

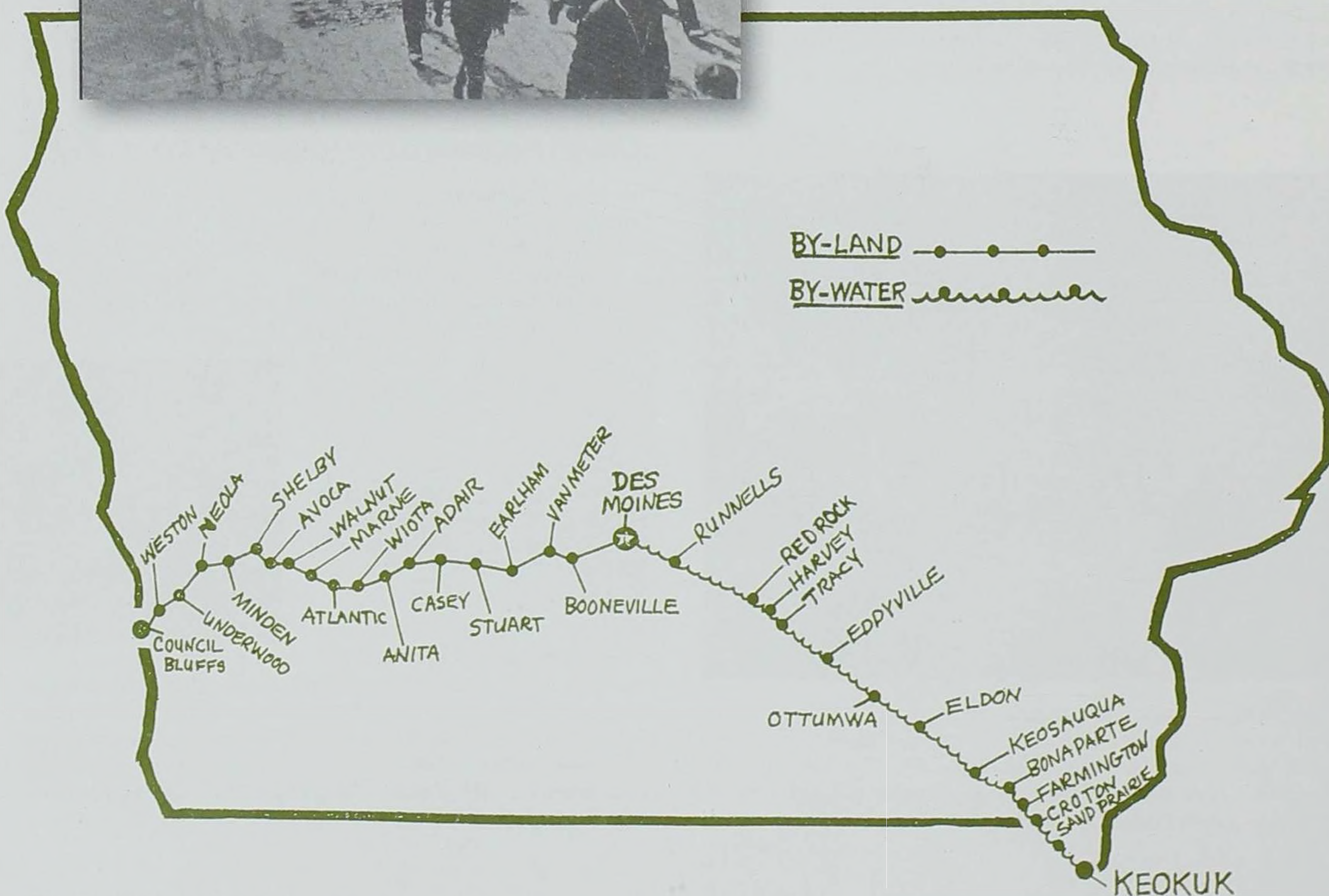
ALL PHOTOS SHSI (IOWA CITY)



# Kelly's Army

The story of Kelly's Army crossing Iowa in 1894 is not widely known, but it is a compelling one. We explore the story here from three perspectives, each preserved by your State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI).

First, an excerpt from the work of historian Carlos A. Schwantes sets the scene. His fascinating, two-part article appeared in SHSI's *Annals of Iowa* in 1983, and is well worth reading again. Schwantes used daily accounts in Iowa newspapers to buttress his research, and we encourage you to also delve into SHSI's rich collection of newspapers to sample reporters' descriptions of Kelly's Army and townspeople's reactions as it crossed Iowa. More newspaper





# y Crosses Iowa

accounts appear in articles published by SHSI in 1923 and 1971 in *The Palimpsest*, available through SHSI libraries.

Second, on-the-scene photos from SHSI's collections reveal rare glimpses of this "army" of out-of-work Americans and the crowds their march attracted.

Third, published here for the first time is a reminiscence of an Iowan who actually visited the army's Des Moines camp when she was 12. Written in her elder years and donated to SHSI's Special Collections, her account explains Kelly's Army in broad strokes, but her use of descriptive childhood memories gives the story a unique, first-hand perspective.

Finally, SHSI has created the opportunity for you to learn more about these events—and offer your own perspective—through programs described at the end of our travels with Kelly's Army.

—The Editor



Kelly's Army arrives in Council Bluffs freight yards, April 15, 1894. Opposite: Marching to camp in nearby Chautauqua Park.

## Soldiers of Misfortune

by Carlos A. Schwantes

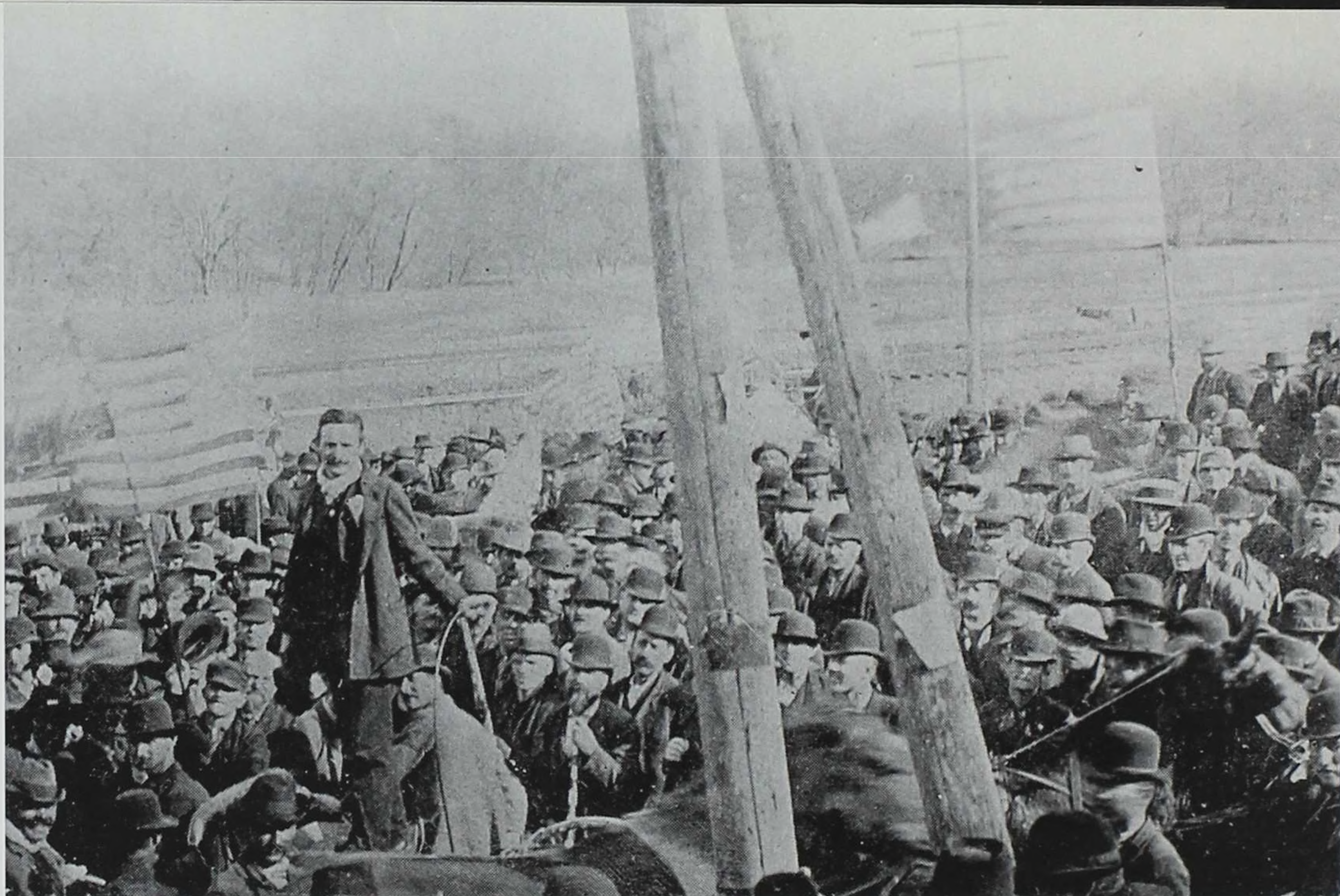
The year 1894 was a time of severe economic depression, the worst any American could remember. Because the federal government kept no reliable statistics of unemployment, no one knew just how many people nationwide were out of work, but in many places the number was large enough to exhaust the community resources available to help the jobless. The idea that the federal government should bear part of the responsibility for unem-

ployment 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. . . . 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 Coxey's army of the unemployed actually got under way in the spring of 1894, they launched a protest unlike any that Americans





**Charles Kelly addresses his followers in Council Bluffs. As in a military army, order and discipline were essential. The men were organized into divisions and companies, and were overseen by officers. A commissary and camp hospital were set up, as well as a recruiting station. Men who brought alcohol into camp were court-martialed and likely to be expelled.**

had seen before. . . . Whether petitioners would actually reach the nation's capital depended to a large degree on actions taken in states like Iowa.

. . . The largest armies [or contingents] arose in the urban West, in places like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and Denver. And no army was larger or seemed more ominous than that led by Charles T. Kelly . . . headed straight for Iowa.

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. . . .

At about 9:30 a.m. [on April 15] the special train carrying Kelly's army rumbled slowly across the Missouri River bridge. . . . From twenty-six box-cars 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. . . . 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. . . .

[In Council Bluffs and Omaha] Kelly and his men rapidly won people's hearts by their good behavior and simple appeals to basic human emotions. [But the railroads] unanimously refused to carry his men for less than full fare.

[After a week of camping and waiting in Council Bluffs, it became] obvious to Kelly that his army must walk the 180 miles to Des Moines. There he hoped that one of several additional connecting railroads could 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. . . .

[A full week later, near Des Moines] 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. . . . 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. ❖

*The previous text was excerpted from a two-part article by historian Carlos A. Schwantes. "Soldiers of Misfortune" appeared in the Annals of Iowa, 46: 7 and 8 (Winter and Spring 1983). Copyright State Historical Society of Iowa. The complete article is available through the State Historical Society's libraries.*



# Historic Events I've Lived Through

## Kelly's Army on the March

by Annie Braniff

In 1894 when I was twelve years old, I visited the camp of Kelly's Army. It was located in the old stove works which was a three-story building located about a mile and a half east of the Iowa State House [in Des Moines]. On this visit, three of my classmates and I were taken to the camp in a horse-drawn, one-seated buggy by our teacher, Sid Marshall, of Ground Hog School, which was a country school southeast of the fairgrounds.

It was a crowded place. Newspapers reported as many as 1,200 men. The number varied due to the addition of recruits and the loss by desertion. Some men were busy cooking food in large kettles over the campfires. Kelly was giving a speech explaining why the army was marching to Washington, D.C. He hoped to gain more volunteers in each town along the way. He also hoped to reduce the number of desertions that took place when weary, footsore marchers gave up the cause. We toured the first two floors of the building. Here men were resting. Some had their feet bandaged due to blisters from marching. We were not permitted to view the third floor as that was the infirmary.

The camp attracted many sightseers who came out of curiosity to see and to hear Kelly. His Industrial Army had started from San Francisco and was marching east to join the army of Jacob Coxey, who originated the idea. Their destination was Washington, D.C. They planned to ask Congress for legislation that they hoped would reduce the unemployment caused by the Panic of 1893. The petition asked for one and a half billion dollars in paper money to use in building

good roads throughout the country and to use in the reclamation of desert lands. They asked for a wage of \$1.50 for an eight-hour day. They had the sympathy of laboring men and farmers.

One member of Kelly's Army was Jack London, who later became a noted author. He kept a diary of the march from San Francisco, where he had joined. In his diary he praised the Iowa farmers who gave food and provided transportation for the luggage. He described the small Iowa towns along the route where the army was welcomed by the mayors and citizens who often marched with them down their Main Streets.

They expected a big welcome in Des Moines, but reports of their vandalism in the Omaha area had reached Des Moines. Although tension was growing as they neared the city, food and money were gathered for their arrival, and Mayor Hillis prepared a welcome speech. No bands or parades were allowed. The army arrived on April 29, 1894. After the speech, the mayor and city council met to discuss plans to speed them on their way.

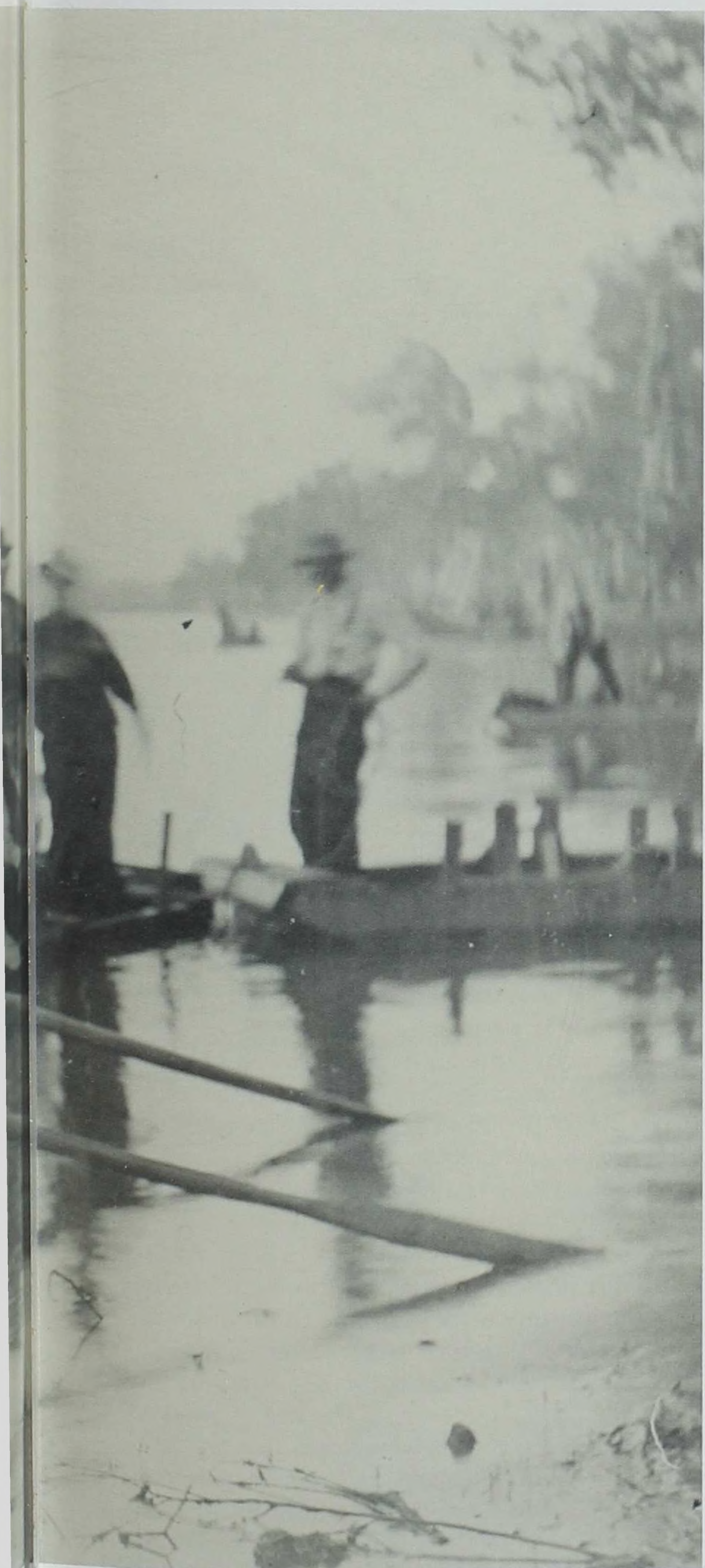
As the food supplies dwindled, and funds ran low, and reports of unsanitary conditions were heard, and fears of pestilence were rumored, the city council asked the army to move on.

On May 3 a delegation of 300 men including labor leaders called on Governor Jackson and urged him to move the army. A plan was decided upon. The army would move out of Des Moines on flatboats. Des









Moines carpenters furnished tools and helped to build Kelly's Navy Yard at the junction of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers. Here 134 flatboats ten feet by six feet were built from trees cut in the nearby timbers.

On May 8 the camp at the stove works building was abandoned and the army moved to the navy yard in preparation for departure.

On May 9 the city fathers breathed a sigh of relief when the floating army started on its journey down the Des Moines River to the Mississippi River to Cairo, where they planned to go up the Ohio River to Wheeling, West Virginia, which is 300 miles from Washington, D.C., their destination.

Their first stop was on the sandbars near Runnells, Iowa. Once again I saw the army. This time our teacher took the entire school. We walked through Section 10 to reach the scene. We carried our lunches in little tin dinner pails. The army was using tin cups and tin plates for their food. There was much joking, laughing, and singing. My sister and I wore blue dresses that day. Several men began to sing a popular song of the day, "Two Little Girls in Blue." The banks were filled with hundreds of people who cheered the men as they once again boarded the rafts and pushed on down the river.

**T**he march received nationwide attention. Coxe's Army reached Washington, D.C. before Kelly was able to join him. A combined army of 100,000 men had been expected. Only 500 arrived in Washington. After a disturbance on the [U.S.] Capitol grounds, the army was arrested for walking on the grass.

Kelly's Army reached Washington in July. Congress did nothing about the petition. Maryland and Washington returned all the men home by railroad. By August the strange crusade was ended.

Although I was only twelve, I remember the event vividly. I'm glad I witnessed a moment of history in the making. ❖

*Annie Braniff lived in Indianola in 1976, when she wrote this account. It is part of the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).*

*For more on Jack London in Iowa, see The Palimpsest (June 1971), and participate in the Big Read – A Walk on the Wild Side (see details on next page).*

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Young boys help men from Kelly's Army ease flatboats across a dam at Ottumwa, as the flotilla heads to Keokuk.

## The Big Read Crosses Iowa

### Jack London and Kelly's Army

To bring attention to the historic event of Kelly's Industrial Army crossing Iowa, the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI) is holding a series of programs as part of The Big Read initiative—A Walk on the Wild Side. These programs combine history and literature because of the literary giant who was part of Kelly's Army: Jack London, author of *The Call of the Wild*.

SHSI's Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs kicks off the events April 19 with a minichautauqua, including Klondike demonstrations, a showing of the movie *The Call of the Wild*, history lectures, and a show by the Montana Mountain Musers dog-sled team. Visits from local dignitaries, a photograph display of Jack London and Kelly's Industrial Army, plus a *Call of the Wild*/Jack London trivia contest will round out the day.

Elsewhere in Iowa, *The Call of the Wild* book talks and Jack London discussions are planned in five towns along the route of Kelly's Army in the western half of Iowa (Walnut, Adair, Earlham, West

Des Moines, and Des Moines) as well as in Newton, Iowa City, and Clermont. Using the Iowa National Guard's telecommunication system, guard members in Iraq and Afghanistan will also have an opportunity to participate.

Additional presentations by humanities scholars will take place in Des Moines and Iowa City. Movie nights will also be held in Council Bluffs, Des Moines, and Clermont.

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

For more information about A Walk on the Wild Side: Jack London and *The Call of the Wild*, contact SHSI staff members Susan Jellinger, 515-281-6897, [susan.jellinger@iowa.gov](mailto:susan.jellinger@iowa.gov) or Jeff Morgan, 515-281-3858, [jeff.morgan@iowa.gov](mailto:jeff.morgan@iowa.gov).

—by Susan Jellinger