

The Green Mountain Train Wreck:

An Iowa Railroad Tragedy

by H. Roger Grant

Death and disaster have always been part of American railroading. The South Carolina Railroad, the country's first carrier to operate a steam locomotive, experienced an industry first, a fatal accident. On June 17, 1831, not long after this 137-mile road opened for service between Charleston, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia, its sturdy little engine, *The Best Friend of Charleston*, exploded and killed its black fireman.

Accidents continued, yet few major disasters occurred during the first several decades of railroad operations in this country. Slow speeds and light traffic accounted for this good record. By the time of the Civil War, however, faster and more frequent train movements reduced the margin of safety considerably. While major technological improvements — steel rails, wheels and axles, airbrakes, automatic couplers, block signals, steam heating, and electric lighting — gradually made rail travel speedier, more comfortable, and theoretically safer, the number and severity of accidents actually increased. Even with the best equipment, mechanical problems remained. There were more boiler explosions, and other accidents were caused by defective bridges, track, brakes, signals, and the like. Nor could human error be overcome; this factor proved to be a principal cause of fatalities. Excessive speed, likewise, contributed to the slaughter. As the editor of a popular magazine, *The World's Work*, observed in 1907:

Our railroads kill their thousands every month in wreck or trespass. . . . In more than half the cases, the real truth underlying the tragedy is the fact that the train was running at forty or fifty or sixty miles an hour over tracks that were built for trains that never ran but thirty miles an hour. The people demand it. The railroads must obey. Each year, the manufacturers of locomotives are called upon by the big lines to produce and deliver more and more engines that can haul a ten-car passenger train at sixty miles an hour. Even in the far South and in steady old New England, the cry is ever for more speed.

The editor concluded: "The railroads take big risks. They have to. Competition grows terrible, and the railroad, like the individual, must live."

The public got its first taste of the enormous carnage a passenger train could cause on May 6, 1853. That morning a crowded New York & New Haven Railroad express plunged into the chilly waters of the Norwalk River at South Norwalk, Connecticut, when the engineer failed to notice an open swing bridge. The accident killed forty-six people. After the Civil War at least one major tragedy occurred annually, and the frequency of accidents increased. Near the zenith of railroad intercity passenger travel the nation's deadliest wreck took place. On July 9, 1918, two Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis passenger trains, run-

ning at approximately fifty miles per hour each, smashed head-on near the Tennessee capital. One hundred and one passengers and crew members died. With the reduction of passenger service after the 1950s, multiple-death accidents became less common. Still, as recently as November 12, 1983, four Amtrak passengers died in an accident near Marshall, Texas.

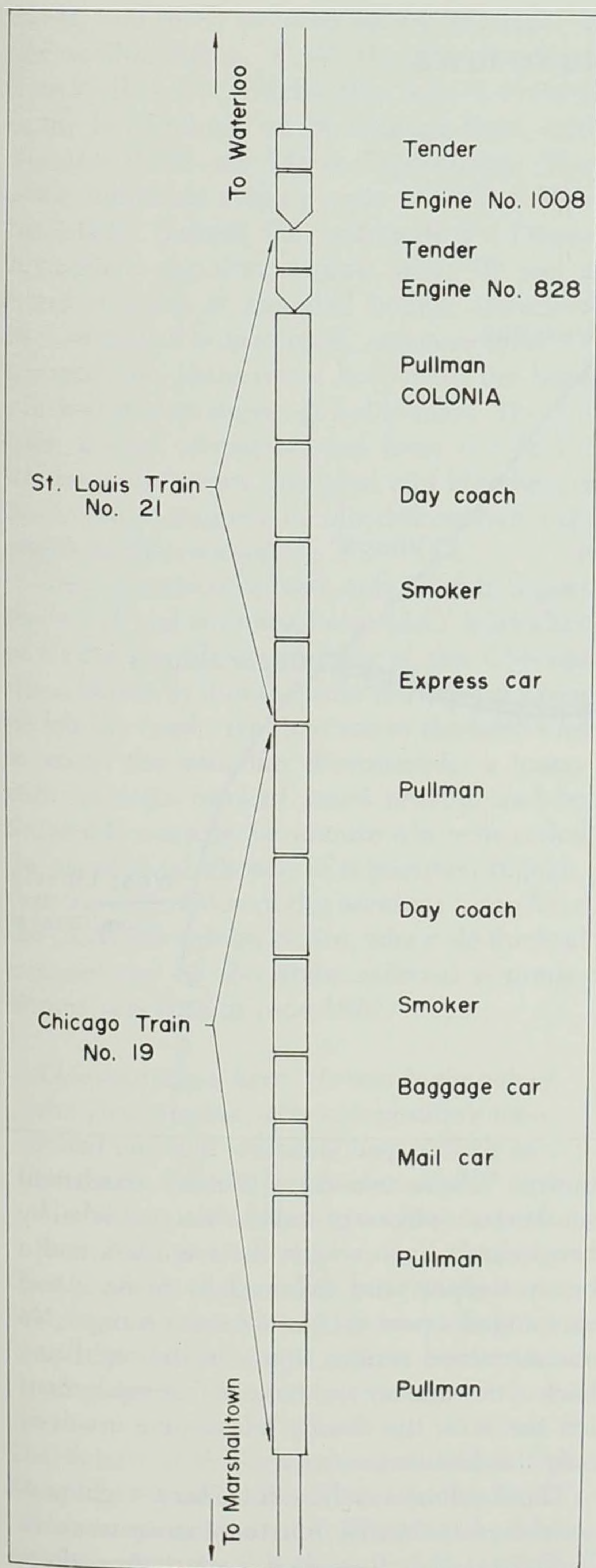
Iowa has had its share of railroad disasters. This is not surprising: by 1920 the state boasted the country's fourth largest track network (9,808 miles); several east-west lines hauled heavy volumes of freight and passenger traffic; and thousands of miles of single track lacked sophisticated signaling devices, relying instead on the timetable and train-order approach.

The Hawkeye State's first railroad catastrophe came on May 7, 1856, only a year after the iron horse arrived. A Mississippi & Missouri Railroad (later Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific or Rock Island) express train derailed near Davenport and killed twelve people. On August 29, 1877, seventeen people perished near Des Moines when a track washout on the Rock Island ditched a circus train. Eleven years later a Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (Milwaukee) passenger train left the track near New Hampton as a result of another washout and nine passengers died. A railroad calamity that shocked Iowans and others nationwide occurred on July 11, 1896, when a Chicago & North Western fast freight rammed a fifteen-car excursion train on the outskirts of Logan. Thirty-one people, mostly members of the Union Pacific Railroad's Pioneers' Association of Omaha, lost their lives in that accident. But Iowa's worst railroad disaster occurred on March 21, 1910, between Green Mountain and Gladbrook, near the Tama-Marshall County line. Fifty-five passengers and trainmen died, thus making it the country's fourteenth deadliest rail accident.

The events that led to what came to be called the "Green Mountain Train Wreck" began the previous day, Sunday, March 20. A derailment on the Rock Island's Cedar Rapids-Waterloo line between Vinton and Shellsburg in Benton County forced the company to reroute its traffic temporarily (see map). The Rock Island got approval from the Chicago & North Western (C&NW) to run its Twin Cities-bound passenger trains from Cedar Rapids west to Marshalltown, a distance of seventy miles, and it then received permission from the Chicago Great Western (CGW) to use its forty-eight mile route between Marshalltown and Waterloo. The detour was not only sixty-five miles longer than the regular route but it was exceedingly time-consuming. In the case of train No. 19-21, however, this would also be a trip of tragic proportions.

The Rock Island train that derailed near Green Mountain consisted of two separate units. Train No. 19 had left Chicago for the Twin Cities on Sunday, March 20, at 4:14 P.M. and arrived in Cedar Rapids at 10:15 P.M. It was scheduled to terminate in Minneapolis at 8:05 the next morning. The other unit was train No. 21 that had departed from St. Louis at 2:15 P.M. on Sunday and had steamed into the Cedar Rapids terminal at 12:30 A.M. on Monday, the 21st. It was supposed to reach Minneapolis at 9:10 A.M. Since these two trains came into Cedar Rapids not far apart, however, the division superintendent logically ordered their consolidation.

In the wee hours of the morning of March 21, No. 19-21, which consisted of two locomotives and eleven cars, headed west over the C&NW rails from Cedar Rapids toward Marshalltown and the CGW connection. When the train arrived there about 6:00 A.M., the question arose as to whether the engines should be turned for the final lap into Waterloo. Because of the track configuration at the interchange, a locomotive could not move



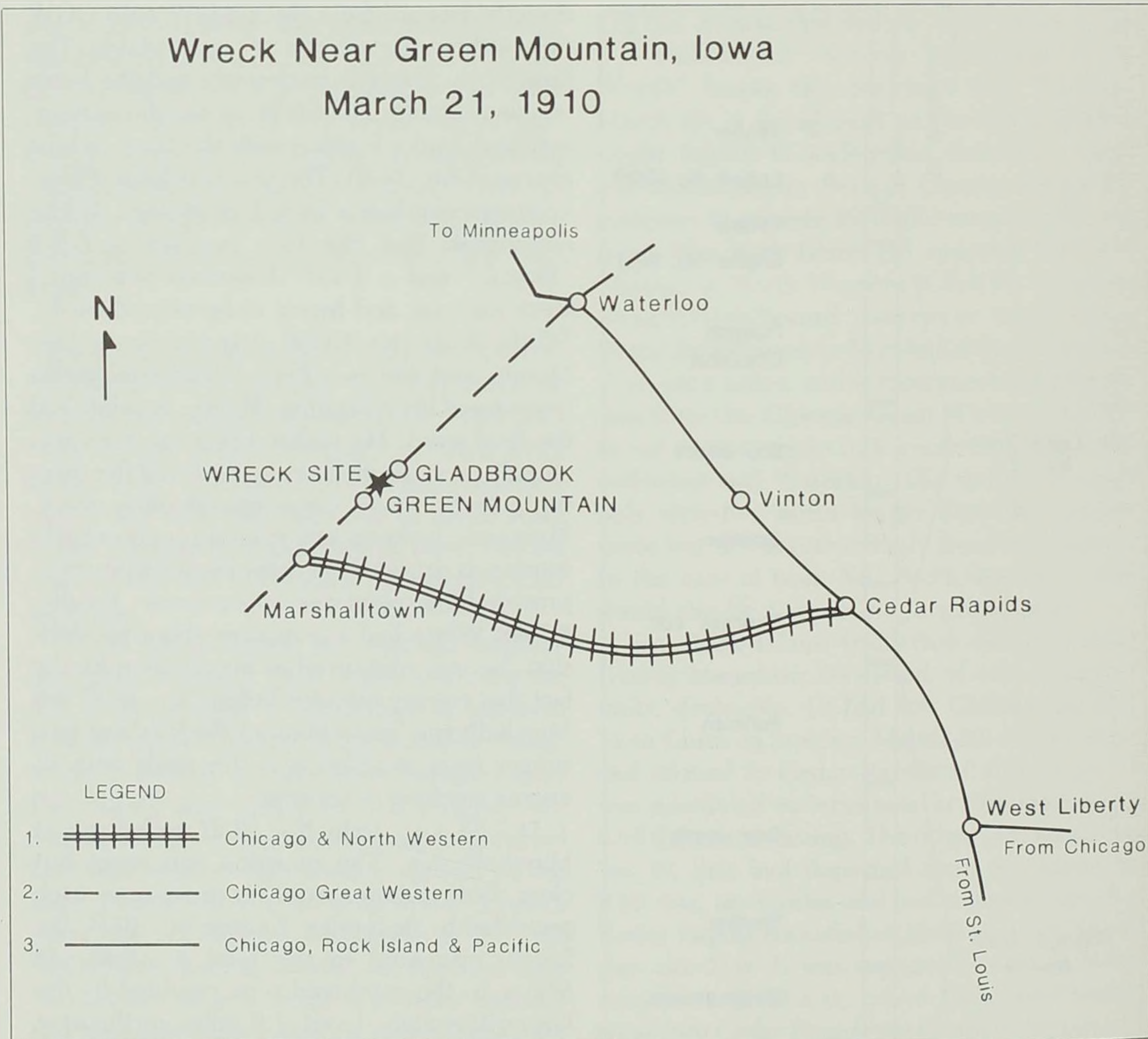
directly forward from the C&NW onto CGW rails without the use of a "Y" or turntable. The former was thought inadequate and the latter was unavailable. The CGW, as was the custom, assigned a pilot familiar with the track to take charge of No. 19-21. The man was John White, a veteran conductor from Des Moines. White concluded that the two engines, a 2-6-0 "Mogul," and a 4-4-0 "American Standard," were too long and heavy to be turned easily. While both the CGW dispatcher in Des Moines and the two Rock Island conductors questioned his reasoning, White, as pilot, had the final word. He realized that the train was already exceedingly late and believed the turning process would cause considerable delay. Moreover, he knew that running engines backwards was considered a safe operating practice, provided the speed was not excessive. Finally, if Pilot White had any qualms about his decision, he was supported in his decision by the fact that twenty minutes before No. 19-21 left Marshalltown a southbound Rock Island passenger train steamed into the yards with its engine working in reverse.

At 7:35 A.M. train No. 19-21 rolled out of Marshalltown. The morning was crisp but clear. Both engines were set in reverse, each preceded by its tender. Engine No. 1008, the 2-6-0, operated in the lead position. At 8:05 A.M. the combined train rumbled by the Green Mountain depot, 7.9 miles northeast of Marshalltown. It traveled at the leisurely and presumably safe speed of between twenty and twenty-five miles per hour. The CGW operator, who watched the train pass, saw nothing that would indicate impending trouble.

Then at approximately 8:20 A.M. disaster struck. On a straight piece of track in a cut about 1,500 feet long the tender of No. 1008

(Left) The composition of the ill-fated train No. 19-21 as it headed out of Marshalltown, bound for Waterloo. (drawing courtesy the author)

Wreck Near Green Mountain, Iowa March 21, 1910



jumped the rails, plunging it and the locomotive and the second tender and locomotive into the mud along the embankment. The stop was sudden and total. The greatest loss of life occurred in the two wooden coaches that followed the Pullman car *Colonia*, which was attached to engine No. 828 (see diagram). The day coach literally disintegrated, and every person riding in it was either killed or seriously injured. The smoker, which followed the day coach, was completely smashed at both ends and few of its occupants escaped death or major

injury. "These two cars [the day coach and smoker] were like egg shells when preceded by two heavy engines with their tenders and a heavy sleeper, and followed by heavy, steel cars and sleepers [of the Chicago train]." No one sustained serious injury in the eight cars back of the smoker and none of that equipment left the rails; the deadly telescoping involved only the first three cars.

The accident was dreadful. Thirty-eight persons died instantly, fourteen more were so badly hurt that they died a short time after-

wards, and thirty suffered serious injuries. "I saw terrible things," C.W. Maier, a passenger from Walla Walla, Washington, who was riding in the last Pullman of the Chicago train, told the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*. The place reminded some people of a Civil War battlefield. Indeed, the comments of a *Times-Republican* reporter explain why: "It was a horrible scene of mangled bodies, detached legs, arms and human parts, and gore splashed everywhere. Here was a body with the head crushed into an unrecognizable mass. There a pair of legs, dismembered from the body. There another torn, mangled and bleeding, a mere pulp wrapped in blood-drenched rags which had been clothing."

Crew members immediately tried to report the wreck and summon help. M.C. Einwalter of Cedar Rapids, conductor of the Chicago train, hurriedly jumped from the rear car when he felt the crash. He then ran to the head-end to assess the situation. Fortunately, a buggy with its team hitched stood nearby, and he drove it to a nearby farmhouse where he called the agent at Gladbrook. It is possible, though, that the first notice of the accident came from the CGW pilot, John White, who rode the lead locomotive. As the state railroad commissioners reported in June 1910,

This man was a hero. He was in the cab of the first engine. His companions were killed outright. In some way, which can never be known, bruised, maimed and horribly scalded, he extricated himself from the wrecked engine, and thinking only of his duty, while practically in a dying condition himself, by sheer force of will, made his way to a farm house and telephoned.

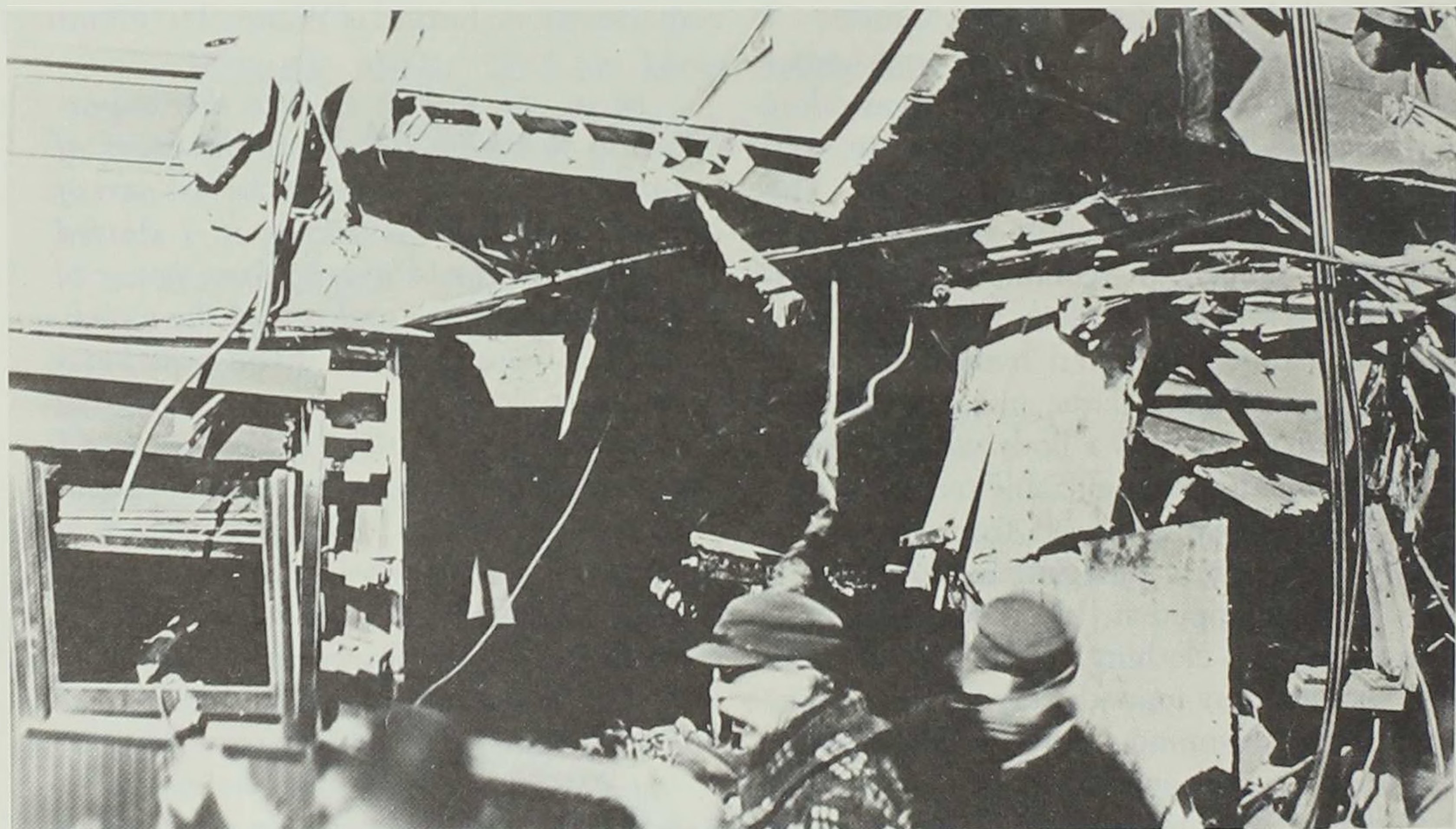
The details of White's valor came from E.A. Murphy of Vinton. In a letter to the CGW's division superintendent in Des Moines, subsequently given to the press and the railroad

commissioners, he told of White's last minutes:

DEAR SIR: I wish to take this opportunity to commend the faithfulness of John White, . . . I was in the last part of that train, and on leaving it, I started immediately for a nearby farm house to telephone to town and report the wreck, and to secure surgeons. I had gone but a little way down the road when something attracted my attention back of me, and I found White hurrying down the road and motioning to me to stop. I rushed back to him and found that he was a mass of water and dirt from head to foot. I asked him if he thought he was hurt internally, and he replied that he was not, but that he was badly scalded, and told me what his position was on the train; that he was [the] pilot and that he wanted to get word to Gladbrook or Marshalltown and notify the company of the disaster and secure surgeons for the injured. He seemed to be giving no thought whatever to himself, but his mind seemed to be wholly upon his duty to the company. I took White to the farm house and reported the affair to the agent at Gladbrook, under his direction, and then did what I could to relieve his suffering and stayed with him until I could get a surgeon to look after him. . . .

Help arrived quickly when word of the wreck reached Gladbrook, Green Mountain, and Marshalltown. Physicians rushed to the scene by automobile. The well-intentioned and the curious also appeared. Almost immediately, the CGW ordered a relief train to the site. In the meantime, able-bodied passengers and those who arrived to assist carried the injured to the rear Pullmans. Others gave what aid they could:

One woman would be nursing an unknown man here, another would be



The Pullman car Colonia telescoped into the day coach of the St. Louis section of train No. 19-21. (courtesy the author)

tearing open garments to get at the seat of the wound, while others hurried thru the aisles rushing water to cool parching lips and fevered brows.

For the nearly forty who were already dead, a handful of stout-hearted souls laid their bodies in an adjoining pasture. These naked, torn, and crushed corpses were covered with whatever was available — sheets, blankets, cushions, or clothing.

When the relief train arrived from Marshalltown, about 10:30 A.M., volunteers speedily loaded the injured and the dead into it. Once the train was on its way back to Marshalltown, persons who required hospitalization were given numbers to designate the seriousness of their condition. Those who needed immediate attention received the lowest numbers. The *Times-Republican* described the next series of events on that black Monday:

At the station a multitude gathered white-

faced and horrified waiting the coming of the special train. Pallid officers of the [CGW] mingled among the crowds nearly or quite as anxious for definite news as the crowd that surged and questioned. The streets and the platforms were filled when the death train drew in. The full extent of the calamity had not been realized. The cars were crowded with dead and dying and wounded. The hurry calls for wagons and conveyances brought teams on the full run thru the streets. One by one the bloodstained victims were taken thru the windows and tenderly as might be sent away to the hospitals and the temporary morgue.

As expected, the wreck upset tranquil Marshalltown. For one thing, it taxed the town's medical resources to the limit. All available doctors and nurses were called and additional personnel came from Des Moines by train. Similarly, area morticians faced an enormous



Volunteers at the scene covered the victims' bodies. The undamaged Chicago section stands in the background. (courtesy the author)

task. For thirty-six continuous hours they worked in a makeshift morgue on South Center Street to prepare the bodies for their final destinations. Several journalists, who came to cover this national news story, labored at identifying the victims. Volunteers earlier had collected the dead's personal effects, and they continued to help by answering the ever-ringing telephone.

The uninjured survivors of the wreck of No. 19-21 received attention, too. Those who did not board the relief train rode back to Marshalltown in the undamaged cars of No. 19-21. Rock Island passenger department employees arrived to counsel the shocked and weary travelers. The railroad offered free tickets to any place that these survivors wished to go.

Once the initial horror of the Green Mountain wreck wore off, individuals, especially members of the press, clamored to learn why it had happened, and how similar disasters might be avoided in the future. Early

reports said merely that No. 19-21 "jumped the tracks." Some speculated that perhaps a broken rail or wheel or perhaps a defective brake beam had caused the derailment. Later, when the railroad commissioners carefully studied the matter, they admitted that the cause would "never be known with absolute certainty." The rails and rolling stock were so badly twisted and distorted that investigators could not positively rule out any of the earlier suppositions.

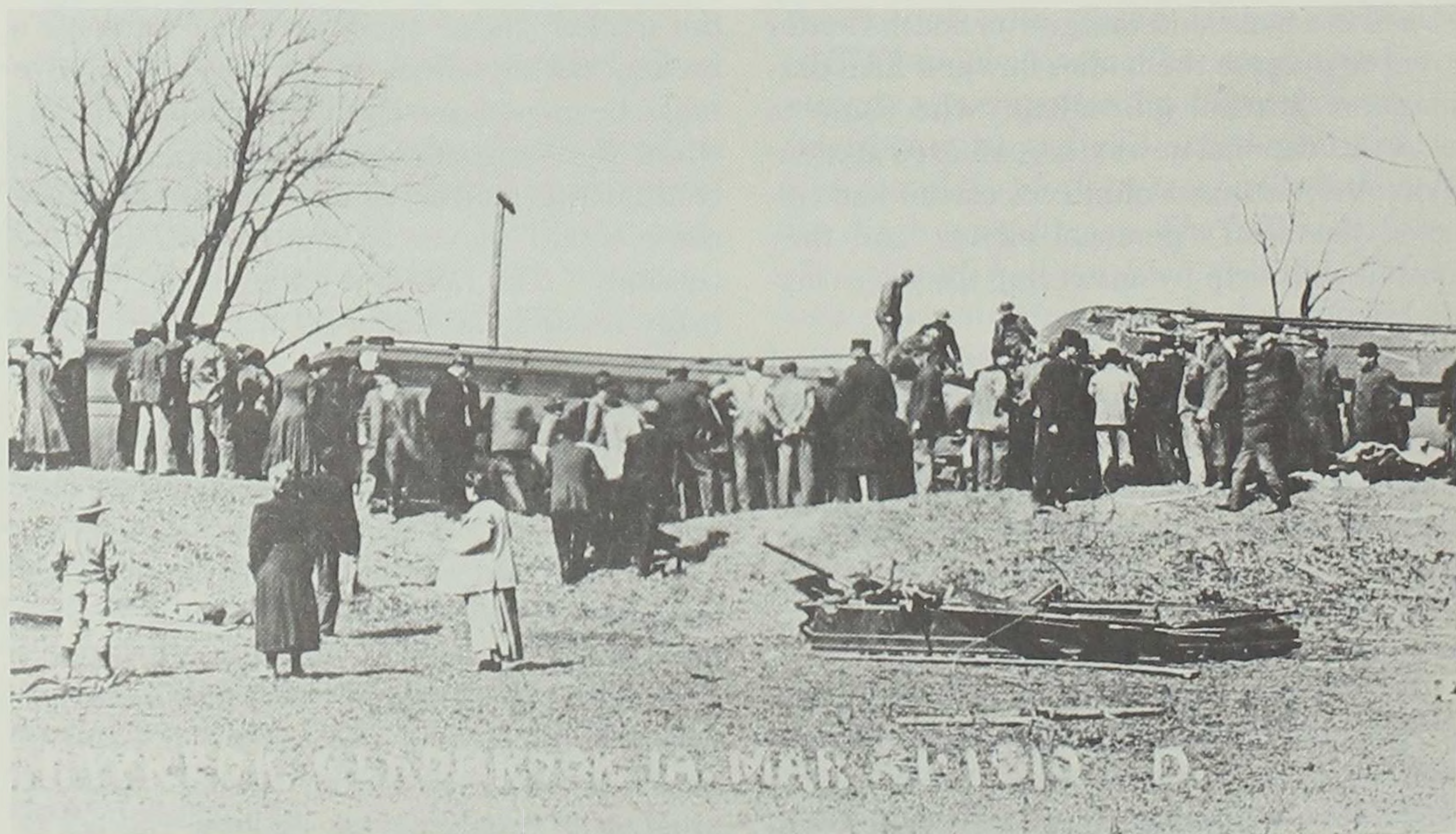
But the commissioners blasted the Chicago Great Western for the generally poor condition of its roadbed. Never financially robust, the CGW had fallen into the hands of receivers in the wake of the Panic of 1907. By March 1910, however, a better day had dawned for this 1500-mile midwestern carrier. The administration of Samuel M. Felton, that had assumed power in 1909, had already started a massive program of rehabilitation. Indeed, the fall of 1909 witnessed some work on the Marshalltown to Waterloo line. Laborers began to

replace defective, worn-out ties and rails, correct track alignment, and add fresh ballast. Yet all of the planned improvements had not been completed. In the vicinity of the derailment new ties had only been strung along the right-of-way, awaiting installation when weather conditions allowed. The commissioners also noted that "From the fact of standing water in the ditches on each side of the track in the cut where the accident occurred, it was clearly apparent that the facilities for drainage were very imperfect, although with proper ditches and proper attention, there would be no difficulty in draining the water from the railroad track."

The commissioners not only suggested that the track conditions contributed to the disaster ("If there be a primary cause of this wreck, in our judgment it was the soft track resulting from the season and lack of proper drainage.") but they strongly urged carriers not to operate any engine backwards. "It is dangerous for a

train to be led by the tender of an engine. To some extent, it obscures the vision of the engineer. In any event, it is topheavy and easily thrown out of balance." And these regulators criticized the Rock Island for placing light, wooden coaches between heavy steel cars. The procedure bothered more than the commissioners. The editor of the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*, for one, in a widely reprinted editorial, entitled "The Lesson of the Wreck," caught popular thinking on the matter: "The make up of that wrecked train is the main reason for the terrible death rate. It was careless, morally at least it was criminal. If no statute covers it then the code of Iowa needs amplification."

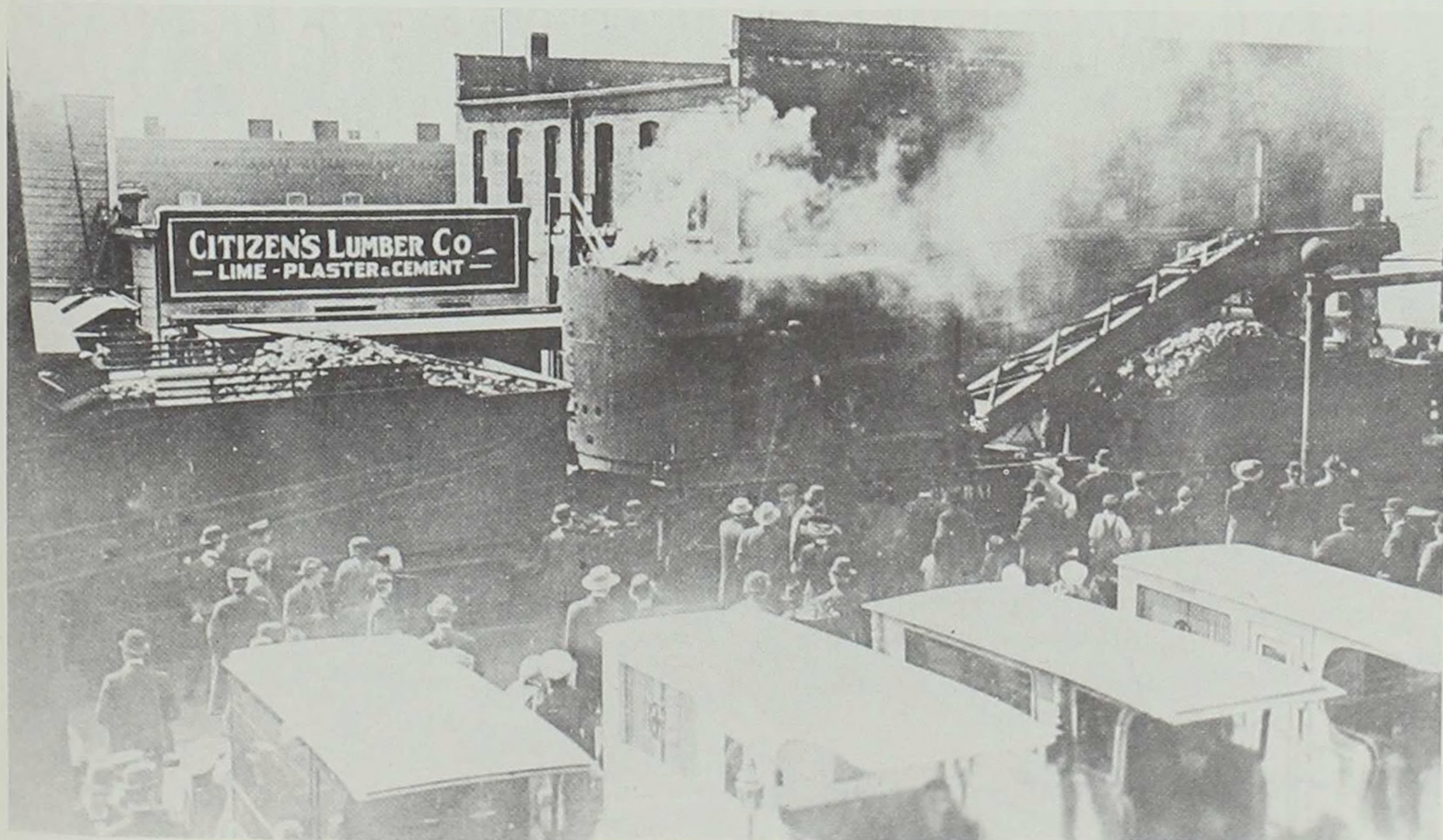
The train wreck near Green Mountain did bring about changes. While public outrage did not prompt Iowa lawmakers to alter immediately the railroad statutes, the federal government moved swiftly to force companies



A large crowd gathered to view the Rock Island wreck near Green Mountain. (courtesy the author)

to report to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) all accidents that involved injury or property damage. The ICC, too, gained the power to make its own investigations of serious railroad mishaps. And there was the force of "moral suasion" created by that black Monday near Green Mountain, Iowa, which led companies to show greater concern about the arrangement of rolling stock in passenger service. In July 1910, for example, when a derailment blocked the C&NW's main line near Belle Plaine and forced the rerouting of varnish over the Milwaukee between Cedar Rapids and Tama, officials discovered as one train was about to leave the terminal that several wooden cars were sandwiched between heavy steel ones. "[The superintendent] decided to change the arrangement . . . and for over an hour a switch engine was busy getting the cars into their proper position, the steel coaches in the front of the train and the wooden coaches in the rear."

Passenger train wrecks, like the one at Green Mountain, contributed to consumer pressure for greater safety measures. Just as rates and service had once been the principal bones of contention between the public and the carriers, passenger well-being emerged as a burning issue early in the century. Patrons wanted "peace of mind" when they traveled. Some reform came in 1907 when Congress passed the Railway Hours Act. This measure, spearheaded by Wisconsin's progressive senator, Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., prohibited railroad operating personnel from working more than sixteen consecutive hours. While difficult to gauge, the March 21, 1910, tragedy likely caused pressure for greater railroad safety at both the state and federal levels. Indeed, it was this type of event that led, in part, to passage of the Adamson Act of 1916, which gave railroad men an eight-hour day. As with the 1907 law, legislators believed that alert workers would be safety-conscious work-



The relief train arrived at the CGW station in Marshalltown at 4 P.M. on Monday, March 21. Volunteers then transferred the dead to ambulances for removal to the morgue. (courtesy the author)



Workers checking the Pullman car Colonia (left) and the remains of the wooden day coach. (courtesy the author)



The remains of the two locomotives of the Rock Island's ill-fated train No. 19-21 attracted both spectators and repair workers. (courtesy the author)

ers.

Unlike most railroad disaster sites, the one near Green Mountain is marked. During the nation's bicentennial a local group placed a bronze marker on a large boulder near the track. Unfortunately, though, the narrative is flawed: a derailment, not a "flood," forced the Rock Island to reroute No. 19-21; the death toll reached fifty-five, not "54"; and the wreck occurred on the Chicago Great Western, not the "Chicago & Great Western." Likely, this memorial will soon stand alone. The Chicago & North Western Transportation Company, which acquired the CGW in 1968, plans to

abandon this historic piece of line and then little will be left to recall the horrors of that March morning in 1910. □

Note on Sources

The general subject of railroad mishaps in the United States is covered in Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *Notes on Railroad Accidents* (New York, 1879) and Robert B. Shaw, *A History of Railroad Accidents, Safety Precautions and Operating Practices* (Potsdam, N.Y., 1978). Of more limited value is Robert C. Reed, *Train Wrecks: A Pictorial History of Accidents on the Main Line* (Seattle, 1968).

Details of the wreck near Green Mountain appeared in area newspapers, with the *Marshalltown Times-Republican* providing the best coverage. *The Thirty-third Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners for the Year Ending December 4, 1910* (Des Moines, 1910) likewise contained valuable information.