

HE WAS SCALDED TO DEATH BY THE STEAM

This song was composed in 1923 by Henry Whitter, which makes it just over 100 years old. That is important, because compositions over 100 years old become “common domain”, which means I can reproduce this song here without infringing on Mr. Whitter’s copyright. As a point of information, for the songs I have published here that are neither traditional nor over 100 years old, I have obtained the songwriter’s permission to do so. The song tells the story of a famous railway disaster that occurred in 1903. The names and towns mentioned in the song are all in accordance with the actual history. Andrew (“Steve”) Broady was the engineer on Train No. 97, known as the *Fast Mail*, which had a reputation for never being late. Trying to maintain schedule, the train derailed at the Stillhouse Trestle near Danville, Virginia, killing 11 on-board personnel and injuring 7 others.



The Wreck of Old 97 at Stillhouse Trestle near Danville, Virginia, 1903. The photograph is believed to have been taken a few days after the occurrence of the wreck as the locomotive, [Southern Railway 1102](#), which had overturned, has been righted.

You will recognize that the tune is the same as The Kingston Trio’s *MTA*. The tune is originally from a song called *The Ship That Never Returned*, written by Henry Clay Work in 1865. You can hear *The Wreck of Old 97* as performed by Flatt & Scruggs here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=732g2a7pmpM&list=RD732g2a7pmpM&start_radio=1 or on the HFMS Audio Archive page at <https://www.houstonfolkmusic.org/AudioArchives> Flatt & Scruggs do the song in Bb, which for bluegrass players means the Key of G with the capo at III. If that’s a little high for you to sing, just slide the capo down.

THE WRECK OF OLD 97

By Henry Whitter

G **C**
Well, they gave him his orders in Monroe, Virginia sayin'
G **D**
Steve you're way behind time – this is
G **C**
Not thirty-eight, but it's old ninety-seven, you must
G **D** **G**
Put her in to Spencer on time.

Well, he turned around, and said to his fireman
Shovel in a little more coal
And when we cross this big wide mountain
They'll watch old ninety-seven roll

It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville
And lies on a three mile grade
It was on that grade that he lost his air brakes
See what a jump he made

He was going down that grade going ninety miles an hour
When his whistle broke in to a scream
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle
He was scalded to death by the steam.

A telegram came to Washington City
And this is how it read:
The brave engineer that run Old 97
Is lying in old Danville dead

Now all you ladies from me take warning
From this time now and learn
Never speak harsh words to your true loving husband
He might leave you and never return