

The Kate Shelley Story

This is the remarkable story of a 17-year-old girl who with an extraordinary act of bravery saved many lives and consequently had the Bridge between Boone and Ogden in Iowa, 184 feet above the Des Moines river renamed after her for her service to the railroad. Poems and books were also written about her story .

Kate was born in Loughaun, Dunkerrin, in December, 1863 and was only nine months old when her parents Michael and Norah Shelley emigrated with many of their neighbours from Offaly county. The Shelleys spent some time in Freeport, Illinois, with relatives before heading west and settling on a quarter section of farm land near Moingona in Boone county. The land was not prime Iowa farm land and Michael finally got a



job as a section hand on the railroad which was growing to meet the demands of Boone county mines. The Shelleys finally built a small frame house on the ground which was only a short distance from Honey Creek, a tributary of the Des Moines River and within sight of the railroad's Honey Creek bridge. Joining the family were siblings Margaret, Mayme, Michael Jr. and John.

When Kate was 12 tragedy struck the Shelley household. Her father, now a section foreman, was killed in a railroad accident and shortly afterward Michael Jr. the oldest of the two boys, was drowned while swimming in the Des Moines River. Mrs. Shelley's health broke under the strain and Kate took over as head of the household. The young girl who was struggling to keep her family together could never have dreamed of what life held in store for her.

July 6th 1881 started out as a clear day but by dusk thunderstorms were rolling into the area. The storms were heavy and stiff winds blew through the valley. Heavy lightning lit up the skies. The Shelleys kept a wary eye on the storm. Honey Creek, already high because of recent heavy rains, continued to rise threatening a stable halfway between the Shelley home and the creek. Kate threw a cloak over her shoulders and waded through the mud to the stable to release the animals and let them fend for themselves.

Kate and her mother continued to keep an eye on the creek as the night wore on. Coming from a railroad family both women knew of the dangers that a flood on Honey Creek could present. At about eleven o'clock Kate and her mother heard old No. 12 with four people on board crossing the nearby Des Moines River bridge. The four men aboard the train, Ed

Wood, George Olmstead, Adam Agar and Patrick Donahue were to make a run to Boone and then return to Moingona. As the train crossed the Honey Creek bridge, Kate and her mother twice heard its bell and then, as she told reporters later, "came the horrible crash and the fierce hissing of steam" as the engine plunged into the swollen stream below.

Despite the shock of the accident another thought raced through Kate's mind. Another train was due. The midnight express from the west would soon try to cross the same bridge. The express must be stopped when it arrived in Moingona but that meant someone must cross the long Des Moines River bridge. There was no one but Kate to try to make the crossing. Kate ran out into the storm, clothed in an old skirt and jacket, with a straw hat on her head and one of her father's railroad lanterns to light her way. She made her way to the washed out bridge. In the light of the lightning, she spotted two men - Wood and Agar - who had struggled to the temporary safety of the branches of a tree caught up in the flooding.

There was nothing she could do for the men in the tree but Kate knew she had to try to do something to stop the express from making its midnight run. Kate headed for the long, high Des Moines river bridge knowing she would have to cross it if she were to have any hopes of reaching Moingona in time to stop the express.

Crossing the bridge, even in fair weather, was not an easy task. The railroad knew of the dangers of the high bridge and prohibited anyone from walking on it. To discourage trespassers the railroad removed some of the flooring from the bridge leaving large gaps between the ties. Kate's first few steps onto the bridge proved to her how difficult the crossing would be when a gust of wind almost blew her off the trestle. If she were to cross the span it would have to be on her hands and knees.

Kate began the long crawl over the span, trying to light her way with her father's lantern. The lantern soon went out in the downpour leaving her in the dark, groping for each tie in front of her. Track spikes ripped at her skirt and splinters tore into her skin but she continued to cross the bridge with only the lightning to light her way. Finally she felt for a tie and felt solid ground instead. Running down the track she reached Moingona only to hear from one person. "The girl is crazy." She fainted.

When Kate came to a short time later, she was told that despite the misgivings of one person, the station agent had recognized her and realized that the express must be stopped. A rescue party was being assembled to go after the men from Old No. 12. She insisted on going with the rescue party, crossing the river on the rescue train en route to Honey Creek. She guided the rescue party to the west bank of the creek where the survivors of the wreck could be helped. A rope was thrown to Wood, still perched in a tree, who fastened down the line and then came ashore, hand over hand. Agar couldn't be reached until the waters began to recede, but he too, was eventually rescued.

In the meantime, word of the amazing story of the rescue and warning was sent nationwide and eventually internationally, first via the railroad's telegraph wires and then by the news media. Kate got no rest as reporters arrived on her doorstep for days after the event. Kate was worn down by the ordeal and the attention and four days after the crossing she was confined to her bed for three months.

The world was waiting for Kate when she finally recovered her strength. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to help the lass who had given her all. The passengers of the train she saved collected a few hundred dollars for her; the school children of Dubuque gave her a medal; the state of Iowa gave her another and with it an award of \$200; the Chicago and North Western Railroad presented her with \$100, a half barrel of flour, half a load of coal and a lifetime pass. A gold watch and chain came from the Order of Railway Conductors. Poems were written in her honour commemorating the event and letters of adulation came in from around the world.

The famous reformer and temperance leader Frances E. Willard, was inspired enough by the story to offer to contribute \$25 toward providing advanced education for Kate at Simpson College. College President Isabella Parks helped raise additional funds for Kate to attend Simpson during the term of 1883-84. Kate only attended one year and then returned home where she felt she was needed.

As the years passed, her notoriety waned and she eventually passed the examinations for a teacher's certificate and taught at a small school near her home earning a monthly salary of \$35. The money wasn't enough to meet expenses and in 1890 a Chicago newspaper discovered the Shelley's home was mortgaged on a \$500 loan at ten per cent interest. A payment was due soon and it appeared the Shelleys would be forced from their home. The public response to the news was immediate with the mortgage paid by the auction of an Armenian rug, wove in one of the display windows of a Chicago furniture store. Other cash gifts totalled an additional \$417. The Iowa Legislature voted Kate a grant of \$5,000 and a publisher of school textbooks put an account of her heroism into a "Third Reader" used in Iowa schools.

Over the years the North Western railroad had several times offered Kate a job and finally in 1903 she accepted their offer assuming the post of station agent at Moingona, the same station to which she had carried the news of the bridge washout. Twice each day she made the trip between her home and the station on foot. It was a route she knew well – being the same one she had travelled that night in 1881. The bridge she had crossed was replaced in 1900 by a new iron bridge, named for Kate, over the Des Moines River.

Kate never married; her full attention was taken by her work for the railroad. Kate worked up until shortly before her death on January 21, 1912.

Today there is no track past the Shelley homestead – the route having been moved several miles north of the original tracks. However, Kate Shelley is not forgotten with a Kate Shelley Museum in Iowa.