

Michigan Every Day **By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly**

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Michigan Teacher First over Niagra in a barrel

Niagara Falls had been discovered. Barrels had been invented. It was only a matter of time before someone would put the two together. The unlikely person to first do this was a 63-year-old school teacher from Bay City. Annie Taylor hoped to give a spark to her life and earn some money on the lecture circuit after accomplishing the feat. She was a widow and had failed in an effort to start a dance school in Bay City. Her life was near financial ruin. Taylor chose the Canadian Horseshoe Falls for her stunt and hired a Bay City cooper to build her a barrel. She was carried by boat into the Niagara River on Oct. 24, 1901 and lowered herself into the barrel. A bicycle pump was used to pressurize the barrel. Then it was dropped into the water and she floated down the river toward the falls as hundreds of spectators gathered to watch what promised to be a tragedy. In the darkness of the barrel, Taylor waited as the water pulled her rapidly toward the falls. The entire journey took 18 minutes. Gawkers watched the barrel reach the crest of the falls and plunge with the rushing water. The barrel disappeared in the foam and the mist for a moment before it popped up intact in the pool below the falls. A rescuer on the boat who was waiting to recover Taylor shouted, "My God, she's alive!" as he opened the barrel. Taylor, it turned out, had suffered only minor injuries. Among Taylor's first words after freeing herself from the barrel were: "Nobody ought ever to do that again."

The stunt was not the boon to Taylor's life for which she hoped. She was unable to cash in on her fame as a circus performer as did Charles Blondin when 50 years earlier he became rich and famous after walking over the falls on a tightrope. Taylor thought the new medium of film was beneath her and she refused to appear at dime museums.

Her life ended in poverty and she spent her last years autographing postcards at Niagara Falls.