

How Curious – Kate Barnard

Who was once known as the Good Angel of Oklahoma?

MUSIC: How Curious theme

Rachel Hopkin Script

Hi. Welcome to KGOU's How Curious. I'm Rachel Hopkin.

Connie Cronley

The photos I have are in the book.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I'm with Connie Cronley, author of a recent biography about trailblazing Oklahoma politician and social activist, Kate Barnard. We're looking at some photos of Kate.

Connie Cronley

That's very similar to what's in a lot of her official portraits, what Dr Debo called "that silly hat."

Rachel-in-situ

It is quite a silly hat.

Connie Cronley

It is, isn't it? [Laughing]

Rachel Hopkin Script

Although Kate was, in the main, the very opposite of frivolous, she evidently had the occasional penchant for some head-topping frippery – as noted by Connie, and her mentor, historian Dr Angie Debo.

Rachel-in-situ

She's very pretty.

Rachel Hopkin Script

In the photos I've seen of her, which were all taken when she was young, she has lustrous dark hair and clear eyes.

Connie Cronley

I think she's very pretty. She thought she was very ugly, and I think because she was so small.

Rachel Hopkin Script

She was only about 5 feet tall, weighed 90 lbs, and wore a size 3. But what Kate lacked in physical structure, she more than made up for with the force of her personality and the power of her convictions.

Sunu Kodumthara

Kate Barnard is the first woman elected to state office in Oklahoma before she even had the right to vote. And she was a reformer through and through.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Sunu Kodumthara is a historian based at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and has also written about Kate.

Sunu Kodumthara

She knows what she wants and she very strongly believes not just in her rightness, but in the righteousness of the issue, whether it's educating young people or making sure that those who are dealing with different mental health issues are getting the kind of treatment they need. All of these things are to her so important.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Kate Barnard herself, whose words are here read by an actor, put it like this.

Kate Barnard (words read by Nicole Poole)

I want to do good. I want to feel that the world is better because I have lived in it. I am especially interested in that class of legislation that will best protect the tiniest and frailest bit of humanity who is entrusted to our care.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Kate Barnard was born Catherine Ann Barnard in 1875 in Nebraska. The family moved to Kansas when she was a baby. A couple of years later, her mother died in childbirth. The baby also died.

Connie Cronley

And one of Kate's earliest memories was standing on that snow covered graveyard for her mother's burial. And those two traumas – losing her mother and suffering from the cold - really just pierced her. And all of her life she felt like a half orphan, because she was, and she wanted to rescue anything young and helpless. And she was very concerned about the cold. When she did investigations, especially of orphanages, she worried that the orphans were cold. So that wounded little child is what propelled her to her career.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Kate's father moved the surviving family to Oklahoma. As Kate came of age, the progressive era was getting underway. This was a period that arose in response to the rapid industrialization, urbanization, and political corruption of the late 19th century and was characterized by grass roots-led social, political, and economic reform. It was an era that Kate would come to embody.

Connie Cronley

Kate started her career as a school teacher, but she wasn't very successful at that. And then she became a secretary in Oklahoma City, and those were skills that fit her perfectly – typing and shorthand. Fast. Modern. She had no trouble finding jobs in offices. She had a lot of trouble keeping them, because she was so bossy.

Rachel Hopkin Script

In 1903, she landed a job with the Democratic minority in the territorial legislature.

Connie Cronley

She found a way to get herself appointed what we would call hostess of the Oklahoma territorial exhibit at the St Louis World Fair. This was a very big deal. The world fairs were monumental and Oklahoma was agitating for statehood, so this was very important.

SEGUE

Sunu Kodumthara

Her experience at the World Fair is really life changing for her because she meets other people from across the country especially who are dealing with corruption, crime, a lot of poverty, and she sees them, meets with them, learns from them, and is inspired by them to bring that kind of reform-mindedness into Oklahoma Territory. And what she starts to do is she joins in with women's activist groups, reform societies, and most importantly, she is writing pretty regularly for the Daily Oklahoman.

Rachel Hopkin Script

This began when she is still in St Louis where she's asked to be the eyes and ears at the world's fair.

Sunu Kodumthara

And as she writes about her experiences there, there's a growing audience here in Oklahoma territory who want to know more from her.

SEGUE

Connie Cronley

Kate was very good at manoeuvring herself into where she wanted to be, and she went to the Shawnee convention, and that was a convention to help agitate for statehood, and she spoke there I think for the first time publicly at a political gathering, and the Democrats saw what an impact she had. People leaned in to hear her. She was such a popular speaker, they sent her stumping across the territory. She was promoting the election of Democratic representatives to the constitutional convention.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Somehow, around the same time, she persuaded the editor of the Daily Oklahoman to send her on a trip to look into the conditions of the benighted – especially children - in the slums and sweatshops back east.

Connie Cronley

And she toured the mills and the factories and the mines where children were working. And she came back and began telling audiences what she had seen on that tour, the horrors of child labor. She was very dramatic and religious and she would tell them about going into a mine so deep. She would say “down, down, down, where no light shines and no flowers grow, there the little children are.”

Rachel Hopkin Script

Kate became increasingly political. She campaigned widely, helping to ensure a large Democratic majority at the Constitutional Convention – which was a meeting held to devise the soon to be new state’s constitution. In addition, she was determined to get support for the three so called “planks” she was most concerned with – prohibiting child labor, ensuring compulsory education, and creation of a dedicated department of Charities and Corrections. She was vocal in her opinions, the righteousness of which – as mentioned earlier – she was convinced. For example, on one occasion, she visited a town where 15 men had recently been killed in a mining accident. When she came face to face with the mine owner, she did not hold back.

Kate Barnard (words read by Nicole Poole)

The diamonds you are wearing in your shirt front were brought with the blood of 15 men who were burned to death in a mine which you own, because you would not spend the money to provide two entrances. You made their wives widows. You made their children orphans; you are responsible to Almighty God for the long, weary lives of poverty and ignorance which they face, and if the people of this state of Oklahoma will elect me to the office which I am seeking, I will change such conditions, not only in your mine, but in all others.

Rachel Hopkin Script

And elect her they did. She became Oklahoma’s first Commissioner of Charities and Corrections – the department she had agitated for. This made her the first woman to take political office in the new state. While this was in many ways a triumph, Kate was less than impressed by the actual physical office space which had been assigned to her.

Kate Barnard (words read by Nicole Poole)

In 1907 public buildings were not equipped with elevators. As I was the only woman state official, and frail, I supposed innate courtesy had assigned me space on the first floor. A careful search proved my estimate of official male courtesy over drawn. Neither was my name on a door of the second floor. Weary and exhausted I climbed the long stairways to the third floor. There I found a tiny “pigeon hole” hidden away in a recess or alcove of the attic, to which they had assigned me. As you approached my room, this “toilet” sign was the only one visible till you were within the alcove. Thus every man and woman had to face that sign squarely: “Toilet”.

Rachel Hopkin Script

But it would take more than a dodgy office to put Kate off her stride.

Connie Cronley

She tore into that job with a vengeance, inspecting all of the state’s orphanages, founding homes, the jails. She was so impressive in that, the national press called her repeatedly “the good angel of Oklahoma.”

Rachel Hopkin Script

One fight Kate eschewed was that raging over women’s suffrage. She was apparently neither for nor against, but too busy with other matters to get involved. The plight of prisoners was particularly challenging because at that time, Oklahoma had no prison system of its own. Instead, it paid the state of Kansas to take care of its criminals. Here’s Sunu Kodumthara again.

Sunu Kodumthara

She talked about visiting these young men. Some of them were only 15 years old. And the conditions they were in. So for example, when they were placed into what we would call solitary, they would be put into very small cages where they had no space to move around. There were some who were dropped in holes and water was just dropped on top of them and that's how they would drink water. Some of them would not be fed. And then of course they were being used as free labor for the state of Kansas.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Kate was instrumental to getting the Oklahoma prisoners moved back to their home state where some of them helped build the new prison at McAlester. In addition, she got a three tier justice system set up that separated boys from men. Kate also turned her attention to facilities to deal with the mentally afflicted.

Connie Cronley

In early mental hospitals, she found them chained to the wall, beaten with soapy towels, locked in a crib, which was like a coffin-like structure of slats so they couldn't move. And she would come down so hard on these superintendents on the spot and she wrote in her annual reports, "despite what you think, mental illness is not a punishment by the devil, it is an illness, that's why we call them patients." She had a huge battle with the superintendent of the mental hospital in Norman. She finally got him fired and she stood there while they brought out those wooden cribs and chopped them into kindling and set a bonfire on the grounds. She was determined to have her way, the way she wanted it, on the spot. And so everywhere she was making progress. And then she made a mistake.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The issue in question was that of grafting in connection with Native Americans' inherited lands. Grafting refers to corrupt practices used to secure illicit gains. White guardians, lawyers, bankers, and others engaged in widespread graft, and even murder to effectively steal the land and its bounty.

Connie Cronley

There was so much money involved. The property was rich with timber and asphalt and coal and oil was coming. The value of the property in today's money was 4 billion six hundred and fifty million dollars. And the only thing standing between the white people and this money was Kate Barnard.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Kate managed to make some progress. After hiring a lawyer, more than \$1 million was restored to the Native Americans, and some grafters were convicted of criminal acts, but in the process, she was making a lot of enemies.

Connie Cronley

And the word on the street was “now she has stopped preaching and started meddling, she has to go.” The press, who had adored her, turned against her. People stopped listening to her when she spoke. And the entire fourth legislature, to their shame, turned against her.

Rachel Hopkin Script

They slashed her budget, making it impossible to carry on investigations and prosecutions. Kate decided against running for re-election.

Connie Cronley

It ruined her department. It ruined her health, which had never been good. It ruined her life.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Although Kate was not yet 40 when she left office, the decade or so that she had been politically active had taken an enormous toll on her physically. She died alone in 1930, aged just 54. Late in life she had reflected on her situation:

Kate Barnard (words read by Nicole Poole)

Slowly as I was ostracized, I felt the creative years of my life slipping into the sands of time. In the blossom and bloom of life, I was forced out of the State House ... forced into idleness...the best years of my life and the best service of my life ... lost to the world.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Thanks so much to Connie and Sunu and much gratitude also to Nicole Poole, who read Kate Barnard’s words.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I’m Rachel Hopkin.

Don’t forget, if you have an idea for a future episode, we’d love to hear about it so please drop us a line at curious@kgou.org.