

Jeffco Students Champion Westall Monument

Based on materials prepared by Frank Reetz



About halfway through the canyon of the North Fork of the South Platte River stands the Westall Monument, honoring a railroad engineer who put the lives of his passengers before his own life. Near the location of the Dome Rock railroad station, the monument poignantly states, “Tell my wife I died thinking of her.”

A year later, on September 4, 1899, Westall’s comrades of the Ancient Order of United Workmen (AOUW) erected the impressive monument to honor him.

When JCHC member emerita Milly Roeder wrote an article in *Historically Jeffco*, marking the 100th anniversary of Westall’s heroic action, she noted that even though the monument “shows little sign of deterioration or destruction... the real threat comes from repeated floods that are washing out the ground, especially after the 1996 forest fire near Buffalo Creek.” It is in the flood plain of the North Fork of the South Platte River.

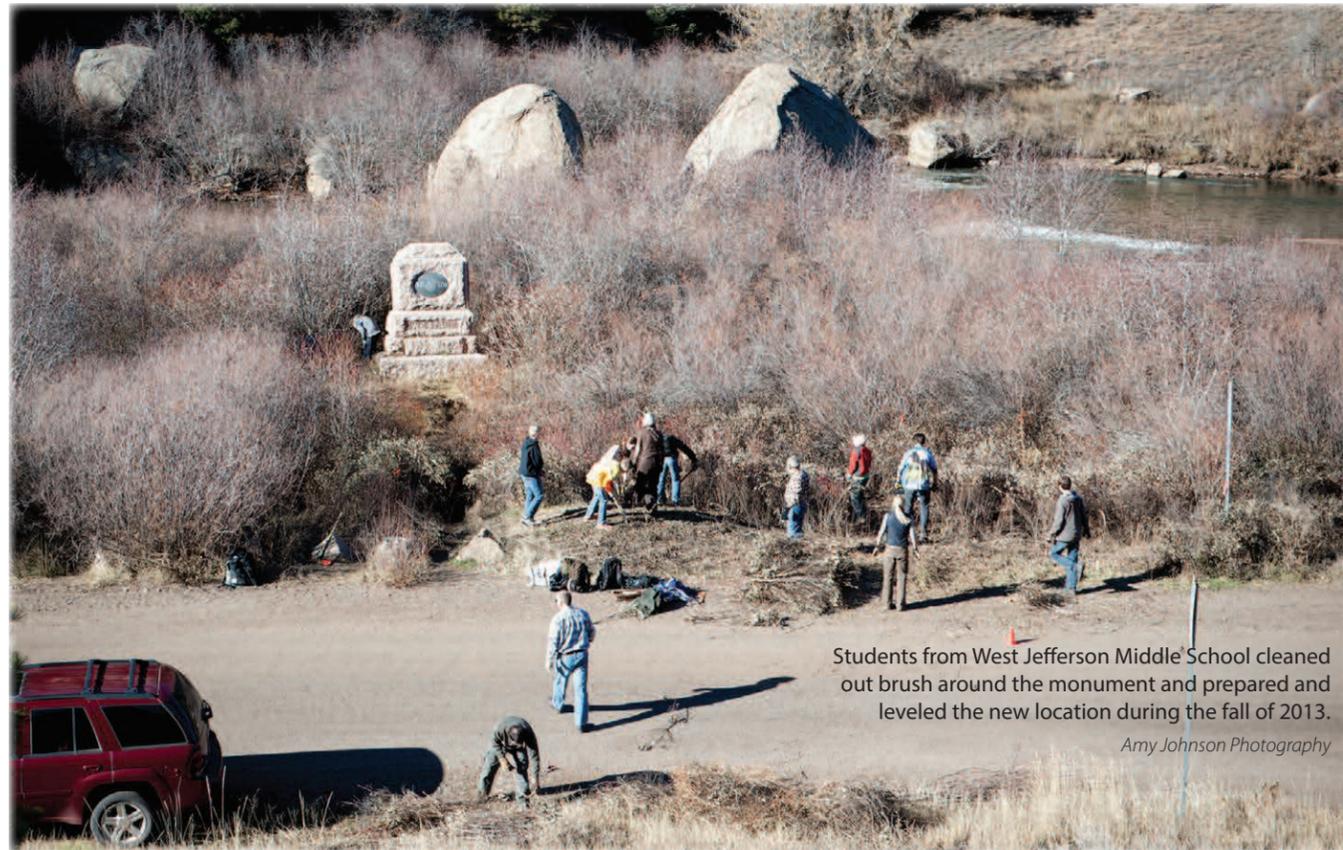
That concern remained largely unheeded until spring 2012, when Frank Reetz, a teacher at West Jefferson Middle School, started a search for an historic site that needed “championing” by young people in South Jefferson County. “It has always been my intention to couch student learning in authentic and relevant contexts,” he said.

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Tilting, gaps at the base, gullies near the monument, and the possibility of future floods threatened to damage or destroy the Westall Monument, shown here at its original site.

Milly Roeder

On August 28, 1898, William “Billy” G. Westall, engineer for the Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad, was guiding his train with about 450 travelers back to Denver. Before getting to the Dome Rock Station, where more people were waiting for their ride home, Westall discovered piles of sand and gravel covering the tracks. He slowed the train to decrease the impact. His fireman jumped to safety, but Westall was pinned in the wreck when the train hit the pile of debris and keeled over. He died later that night.



Students from West Jefferson Middle School cleaned out brush around the monument and prepared and leveled the new location during the fall of 2013.

Amy Johnson Photography

During the fall cleanup, students gathered at the monument in its original location.

Amy Johnson Photography



A Personal Westall Legacy

By Burdette Weare

In 1898, my grandfather, Elias Amos Haight, worked as a fellow engineer with Billy Westall on the Denver, Leadville and Gunnison Railroad. They were best friends, and figuratively speaking it was no accident that my grandfather resigned from the railroad following Billy’s death. Literally speaking, it was all about accidents. The best source on this subject, Mark Aldrich’s *Death Rode the Rails: American Railroad Accidents and Safety, 1828-1965*, reports a combined 2,262 collisions and derailments on American railroads during 1898, with 243 fatalities among engineers and their crews. Counting passen-

gers and pedestrians, along with fatal accidents among workers in railway shops and yards, the annual death toll exceeded 10,000!

According to the stories Grandpa Haight told me before his death from natural causes in 1949, the romance of the rails could not override the reality of the risks: exploding boilers, faulty brakes, flimsy trestles, fractured ties and tracks, not to mention snowslides and washouts. So, in the wake of the Westall tragedy and while still serving as the guardian for two sons of another fallen engineer, my grandfather retreated to 60 acres of irrigated land five

miles east of Morrison in Jefferson County. Here, close to the present-day intersection of Highway 285 and Kipling, he built a pretty little farmhouse flanked by the fanciest privy in the territory—all in preparation for the arrival of a bride (my grandmother) from his native Missouri. In 1914, my mother was born, and as they say, “the rest is history.” If history is about telling a story and explaining something—whimsical contingencies and transcendent forces—the Billy Westall story is as large and public as the history of the American West and as small and personal as the existence of Elias Haight’s grandson.



Aftermath of the train wreck at Dome Rock August 28, 1898, that took Billy Westall’s life. Denver Public Library, Western History Department, X-22234



Reetz then worked with Neil Sperandeo of Denver Water to develop a “research to action” project. Assistance was also provided by Colorado Preservation, Inc., and the History Colorado Center. Reetz started the three-year project when the students in his social studies class were in the sixth grade. Students were given the opportunity to join the Core Team.

Denver Water guided the students in making preliminary measurements and conducting research. They measured the volume of the monument’s blocks (courses), approximate weight of each course, distance from the road, and distance from the current river level. The students were assigned to write lengthy reflections of their visit and the process to that point.

During the 2012-2013 school year, the Core Team cleaned up trash and sketched ideas for landscaping proposals. Plans included bridges, parking areas, barbecue stands, bathrooms, picnic tables, signs, and paths. Coordinates were drawn to move the monument 40 feet closer to the road and out of the 60-year flood plain.

Top left: Students reflected on the meaning of the monument by writing poems, later compiled into a book.

Amy Johnson Photography

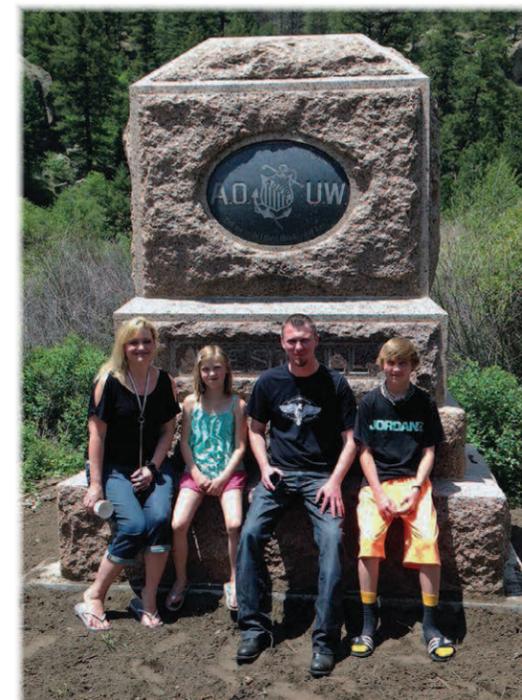
Top right: Bob Schoppe, president of the Denver, South Park and Pacific Historical Society, helped with the cleanup around the monument.

Amy Johnson Photography

The students then worked on fundraising plans. Bob Schoppe, president of the Denver, South Park and Pacific Historical Society, joined the Core Team. The organization awarded a significant grant to the project. Denver Water and the Anschutz Foundation also awarded grants.

The Core Team was joined by Adam Cornett, undergraduate from the University of Colorado at Denver’s History Department. His work began the process of developing interpretative signage for the two sites: the monument site and the actual train wreck site, three quarters of a mile upriver from the monument.

During early 2013, many of the students, now in Reetz’s eighth grade English class, wrote poems about the Westall Monument. Two books of poems have been edited to replicate the monument’s restoration process by placing students’ first drafts alongside their final poems.



Everyone likes tee shirts, including Hudson McCarthy and Rachel Shirlaw, members of the Core Team. Hudson designed the shirts that were given to all students and to the main project coordinators.

Frank Reetz.

Top left: Workers from Denver Water fitted the stone blocks of the monument in place in new location.

Denver Water

Top right: Members of the Core Team with teacher Frank Reetz and Milly Roeder.

S.L. White

The monument was rededicated in a ceremony, Friday April 18, 2014, located at Dome Rock along the North Fork of the South Platte River, in a location so desolate that the invitation stated in bold letters: “There are no facilities and no cell phone coverage at this remote site.”

On October 16, 2014, at the annual Hall of Fame Awards Ceremony, the Norman and Ethel Meyer Award for Historic Preservation recognized West Jefferson Middle School’s Gifted and Talented students and teacher Frank Reetz for their dedication and work to preserve and restore the Westall Monument. 📖

Source:
Roeder, Milly. 1998. Billy Westall and the Westall Monument. Historically Jeffco Vol. 11, Issue 19; pages 27-28.

Left: In June 2014, Reetz was working at the site, when he noticed a family checking out the wreck site. He discovered the father’s name is Robert Westall, great-great-nephew of hero Billy Westall. With Robert are his wife Jennifer, and their children, Jackson and Lauren. Frank Reetz.

Frank Reetz.