

ILLINOIS CENTRAL TRAIN WRECK 1901

On a twenty below zero mid-December night at about midnight, passenger train number four known as the Omaha Special headed for Chicago, and a heavy freight number fifteen in route from Chicago to Freeport collided head on. This happened east of River Road killing at least eleven, possibly twelve people.

Due to the cold weather the passenger train was three hours late and running fast to make up time. The freight was supposed to take the siding at Irene to let the Special pass. There was a night operator at Irene and when he saw the freight pass through without stopping he telegraphed Rockford to hold the passenger, as there was no night operator at Perryville, but the passenger train was already heading east out of Rockford. As the Rockford Register stated "The trains were doomed when they passed Rockford and Irene."

While speeding toward each other preparations were being made to care for who would soon be dead or dying. The Rockford operator set in motion preparations to send a relief train to the scene with railroad personal, three doctors, and provisions to help possible victims. The relief train left Rockford at about two o'clock am stopping at Perryville to wake up the operator and from that point the glare of a large flier could be seen.

The conductor of the passenger was riding in the smoker and reported that without warning the rear of the car went up in the air and the seats were ripped from the floor and slid to the front trapping, the passengers beneath them. We said neither train sounded a whistle. The cars piled up upon each other and the boiler of the freight engine exploded. The wooden cars took fire which quickly spread and cut off all avenues of escape.

Before the relief train arrived the survivors were loaded into the way car (caboose) of the freight train. An engine from the east took them back to Irene and then back to the wreck scene where they were transferred to the relief train. This train took them back to Rockford where they arrived at about four a.m. The injured were taken to the Rockford Hospital and the uninjured were taken to the Nelson Hotel at the expense of the railroad.

Of the injured, one man lost an arm and another had a severe cut on his head. The rest of the injuries were relatively minor. The dead consisted of both of the engine crews and those trapped and burned in the front cars of the passenger train.

The engines collided with such force as to turn themselves around 180 degrees to point in the direction from which they came. The sudden stop ripped the baggage car roof off and it flew over the top of the engines and landed on the outer bank of the cut.

The monetary loss of the wreck was estimated at \$200,000 which does not seem to be high until you take into account another story on the same page of one of the papers. It stated that Miss Lillian Norton who was superintendent of postal finance in Washington was the highest paid woman employee of the federal government. She received a salary of \$2,250,00 per year.

Written by John Larson
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