

The Industrial Army In Des Moines

Once in Des Moines, Kelly's Army found the Capital of Iowa a delightful haven in which to sojourn. Des Moines was the largest city in Iowa in 1894. It had a large labor force, much of it unionized, and all sympathetic to the Industrial Army. Kelly himself was a popular speaker and appeared frequently before church, labor, and civic groups. While enjoying these social contacts, he was constantly soliciting money, food, and the everyday necessities of life. Meanwhile, everyone from Governor Jackson down was making every effort to find a way to move Kelly and his men out of Des Moines and Iowa.

The idea of using the Des Moines River as a highway for moving Kelly's Army out of Des Moines and Iowa came after every other means had met with failure. General James B. Weaver and Chairman A. P. Lowery were at their wits end when they sought out Governor Jackson. According to the *Register* of May 4, 1894:

Governor Jackson met the men squarely and by a plain, straightforward statement convinced every man present that he had done the best that could be done, not for the army itself, but to relieve the people of the state from the burden of caring for it. The governor said this matter had

been on his mind much longer than any other man in Des Moines had thought of it. He read some of the telegrams that had been passed between himself and the railroad presidents showing the efforts he had made at Council Bluffs to secure transportation and how the railways had refused, all of which has been published before. . . .

"The question is, what to do now. The only thing we have now is regular passenger rates. I will lay before the executive council your petition for a subscription from the state to help pay this transportation, and I will make one other effort to get the army transportation by rail from here to the Mississippi river."

Turning to Gen. Weaver, the governor asked if Kelly would take a boat and go on at once if he was transported to the Mississippi river and furnished a boat there. Gen. Weaver replied that he was sure Gen. Kelly would gladly accept this offer if it would be presented at once. "Then let me know as soon as you find out and I will make the effort," said the governor. This declaration was received with hearty applause. Gen. Weaver thanked the governor for his consideration and assurance of help, which was warmly approved by the men present. They went away certain that Gov. Jackson had done and would do all he could to help get the army out of the state. They came to find fault and went away to praise.

Gen. Kelly soon sent word to the governor that he was most anxious to move on and that he would gladly accept any transportation by rail to the Mississippi river.

So the negotiations for transportation were actively renewed by Gov. Jackson, and Chairman Lowery, of the citizens' committee, began to negotiate for the boat to take the army down the river. Gov. Jackson said he would not ask any railway to take the army to the river unless the boat was ready to take it right from the station when it arrived.

Possibly the most colorful day in the story of Kelly's Army grew out of the decision to build boats with which to allow the men to float down the Des Moines River to Keokuk and then on down the Mississippi to St. Louis. The Army's stay in Des Moines had been a costly one—to the tax-payer, to the almsgiver, and especially to the Des Moines laboring men, who while sympathetic to Kelly's Army, could ill-afford to feed it from their own slim family larder, and yet could not afford to let these jobless adventurers stay in Des Moines and perhaps rob them of their own jobs.

Once the idea had been accepted to float the Army down the Des Moines, it remained only to raise the money with which to buy the lumber and other material needed to construct the boats in which to send the men on their way. The *Iowa State Register* of May 11, 1894, declared:

The boats are eighteen feet long, six feet wide and one foot deep. The sides are of two inch plank, the bottoms of one inch boards. The 2x4s run lengthwise on the inside of the bottom. Over these are nailed five 1x4 strips across the bottom, secured to the sides. A false bottom of 30 inches is then run lengthwise of the boat. The cracks are thoroughly caulked and tarred. The boats are strong and thoroughly seaworthy. With thirteen men in they draw but six inches of water.

What of the cost of these crudely constructed craft? According to the *Iowa State Register*, General Kelly put up \$500 for the lumber which was

sold at cost to him by Gilcrest Bros. of Des Moines. Besides the lumber, the expenditures as of May 11 were \$20 for nails, \$36 for tar, \$22.50 for oakum and cotton, and \$10 for lunch for the men on Monday. At the last minute it was found each boat would need 100 feet of three-quarter inch rope, or a total of 15,000 feet.

Since Kelly's Army provided the labor, and this would probably have cost as much as the lumber and other material, one might hazard a guess that a single boat might have cost between \$6 and \$7. Then, if 150 was the exact number of boats (and different figures are given) the total cost, including donated labor, would be around \$900 to \$1,050 for the entire flotilla.

It was one thing to build the boats for Kelly's Army in the capital of Iowa. It was another thing to see that the men did not go empty-handed. The following circular was sent to towns along the Des Moines:

Kelly's Army On The Move!

The army of unemployed men, 1,400 strong, under the leadership of "Gen." C. T. Kelly, are floating down the Des Moines river in a fleet of one hundred and fifty boats and will camp over night at, or near, May, 1894. As chairman of the citizen's committee, of Des Moines, Iowa, I appeal to the people of Iowa, along the route, to not let them starve. Go and see them, and take with you bread, crackers, meat, sugar, coffee, potatoes, boiled eggs and anything they can eat. It requires 1,400 loaves of bread, 1,000 pounds of meat, and 50

pounds of coffee to make the men one day's food. Help them. Help them.

A. P. LOWERY, Chairman
Citizen's Committee

That things were not running as smoothly as hoped for was noted by the *Register* of May 11, 1894:

While Gen. Kelly has criticised the citizens' committee, now that he and his army are safely out of town, it is only fair to say that during the past two or three days his generalship has consisted largely in escorting about the two infatuated women who are with the army, much to the neglect of the latter. It seems to be the commencement of the old, old story and Kelly will find worse snags ahead with this army than those in the Des Moines river unless he changes his course. There was no system or order about the starting Wednesday morning. Every man went in his own appointed time and in his own appointed way. No one knew exactly what to do, and some of the men drifted down through pure ignorance. Even about so important a matter as the commissary department there was only a harum skarum arrangement. As far as Kelly was concerned the navy might as well have been without a commodore. The result was that Wednesday night while the vanguard rested near the mouth of Camp Creek, the Polk county line, about one and a half miles above Runnells, the rear end was fully six miles this side of that point, and Kelly, the devil himself did not know where he was or what he was about, but all the men in the barges ahead supposed he was bringing up the rear some place below Des Moines with "them women."

There can be little doubt that the presence of

"them women," who had helped steal a train in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area, had raised many a critical eyebrow. A critic reported in the *Iowa State Register* the two "young ladies" with Kelly's Army "wear stockings worth \$2.50 a pair in spite of the fact we are on the verge of summer."

Little wonder that the following comment appeared after the "Army's" departure:

Kelly's army left Des Moines Wednesday as it came in, that is, straggled and blundered along without the least semblance of organization or order of any kind. The boats began to leave before 9 o'clock. There was no restraining the men from getting into the boats that were completed and pulling out. Gen. Kelly was busy at the navy yard attending to the provisions, the finishing of the few boats not yet completed, and in getting as much money as he could from the crowd.

Gen. Kelly ordered that the boats should be rounded up just below the packing house dam to await the order to start, which he said would be about noon. But they paid no attention to his orders and went right on down the river, it was such fun—at first!

While Gen. Kelly kept up his complaint about not getting enough provisions to last him on the way to the first town, the fact is that a very generous supply was worked by private donations, of large and small quantities.

The satisfaction in the city upon the departure of the enormous white elephant was intense. Every one was glad, but most of all the poor laboring men, who have been bearing the burden.