

Soldiers of Misfortune

Part I

Iowa Railroads versus Kelly's Army of Unemployed, 1894

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THE YEAR 1894 was a time of severe economic depression, the worst any American could remember. Because the federal government kept no reliable statistics of unemployment, no one knew just how many people nationwide were out of work, but in many places the number was large enough to exhaust the community resources available to help the jobless. The idea that the federal government should bear part of the responsibility for unemployment relief was not widely accepted and, in fact, was denounced by many as "paternalism," an undesirable state of affairs not far removed in their minds from socialism or communism. There were those, however, who believed that a mass appeal to Congress, a living petition that lawmakers dare not ignore, would bestir the federal government to create a variety of temporary public works jobs, such as building farm-to-market roads, that would benefit both the involuntarily idled and the nation at large. Such help became a cornerstone of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the early 1930s and has generally been accepted ever since as a legitimate function of the federal government, but when Jacob Coxey and others proposed a public works program in 1894, they were dismissed as cranks.

But could their proposals be treated so lightly if thousands of their followers congregated in Washington?

When the various contingents comprising Coxe's army of the unemployed actually got under way in the spring of 1894, they launched a protest unlike any that Americans had seen before. No one knew exactly what to expect: neither Coxe, nor President Cleveland, Congress, or the various states through which marchers had to pass. Whether petitioners would actually reach the nation's capital depended to a large degree on actions taken in states like Iowa, host to the largest army of unemployed for a month, a time crucial to the success or failure of this major American protest movement.

Grover Cleveland maintained an outward show of calm as the ragged armies of unemployed converged on Washington in the spring of 1894, but his subordinates were clearly nervous. Fearing violence, someone ordered extra guards stationed at the entrance to the White House, at the foot of the staircase leading to the second floor sleeping rooms, and in the hall outside the president's bedroom. Not since Lincoln occupied the White House during the Civil War had security been so tight.¹

Perhaps nothing since the Civil War aroused such curiosity and fear in Americans as did the twenty or more contingents comprising the Coxe's army movement. For a few brief weeks in April 1894 it dominated newspaper headlines and prompted an outpouring of speculation about its meaning. Coming on the heels of the supposed closing of the frontier in 1890, it seemingly confirmed the fears of those who believed that free land was no longer available to function as a safety-valve for urban discontent. To others it signaled the breakdown of the local community, which had formerly provided for the needy during periods of economic depression. For whatever reason, the largest armies arose in the urban West, in places like Los

1. St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* as quoted in the *New York Tribune*, 28 April 1894, 7; *Washington Post*, 27 April 1894, 1. Some Americans were more amused than worried by the prospects of a confrontation: "Washington might defend herself against Coxe's army by sending the United States senate out to meet it. Whichever side got licked the country would be the winner." *Louisville Courier-Journal* as quoted in the *Tacoma, WA, Morning Union*, 5 April 1894, 2.

Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and Denver. And no army was larger or seemed more ominous than that led by Charles T. Kelly: Bolting out of the far West on a captured train, Kelly and his thousand followers headed straight for Iowa. Like the men around President Cleveland, Iowans did not know how best to prepare for their arrival.²

Saturday, April 14, was a day of rapidly mounting tension. In Des Moines, Governor Frank D. Jackson pondered the telegrams he received from nervous officials of the Chicago and North Western Railway begging him to use the state militia to bar Kelly's men from Iowa. Jackson knew that there was no precedent for such action, but neither was there any precedent for Kelly's Army. He knew also that time was running out. At that moment the captured train was steaming across central Nebraska and in a matter of hours would cross the Missouri River bridge into Council Bluffs. The Union Pacific Railroad, which had reluctantly hauled the men from the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains, terminated in Council Bluffs; from there the problem of transporting Kelly's men would be in the hands of four midwestern lines that connected with Chicago and points east. The Chicago and North Western took the initiative, announcing that it would do anything to keep the army of unemployed off its trains. The railroad's attorney, Nat M. Hubbard, warned that the line would refuse to turn a wheel for ten days rather than transport the Kellyites. His solution was to draw a line of bayonet-carrying troops across the bridges linking Council Bluffs with Omaha.³

2. Donald L. McMurry, *Coxey's Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (1920; reprint ed., Seattle, 1968); Henry Vincent, *The Story of the Commonweal* (1894; reprint ed., New York, 1969); William J. Petersen, "Kelly's Army Comes to Iowa," *Palimpsest* 52 (June 1971), 289-297; Carlos A. Schwantes, "Coxey's Montana Navy: A Protest Against Unemployment on the Wage-Workers' Frontier," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* (forthcoming); T. B. Veblen, "The Army of the Commonweal," *Journal of Political Economy* 2 (June 1894), 456-461.

3. *Iowa State Register* (Des Moines), 15 April 1894, 3, 10; *Omaha World-Herald*, 16 April 1894, 1. The connecting lines were the Chicago and North Western; Chicago, Burlington and Quincy; Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific; and Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul.



Charles T. Kelly, c. 1894

Governor Jackson finally agreed to dispatch seven companies of state militia—about four hundred men—to Council Bluffs. Then he himself headed west to the potential trouble spot on a special train provided by the Chicago and North Western. Council Bluffs was alive with rumors. Was it true that the Union Pacific planned to sneak the army of unemployed across the river and dump them at its eastern terminus for fear that it would have to provide for the men should they be unable to reach the connecting roads? Had Chicago and North Western officials really prepared a proclamation for Governor Jackson to sign forbidding Kelly's men to enter Iowa on peril of bloodshed?⁴

4. *Omaha World-Herald*, 16 April 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 15 April 1894, 3.

Upon reaching Council Bluffs the governor was whisked away to a secret conference with local law enforcement officers and railroad managers. They passed around law books and studied them late into the night. Chicago and North Western officials repeated their demands that Kellyites be barred from the state, but Pottawattamie County sheriff John T. Hazen would not agree: "I do refuse to shoot down these men to prevent them from entering this state." The state's attorney general also took issue with the railroads. In the end, Governor Jackson proved that he was no puppet of the North Western by ordering militiamen simply to keep the peace and to prevent Kelly's men from scattering once they reached Council Bluffs. The meeting adjourned around midnight, and all parties wondered what the morning light would bring.⁵

At about 9:30 a.m. the special train carrying Kelly's army rumbled slowly across the Missouri River bridge and clanked to a halt at the Union Pacific Transfer station. Waiting there were the militiamen in battle array. But neither the sight of troops nor the low morning fog dampened the holiday mood of the Kellyites. From twenty-six boxcars festooned with red, white, and blue bunting, American flags, and a large banner reading, "Government Employment for the Unemployed," there arose a loud and sustained cheer. Faces weary and begrimed by long days on the road smiled at the swelling crowd of sympathizers that pushed among the soldiers. Jumping down to the cinders, the travelers hurriedly washed-up before enjoying a hearty breakfast topped off by a thousand pies donated by the Omaha mercantile firm of Brandeis and Sons. The railway yards were soon packed with an estimated fifty to sixty thousand people. By foot, carriage, and streetcar they came, at least twenty thousand from Omaha alone. They donated carloads of bread and other food, bedding, and \$1,000 in cash.⁶

After breakfast the Kellyites fashioned makeshift barber's chairs from railroad ties and old pails and relished the luxury of

5. *Iowa State Register*, 15 April, 1894, 3; *Omaha World-Herald*, 16 April 1894, 1 (quotation).

6. *Omaha World-Herald*, 15 April 1894, 1; 16 April 1894, 1; *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, 17 April 1894, 1; Ogden, UT, *Standard*, 19 April 1894, 1; *Omaha Bee*, 16 April 1894, 1, 2.

a haircut and shave. Some lounged around reading Sunday papers while others regaled visitors with tales of their cross-continent odyssey. The center of attention, though, was Charles T. Kelly, the self-styled "general" who led the army of misfortune. Those who expected to see a burley, pugnacious roustabout from San Francisco's Barbary Coast were probably surprised when they spotted him.⁷

He looked and acted more like a mild-mannered captain in the Salvation Army. A diminutive man, thirty-two years old with blue eyes and a small black mustache, Kelly wore a uniform consisting of a short overcoat and a middy cap. His voice was soft but firm, and he exhorted rather than commanded his men: "Oh, Company K," he might say to a company that was marching along smartly, "That's right good. God bless you." To another company, his exhortation might be, "Keep straight ahead; we'll all get there. Victory is ours." His revivalistic style prompted newspaper stories that he was indeed a former Salvationist and that his wife was one too. Kelly denied that allegation as well as the claim by an Omaha paper that he had abandoned his wife and infant daughter in San Francisco. In fact, he was working as a typographer for the San Francisco *Chronicle* when a delegation of unemployed asked him to lead their army to Washington, and, Kelly claimed, his wife encouraged him to go. As for the story circulated by an Omaha paper that he was "Cigarette" Kelly, a tough character, prize fighter, and gambler who once frequented Nebraska and Wyoming, he joked that if his wife read that story "she would apply for a divorce." One thing was clear, though: "General" Kelly was a skilled leader of men and a fluent speaker.⁸

When Kelly got up to address the Sunday afternoon crowd, everyone listened attentively as he explained his army's mission. In response to the depression of 1893, the worst downturn the country had ever experienced, the unemployed were sending a living petition to Washington, D.C. Kelly argued that if Con-

7. *Omaha Bee*, 16 April 1894, 2.

8. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 April 1894, 2 (first quotation); *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 April 1894, 16; *Omaha World-Herald*, 14 April 1894, 1; 15 April 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 17 April 1894, 1; *Omaha Bee*, 15 April 1894, 1; *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, 17 April 1894, 1 (second quotation).

gress would put the jobless to work for three years digging irrigation ditches in the arid West, "the people will be on their feet once more." This scheme would provide both jobs and productive farmlands for the worker. "Talk about hard times," he continued. "This is the richest country in the world and there is no reason why a single individual should beg for bread." Referring to Governor Jackson's dispatch of the Iowa militia, Kelly assured his listeners, "we have a mission to perform, which is to secure legislation and not to steal and plunder." The crowd cheered wildly when Kelly concluded his presentation.⁹

Through a series of speeches and newspaper interviews, Kelly provided an extremely curious public with additional information about himself, the purpose of his march, and his overland adventure. He revealed that he was a native of Hartford, Connecticut, had run away from home at a tender age, sold newspapers on the streets of Chicago, learned the printing trade, and worked at various times in St. Louis, Kansas City, and San Francisco. He was a member of the International Typographical Union.¹⁰

Kelly's men had left Oakland, California on April 7. The Southern Pacific Railroad hauled them in boxcars to its eastern terminus at Ogden, Utah, but there they were trapped, unable to obtain help from the territory's unsympathetic governor or the connecting railroads. After two days in Ogden, Kelly's restless troops marched out of town along the Union Pacific right-of-way but had not gone far when they commandeered a local freight. The railroad, unsure of itself in an unprecedented situation and not wanting to disrupt traffic, agreed to hurry the men through to Council Bluffs, stopping only briefly at small stations where they could be fed by sympathizers. Covering themselves with small pieces of burlap to keep warm, the Kellyites attempted to sleep on the bare and drafty floors of the

9. Omaha *World-Herald*, 14 April 1894, 1; Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, 17 April 1894, 1 (quotations). A reporter found that the average length of unemployment in one of the companies was four months. Some marchers had been out of work for almost eight months. Omaha *World-Herald*, 23 April 1894, 5.

10. St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, 27 May 1894, 25; Omaha *Bee*, 15 April 1894, 2.

boxcars. At Cheyenne, four to five thousand people greeted them as they steamed through town without stopping. A large group of supporters fed them at Grand Island, Nebraska. A few hours earlier at North Platte, however, they just missed receiving three steers that "Buffalo Bill" Cody sent to the station. Kelly greatly lamented the loss, adding that he four butchers in his army.

During their Sunday in Council Bluffs, Kelly's men demonstrated to the skeptics that they were indeed an army. Each member carried enlistment papers that he had to show before retiring for the night and wore an insignia consisting of a small American flag pinned to his lapel. When he joined, he signed an obligation to uphold the law, had his name, occupation, and body measurements recorded, and received a serial number, just as if he had joined the regular army. Kelly's army, organized into two divisions and fourteen companies, was run by a staff of colonels, captains, sergeants, and aides, in addition to the general himself.¹²

Chaplain William Parsonage conducted regular religious services, and three pharmacists and a hospital steward cared for the sick. The camp hospital was well supplied with blankets and medicine. A central commissary collected all food and distributed it to each company, which was responsible for its preparation. On one occasion a careless cook preparing a meal mistook a tobacco pouch for a tea bag. The men grumbled about the taste of the resulting brew but blamed the Chinese who packed the tea, until further investigation revealed the true culprit. As punishment the cook was assigned to night guard duty. Any member who brought alcohol into camp in violation of the rules was liable to be court-martialed and expelled, that being the severest form of punishment.¹³

11. Kearney, NB, *Daily Hub*, 14 April 1894, 3; Fremont, NB, *Daily Tribune*, 16 April 1894, 1; Omaha *World-Herald*, 13 April 1894, 2; 14 April 1894, 1; 16 April 1894, 1.

12. Chicago *Daily Tribune*, 16 April 1894, 1; Omaha *World-Herald*, 15 April 1894, 1; St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, 13 May 1894, 14.

13. Omaha *World-Herald*, 14 April 1894, 1; 16 April 1894, 1, 2; Chicago *Daily Tribune*, 16 April 1894, 1; Joseph T. Duryea, "The 'Industrial Army' in Omaha," *Outlook* 49 (5 May 1894), 781. Some liquor was brought into camp



*Kelly's army encamped in
Council Bluffs railway yards*

Kelly opened a recruiting station in Council Bluffs and inducted several new members; but he abruptly suspended enlistment when he learned that an Omaha judge had promised freedom to any petty offender who would leave town with Kelly's army. The general refused to accept such men, saying that he was already taking care of too many men: "It is giving me gray hairs." About a dozen men accepted the judge's offer but others refused. One black prisoner spoke for many when he said he would rather remain in jail all summer than march to Washington to be shot and killed.¹⁴

In Council Bluffs and Omaha, though, the only killing was with kindness. Kelly and his men rapidly won people's hearts by their good behavior and simple appeals to basic human emotions. As Kelly told a mass meeting of Omaha citizens: "Do you not think that in California tonight there are thousands of women and children kneeling by their bedsides praying to God

surreptitiously, though. See Jack London's account in Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings* (Logan, UT, 1979), 46.

14. *Omaha World-Herald*, 15 April 1894, 1; 16 April 1894, 1 (quotation).

for the success of the Industrial Army. So long as those prayers are ascending we will not turn back, nor will we abandon our purpose." Visitors and newspaper reporters were impressed by the army's Sunday evening prayer meeting. Dressed in their tattered garments and gathered around campfires, hundreds of men raised their voices in hymns and prayers. The singing of Methodist gospel hymns, duly recorded in the next day's papers, reached an audience far larger than that which worshipped in Council Bluff's darkened railway yards.

Except for the Union Pacific, which kindly allowed Kelly's men to remain one more night in its boxcars, the railroads steadily lost favor in the eyes of the public. All day Sunday, while Kelly and his men made friends with the local populace, railway officials remained in conference with Governor Jackson but refused to make any concessions. At one point, Kelly was invited to the meeting and was questioned closely by railway attorneys. Proving himself a more articulate antagonist than they expected, he carefully explained his arid lands program, but with tears in his eyes, added that his men demanded nothing. And the railroads gave nothing. Unanimously they refused to carry his men for less than full fare. Kelly, who expected to remain in Council Bluffs less than a day, replied, "I don't know what course we shall take. I shall have to think it over." Though Kelly failed to budge the railroad officials, he did impress Governor Jackson with his sincerity. The governor redoubled his efforts to find transportation across Iowa for the Kellyites.¹⁵

ON MONDAY AFTERNOON, when it became obvious that they would be remaining in Council Bluffs longer than expected, Kelly and his men accepted an offer of a campsite on the Chautauqua grounds located three miles across town. Thousands waited and cheered as Kellyites marched through the streets of Council Bluffs to the tune of "John Brown's Body" and held aloft American flags and banners bearing such slogans as "Labor is the Creator of All Wealth." At the head was General Kelly on a

15. *Iowa State Register*, 17 April 1894, 1; *Omaha Bee*, 16 April 1894, 2; 19 April 1894, 1 (quotation).

16. *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, 17 April 1894, 1; *Omaha World-Herald*, 16 April 1894, 1 (quotation).

borrowed horse and tagging along were two companies of Iowa militia. As Kelly's men passed the Methodist church where Governor Jackson and his staff reviewed the strange procession, they recognized Jackson and raised ragged arms but clean hands in a military salute.¹⁷

Reaching the Chautauqua grounds, Kellyites and militiamen mingled together on friendly terms setting up camp. After supper Kelly addressed his followers from a wagon, exhorting them to be patient and remain in good spirits, for he had every confidence that he would take them through to Washington. The men cheered vigorously and added three cheers for the people of Omaha and Council Bluffs. As night fell, they huddled around campfires cracking jokes and singing. Accompanied by a banjo they broke into renditions of "Bring Back My Bonny to Me" and "Nearer My God to Thee." Newspaper reporters, militiamen, and Sheriff Hazen frequently applauded.¹⁸

Kelly was optimistic because he expected that either the Rock Island or Milwaukee railroads, which skirted the Chautauqua grounds, would soon provide a train for his men to capture. In fact, he instructed his aides to investigate a train idling nearby but was disappointed to learn that it had only three cars and was occupied by railroad officials keeping a wary eye on his troopers.¹⁹

Because the Kellyites expected to leave the Chautauqua grounds in a few hours they did not mind bedding down without shelter under a clear sky. But during the night a spring storm blew in and soaked the men to the skin. A few managed to fashion huts of sticks, and Kelly made rounds by lantern to keep his men's spirits up. Coming across one of the brush huts, he called in to its inhabitants: "You're pretty snug in there aren't you?" "Oh, yes," was the reply. "All we need is a pianner."²⁰

At the Chautauqua campsite, rain was not the only problem. The army was almost out of food. Consuming \$600 worth

17. Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, 17 April 1894, 1; Omaha *World-Herald*, 17 April 1894, 2; Iowa *State Register*, 17 April 1894, 1.

18. Omaha *World-Herald*, 17 April 1894, 2.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 1; Omaha *Bee*, 18 April 1894, 2 (quotation).

of food a day, the Kellyites had nearly used up the \$1,000 in contributions they received on Sunday. And as the rain continued, men grumbled ever louder about the lack of shelter. Kelly formally demanded of Sheriff Hazen that his men be able to use the Chautauqua pavilion but Hazen refused, saying that it was reserved for militiamen. Exhausted from lack of sleep, Kelly angrily retorted that he held the sheriff and Pottawattamie County responsible for any member of his army who became sick and died from exposure, a not unlikely possibility when rain changed to driving hail. The camp hospital was soon full. While his men spent the day gathering twigs and limbs for shelter and fire, Kelly commenced thinking about the unthinkable: crossing Iowa on foot. Studying a map to calculate how long it would take his army marching at the rate of fifteen miles a day to reach Davenport, Kelly concluded that an overland walk was impossible because the towns through which his men must travel were too small to feed them. The railroads remained their only hope, but railroad executives refused to relent. Fortunately, sympathetic citizens visited the Chautauqua grounds throughout the day bringing donations of food. In Omaha, Mayor George P. Bemis and merchant Emil Brandeis solicited aid from businessmen.²¹

Kellyites spent another miserable night in the rain and hail. They awoke Wednesday morning to the sight of a stout German woman driving up with a wagonload of comforters and loaves of homemade bread. Soon, additional wagons arrived bringing meat and more bread. The best sight of all, though, was the departing militia. Governor Jackson sent it home in a move that Kellyites incorrectly interpreted as a prelude to the arrival of a train for them to capture.²²

The governor's actions were not part of any well conceived plan. He readily confessed that he was dealing with a problem like nothing that had ever happened before, a problem that he called a novel expression of discontent. More than anything

21. *Omaha World-Herald*, 17 April 1894, 1; 18 April 1894, 1, 2. At each meal the army consumed six hundred loaves of bread, a thousand pounds of fresh meat or five hundred pounds of salted meat, and ten bushels of potatoes. It required fifty pounds of coffee a day. *Ibid.*, 20 April 1894, 1.

22. *Ibid.*, 19 April 1894, 1.

else, the mounting furor provoked by stubborn railroad executives prompted his recall of the state militia. Although railroad leaders were the primary targets of public wrath, Jackson was stung by criticism of his calling out militiamen at the request of the railroads and by reports that his troops had threatened to shoot any Kellyite who sought shelter in their dry pavilion. Early in the week, Jackson had defended himself saying, "If the railroads persist in refusing transportation to these men, will Kelly's men adhere to his peaceful policy?" But with popular indignation reaching dangerous levels in Omaha and Council Bluffs, Jackson took a more conciliatory line: "I feel the keenest sympathy for these men. What the final outcome will be I cannot say, but I feel confident now that the problem will soon resolve itself." Reportedly he was seeking to charter a boat to take Kelly's army to Kansas City, and in an effort to keep other western armies from entering the state, threatening to seek an indictment of Union Pacific general manager E. Dickinson for bringing paupers into Iowa in violation of state law. If Jackson thought his action would calm public opinion he failed to reckon with such railroad spokesmen as Judge Hubbard of the North Western.²³

Every time Hubbard opened his mouth he increased support for the Kellyites and the likelihood of violent confrontation. He readily admitted that he had influenced the governor to call out the state militia. Furthermore, said Hubbard, "If these tramps and bums try to capture one of our trains, there will be trouble." He warned that "should they gain possession of a train by hook or crook, or by the sympathy of our trainmen, we will ditch the train if it destroyed every car and hurts alot of men." Hubbard maintained that "this movement must be stopped now and right here, and I don't think the people show good judgement in feeding these people. There is too much false sympathy for these men." Bluntly declaring that "our road was not built for charitable purposes," Hubbard did not hesitate to suggest that the Kellyites be starved into disbanding.²⁴

23. *Ibid.*, 16 April 1894, 1 (first quotation); 19 April 1894, 2; *Iowa State Register*, 18 April 1894, 2 (second quotation); 19 April 1894, 1.

24. *Ogden Standard*, 20 April 1894, 2; *Iowa State Register*, 20 April 1894, 2 (quotations).



*Kelly's army marches out of
Council Bluffs, April 19, 1894*

By contrasting the callousness of men like Hubbard with the plight of the Kellyites, the daily press evoked a tremendous outpouring of public sympathy. Organized labor in Omaha and Council Bluffs held indignation meetings denouncing Judge Hubbard and demanding that he leave Council Bluffs at once. The judge, unmoved by such criticism, warned that the North Western would kill Kellyites to defend a principle: "We will steam up a wild engine, open the throttle and send it down to meet the captured train, and let the wreck solve the problem as to whether we are obliged to carry these men without remuneration." "Judge Hubbard," remarked one of Kelly's officers, "must be two or three kinds of an ass," but Superintendent Goodnow of the Milwaukee, oblivious to the damage Hubbard was doing, turned on the press, saying that it was trying to curry favor with the people by antagonizing the railroads.²⁵

Frustrated by the impasse and fearful that time was running

25. Omaha *World-Herald*, 21 April 1894, 2.

out for his rendezvous with other contingents of the unemployed, Kelly ordered his men to march to the village of Weston, seven miles east of Council Bluffs. Moving out of Camp Chautauqua on Thursday, April 19, with cries of "On to Washington" and frequent cheers for Kelly, 1,400 men formed a column a half-mile long. The dirt road took them through rolling country just beginning to show the beauty of spring. The men's spirits were high, and though a cold, steady rain turned the road into mud several inches deep, they marched along singing "We'll Never Turn Back 'Till Our Mission is Finished." Along the way, farm families greeted them with words of welcome and donations of meat and potatoes. Dragging along in his buggy was Sheriff Hazen, reluctantly carrying out a request by the railroads to keep an eye on the procession. "I am in sympathy with these men," he protested. "They are creatures of circumstances." Like a tormenting spirit, a special train carrying Superintendent Goodnow of the Milwaukee and Judge Hubbard and John H. Baldwin of the North Western shadowed the procession. Hubbard had just announced that the North Western would not carry the Kellyites under any circumstance, not even at full fare. Judge Hubbard, reported the *Omaha World-Herald*, "says public opinion be damned."²⁶

REACHING WESTON after marching several hours in a cold rain, shivering Kellyites attempted to pitch their camp on the grounds of the Milwaukee depot, but Superintendent Goodnow protested: "Your army is a menace to property and we want you to move at once." Kelly, though careworn and exhausted, courteously responded, "It is raining now and the men are wet and hungry. There is no immediate danger arising." But when Goodnow remained firm, the people of Weston opened their homes, barns, and stores to shelter the wayfarers. Not trusting the Kellyites or their sympathizers, the Milwaukee kept its special train posted at the depot all night.²⁷

But while Kelly and his men demonstrated their peaceable intentions, in Council Bluffs and Omaha popular indignation at

26. *Ibid.*, 20 April 1894, 1 (quotations); 22 April 1894, 2.

27. *Ibid.*, 20 April 1894, 1 (quotations); 21 April 1894, 1.

the railroads took a dangerous turn. All week long, when people met on the streets of the two communities, the first words exchanged were, "What's the latest from Kelly's army?" The latest was often news of another refusal by the railroads to carry the men. After the Rock Island twice rejected Governor Jackson's request to transport the wayfarers — with Iowa paying the cost — a Council Bluffs newspaper editorialized that the railroad should be compelled to move them: "The Rock Island owes something to this state which gave it a rich endowment of fertile land." Failing that, the sentiment was growing among sympathizers that they should take overt action to batter down the wall of railroad hostility that blocked Kelly's army. On several occasions Union Pacific shopmen staged conspicuous marches from Omaha to Council Bluffs bringing food and money to Kelly's men and hoping to intimidate the railroads. Once they marched with loaves of bread stuck on pikes. Union Pacific operating employees offered to donate their services to any railroad willing to carry the Kellyites eastward. Actually, Kelly had an engineer and three firemen in his own ranks should he decide to capture and operate a train. And on Friday evening an enormous crowd of sympathizers roamed the rail yards of Council Bluffs looking for a train to capture.²⁸

All day popular indignation had hovered near the boiling point. That morning a thousand people crowded into Omaha's Knights of Labor hall to pledge themselves to blow whistles or ring bells in the Union Pacific shops, local factories, and churches as a signal for workingmen and women to march together to Council Bluffs. There they would demand for a final time that railroads carry the Kellyites. Motivated by feelings of altruism mixed with the desire for self-preservation, they feared that if Hubbard and Baldwin (popularly called "Little Louis XIV") succeeded in carrying out their stated goal of starving the

28. *Ibid.*, 19 April 1894, 1, 2; 21 April 1894, 1; Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, 21 April 1894, 2 (second quotation); 22 April 1894, 1 (first quotation); Ogden *Standard*, 19 April 1894, 1; Omaha *Bee*, 19 April 1894, 1; San Francisco *Chronicle*, 21 April 1894, 1. Some of Kelly's men were former Union Pacific employees and had personal friends among the shopmen. One Kellyite had been a foreman in the railroad's North Platte, Nebraska, shops. Omaha *World-Herald*, 16 April 1894, 1.

army into disbanding, the resulting influx of unemployed men would further depress the local job market.²⁹

Five hundred Union Pacific shopmen and their families marched on signal to Council Bluffs and were joined by hundreds of others, most notably the packinghouse workers of South Omaha, described by one nervous Iowa observer as "corn-fed Omaha steers." The crowd of workers swelled to more than eight thousand by the time it confronted the Council Bluffs mayor and various railroad representatives. "Such a scene as that upon the streets of Council Bluffs," observed a local newspaper, "will probably never be seen but once in a lifetime."³⁰

At times the city resembled a three-ring circus. In one part of town a delegation of about two hundred women met with North Western officers, hoping to succeed where men had previously failed. In another location a mass meeting denounced Judge Hubbard. Elsewhere, a third group telegraphed railroad presidents, urging them to carry Kelly's army out of Weston. All the protesters eventually congregated in a city park to await a response from the railroad leaders. At about 4 p.m. a message arrived: The railroads would provide no train. The crowd responded with a loud hiss and a shout, "We won't wait any longer. Let's get a train."³¹

The women, who had been conspicuous in the day's events, took charge. They led a thousand people to the Milwaukee and Rock Island depots but found them locked and the engines and cars gone. A three-car Union Pacific local passenger train rumbled across the bridge from Omaha, and in a moment the crowd swarmed over it. One of the leaders of the Omaha Knights of Labor, a son of the engineer, and an engineer himself, swung up into the cab, saying, "Pop. You are our prisoner." The old man, exploding with a series of expletives,

29. Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, 21 April 1894, 1; Omaha *Bee*, 18 April 1894, 1 (quotation); Omaha *World-Herald*, 20 April 1894, 1; 22 April 1894, 2; Iowa *State Register*, 20 April 1894, 2.

30. Omaha *World-Herald*, 21 April 1894, 1 (first quotation); Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, 21 April 1894, 1 (second quotation).

31. Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, 21 April 1894, 1; Omaha *World-Herald*, 21 April 1894, 1, 2 (quotation).

surrendered and climbed down. A dozen women filled the cab and decorated the locomotive with American flags. When the young engineer agreed to run the engine but refused to start it—presuming that he could thus avoid legal responsibility for his action—Edna Harper pulled the throttle open.³²

After attaching some freight cars from the yard, the special, with its bell ringing and whistle blowing, steamed rapidly along the Rock Island tracks to Weston. The army, surprised in the midst of its evening religious service, gave a cheer that could be heard all the way to Council Bluffs. With a short speech, Kelly thanked his sympathizers. All the while, Harper with two companions, May Cromer and Anna Hooten, stood demurely at his side. Urged to address the men, Hooten related the details of the capture but wondered whether it was patriotism or foolhardiness that had motivated her. She was afraid she had almost forgotten her womanhood in her desire to do good for the cause. The delighted soldiers presented each woman with the badge of the army.³³

Though he did not admit it at the time, the train stealing greatly perturbed Kelly. He desperately needed the transportation but he did not want the army to abandon its peaceable posture. He knew, too, that the railroads wanted nothing better than to provoke the army into a lawless act that would turn public sentiment and government against it. Worried and unsure what steps to take, Kelly suggested to the women that it would be safer to move the army after daylight. Noting that the eleven-car train was too small to carry his men, he requested that sympathizers return it to Council Bluffs along with twenty marchers needing medical attention. Kelly permitted Harper and Hooten, who were afraid to go back for fear of arrest, to remain temporarily with the army. Though it was nearly midnight when the captured train returned to Council Bluffs, it was

32. San Francisco *Examiner*, 21 April 1894, 1; Minneapolis *Journal*, 5 June 1894, 2. Harper was lonely, she explained. She went to visit a friend, Anna Hooten, in Council Bluffs; together they went to see the Kellyites and became involved with the protesters: "We got a little excited and lost our heads." Minneapolis *Journal*, 5 June 1894, 2.

33. Omaha *World-Herald*, 21 April 1894, 1.

met by a crowd of about five thousand, half of whom were Omaha workers.³⁴

If the train capture left Kelly confused, the mass protests and the revolutionary implications of bread impaled on pikes frightened some railroad executives. Protesters were convinced that their actions had had the desired effect when news arrived of a remarkable interview published in Saturday's *Iowa State Register*. The wall of railroad intransigence seemed at last about to crumble. E. St. John, general manager of the Rock Island, told a *Register* reporter that he had talked with Kelly and inspected his men at Weston. He described them as "intelligent, determined men. . . . There are no bums among them. . . . Their leader is a man of brains and character and great determination, and he is a religious man, too."

St. John noted that "the more opposition they meet, the stronger they become. The laboring classes all over the country are in sympathy with them. If they have a few days more of such treatment as they have had the past two days, I tremble to think what may happen." Emphasizing that "I would not be one bit afraid to take them to Chicago," St. John was clearly worried about the revolutionary implications of the march and the mass protests in Omaha and Council Bluffs. The situation, he believed was "very similar to the French revolution. It is a terrible thing, and it made me sad to find that there were sixteen-hundred respectable, well-meaning men reduced to such desperate straits in this country." Given the dangerous level of social tension, he criticized Judge Hubbard's provocative language: "Such brutal utterances drive people mad." He also denounced Hubbard's call for the Iowa militia.³⁵

St. John admitted that for the past several days he had been out of touch with the Rock Island's president, Ransom R. Cable. He was thus not sure what steps the leaders of the various

34. *Ibid.*; *Omaha Bee*, 18 April 1894, 1; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 April 1894, 1. Kelly sent an urgent message to Rock Island president R. R. Cable in Chicago requesting permission to operate the train over his line. Cable's answer was one word: "No." Vincent, *Story of the Commonwealth*, 144.

35. *Omaha World-Herald*, 21 April 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 21 April 1894, 6 (quotation).

railroads were planning in Chicago, but he telegraphed his views to Cable and waited for a reply. St. John, it soon became apparent, was a lone voice crying in the wilderness: Cable refused his general manager's request. Railroad leaders had apparently established a blind pool enabling them to share the risks and the costs of refusing to carry the Kellyites. Whichever railroad was nearest to Kelly's line of march simply quit operating its trains or rerouted them over another road, and all companies shared the resulting costs.³⁶

With their hopes dashed yet again, sympathizers filled the streets of Omaha and Council Bluffs, but Saturday's protests were far more restrained than Friday's. Perhaps protesters realized how close they had come to bloodshed the previous evening. At that moment, companies of Iowa militiamen remained on alert in several towns. Perhaps protesters recognized, too, the hopelessness of their cause: There were no more trains left in Council Bluffs for them to capture. Although they continued to provide food and moral support for Kelly's army, they were not sure what else to do. And neither was Kelly.³⁷

His two most pressing problems were organizing a march across Iowa if a train was not soon forthcoming and determining the status of women in his army. A discouraged Kelly told reporters, "The fact is that I have heard so many rumors of trains during the past few days that have proven to be false, and we have been so often deceived that I don't know whether there is any train or not." Saturday was another day of watchful waiting, of rumor and disappointment. The army whiled away the time with speeches and songs, often to the accompaniment of General Kelly on the banjo. The army's two women members, Hooten and Harper, spoke occasional words of en-

36. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 April 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 26 April 1894, 1. A primary concern of the railroad executives was expressed by J. H. Duggan, division superintendent of the Burlington: "If there were no others to follow I should be in favor of putting a train out on the track and telling the boys to jump on and go and run the risk of damage suits. But I understand there are 9,000 more of them ready to leave San Francisco and other western cities for the east, and if we commence now we'll have to keep it up for no one knows how long." *Omaha Bee*, 16 April 1894, 2.

37. *Omaha World-Herald*, 22 April 1894, 2.

couragement. Welcomed was the news from Mayor Bemis that Omaha was sending additional supplies and word from Woodsmen of the World that its lodge brothers would welcome Kellyites everywhere along the way.³⁸

As for women, an increasing number wanted to join Kelly's army. Before it arrived in Council Bluffs, many women had apparently spent a sleepless night, fearful that Kellyites would slip in before dawn, raid their homes, and "subject them to indignities." But when they learned of the orderly demeanor of the sojourners, fear turned to fascination. Some women skipped Sunday morning services in order to view the marchers in person. Their sympathy for the soldiers of misfortune grew with each passing day and was most apparent during Friday's capture of a train. When women asked to join the army, Kelly good naturedly refused, saying that it was hard enough to manage men without attempting to manage women. Kelly made an exception for Hooten and Harper, saying that the spirit of humanity motivated him to provide for the two. He regarded them as mascots and was fearful that he would incur the wrath of organized labor if he forced them to return home to face arrest.³⁹

Though tongues inevitably wagged about the relationship of two attractive women with fourteen hundred men, Kelly sought to protect his army's reputation and that of Hooten and Harper by putting them up in a special tent or hotel, where available. The two usually rode in the carriage of the army's official photographer. Similarly he refused to permit the female reporters covering the army to camp with the men. The question of women joining the army came up again and again, and soon Kelly must have wondered if he had not erred in permitting Hooten and Harper to remain. Even within his own ranks some men objected, perhaps fearful that insinuations of im-

38. *Ibid.*, 1, 2. Bemis' sympathy for the Kellyites was not merely a matter of keeping them from disbanding near Omaha. He served as president of the United States Industrials, an organization formed in Des Moines on May 16 to provide an institutional framework to perpetuate the movement as a political force. *Farmers' Tribune* (Des Moines), 6 June 1894, 5.

39. *Omaha World-Herald*, 16 April 1894, 1 (quotation); 24 April 1894, 1; 29 April 1894, 1.

morality circulating in the press would reach their wives back on the West Coast.⁴⁰

BY SUNDAY MORNING it was obvious to Kelly that his army must walk the 180 miles to Des Moines. There he hoped that one of several additional connecting railroads would provide the long-sought train. With twenty bicyclists from Omaha and sixty farmers on horseback providing an escort and four women sympathizers marching at the head of the column, Kelly and his troops set out for Neola, twelve miles away. Shortly before noon they came to the village of Underwood where residents gave them a royal welcome and hearty lunch. The ladies had prepared several barrels of coffee and stacks of sandwiches. Hundreds of people shook hands with Kelly and encouraged him with words of cheer. A six-year-old girl pressing his hand asked if he had any little girls in his far-away home. The general with tears in his eyes, nodded yes. Such touching displays tugged at onlookers' emotions and purse strings. As the general held his middy cap, they poured a stream of silver coins into it.⁴¹

Accompanied by the Underwood coronet band playing Sousa's "Cadet March," the popping of fireworks, and the cheers of hundreds of rural folk lining the way, marchers started for Neola. There they were met by a friendly band of children bearing toy wooden guns and a sign reading, "Neola's Militia," a sardonic comment on Jackson's use of the Iowa militia. Men and women dressed in their Sunday finest welcomed the sojourners with a lavish display of kindness. They opened city hall for speeches and offered marchers bread, meat, crackers, and other provisions, plus a campground for the night. At one of several

40. *Ibid.*, 24 April 1894, 2; 27 April 1894, 1; *Des Moines Leader*, 24 April 1894, 1; *Omaha Bee*, 16 April 1894, 2; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 29 May 1894, 1. In addition to the Associated Press, the following newspapers had reporters accompanying Kelly on his way to Des Moines: *Chicago Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Record*, *Chicago Dispatch*, *Des Moines Capital*, *Des Moines Leader*, *Omaha World-Herald*. *Des Moines Leader*, 29 April 1894, 1.

41. *Omaha World-Herald*, 23 April 1894, 1, 2; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 April 1894, 1. Additional railroads serving Des Moines were the Chicago Great Western and the Des Moines and Kansas City, which connected with the Keokuk and Western for the Mississippi River.

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meetings voicing support for the crusade, residents hung North Western attorney Hubbard in effigy. If rumors were true that the railroads had hired Pinkerton detectives to precede Kelly's army to turn townspeople against it, the Pinkertons were spectacularly unsuccessful. Republicans, Democrats, and Populists; Protestants, Catholics, and Jews; city laborers and farmers all demonstrated their support for Kelly's march.⁴²

The triumphal march from Weston to Neola seemed a good omen. Caught up in the euphoria of the moment, Kelly and his men could not have dreamed how long and arduous their journey across Iowa would ultimately prove to be. Railroad executives, having learned how to handle Kelly's men during their encampment in Council Bluffs, placed new impediments in their way, and to these nature added some torments of her own. By the time Kelly and his followers reached the Mississippi River they must have wondered whether joblessness and starvation at home could have been any worse than running the gauntlet of troubles that awaited them as they made their way across Iowa.

In late April, time was running out for the soldiers of misfortune. The three-hundred-man contingent from Ohio led by Jacob Coxey was soon to reach the nation's capital, and he desperately needed the support of marchers from the far West. If the Coxey's army movement was to make any impression on Congress, several thousand petitioners would have to make their collective presence felt in Washington. Thus crucial to the success of the great protest army was Kelly's large contingent of westerners. All across the nation, newspaper readers sympathetic with the armies of unemployed sought the latest news from Iowa.

42. *Omaha World-Herald*, 23 April 1894, 1, 2; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 April 1894, 1; Vincent, *Story of the Commonweal*, 147.

This is the first of a two-part article. "Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II: Jack London, Kelly's Army, and the Struggle for Survival in Iowa," will appear in the next issue of The Annals (Spring 1983).

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