

THE GREAT CAHABA RIVER TRAIN WRECK OF 1896

by Marty Everse

A little over ten miles as the crow flies from Montevallo, what was the worst railroad disaster in Alabama to that time occurred. Here is the story.

Sunday morning, two days after Christmas, 1896, passenger train number 40, the Blocton accomodation, chugged slowly out of Birmingham on time at first light. The day would be bright and cool, and the train's two coaches were filled with miners and their families returning from Birmingham, taking advantage of the cheap excursion fares charged by the railroad during the holidays.

The trip along the Birmingham Mineral line, as it was called, sliced through the ruggedly beautiful Cahaba hills and valleys connecting the numerous mining camps and towns. Conductor Henry Hanbury thought his wife, Ora, and children, lone and Guy, would be enchanted by the route with its many trestles and deep cuts and took them along with him that day. Among the other passengers were Ellen Walker and her three children of Blocton.

Around 7 a.m., the train reached Toco. Nearby Helena resident Ed Echols climbed aboard. By 7:30, the train glided into Gurnee Junction and later paused briefly at Boothton before resuming the trip to the Cahaba River and then Blocton.

The great bridge over the Cahaba River was the scenic highlight of the trip. Twelve hundred feet long, the bridge provided a breathtaking view of the rocky shoaled Cahaba 110 feet below.

The engineer was the first to realize that something was terribly wrong with the bridge that day. There, on the center span, a rail was missing. He shut off the steam and put the locomotive in reverse. He was too late. The train, rumbling along at 20 miles an hour, lurched on to the cross ties and churned along violently until the bridge collapsed sending the passenger cars into the shallow water and rocks below where they soon caught fire from the heating stoves in the cabins.



Here crews are searching for human remains and clues to the cause of the tragedy. *Courtesy University of Louisville Archives & Records Department.*

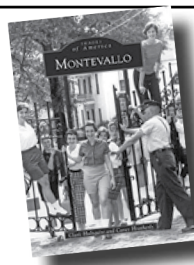
Initial reports listed 22 people dying that day. Those not killed in the fall were burned to death. Conductor Hanbury was trapped by wreckage and watched helplessly as his wife and children were engulfed in flames.

Ellen Walker was trapped in the twisted metal and shattered wood but only slightly hurt. Ed Echols survived, shaken but sound. He freed Ellen Walker and ran to the nearby mining camp of Hargrove for help. Ellen then rescued all three of her children, one at a time, from the inferno. They were unscathed. When the rescue train arrived, one child was sitting unconcernedly on a rock near the river bank, the others nearby.

Railroad officials reported that the wreck was caused by the removal of a rail by men intending to stop the rain to rob it. A ten thousand dollar reward was offered for their arrest. No one was ever convicted.

In a cruel twist of fate, Conductor Henry Hanbury was killed in September 1905 when a freight train collided with his passenger train at Woodstock, Alabama. He had remarried and left a wife and two small children.

Join us for our next meeting
Sunday, October 21st
2 p.m., Parnell Library



Guest Speakers:
Carey Heatherly
& Clark Hultquist
Authors of "Montevallo"