
Orders Misunderstood

An Illinois Central Train Wreck at Raymond by Fred J. Pierce

When Illinois Central passenger train No. 2 steamed serenely out of Waterloo, Iowa, at 2:33 A.M. on June 19, 1903, a terrible destiny waited just seven miles away. Any notion of an impending disaster was far from the minds of the train crew, mail clerks, and many passengers aboard.

Passenger train No. 2 routinely left Fort Dodge eastbound and arrived in Waterloo about 2:00 A.M., where it would meet a train coming from Minneapolis. In Waterloo the cars on the Minneapolis train were usually connected to No. 2 headed for Chicago. On June 19, however, the Minneapolis train was almost an hour and a half late. Train schedulers had decided that No. 2 would leave at its regular time and that when the Minneapolis train arrived in Waterloo, a second section would be made up and would depart for Chicago. Passenger train No. 2 continued on its way.

John R. Griffin, from Waterloo, was the engineer of the passenger train. The locomotive was a relatively new "Prairie" type, considered the ultimate in rail motive power when first put into use. It pulled an express car, a mail car, two smaller freight or baggage cars, four coaches, and two passenger cars.

The predawn hours were calm, and the exhilarating air was fragrant with the pleasant odors of a growing outdoor world. But it was still dark, and no moon revealed the varied

features of the landscape as the train picked up momentum after leaving the Waterloo depot.

In less than a half-hour, passenger train No. 2 reached a place referred to by trainmen as Raymond Hill, a quarter-mile west of the Raymond depot. There the terrain sloped downward into Raymond from the east and the west. The train traveled at top speed, accelerated by the downward slope.

Another train, freight train No. 87 pulled by Engine No. 44, was coming from the east. It, too, moved at top speed.

Fate decreed a further tragic twist: the trains were headed toward a deep cut and a curve where vision was almost totally obscured. At another place their headlights, though dim by today's standards, could have been seen.

At about 3:00 A.M. the freight train and passenger train collided head on. The terrific crash almost welded the two locomotives together. Two lead cars of the passenger train were demolished, and seven freight cars were splintered to kindling. The sound of escaping steam mingled with the cries of the injured and dying.

The wrecked trains lay in complete darkness; dawn had not yet broken. Nearby farmers and Raymond residents arrived with lanterns to help in the rescue work. The two locomotives, seven freight cars, and two lead cars of the passenger train lay scrambled in a pile as high as the telegraph poles. Other

freight and passenger cars were derailed and in various degrees of damage.

In an account published in the *Dubuque Morning Telegraph*, June 20, C.J. Mekkleston, a passenger, described the crash and the time leading up to it:

We pulled slowly out of Waterloo and gained a high rate of speed as time passed. When about 7 miles this side of Waterloo near Raymond, after the engineer whistled for the approach, an awful crash came. Everybody was shaken up. Women and children ran about crying and trying to get out. Conductor Quinlan and the newsboy held them down well and assured them that there was no danger. The crying and wailing continued for a long time. Several men, of which I was one, managed to get out of our car and we immediately went forward to the front of the train. There were no lights and those which had been on the train were extinguished. After a little time had elapsed a couple of lights were secured. Farmers came to the scene. The

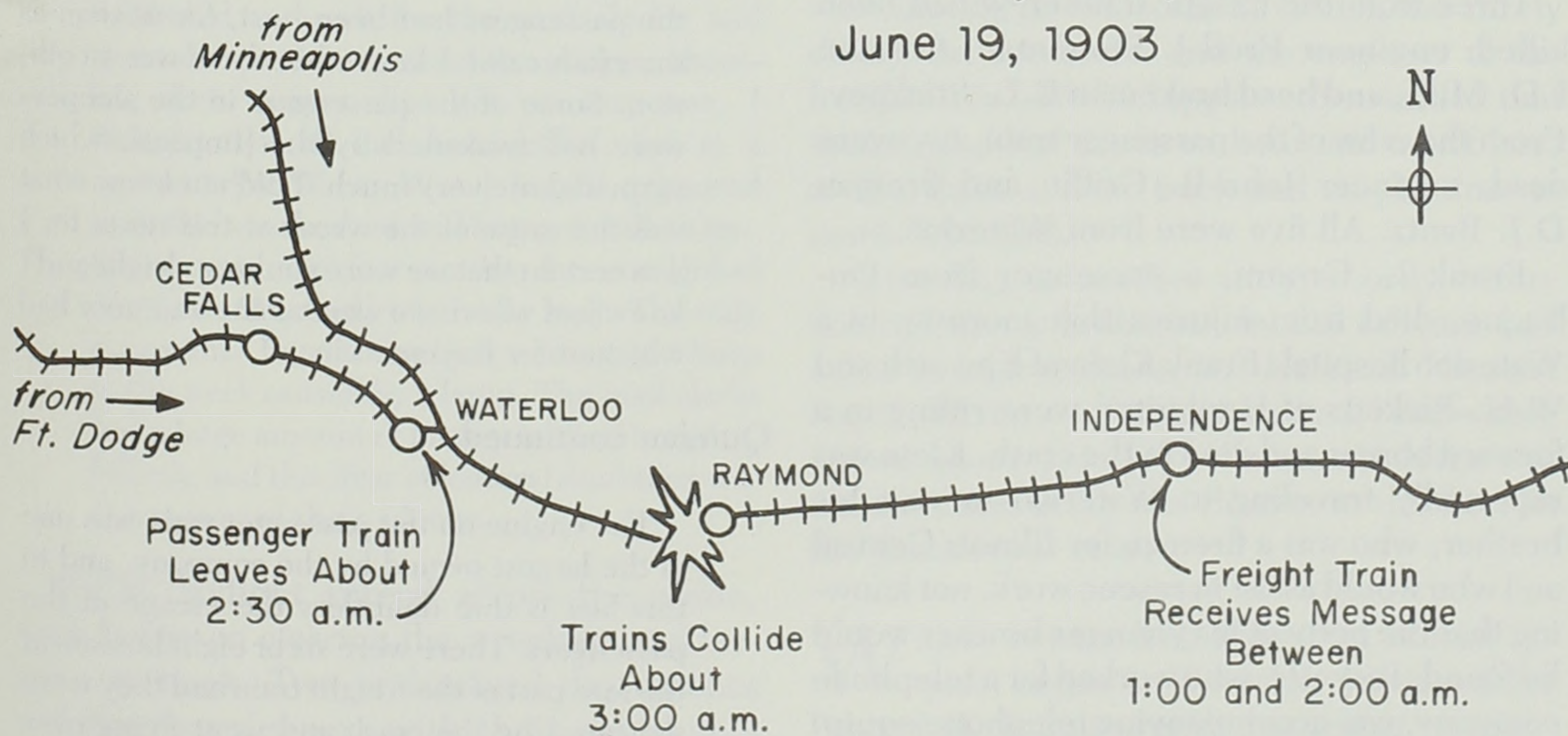
sight was appalling. The wreckage was piled high. Groaning and cries for help were heard on all sides.

Passengers, too, tried to help the injured. The same news story reported that "A woman passenger entered the baggage car and took off her jacket and started in to work. To the injured she was a comfort. Through long hours of the morning she remained with the dying and dead. She worked hard attending to their wants. She modestly refused to give her name."

E.N. Birdsall, a passenger from Waterloo, had been sitting at the window smoking a cigar as the train approached Raymond. He had heard the engineer give the signal and shut off the steam to go down the grade. "While rounding a curve," he explained in a *Waterloo Daily Reporter* story on June 20,

the trains came together. There was nothing seen of the freight engine. It was smashed and covered by debris. The cars were piled up

Wreck at Raymond, Iowa
June 19, 1903



high. The front cars of the freight train were telescoped. Groaning was heard on all sides. When the shock first came, the cushions on the seats were thrown in the air. I was thrown underneath a seat on the opposite side. The men on the car started the relief of the victims as fast as they could.

We found Griffin [engineer of the passenger train] at the right of his engine with his legs cut off and covered with debris. When day began to dawn we walked to the right side of the wreckage. In a ditch a little distance from the scene, Engineer Stoneman of the freight train was found. He appeared to have been killed instantly.

Rescue work began immediately. At the time of the crash the operator of the Raymond depot, which was only a day station, had been asleep at his home nearby. He went to the depot at once and notified division headquarters at Waterloo and Dubuque. Every available doctor in Waterloo was called to the train there, and both cities rushed relief trains to Raymond. The Waterloo train carried the injured and dead back to Waterloo.

Three from the freight train crew had been killed: engineer Fred J. Stoneman, fireman I. D. Mills, and head brakeman E. L. Stickney. From the crew of the passenger train, two were dead: engineer John R. Griffin and fireman D. J. Bantz. All five were from Waterloo.

Frank L. Groom, a passenger from Dubuque, died from injuries that morning in a Waterloo hospital. Frank Klein of Epworth and W. H. Ricketts of Hopkinton were riding in a forward boxcar and died in the crash. Klein was reportedly traveling to Waterloo to visit his brother, who was a fireman for Illinois Central and who would assist in rescue work, not knowing that the body of his younger brother would be found. Ricketts, who worked for a telephone company, was accompanying telephone equipment destined for Hawarden.

Three men who were riding "blind baggage"

(stealing a ride) in a boxcar also died of injuries. Two were identified as John O'Neil of Syracuse, New York, and sixteen-year-old Earl Book, of New York City or of Murphysboro, Illinois, where his stepfather lived. A third man was not identified.

Several persons on the passenger train sustained bruises and a few broken bones, but none were seriously injured. The wooden coaches then in use provided little protection compared to the steel coaches introduced later. It was theorized that the large passenger engine took most of the impact and saved the lives of many passengers. Tom Quinlan was the conductor on the passenger train. In the *Dubuque Morning Telegraph*, June 20, his account of the moment of impact described little panic or confusion in the passenger cars:

Surprising as it may seem, the concussion was not as great as one would expect after seeing the wreckage. The passengers did not become greatly alarmed and there was little or no confusion, many not knowing what had happened and others thinking that we had merely made a sudden stop. I immediately went through the train to see whether or not any of the passengers had been hurt, for as soon as the crash came I knew that there was a collision. Some of the passengers in the sleepers were not awakened by the [impact], which surprised me very much. I did not know what was the cause of the wreck at this time, for I was certain that we were running alright and I knew just where we were as the engineer had whistled for Raymond.

Quinlan continued:

The engine on the passenger train was one of the largest owned by the company, and to this fact is due doubtless the escape of the passengers. There were six or eight boxcars in the fore part of the freight train and they were shattered by the crash and went flying over both engines. The wreckage was deep and difficult to remove. I could not see the freight

crew as I think they were buried beneath the wreckage.

In the freight train at least three others riding the "blind" were injured but survived. One of the injured was found hanging by his ankles in a shattered boxcar. Two young men stealing a ride on the outside of a passenger car had been put off at Waterloo but had gotten on again when the train started. One received a serious head injury and the other a broken arm.

Quinlan, quoted in the *Waterloo Morning Telegraph*, attested to the crews' sense of duty:

I do not know whether or not the men had time to jump. I do not think that they did, for the position they were in when found shows that they had remained true to their post of duty until the last. Moreover, we felt the application of the air brakes.

The train had not advanced two car lengths before the crash came. Going outside of the train, we began to look for the injured. . . . Griffin, the engineer of the passenger, was found lying under the engine, dead. Bantz, the fireman, was a little farther away. He was terribly injured and it was seen at a glance that he would die. . . . As soon as possible I instituted a search for the mail clerks, and several times I ran around the mail car shouting their names, but got no response. I thought that all had been killed, but in a moment [W.W. or W.A.] Ingalls appeared from the wrecked car and began to talk to me. He assured me that neither he nor [John] Crisford [Cresford] was badly hurt. The only injury that Ingalls received was a slight burn in the neck caused by a lamp. The mail clerks had a large amount of money in their keeping, I think, and this [fear of looters] doubtless was the reason of their silence.

While daylight spread across the scene, work began on clearing the wreckage and laying new track. Two undamaged day coaches and the two sleepers with their passengers were pulled back to Waterloo. With a new engine, a new baggage car, and a train crew,

the reassembled train was detoured on the Great Western as far as Dyersville, where it was switched onto Illinois Central tracks and started for Dubuque. It arrived at 11:30 A.M. With unusual composure, Conductor Quinlan managed to stay at his post and finish the trip.

Possible explanations of the disaster were quickly pieced together. Sometime between 1:00 and 2:00 A.M. the freight train had gone through Independence. There Conductor Charles Judd and Engineer Stoneman received a telegraphic order from Dubuque that stated, "Second No. 2, engine unknown, will run one (1) hour and thirty (30) minutes late Waterloo to Manchester."

Some people speculated that the wreck might have been caused by careless handwriting. According to one story, the order had been handwritten and although it stated that Second No. 2 was running late, the word "Second" had been abbreviated and written as "2nd" near the left-hand margin of the order sheet. The person reading the order might have inadvertently held his thumb over "2nd."

Without realizing that the passenger train was running in two sections (which was rarely done), the conductor and the engineer of the freight train both had apparently assumed that the regular No. 2 was an hour and a half late, giving them a clear track and ample time to reach Waterloo.

According to another story, shortly before the collision a brakeman in the caboose had asked to look at the order. He read: "Second No. 2 will run . . ." Then he asked, "But where do we meet No. 1?" A moment later the answer came as he was thrown to the floor in the thunderous crash.

Within twenty-four hours, an official inquest began in Waterloo. Justice of the Peace J.H. Kuhns presided as acting coroner. Jury members Frank L. McCune, C.W. Cotton, and A.S. Thompson heard testimony from

three witnesses — two freight crew members and the trainmaster from Dubuque. The other two men from the freight train who shared responsibility for orders — Stoneman and Mills — had been killed in the wreck.

The focus of the inquest was the order received by the freight crew. (The crew on the passenger train had received no order because passenger trains generally had right of way.)

Conductor Judd affirmed that he and Stoneman had received the orders, handed to each of them on hoops while the train was still in motion. According to the *Waterloo Daily Reporter* story on the inquest, Judd stated that

he entirely overlooked the word "second" and thought the order referred to train No. 2

which he supposed was running as one train. According to Mr. Judd's own statement the order was entirely legible and it was purely an oversight on both his part and [the] engineer that it was not properly read.

Trainmaster F. J. Bechley explained the procedure for distributing orders:

Engineers are required to read all orders to their firemen, who are supposed to also read and remember them, so that in case of any violation of the order on the part of the engineer the fireman can correct him. This same rule is required in the case of conductor and brakeman. There are just four men on every train who are responsible for the proper

The impact of the trains created a mass of twisted cars as high as the telegraph poles. (courtesy the author)



execution of all train orders and they are the engineer, fireman, conductor and rear brakeman.

Bechley stated that "These two men, up to this time, had good records as railroad men. In fact no one had any better, but they seemed to have entirely overlooked or forgotten that there was a first section of No. 2."

Rear brakeman M.F. Gerin testified that the order concerning a second No. 2 had not been read to him, nor had any mention been made of a second section.

The inquest jury ruled that the collision occurred because "the conductor, engineer, brakeman and fireman on said freight train No. 87 mistakenly misread the order they had received for the moving and handling of said train."

Waterloo citizens mourned the five trainmen who died at Raymond. The wreck was called Waterloo's greatest disaster in terms of loss of life. The *Waterloo Daily Reporter* compared the wreck to the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern wreck in May 1899 (in which more were injured) but confessed that it "did not so deeply affect the people of Waterloo, as none of those whose lives were lost at that time were residents of this city."

Area newspapers covered in detail the funerals of the five Waterloo trainmen. Griffin was a longtime resident of Waterloo, well known in the community. The minister presiding at Griffin's funeral eulogized, "He knew what it was to ride out into the darkness at a rate of thirty-five, forty-five, yea, and even a higher rate of speed. . . . Oft times with insufficient sleep and rest, he has been called to take charge of the monster steam horse, and for nearly a quarter of a century that he has been leading this life, he has never been found wanting, always ready when duty demanded."

Griffin was about 45 when he died. Stoneman, the freight engineer, was only 31. At Winthrop, Iowa, where his parents lived,

twelve hundred people attended his funeral at the Opera House. The Illinois Central provided a special train from Waterloo for members of different fraternal orders who wished to attend the young freight engineer's funeral.

News stories reported that both locomotives were smashed beyond repair. But evidently No. 1008, the passenger engine, was rebuilt. In a 1937 news release, Harmon Buckley, Illinois Central engineer, said that No. 1008 in the Raymond wreck was still in active service on the Freeport division.

By coincidence, a Rock Island 2-6-0 "Mogul" locomotive — involved in the Green Mountain train wreck on March 21, 1910, in which fifty-five died — also bore the number 1008.

There was not much coincidence, however, about the number of train wrecks at the turn of the century. Railroading was plagued with accidents caused by defective equipment, inadequate tracks, unsophisticated signal systems, and human error. Automatic block signals might have prevented the Raymond train wreck by alerting each crew to the presence of the other train on the track, but automatic block signals were rarely in use anywhere in the United States in 1903.

A June 19 story in the *Waterloo Daily Reporter* underscored the risk of trainmen misunderstanding orders and the generally "dangerous character of the life [trainmen] are called upon to lead. As one engineer long in the service said, 'We are always facing death when on the road with an engine.'" □

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article was compiled from newspaper coverage of the collision and inquest in the *Dubuque Morning Telegraph*, the *Waterloo Daily Reporter*, the *Waterloo Times-Tribune*, the *Buchanan County Review*, and other unidentified newspaper clippings handed down in the family of engineer Fred J. Stoneman and now in the possession of Stoneman's nephew, the author of this article.