

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

Horrifying Train Wreck Kills Many

Eva Grace Brown—a six-year-old girl

Loren Allschwager—a machinist returning to Minneapolis after visiting his grandparents in Ogden

Anna Elizabeth Anderson—a “sweet and loveable” 19 year old visiting from Sweden

Mae Hoffman of Waterloo—known as “The most beautiful woman in Iowa”

Mae, Anna, Loren, and little Eva were just four of the 45 victims in a deadly train crash four and a half miles north of Green Mountain in March 1910. Descriptions at the scene of the tragedy were gruesome:

“terrible suffering among the injured”

“slow work to identify victims”

“wreckage was crimson with blood”

It was unclear exactly what had caused the horrible wreck of the Rock Island cars. Railroad officials were refusing to talk. But plenty of the injured were talking. Most believed the trains were going too fast for the conditions.

Two locomotives coupled together were running backwards as they moved 13 cars over the Rock Island track. There was a Pullman sleeper next to the locomotive, then came a smoking car and a day coach—occupied mostly by women and children. Several additional passenger cars followed.

The train was traveling at 25 miles per hour when it reached the top of a hill. Suddenly the head locomotive jumped the track and wedged into the soft clay soil of a high embankment. The momentum of the sudden stop caused the other locomotive and cars to crumple “like cardboard.” The impact crushed the day coach and smoking car against the heavier Pullman. Passengers in the other cars were thrown from their seats. Victims said it happened so quickly there was no time to jump from the moving train to escape injury.

No one in the Pullman, a more heavily constructed vehicle, was injured or killed. However, everyone in the first regular car was killed. Nearly everyone in the second car was killed or injured. The conductor sent some of his crew up the track to flag approaching trains. He sent others into Green Mountain to get help. Those passengers who were able did what they could to help in the chaos in the first minutes after the crash. Dr. John W. Devry from Chicago was badly injured himself. However, he organized other passengers to help make the injured comfortable until rescuers could arrive. And he supervised the removal of the dead to a nearby field.

The task of dealing with the dead was delayed when the coroner was injured on his way to the crash site. As his ambulance sped to the wreck, it whirled around a corner throwing the coroner out of the vehicle. He was knocked unconscious and ended up with a broken back.

For those who survived the train wreck, the wait for rescuers must have been a torturous ordeal. Finally help arrived from Marshalltown and smaller communities nearby. Nurses from a Des Moines hospital arrived by train—ready to help where needed. A special train removed the injured to a Marshalltown hospital. When it was filled, victims were taken to private homes where doctors and nurses cared for them. By the end of the day 45 people were among the dead, but it was doubtful that all of the injured would survive the horrendous crash as their injuries were so severe.

The crash was called “the most horrifying in the history of Iowa railroads.” Trains filled with relatives looking for their loved ones began to arrive during the hours after the crash. Many were devastated to learn of the death of a friend or family member. Some held out hope for the recovery of loved ones who had been injured—only to have those hopes dashed when one more victim perished.

Sources

“Blood of 45 Crimsoned the Wreckage,” *Bennington Evening Banner*, March 22, 1910.

“Disaster to Rock Island Train Most Horrifying in History of Iowa Railroads,” *Lincoln Evening News*, March 22, 1910.

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