

GREAT TRAIN WRECK OF 1877

In August of 1877, central Iowa experienced record amounts of rainfall. Farm fields were flooded, rivers and creeks were overflowing, and livestock retreated to safety on higher ground.

During the night of August 29, 1877, Little Four Mile Creek became a swollen, raging torrent. It was reported that the Creek was fifty feet wide at some points. The force of the water caused the stone arches under a railroad bridge near Altoona to be washed away.

Early that morning, a passenger train headed for Des Moines sped around a curve in the track located about a mile southwest of Altoona. The engineer could not see that only part of the bridge was standing. He opened the throttle and the train plunged into the water.

The *Iowa State Register* reported that the locomotive had jumped the stream and landed hard against the western bank of the Creek. A tender car and a Barnum Bailey circus poster car were pulled in behind the engine. A mail car, an express car and three passenger cars also plunged into the creek. A sleeper car was saved because there was no room for it in the creek bed. Twenty people died and 35 were injured. Dr. F. E. English of Altoona was the first doctor on the scene.

News of the disaster spread quickly, and people rushed to the site of the accident. By the following afternoon, thousands of people had walked from as far away as Des Moines to see the wreckage. For many years, local people scoured the banks of the creek for remnants of the accident. The disaster was called the worst train wreck in Iowa history.

The site of the Great Train Wreck of 1877 is marked by a monument located about one mile southwest of the bike trail entrance near the intersection of 8th Street SW and 17th Ave. SW in Altoona.

Sources: Henning, Barbara Beving Long and Beam, Patrice K. *Des Moines and Polk County: Flag on the Prairie*. Sun Valley, CA: American Historical Press, 2003.
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