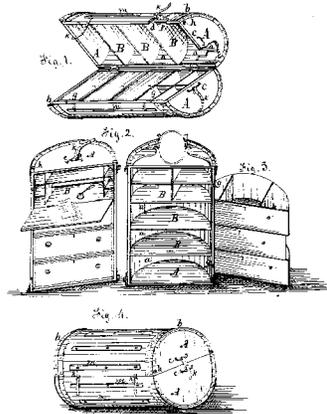


IOWA HISTORY

MATILDA FLETCHER.
Portable Trunks.

No. 158,056.

Patented Dec. 22, 1874.



Witness
J. K. Owsing
J. W. Clark

In witness
Matilda Fletcher
Attorney Thomas & Owsing

Courtesy US Patent Office, Google Patents
Matilda's Patent Application

Matilda Fletcher Defies Baggage-Smashers

“Baggage, Baggage-smashing, and Baggage-Smashers”

A Kansas newspaper ran a lengthy story about the disastrous experiences of train passengers entrusting their bags to railroad baggage handlers in the late 1800s.

“When the first trunk was made, that first trunk was smashed. And since that far away day, ages back in the misty past, the history of trunk-making and trunk smashing has gone hand in hand...” wrote a columnist for the *Phillipsburg Herald* (Kansas) newspaper.

The writer labeled the handlers “baggage smashers” and “destructive destroyers.” He claimed that anything the handlers touched ended up looking like it had been attacked by an anvil or a sledge hammer.

According to the columnist, railroad baggage handlers existed “to make life a burden” to all travelers. Although tough materials such as leather, nails and rivets held the solid oak ribs of a trunk together, by the end of a trip the passenger retrieved a jumble of materials held together by ropes for which the “destroyer” charged 25 cents.

“If there is an evil in the world that afflicted travelling humanity worse than baggage I don’t know what it is,” the writer concluded. He had some advice for travelers who hoped to

ensure that their luggage would travel safely: "...make the trip in a farm wagon lined with straw, sit upon your trunk all the way and handle it as tenderly as though it were an egg."

In his column about the perils of handing over trunks to the railroad's "baggage smashers," Bob Burdette mentioned a "bright and gifted Iowa woman" who had invented a travel trunk that forced handlers to "hug it (the trunk) up in his arms and carry it into the car as though it was a three-year-old baby."

Iowan Matilda Fletcher had spent plenty of time riding the rails as a popular speaker on education reform and woman's suffrage. She had witnessed firsthand the destructive powers of the "baggage smashers." From Council Bluffs and Des Moines, Matilda traveled across the country to her speaking engagements. She must have had time to think about the condition of her luggage as it jostled about the baggage car. In 1874 she decided to take steps to solve the problem of the "destructive destroyers."

"The object of my invention is to construct the body of a trunk in such a manner as to increase its strength, durability, and convenience..." Matilda wrote in her U.S. Patent application.

Some said Matilda's proposed travel trunk looked like an "overgrown dynamite" stick. One end was flat, the other rounded. This feature required the trunk to be placed upright on the bottom end during travel and prevented the contents from being upended. And the cylindrical shape discouraged handlers from lying the trunk on its sides, keeping it from rolling around and possibly breaking the "destroyer's legs."

She had designed a trunk that could be used as a closet as well as a writing desk. Its unique cylindrical shape was sliced in half lengthwise, with hinges holding the two pieces together on one side. And a lock on the other side clasped the two sections tightly together during travel. The inside of Matilda's trunk was divided into numerous drawers and shelves and pigeonholes that could be adjusted to hold various sizes of clothes and toiletries. Probably most intriguing was the option to use one of the inside hinged compartments as a writing desk. The exterior could be covered in paint and trimmed out in any stylish design.

Matilda continued to lecture and write long after she applied for a patent on her unusual travel trunk. It's unclear if she ever developed and manufactured the trunk. You can learn more about Matilda at her great-great-great-granddaughter's Web site:

<http://www.lauramadelinewiseman.com/> And to see Matilda's original patent application, visit <https://www.google.com/patents/US158056>

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Sources

Burdette, Bob. "An Idyl of the Railroad," *Phillipsburg (Kansas) Herald*, Jan. 6, 1888.