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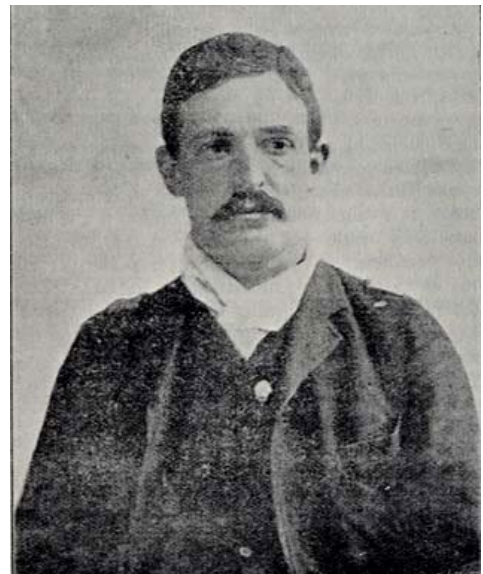
**April 3, 2013**

**THIS WEEK: Kelly's Army**

**BACKGROUND:** A recession had begun in America in the late 1880s. By 1893, a depression devastated the country. The South and the Great Plains were especially hit hard because of a drought and an agricultural recession. A businessman from Massillon, Ohio, Jacob Coxey, organized a march of unemployed men to Washington, D.C., asking the federal government to fund a public works program.

Soon after, others joined in and in 1894, a group of about 2,000 unemployed laborers formed in San Francisco led by Charles T. Kelly. Kelly's Army, as they came to be called, moved east through Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, and Iowa. The "army" rode the rails for free until they crossed the Missouri River and from there they walked.

This mob arrived in Council Bluffs, but they realized the free rail rides had ended. Some returned west to Omaha, but the rest came east through Underwood, Avoca, Walnut, Atlantic, Anita, Adair, Casey, Stuart, Dexter, Earlham, Desoto, Van Meter, Booneville, Commerce, and Valley Junction. They were welcomed in these towns as heroes. The small town inhabitants carried their baggage, fed them hot lunches, and sent them on their way east.



**Charles T. Kelly**

Kelly's army arrived at the old stove works on the outskirts of Des Moines, and here they made camp and let Des Moines know they had come to stay. These men were tired and refused to walk any further, demanding the railroads once again give them free passage to the Nation's Capital. The railroads refused, so Kelly's Army camped in Des Moines, expecting the good people of Des Moines to feed them. One of the laborers who joined the march in Omaha was famous writer Jack London.

**The following is an excerpt from *The March of Kelly's Army: The Story of an Extraordinary Migration*, by Jack London. This is a portion from an installment written by London from "My Life in the Underworld."**

## **The March of Kelly's Army** *The Story of an Extraordinary Migration*

Last year, while on a lecturing trip, I rode into Des Moines in a Pullman—I don't mean a "side-door Pullman," but the real thing. On the outskirts of the city, I saw the old stove-works, and my heart leaped. It was there, at the stove-works, a dozen years before, that the army lay down and swore a mighty oath that its feet were sore and that it would walk no more.

We took possession of the stove-works and told Des Moines that we had come to stay—that we'd walked in, but we'd be blessed if we'd walk out. Des Moines was hospitable, but this was too much of a good thing. Do a little mental arithmetic, gentle reader. Two thousand hoboes, eating three square meals a day, forty-two thousand meals a week, or one hundred and sixty-eight thousand meals for the shortest month in the calendar. We had no money. It was up to Des Moines.

Des Moines was desperate. We lay in camp, made political speeches, held sacred concerts, pulled teeth, played baseball and seven-up, and ate our six thousand meals a

day, and Des Moines paid for them. Des Moines pleaded with the railroads, but they were obdurate; they had said we shouldn't ride, and that settled it. To permit us to ride would be to establish a precedent, and there weren't going to be any precedents. And still we went on eating. That was the terrifying factor in the situation. We were bound for Washington, and Des Moines would have had to float municipal bonds to pay all our railroad fares, even at special rates; and if we remained much longer she'd have to float bones anyway to feed us.

Then some local genius solved the problem. We wouldn't walk. Very good; we should ride. From Des Moines to Keokuk on the Mississippi flowed the Des Moines



**Jack London**

River. This particular stretch of river was three hundred miles long. We could ride on it, said the local genius; and, once equipped with floating-stock, we could ride on down the Mississippi to the Ohio, and thence up the Ohio, winding up with a short portage over the mountains to Washington. Des Moines took up a collection. Public-spirited citizens contributed several thousand dollars. Lumber, rope, nails, and cotton for calking were bought in large quantities, and on the banks of the Des Moines was inaugurated a tremendous era of ship-building. Now the Des Moines is a picayune stream, unduly dignified by the appellation of "river." In our spacious Western land it would be called a "creek." The oldest inhabitants shook their heads and said we couldn't make it, that there wasn't enough water to float us. Des Moines didn't care, so long as it got rid of us, and we were such well-fed optimists that we didn't care either.

On Wednesday, May 9, 1894, we got underway and started on our colossal picnic. Des Moines had got off pretty easily, and she certainly owes a statue in bronze to the local genius who got her out of her difficulty. True, Des Moines had to pay for our boats; we had eaten sixty-six thousand meals at the stove-works; and we took twelve thousand additional meals along with us in our commissary—as a precaution against famine in the wilds; but then think what it would have meant if we had remained at Des Moines eleven months instead of eleven days. Also, when we departed, we promised Des Moines we'd come back if the river failed to float us.

## Hospitality and Development Shape Des Moines

*(From Des Moines: History)*



The history of Des Moines is filled with colorful events such as the arrival in the spring of 1894 of Kelly's Army, 1,000 unemployed men on their way to Washington, D.C., and led by Charles T. Kelly, "King of the Commons." Citizens greeted them with hospitality to prevent trouble. When

### **Kelly's Army**

Kelly's Army seemed reluctant to leave, however, the townspeople bought lumber to construct an "industrial fleet" of 150 flatboats, under local union direction, to transport the men out of the city. Each man was issued a small American flag, and the waving of the flags was the last sight of Kelly's Army. Among them was the American writer Jack London.