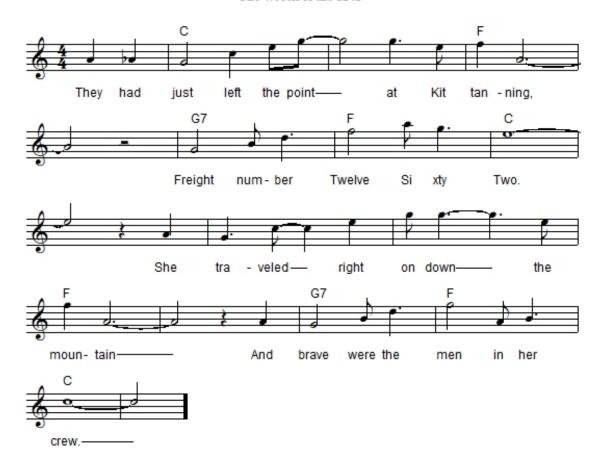# The Altoona Freight Wreck
## The Wreck of the 1242



*They had just left the point—— at Kit tan - ning,*

*Freight num- ber Twelve Si xty Two.*

*She tra - veled—— right on down—— the*

*moun- tain———— And brave were the men in her*

*crew.————*

1. They had just left the point at Kittanning,
   Freight number Twelve-Sixty-Two.
   She traveled right on down the mountain
   And brave were the men in her crew.

2. The engineer pulled at the whistle,
   For the brakes wouldn't work when applied
   And the brakeman climbed out on the car tops
   For he knew what the whistle had cried.

3. With all of the strength that God gave him
   He tightened the brakes with a prayer,
   But the train kept right on down the mountain
   And her whistle was piercing the air.

4. And on down the grade she went racing.
   She sped like a demon from Hell
   With the engineer blowing the whistle
   And the fireman was ringing the bell.

5. She traveled at sixty an hour
   Gaining speed every foot of the way,
   And then with a crash it was over,
   And there on the track the freight lay.

6. The engine was broken to pieces,
   The freight cars were thrown far and near
   And a mile up the track lay the wreckage
   The worst wreck in many a year.

7. It's not the amount of the damage,
   Or the value of what it all cost,
   It's the sad tale that came from the cabin
   Where the lives of two brave men were lost.

8. They were found at their posts in the wreckage,
   They died when the engine had fell;
   The engineer still held the whistle
   And the fireman still hung to the bell.

9. This story is told of a freight train,
   And it should be a warning to all--
   You should be prepared every minute,
   For you cannot tell when He'll call.

"The Altoona Freight Wreck", also known as "The Freight Wreck at Altoona" and "The Wreck of the 1262" was composed by Fred Tait-Douglas and Carson Robison shortly after the incident occurred on November 29th 1925. The song is not really a folk song but follows the pattern of other train wreck song like "The Wreck of the Old 97" and "The FFV". Cambiaire did collect the song from traditional singers in Tennessee which gives the locations as "Chitamia" (Kittanning) and "Latona" (Altoona).

The melody is similar to "Amelia Earhart's Last Flight" which was written by Red River Dave McEnery. Red River Dave also recorded this song.

The wreck as described by the Associated Press:

> Traveling at a speed variously estimated between 50 and 80 miles an hour, a runaway freight train was wrecked, two of its crew killed and one severely injured in one of the worst accidents on the middle division of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The accident occurred within two hundred yards of the Pennsylvania passenger station here at 8 o'clock this morning after the train had made a mad dash down grade from Kittanning Point, seven miles away.
>
> The dead are:
>
> F. C. Scheline, 48, of Sharpsburg, Pa., engineer.
>
> H. H. Tauber, 27, of Aspinwall, fireman.
>
> Seriously injured:
>
> G. M. Pineuspy, Pittsburgh, brakeman.

Uninjured was W. E. Perry who was the conductor. He and brakeman Pineuspy were out on the cars applying the manual brakes and jumped from the train before the crash.

Kittanning Point sits at the highest point of the Horseshoe Curve on the Pennsylvania Railroad's mainline just west of Altoona. In the era of steam locomotives, west bound trains usually required several additional "helper" locomotives to make it up the grade to the Horseshoe Curve. The helpers would then detach at Gallitzen, make a loop and return to Altoona. East bound trains would stop at Kittanning Point to recharge the air brake reservoirs before descending the steep grade to Altoona.

Two possibilities for the cause of the wreck are 1) the Westinghouse air brake system failed to maintain pressure or 2) the engineer did not stop long enough at Kittanning Point to sufficiently recharge the air brake system.

It was recorded by Vernon Dalhart on January 15, 1926, Red River Dave - "Altoona Freight Wreck" (1944) and Riley Puckett - "Altoona Freight Wreck" (1937).

It appears in the **Roud Folk Song Index** as #7128.

It was printed in Lyle's **Scalded to Death by the Steam** (1983), Cohen's **Long Steel Rail** (1981/2001) - "The Freight Wreck at Altoona/The Wreck of the 1262", Cohen's **American Folk Songs: A Regional Encyclopedia, in two volumes** (2008) - "Altoona Freight Wreck", Cambiaire's **East Tennessee and Western Virginia Mountain Ballads (The Last Stand of American Pioneer Civilization)** (1933) - "The Wreck at Latona" and Burton and Manning's Folksongs (1967) - "The Freight Wreck at Altoona".