

IOWA HISTORY



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Carrie Nation in Iowa

Newspapers called her “a dauntless woman in a ferment” and a “militant temperance advocate.” Carrie Nation described herself as “a bulldog running along at the feet of Jesus, barking at what he doesn’t like.”

The 6-foot tall, 180-pound Carrie Nation believed she was divinely ordained by God to promote temperance. Born in Kentucky in 1846, she married young—to a hopeless alcoholic. After he died, Carrie devoted her energies to the suppression of the liquor traffic. And she did it in an unusual way—by taking a hatchet to every saloon in her path!

Her first smash was in Kiowa, Kansas, where she was arrested, jailed, and eventually released on bond. But the threat of arrest did not deter the woman who became known as the “Saloon Smasher.” Between 1900 and 1910 she was arrested 30 times as she left a “trail of ruined barroom fixtures” wherever she went. It was reported drinkers became “terror stricken” when the

fiery temperance advocate appeared at the door of a saloon. Customers fled “before the ever faithful hatchet could get into action.”

It’s unclear if Carrie actually smashed any saloons in Iowa, but she certainly visited frequently between 1901 and 1910—and drew big crowds everywhere she traveled in the state. Often she was met at depots by reception committees armed with hatchets.

In 1901 Carrie made a sweeping tour across the western half of the state stopping at points between Council Bluffs and Des Moines. In Council Bluffs a crowd of 2000 people cheered her at the YMCA before she boarded a train. At Anita about 100 individuals met her at the depot where she greeted them from the railroad platform, “I’m the Saloon Smasher; I did it with my little hatchet.” The crowd “surged up to the car” to shake hands with the famous temperance advocate.

At Adair Carrie told a crowd, “You are all saloon smashers; I can see it in your faces. We must work together to down the devil and rum.” She singled out a group of little boys in the crowd and said, “Now I want every one of you to fill your pockets with rocks and go out and smash saloons and joints.”

In Stuart the railroad platform was crowded with people when Carrie arrived. “I haven’t got a hatchet with me,” she told the gathering; but she said they must all work to smash the saloons and that they would meet one day in heaven. When asked by a person in the crowd, “Will you have your hatchet there?” she replied, “I won’t need it there.”

At the Casey stop Carrie shook hands with the nearly 500 who had come to see her. “I hope that you each will take a rock and throw it through the window of any saloon you find in your town,” she told the crowd.

By the time she reached Des Moines an estimated crowd of 10,000 awaited Carrie. It took her nearly a half hour to get through the crowd to her carriage where the police waited to escort her on a tour of city saloons.

Carrie was received with mixed reactions in the capital city. While the Bartenders’ Union of the city employed a band to meet Carrie at the depot and escort her carriage to her hotel with music—maybe as a way of softening her up, one Des Moines saloon keeper joked he had “acquired 50 rats and mice to use as a reception committee” if she called on him with a hatchet.

Sources:

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