

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

April 8, 2015

THIS WEEK:

Railway Wreck in Iowa

BACKGROUND:

In the early morning hours of August 29, 1877, near Altoona, Iowa, in a blinding thunderstorm along the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Rail line, a passenger train headed for Des Moines crashed into a swollen, rushing creek bed along the east branch of Four Mile Creek. The train was reportedly traveling about 30 miles per hour. Besides the locomotive, the train included a sleeper car and a Barnum and Bailey's Circus advertising car. The stone bridge arches over the creek had washed away with the rising water. The engineer, unaware of the situation, drove directly into the creek pulling all cars into the flood except the sleeper car. Varying reports of how the disaster played out do not agree on the number of dead and wounded. Sources disagree on the date of the disaster, but they all agree that on down the line, other bridges also washed away that night. The train likely was slated for destruction either way. Sources also agree this was the worst train wreck in central Iowa.



From: *Images of America: Altoona
by Alex Payne on behalf of the
Altoona Area Historical Society**

Railway Wreck in Iowa

The Evening Gazette

Port Jervis, New York, August 30, 1877

A Passenger Train Goes Crashing Through A Bridge.

Barnum's Show Car Going Down with the Rest

Eighteen Persons Known to have Been Killed—the Wounded

Des Moines, Iowa, Aug. 29. — Details of the railroad accident on the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad at the

**This book is for sale in the Capitol Gift Shop,
Iowa State Capitol Des Moines, Iowa.*

east branch of Four Mile Creek, seven miles from this city, are beginning to arrive. The number of killed is estimated all the way from ten to fifty. All the train but the sleeping car went down into the stream. The engine is completely out of sight. Barnum's show car went down among the rest, and it is said all of its eleven occupants but one were killed. The following list of the killed and wounded has been received:

The killed:

There are sixteen killed so far as known. Twelve bodies are out on the banks, as follows:

WILLIAM ROBESTRAW, engineer, Smart, Iowa.

J. K. BOLT and 8 year old daughter, Boone, Iowa.

WM. CUMMINGS, newsboy, Des Moines.

MRS. EMMA BABCOCK, school teacher, Rock Island, Illinois.

E. JABEZ, Cincinnati.

E. PRINCE, Cincinnati.

MRS. WM. CROW, East Des Moines.

M. COGEN, traveller, Peoria, Illinois.

THOMAS DUNAWAY, East Des Moines.

Members of P. T. Barnum's crew:

GEORGE ROCKWELL.

GREEN BERRY.

JOHN PURCELL.

JOHN BRUCE.

CHARLES THOMPSON.

A. MACK.

F. B. BAKER.

MRS. J. K. BOLT, whose husband and daughter are among the killed, is badly injured. MR. BOLT was a prominent citizen and druggist at Boone, Iowa.

The wounded:

J. M. ADSLEY, of Davenport, Iowa.

DAVID MORGAN, of New Sharon, Iowa, slightly hurt.

C. C. GILMAN, Eddors, Iowa, two ribs broken and otherwise slightly bruised.

W. Y. HUME, Des Moines, slightly in the head.

A. J. PATRICKS, conductor, dangerously.

MRS. D. A. STEBBINS, Panther Creek, Iowa, bruised badly.

S. S. FERGUSON, Andalusia, Ill., slightly.

J. L. GRAHAM and wife, Des Moines, both slightly.

L. S. SPENCER, Lathrop, Iowa, breast and both legs hurt.

J. BROWNING, St. Louis, severely bruised, burned, and knee cut.

DR. CAMPBELL, wife and daughter, Fishkilwa County, Ill, all slightly bruised.

M. BARRINGTON, Washington, Iowa, slightly.

DENNIS SHANNON, Iowa City, breast and legs severely.

MRS. MARY HOFF, Norwalk, Iowa, in back and head.

MRS. C. FOLLETT, Moline, Ill., quite severely.

BEN TRUCK, the fireman, had a miraculous escape.

The accident was occasioned by the washing out of a bridge, and occurred about 4 o'clock this morning.

One more body has been recovered, that of an aged man with the name J. S. FERGUSON in his hat. In a car not yet uncovered several more bodies can be seen. It is thought that several bodies have floated down the stream, the water in the channel of which is over twenty feet deep. The wounded and uninjured have all been taken to Altoona.

At 3 1/2 this afternoon the body of MRS. CROW, of East Des Moines, was recovered.



Later—Three more male bodies were removed from the wreck, one of which is supposed to be MR. COGEN, a commercial traveller from Peoria, Illinois. The other two bodies have not been identified. The body of a lady has been found entangled in the wreckage, making eighteen persons known to have been killed.

The site today shown along the Gay Lea Wilson bike trail.

The tracks coming from the east

The name of the last man removed is THOS. DUNAWAY of East Des Moines, who recently escaped from the insane asylum.

Barnum and Bailey's historical outline

1877: During the early morning hours of August 29, 1877, the worst railroad accident in central Iowa history occurred on the southwest side of Altoona. The wreck of a Rock Island train at Four Mile Creek killed 20 people and injured 35 others. Heavy rains washed out the stone arch railway bridge and caused the train

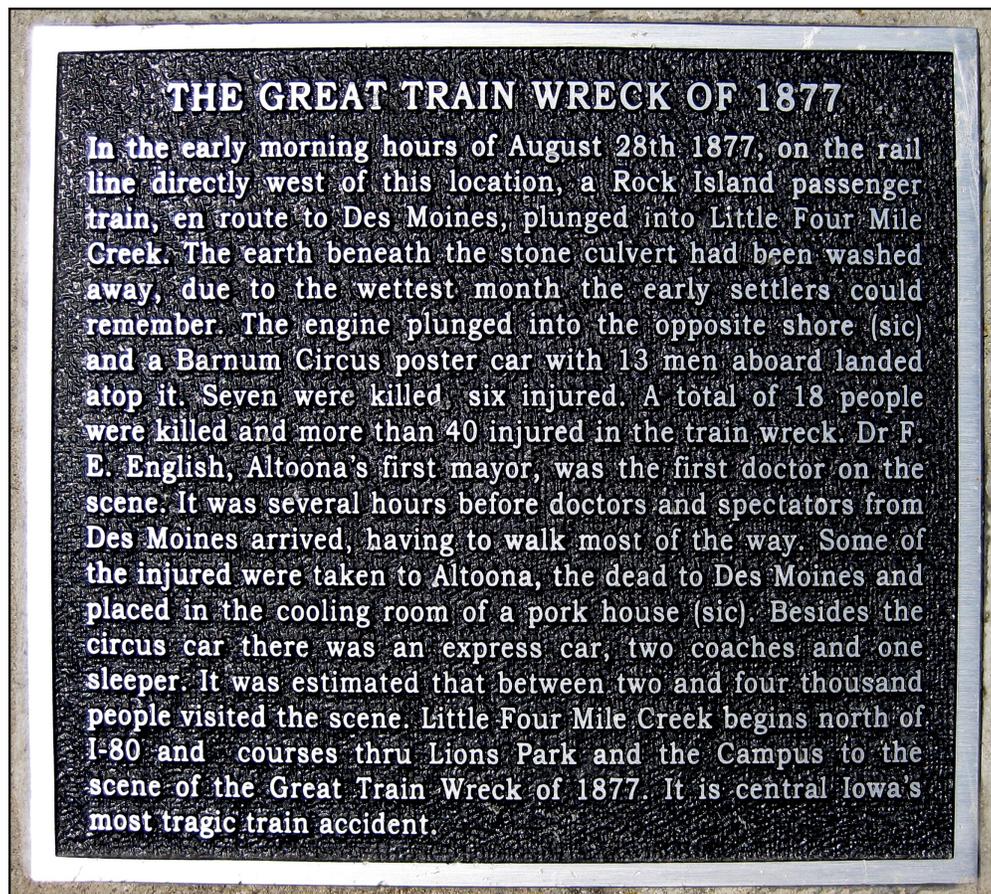
to plunge into the creek. The first doctor on the scene was F. E. English, father of *Altoona Herald* editor, Emory English. Word of the tragedy spread quickly, and by mid-afternoon more than four thousand people were at the scene.



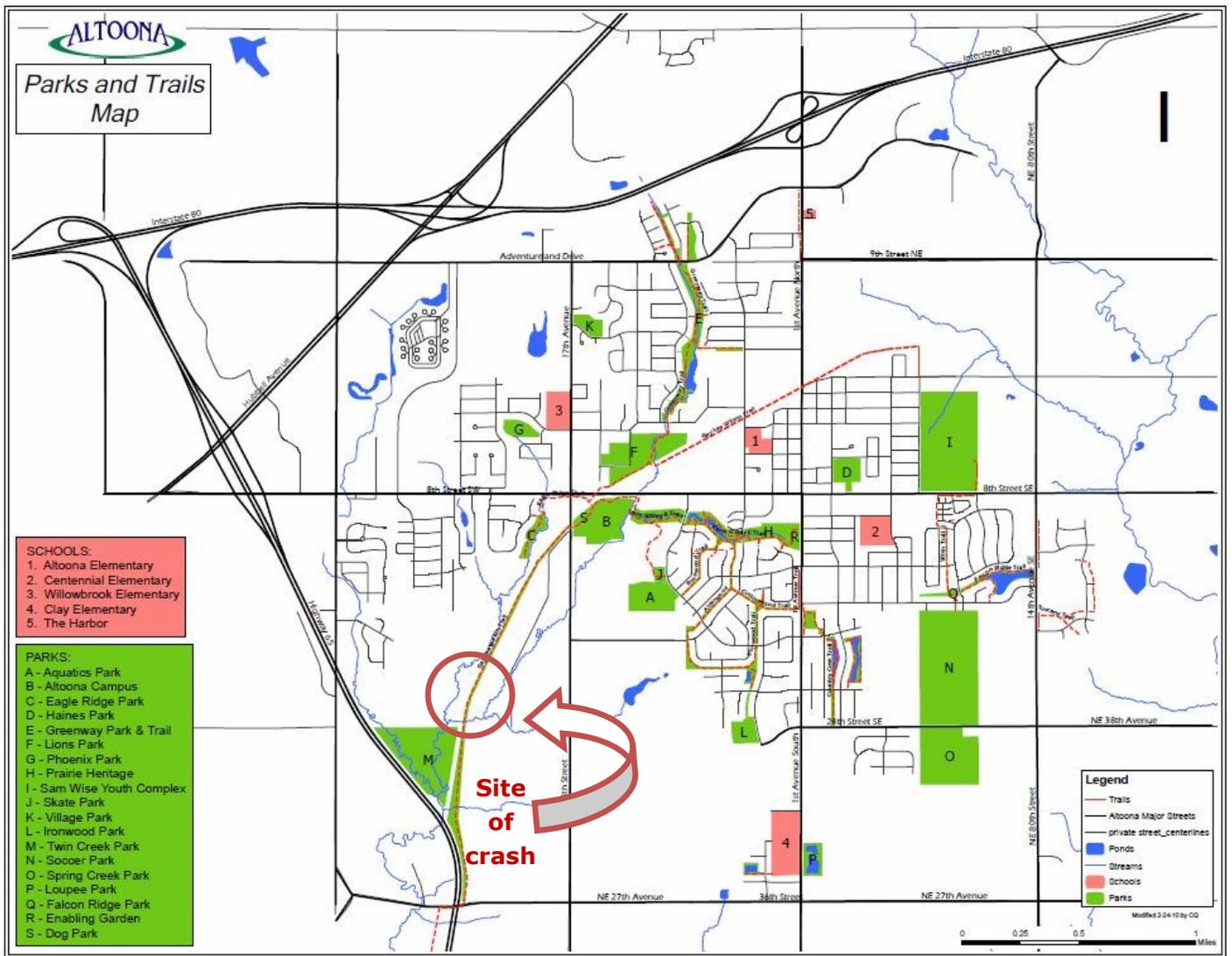
The creek beyond the bridge



Emory English was later an Iowa State Representative from 1902-07



Historical marker at the trail



The bridge across the creek