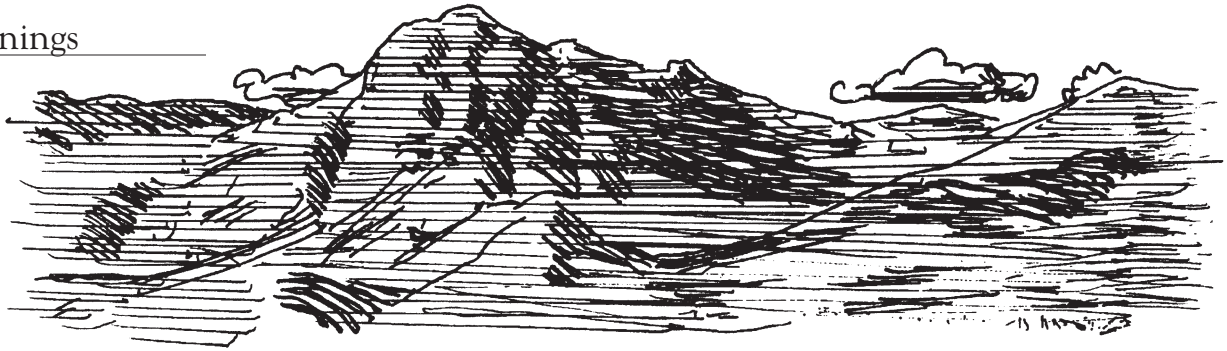

America The Beautiful - Birth Of An Inspiration

Paul Jennings



The year 1893 was quite a turning point for America, and especially for Katherine Lee Bates, an English teacher at Wellesley College. It was her good fortune to have a summer teaching job in Colorado Springs, Colorado, so she joined thousands of other Americans in visiting the amazing Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Gathered together in one place were wonders from all over the world. Here Americans could hear John Philip Sousa's band, could see arts and crafts from the leading artisans of the era, and could be awed by inventions that were changing every day life in hundreds of ways.

After summer school, she and several other teachers from the east coast decided to take a trip to Pike's Peak, a famous mountain nearby. Riding in an old buckboard wagon, just like the pioneers who had preceded them, they bounced their way to the top. It was a beautiful clear day, and they could see in every direction: richly colored mountains, green valleys, and vast prairies stretching as far as the eye could see.

This awe-inspiring sight moved Katherine to write a poem that eventually captured the imagination of people the world over. And the poem grew to speak of more than just the beauty of the land. She also wrote of a nobility and spirit that she wanted to see in Americans. The 1890s was a rare period of peace for America, and so the brotherhood so often mentioned in the song was something that many people hoped for in their future.

When she went back to Massachusetts, she put her notebooks away and nearly forgot the poem she had written on her trip. Two summers later, though, she made a copy of it and sent it to *The Congregationalist*, a magazine of the time, where it was printed in July, 1895. The reaction was amazing. Thousands of people wrote to her thanking her for the poem and telling her how the poem had captured their feelings.

The original poem was written for adults and was more complex in its language than the one we know today. Once Katherine saw how people loved this poem, she created a simpler version that would be more accessible to children, and that would be more appropriate as a musical setting. This simpler version of the song first appeared in a Boston newspaper in 1904, where it set off another wave of emotional

response across America.

Many people felt that "America The Beautiful" should be a song. As a matter of fact, over a hundred different tunes were submitted for it from people in many different walks of life. None of them was quite what Katherine Bates had in mind, though. She felt that it would be better to set the poem to music that people already knew, a common practice at the time.

She chose the popular hymn "Materna" by Samuel A. Ward. It was very popular then, and was sung to words that began, "O, Mother Dear, Jerusalem." She knew that it would be available to most Americans through school books and hymnals. We may never know if Mr. Ward's hymn was destined for greatness on its own because as "America The Beautiful" it has worked its way into the hearts of people all over the world. In Canada, it is "Canada The Beautiful," in Australia, the word "Australia" replaces "America." It has even been translated into other languages including Spanish, so in Mexico we find "Mi Mejico" as its refrain.

"America The Beautiful" has been adapted as the official song of the National Women's Clubs and is sung regularly at their meetings. Nevertheless, they, too decided at one point that the song needed a new melody, so they held a contest with a prize of \$500. Again, hundreds of new melodies were sent in to accompany Katherine Bates' lyrics, and eventually it was decided that there would be no winner. They kept Ward's hymn for their official song. And so it has remained until this day.

After World War I, people in the United States began a great debate about an official National Anthem. Many people felt that "America The Beautiful" was the ideal choice. But Congress had other ideas, and in 1931 "The Star Spangled Banner" was granted the official status in a bill signed by Herbert Hoover. To this day, though, many Americans argue that they made a mistake. They believe that Katherine Lee Bates' stirring portrait of beauty and brotherhood holds up the best of ideals for America. It's also a lot easier to sing. Katherine died in 1929, so she never knew how this debate ended. Still, she already knew that her words would continue to inspire and enrich Americans for many generations to come.