

Tour the Uintah

Where to Start

The usual place to start your Uintah tour is at Mack, CO which was the headquarters of the railway. Mack is located 20 miles west of Grand Junction, CO on US 6 and is just north of the I-70 Mack turnoff. You can, of course, start at Watson, UT which is accessible from either Rangely, CO or Vernal, UT and take this tour in reverse order. If you wish to return to your starting area from either direction, you can either backtrack the route or take Colo 139, which is a good paved road to the east running roughly parallel to the Uintah route.

Before You Start

Most of the tour is over dirt back roads that are sometimes in poor condition, especially in the Baxter Pass region, so it is recommended that you have a high clearance vehicle and preferably one with four wheel drive. Once you leave Mack there are no services of any kind until you come out at Rangely, CO., approximately 70 miles away, so it is highly recommended that you have a full tank of fuel, a good map of the area, a compass, a supply of drinking water, some lunch or snacks, and a cell phone in case you need to call 911. As a minimum you should have a good Colorado and Utah road map, but most road maps do not show the Baxter Pass road so check that yours does. If you want more detail get the Geological Survey 1:100 000 scale Grand Junction, CO., Douglas Pass, CO., and Sheep Ridge, UT. maps for tracking the railway. There are also 1:50,000 USGS maps for CO, but none for UT. Baxter Pass is sometimes impassable in the winter, and after rain storms, (especially the shady north side) so you should check on conditions with the Mesa County Sheriffs Department, or the Mack store if in doubt.

Reminder

Some of the Uintah Railway grade and sites are on private property. Please respect private property rights. The remaining Uintah grade and sites lie on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management. In order to preserve these sites for all to enjoy, Federal law prohibits the disturbance or removal of any artifacts. Please help protect and preserve these sites for future generations to enjoy.

Driving the Route

This guide will point out the most interesting railway related sites and will give you an idea of what you can expect to see. Please note that odometer and milepost distances will differ by several miles because the road bypasses around the railway grade for a short distance just out of Mack, and around several trestle washouts along the way. Other than these slight bypasses, the road is either on, or very close to, the railway grade as far as a turnoff just north of Dragon, UT. After this turnoff the road bypasses most of the area between Dragon and Rainbow Junction because of washed out trestles in a narrow canyon. If more detail is desired on the route or sites, it is highly recommended that you have Rodger Polley's books *Uintah Railway Pictorial, volumes I & II*.

Let's Get Started

Mack, CO - We will start our tour at the intersection of US 6 and the road to I-70. Mack was not only the headquarters of the Uintah, but was the point where all freight was transferred between the narrow gauge Uintah and the standard gauge D&RG railroad. The only Uintah structure still standing is the east wing of the Uintah Hotel which has, until recently, been used as a rock shop. The west wing and lobby was destroyed by fire in 1960. The street just south of the hotel was the Uintah track and the curved section to the west was a leg of the wye. The combined D&RG/Uintah station was between this section of track and the present D&RGW track.

Note - The mileages given in this guide are from this intersection so it is suggested that you zero your odometer before proceeding, and please note that we will zero the odometer again on top of Baxter Pass. Railway mileposts and odometer readings will be given at numerous points in a (MP-28, O-33.5) format. Milepost distances will usually be to the nearest whole number, whereas the odometer readings will usually be to one decimal point. Keep in mind that odometer readings will vary among vehicles, but should serve as an useful guide just the same.

Route - Proceed west on US 6

Note - Along this section as far as MP 4.6, the Uintah utilized the old D&RG roadbed which was abandoned when the D&RG was standard gauged and rerouted from Mack to follow the Colorado River. In many places the roadbed can still be seen running parallel to the north side of the highway.

Bridge 0-A, (MP-1, O-.8) This was the first bridge on the route and the embankments can be seen just north of the present road bridge.

Bridge 1-A, (MP-2, O-1.9) Bridge 1-A was one of the longest trestles on the Uintah. On the night of Sept. 30, 1911 part of the trestle weakened by flooding and engine #10 toppled into the creek killing the fireman and a man riding on the pilot looking for washouts.

Point - At 3.9 miles west of Mack the highway has a slight bend to the left. At this point the railway continued straight ahead following the north bank of Salt Creek. Just north of here was the siding of Clarkton where sugar beets were loaded into gondolas.

Route - Turn around and backtrack for 1.4 miles and turn north on Mesa County 8. There is a sign pointing to Baxter Pass at this turn. Follow this road north for 1.8 miles then turn west on Mesa County R road and follow it for 2 miles until it ends overlooking a valley.

From this point you can look down in the valley where the Uintah ran north west, and the D&RG headed west to Salt Lake City. The Uintah split off from the old D&RG roadbed,

just south of here (just south of a large tree), and continued north west on new roadbed.

Route - From here head north 1 mile to a paved road where you turn left (west) and and continue 1 mile where you will reach the end of the pavement. At this point the road becomes dirt and turns northwest - this is the continuation of the Uintah roadbed that we had to leave earlier, and is at (MP-6.4, O-11.3). Follow this dirt road which is, with few exceptions, is on or adjacent to the roadbed.

Route - In about 3 miles there is a small road junction - go straight through staying on the main road heading northeast. In 1.2 miles past this junction the road will make a climbing left turn and then descend to the right. This short detour bypasses approximately 1.2 miles of roadbed to avoid two washed out trestles. In general, in this area, any place the road suddenly has sharper curves and/or steeper grades, it is bypassing washed out trestles.

Note - Between the two bypassed trestles there was a straight 600' siding and a small section house called Salt Wash, later called Sprague. There is nothing there to identify the location (which can not be seen from the road), other then faint indications of a wider then normal roadbed. The middle of this siding was MP-11.5.

Route - At 20.4 miles you will pass a road to a pumping station that is a little to the east. Approx 4 miles past the pumping station (MP-19, O-24.3) there will be a split in the road. You want to bear left (north) as the other road goes northeast up South Canyon.

Carbonera - (MP-20, O-25.5) 1.2 miles north of the split in the road, on the west side, is Carbonera. It is hard to identify, but there is a turnoff on the left to a gas well that is just to the north. The mine can be recognized by an incline for a mine track and some large chunks of concrete in the brush at the end of the incline. The concrete chunks are the remains of the coal loading tipple. The coal mine was at the upper end of the incline and a small settlement was in the large open area to the south.

Carbonera was the only settlement between Mack and Atchee and was where the Uintah's parent company, the Gilson Asphalt Company, had it's own wholly owned and operated coal mine. This mine produced all the coal for running the railway, firing the boilers at Mack and Atchee, and heating the buildings and residences along the route. All that can be seen today is the chunks of concrete, the mine track incline, and indications of where some of the houses were. There were two siding tracks here with one running under the tipple and the other running past the end.

Route - Keep going north from Carbonera for eight more miles to reach the town of Atchee. You will again notice that where the road has sharper curves, you are usually bypassing washed out trestles. Several old trestle sites can still be seen in this area.

Point of interest - Four and a half miles past Carbonera (O-30.1) there is an old boiler

shell off to the left side of the road. It is not certain what this was but it is believed to be the original boiler from the Atchee machine shop, and had been used as creek rip rap or as a culvert.

Atchee - (MP-28.3, O-34) Atchee was the site of the Uintah's maintenance shops and was where the "flatland" rod locomotives were replaced with "pass climbing" Shay locomotives for the grueling climb over Baxter Pass. It had a two stall engine house with an attached machine shop, a car shop, coal servicing trestle, two water tanks, a wye, housing and a school for the employees, and a "fancy two hole outhouse" for the use of passengers. In addition to supplying the town and the locomotives, the water tanks were used to fill water cars used to supply water to the towns of Carbonera and Mack, and any section houses along the way.

Today the only thing still standing is the concrete walls of the machine shop. The engine shop was connected to the west end of this machine shop, and you can still see the outlines of the inspection pits and "driver drop pit" (a pit used to remove the drivers (the large wheels) from under the locomotives) hidden in the weeds. There is hardly a trace of anything else remaining.

Route - Cross a bridge, which goes around the old Bridge 28A on the north edge of Atchee, and follow the road, which now heads northwest to Moro Castle.

Point of interest - (MP-30, O-34.6) About one and a half miles past bridge 28A there is a fairly sharp turn to the left. This is where the infamous 7.5% grade, to the pass, began.

Moro Castle - (MP-30, O-35) Moro Castle is famous as the site one of the two sharpest curves on the railway. The curve is 66° (88' radius) and is on a 7.5% grade. Much of the curve is on fill and was a constant maintenance problem for the Uintah. This was one of the favorite places for photographers to take pictures of Uintah trains.

Point of interest - (MP-31, O-36) In 1918 engine 20, with it's usual one combine, had a brake system failure coming down the pass and left the tracks at this curve. The passengers and engine crew jumped but the conductor stayed in the car and was killed.

Point of interest - (MP-32, O-36.7) There is a fill just past a left curve. This was originally a four span (62') trestle but was replaced with a fill to reduce maintenance.

Shale Tank - (MP-32.5, O-38.3) Just before the long grade up the side of the pass you will go through a sweeping curve to your left. There is a large Aspin grove sweeping down from the ridge to this curve. The Aspin grove is there because there is a spring near the top of the ridge and this was utilized to supply water to the tank. Today you can see some concrete and pipe and see a flat area above the road where the tank used to be. Just short of this point was a passing siding called Shale.

Route - Continue for another 2 miles to Baxter Pass. You will notice a couple of sudden sharp turns on this stretch - these are places where the pass slid away and cuts were made around the slides. This has continued since the RR shut down, so the road deviates a little from the original roadbed in these spots.

Baxter Pass - (MP-34, O-40) There was a short wye, a siding, a telegraph booth, and a section house on the West side. Trains would always stop here for brake inspections before descending either side.

Note - Please re zero your odometer before proceeding. The remaining distances will be measured from this point, in order to reduce the odometer reading error between different vehicles. If you forget to do this, just add 40 miles to all further odometer readings.

Deer Run - (MP-36, O-1.9) This was a short stub siding, on your right, established to serve as a coal servicing point for the Shay Locomotives. Pile driver 001, was often spotted here in the spring to be available to repair washed out trestles and to drive old rail into the ground to stabilize shifting embankments.

Columbine Tank - (MP-37,O-3.3) As you enter a right turn you will see the remains of an old log cabin on your left.. The cabin was sometimes used by section crews. There was a water tank on the left a short ways before the cabin, and a telegraph booth near the cabin.

This area was very popular for picnics and sometimes special trains were run for that purpose. There was much timber, used for ties and mine supports, cut in ths area so there was a balloon loop here so timber trains could be turned without having to go all the way to Baxter Pass to be turned. A picture on P-177 of the *Uintah Railway Pictorial, Vol II* shows the water spout, telegraph booth, and the balloon loop.

Hairpin Curve - (MP-39, O-4.9) This was the second 65 degree (88' radius) curve on the Uintah. Pages 200 & 201 of the *Uintah Railway Pictorial, Vol II* shows a great view of a troop train working it's way around this curve.

McAndrews Lake - (MP-40, O-5.9 (at the dam)) This lake was dammed by the Uintah as a water supply for Wendella, where it was used for locomotives and was shipped to all points North using the Uintah's unique water cars. This lake was also the source of the ice stored in ice houses at settlements along the Uintah. There were also two section houses on the east side of the track at the southern end of the lake.

Wendella - (MP-41, O-6.8) A short ways north of McAndrews Lake you approach a small ranch on the east side of the road, this is the site of Wendella. On the west side of the road just short of the ranch, hidden by brush, is the remains of the water tank foundation. The open area just south of the ranch is where the short wye used to be.

The middle of the three small buildings, just South of the main ranch building, is an old section house from McAndrews and on the north side of the yard is an old octagon shaped telegraph booth from somewhere on the Uintah.

Note - There is one gate across the road past Wendella. It is OK to pass through but if it is closed, please close it after you do

Whiskey Trestle - (MP-48, O-14) Three miles from the Utah border, you will drive through a wash adjacent to an old trestle site on your right. This trestle was called Whiskey Trestle (it went across Whiskey Creek) and is the trestle presently on display at the Cross Orchards site in Grand Junction. A few timber stubs are still visible on the abutments.

Utah border - (MP-50, O-16.6) You will cross into Utah at this point and will remain in Utah for the rest of the route. The road now becomes "Uintah County 400 - Dragon Road".

Viewpoint - A short ways past the boarder the road climbs a low hill and makes a turn to the left, opposite a small flat area on the right. This flat area affords a good view of some undisturbed roadbed that still has ties scattered along it. This spot is also a great place for a snack or lunch break.

Dragon - (MP-53, O-20.1) Dragon was the end of the main line when the Uintah was built. It was where passengers and freight were transferred to stage coaches and freight wagons to continue northwest to Vernal, UT. as well as being the nearest town serving the Dragon mine located 1.1 miles to the west. There was a small town here with a Uintah hotel, a large freight warehouse, and many other buildings, as well as a wye for turning trains

Route - Turn left (west) at the narrow dirt road in Dragon and drive 1.1 miles to the site of the Dragon mine, which will be on your right.

Dragon Mine - (O-61.1) Dragon mine was the first producing mine that the Uintah serviced and was the object of the initial construction. There was a small wye across from the mine, as well as numerous living quarters and mine buildings in the area.

Route - Turn around and backtrack to Dragon. Turn left (north) on the original road, and go one half mile to where there is a road going east at a gas pumping station. This was Country Boy siding.

Country Boy Siding - (MP- 53.5, O-23.4) This was a loading point for the Rector and Country Boy mines, which were in the hills to the west and on the same ore vein as the Dragon Mine.

Route - Continue north 2.3 miles (O-25.7) and turn left (west) at the BLM sign pointing

to Three Mile Canyon and Atchee Ridge. This road is "Uintah County 4051 - 3 Mile Canyon".

Note - we are now leaving the Uintah route, because of numerous washed out trestles in a narrow canyon, and will not rejoin it until reaching the Rainbow area. You could continue on the present road for another two miles before it turns away from the RR route, but the roadbed in this area is very hard to discern so it is hardly worth it.

Route - follow this road, which is on a streambed until it abruptly turns steep and winding for a short ways, for 4.6 miles. Shortly after the steep winding portion, we make a right turn (north) at a BLM sign pointing to Rainbow and Bonanza (O-30.3). This new road is "Uintah County 405 - Rainbow Loop".

Route -Stay on UC - 405 and you will approach a rock formation on your right called "Thimble Rock". After passing this formation you will make a 90 degree right turn and cross over a cattle guard at O-35.3. At .1 mile past the cattle guard you will be at the southwest edge of Rainbow.

Rainbow - (O-35.4) From here you can see a small valley towards your left; this valley is the site of the town of Rainbow. To the southeast you can see the Thimble Top mine, by following the Gilsonite veins. To the northwest you can see the Rainbow Mine. Directly in front of you was the site of the Rainbow wye. The top picture on P-368 of the *Uintah Railway Pictorial, Vol II* shows the view from this point.

Route - Continue Approx.1/4 mile and you will come to a small junction (Pigeon Toe Switch) with a BLM sign pointing to Kings Well. Turn left at this point (south) on "Uintah County 4190 - Kings Well" and proceed 1/2. mile to a well site clearing on your left (O-36.6), and park at this point.

Barlow and Colorow Mines - Cross the road, and climb to the top of the slight rise, and you will be able to make out the roadbed heading north to the Barlow, Colorow, and China Wall mines. Hike down the roadbed Approx. 1/2 mile and you will come to a fence across the roadbed, from this point you can see the Barlow and Colorow mine sites. The China Wall Mine is out of sight to the northwest Approx. one mile. The picture on P-361 of the *Uintah Railway Pictorial, Vol II* shows the view from the small hill to our right.

WARNING - Gilsonite veins have vertical sides, are very deep, and are sometimes unprotected. It is best to not approach them, but use extreme caution if you do.

Route - Turn around and drive back to the Pigeon Toe junction. Bear left (north) Remaining on "Uintah County 4190", and drive 1/2 mile to American.

American - (MP-3.3, O-37.7) American is at a road junction. There was a loading

platform here where ore from the China Wall area mines was loaded, before the line was extended to that area. This location was sometimes called American Switch.

Route - Continue north 3 miles to Rainbow Junction.

Rainbow Junction - (MP-62, O-40.8) At the end of a seemingly endless decent through a steep winding canyon is Rainbow junction, where the track from Dragon split to go west up the steep canyon to Rainbow or north to Watson. It can be recognized by the sudden opening of the canyon on your right and the road's gradual curve to the left. Looking south you can see the stone foundation from the water tank, setting on a small knoll, and see grade on it's right. A little south of the water tank was where the tracks split and crossed two curved trestles. That junction formed a wye and the section of road, where you are parked formed the third leg. All trains to Watson were turned here and backed the rest of the way.

Route - Bear left (north) for one half mile.

Watson - (MP-62, O-41.3) One half mile north of Rainbow Junction is the site of Watson. This was the northern terminus of the railway, after the lines extension from Dragon, and was the point where passengers and freight were transferred to stage coaches and freight wagons to continue northwest to Vernal. You can still see numerous remains of buildings, especially just east of the road. There was not any Gilsonite mining in Watson but it was a regional center for sheep shearing.

Route - you have now finished the tour and can either return to the Grand Junction area by backtracking the route just taken, or continue north to Rangely, CO or Vernal UT. If you choose to go north, continue north ? miles where you will come to another dirt road where you will see sheep pens on your right. Turn left and go 4 miles to a stop sign at a paved road. Turn right at this road and in 4.4 miles you will come to the company town of Bonanza (19 miles past Watson) on the west side. From Bonanza continue north to Vernal, or turn right to Rangely and on to Douglas Pass and Grand Junction.

I hope you enjoy the tour and that this guide is helpful. I solicit any comments and suggestions that will help make the guide even better. You can contact me at bpratt15@bresnan.net or at 970-241-2248. Bill Pratt