

America the Beautiful

- **Katherine Lee Bates wrote the poem.** She was head of the English department at Wellesley College - June 1893 she boarded a train in Boston heading on her first trip out west; She was to teach summer school courses in Colorado for 3 weeks.
- **Visited Niagara Falls** which had become one of the most famous tourist attractions on the continent. Visitors included Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Sarah Bernhardt, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Prince of Wales. She wrote a poem after seeing the incredible falls:
 - Passion of plunging waters....
 - Columnar mist and glistening rainbow play;
 - A splendid thrill of glory and of peril

- **Spent time in Chicago attending “the Fair.”**

Officially the World’s Columbian Exposition , 65,000 exhibits on 633 acres including an enormous exhibition of electricity, steam engines, dynamos and more unusual displays including a Liberty Bell made of oranges and one made of wheat, rye and oats, a US map made of pickles, a Statue of Liberty made of salt. Also introduced was the fastener we now call a zipper, Cracker Jacks, Shredded Wheat, the first moving sidewalk and Juicy Fruit chewing gum. Wamego, Kansas, has restored murals from the fair on the walls of their Columbian Theater.

- **July 3rd she boards the train heading to Colorado**

She observed fields of wheat growing in Kansas, vistas that gave her a “quicken and deepened sense of America.” Arriving in Colorado Springs she was amazed by the “purple range of the Rockies.” Toward the end of her teaching assignment, she went with a group to Pike’s Peak where she wrote “most glorious scenery I ever beheld.”

- **Writing the lyrics**

She jotted in her notebook “O beautiful for...” It took two years for her to organize her thoughts and complete the poem. First publication was in *The Congregationalist*, a popular journal. A surprisingly large number of people found the poem. “No one was more amazed than I at the way the hymn was taken up,” Bates later told an audience.

- **The Music**

People wanted to sing the poem. Several attempts were made to set it to music. Samuel Ward, a noted organist from New Jersey who conducted choirs with great success, had written a hymn tune he called, Materna.

- A minister from Rochester, New York, Clarence Barbour and his wife, an accomplished musician, started looking for a hymn tune that worked with the poem. They selected Materna. The sad part of this history is that Sam Ward died without knowing the impact of his hymn tune.

America the Beautiful, The Stirring True Story Behind Our Nation’s Favorite Song by Lynn Sherr is full of interesting tidbits about the song.