

ROLL OUT THE BARREL · ANNIE EDSON AND NIAGARA FALLS



Annie Edson with her barrel, Queen of the Mist • 1901

With social distancing all the rage these days, many people may have passed on their usual summer travels and opted for a day trip and an outdoor experience to make sure they stay within the various guidelines set forth due to, you know... that virus thing.

Annie Edson Taylor came up with the perfect activity! It is done alone, involves the outdoors, can satisfy the thrill seeker in you, and only takes about 20 minutes.

On October 24, 1901 Annie became the first person to survive a trip over Niagara Falls in a barrel. Annie was a poor, widowed schoolteacher who thought this feat would lead to financial security and perhaps a bit of fame. She had read about the unsuccessful “barrelers” of Niagara Falls and set her sights on making history. She used a pickle barrel made to her specifications. The inside was lined with a mattress and there was a harness to hold her in place. She added a 200 pound anvil to the bottom of the barrel as a ballast to keep it upright throughout the endeavor. Air was pumped into the barrel through a hole which was later plugged for the

journey. Just to make sure the design had what it took, she sent her cat over the falls in the barrel first. The cat, named Higgins, survived and seemed no worse for wear.

Annie climbed into her barrel at 4:00 p.m. on her birthday, October 24th, and was towed by a boat to the middle of the river before being cut loose. Observers watched as the barrel bobbed through the water before disappearing in the mist as it fell. A few minutes later, she re-emerged and floated to a stop on a rock. She only suffered a small cut to her head, which might have happened while her handless men were helping her out of the barrel. Annie's first words after the stunt: "I prayed every second I was in the barrel—except for a few seconds after the fall when I went unconscious." Annie would later comment that she would rather put her face in front of a firing cannon than do the barrel thing again.

Just about a month earlier a variety actress named Maud Willard tried to shoot the rapids of the falls in a barrel—with her dog. But the barrel got caught up in the whirlpools and rescuers could not get to her for hours. Polkovec says that her dog stuck his nose out the air hole to breathe, blocking Maud's air, and she died in the barrel. The dog survived.



Annie being retrieved after the plunge

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