

Kate Loftus Welch (1996)

Prepared for the Waterville Public Library and the Waterville Historical Society by Thomas Barnes, author and editor of Along Willona Creek (1996) and The Poet of Forge Hollow (1997).

During the last thirty-eight years of the Nineteenth Century and the first thirty-eight years of the Twentieth, an extraordinary woman lived in the tiny community of Forge Hollow, New York, sixteen miles southwest of Utica.

Kate Louise Loftus was born a few miles north of the college town of Clinton, New York in September, 1862. Her parents, Thomas Loftus and Ann McDermott moved to the Forge Hollow area soon after, and there Kate lived for virtually all of her life. She was married to Martin Welch in May, 1891; a devoted union that ended with Martin's death in March, 1917.

Kate Loftus Welch was a much beloved wife, poet, naturalist, school teacher, farmer and collector of taxes for the Town of Marshall. Perhaps most fortunately, she was also a "country correspondent" to *The Waterville Times*, a weekly, rural newspaper which still rolls off the press each Wednesday.

During the last forty years of her life, Kate wrote to *The Times*, endearing herself in a column titled "Along Willona Creek." This immensely popular and widely-known feature was filled with naturalist observations, stories of her life, poetry and the weekly goings-on of the family and friends that surrounded her home, a home she affectionately called "The House by the Side of the Road."

Kate's life is the story of an exceptional woman whose formal education barely progressed beyond the one room schoolhouse of her childhood. As a young woman of sixteen, however, she dedicated herself to a lifetime of learning and service. Her self-education was a constant, consuming passion, acquired from books and from the people and natural world around her. Kate reveled in classic literature, music and art. She loved opera and was well versed in astronomy. She published two beautiful books of poetry, *Idylls Of Willona Creek* and *Hearts and Flowers*. Amid all this, including the very real joys and sorrows of her life, there is the constant soul of a romantic, who always took time to search for the soft, silver dawn or the last aquamarine glow at twilight. This was a woman immersed in the seasons, recognizing each signal lantern raised by the flowers, plants and animals around her.

The rich beauty of her life, communicated so openly and sincerely in her newspaper stories and poetry, is woven throughout with the great love and lifelong friendship of her schoolmate, Carrie McNamara McDermott. Indeed, Kate's last column in *The Waterville Times* spoke of that friendship and ends with a poem honoring it. The other great love of her life was Martin Welch. One of Kate's great sorrows was the breaking of their wedding engagement and years of separation caused by Martin's one night of inebriation. Although they eventually married, she was to always "hate the bowl," as she referred to the drinking of strong spirits.

Besides her family and friends, Kate's other consuming passion was literature. She was particularly fond of the poet James Whitcomb Riley, as were many other rural, farm people of that time. Alfred

Lord Tennyson and Robert Burns were other favorites. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* may have been the inspiration for her *Idylls of Willona Creek*. Above all else, however, were the novels of George Eliot. In a 1929 column, Kate wrote: "No other pen has quite the magic of our favorite author, George Eliot, whose descriptive phrases abide with us forever. " Kate had a particular affinity for Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. During her childhood, Forge Hollow was very similar to that setting with its dam, mill pond and gristmill. In many ways, Kate viewed her life through that novel and constantly made analogies to its characters and landscape.

Through her writings and years of teaching, Kate became a local celebrity, the center of cultural propriety in Forge Hollow. Neighbors and family were constantly bringing baskets of food and bouquets to her door in bounteous return for her kindness and devotion to others. Plants, nests, flowers and hives were brought to her for identification, injured animals for mending. Kate judged the local flower shows. She was invited to speak before several area garden clubs, and when asked to address the Waterville Parent-Teacher Association in 1927, the auditorium was filled to overflowing, the largest attendance ever recorded. In 1947, she was prominently mentioned in the book, *Along The Oriskany*, published by the *Utica Observer-Dispatch*: Tucked against the rocks is a stone schoolhouse, where in the Civil War they pulled down the flag every time the North lost a battle (which was often) and where, not surprisingly, a poetess used to teach. Kate Loftus Welch was her name. She seems to have gotten the name of the creek changed from "the West Branch of the Oriskany - (its original name) and "Big Creek" (that's what the unemotional 1907 surveyors called it) to " Willona" - not a bad accomplishment for a poet even if she had done nothing else. But Mrs. Welch, tall, angular, effusive, friendly, taught a lot of Forge Hollow youngsters as well; published a book, *Idylls of Willona Creek*, wrote scads of poems for *The Waterville Times*, collected the town taxes, and made dozens of Forge Hollow and Dicksville folks more than normally flower-garden minded. Her book, *Idylls of Willona Creek*, begins:

Willona Creek goes singing still
North from the town of Waterville,
With sweeps and curves through meadows fine,
Fringed with fern and columbine.

When Kate died in April, 1938, she left behind a community of friends and acquaintances that stretched for miles in every direction. Some of them knew her only through her newspaper column, but they were her friends nevertheless. Upon her passing, *The Waterville Times* printed a tribute to their star correspondent, a woman who shared her life for forty years on the printed page. It reads as follows:

Our Tribute To Mrs. Kate Loftus Welch

In the death of Mrs. Kate Loftus Welch not only her own relatives sustain a loss but every reader of this paper. Her contributions have attracted much attention and have been read with pleasure and profit. She found so much in life which was good and passed it along to others. Truly she was a noble woman, a kindly soul and lady who by her every deed gave an example to emulate. From nature she found many an inspiration which only a cultivated mind could find. She lived the allotted time, and we know she has merited a rich reward, and as the poet aptly puts it:

Somewhere she waits to make you win,
Your soul in her fine white hands

Somewhere the gods have made for you
The woman who understands.

* * * * *

In August, 1919, Kate began to refer to her home as "The House by the Side of the Road." It was the fashion then to name your house or farm. Other local names were Gold Coin Farm, Hillcrest, Cedardale, The House in the Green Pastures, Pleasant View, Meadowbrook and Breezy Point. Kate named her home after a poem written by Sam Walter Foss of Summerville, Massachusetts. Foss drew his inspiration from Homer's line "He was a friend to man, and lived in a house by the side of the road." This theme epitomizes the way Kate lived her life. The last eight lines of "The House by the Side of the Road" by Sam Foss read as follows:

Let me live in my house by the side of the road
Where the race of men go by
They are good, they are bad, they are weak, they are strong,
Wise, foolish - so am I.
Then why should I sit in the scorner's seat
Or hurl the cynic's ban?
Let me live in my house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

* * * * *

POEMS BY KATE LOFTUS WELCH

As I Came Down from Waterville

As I came down from Waterville
The sun sank down behind the hill,
And gorgeous colors, red and gold
With tints and shadings manifold,
Mauve, primrose, saffron, lilac, pink,
Flamed along the sky's far brink;
It was a scene one's heart to thrill
As I came down from Waterville.

As I came down from Waterville
Autumn reigned on vale and hill,
The trees in dress of diamond dyes
Rivalled all the flaming skies;
A farmhouse window, flashing seen
Was opal set in tourmaline;
It was a scene one's heart to fill
As I came down from Waterville.

As I came down from Waterville,
The old stone schoolhouse by the mill

Was folded 'round in shadows sweet
With fragrance from the woodland deep;
Below the caves where waters wait
A fall bird, calling to its mate,
Sang out, "Good Night," and then was still
As I came down from Waterville.

Along Willona Creek

Willona Creek goes singing still
North from the town of Waterville,
With sweeps and curves through meadows fine,
Fringed with fern and columbine,
With honeysuckle blossoms pink
From which the bees of summer drink;
With many a curve and pretty freak
Flows on our dear Willona Creek.

On "Barton's flats" it winds about
With here and there a lusty trout,
The spotted pipers flit and cry
And o'er the sandy beaches fly;
While from the marsh the cowslips gleam
Between the aspen's silver sheen,
And cherry trees along the way
Drop down their pearly petals gay.

Beside the school house on the hill
Below where stood the old sawmill,
It dips in pools all crystal clear
The "swimmin' holes" to schoolboys dear,
Then on short space it ever raves
To beauties rare along the caves,
Where sparkling waters ever fall,
And from the cliffs the thrushes call.

Through Dicksville meads the scenes so fair,
It ever loves to linger there,
In clover red and amber wheat,
In verdant pastures, lush and sweet;
Trim cot and farmhouse line the shore
Where stood the redman's hut of yore;
The Brothertowns forever rest
Upon the meadow's throbbing breast.

Now since Willona ever bides
'Twixt inland sea and ocean tides,
Or soaring in the ether blue

Comes singing back again to you,
 Shall not the soul, the vital spark,
 Forever bide with thrush and lark
 Within the blue o'er tide and lea
 In scenes loved eternally?

Thus true to nature's law I know,
 Shall our Willona ever flow
 Within the blue, from land and sea,
 And then - come singing back to me.
 Oh, may some sweeter bard than I
 As fast the silent years go by
 Love well the haunts of which I speak,
 And write "Along Willona Creek."

Memories

That one sweet summer on the farm
 What sweep of hills and skies,
 The emerald leas, the clover seas,
 The gorgeous sunset dyes!

The orchard in its bridal bloom
 Too soon such fair things pass
 And O, the silver rain that blew
 In perfume, on the grass.

One night beside the pasture bars . .
 The moonrise o'er the hill,
 While from the woodland's silver-dusk
 There called a whip-poor-will . . .

How yearns my heart for you always,
 How burns each'falling tear . . .
 Alone I watch the moon tonight,
 My dear . . . my dear . . . my dear

* * * * *

STORIES BY KATE LOFTUS WELCH

Spring, 1862

It was in the spring of 1862 and Charles Oliver had been teacher at the old stone schoolhouse for the fall and winter term, which in those days closed in March. The Civil War had been going on for a year, with results favorable to the Union forces, especially in the west. Spring brought its famous engagement between the Monitor and Merrimac, the taking of New Orleans, and in August the second battle of Bull Run, following which four young men of this place volunteered for service in the Union

army. The four volunteers of that fall were Alfred Dunn, George Tefft, Joseph Richmond, and Reuben Daniels. Young Daniels, Tefft, and Richmond died in the service. Tragic, bitter days, that the sweetness of springtime could not dispel, was that spring of 1862. Busy days, too, with three forges, a tannery, two saw mills, and a gristmill running.

The host at the Brown Tavern, William Hatheway, was busy too, receiving the many travelers whom the canals and railroads had not yet taken from the valley. A wing had just been built on the Sorrell cottage; and there the mistress, whose husband worked in one of the forges, kept an attractive milliner shop, and being something of an artist, she had the patronage of the five-mile-long valley and the surrounding hillside homes. The picturesque, yellow stagecoach, drawn by four horses, the coming of which was announced by the merry notes of a horn, stopped at the Brown Tavern, where a watering tub offered refreshment to the tired beasts. Often, too, on warm summer days, Thomas Lyman halted his dripping teams at the Caves where there was a large tank filled by the crystal stream that falls from the rocks. Sometimes richly dressed men, women, and children descended from the heavy coach into the sylvan shade and looked with approval on the romantic beauty of the rock-and-pond-bordered gorge, in those days musical with the celestial voices of wood and hermit thrushes and countless veeries which homed on the wooded cliffs. There were scarlet tanagers too, flashing through the dense foliage, dipping their flaming coats in the foaming waterfall or on the blue surface of the pond.

The Dancing Party at Conger Farm

A dancing party was held at Conger farm in February, 1883. Snow had been falling daily for a week or more, but as there had been little or no wind, the highways, although heavy, were not drifted.

On the evening of the 18th of February, a party of the younger set of Willona Creek folks started out in single rigs for Conger farm, and, the short cut by way of Burr Hill being unopened, drove up the valley to Waterville from whence they were preceded by two bob sleigh loads of young people headed for the same place. When they reached the large farm house the orchestra of three pieces, yeomans Phinney, bass viol; his son, Daniel, first violin, and Charles McGinley, second violin, were "tuning up" in the spacious double parlors that had been divested of their carpeting for the night's dance. Budding maids and their gay young escorts were moving restlessly about, eager for the first strains of music.

"Four more couples right this way," called the second violin, and, as if by magic, the four more couples were on the spot. Then began the siren strains of the violins, lifting everybody into the world of romance, as it ever does when the heart beats young.

By the time the oyster supper was being served on the long "hop" tables in the great dining room, the wind had started to blow, and in less than an hour there was a fifty-mile gale beating at the farm house windows, and whenever an outside door was opened a filmy sheet of snow dashed in and heaped like white blossoms upon the floors. "No getting away from this neck 'o the woods until daylight," called a young man who sat contentedly with his fiancée in a cozy corner. "And why should I worry," he added, "when I have everything I want right beside me?" Why, indeed?

By that time the orchestra was tiring, and Yeomans was adamant to the pleadings of our host that they keep the magic bows going for an hour longer. It was not until the older Phinney had been waited upon by the most irresistible girl in the party that he yielded. We might add that the irresistible was reinforced by the second passing of a hat.

And so the winter night passed happily until morning burst in the room like a primrose in bloom. We met no rebuke when we reached home at about 8:30 a.m. The situation had been unavoidable, but the cause of education suffered that day at the stone schoolhouse and at the little red one over at Conger's Corners, where two sleepyhead instructors tried vainly to work up some enthusiasm for the printed text. Indeed, time passed on lagging feet, and when four o'clock came there was no lingering about the dingy room, sweet though it was. No fine sentiment from prose or verse was placed upon the blackboard for the edification of the bunch who would come next day with shining, morning faces.

It was home and to our bed in the low room beneath the eaves ere yet the glories of the February sunset had faded on the western sky. A blissful sinking away on a pillow soft as a cloud, dear familiar voices below sounding more and more indistinct, and then, lapping waves on quiet shores

O, for the vanished riches of that day and hour, mother putting on an extra coverlet, mother tip-toeing away, starry-eyed. For the relentless years have robbed us of our dearest treasures, have taught us that real riches are not found in material things, but in the measure of love that is ours.

A Perfectly L-o-v-e-l-y Party

It was a perfectly l-o-v-e-l-y party. You may have heard of it - Dorothy Hartley's birthday party up at Duard Stock Farm. Dorothy is an April child. It was an absolutely l-o-v-e-l-y party. Muriel Landon says so, and so do Gertrude Zieres, Gladys Clarke, Claribel Clarke, and Doris Zieres.

So likewise says charming little Mary Bogan. Mary comes and goes to and from school, all alone over the woodsy Hillcrest road where the trees lean over to woo each other, and where the scarlet tanagers flash through the lacy foliage, and the wild flowers come and go in their appointed season. There are fairy rings all along that woodsy hill road, and Mary sees the fairies dancing there sometimes, Titania and her lovely train You would know as soon as you had seen Mary that she lives at times with the fairies. They have been good to her, too, and have given her many graces. Why, out in our southwestern states there are no fairies; the cactus thorns would tear their gauzy wings But, we started to tell of Dorothy Hartley's ninth birthday party. We are always digressing like Mrs. Micawber. Isn't digressing the word to use when you mean starting a subject and then flying off on a tangent to talk of something else? The writer forgets. She admits being a bit senile.

Well, the party was won-der-ful. They had ice cream an' everything. Gertrude Zieres rushed in to tell the writer about it before it happened. She was starry-eyed. So was little Doris.

"Oh, Mrs. Welch, Dorothy Hartley is having a birthday party tomorrow - Saturday. Her mother sent notes to all us little girls this afternoon. The notes said: "come to Dorothy's birthday party tomorrow afternoon, April 20th, 3:30 until 5:50" Dorothy had distributed the notes herself, passing from seat to seat, looking very mysterious and tossing her golden hair like a Shetland pony. Then she whispered behind her geography to Muriel Landon something about cakes, candles, and ice cream. How could they study the rest of the afternoon? Dorothy didn't; she just looked kind of mysterious and kept tossing her golden hair or holding a strand of it down against her Madonna-blue dress She said the party was to come off rain or shine, and if there was rain, as there had been all week, the nine candles would brighten things. They would flare and flicker and carry prayers up to heaven -

"The children sing in old Japan,
The children sing in Spain,

But the organ and organ-grinder
Are singing in the rain."

Don't you love to hear the soft spring rain come streaming down the windowpane, and see it drip between the buds of wind-stripped bushes, virgin-green? That's the way it was during the April birthday party, but nobody noticed for they were eating the most delicious food conceivable; and there was the marvelous cake, a great mound of frosting set with pink candy drops.

Neither did they notice that the lovely line of spring hills to the westward had changed from violet to amethyst. Then there was a sudden rush for rain suits and rubbers. The April dusk was setting down in the valley, and they must hasten home. A red letter day of childhood had been written and:

"The lark's on the wing
The snail's on the thorn,
God's in His heaven,
All's right with the world."

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