

Wreck victims honored



Redford Township sculptor Sergio De Giusti, originally from Maniago, Italy, created a sculpture commemorating the victims of the "Wreck of The Wabash." The work will be unveiled at Adrian's Oakwood Cemetery in September.

Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Adrian to honor 100 Italian immigrants killed in a fiery train crash in 1901

BY MICHAEL H. HODGES
Detroit News Fine Arts Writer.

The 1901 train wreck near Adrian was so horrendous it made the front page of the New York Times.

"Train Wreck and Fire Kill 100 in Michigan," read the headline above the fold. The men killed in the head-on collision between two trains at 6:45 the night before Thanksgiving were all Italian immigrants, riding the Wabash Railroad from New York City to mining jobs in Colorado and California.

"After the fire," says Metro Detroit artist Sergio De Giusti, who's sculpted a memorial to the victims that will be unveiled in September, "there was so little left that they buried them all in five coffins." The Wabash Railroad, he adds, always downplayed the number, insisting far fewer than 100 died, despite testimony from the train conductor.

These forgotten men may have perished 115 years ago, but their story — and the fact that they were buried in unmarked graves — moved Adrian residents, local Italian-Americans and the Italian Consul in Detroit to raise \$12,000 to cast De Giusti's bas-relief sculpture in permanent resin. No city funds will be used.

There will be a fundraiser open to the public Friday at the Italian-American Cultural Society in Clinton Township, and there's an ongoing crowd-sourcing campaign on Patronicity-

Date	Name	OSAGE	ROW
May 11, 1901	Wheeler, Anna May	1	5
June 30, 1901	Toussaint, Nellie	2	5
Sept 25, 1901	Campbell, Jeremiah	3	5
May 20, 1902	Victims of R.R. Accid.	4	5
Nov 20, 1901	"	5	5
Nov 20, 1901	"	6	5
Nov 20, 1901	"	7	5
Nov 20, 1901	"	8	5
Jan. 27, 1900	Plank, Edna	9	5
Dec. 31, 1901	Morris, William	10	5
Jan. 11, 1902	Hollis, Abasbeth	11	5
Apr. 2, 1902	Herringer, Anna	12	5
May 30, 1902	Tuboe, Charles A.	13	5
June 8, 1902	Holton, Ora	14	5
Oct. 28, 1902	Vendin, Joseph	15	5
July 16, 1902	Shane, Conrad	16	5
July 29, 1902	Jackson, George	17	5
Aug. 21, 1902	Coburn, Russell	18	5
Mar. 1, 1903	Stone, Walter	19	5
Mar. 11, 1903	Morris, Martha	20	5
May 20, 1903	Monroe, Mary	21	5
June 6, 1903	Huffman, Ovidia	22	5
Sept 27, 1903	Geo. Jerusha	23	5
Oct 27, 1903	Jergus, Lizzie	24	5
Nov. 3, 1903	Reed, Edna	25	5
July 3, 1904	Wheeler, Rose	26	5
Aug. 23, 1904	Deeds, Frank	27	5

Oakwood Cemetery

The remains of victims from a 1901 train disaster were buried in unmarked graves at Adrian's Oakwood Cemetery, and forgotten. Their location was just rediscovered by cemetery officials.

.com. Assuming sponsors meet their target, the sculpture will be unveiled Sept. 24 in a memorial ceremony at Oakwood Cemetery, where the side-by-side graves are located.

According to historic accounts, the rail car carrying the Italians virtually exploded on collision.

"They were all in an old wood-frame car," says Adrian Mayor Jim



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

The memorial to Italian immigrants killed in 1901 will be dedicated in Adrian on Sept. 24. The men were on their way from New York to jobs in Colorado and California mines when two trains collided head on near Morenci, Mich., and caught fire. "There was so little left that they buried them all in five coffins," De Giusti says.

Berryman, who helped spearhead the research project.

"Articles at the time said they were packed in like cattle. Lighting was kerosene lamps, and the insulation was sawdust. If they weren't killed in the crash," he adds, "they were cremated."

What body parts could be found were buried in Oakwood Cemetery, but in recent years nobody knew exactly where. So Berryman recruited cemetery Superintendent Denny Vesceilius, who's Italian-American,

and he spent three months poring through ancient logbooks until he found what he was looking for.

In a 1901 register, right between numbered graves for "Campbell, Jeremiah" and "Plank, Edna" was the listing, "Victims of R.R. Accid."

"I'll never forget the day I got the call, 'We found them!'" says Kyle Griffith, assistant superintendent for the Lenawee Intermediate School District who's been interested in the

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mystery for decades and first suggested to Berryman that the town should right the historic injustice on the disaster's 115th anniversary.

When he heard, Griffith adds, "It was like the old cliché — the hair on my arms stood up."

For his part, De Giusti says he'd never heard of the catastrophe until the Italian Consulate in Detroit called him to discuss a memorial. Neither had Domenico Ruggirello, president of the local chapter of the Committees of Italians Abroad.

"We were shocked when we heard about it," says Ruggirello, who's from Sicily. He adds that given the date, the men were probably from northern Italy, where mining companies did a lot of recruiting early in the last century.

What scandalizes Ruggirello as much as anything is that railroad officials didn't let a Roman Catholic priest from Detroit bless the remains the day after the accident.

"A priest from San Francesco

'Wreck of the Wabash' benefit

6:30 p.m. Friday

Italian-American Cultural Society,
43843 Romeo Plank, Clinton Township

Speaker: Laurie Perkins, author of
"The Wreck on the Wabash"

\$25 per person

To reserve tickets: (586) 991-0193

To donate online

Visit patronicity.com, and search for "Italian/American Train Wreck Memorial"

Church went to give the last rites," he says, "and they wouldn't let him. They chased him away. Maybe," he suggests, "they didn't want the reputation of the railroad hurt."

Italian Consul Maria Luisa Lapresa says no one on her staff knew about the catastrophe either.

"It was very sad for me to hear of it," she says. "I thought of the difficulty our immigrants faced in those years, and then these poor men tragically meet with death."

Lapresa is touched by Adrian's steps to honor the lost

men, and notes that the night of the catastrophe many local residents tried to pull people out of the inferno.

"The response of the people of Adrian is something the Italian community is very thankful for," she adds.

De Giusti's relief features the head of a Roman goddess, her closed eyes covered with a scarf. Laurel leaves, symbols of heroism, run up one side of the sculpture, while a railroad track frames the noble head on the other.

When the relief is cast, it will be erected in the middle of four side-by-side plots where the five caskets were buried, along with a marker explaining the history.

For Berryman, the memorial represents more than just doing the right thing. His grandfather immigrated from Great Britain at about the same time to work the copper mines in the Upper Peninsula, and, just like the Italians, took a train from New York to Michigan.

"This very well could have been my own grandfather," Berryman says.

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