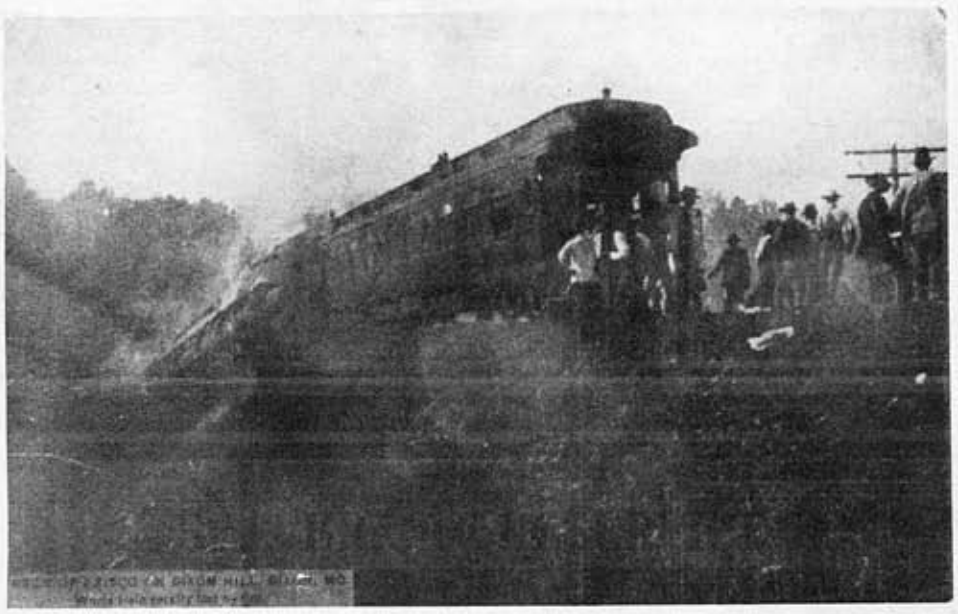
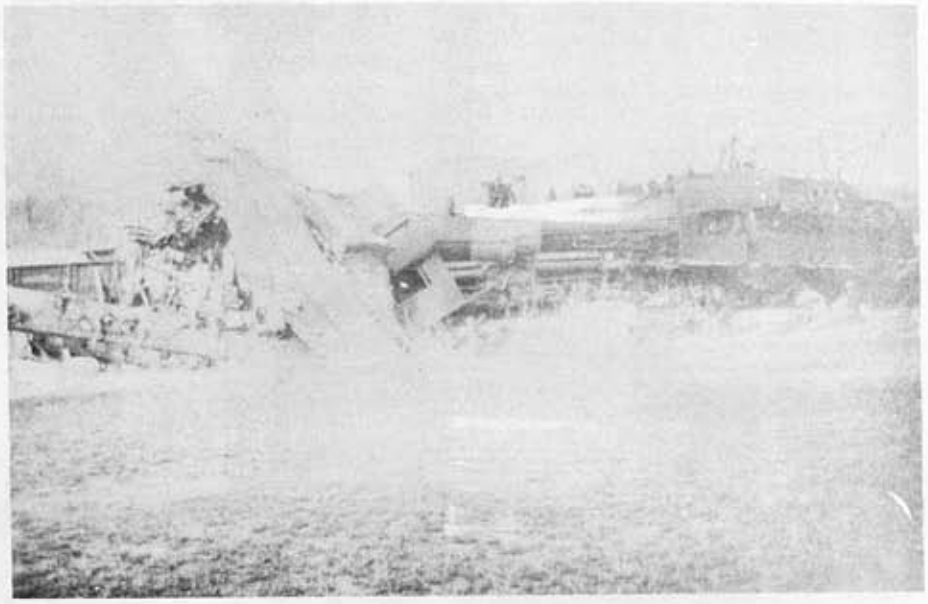
Dixon's 1906

Frisco Train Wreck

By O. Zark

(COURTESY OF THE DIXON PILOT, FEBRUARY 4, 1971)





A fourteen year old farm boy dangled from a rope tied around his waist, trying to steady and brace himself to get a solid swing with an ax, to cut off a trapped man's leg who was caught inside the lower end of an up-ended, burning railroad baggage car.

It was a pleasant spring morning, May 6th, 1906. Frisco passenger train number ten, one of the road's tight-scheduled trains, had been eastbound from Oklahoma City to St. Louis.

Dixon Hill, as it is still known, was the steepest grade between Texas and St. Louis. One sharp curve after another blended into its reverse curve to make the hill more difficult to negotiate, both up-grade and down.

As the train went into an eastbound, down-grade curve about two and one half miles east of Dixon, the engine left the tracks, plunged down an embankment, dragging most ot the train after it.

The engineer was pinned under the locomotive and died at once. The fireman was thrown clear, and was not severely injured.

The first baggage car crashed down, on end, onto the overturned locomotive. The heat from the firebox soon had splintered, wooden car on fire, still standing steeply on end.

The grinding, tearing crash of the passenger train rumbled down the valley and over the ridges, while dust, steam, and smoke rose to mark its position. The site of the wreck was about a mile northwest of the present Eagan cemetery.

Passengers, none of whom had been fatally injured, left the coaches and crowded toward the front part of the train, where they were joined, a few at a time, by people from the neighboring farms and hills. Among them were two young brothers who had been planting corn about a mile away.

In addition to the near panic, awe and consternation inspired by the spectacle of a wrecked passenger train, interest was centered on the burning baggage car.

One of the baggagemen, going about his usual duties in the car at the moment of the wreck, had been tumbled to the lower end of the up-ended car along with most of the car's contents. His left leg was pinned to the wall by a steel safe. He was unable to free himself in spite of his most desperate efforts.

The sound of crackling flames, tendrils of curling smoke and rising heat told him the car was burning.

The side door, midway of the length of the car, was crowded with panicky on-lookers. Some shouted advice, others were too shaken to make a sound, others humbled by the terrible tragedy taking place within the car.

The trapped baggageman finally gave up to the awful realization that he could not free himself by his own efforts, but must have help from others to escape a horrible death. He beseeched someone, anyone, to cut off his leg.

It was plain to all that it was the only way to save the man, and time was running out. A member of the train crew produced a small ax, as of the type carried on trains for emergency use. The slope of the car was too steep for a man to go to the lower end of the car without support of some kind.

A trainman came running with a section of bell rope to lower someone to the trapped man's assistance. Then the question as to who would be lowered at the end of the rope. Some begged off, saying it was simply impossible for them to cut off a man's leg. One of the two farm boys volunteered, and little time was spent in agreeing that he be the one.

Only those who have been called on to do so know the steel nerves it takes to chop off, with an ax, a living, conscious fellowman's leg, no matter how great the necessity.

The boy was lowered head first at the end of the rope, and for several minutes, that seemed like ages to others, he made as valiant an effort to save another's life as was ever made.

It was impossible for him to get into a position to use the ax effectively due to the angle and slope of the car, the tumbled objects in the lower end of the car, and his pendulum-like swinging when he kicked away from the wall in an attempt to find a better position.

The air became unbreathably hot. The boy was pulled up for fresh air. He asked to be lowered again. The last stay was short. The heat was past endurance. The cries of the baggageman became farther apart as smoke seared his lungs and numbed his brain.

The burning end of the car fell out onto the burning locomotive in a great burst of flames, gas, and smoke that drew a merciful veil over the horrible scene.

The crowd fell back. Some prayed. Some cursed. Some wept. Some turned and stumble away. The stench of a burning human body hung heavy in the air.

Amid all the excitement, shock and near panic, men stood mute, eyes misty with admiration and respect for the lad in overalls, who stood silent and exhausted, slowly untying the rope from around himself, sick at heart that he had failed to save the man. That he had made an heroic effort brought no consolation.

Since that morning the tall white oaks and rocky hills around have kept vigil to mark this place of tragedy and heroism.

The boy grew up to be one of the best known and respected men of his community.

He was Fred H. Gilbert.