




East  
Side...

 West  
Side...



   
All around the mountainside 



# Winter Park Express

## March 14-15, 2015





## A Short History of The Rio Grande Ski Train

By Richard W. Luckin  
March 14th & 15th, 2015

Think of snow and one automatically pictures Colorado's fluffy powder and ski resorts second to none. Winter Park Resort stands out from the rest because of its closeness to Denver. What made Denver and Winter Park close for years was transportation by the Rio Grande Ski Train.

At first, Rio Grande operated special trains to ski locations within Colorado, before they began regularly scheduled service to Winter Park.

Frank Bulkley, an ardent skier, saw the railroad as an excellent way to transport members of his new Eskimo Ski Club. So, in 1939, he contacted the Denver and Salt Lake Railway about transportation of his youthful skiers to Winter Park. A year later (1940) the railroad operated the first Ski Train to Winter Park.

In 1941 the United States entered World War II and this caused a temporary halt to the Ski Train. Two years after the war's end, the Denver and Rio Grande Western acquired the Denver and Salt Lake Railway (1947). The railroad immediately began to re-create the Ski Train.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the Ski Train was youth-oriented and dominated by the Eskimo Ski Club, whose ages ranged from 7 to 17. Those two dollar round trip fares certainly enticed passengers to ride the train and yes, even snacks and hot drinks were available too!

The old train cars were showing their age and they became costly to repair. In 1960 the Rio Grande purchased eight all-steel cars (1915 era) from the Northern Pacific Railroad. As one passenger related, "when I first started riding these cars, it was a museum on wheels – they were fun to ride, nice heavy-weight cars."

To add a little spice to the ride, a Moffat tunnel pool was often run on the trip. A quarter would buy you a chance to guess how long the train would take to travel through the 6.2 mile tunnel. The winner would collect all the money.

By the mid 1980s, the railroad had come under new management and the leadership of Philip Anschutz. It was soon determined the old 1915 Northern Pacific coaches were getting too costly to maintain. So, in 1988 Ansco Investment, which had purchased the Ski Train franchise from the railroad, put newer equipment into service. Ansco bought 1968-built Hawker Siddeley Tempo Train cars which had been used by the Canadian National Railway. Several classes of service were offered on the newly upgraded train. The older Northern Pacific cars were sold to the Napa Valley Wine Train.

Over the next twenty-one years, the newer Tempo cars would ply the rails, traversing up the front range and through nearly 30 tunnels. They were pulled by three Ski Train lettered ex Amtrak EMD F40PH locomotives. Sadly, 2008-2009 was to be the train's last season. On March 29th, 2009 the Ski Train made its last run. The locomotives and cars were sold to the Algoma Central Railway in Ontario, Canada.

For over 60 years, the Rio Grande Ski Train was truly "A Denver Tradition for Generations."

## TODAY'S TRAIN The Amtrak Winter Park Express

Amtrak's Winter Park Express trains of March 14 and 15, 2015, were born out of a citizens' rail advocacy group that determined the time was right to restore the convenience of the original Winter Park Ski Train after a 6-year absence. An opinion piece in the group's newsletter found its way into the hands of a very determined and dedicated Amtrak California Zephyr conductor who had previous work experience on the original Ski Train. That conductor prepared a professional business plan, with the assistance of other professional volunteers, which was presented to Amtrak and Winter Park management, who enthusiastically agreed that the time was right to explore the possibility of returning the popular train to service.

Many factors were considered in determining the viability of the train's return, including the new Denver Union Station transit hub and the former train's frequent "sold out" status, depicting its overwhelming popularity. Also playing supporting roles were members of the millennial generation who are not as wedded to the private automobile as other generations, seeing value in transportation time as "productive" time, even if it means a nap! Population growth, especially in the urban core surrounding Denver Union Station, likewise spurred interest. Of course, the frequent and often dangerous calamities on our mountain roads and highways suggest the most popular reason for the train alternative. The very winter weather events that produce great skiing and boarding conditions also produce those same slick conditions on road surfaces, a poor match for even the best rubber tires.

So who really wants to deal with dubious driving conditions after a hard workout on the slopes?!

While today's train celebrates Winter Park's 75th birthday, as well as the 75th anniversary of the first Ski Train, its success will likely determine if the rail alternative can be restored permanently. The efforts and cooperation of many people and many entities brought this train to reality, including host railroad Union Pacific, Amtrak, and Winter Park. They are to be congratulated!

Perhaps this special event will become a permanent option for our high country enthusiasts. Let your voices be heard! And enjoy the ride.....

## ABOUT COLORAIL

The Colorado Rail Passenger Association, ColoRail ([www.ColoRail.org](http://www.ColoRail.org)), is the 25-year-old successor to the organization Save Our Station (SOS), a citizens' group formed to prevent the razing of Denver's historic Union Terminal for a convention center. That successful effort emboldened the SOS members to advocate for rail and transit, not only for Denver, but for the entire state of Colorado. SOS was re-christened ColoRail and the goal became one of adding rail services to the pre-served station that then only hosted Amtrak and the seasonal Ski Train.

Denver Union Station is now the most talked about transportation hub in the nation as it anticipates several new rail services in 2016, the year that ColoRail has dubbed "The Year of the Train." ColoRail has been a strong supporter of RTD's FasTracks transit expansion project approved by regional voters over a decade ago. It is indeed gratifying to observe the successful culmination of the public's investments in the alternative mobility services about to spring forth in the region. Especially with Denver Union Station at the heart of the system - the station once threatened then championed by ColoRail's founders.

ColoRail is also a strong proponent of Amtrak, America's Railroad, which has great potential in both its regional and national networks. ColoRail advocates for more investment in these networks as the nation's citizens demand more mobility choices, especially environmentally friendly ones, as rail most certainly is. The most urgent ColoRail effort involving Amtrak is retaining the famed Amtrak Southwest Chief in Colorado and even including Pueblo as a station stop at that city's historic depot.

The Colorado Department of Transportation has garnered ColoRail's support for its efforts to initiate I-25 Corridor bus service under the *Bustang* banner. Developing this transit market could eventually lead to a rail component. Other markets are likely, concurrent with Colorado's rapid growth and constrained highways.

ColoRail supports an incremental, building block approach in developing transportation choices for Coloradans, beginning with affordable, doable projects, not unlike Amtrak's Winter Park Express. Demonstrating that there are other solutions to the public's mobility needs only hastens the imagination, then execution, of the next logical step. And the more voices that demand action, the faster change will occur.

Please consider joining ColoRail today. Add *your* voice for more rail and transit!

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Or join online at: [www.ColoRail.org](http://www.ColoRail.org)