainted with him later on?

LYONS: No, no. He was afterwards, of course, involved in the Southern and so we took care of that property till the Rio Grande took it over.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: But you wouldn't really say you knew him personally?

LYONS: No, I didn't know him personally.

HAYNES: Another famous name from the past, William Henry Jackson; I understand you have a photograph taken by him.

LYONS: I have one right behind me, here, up here, and it's the last picture off the plate that was made up.

HAYNES: Now that looks to be a picture of a train in the Animas Canyon...

LYONS: Yes.

HAYNES: Up towards Silverton, following the river there?

LYONS: Yeah, it's just this side [south] of the first view of the Needle Mountains.

HAYNES: Yes, I see the Needle Mountains there. How did you happen to come in possession of this picture?

LYONS: Well I knew his son, Clarence Jackson, and he said, there's no better to place to leave this last picture that I have. That was the last one of the pictures.

HAYNES: Before the plate broke?

LYONS: Yeah, before the plate, he couldn't make no more, so he says I have no more pictures, I gave them all away and you just as well have the last one.

HAYNES: About when was it that he gave this picture to you?

LYONS: Oh, it was somewhere in the '60s some time.

HAYNES: And how was it that you were acquainted with Clarence Jackson?

LYONS: Well, I used to be invited by Vac Poer, who wrote several books on the railroad, and they'd always invite me for a dinner down at one of the restaurants in Denver, and Clarence was a member of that group too, that's how I got acquainted with him. He was also a member in the Rocky Mountain Rail Club.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: And, of course, knew of your activities? [Trying to save the Silverton]

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Coming up to the present, earlier this summer you and I took a ride on the rail bus, the Animas River Railway. What did you think of that contraption?

LYONS: Well it's quite an innovation, I'll say that for it, but it was nice riding on it and there are very nice views of the canyon, particularly from Rockwood to Cascade.

HAYNES: To the best of your knowledge is this the first time that there has ever been a diesel locomotive on that line, that part of the line?

LYONS: That kind of a bus, that's the first time for that.

HAYNES: Was there ever a diesel locomotive up there, anything but steam?

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: This would be the first diesel locomotive power ever on the Silverton branch?

LYONS: Yeah. We did have, during World War II, an army diesel that we used here on the Farmington branch, and I think it did a couple of trips up on the Silverton branch. I think on a work train, probably.

HAYNES: But no passenger? [Train was ever pulled by a diesel before...]

LYONS: No passenger, no.

HAYNES: While we were on that trip, you commented that the parking lot now being used by the Animas River Railway was the source of some fill dirt used up in that area some place. Would you tell us about that?

LYONS: Well, all the soil there was loaded on dump cars by a steam shovel, and we hauled all of that dirt to a mile west of, or north of, Rockwood and filled in the big long trestle and made it curve, a curved trestle and we just covered that up.

HAYNES: When you say dump cars, you are speaking of rail cars?

LYONS: Yes.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: So that dirt is still up there a mile north of Rockwood?

LYONS: Yeah. You never see that bridge because it's completely covered with dirt.

HAYNES: I see, is that along the highline, part of the highline?

LYONS: That's part of the highline.

HAYNES: Also, as we were traveling on the Animas River Railway, I asked you about salvaging the rails. You see some rails down there in the river, and I asked why were they there, why hadn't they been salvaged?

LYONS: Mike Cummins, who ran a grocery store here, got the job of picking up rail out of the river, but the high water comes in and covers it up [with sediment] at times, so he didn't get all the rail out of there.

HAYNES: Now at what time would he have been doing this?

LYONS: That was during World War II.

HAYNES: And he got all he could see at that time?

LYONS: He got all he could see at that time.

HAYNES: And then what you are saying is that the water will come up and the sand will shift a little bit, and then...

LYONS: And then expose it again. In fact, I picked up a couple of rails up there, where we were bulldozing in the river to change the channel a little bit, and two of those rails were in complete circles. I hauled them to Denver and the manager of the Worthington Bulk Company up there, that is the manufacturing plant manager, why he cut book ends for me out of that.

HAYNES: Out of these circular rails. They'd been bent by the force of the river?

LYONS: Yeah. And then I also got a couple of rails there that were pretty straight and brought them to Durango, and I had them cut up into paperweights and then gave them to all the wives of an organization I belonged to in Denver.

HAYNES: A rail-connected organization?

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: They were Masonic-connected, they were, but there were a lot of railroad men in there. Rail fans in particular.

HAYNES: One other thing that I remember from our trip on the railbus was that you pointed out the site of the fireworks that was in the movie "Ticket to Tomahawk." Tell us a little bit about that.

LYONS: Well that was on the first curve where you enter into the canyon.

HAYNES: North of Rockwood?

LYONS: Yeah north of Rockwood, where you can see the whole train around there, and that's where the fireworks took place on that movie.

HAYNES: And you actually watched them setting this up and watched the filming of the movie there?

LYONS: Well, no, I don't know as we could watch it, I think we had to cut the part of the train off there and they just used the movie train in that part.

HAYNES: As I remember, the site is kind of barren rock there on the west side of tracks, just as you make a [sharp] curve to the right?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: About how far north of Rockwood was that?

LYONS: It's about a half a mile from Rockwood.

HAYNES: Anything else about making a movie up there on the highline?

LYONS: Well there were a lot of movies made right there, that is scenes for movies. "Night Passage," "Ticket to Tomahawk," and "Zapita," a Mexican picture, and what else, there was one other one there? I don't happen to think of that one right now.

HAYNES: Well you and Dr. Delaney did quite a bit of talking about the movies, so that may be on that earlier tape. Going back in history, what was the longest narrow gauge passenger train on the D&RG that you remember?

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

LYONS: The longest one that I remember was a Labor Day special from Durango to Denver, round trip fare \$9.00, and they brought in the Farmington train, and, of course, brought some passengers from down that way, Farmington, Aztec to Durango and they got on to the passenger train in Durango. But by the time we got to Alamosa, we picked up coaches at Pagosa Junction, Chama, Antonito, so we had a total of 23 cars into Alamosa.

HAYNES: Do you recall what year that was?

LYONS: 1920s, somewhere in there.

HAYNES: And so once you got to Alamosa, [then you made the] transfer to the standard gauge?

LYONS: Yeah, all the passengers then had to transfer to the standard gauge [coaches].

HAYNES: But between Antonito and Alamosa you had 23 coaches.

LYONS: Yeah, yeah.

HAYNES: And you were the conductor on that train?

LYONS: I was the conductor on that train.

HAYNES: And passed out a lot of hat checks that day?

LYONS: Yeah, hat checks. Regular old hat checks.

HAYNES: I know you have some souvenir hat checks too. Tell us about what you used to do with those hat checks.

LYONS: First, after they canceled all the passenger trains, I had a lot of hat checks left, all of different colors, so I got a printing company then to print me some, using the Montezuma engine on one side, no caboose, and my name on the hat check on the other side. They did that for, oh I don't know, three or four or five years, something like that, until I tried to change it and had the hat checks printed in Denver and Ed Haley then finished the design that I started. He was a Bureau of Reclamation employee, he worked in Denver.

HAYNES: So he finished the design and [you had some more printed]

LYONS: He finished the design and the Rocky Mountain Rail Club, they [had] some

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

printed, had a whole year supply printed.

HAYNES: I see, and how did you distribute these?

LYONS: I had an average of 60,000 of those printed every year, and I gave them, one to every passenger -man, woman, boy, kid, everything else- all over the years.

HAYNES: So each passenger got a souvenir hat check with your name on it?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: And did you punch those to make them even more authentic?

LYONS: I always punched them, I had an "L" punch.

HAYNES: Oh, for "Lyons."

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Back when hat checks were used for real, how did that system work?

LYONS: Well whether you had a cash fare or you picked up a ticket, then the passenger didn't have anything, so to designate the seat that he was in, why you either put a hat check in his hat if he had a hat, or they had a little clip on the back of the seat where you could put it, if it happened to be a woman.

HAYNES: And so that indicated that...

LYONS: That indicated that they had transportation.

HAYNES: ...they really were a bona fide passenger and they'd paid their fare and their ticket had been collected?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: What about the business cards that were furnished to you?

LYONS: Well, all those business cars had a blanket ticket covering so many people, like 17 in the green car, 22 in the red car and in the yellow that was the old business car of the railroad, superintendent, we could get 12 in there.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: I think you thought I said “business cars,” I said “business cards.”

LYONS: Business cards?

HAYNES: Your printed business cards with your name on it?

LYONS: Oh, yeah.

HAYNES: I think I remember you saying that the railroad gave you special business cards?

LYONS: Well they did, that was after we got rid of all the passenger trains except the Silverton branch, why they gave me a special card as conductor of the Silverton. I'd already had cards, business cards before as a passenger conductor on the Denver & Rio Grande Western.

HAYNES: But they just said conductor?

LYONS: But this one designate[d] me as “conductor, The Silverton.” That's the only train that I ever knew of or any conductor who had a designated train he was the conductor of.

HAYNES: That just showed that you were the conductor for that one particular train?

LYONS: That one train, yeah. That's all the trains they had left.

HAYNES: And when you retired, what happened to that title?

LYONS: That title expired with me; when I retired I took it with me.

HAYNES: You're the one and only [conductor of the Silverton]

LYONS: Yes.

HAYNES: You started to talk about business cars, and I interrupted... Do you want to go back to that and tell us a little more about what you meant?

LYONS: Well, being a passenger conductor, I always had business cards for the railroad and I became acquainted with a lot of people that did business with the railroad. One example was the Memphis Broom Company in Memphis, Tennessee. He became acquainted on riding these special trains that the Kiwanis Club used to run in the fall, and so he'd ship his brooms by rail from Memphis to the West Coast and also pick up the lumber he made the broom sticks out

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

of in the west.

HAYNES: What's the significance of these red and blue and green cars you mentioned a moment ago?

LYONS: Well, you had different colors so that you would be if you had, a passenger train and one conductor going part and another conductor finishing the job, why the colors would not match so that your colors wouldn't match with his or you wouldn't want your cards if they were left on there, the passenger was still on the train you had to, and had a new train load of passengers to, or partial train why you had to have use different colored cards....

HAYNES: And this is different from hat checks.

LYONS: They were hat checks, they were all hat checks.

HAYNES: What was the significance of car number 212?

LYONS: Well it was the first, the only passenger car we had on the freight train on the Silverton branch. Had a baggage compartment. They had another just like it, the 211 over on the Pagosa Springs branch.

HAYNES: So it was actually the 212 that you did your early tourist work in?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Serving the coffee and...

LYONS: We always served coffee to any of the passengers in the caboose, that was the start of it, and I didn't actually start serving coffee in big coffee pots until I was the conductor on the passenger train.

HAYNES: And at that time was there just this one car?

LYONS: We just had one passenger car, yeah.

HAYNES: And what's happened to the 212?

LYONS: Well the 212 finally was changed into a full page [?] passenger car eventually. They put more seats in it.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: And it's still in use on the...

LYONS: It's still in use on the Silverton run.

HAYNES: In your interviews with Dr. Delaney, you indicated that you had given a number of things to Fort Lewis College, the Center of Southwest Studies, like letters from train riders, tickets, bumper stickers, your conductor bag, typewriter and train books, and I wonder if you had donated anything else to the College since those interviews in 1982?

LYONS: The only thing that I gave in that time was a marker from the Panama Canal Railroad that I brought from Panama. It was given to me by the superintendent of the railroad down there.

HAYNES: These scrapbooks and things that you have shown me here at your home are more of a personal kind of thing?

LYONS: They are all personal and I've kept them. I don't know what my daughter will do with them. At least they are available here for anyone who wants to come to look at them.

HAYNES: And they are not really the kind of thing that you would ever donate to the College?

LYONS: No I don't think so, unless they wanted to do it.

HAYNES: I see.

LYONS: I have had one thing and that was Bob Shaggs [?] told me that when he was looking over my stuff here cause I have a piece of the old French rail on the Panama Canal that the French built and he said that the only other rail that he a piece of was in the big museum in Washington.

HAYNES: The Smithsonian?

LYONS: The Smithsonian.

HAYNES: I see, and you have that here at your house?

LYONS: And I have a piece of that rail here that was dredged up out of the channel at Panama in the Panama Canal.

**Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Sept. 20, 1989, Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College**

HAYNES: Did you acquire the marker and this rail at the same time?

LYONS: I don't think so. I think it was two different times, yeah.

[end of interview]

[Note: This audiotaped interview was transcribed by Catherine Conrad, Administrative Assistant for the Center of Southwest Studies, and was formatted and edited by Center Archivist Todd Ellison on April 4, 1996, and further on February 7, 2008, including conversion to PDF file format for online access on the Center of Southwest Studies website.]

This oral history interview (both the original recording and the written transcription) is housed at the Center of Southwest Studies on the campus of Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. Researchers wanting more information about using this material at the Delaney Southwest Research Library at the Center may email the archivist at archives@fortlewis.edu or [click here to use our E-mail Reference Request Form](#) (or phone the archivist at 970/247-7126). The Center does not have a budget for outgoing long-distance phone calls to answer reference requests, so please email if you wish to receive a response from the Center. [To request reproductions/copies, click here for instructions.](#)



[Center of Southwest Studies home page](#)