

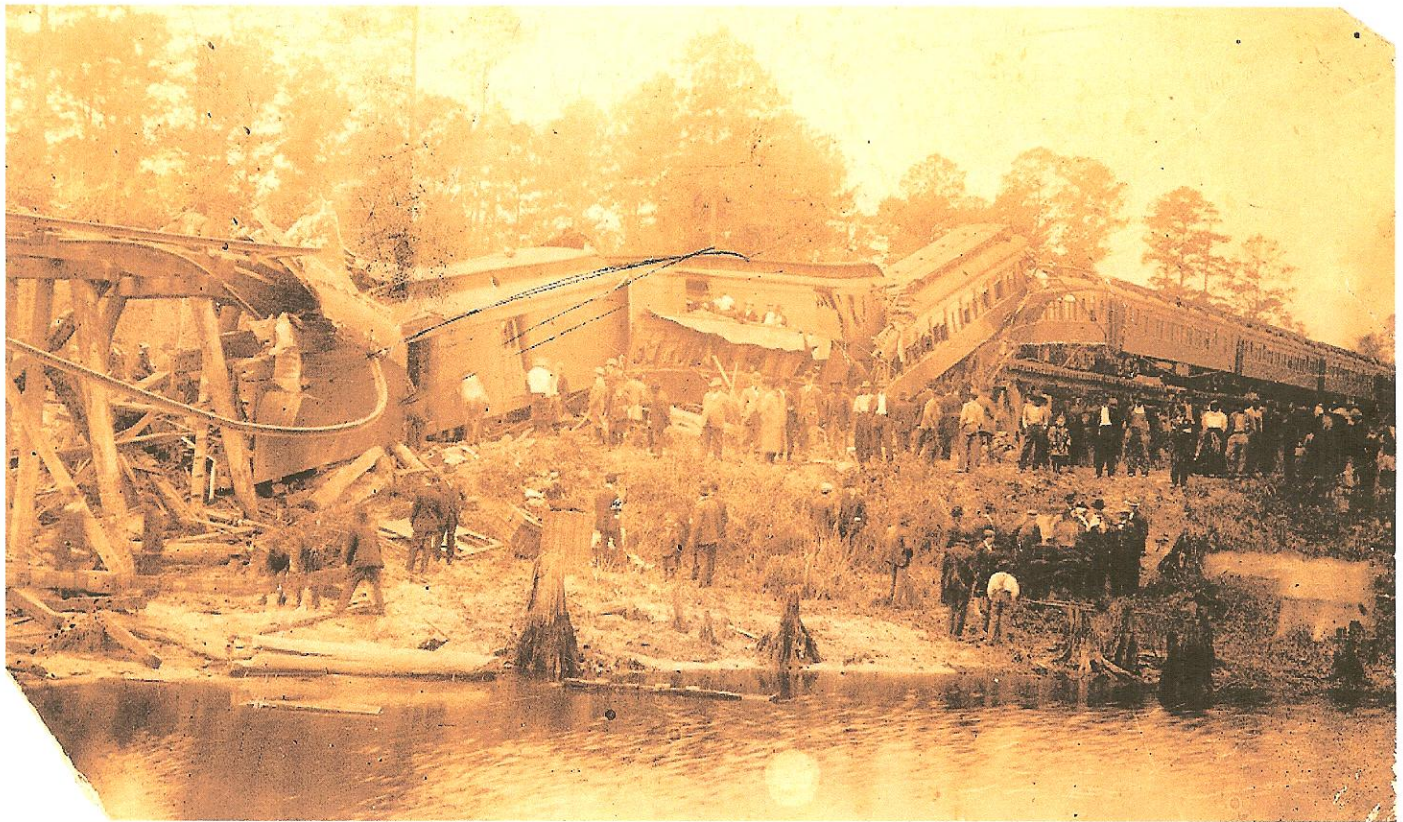
OLD BERRIEN

Newsletter of the
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Foundation

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THE GREAT ALAPAHA TRAIN WRECK—MARCH 25, 1911



In the early morning hours of March 25, 1911, one of the most tragic losses of life in Berrien County history occurred when the southbound *Dixie Flyer* passenger train left the tracks and tumbled into the Alapaha river just east of Alapaha. Ten were killed and scores more were injured when the main drive axle of the engine broke and sent the pullman, dining, and baggage cars and their passengers plummeting off of the trestle into the depths of the river below. 440 feet of trestle were destroyed by the wreckage.

The event filled the front pages of newspapers across the nation, from Kansas to New York. As so often occurred with events of that period of time, misinformation and embellishments made it difficult to sort out the facts of the tragedy. But with almost a century to sort through the pages of many of those newspapers, we can perhaps arrive at a more accurate picture of what brought about this tragic event and its results.

Train No. 95, known as the *Dixie Flyer*, was one of the most palatial passenger trains of the Atlantic Coast Line

Railroad. It ran from Chicago, Illinois to Jacksonville, Florida, via Evansville, Indiana, Nashville, Tennessee, Louisville, Kentucky, Atlanta, Macon and Waycross, Georgia. It was the fastest train of the system as well, making the journey from Chicago to Jacksonville in 36 hours.

The exact hour of the wreck is still mired in conflicting reports. The train was scheduled to leave Atlanta at 8:50 the night before, and was due in to Tifton at 3:25. It was due to cross the trestle at 4:00, however the company news release that same day indicated

that the accident did not occur until 7:20 in the morning. Some newspapers across the country varied in the hour of the accident, from 4:15 to 6:00.

However there were no reports of the rescue efforts being hampered by darkness, and it was almost 10:00 before anyone arrived in Tifton, just 15 miles away, to notify authorities. So the 7:20 time frame is probably right. The train may not have been running on schedule.

The cars plunged into the river without a moment's warning to the sleeping passengers. The locomotive never left the track, but the tender was derailed and the tank tumbled to the bank of the stream.

The trestle is about a half mile long, but the river was low and at the point of the accident was not more than 50 yards across. The express and baggage cars, two day coaches and one Pullman were piled in an indescribable mass in the center of the stream, but fortunately few of the passengers were carried beneath the water.

The first-class coach, a new steel car, was driven through the sleeper. In this car A. F. Baumwart, of Henderson, Ky., was instantly killed, while his wife beside him, escaped with slight injuries.

J. P. Woodward, the express messenger, was killed and the Baggage-master, J. E. Powell, was fatally injured by bridge timbers being driven through their car. Conductor Charlie J. Parnell, of Savannah, and a negro porter, named Simmons, were instantly killed in the second-class coach when it was telescoped by the baggage car. Tifton lumberman, Warner Culpepper, was also killed.

A couple married just 3 days earlier in Roland, Illinois, were severely injured as they slept in adjoining berths. W. D. Fletcher, a real estate businessman from Tampa, Florida, survived with a broken arm and dislocated shoulder. His wife did not.

And finally there was John T. Watson, of Kissimmee, Florida, who was traveling with his fiancée, Elizabeth Shippey. Miss Shippey made a sympathetic impression on the rescuers with her winsome manners and resolve to not leave the scene until the body of her lover could be retrieved from the wrecked Pullman



The site of the accident, as it appears today, is almost as remote as it was in 1911. The railroad bed has been abandoned and the tracks removed. Jimmy Griffin points out the small rotted stumps which are the only remains of the original trestle. Newer creosote timbers replaced the old, and concrete pylons replaced those.

car. She ceased her vigil when she identified him by the signet ring he wore.

As might be expected, the early reports of the cause of the accident ranged from failure of the trestle, to the failure of the engineer to see a problem on the tracks. This theory was offered because the dark, long shadows of the Spanish moss, hanging from the trees approaching the trestle, blocked his view.

However the engineer, a Mr. Greene, pointed directly at the broken main axle of the locomotive as being the cause.

An early witness to the gruesome scene was H. J. Longshore, of Atlanta. In his own words, printed in the Atlanta Constitution on Sunday, March 26, he paints this horrible picture.

"I have seen a number of railroad wrecks," said Mr. Longshore "but this was the most horrible sight I was ever called upon to witness. I hope I shall never again see depicted the misery and



suffering and despair I found all around me the moment I reached the scene, which was in a short time after the wreck occurred.

"I talked to Engineer Green, who expressed the belief that it was only an act of Providence that he was not killed. He states that when the driving rod broke, the negro fireman had just climbed into his seat after filling the engine with coal. The break occurred on the fireman's side of the engine, and as the rod crashed through the air the first time, it struck the fireman's head and shoulder hurling him headlong from the cab.

"The engineer made a grab for his air-brake lever, but before he had time to use it, he too, was thrown head-long through his own window. As he was passing out, however, he managed to grab the window sill with his left hand and here he hung while the engine continued its wild flight over the trestle. When this was crossed he released his hold and dropped safely to the ground.

"The terrific force with which the broken driving rod was being hurled through the air may be [understood] when I tell you that I myself saw the end of a beam 12 inches square, which was broken squarely off by one blow of the terrible [shaft], as it whirled wildly about the moving engine. In another instance, the rod struck the four large supports under one of these cross pieces and literally demolished the tops of all four.



"The trestle, which is quite a long one, was literally torn to pieces from the point where the driving rod broke. It is almost impossible to see how so much damage might have been done by a rod so small in comparison no matter with what speed it was revolving.

"Everywhere were women crying and screaming and praying. Many of them had husbands or other relatives still pinned under the wreck dead or alive, and in many instances it was found necessary to place a burly negro on either side of them to prevent their rushing under the wreck which was in danger of falling.

"The majority of the men were little, if any, more collected than the women. They were running everywhere as though crazed, calling loudly for their loved ones or acquaintances, too panic-stricken to be of any material assistance in getting those pinned under the wreck out.

"There were two notable exceptions to this however. I have forgot the names of the two men, if I ever knew them, but there were two who had did noble work in their efforts not only to rescue the hapless victims, but to alleviate the suffering as much as possible. I think one man's name was Wooten. He was from Chicago. The other fellow was from Louisville."

Rescue trains were brought from Waycross and Willacoochee, and the injured were transported to the Coast Line's Hospital in Waycross. As the day

wore on, rain began to soak the rescuers and victims, continuing into the night.

Other train traffic was temporarily routed through Valdosta and back to Waycross. Remarkably, the trestle was cleared, repaired, and opened two days after the accident.

Soon caskets, carrying the bodies of the victims, headed back home for funerals—crossing back over the same trestle—the site of the "Great Alapaha Train Wreck."

On December 4, 2007, almost a century after the train wreck near Alapaha, Georgia, Jimmy Griffin and I called on Kenneth "Slim" Lee, a native of the Alapaha area, to help us find the site of the tragic event. He had fished and hunted the river all of his life and was quite familiar with the trestle, though he had not heard of the wreck of 1911.

As we drove down the narrow three-path lane of Autry Moore, just off of Highway 82, it was hard to imagine how the area looked in 1911. The dense woods are almost gone, replaced by open fields of Bermuda grass. Only upon reaching the old railroad bed, is there a hint of pines, standing amid sycamores and river oaks.

The rails were removed years ago and the roadbed is already being taken over by scrub brush and trees. A power line right of way is cut through parallel to the north side of the bed.

Arriving at the side of the river, upstream from the trestle, the formations of the most recent pylons stand out starkly against the wooded background. The elevation of the old roadbed across the river are barely visible. Of course the old trestle was cut away years ago and replaced with creosote timbers, but the rotted stumps from the bracework are still quite evident.

There was a certain peaceful haunting that permeated the late afternoon air. The flow of the black-stained river was hardly discernable, even with a carpet of oak leaves covering the surface. There was a sense that this place was still sacred ground.

—Bryan Shaw, editor

HISTORICAL PHOTO CHALLENGE, EDUCATION EXHIBIT, NEXT ON THE SCHEDULE FOR THE FOUNDATION

There is no rest for the members of the Berrien Historical Foundation. Even as the Veterans exhibit is still being viewed by many interested citizens, plans for the next sponsored event are underway.

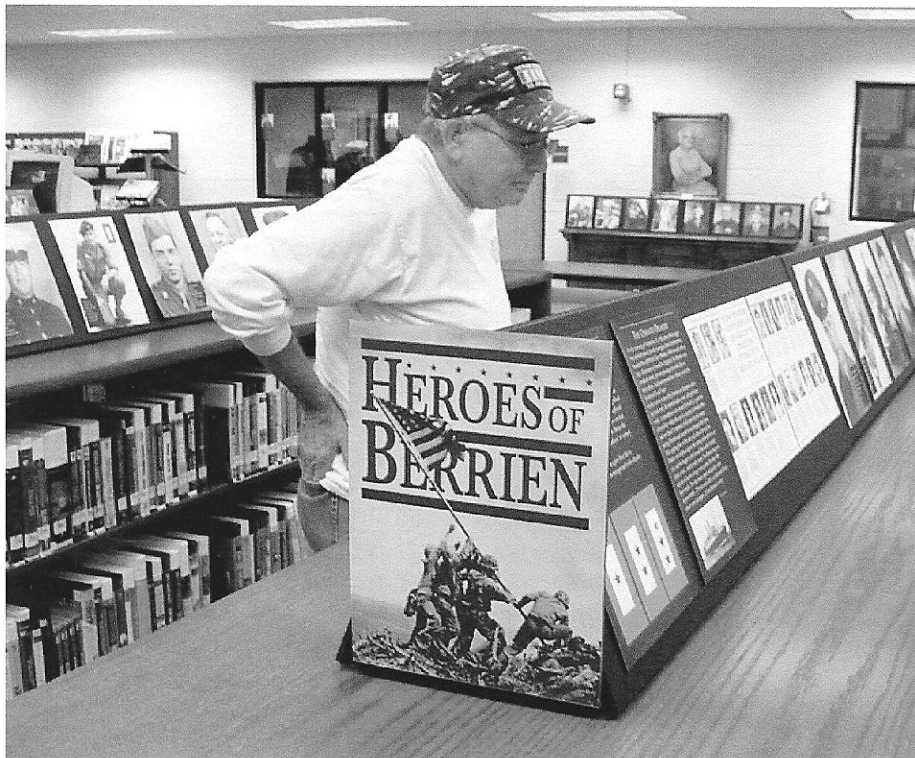
A photo challenge is being made to all Berrien Countyans to pick up their cameras and snap photos of old homes, farms, barns, wells, etc. that are existing landmarks in the county. The photos will be displayed in the Perry Library sometime in February.

And the gathering of photos, artifacts and information for the big display featuring the Education in Berrien County schools, is also underway. Each member of the BHF is encouraged to help gather any photos or artifacts that pertain to the educational process in the County for the past 150 years. A mid-summer opening is planned.

New Lois consolidated faculty 1936-37.

L to R, F to B: Arlo Snead, Maxie Patten, Alice Young, Gladys Gaskins, Earl Weaver. Bernys W. Peters, and Mary Jane Seymore (obscured)





“HEROES OF BERRIEN” EXHIBIT A HUGE SUCCESS AS HUNDREDS OF VETERANS AND RESIDENTS SEE FIRST BHF PROJECT

The first project, “Heroes of Berrien” created through the efforts of the Berrien Historical Foundation, is a huge success. The display featuring nearly 300 veterans of the military from Berrien County, has created more interest in the history of the county than possibly any other event since the 1956 Centennial celebration. Well over 1000 people have viewed the exhibit, and it continues to draw interest.

The photos, artifacts, and uniforms display has created an awareness that there is a worthwhile history to be preserved in Berrien County, and there are many willing to participate.

When the exhibit comes down after the first of the year, it will continue to serve a historical function. The photos will be included in a multi-volume collection of scrapbooks, and will include a one-page biography on each soldier represented in the exhibit. The collection will be housed in the Perry Memorial Library Genealogy Room.

The process of gathering the biogra-

phies will be a great challenge. However, it is expected that the citizens of the county will be enthusiastic about having their soldier’s biography included in this record. The Foundation is looking to the Students of Achievement from Berrien High School to assist in the project.

Photos will continue to be accepted, along with the accompanying biographies, as long as there is an interest and willingness of the public to submit them.

If you, or anyone else, wish to include a short biography of a service veteran, you are encouraged to pick up a sample biography and instruction sheet at the library. These sheets will assist in preparation of the written biography. Handwritten or typewritten biographies are welcome. The Foundation will also assist anyone who has difficulty putting their life profile into words, Contact Bryan Shaw at 563-0586 if you have any questions.



HERITAGE REGISTER
BERRIEN COUNTY GEORGIA

HERITAGE REGISTER PLAQUES—HELPING HISTORY, FUNDING

Funding for projects of the Berrien Historical Foundation is a constant need. The Heritage Register Plaques are created in an effort to not only help provide those needed funds, but to also identify and document the existing historical structures in Berrien County.

The 7x7, numbered, bronze-colored plaques and accompanying certificate are intended to identify any structure in Berrien County that is 50 years old or older, including: homes, farms, stock barns, tobacco barns, carriage houses, wells, bridges, etc. The plaque and certificate sell for \$30, and will be issued upon completion of a short application. This designation does not in ANY way limit the use of the structure. It is an honorarium only.

We also encourage you to attend the Foundation’s workshop, held on the first Thursday of each month, 7:00 p.m. at the Perry Memorial Library.

Contact Sponsors:

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BERRIEN HISTORICAL FOUNDATION