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America The Beautiful: The Stirring True Story Behind Our Nation's Favorite Song



Synopsis

We've all sung it a thousand times, and most of us know at least the first verse by heart. "America the Beautiful" has been called a hymn, a prayer, even the "national heartbeat set to music." Numerous proposals and half a dozen bills in Congress have tried to replace our national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," with this more lyrical, less militaristic song. But who knows the story behind the song? In *America the Beautiful*, Lynn Sherr tells the story of Katharine Lee Bates, a poet and pioneering young English professor at the newly established Wellesley College, who penned "America the Beautiful" at age 33, as she gazed over the glorious panorama from the top of Pike's Peak, Colorado. The poem, published two years later on July 4, 1895, struck a chord. Americans embraced it and immediately set it to music, trying out at least 74 different melodies. There were even Mexican, Canadian, and Australian versions. Analyzing the lyrics of "America the Beautiful" and the story of Katharine Lee Bates's unusual life, Lynn Sherr opens a window onto the shifting world of late 19th century America. She explores the lingering impact of the Civil War and the dramatic developments in commerce and technology, which shaped the American Century and the popularity of one brilliant, stirring song.

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Customer Reviews

The story behind "America the Beautiful" is as emotionally moving as the song it produced and Lynn Sherr has captured all of this in her timely new book. I read it this evening and found myself on more than one occasion needing to go to my piano and play and sing through this wonderful national

song. Many facts leap out at the reader...the poet and author of "America the Beautiful", Katharine Lee Bates, never met the composer, Samuel A. Ward, and except for one \$5 fee, neither received any money for it...Mr. Ward died before the tune and text ever appeared together in print...and that dozens of other tunes were proposed to be wedded to Miss Bates's poem yet it wasn't until shortly before her death in 1929 that tune and text became the accepted national version that we sing today. There are many more rich details to this story and Ms. Sherr has put them forward with colorful prints throughout the book, many of them reminders of the times in which these two gifted people lived. Fate certainly played several pivotal parts. The biggest was Miss Bates's trip west in the summer of 1893 where she was inspired in at least three places to pen lines that exist in the song today... "alabaster cities" (from seeing the "White City" of the Chicago World's Fair), "amber waves of grain" (while passing through Kansas on a train) and "spacious skies", "purple mountain majesties" and "above the fruited plain" from her view atop Pikes' Peak. But we also learn that it is quite plausible that Samuel Ward wrote the tune on a friend's linen cuff as he left Coney Island one day aboard a boat. And if it hadn't been for a conscientious clergyman from Rochester New York, the words and music might never have been paired.

Lynn Sherr describes the poem, music, meaning, history, and legacy of the song "America the Beautiful" in this unique book. In many ways this book is a glimpse at the Progressive era in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Katharine Lee Bates, author of the poem, was a progressive intellectual who supported many views which were considered radical in her time (i.e. women's rights, pacifism, social service, etc.). Sherr follows Bates on her travels to a teacher's sojourn in Colorado, where Bates received inspiration for her poem. On her way, Bates visited the 1893 Columbia Exposition in Chicago where she was awed by the "White City" (not so much a racist classification-at least not as Bates regarded it-but an interpretation of the ideal urban civilization). This experience found its way in the fourth stanza of Bates' poem as "alabaster cities." Bates also visited Jane Addams' Hull House on this trip. Samuel Ward, of which little is known, is also discussed briefly. Ward wrote the music that would later be used for "America the Beautiful" in the form of a hymn entitled "Materna" (with the lyrics for "Oh Mother, Dear Jerusalem.") His inspiration came during a visit to Coney Island. What I found to be fascinating is how Bates' poem captured the hearts of so many people even before it was set to music that many wished was our national anthem. Bates received hundreds of letters praising her poem from all age groups. I cannot imagine any poem moving the people of the nation today except, perhaps, if it were in the form of a rap. I found the explanation on how Bates' poem and Ward's music were united to be very

interesting.

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