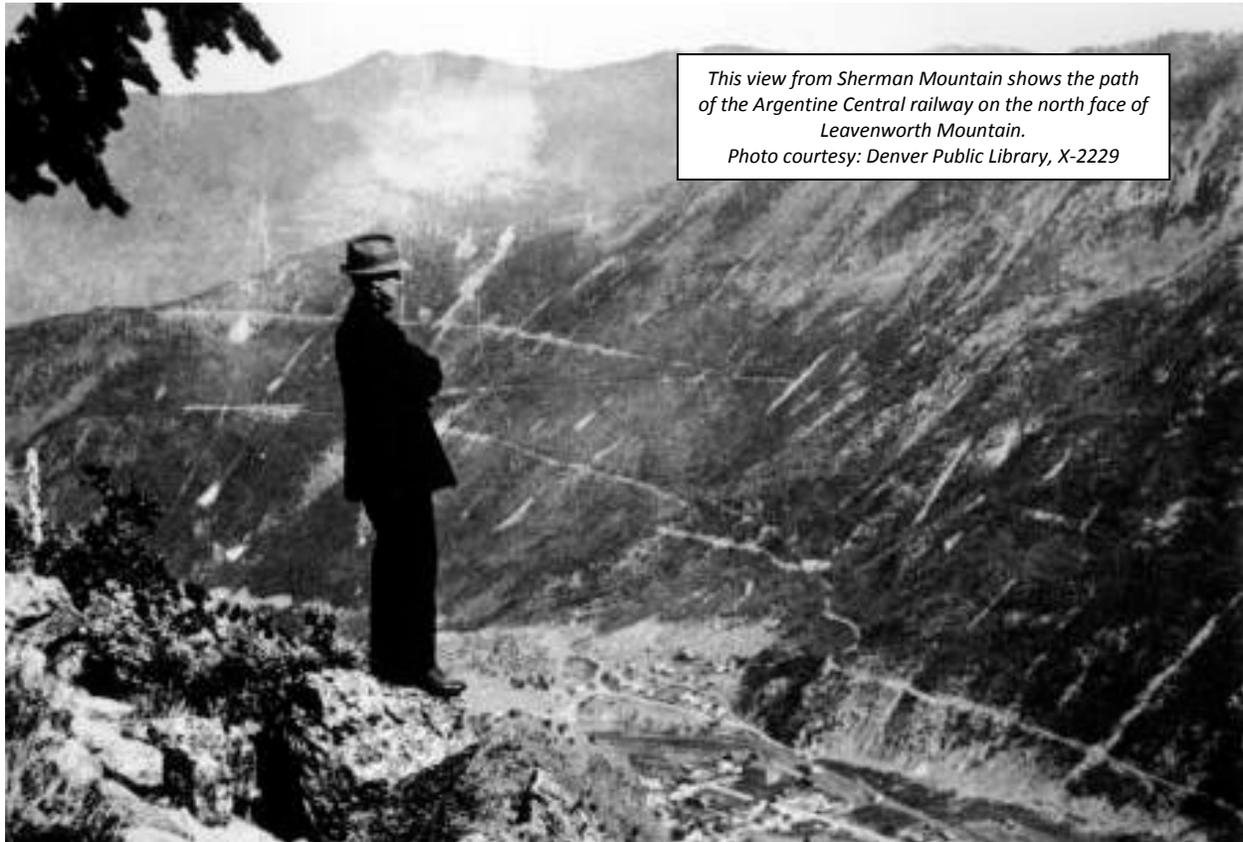


## Site 1: The Argentine Central Railway

Edward John Wilcox, president of the Waldorf Mining and Milling Company, wanted a more expedient way of transporting materials to and from his extensive group of mining properties in the Argentine District other than the laborious method via pack mule and wagon freight. On August 1, 1905 Wilcox started construction on the Argentine Central railway, beginning at the terminus of the Colorado & Southern railroad in Silver Plume and ending at the Wilcox Tunnel at Waldorf. The track was further extended to a point near the top of Mt. McClellan, a total distance of approximately 16 miles from Silver Plume. On August 1, 1906, exactly one year after ground was broken, a special ceremony was held near the terminus of the railway in which a golden spike was driven in to celebrate the railways completion.



The Argentine Central railway was a narrow gauge, the same as that of the Colorado & Southern railway that ran from Denver to Silver Plume, thus making the cars of the two rail lines interchangeable. Connecting with the C&S at Silver Plume, the Argentine Central climbed the north side of Leavenworth Mountain by a series of switchbacks, cresting at Pavilion Point before curving back along the south side of the same mountain into Leavenworth Gulch, then climbing until making its final ascent along the eastern face near the top of Mt. McClellan at an elevation of 14,007 feet.

Steeply graded and sharply curved, the rail line has a maximum grade of 6 percent with a minimum curvature of 32 degrees. As a result of these grades, a total of seven Shay geared steam locomotives were used during the existence of the railway. Shay locomotives were not built for speed but rather for strength, enabling it to pull heavy loads - up to 200 tons - on a 6 percent grade, with the capacity of attaining a speed of 15 miles per hour.

*Two women pose on the No. 5 Shay locomotive of the Argentine Central. E.J. Wilcox ordered the No. 5 from the Lima (Ohio) Locomotive Works in 1907. Photo courtesy: Verona Chappel Zimmerman Collection*



Although the primary object of the building of the new railway was to furnish transportation facilities to the mining properties, it became evident that this new road would also furnish as an unsurpassed scenic attraction.

Tourists rode up the north face of Leavenworth Mountain where they were rewarded with birds-eye views of Silver Plume, the “Loop” of the Colorado & Southern, and Georgetown. After rounding Pavilion Point and gradually climbing Leavenworth Gulch to above timberline, the rail line reached the mining town of Waldorf. From there tourists could continue the climb up toward the summit Mt. McClellan with its unsurpassed views of Mt. Evans, Mt. Rosalie, Gray’s and Torrey’s Peaks.

Despite the enthusiasm surrounding the railway, it never prospered as hoped and Wilcox did not maintain ownership of the Argentine Central for very long. Financial troubles, conflicts with the Colorado & Southern, and not operating on Sundays (Wilcox, a one-time Methodist minister, was a strict observer of the Sabbath) forced the sale of the railway in 1909.

The new owners, a Denver syndicate, immediately initiated Sunday operations and revitalized plans to extend the line to the top of Grays Peak, proposing to construct an observatory and hotel at the summit. However, the railway was operating at a loss and heavily in debt; operations ceased in 1911 or 1912 due to these financial troubles.

Sold at auction and reorganized as the Georgetown & Gray’s Peak Railway Company, freight and tourist traffic was resumed for the 1913 summer season. Attempts were made to boost dwindling tourist interest with the introduction of a tourist camp at Pavilion Point and replacement of the Shay locomotives with self-propelled trolley-like railcars.

In 1918, with mining production diminishing, growing popularity of the automobile, and the country’s involvement in World War I, a notice of abandonment was filed by the Georgetown & Gray’s Peak Railway Co. and operations were discontinued. The last of the Argentine Central’s 16 miles of track were removed in 1920.

Silver Plume resident William J. Guard composed an ode to the Argentine Central, published in the *Silver Standard* newspaper on August 3, 1907:

**THE ARGENTINE CENTRAL RAILROAD:**  
**"GRAY'S PEAK ROUTE."**

—

Tourists seeking scenery grand,  
Take the Argentine Central,  
It's the highest railroad in the land,  
The Argentine Central.  
From Silver Plume it wends its way,  
With their famous engines called "The  
Shay,"  
To the snow-capped peaks in white array:  
On the Argentine Central:

What visions nature has in store;  
On the Argentine Central.  
You view the landscape o'er and o'er,  
On the Argentine Central.  
From the mountain side with valleys green;  
The high switch-back can then be seen,  
And the whole trip seems just like a dream;  
On the Argentine Central.

From the mountain top we have to show—  
On the Argentine Central—  
Just seven railroad tracks below,  
On the Argentine Central.  
Look north or south, yes, east or west;  
You really don't know which is best,  
Your eyesight now must stand a test,  
On the Argentine Central.

Then over the hill to the other side—  
On the Argentine Central—  
Such a beautiful valley deep and wide,  
On the Argentine Central,  
Through the timber, pitch and pine,  
Passing Green Lake on the line,  
To the Wilcox tunnel and Waldorf mine;  
On the Argentine Central.

Here the traveler observes a change;  
On the Argentine Central.  
It's the "Continental Divide or Snowy  
Range,"  
On the Argentine Central.  
The next point reached, quite strange but  
nice;  
Makes your pleasure worth double the price;  
'Tis a natural palace of perpetual ice,  
On the Argentine Central.

One hundred and six high peaks in view,  
On the Argentine Central.  
Pike's and Gray's the prominent two,  
On the Argentine Central.  
From the summit high you can obtain  
A vast expanse o'er hill and plain—  
You'll wish to take this trip again,  
On the Argentine Central:

A wonderful trip, you will agree;  
On the Argentine Central.  
Fourteen thousand feet above the sea;  
On the Argentine Central.  
Above the clouds the air so pure,  
If you have the blues, this is a cure,  
For you'll not forget this ride I'm sure,  
On the Argentine Central.

—W. J. GUARD.