

## MUSEUM NOTES

### KATE SHELLEY'S LANTERN

*"... Let your name, let your fame, let your courage declare: What a woman can do and a woman can dare."* These lines are from a poem by Eugene J. Hall about the 15-year old heroine, who armed with only this lantern, prevented a railroad disaster.

Kate Shelley lived on a farm near Honey Creek in 1881 with her mother and several younger brothers and sisters. Her father, who died when she was 10, had been a section foreman on the Chicago and North Western Railroad.



*Photo by John Phipps*

A severe storm flooded Honey Creek on the afternoon of July 6, 1881, and swept into the yard of the Shelley trackside home. As it grew darker and the storm grew worse, Kate knew "that the railroad bridge a quarter of a mile up on the creek could not withstand the storm and the trestle across the Des Moines River was under a terrible strain."

At 11 p. m., she heard the "pusher"—the engine stationed at the nearby town of Moingona to help the heavy trains up the grades on both sides of the river—move past the house toward Honey Creek bridge.

"Then came the horrible crash and the fierce hissing of steam," one historian wrote, and Kate cried: "Oh, mother, they have gone down!"

Two of the "pusher" crews perished in the river. Kate, knowing the "Lightning Express" from the west was due, made her way across the trestle to warn the trackmen to stop the train. She had to cross on hands and knees to keep from being blown into the river and tore her flesh on the "twisted and rusty

spikes" that were bared because planks had been removed to discourage all but railroad traffic across the bridge.

Although weakened by loss of blood, so the story goes, she stopped the train in time. Seventy-five years later, on the anniversary of her deed, the Order of Railway Conductors voted to honor the memory of Kate Shelley by placing a bronze marker on her grave at the Sacred Heart Cemetery in Boone, Iowa.

At that time, Kate Shelley was called the railroad's "most famous heroine." The lantern was presented to the Historical Building in 1913 and is currently displayed on the second floor.

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## VIGILANTES IN IOWA, PART II

*This is the continuation from the Spring, 1966, issue on the Vigilantes in Iowa, taken from the Des Moines Sunday Register, March 24, 1946.*

There were occasions when the Vigilantes turned their prisoners over to the legal authorities. More often were jails and courts invaded and men taken to be executed by mobs. An example of court invasion was the case of William (Comequick) Thomas, who lived on Camp creek in Polk county.

In September, 1856, he met a young couple near Oskaloosa. They had \$1,000 and they wanted to buy a good farm. He promised to show them where they could get one. Two weeks later their bodies were found in cornshocks in Poweshiek county.

Through continuances and a change in venue, the case was delayed and finally transferred to Montezuma. On July 14, 1857, Comequick was given another change in venue.

Some 2,000 persons gathered around the Poweshiek county courthouse. A brother of the slain woman, who had come from out of the state, cried to the crowd:

"That villain up there butchered my sister and hid her in a cornshock and his lawyer is going to get him cleared the next time because I have nothing left to pay my expenses here again.

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