

# Soldiers of Misfortune

## Part II

### Jack London, Kelly's Army, and the Struggle for Survival in Iowa

CARLOS A. SCHWANTES

*In the first part of his essay, "Iowa Railroads versus Kelly's Army of Unemployed, 1894" (published in the winter 1983 Annals) Carlos A. Schwantes describes the marchers' arrival in western Iowa, the enthusiastic popular support their protest received, and the dampening opposition of Iowa railroads. Here, the author traces the Kellyites' progress across the state—a long march hampered by erratic public sympathy and the protesters' own growing disillusionment.*

JACK LONDON finally overtook General Charles T. Kelly's soldiers of misfortune in Council Bluffs after bumming his way by rail from California. Whether the future best-selling author ever actually joined the army of unemployed remains in doubt, but he accompanied it as far as the Mississippi River and left a diary account of how the largest contingent of the Coxey's army movement struggled across Iowa in the spring of 1894. The hardships of those days provided London with material for his later fiction. And in its own way the strange journey was a struggle for survival not unlike those in the frozen Klondike that he subsequently described. More than a thousand of California's unemployed set out in early April for Washington, D. C.; their purpose was to persuade the federal government to

provide them temporary work during a period of unusually severe hard times. But when they became stranded in the Council Bluffs area waiting in vain for free rail transportation, some wondered whether they would make it even as far as the Iowa capital.<sup>1</sup>

After a week's delay, Kelly's men started for Des Moines on foot on Sunday, April 22. From there they still expected to ride east by train; the hike across western Iowa was to be only a temporary interruption of their plans. The overland trek began pleasantly enough. In his tramp diary London noted the enthusiastic reception that townspeople gave the army at Neola, a village not far from Council Bluffs, where the marchers camped for the night. "It was more like Fourth of July than a peaceful Sunday in a quiet little country town." London described an idyllic scene, an evening spent in song and worship around the campfires, but he ended his sketch of camp life on a somber note. His sobering message portended the many troubles to come that threatened to destroy the army's spirit of community by pitting soldiers against one another in a brutal struggle for personal survival: "At 10 o'clock we started to march to a stable in the town with our second lieutenant had procured for us. We were stopped by the pickets, but Col. Baker came along with quite a jag & a woman on his arm & passed us through. He will most likely be court martialed tomorrow."<sup>2</sup>

Reports that a ranking officer was publicly drunk and consorting with prostitutes reached General Kelly. Ever since arriving in Iowa he and his men had carefully cultivated a reputation for morality and decorum. If through the foolish activity of officers like Colonel William Baker the army lost its good name, marchers could expect little sympathy and support from the

1. Jack London's diary is reproduced in Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings* (Logan, Utah, 1979), 30-56. See also Joan London, *Jack London and His Times: An Unconventional Biography* (1939; reprint ed., Seattle, 1968), 71-81. On the Coxey's army movement see Henry Vincent, *The Story of the Commonwealth* (1894; reprint ed., New York, 1969); and Donald L. McMurry, *Coxey's Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (1929; reprint ed., Seattle, 1968).

2. Etulain, *London on the Road*, 45.

*Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

folk of western Iowa; without their aid the protest was doomed. Wasting no time, the normally mild-mannered Kelly literally kicked Baker out of his tent, stripped him of his shoulder straps, and with a stern rebuke dismissed him from the army. A hastily convened court-martial sustained Kelly despite Baker's claim that he was not intoxicated and was merely escorting visiting women to a hotel because the army had no room for them. Baker stalked off complaining that Kelly's command had gone to his head and wondering if the general had lost his sanity.<sup>3</sup>

The incident might have been dismissed as a personality conflict caused by the nervous strain of trying to get the army out of Council Bluffs, but the trial was scarcely finished before a far more serious conflict erupted, causing people to wonder whether the entire army was about to split into warring factions. The public was unaware of growing friction between marchers from San Francisco and those from elsewhere, primarily Sacramento, until protesters created an ugly scene near the village of Walnut. Urban rivalries longstanding in California manifested themselves anew when Sacramento men charged that San Franciscans received preferential treatment. All were supposed to take turns riding in the limited number of wagons furnished by local farmers, but men driven half mad by aching and blistered feet found it easy to imagine that others rode longer and more often than they. Jack London, nominally attached to a small company from Reno, Nevada, complained: "As usual our company was walking while the S. F.'s rode. I walked 6 miles to the town of Walnut enduring the severest of tortures & I arrived in a most horrible condition. I resolved to go no further on foot."<sup>4</sup>

Contributing to the friction was the popularity of Colonel George Speed who exercised greater influence over the Sacramento men than Kelly did. A hatter by trade and a socialist agitator far to the left of Kelly, Speed was an impetuous man. He chafed at Kelly's unwillingness to take bold action,

3. *Des Moines Leader*, 24 April 1894, 1; *Omaha World-Herald*, 24 April 1894, 1, 2; 25 April 1894, 1.

4. *Omaha World-Herald*, 24 April 1894, 2; Vincent, *Story of The Commonweal*, 148; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 46.

perhaps even to steal a train if necessary. When Kelly disciplined Speed for failing to obey an order, Speed demanded the Kelly account for several thousand dollars collected by the army in Council Bluffs before he charged others with disobedience. Each man's supporters joined in a heated exchange of epithets: "Soup fiends!" "We want our money," the Sacramento men shouted. Citizens watched in alarm as former comrades menaced one another with sticks and knives.<sup>5</sup>

Kelly, fortunately, calmed the men before they shed any blood and rebuked both factions for publicly airing the army's dirty linen. A court-martial sentenced Speed to the ranks by a vote of 20 to 3, but the disgraced man's friends rallied around, refused to recognize the sentence, and elected him their general. The unemployed proceeded from Walnut to Atlantic in two groups. In the lead were Kelly's eight hundred men followed by Speed's two hundred seceders. Although the weather was perfect as they followed the Rock Island line across the undulating blue grass prairies of western Iowa, a noticeable pall hung over the ranks. To Jack London the procession resembled a "grand retreat" by broken men.<sup>6</sup>

A volunteer army composed of the discontented and predicated on democracy and egalitarianism was at best a volatile organization. Certainly complaints came easily to the men: When they left California they never had anticipated the long delay in Iowa or their difficulty in obtaining railroad transportation. Nonetheless, something had to be done soon to resolve the bickering. The march was difficult enough when the army's morale was high, but with thoroughly dispirited men it was nearly impossible. By the time the marchers reached Atlantic, the half-way point and the largest community between Council Bluffs and Des Moines, the tension between the two factions was so high that many feared the army would unravel

5. *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph*, 2 May 1894, 2; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 46-47n; Vincent, *Story of the Commonweal*, 149-150; *Des Moines Leader*, 25 April 1894, 1 (first quotation); *Omaha World-Herald*, 25 April 1894, 1 (second quotation).

6. *Des Moines Leader*, 25 April 1894, 1; *Daily Iowa Capital* (Des Moines), 25 April 1894, 1; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 47; Vincent, *Story of the Commonweal*, 149.

## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

on the spot. Sobered by that prospect, the rival leaders acted through intermediaries to resolve their differences. In a scene not unlike one of the era's great revival meetings, Kelly, Baker, and Speed appeared before an overflow crowd of townspeople at the Atlantic opera house and promised to forgive and forget. Climaxing their tearful repentance, the trio knelt in prayer. After the meeting they drove to camp to announce their reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>

The men's spirits soared once again. It was a time for singing, dancing, and good fellowship with local residents. A baseball game between the visitors and the Atlantic club ended in an 11 to 4 victory for the home players. Baseball games, like the frequent singing of gospel and patriotic hymns, were apparently calculated to win a maximum of good will. Kellyites played ball in several towns along the way, and though the army claimed to have professional players in its ranks the home teams often won.<sup>8</sup>

Even as Kelly's army resolved its internal differences, the telegraph clicked out word of another crisis, originating this time in Montana: A contingent of Coxeyites had stolen a train to speed them to Washington and had been captured by the United States Army. Blood was shed and at least one person killed. When Kelly read the news to his followers, someone cried out, "First blood of the revolution!" Kelly responded with a frown and a lament that "this is the worst blow we have had. We will now be regarded as lawless men, we, who have broken no laws. But we will march to Washington through thousands of regulars and tens of thousands of the militia. Not by physical force, men, but by law and through favorable public opinion." Kelly warned that if it became necessary to commit a single illegal act to reach their goal, he would return home to his "Bess and the babe." Another message added to Kelly's new woes: Chicago's city councilmen forbade Kelly's army to pass through their city. Residents alarmed by the formation of a large army of

7. *Omaha World-Herald*, 25 April 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register* (Des Moines), 26 April 1894, 1; Vincent, *Story of the Commonwealth*, 149-151.

8. *Iowa State Register*, 26 April 1894, 1; *Omaha World-Herald*, 25 April 1894, 1; *Daily Iowa Capital*, 27 April 1894, 1.

## THE ANNALS OF IOWA

the unemployed in their midst did not care to host an additional thousand battle-hardened veterans from the Far West.<sup>9</sup>

Kellyites had traveled so far and had overcome so many obstacles that Chicago's threat scarcely worried them. By the time they left Atlantic they viewed the road ahead with a curious mixture of optimism and fatalism. To their delight they discovered that the squabbling of the past few days and the train theft in Montana had not turned local people against them. Iowans continued to enjoy the show. All along the way crowds gathered to watch the spectacle pass. No circus had greater drawing power. A newspaperman had the misfortune of being in a barber's chair in Stuart when the army marched by. Neither threats nor bribes could bring the barber back to finish the shave until the last man had passed. Typically the army marched with Kelly riding at the head on a black charger; the men followed rank upon rank in individual companies. Each company had a mascot, most often a rooster, but the Sacramento men adopted a vicious-looking bulldog.<sup>10</sup>

An advance guard preceded the main body of marchers collecting donations of food, arranging for wagons, and preparing the evening campsite. At Adair, an overnight stop, citizens donated 1,200 loaves of bread, one beef, and fifty pounds of coffee. This menu included the standard fare, although the town of Anita added an extra touch much appreciated by the sojourners: Pretty girls dressed in their Sunday best sliced the bread, poured the coffee, and ladled out the soup.<sup>11</sup>

As nice a gesture as that was, a train ride to Des Moines would have been even more appreciated. Scarcely had the men left Atlantic before fatigue and blisters returned to take their toll

9. *Omaha World-Herald*, 25 April 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 26 April 1894, 1 (first quotation); *Chicago Tribune*, 24 April 1894, 1; Vincent, *Story of the Commonweal*, 152 (second quotation). Vincent quotes the voice from the crowd as saying, "First blood for the unemployed" (151). He wrote his book, however, to put the Coxeyites in the best possible light. On the Montana train theft see Thomas A. Clinch, "Coxey's Army in Montana," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 15 (October 1965), 2-11.

10. *Des Moines Leader*, 24 April 1894, 1; 29 April 1894, 1; 2 May 1894, 1.

11. *Omaha World-Herald*, 27 April 1894, 1; *Chicago Tribune*, 27 April 1894, 1.

## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

and to transform the march once again into a contest for personal survival. The army's morale seemed to rise and fall with the rough and undulating road. There were never enough wagons. The usual complaint was, "We can't keep it up much longer. The men are weak, sick, sore and unable to walk, and besides, riding in a lumber wagon in the hot sun is a greater task than manual labor." On they trudged through a blur of little towns such as Casey, Menlo, Dexter, and Van Meter, each looking very much like the last, each being a station stop on the Rock Island and local farmers' link to the wider world. With every passing mile the Sacramento men grew more restless. They took to walking along the Rock Island track, passing time by counting ties, singing tracklaying songs like "Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill," and carefully eyeing each passing train.<sup>12</sup>

The hostility between the marchers and the railroads, revealed so clearly by the confrontation in Council Bluffs, reappeared when the Rock Island resumed running its trains along the line of the march. In the rolling country east of Atlantic, freight trains lumbered uphill at a crawl, and though Kelly had ordered his men not to steal rides, some could not resist the temptation. The Pinkerton detectives and extra crewmen assigned by the Rock Island to keep freeloaders off its trains sprang from car to car dislodging the Kellyites. Several times the men summarily ditched hurled rocks at the guards.<sup>13</sup>

Rock Island officials, concerned that desperate Kellyites might emulate the train theft in Montana, distributed circulars warning men of the consequences of such illegal acts. Kelly, who believed that the notices were designed to incite the men to commit acts of violence as a pretext for calling in federal troops, told the company not to worry. But many of his followers were clearly spoiling for a fight with the hated Rock Island, and only respect for Kelly restrained them. The question was how much longer he could keep that respect in the face of rising complaints from footsore and weary men.<sup>14</sup>

12. *Chicago Tribune*, 27 April 1894, 1; *Omaha World-Herald*, 27 April 1894, 1 (quotation); 28 April 1894, 1; *Des Moines Leader*, 27 April 1894, 1.

13. Vincent, *Story of the Commonwealth*, 156-158.

14. *Omaha World-Herald*, 27 April 1894, 1; Vincent, *Story of the Commonwealth*, 157-158.

## THE ANNALS OF IOWA

Saturday, April 28, found the army encamped at Stuart, a week's march from Council Bluffs and still forty-one miles from Des Moines and its promise of relief. For a week sympathizers in the Iowa capital had been collecting food and supplies in anticipation of the army's arrival. Just that morning the rumor circulated among marchers that their Des Moines supporters had obtained a Chicago Great Western train to take them to Chicago. Buoyed by the prospect of an easier way ahead, Kelly decided that the time had come to march straight through to Des Moines in one herculean step. Apparently he believed that the feast awaiting the men would keep their grumbling on the road to a minimum.<sup>15</sup>

It was to be a long march that the men would not soon forget. All the stiff joints and blisters of the past week would appear insignificant compared to the troubles that lay down the road. Newspapermen, unable to find a precedent in American history for the Coxey's army movement, sometimes compared it to the crusades of medieval Europe or the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Before the march from Stuart to Des Moines was done, those given to Biblical allusion might have compared the sufferings of the Kellyites to those of Job and wondered whether anyone with less wisdom than Solomon could have led them.<sup>16</sup>

All day they marched. The weather was pleasant enough, but each painful step dimmed the vision of the delights that awaited them. In this test of will it was easy to fail. Jack London complained once again: "Walked 11 miles through the town of Dexter to Earlham where we had dinner. My feet are in such bad condition that I am not going on any further, unless I can ride. I will go to jail first." London, with his broad smile and ingratiating manner, played upon the sympathies of bystanders who bought him a rail ticket to the next town. Others were not so fortunate.<sup>17</sup>

Marchers reached Van Meter at dusk. Des Moines was still

15. *Omaha World-Leader*, 28 April 1894, 1.

16. On historical precedents for the movement see Vincent, *Story of the Commonwealth*, 22-48.

17. *Omaha World-Herald*, 29 April 1894, 1; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 49.



## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

nineteen miles ahead. They rested briefly until at 9 p.m. Kelly ordered them to move on. In the darkness they could scarcely see the road. Those who believed that providence favored their crusade must have been dismayed when about a mile down the road all the fury of nature was unleashed against them. A dust storm of apocalyptic proportions blew out of the darkness. Men stumbled about in confusion, swallowing sand and trying to rub it out of their eyes. Kelly shouted words of encouragement but they were lost in the wind. The heavens opened and rain fell in torrents. Lightning and thunderbolts gave the march the semblance of a true military engagement. Instead of cannonballs, lightning smashed through the tree limbs.<sup>18</sup>

Men from the West Coast unaccustomed to the violence of a spring storm in the Midwest were terrified. They broke ranks and raced into the woods for protection until someone warned them that tall trees would attract death-dealing lightning. They bolted out into the open again and prostrated themselves on the sodden ground. When the storm abated, they slogged and slid through the darkness toward Des Moines. Or was it toward Omaha? Many had lost their bearings. They stumbled through potholes and occasionally tumbled into ditches filled with waist-deep water. Their curses filled the night. They cast aside their waterlogged and worthless shoes and tried to protect their feet by wrapping them with their shirts. Half-naked, mud matting their hair and filling their eyes, ears, nostrils, and pockets, they broke into small groups. Some made a wrong turn and ended up at Waukee, several miles out of the way. Hungry and exhausted, others simply dropped in their tracks, preferring to wait the morning light before struggling on to Des Moines.<sup>19</sup>

For a time Sunday morning Kelly was a general without an army. Neither the marchers nor the fleet of wagons promised by sympathizers materialized. And unlike those in Omaha, city officials and the press in Des Moines were indifferent or even hostile to the protest. The *Leader* editorialized prior to their arrival that the Kellyites were "an army of tramps and

18. *Omaha World-Herald*, 29 April 1894, 1; *Des Moines Leader*, 27 April 1894, 1; *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1894, 1.

19. *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1894, 1.

malcontents who are hunting for snow to shovel in summer." Governor Frank D. Jackson voiced similar sentiments.<sup>20</sup>

Gradually, little bands of men appeared on the horizon. For the next several hours they collected on the west side and organized for a triumphal march through Des Moines. Considering the ordeal of the past night, they were in amazingly good spirits. Even now, though, nature was not done with the unemployed miners, hatters, and printers who would reform the system. Halfway through their four-mile march across town, the sky opened up once again, drenching the Kellyites and the numerous spectators who lined Grand Avenue. The men finally reached their temporary home, an abandoned stove foundry, and at 7 p.m. ate their first real meal in twenty-four hours.<sup>21</sup>

If Kelly's men concluded after surmounting all of the difficulties of the past three weeks that no new trouble could befall them, they were wrong. In Des Moines they encountered sympathizers who promised more than they delivered or who wanted to exploit the army for their own narrow purposes. Several days before the Kellyites arrived, when they were the city's main topic of conversation, General James B. Weaver sensed an opportunity to make political capital out of what some called "Kelly's disinherited army." Weaver, a local Populist leader and the party's standard-bearer in the 1892 presidential election, called a meeting of sympathizers and nominated as chairman B. O. Aylesworth, president of Drake University. Aylesworth, a philosopher by profession and an idealist by temperament, readily accepted, calling it an honor. Aylesworth lent respectably to the proceedings but Weaver was clearly in charge.<sup>22</sup>

Weaver next enlisted the support of organized workers, women's groups, and clergymen. Together they were supposed to collect enough food to feed the army, an amount valued at

20. *Des Moines Leader*, 24 April 1894, 2 (quotation); 25 April 1894, 1.

21. *Iowa State Register*, 1 May 1894, 4; *Des Moines Leader*, 1 May 1894, 1; *Omaha World-Herald*, 30 April 1894, 1.

22. *Chicago Tribune*, 23 April 1894, 2; *Farmers' Tribune* (Des Moines), 2 May 1894, 5 (quotation); *Iowa State Register*, 27 April 1894, 5; *Des Moines Leader*, 11 May 1894, 1.

## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

about \$700 a day. But scarcely having begun their task, the odd coalition split apart. Organized labor, sensing that it was being used as a tail to the Populist kite, drew back in resentment. Conflict between sympathizers so hampered the collecting of food—despite the glowing reports that they sent Kelly—that Des Moines mayor Isaac L. Hillis stepped in and appealed to citizens to help the marchers as a matter of charity rather than sympathy.<sup>23</sup>

Des Moines residents in the end proved surprisingly generous. People from all walks of life donated food and clothing to the visitors encamped on the city's northeast side. On one occasion, just as Kelly was about to address a large crowd, a beautiful basket of flowers was handed up to him, a gift from the ladies of Des Moines. Kellyites curried the favor of townspeople through their usual games of baseball. Jack London recorded three games, with the Kellyites winning two, though not by impolitic margins. His account also recorded one of the army's chief concerns as the days passed in Des Moines: "We spent the evening round the fire singing & joking till 11 when we went to bed. It was awful cold. Wednesday was spent in camp. No transportation." The Chicago Great Western train supposedly promised by sympathizers turned out to be a mirage; meanwhile, the army's ranks swelled with new men to feed.<sup>24</sup>

MAY 1 was to have been the day of triumph for the Coxey's army movement. One hundred thousand strong and representing every corner of the union, they were to have presented their living petition to Congress. Instead, however, a few hundred men from the Midwest and Northeast marched down Pennsylvania Avenue, and when Coxey attempted to deliver a speech from the steps of the Capitol he was arrested for walking across the grass. At that time the press reported thirteen additional armies bound for Washington with a total of five thousand men. The largest of these was Kelly's contingent stranded

23. *Omaha World-Herald*, 29 April 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 29 April 1894, 13.

24. *Iowa State Register*, 2 May 1894, 5; *Daily Iowa Capital*, 8 May 1894, 1; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 50.

in Iowa. Kelly clearly was exasperated with Coxey and his officers for having forced a premature confrontation. Labeling Coxey's own contingent from Ohio "only a little squad of Eastern men," he lashed out at Coxey's field marshal, Carl Browne, who arranged the rendezvous, calling him a "conceited ass." Kelly contrasted the generous support westerners gave the movement with the general indifference shown by easterners, a fact that now caused him to view his army as Coxey's "only hope." "We go there with the influence of the laboring men of the great West behind us and will be supported by the Populist leaders in Congress from the West and also by other Western Congressmen."<sup>25</sup>

As the days after May 1 passed with no prospect of obtaining a train, both Kellyites and their Des Moines sympathizers showed increased frustration. The novelty of feeding the army was gone. Some wished the protesters had never come. Kellyites found fault with their Populist hosts, particularly General Weaver—they believed he had kept businessmen from aiding their cause. A growing number of men reported sick: At one time twenty-three were in the hospital, seventeen with pneumonia probably caused by sleeping in a cold rain in Council Bluffs. President Aylesworth used the delay to learn more about the marchers. At his urging Drake students conducted a statistical survey that provided the most complete picture of any contingent of Coxey's army. Drake faculty and trustees, however, did not share their president's interest in contemporary sociology and as a consequence he nearly lost his job.<sup>26</sup>

Even as Aylesworth edged out of the limelight, another man elbowed his way in. He was James R. Sovereign, a Des Moines resident and national head of the Knights of Labor. A decade earlier the Knights constituted the largest and most prominent labor organization in America, but events during the in-

25. *Iowa State Register*, 2 May 1894, 5 (first and second quotations); *Daily Iowa Capital*, 1 May 1894, 4; *Chicago Tribune*, 3 May 1894, 2 (third quotations); McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 116-121.

26. *Omaha World-Herald*, 3 May 1894, 1; *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, 9 May 1894, 1; *Des Moines Leader*, 25 April 1894, 1; 11 May 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 8 May 1894, 6. The results of Aylesworth's survey are summarized conveniently in *The Palimpsest* 52 (June 1971), 300-302.

## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

tervening years had reduced the order to comparative insignificance. Sovereign, like Weaver, sensed a personal opportunity in Kelly's army. Rushing back from a meeting in Chicago, he immediately grabbed headlines with a series of blustering statements. Clinging pathetically to the illusion of power, Sovereign threatened that unless Iowa's railroads provided transportation for the Kellyites he would call a massive sympathy strike by members of the Knights of Labor and Eugene Debs's new American Railway Union. He claimed that Debs had told him, "Whenever you want us, speak the word. We will be with you in any fight." But when the Des Moines local of the American Railway Union, not wanting to walk off the job during a period of high unemployment, protested to Debs, he quickly wired back, "Pay no attention to the report. It is false."<sup>27</sup>

The situation looked hopeless: Railroads moved their engines out of Des Moines to frustrate any capture attempt; Kelly warned that his men would starve before they walked on; and members of organized labor, who had generously shared their food with the Kellyites, feared that the army would disband and seek their jobs, too. Then someone had a brilliant idea. Naturally, both Weaver and Sovereign claimed credit. Why not convert the army into a navy and float lazily out of town? There would be no stolen trains and no blistered feet.<sup>28</sup>

A veteran canoeist called the proposal to float down the Des Moines River to the Mississippi "impractical." The distance was more than two hundred miles; the river was very shallow, filled with sandbars and hidden snags that easily could sink a homemade scow; dams obstructed it in several places; and the few towns lining the river scarcely could feed all the Kellyites. Kelly himself greeted the idea with a derisive laugh, though after a bit of reflection he accepted. A short test run by some of his sympathizers suggested that small boats could make the trip downstream; in addition Kelly scarcely dared to remain in Des

27. *Omaha World-Herald*, 2 May 1894, 1 (first quotation); 3 May 1894, 1 (second quotation); Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895: A Story in Democracy* (1929; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass., 1959).

28. *Omaha World-Herald*, 28 April 1894, 1; 30 April 1894, 1; *Des Moines Leader*, 3 May 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 4 May 1894, 5; 5 May 1894, 8.

Moines much longer. As his army swelled to 1,345 members, rations grew meager and the camp insanitary. On Saturday, May 5, Kelly assembled his men in the stove works. Admitting that he saw no possibility of a train, he asked how many were willing to walk on east. No one made a sound. He then asked if they were willing to travel by water to Wheeling, West Virginia, only three hundred miles from their goal. Shouts of approval filled the air and men eagerly awaited a chance to build their flotilla.<sup>29</sup>

The next morning Commodore Kelly established his navy yard at the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, near the site of old Fort Des Moines. Local residents donated money to purchase the necessary materials, and with the help of the carpenters' union the Kellyites commenced nailing together the first of more than one hundred boats. James Sovereign, dressed in a Prince Albert coat and sporting a pencil behind his ear and a rule in his hand, acted as master shipbuilder. General Weaver moved among the men offering free advice.<sup>30</sup>

Fifteen thousand Sunday visitors lined the river banks to watch a spectacle that reminded them of small boys in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. Also watching discreetly were Rock Island officials, concerned that at several locations their railway lines were within hailing distance of the river. Kelly worked the crowd like an old-time evangelist, raising nearly three hundred dollars. Promises of support were forthcoming from Omaha mayor George P. Bemis, townspeople living downriver, and organized workers. A committee composed of Sovereign, Debs, and local labor leaders in Iowa and Nebraska sent out a letter asking American trade unionists to help the Kellyites. The Durango, Colorado, assembly of the Knights of Labor, for example, immediately wired back one hundred dollars.<sup>31</sup>

The first boat was launched at 4 p.m. Anna Hooten, who

29. Des Moines *Leader*, 6 May 1894, 1 (quotation); *Daily Iowa Capital*, 5 May 1894, 1; 7 May 1894, 1; Omaha *World-Herald*, 6 May 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 6 May 1894, 3.

30. *Daily Iowa Capital*, 7 May 1894, 1; Des Moines *Leader*, 8 May 1894, 1; Omaha *World-Herald*, 7 May 1894, 2.

31. *Iowa State Register*, 8 May 1894, 6; Omaha *World-Herald*, 7 May 1894, 2; Des Moines *Leader*, 8 May 1894, 1; 9 May 1894, 1; Ottumwa *Daily Courier*, 9 May 1894, 1.

*Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*



*A scow from Kelly's flotilla,  
May 1894.*

along with Edna Harper had accompanied the marchers from Council Bluffs, christened it the "Omaha." After Kelly, the two women, and four rowers made a brief shakedown cruise, the commodore pronounced his craft satisfactory in every way. But Kelly proved a poor judge of things nautical, for in practice the scows took on so much water that two crewmen had to bail constantly to keep each afloat. He was, however, extremely anxious to get his flotilla underway. By Sunday evening his men had finished fifty boats, and a new crew working by the light of bonfires continued building through the night. Each craft was eighteen feet long, six feet wide, and one foot deep. When fully loaded with thirteen men they drew about six inches of water. Made of rough planks and caulked with oakum and tar, most boats contained lockers to provide seating and storage facilities. Rough boards served as paddles. The craft bore names such as "Des Moines," "Ottumwa," "Queen Isabella," "General Weaver," and "Tale of Woe," and were decorated with American flags and

bunting. One scow belonging to a Sacramento crew featured a substantial perch crowned with a large eagle. Kelly, ever mindful of his need for good public relations, assigned one boat to the press.<sup>32</sup>

Launch day was Wednesday, May 9, ten days after the Kellyites had arrived in Des Moines. Everything seemed perfect for the start of the next phase of the great adventure. The sun shone brightly and the river ran full with the rain that had fallen in northern Iowa during the past several days. Des Moines businesses closed for the occasion. People in a holiday mood lined the banks and asked one another in loud voices, "Which one is Kelly?" They also wanted to see the "Engine Heroines," the two women who had attempted to capture a train for Kelly in Council Bluffs.<sup>33</sup>

Heavy wagons lumbered to the launch site all morning, bringing donations of bread, beef, vegetables, and coffee. Kelly periodically harangued the crowd by reading telegrams of support, which elicited loud cheers from the onlookers. They also cheered crewmen as they launched each boat. Kelly's sailors were to have rendezvoused a short distance downstream, but in true Tom Sawyer fashion they started racing one another, having too much fun to obey orders. Disappearing from view they could be heard lustily singing, "We'll hang old Grover on a sour apple tree." Kelly did not leave until 2 p.m., by which time his navy was hopelessly scattered.<sup>34</sup>

In all 140 boats left Des Moines carrying nine hundred men and an indeterminate number of women. As estimated five hundred women boarded the boats for brief rides. They were supposed to disembark a short distance downstream, but some fifty had no intention of returning. People soon noticed a Swede riding horseback along the river in a terrible fret: He kept yell-

32. Des Moines *Leader*, 8 May 1894, 1; 10 May 1894, 1; St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, 13 May 1894, 13; *Daily Iowa Capital*, 9 May 1894, 1; Ottumwa *Daily Courier*, 9 May 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 8 May 1894, 3.

33. Des Moines *Leader*, 9 May 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 10 May 1894, 3 (first quotation); Omaha *World-Herald*, 11 May 1894, 1 (second quotation).

34. Ottumwa *Daily Courier*, 9 May 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 10 May 1894, 3 (quotation).



## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

ing, "Well, she's my wife and I'm going to have her." A reporter observed that "Kelly's army does not disturb the chicken coops or the cellars or the people along its line of travel to any considerable extent, but it appears to work havoc with the hearts of impressionable women." Another wrote that "it used to be said that women adored uniforms, but in this case it proved true that they adored rags, and with the same blind infatuation." A wild-eyed man was observed going down the Des Moines River in a skiff. Carrying a shotgun and a look of stern determination, he asked everyone if they had seen a young woman about thirty years old, with brown hair and blue eyes. She was his wife and had run off with a Kellyite. The farmer declared that he would use one barrel of his gun on his false wife and the other on her new lover.<sup>35</sup>

When Kelly caught up with his navy at Runnells, the first night's stop, he found that hunger had turned the men discontented and surly. They complained about Kelly's lack of leadership during their first day on the river and about him spending too much time with "them women," Hooten and Harper, now called "Kelly's angels." The commissary boat arrived with Kelly and when the men had eaten they were once again as docile as lambs. But observers predicted trouble unless Kelly rid his contingent of all women. That he refused to do: While he assisted law enforcement officers in capturing runaways from Des Moines and even disbanded a company for refusing to oust a woman, he clung steadfastly to the notion that Hooten and Harper were entitled to special protection since they had risked their reputations and broken the law attempting to capture a train for his men. As noble as the policy was, it increased jealousy among the Kellyites. During the trip downriver, Kelly made every effort to ensure that morality prevailed: At night Hooten and Harper slept in a special tent guarded from a discreet distance by three men. No one was allowed to go near. Kelly also reminded people that he was

35. Ottumwa *Daily Courier*, 9 May 1894, 1; Des Moines *Leader*, 10 May 1894, 1; 11 May 1894, 1; *Daily Iowa Capital*, 9 May 1894, 1; 10 May 1894, 1 (first and second quotations); Omaha *World-Herald*, 11 May 1894, 1 (third quotation); Iowa *State Register*, 10 May 1894, 3.

bunking with his wife's brother, the treasurer of the army: "Do you think he would stand actions such as have been charged to me? . . . There were some women got among the men, who are not all saints, at Des Moines, but I soon had them arrested and sent back." The "angels" remained an attraction second only to the commodore himself.<sup>36</sup>

Next to the jealousy caused by the presence of Hooten and Harper, Kelly's most serious problem was food. Most townspeople along the Des Moines River were generous. But when those of Dunreath and Red Rock refused to sell anything to the navy, Kelly warned a deputy sheriff that if he could not purchase food, his men would take it by force. The deputy advised citizens to change their minds, pointing out that there were enough Kellyites to capture both towns. Kelly was also troubled by foragers and promiscuous beggars in his ranks. Jack London and a group of Sacramento men got ahead of the main flotilla, feasted on donations meant for the entire navy, and left little for the unfortunates who followed. When Kelly tried to discipline the malefactors, the Sacramento men complained loudly about what they called his failure of leadership.<sup>37</sup>

The cruise through Iowa lasted ten days. "In motion, the army might be described as a tatterdemalion *Carnival de Venice*," wrote one onlooker. Each boat was festooned with banners, flags, and spring wildflowers; their sunburned crews resembled Italian gondoliers. So many Iowans lined the riverbanks to watch the passing show that Jack London protested in his diary that "we would have to go for miles to find a secluded spot in which to bathe, or make our toilet." If the navy traveled after dark, farmers built bonfires so as not to miss seeing the odd flotilla. To pass the time some crewmen took to impersonating Kelly. They stood and bowed to the appreciative crowds. One bewildered farmer was introduced to six Kellys. A

36. *Iowa State Register*, 10 May 1894, 3 (first and second quotations); *Omaha World-Herald*, 11 May 1894, 1; *Des Moines Leader*, 11 May 1894, 1; *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, 11 May 1894, 1; 12 May 1894, 3; 15 May 1894, 4 (third quotation).

37. *Omaha World-Herald*, 12 May 1894, 1; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 51-52; *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, 11 May 1894, 1.

## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

special glee club boat followed Kelly's flagship and serenaded onlookers with verses of "After the Ball," "Daisy, Daisy," and a special Kellyite version of "Marching Through Georgia":

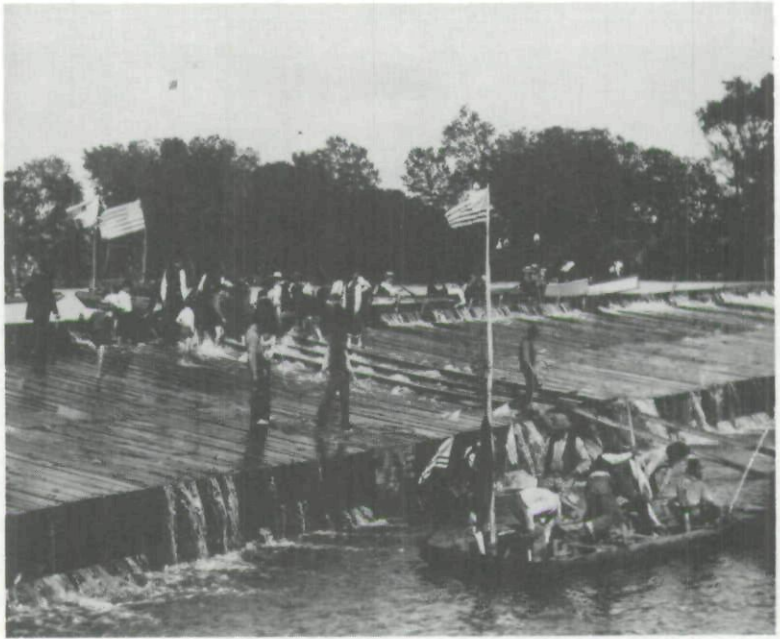
Hurrah! Hurrah! In Kelly we will trust.  
Hurrah! Hurrah! Monopolies we'll bust.  
We'll rally 'round the camp fire, yes—  
And stay there if we must;  
But we'll go marching to Washington.

A reporter for the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* noted an especially curious feature of Kelly's contingent. In an age noted for its race hatred, "There are several darkies in the army and they fraternize on a footing of equality with their white companions. They possess the light-hearted qualities of their race and their songs and wit keep up the spirits of all within hearing."<sup>38</sup>

Kellyites were just as interested in Iowa as Iowans were in them. They commented favorably on the lush rolling farmland through which they floated and were especially curious about how farmers planted corn. In all probability they would have passed downriver without incident had it not been for the Rock Island officials who shadowed the men "like a hawk hovering over a brood of chickens." Anticipating trouble, the railroad ultimately caused it. The Rock Island infiltrated Kelly's navy with detectives and placed hundreds of armed employees—erroneously thought by Jack London and others to be Pinkertons—at crucial points. One of the most heavily guarded locations was Eldon, where the Rock Island's Chicago to Kansas City mainline crossed the Des Moines River. There nearly a hundred special deputies, mostly company employees, waited with axe handles and other weapons to prevent the Kellyites from landing.<sup>39</sup>

38. Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, 15 May 1894, 1 (first and fourth quotations); *Daily Iowa Capital*, 10 May 1894, 1; 12 May 1894, 1; Ottumwa *Daily Courier*, 14 May 1894, 1; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 52 (second quotation); St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, 13 May 1894, 14 (third quotation).

39. *Iowa State Register*, 12 May 1894, 3; Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, 15 May 1894, 1, 2 (quotation); 16 May 1894, 1; *Daily Iowa Capital*, 12 May 1894, 1; Omaha *World-Herald*, 1 May 1894, 2; Des Moines *Leader*, 10 May 1894, 1; 17 May 1894, 4.



*The navy eases over a dam at Ottumwa on its trip down the Des Moines River*

As one of the lead boats passed, townspeople motioned it over to receive provisions. The Rock Island guards would not permit it to land, however, and hurled stones at the Kellyites, reportedly breaking the ribs of one and knocking another unconscious. Encamped about two miles below town, Kelly's navy would have liked nothing better than to punish the railroad that had harassed them repeatedly. Jack London, who arrived at the campsite ahead of the main flotilla, described the mood: "Two of the detectives were arrested but the R. R. officials instantly bailed them out. By nine o'clock the boats came in all in a lump, & they were all greatly excited. If any Pinkertons are captured Woe unto them for the men are getting desperate."<sup>40</sup>

40. *Iowa State Register*, 17 May 1894, 3; *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, 16 May 1894, 1; *Des Moines Leader*, 16 May 1894, 2; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 53.

## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

Early the next morning one of the boats crossed to the opposite bank where about twenty-five guards refused them permission to land. In an instant every boat was filled with excited Kellyites crossing to the aid of their comrades. Some literally ran across the river at a ford, never stopping to pull off their shoes or socks or to roll up their pants. All but two of the guards bolted for town. A Des Moines reporter observed tongue-in-cheek that one guard, a fat engineer, moved so fast that his was "the quickest run ever made in the Des Moines valley." The two guards who remained were surrounded and disarmed. Kelly once again intervened to avoid bloodshed. Law officers arrested two Kellyites but released them a short while later. The townspeople of Eldon were so angry with the Rock Island for disturbing their peace that the railroad was forced to apologize. An editorial in the *Ottumwa Courier* called the railroad's action "so senseless that it is little, if any, less than criminal." Rock Island representatives, nevertheless, continued to shadow the navy all the way to Keokuk, where the Des Moines River meets the Mississippi, but they incited no further trouble.<sup>41</sup>

ON MAY 21, after an extended stop near Keokuk, where the men received mail, supplies, and nearly ten thousand visitors who arrived by excursion boat and special train, the Kellyites finally left Iowa. It had been a very long five weeks since arriving in Council Bluffs. Their early optimism was gone and the way ahead looked no easier. At Quincy, Illinois, a short distance from Keokuk and Kelly's boyhood home for ten years, the commodore addressed a large and friendly crowd, promising to reach Washington "in spite of hell," if he lived that long. That was a big "if." The Mississippi River was no sluggish, shallow stream. In places its massive current boiled up above the surface or swirled around in giant whirlpools. Against such perils the none-too-seaworthy scows of Kelly's navy had no

41. *Des Moines Leader*, 17 May 1894, 1 (first quotation); 18 May 1894, 1; *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, 16 May 1894, 1, 3 (second quotation); 17 May 1894, 8; Etulain, *London on the Road*, 53.

chance. Thus at Keokuk they lashed their craft together to form one great barge and got a tug to assist them. But no one could be sure that the odd craft would survive as far as St. Louis much less make the trip up the Ohio River to Wheeling.<sup>42</sup>

Jack London for one had had enough. At Hannibal, Missouri, he wrote in his diary, "We went supperless to bed. Am going to pull out in the morning. I can't stand starvation." The next day he left for Chicago, bumming his way by rail. One must wonder, though, whether he used starvation as an excuse to avoid facing even more frightening perils on the river ahead. In the struggle for survival, London knew how to calculate the odds.<sup>43</sup>

Nearly two months later a diehard band of three hundred Kellyites finally reached Wheeling. Their journey had been one long struggle to overcome all the old troubles that plagued them in Iowa plus a few new ones. Speed and his seceders abandoned the main body of Kellyites in St. Louis and made their way east by freight train. Colonel Baker quit the odyssey in Cincinnati. A few members drowned and many more, possibly fearing a similar fate, quietly slipped away at each landing. As Kelly's navy made its way up the Ohio Valley the novelty of the protest faded; the crowds of onlookers dwindled; and press comment grew ever more hostile. Louisville, Kentucky, authorities harassed Kelly out of town by threatening to jail him on a charge of vagrancy. In southern Ohio he became so sick with what was apparently typhoid fever that his men had to go on without him.<sup>44</sup>

A remnant of Kellyites reached Washington in late July and went into camp without other western marchers at Rosslyn, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from the capital. They

42. *Daily Gate City* (Keokuk), 20 May 1894, 5; *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, 15 May 1894, 3; *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, 20 May 1894, 1; 22 May 1894, 1; *Iowa State Register*, 20 May 1894, 3; 22 May 1894, 3 (quotation); *Des Moines Leader*, 22 May 1894, 2.

43. Etulain, *London on the Road*, 54-55.

44. *Evansville, Indiana, Journal*, 15 June 1894, 1; *New Albany, Indiana, Daily Ledger*, 18 June 1894, 5; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 29 June 1894, 8; 1 July 1894, 2; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 22 June 1894, 1; *McMurry, Coxey's Army*, 194-196.

## *Soldiers of Misfortune, Part II*

scarcely had been there two weeks when the governor of Virginia dispatched state militiamen to burn their settlement and drive the indigents across the river into the District of Columbia. Authorities, uncertain about dealing with the survivors of Coxey's once grand crusade, chartered passenger coaches and sent the men west to St. Louis and St. Paul. Ironically, that was the kind of free railroad transportation the Kellyites had sought in Iowa.<sup>45</sup>

The Coxey's army movement failed, or so it seemed to contemporaries. Congress remained unmoved by the plight of the unemployed and authorities dispersed the various protesters. In the eyes of many the vaunted "petition in boots" proved to be nothing more than the great American farce, and Coxey, Kelly, and the others were simply cranks. Kelly's followers were "silly and weak-minded men" who "flocked to his standard to get free pies, free rides, and newspaper notoriety."<sup>46</sup>

But the story of the Coxey's army movement is much more complicated than that. At one level, the transcontinental journey of Kelly's and other western contingents was one of the great unsung adventure stories of American history. It was the late nineteenth-century version of the overland trek by pioneers seeking the gold fields of California or an agricultural paradise in Oregon. In each, necessity forced the creation of a temporary community on the trail. An earlier age might have cast Kelly in the role of a patient and gentle wagonmaster coaxing a party of Illinois farm families across sagebrush deserts and alkali flats to the promised land beyond the horizon. In fact, the drama of people braving fantastic obstacles in the pursuit of some goal, or simply struggling to survive, has an appeal as old as Homer's *Odyssey*, and that helps account for the great interest that Kelly's army aroused. As entertainment the movement was a notable success.<sup>47</sup>

45. *Washington Star*, 11 August 1894, 1; *Washington Post*, 15 August 1894, 5; 17 August 1894, 5; *Minneapolis Journal*, 18 August 1894, 1.

46. McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 33 (first quotation); *Iowa State Register*, 26 April 1894, 4 (second quotation).

47. The *Des Moines Leader* described the interest of Iowans in Kelly's army: "It is the most interesting thing they have had to talk about for years and it will continue to be a topic of discussion for years to come" (24 April 1894, 1).

Like many good adventures, the story of Kelly's army mixed noble ambition and high-minded idealism with jealousy, pettiness, and exploitation. Love and sex were present, too. One of Kelly's angels, Edna Harper, left the army in St. Louis to rejoin her husband, but not without complaining to the press that "intimate relations" between Anna Hooten and Kelly were a detriment to the cause. What that meant, neither she nor any of the reporters covering the army would say. The Victorian age left such things to the imagination. Perhaps Harper was only trying to create a scandal where none existed; a short while later Hooten married Thomas Sutcliffe, a carpenter from San Francisco. In an open-air ceremony near Cairo, Illinois, the couple exchanged their wedding vows before a local minister and 1,100 comrades. The men stood with bowed heads, perhaps contemplating their own families, some two thousand miles and two months removed. When it was all over, the bride fainted, having been overcome by emotion. History does not record how the couple spent their honeymoon or details of their future together.<sup>48</sup>

At another level, the saga of Kelly's army reveals much about American attitudes in the late nineteenth century, particularly how people perceived unemployment. Twenty years earlier, in the 1870s, and again in the 1880s, the unemployed of the West Coast singled out Chinese immigrants to the United States as the chief source of their unhappiness. Their slogan was "The Chinese must go!" Give the jobs held by Orientals to Caucasians, ban Orientals from the United States, and unemployment would vanish; or so many people believed. By the 1890s the unemployed of the West Coast had developed a more sophisticated understanding of the causes of unemployment, and they sought help through a variety of federal measures to create temporary jobs. When Kelly explained his program to a gathering of organized workers in St. Louis, a reporter from the *Post-Dispatch* observed, "The labor leaders didn't appear to think of Gen. Kelly as a crank, or to look upon

48. *Minneapolis Journal*, 5 June 1894, 2 (quotation); *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 June 1894, 2.



his plan as impracticable." Those who agreed with Kelly and Coxey were a definite minority, however, else the march to Washington would have been unnecessary.<sup>49</sup>

Many observers quite correctly perceived that the Coxey's army movement required the federal government to move in a new direction and that possibility frightened them. President H. L. Stetson of Des Moines College voiced a commonly held position when he told a student assembly that the Kellyites' demand for "free food and transportation is upon a principle utterly false. The business of the government is not to furnish employment to all at \$2.50 per day. The very hour that the United States agrees so to do, that hour it goes out of existence."<sup>50</sup>

Changing the attitudes of people who shared the fears of President Stetson and his generation was largely a process of education; and in the end, Kelly's army, like the entire Coxey protest, probably functioned best as an educational device. "The uprising of an army of unemployed citizens has already set the press and pulpit to work in every city and hamlet in the Nation," maintained one contemporary. The Des Moines *Leader*, originally hostile to the movement, noted that "the Kelly army in promoting the interest of their cause could not have chosen a more effective means than to float slowly and fragmentarily down the river, as they are now doing. They may be floating to a destiny of despair or even death, but they are advertising the cause. Hundreds of people go out to see them." The *Leader* added that not since the Civil War had people been so interested in any movement.<sup>51</sup>

The educational process could take several years, as the lengthy crusade for women's suffrage illustrated. In similar fashion the Coxey's army movement must be seen as part of a larger effort to gain political legitimacy for new and generally

49. St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, 29 May 1894, 1; Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971).

50. *The Palimpsest* 52 (June 1971), 303.

51. G. A. Eckles to editor, *Iowa State Register*, 12 May 1894, 2 (first quotation); Des Moines *Leader*, 15 May 1894, 1 (second quotation).

unpopular ideas. Although we have no way of knowing how many minds the Kellyites changed, the discussion they promoted of the state's responsibility for the unemployed was an important step in getting people to consider a concept that they formerly rejected out of hand. When, in the early 1930s, the New Deal finally provided temporary work for the unemployed, it signaled the political legitimization of an idea first seriously discussed by a large number of Americans in the late nineteenth century. For certain Iowans that process probably began when the state hosted Kelly's army in the spring of 1894.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.