

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Stop the Atlantic Express!

By Kate Sharp and Sarvinder Naberhaus  
2016

*On July 6, 1881, a storm in Iowa caused a railroad track to be flooded. Seeing this, Kate Shelley took action to ensure that no train would cross the flooded track. As you read, take notes on what Kate endured to help people who were in danger.*

"You can only imagine what a fearful thing it is to see the heavens grow black and blacker until the light of day is all shut out."

-Kate Shelley, about the events of July 6, 1881



*"Stop the Atlantic Express!" by Gary Undercuffler is used with permission.*

- [1] The wind was whipping from all directions, trying to snatch the flapping linens from Kate's hands. Another Iowa storm was brewing.<sup>1</sup>

Dodging raindrops, Kate ran with an armload of clothes into the farmhouse nestled<sup>2</sup> on the hill above Honey Creek. Thunder rattled the panes as she looked out the window to the railroad tracks below. They reminded her of Father, who had been a railroad man. Kate loved hearing the trains rumble back and forth over Honey Creek Bridge. Every day she heard the trains' whistle and knew their schedules, when they would arrive and when they would depart.

Fifteen-year-old Kate Shelley knew her family's survival depended on her. Her father and brother James had died and now her mother was sick. Kate gave up going to school. She sent her younger brother and sisters instead. She tended the crops, fed the animals, and hunted with her dogs in the nearby woods. She was a good shot and protected the family's livestock from chicken hawks and wolves.

The panes of the little house continued to rattle as the storm invaded the night. Kate thought about the hundreds of Chicago-bound passengers on the Atlantic Express. At midnight they would cross the valley. Would dispatchers<sup>3</sup> send a train out in this weather? With each flash of lightning, Kate watched the creek rise higher — almost touching the tracks of Honey Creek Bridge.

- [5] Suddenly, Kate heard the clanging bells of a pusher engine,<sup>4</sup> a loud crash, and the hissing of steam. She knew that the engine must have gone off Honey Creek Bridge.

1. **Brew (verb):** to begin to develop
2. **Nestle (verb):** to lie comfortably within or against something
3. a person whose job is to organize the movement of vehicles
4. an engine at the back of a train to provide it with more power for climbing a steep slope

## Kate to the Rescue

Grabbing her lantern, Kate slipped down the muddy hillside, amidst the lightning and crashing thunder, to the washed-out bridge. Peering through the rain, she saw a partially submerged<sup>5</sup> engine and two men clinging to tree branches in the angry water.

Kate shouted above the wind — and listened. The men yelled back, but the roaring water carried their voices away.

Kate would have to make her way through the dark woods to the *Moingona* train depot.<sup>6</sup> There she could get help and stop the train — the Midnight Express — but first she would have to cross the Des Moines River Bridge.

As Kate finally reached the bridge, the fierce wind snuffed<sup>7</sup> out her lantern. Nearly 700 feet of bridge lay ahead. Would she meet the Midnight Express while crossing? Tired, soaked, and shivering, Kate got down on her hands and knees and began to crawl.

- [10] She felt the slippery, splintered boards beneath her hands. She stretched her hand toward the next railroad tie. It was so far away. She tried not to think how easy it would be to slip through to the rushing torrent<sup>8</sup> below.

When she was halfway across the bridge, lightning revealed a giant tree in the river barreling toward her. She raised to her knees, clasped her hands, and prayed. Would the river swallow her? Suddenly, the tree swerved so closely she felt its spray of water.

Finally, Kate inched her way across to ground on the other side. Exhausted, she ran to the train depot. Bursting through the door, she shouted something about stopping the Midnight Express, then collapsed on the floor.

When she recovered, she told the men her story and guided them back to Honey Creek to rescue the survivors. Luckily, the Midnight Express hadn't arrived. It had stopped farther west because of the storm.

## Kate's Story Spreads

It was early morning before Kate was put to bed, where she stayed for months. The ordeal<sup>9</sup> had made her ill, probably from exhaustion. She kept repeating to her sister Mayme that she could still feel the cold rain on her face.

- [15] Kate's story did not go unnoticed. Mayme later recalled that Kate woke up famous. Newspapers spread her story. And Kate received a medal for her courage along with a lifetime train pass, which she used often.

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5. **Submerge (verb):** to cause to be under water  
6. a train station  
7. to cause a light or fire to go out  
8. strong and fast-moving water  
9. **Ordeal (noun):** an extremely unpleasant or tiring experience

It has been more than 100 years since Kate's heroic act, but she is still remembered. By her grave is a memorial tablet placed by the Order of Railway Conductors and Brakemen that reads: "Hers is a deed bound for legend... a story to be told until the last order fades and the last rail rusts."

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
  - A. Kate felt that she had a duty to help her family rather than help those who might be injured on the Atlantic Express.
  - B. The dangerous route that Kate had to take to get to the train station made her actions more foolish than brave.
  - C. Kate risked her own safety to help people in danger and to ensure that a greater disaster did not take place.
  - D. Railroad conductors continue to remember Kate's brave actions because without them an entire train of people would have died.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Fifteen-year-old Kate Shelley knew her family's survival depended on her. Her father and brother James had died and now her mother was sick." (Paragraph 3)
  - B. "There she could get help and stop the train — the Midnight Express — but first she would have to cross the Des Moines River Bridge." (Paragraph 8)
  - C. "It was early morning before Kate was put to bed, where she stayed for months. The ordeal had made her ill, probably from exhaustion." (Paragraph 14)
  - D. "'Hers is a deed bound for legend... a story to be told until the last order fades and the last rail rusts.'" (Paragraph 16)
  
3. Which of the following best describes the structure of the text?
  - A. The author discusses how well known Kate is, and then describes her heroic actions.
  - B. The author describes Kate's heroic actions, and then how she was celebrated after.
  - C. The author describes Kate's difficult early years, and then her accomplishments later in life.
  - D. The author discusses what it means to be a hero, and then provides Kate's actions as an example.
  
4. How does Kate's knowledge of the trains help her decide to inform others of the danger that the Atlantic Express faces?

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