

The Story of Billy Westall and the Westall Monument

By Milly Roeder

Some time ago, a traveler from Arkansas drove along the popular North Fork of the South Platte River. About halfway through the canyon, near where the Dome Rock railroad station used to be, he discovered a huge monument

with WESTALL incised on

it. His curiosity was raised and he asked himself, "Who might be so important to be buried here?"

Like many others, he looked up and saw the medallion of polished blue granite with the letters A.O.U.W.

engraved in and around a crest over an anchor. On the upper edge he saw written "CHARITY, HOPE AND PROTECTION," and on the lower one, "Tell my wife I died thinking of her." The traveler may not have seen the incision on the grass-covered back of the monument toward the river with the name of the manufacturer of the stones, "BAHAY & BOHM, DENVER." The traveler began to ask around, but didn't get too many answers. Most were pretty vague. One man told him that he didn't know much about the monument,

but that he rode the train to Denver as a child.

The traveler wasn't the only one to wonder about the mysterious assembly of hewn granitic rocks that sits so dangerously close to the river bank. Many others, like fishermen, occasional tourists, or

Then one day our traveler historian was having "lunch in a restaurant in Shawnee, (where) a man told (him) the story about a rock slide, the death of an engineer, and his dying words."

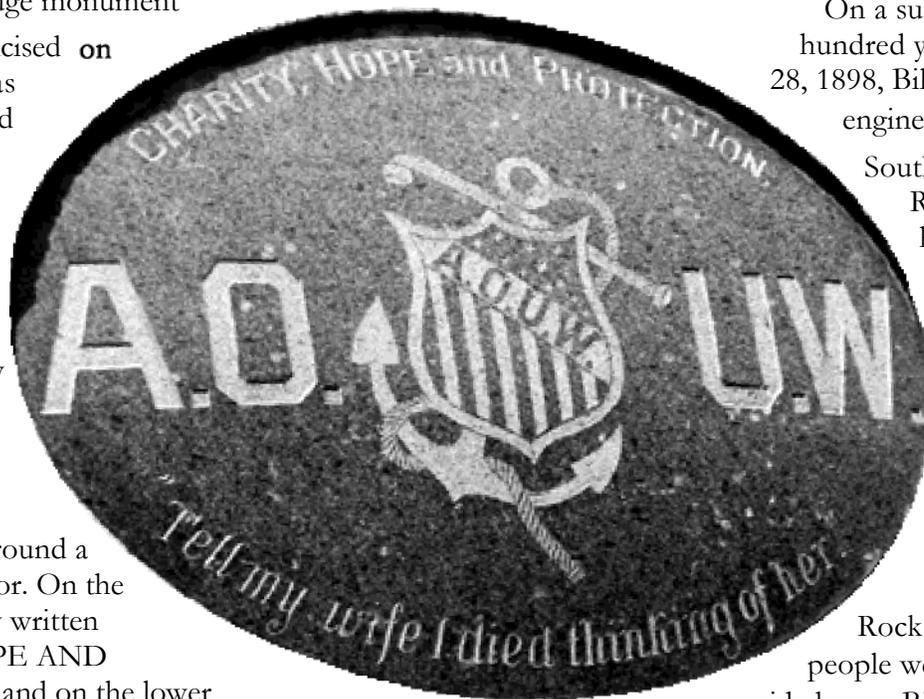
That brings us closer to the real story.

On a summer afternoon a hundred years ago, on August 28, 1898, Billy Westall, the engineer of the Denver,

South Park and Pacific Railroad, was guiding his train with about

450 travelers back to Denver, after what must have been a delightful day in the mountains. Some passengers had boarded the train in Pine. But before arriving at the Dome

Rock Station, where more people were waiting for their ride home, Billy Westall discovered piles of sand and gravel covering the tracks. A cloudburst to the north had washed out the valley of a small stream that fed into the river. Loyal to his human freight and trying to avoid a disaster, Westall slowed the train to decrease the impact. His fireman jumped to safety just in time. The train hit the pile of debris and keeled over, and the engineer was pinned in, seriously injured. His excursionists got away scared and



curious historians, couldn't satisfy their curiosity, either. Dr. James King of Evergreen heard some wild story of a man from England who said, "I am told on good authority, that this is a grave of a guy named A.O.U. Westall, who used to own a humongous chunk of land around here." Another one told him, "that the huge stone marked the vanished town of Westall, and the rock was the cornerstone of the town hall."

later were taken home to Denver by another train. John L. Green of Buffalo Creek recalls that Westall “was taken back to Buffalo,” and, “he died of his injuries later that night in the Buffalo depot.” While in the arms of his fireman “Buddy” John Nichols, Billy Westall uttered his last words, “Tell my wife I died thinking of her.”

William G. Westall, who was popular with his passengers, his crew and the people along his route, was buried at Riverside Cemetery.

A year later, on September 4, 1899, Westall’s comrades of the A.O.U.W., the Ancient Order of United Workmen, erected the impressive monument for him. Nearly all of the officers of the grand lodge were expected to take part in the ceremonies of unveiling the monument. Former passengers came by special train to pay their respects, together with a band and a men’s quartet. Caterers from Denver took care of refreshments. Locomotive engineers from the South Park Division also planned to come. John D. Vaughn expressed his thoughts for all with his poem, which, according to Dr. James King, was set in music and recorded by a WPA folk music project in 1935. Unfortunately, the recording was lost in a fire in 1953.

News about the incident soon spread throughout Jefferson County, the state, and even the country. For many years, school kids heard the tale from their grandmothers. By erecting the monument, William Westall’s friends tried to bring the memory of this heroic man and his tragedy to people’s minds. But there is no sign on the monument to tell the story to the travelers and other curious people.

Not only is the story of Westall and the monument intriguing. For years, people have been concerned about the safety of the monument itself. Although the beautiful,

rusticated granite surface shows little sign of deterioration or destruction, and motorized intruders are kept at bay by boulders placed along the road, the real threat comes from repeated floods that are washing out the ground, especially after the forest fire of 1996 near Buffalo Creek. The monument is without a foundation and sits on soggy, unstable soil. The individual stones, of which it was assembled, have come apart. The monument is tilting toward the river

Photos by Milly Roeder



The Westall monument sits in the flood plain of the South Platte River, which has caused the large granite monument to sink and lean. The monument is separating from its foundation and needs immediate attention.

and threatening to fall into the water, and is thus a hazard to unsuspecting fishermen or playing children. In addition, if thrashing waters should knock the monument to the ground, vandalism would be the next threat.

Letters and articles have been written about the monument in the flood plain of the North Fork. All are concerned about its history and its future. Many have suggested how to rescue and restore it. Some want it near Westall’s grave in the Riverside Cemetery, others would like to see it

in an open air museum. However, both ideas would take the monument out of the historic context in which it should remain. The best recommendation, to secure and restore the monument and retain the integrity of its original environment, was made by Ken Noteman of the Jefferson County Historical Society. He proposes to temporarily move the monument to a safer place while constructing a suitable foundation—then reinstall the monument in its original location. A suitable marker to identify the site also should be added.

The accident took place one hundred years ago. Next year is the one-hundredth anniversary of the erection and dedication of the monument for Billy Westall. What a fitting time to restore and preserve the monument for the celebration and remembrance of this heroic man. Fishermen, playing children, occasional travelers, and curious historians would surely be grateful, and an important piece of Jefferson County history would be preserved.

I would like to thank Brian Lang, curator at the Jefferson County Historical Society in Evergreen, for his untiring assistance with the research for this article. MR

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