

Prosperous Years

From 1887, when Marvin Hughitt became president, until his death in January, 1928, the North Western was regarded as a Hughitt road. Hughitt's ability and his prodigious capacity for work had been demonstrated while on the Illinois Central. As a youthful superintendent on that road he had sat for thirty-six continuous hours at the telegraph key dispatching troop trains southward through Cairo to reinforce the hard-pressed Union forces at Corinth. Then, after a few hours sleep, he took the key for *another* thirty-six gruelling hours to move the same troops to a different battlefield.

Marvin Hughitt began railroading on the St. Louis, Alton & Chicago Railroad (Chicago & Alton). Later he went with the Illinois Central. Then he switched to the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad, and just before coming to the North Western he was for a short time superintendent of the Pullman Palace Car Company. As we have seen, Hughitt rose rapidly on the North Western. Under his firm guiding hand the railroad prospered. Hughitt had two dominating interests in life — his family and his railroad. For twenty-three years he shaped the policies of the

North Western as its president. When made board chairman in 1910 he, as elder statesman, still ran the railroad. Even as chairman of the finance committee from 1925 to his death at nearly 91, his consuming interest was the Chicago & North Western.

During his tenure as president, and later as board chairman, the North Western's mileage was virtually doubled. Under his direction the main line across Iowa had been double tracked by 1902. Like the main stem in Illinois, trains operated on the left hand track as is customary in Great Britain. Contrary to popular belief it was a matter of economy and not the influence of English investors which led to "southpaw" operation. Most of the stations being on the north side of the original single track line, it was cheaper to add another track to the south. By reversing the normal direction of traffic the depots could remain intact and passengers could buy tickets without crossing the track before boarding trains for Chicago.

The most spectacular improvement in this period was building "the longest, highest double-track railroad bridge in the world" over the Des Moines River near Boone. Opened in 1901, the 2,685-foot structure, known as the Kate Shelley Viaduct, rose 184 feet above the beautiful valley. Completion of the bridge marked the use of the 7.25-mile cut-off built by the Boone County Railway Company. This eliminated the longer single

track line through Moingona with its steeper grade and greater curvature. It also did away with "pusher" operation. The older line, on which the immortal Kate Shelley's signal saved victims from a washed out railroad bridge, was later abandoned.

This brings us to the legend of Kate Shelley. What Casey Jones is to folksong and John Henry is to Negro folkways, Kate Shelley is to American railroad heroines. All three were railroaders, and their stories are founded on fact. But their exploits have transcended actual happenings to emerge into ballad and folklore, adding luster and shedding fact. Here, however, are the known facts of Iowa's famous woman and the nation's most popular railroad heroine.

Kate Shelley, daughter of a North Western section foreman, was born on a farm near Moingona September 25, 1865. After the death of her father, Kate with her two sisters and brother remained at home helping her mother run the farm and support the family. On July 6, 1881, a violent storm swept the Des Moines Valley and fifteen-year-old Kate was obliged to get the livestock out of the stable, which was partly flooded by the waters of Honey Creek. As the rain increased in fury Kate became very apprehensive. She feared driftwood in the creek and in the nearby Des Moines River would back up against the railroad bridges and undermine them.

Just before midnight the frightened girl heard a "pusher" engine going east. As it neared the Shelley farm she noted an eerie tolling of the bell, a crash and a hissing of steam. Kate sensed at once the locomotive must have plunged from the Honey Creek bridge. If so, who would flag No. 4, the *Atlantic Express*, due shortly from the west? It was up to her!

She hurriedly put on a hat and coat, grabbed a lantern and ran to the bridge. Part of the structure remained, but the engine was in the creek. Clinging to driftwood were Ed Wood, the engineer, and Adam Egar, a brakeman. Others in the crew had perished in the raging creek. Seeing she could not help them, Kate went to seek aid — and to flag the express. To do so she had to cross the Des Moines River on the railroad bridge above the rushing water. Her lantern had since gone out, and she groped along the ties on her hands and knees in the dark. The wind almost blew her from the structure; and she was afraid lest any minute the express would bear down on her. But courageous Kate finally made it. She then sped down the track to the depot at Moingona.

Nearly exhausted and half-coherent from fright, Kate told her story to the operator. Summoning all her energy, she later went back with willing railroaders on another engine to help rescue Wood and Egar from the swirling currents of Honey Creek. Kate subsequently became ill from

her terrible ordeal, and it was three months before she fully recuperated. By this time all America knew of her heroic deed.

Not content with her truly remarkable feat, legend has it she reached Moingona just in time to have the operator snatch a red lantern and flag the express. Some accounts say she stopped the midnight flyer herself. But careful research by Edward H. Meyers of Boone explodes this myth. In "The True Story of Kate Shelley" in October, 1957, *Trains*, Meyers points out there was a "hold order" set up as a precautionary measure. Eastward trains were held at Scranton, some 40 miles west of Moingona, and westward trains at Marshalltown, about 60 miles from where Kate contacted the telegraph operator. Furthermore, a bridge at Coal Valley, just west of Moingona, was also washed out.

At any rate, Kate Shelley's name has gone down for posterity. The Iowa State legislature awarded her a gold medal and \$200; the Order of Railway Conductors gave her a gold watch; and the Chicago *Tribune* raised a fund to help the Shelley family. In Dubuque a statue was erected in her memory, and the school children of that community presented her with a medal. The grateful railroad made her the agent at Moingona in 1903, and she continued working there almost up to her death on January 21, 1912. Her name is currently being perpetuated by The Kate Shelley

Award given yearly by *Modern Railroads* to individual women and groups of women for outstanding achievement in American railroading.

Many poems have been written about this brave Iowan. One of the best was penned by the well-known Iowa writer MacKinlay Kantor. Titled "The Ballad of Kate Shelley," and first published in the *Chicago Daily News*, the poem ends as follows:

But if you go to Honey Creek in some dark summer storm,
Be sure to take a lantern flame to keep your spirit warm.
For there will be a phantom train, and foggy whistle cries—
And in the lightning flare you'll see Kate Shelley on the ties.

Along with double tracking of the main line, considerable track relocation took place, resulting in more favorable grades and reduced curvature. The remains of the old lines may still be seen in several places by sharp-eyed observers even today.

Another major improvement was replacing the old single-track Mississippi River Bridge with a two-track structure. The new span was built between 1907 and 1909. It consisted of eight lattice truss spans and one Pratt truss across the east channel of the river. The narrower west channel is crossed by three spans: one of through riveted lattice, another of through Pratt truss and a third being a through 460-foot pin-connected swing span. The sturdy modern structure is a few feet south of the original bridge.

In 1886 the Linn County Railway Company

was organized to by-pass the congested Cedar Rapids area. It resulted in rebuilding a six-mile cut-off between Otis and Beverly, thereby speeding up freight operation.

Apart from line relocation and cut-offs, there were scarcely any new lines built after 1901. An exception was the Sioux City, Dakota and North Western Railway Company, organized in 1909 to build from Hinton Jct. to Hawarden Jct. Completed in 1910 the 28-mile line provided a shorter route between Sioux City and points west of Hawarden.

Another exception was the twelve-mile extension of the Iowa Southern Railway Company to tap coal mines between Consol and Miami in 1915. The line proved to be the last North Western branch built in Iowa (except for a 7-mile power-plant spur built in 1962, near Sioux City) and one of the first to be retired after the mines petered out in the late 1920's.

The financial picture of the North Western appeared never brighter than it did under the presidency of Hughitt. But World War I and its aftermath changed the situation, as did economic conditions over which the railroad had little control.