

Kate Shelley and the Chicago & North Western Railway

by H. Roger Grant

The literature of American transportation overflows with colorful and episodic tales. Stories of bravery, usually of the most dramatic sort, have become a staple of railroad folklore. The legend of John Luther "Casey" Jones, the dedicated locomotive engineer of the Illinois Central Railroad, is surely the best representation of the genre. The saga of a fifteen-year-old Iowa girl, Kate C. Shelley, has also long captured the imagination of writers, and for understandable reasons. During a stormy night in July 1881, Shelley saved victims of one train wreck and single-handedly sought to prevent another accident on the Overland Route of the Chicago & North Western Railway.

The courage of Kate Shelley rightfully deserves to be remembered. Published commentaries focus almost exclusively on Shelley's gallant actions, but the story involves more than the excite-

ment of that tempestuous summer evening. The ensuing relationship between Shelley and the North Western is also significant. Most of all, the connection illustrates the pervasive nature of railroad paternalism and the carrier's desire to use the tale to enhance its public image.

Neither Kate Shelley nor her family expected July 6, 1881, to be anything special. Yet that Wednesday varied sharply from the typical dog days of an Iowa summer when at supper time a cloudburst struck the vicinity of her home near Moingona, a coal mining settlement five miles west of Boone, in the central part of the state. The Shelleys watched the storm, which raged for hours, from their modest cottage near Honey Creek, a stream that paralleled the main line of the North Western railroad for several miles before emptying into the Des Moines River.

The unusually heavy rains



SHS (IOWA CITY)

Kate Shelley, three months after the night of the flood. Photographer J. Paul Martin sold copies of the photo for a quarter, cashing in on her fame.

made the Shelleys anxious. The year had been extremely wet, and streams were already at or near bank-full. By late evening the rapid runoff posed an immediate threat to the area, especially to the nearby railroad. The Shelleys probably felt vulnerable. The soon-to-be heroine, the oldest of four surviving children, lived with her widowed mother on a small, hard-scrabble farm that generated a meager cash income from the sale of eggs and milk. The father, Michael Shelley, a former North Western section foreman, had died three years earlier. The family had spent heavily on worthless medical remedies to combat the senior Shelley's lengthy affliction; the land, which Michael Shelley had acquired to supplement his railroad income, was mostly all

that remained.

The Shelleys had reason to worry about the rains. About 11:30 p.m. the family heard a "horrible crash" as a locomotive, whose crew was checking for washouts, plunged into the swollen Honey Creek. "Oh, Mother . . . It is [engine] No. 11. They have gone . . . [off] Honey Creek Bridge," recounted Shelley in a sketch of that memorable night. "The storm and all else was forgotten and I said that I must go to the help of the men, and to stop the passenger [eastbound *Atlantic Express*] that would soon be due at Moingona." If that train were not halted, Shelley believed, an awful accident at Honey Creek, east of the Des Moines River, would surely occur.

Kate Shelley possessed imagination and determination. Before embarking on her mission of mercy, she improvised the needed illumination; she placed a miner's cap lamp in the frame of a battered farm lantern. "I filled the little lamp, and for a wick cut a strip from an old felt skirt," she recalled. Then Shelley left the safety of her home. "[I] started out into the night and the storm, to do what I could, and what I thought was my duty, knowing that Mother and the children were praying to God to keep me from every harm."

After an arduous trip through nearby woods to the tracks, Shelley reached the wreck site. Two of the four railroaders had drowned (Amos Olmstead, the fireman, and Patrick Donahue,

the section foreman), but Edward Wood, the engineer, clung to a tree and Adam Agar, the brakeman, likewise managed to fight the waters by holding onto tree roots. Flashes of lightning revealed Wood to the teenager. "He called to me again and again," related Shelley, "but neither one of us could understand what the other said, for the raging of the elements, and I turned towards Moingona lying across and west of the great [Des Moines River] bridge."

Shelley began the most perilous portion of her trek. Crossing the Des Moines River bridge, even in ideal conditions, was dangerous. The North Western had studied the ties along this 673-foot-long span with twisted, rusty spikes to discourage trespassers. And the ties themselves were spaced a full pace apart. "I got down upon my hands and knees, . . . and guiding myself by the stretch of rail, I began the weary passage of the bridge," explained Shelley. "I do not know how long I was in crossing, but it seemed an age. Halfway over, a piercing flash of lightning showed me the angry flood more closely than ever, and swept along upon it a great tree, the earth still hanging to its roots, was racing for the bridge, and it seemed for the very spot I stood upon." Added Shelley, "Fear brought me up right on my knees, and I clasped my hands in terror, and in prayer, I hope, lest the shock should carry out the bridge. But the monster darted un-

der the bridge with a sweeping rush and his branches scattered foam and water over me as he passed."

The resolute teenager finally reached the west end of the bridge and proceeded to the Moingona depot. Finding that the North Western had already halted its trains at the perimeter of the storm and no impending disaster existed, she turned her efforts to saving the survivors at Honey Creek. Kate climbed aboard a relief locomotive and guided a hurriedly assembled party of rescuers to the marooned survivors. Both trainmen escaped a watery grave. However, only one of the bodies of the two who had died was ever recovered.

The events of the horrific night of July 6-7, 1881, were much discussed in the Moingona community, and were soon related to a larger audience by the local press. The heroism of Kate Shelley was immediately recognized. A reporter for the *Boone County Democrat*, in the issue of July 13, told in detail Shelley's remarkable evening: "From the house [of the Shelleys] the Democrat reporter followed the route taken by the intrepid girl to the bridge. This was on Saturday and the ground was yet soaked and the way difficult, but nothing in comparison with what it must have been when dense midnight clothed the woods in darkness, and a rushing flood swept down the hill sides and through the gullies, weighing the thick underbrush to the ground."

The writer continued:

"Once she was lost in the woods, but the moment she found the path she knew which way to go. Ed Wood says he was well nigh overjoyed when he saw the light approaching the clearing near the end of the bridge, and that he will never forget the sight of Kate Shelley making her way out over the twisted and broken trestle work to the last tie yet hanging over the wreck in the boiling flood below."

The *Ogden Reporter* of July 14 observed that Shelley had to cross the Des Moines River bridge "with nothing but the ties and rails [with] the wind blowing a gale, and the foaming, seething waters beneath. Not one man in five hundred [would] have [gone] over at any price, or under any circumstance. But this brave, noble girl, with the nerve of a giant, gathered about her, her flowing skirts, and on hands and knees she crawled over the long weary bridge."

In the Victorian Age, with melodramas much in vogue, the uncommon bravery of the "Maiden of Moingona" proved electrifying. Chicago newspapers, which grabbed the story and added their own embellishments, did much to make Kate Shelley one of the most famous teenagers of the period. Her fame spread nationwide. Poets wrote verse, photographers hawked portraits, and platform speakers related the tale, likely in a garbled form.

The extensive publicity had a positive impact on the household of Kate Shelley. The public sought to reward this remarkable act of concern and courage. By late October approximately \$500 had been donated to the Shelleys, including \$104 raised by the *Chicago Times*, the newspaper which had done much to introduce the heroine to the public outside of Iowa. The North Western also contributed \$100, which

in itself surely must have constituted a sizable part of the annual income of the Shelley household.

Observers felt that the North Western should recognize the good deeds of Kate Shelley. The *Ogden Reporter* editorialized shortly after the event: "We believe the officials of the Northwestern [*sic*] cannot be unmindful of the duty they owe this brave girl." Indeed, the company would do much in the months and years to come.

Kate Shelley fortuitously aided a public-spirited railroad. The Chicago & North Western enjoyed remarkably good relations with both the public and its employees. Illustrations abound. For example, when the Granger movement swept the upper Mississippi River valley during the early 1870s, this combative coalition of merchants, commercial groups, and farmers demanded rate relief, concentrating on an end to long-haul and short-haul discrimination. Yet these reformers largely ignored the North Western. In Iowa, the Patrons of Husbandry, the core farmer body, revealed that the North Western's short-haul charges were next to the lowest of the five trunk lines serving the state and that its long-haul rates to Chicago were the least expensive. The Iowa Grange, furthermore, made no complaints about the quality of service or the physical condition of the road. A few years later, in 1877, when the nation experienced enormous labor unrest, what historian Robert

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Shelley stands outside her family homestead by Honey Creek.

6316. Kate Shelley's Home.



In the early 1890s, funds were raised to build Shelley, her mother, and brother this new home, where she would live until her death in 1912. That the photo was made into a color postcard suggests her ongoing fame.

Bruce rightly called "The Year of Violence," the North Western avoided conflict with its workers. Two neighboring roads, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy and the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific, were less fortunate, however. Strikers and their compatriots vented their rage against these carriers over wage reductions and other grievances.

Officials of the North Western had no intention of ignoring either the valor of Shelley or the families of the men who died that stormy night. The \$100 payment to the special subscription for the Shelleys was the most public demonstration of gratitude. The railroad also received attention for its cash bequests to the estates of the flood victims. The company granted \$5,000, a generous award, to the family of section foreman Donahue and \$2,500 to "Widow Olmstead." The explanation for the lesser amount was "because

the body [of fireman Olmstead] was never found [and the railroad] had no proof of his death." The North Western, however, gave \$5,000 to the family of section foreman John O'Neil, another storm victim. O'Neil, too, had been inspecting track on that eventful evening and drowned in Granny's Branch Creek near Ogden, west of Moingona. The North Western was under no legal obligation to assist anyone associated with this "cruel act of God," in the words of an Olmstead descendant, yet the company responded out of its own sense of moral justice.

The North Western did not initially seek to exploit the public relations benefits from the Shelley episode. There appeared no reason to do so. "The company has quietly donated [to Kate Shelley] something to help the family along this winter," commented the *Ogden Reporter* on November 10, 1881.

"We are told that the company has forwarded to her a car of hard coal, two barrels of flour, [a] sack of coffee, [a] chest of tea, potatoes, [and] soap. [A]nd wearing apparel is promised." The railroad also issued Shelley a life-time pass for passenger train travel.

Although the North Western may not have made additional contributions at this time, others did. A variety of individuals and groups assisted the Shelleys. For instance, Frances E. Willard, the prominent temperance leader, convinced Simpson College, a small (and dry) Methodist institution in Indianola, Iowa, to finance Shelley's higher education for the academic year 1883-84, and the Iowa General Assembly awarded Shelley a gold medal and \$200.

Unfortunately, the various acts of kindness bestowed on Kate did not result in a care-free life for the young woman. Shelley's health was fragile and her physical (and perhaps mental) limitations apparently prevented her from achieving steady employment. Still, she taught school, mostly as a substitute teacher in the neighboring townships, and worked briefly as a bill clerk in the state capitol in Des Moines. By 1890 the fortunes of the Shelley family had declined appreciably. A new fund-raising campaign, spearheaded by a Chicago newspaper, raised more than \$900. The Shelleys cleared their farm of debt and modestly enlarged their holdings. Nevertheless,

the family, namely Kate, her brother John, and their mother, were hardly prosperous.

The North Western remained an important part of the life of the Shelley family. Although Kate's two sisters, Maggie and Mayme, entered teaching, John found employment with the railroad as a watchman on the Des Moines River bridge. And Kate herself joined the company in October 1903. Thirty-seven years old and single, Kate entered North Western service as "station mistress" at Moingona. Shelley had apparently rejected previous opportunities to work for the railroad. "Many times before the Northwestern [*sic*] has offered her high salaried positions," reported the *Boone News*, "but each one would necessitate her removal from . . . [her] home . . . where her aged mother, . . . is enjoying the last years of her life, [and] she refused them all."

The appointment proved ideal. While the monthly salary was modest, probably less than \$50, Shelley could remain with her beloved mother. Moreover, the pressures of employment were minimal. There was no need to master the telegraph because the busy main line no longer passed through Moingona. Early in the century the North Western, which spent heavily on betterments to fulfill its commitment to the company credo, the "Best of Everything," had relocated the line between Boone and Ogden. The new high-level, double-track cut-

off now traversed the Des Moines River on a long, steel viaduct about four miles upstream from the original crossing. This construction shortened the length of the main line by three miles and substantially reduced both grades and curvature. The old Boone-to-Ogden trackage remained for local service and as an alternative way to across the river. Thus, the railroad needed someone to handle passenger ticketing and shipments of freight and express at Moingona.

The North Western named Kate Shelley to be its agent at Moingona for a variety of reasons. It was not unusual for a railroad to place women in custodial-type positions. Generally these women had some association with the railroad; nepotism early on became a hallmark of industry hiring practices. Kate's father and brother had both received paychecks from the North Western.

The Moingona assignment could also have been seen as the company's way of further rewarding Kate Shelley for her bravery. That spirit of paternalism from the nineteenth century carried over into the twentieth. Marvin Hughitt, president of the North Western since 1887, fervently believed in treating employees in a fatherly fashion, and this tendency ex-

6317. Kate Shelley at Depot.



When the picture postcard craze swept the nation early in this century, a Boone entrepreneur turned a black-and-white photo of Shelley at the Moingona station into a color card. Likely the coloring occurred in Germany, center for postcard production.

tended into a variety of activities. Either personally or through the company, Hughitt donated money to a plethora of civic-improvement programs: money went to colleges, libraries, and parks, almost exclusively in communities along North Western lines.

Yet records of the North Western reveal still another consideration. By 1903 shrill cries for further railroad reform and for increased taxation of the carriers could be heard in Iowa. The company did not require a special antenna to realize that political trouble lay ahead. While Io-

wans had largely ignored the populist movement of the 1890s, they became heavily involved in that great national housecleaning escapade known as progressivism. Of special concern to the North Western and other roads in the Hawkeye state was Albert B. Cummins, an ambitious Republican lawyer who had cast his lot with anti-railroad elements. The railroads had kept Cummins out of the United States Senate during the 1890s, but the tenacious politician won the governorship in 1902, "resolved to bear down on [railroads] in earnest." Later, in 1908, Cummins would go to Washington as a senator and frame several pivotal pieces of federal railroad legislation.

North Western management believed that Cummins and his allies needed to be watched. Ideally, the company could minimize the mischief caused by the "Cumminsites." A memorandum from an unidentified member of the North Western's legal department to President Hughitt about 1903 contained these comments: "The Company would be wise to do everything in its power in Iowa to increase its popularity with the people. . . . Gov. Cummins is always seeking out ways to embarrass the railroads. . . . He does so solely for his political purposes. I see that it is prudent to convince that Irish gal, Kate Shelley, to take a position with the Company. For the public to know that the Company is taking care of her can only be a good thing.

It can only work to the advantage of the Company."

What value "that Irish gal" had for the North Western in a political way is unknown; probably it was minimal. Nevertheless, the employment in 1903 of this true heroine tangibly demonstrated the kindheartedness of the company. For some in the Chicago headquarters, there was likely the hope that Kate Shelley might symbolize a railroad that truly considered itself a leading corporate citizen. Actually, the major damage done to the North Western and the railroad industry by Albert Cummins and his fellow progressives took place not in Iowa but later in the halls of Congress. Any kindness to an individual surely meant nothing in the larger scheme of events, but it meant much to a family from rural Moingona, Iowa. Kate would serve the railroad until her resignation shortly before her death from Bright's disease in 1912 at the age of forty-six.

Even after the death of Kate Shelley and the demise of political progressivism, the North Western continued to recognize her act of heroism. The company immortalized Kate when it named the massive Des Moines River

bridge in her honor in 1926. When the railroad introduced a new passenger streamliner in Iowa in October 1955, the name selected for the Chicago-to-Boone train was the *Kate Shelley 400*. This streamliner retained its moniker even after the company cut back the run to Cedar Rapids and later to Clinton, Iowa, before its termination in April 1971.

North Western management recognized the value of Kate Shelley's story well into the twentieth century. "We knew that we had an unusual person associated with the C&NW," remarked the railroad's long-time publicity manager Frank V. Koval in an 1986 interview. "When you have a woman whom everyone admired, why not capitalize on it?" Concluded Koval, "Kate Shelley helped us and we certainly helped her over the years; it's that simple."

Without doubt, the relationship between Kate Shelley and the Chicago &



Construction crews in 1901 build a new viaduct over the Des Moines River four miles upstream. In 1926 the viaduct was named after Kate Shelley.

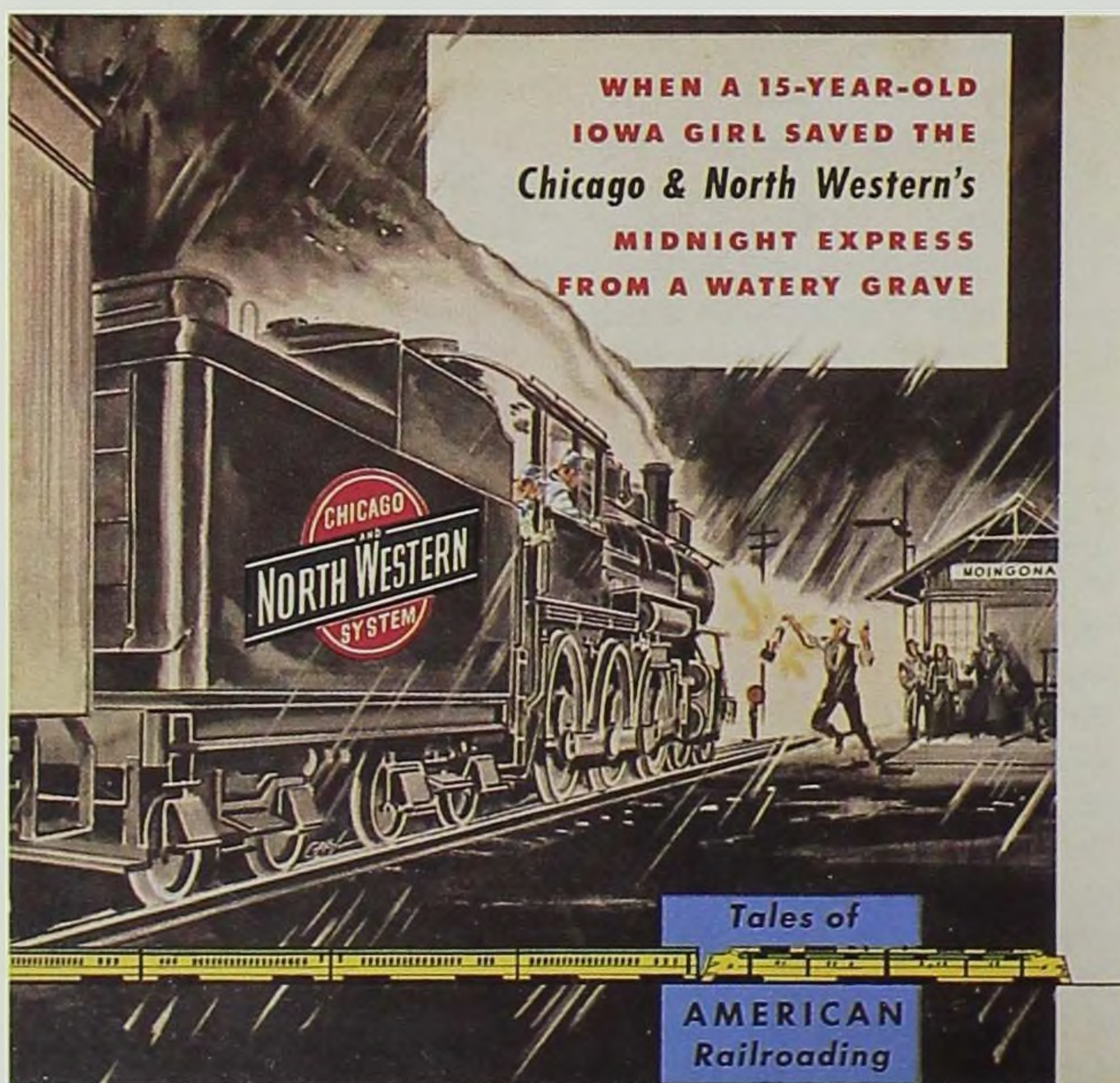


North Western Railway was a good one. What happened that night in July 1881 lasted far longer than the immedi-

ately following days or months. The tie between Kate and the railroad lasted for years. And the railroad

preserved her memory with a viaduct and references in various company-sponsored publications. With the take-over of the North Western into the Union Pacific system in 1995, one wonders if Union Pacific will find the saga of Kate Shelley of value. □

BOTH IMAGES: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Both images: In the 1950s, Badger Paper Mills in Wisconsin published a garbled description of the Kate Shelley story, yet it helped to keep the Iowa heroine before the public. The cover depicts what never happened at Moingona, a train speeding toward disaster. Moreover, the artist drew the wrong type of steam locomotive and the wrong style of depot architecture.

NOTE ON SOURCES

A considerable amount of the primary sources, including newspaper accounts of Kate Shelley, came from the collection of the late Edward H. Meyers of Boone, Iowa. Meyers had conducted extensive research for his article, "The True Story of Kate Shelley," which appeared in *Trains* (Oct. 1957). Shelley is discussed in such popular works as Freeman H. Hubbard, *Railroad Avenue: Great Stories and Legends of American Railroading* (New York, 1945) and B. A. Botkin and Alvin F. Harlows, ed., *A Treasury of Railroad Folklore* (New York, 1953). An excellent early account of Shelley, which influenced the Meyers study, appeared in *The Palimpsest* (Feb. 1925), "Kate Shelley," by J. A. Swisher. Materials about the role of the Chicago & North Western Railway came from the company's corporate headquarters in Chicago, now either in possession of the Union Pacific Railroad in Omaha or the Chicago & North Western Historical Society Archive at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb.