

Chapter Eight: Katharine Lee Bates _Chicago, 1890s

In the context of the 1890s, when the U.S. faced a severe economic downturn known as the Great Depression, societal unrest fueled growing nativist sentiments and led to restrictive immigration laws, particularly against Asian immigrants. As corruption peaked in Washington, Grover Cleveland was reelected president, promising to root it out.

Amidst these challenges, Chicago prepared to host the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, celebrating Columbus, a figure personified as "Columbia" — a female embodiment of America. The exposition, filled with extravagant displays including a Liberty Bell made of oranges and a salt Statue of Liberty, aimed to signal to the world that America was emerging as a powerful nation worthy of recognition.

The event also introduced the Pledge of Allegiance written by Francis Bellamy, which aimed to foster loyalty among new immigrants toward America amidst rising xenophobia. Cleveland's inaugural remarks at the fair highlighted the nation's aspirations for dignity and freedom, encapsulated in a grand ceremony that featured acoustic spectacles.

Bertha Palmer led the "Board of Lady Managers" at the Expo, advocating for a space dedicated to women's accomplishments that would encourage broader rights for women rather than maintaining isolated pedestals. Inside the Women's Building, significant figures in women's rights were honored, while exhibitions showcased dire working conditions women faced.

After their Chicago trip, Katie and Katharine journeyed through Colorado, where Katie experienced a moment of divine inspiration that led her to write a poem reflecting her awakened emotions about America's beauty and promise. Revisiting her notes a year later, she submitted the poem to *The Congregationalist*, receiving accolades and a small payment of five dollars for its publication on July 4, 1895.

The poem gained immense popularity, leading to requests for a musical adaptation. Clarence Barbour found a suitable melody, "Materna," composed by Samuel Ward, which was initially a hymn. Katie's verses, set to this tune, became an anthem of American ideals, culminating in the beloved "America the Beautiful."

Through her literary contributions, particularly amid the political and social turmoil of her time, Katharine Lee Bates left an indelible mark, capturing the essence of American aspiration and beauty in her work, which continues to resonate deeply with the American spirit.