



## William Jennings Bryan in Oklahoma

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Photographs / Images: William Jennings Bryan; "The Plea of the Partisan," *The Commoner*, May 24, 1907; outline map showing Bryan's stops in Oklahoma, 1906-1907



## WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN IN OKLAHOMA

BY NORBERT R. MAHNKEN

One phase of the life and career of William Jennings Bryan has been almost entirely ignored by his biographers and critics. That phase relates to Bryan's influence on state and local alignments of his day. Bryan the congressman, Bryan the Boy Orator, Bryan the presidential candidate, Bryan the cabinet official—these appear in dozens of word portraits. However, the area in which the Great Commoner made his most significant impress on his life and time, namely in helping to shape for a generation the local pattern of the Democratic party, has hardly been mentioned. To get a complete picture of Bryan one must, therefore, examine in some detail his relation to state political currents.

Oklahoma is uniquely suited for a study of this phase of Bryan's career. Perhaps no other territory or state was as close to Bryan as was Oklahoma. In few other areas did political leaders and the general public so enthusiastically follow the footsteps of the Peerless Leader. In no other state were so many of Bryan's theories put into practice as in Oklahoma. The story of the famed Nebraskan's association with Oklahoma reveals his influence on reform movements at the local rather than national level, and leads to the conclusion that at that level of politics he was a giant among his political fellowmen. Bryan in Oklahoma found a situation far different from that in the nation at large, for among the residents of that area he moved in an environment that was friendly and receptive to his suggestions. Above all else, an examination of Bryan's activities in Oklahoma seems to demonstrate that biographers, seeking to fasten a label on Bryan, have so far failed to discover the most apt and descriptive one of them all, namely Bryan, the "Voice of Rural America."

The parallelism in the political philosophy of William Jennings Bryan and that of the mass of Oklahomans was not accidental. Both Bryan and Oklahoma had entered the national scene at the same time and under much the same conditions. The Unassigned Lands in Oklahoma had been opened for settlement by the great "run" of April 22, 1889; a year later Oklahoma Territory was organized and launched on its turbulent political career by the Organic Act of May 2, 1890.

The early settlers of Oklahoma, many of whom had fallen victim to land mortgage companies and the declining price level for farm commodities, brought their traditional party loyalties with them. But with their loyalty to party these early Oklahomans also brought—or soon developed—new and strange political and social ideas, based on their experience, and on their contact with the Farmers Alliance and the Populist movements. Demands for tax and tariff reform, currency management and expansion, regulation of corporations, and increased direct participation in government were almost universally approved in the new territory. The impact of Populism on all Oklahomans, regardless of their political faith, was greater than they realized.

Bryan, too, was the product of agrarian discontent. His first election to Congress in 1890 came in a year in which Nebraskans were showing at the ballot box their dissatisfaction with the depressed state of agriculture on the Great Plains. Bryan; Omer M. Kem, a Populist; and W. A. McKeighan, a Democratic-Populist fusion candidate were sent to the House of Representatives as a completely new congressional delegation. The explanation for their victory lay in the popular discontent which the Farmers Alliance and the Populist party had sensed and exploited. Bryan from the beginning of his political career was probably more influenced by Populism than he realized.

The early congressional career of Bryan did not bring him strikingly to the attention of Oklahomans. Local Democratic editors noted with only passing interest Bryan's great tariff speech of 1892 which first brought him national acclaim. His later congressional appearances, while opposing the

repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893, and while defending the income tax law in 1894 merely brought routine comments in the Oklahoma press, such as that "Mr. Bryan made the speech of the day in favor of silver,"<sup>1</sup> that "Congressman Bryan thinks he has solved the income tax problem, and will offer a bill for that purpose in the House."<sup>2</sup>

It was not until Bryan and other western Democrats aggressively began to criticize and challenge the conservative program of the Cleveland administration that he became a personality in whom Oklahomans were actively interested. The increasingly conservative tenor of the Cleveland administration ran counter to the prevalent pattern of thinking on the Great Plains. Presidential policies, such as his demand that the Sherman Silver Purchase Act be repealed, his sale of government bonds to a New York banking syndicate to restore the treasury's gold supply, his smashing of the Pullman strike, all were viewed by western Democrats as evidence of Cleveland's growing conservatism and the crystallization of his thought processes in the field of economic and social reform. Many western Democrats were convinced that only through a complete alteration of the character, program, and leadership of the party could the Democratic party develop any future in the West. The result was an intraparty struggle which was to grow in intensity between 1894 and 1896.

Oklahomans witnessed at first hand the struggle within the Democratic party between Cleveland conservatives and agrarian reformers. The majority of Oklahoma Democrats by 1894 were unquestionably sympathetic to free silver, the income tax, effective corporation and monopoly control, and the other items in the reform program of that day. At the same time, however, many local leaders of the Democratic party in Oklahoma Territory were conservative. Some were conservative by choice, being southern Bourbon Democrats whose pattern of thinking was still conditioned by

<sup>1</sup> El Reno Democrat, August 25, 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Beaver County Democrat, October 20, 1893.

Reconstruction days and who had little sympathy for the reformist groups. Others were conservative of necessity. Since Oklahoma was still in territorial status all the executive and judicial positions were appointive in character. Governor, secretary, the minor administrative positions, judges, marshall, land office officials—all were selected by President Cleveland and his subordinates. Oklahoma editors and party wheelhorses seeking appointive posts soon learned that reformers need not apply. Bitter factional strife was inevitable.<sup>3</sup>

During 1895, while the administration was gradually losing control of the local party machinery in Oklahoma, Bryan made his first visit to the territory. His appearance was a part of that extensive speaking tour which carried the gospel of free silver throughout the South and West. During the last week of June, 1895, Bryan delivered major addresses at Enid, Guthrie, and Oklahoma City, and at Purcell in the Chickasaw Nation of Indian Territory. The Oklahoma City meeting of June 25, 1895, was typical of them all. Local Democrats took the leadership in arranging the details of Bryan's visit, but they were aided by Populist co-workers, and even by Republicans interested in the silver movement.<sup>4</sup> Bryan made two appearances, the first of them in the afternoon at an outdoor meeting in Smith's Grove on the east edge of Oklahoma City. It was the usual type of political meeting so dear to the heart of Oklahomans raised on the heady diet of Populist campaigning. From the speakers' platform, gaily decorated with bunting, placards and flags, a brass band entertained the audience until the

<sup>3</sup> Typical of the attitude of the pro-administration group was the comment on Bryan by C. J. Nesbitt, the pro-Cleveland editor of the Kingfisher *Times* (issue of March 12, 1894): "Rarely since the formation of the government and the division among the people of political parties has a more striking example of the fallacy of insubordination within the pale of a party been more forcibly illustrated than in the case of Mr. Bryan of Nebraska (for opposing the repeal of the silver purchase clause). There are other apostates both in the Senate and House, and they will go with Bryan. The sooner the better."

<sup>4</sup> In fact, C. G. Jones, chairman of the Oklahoma County Republican Central Committee, presided at one of the meetings.

speaker arrived. Around the edge of the gathering were clustered the usual refreshment stands, the hawkers of "16 to 1" hats and other souvenirs, the catch-penny games, and the pre-Fourth of July fireworks stands. In spite of the sweltering heat over 1,500 people came to listen to Bryan's 150-minute speech.<sup>5</sup> They proved a highly receptive and enthusiastic audience.

After Bryan's evening oration at the Opera House before an audience that included leading figures from all three parties a Territorial Free Silver League was organized with tremendous enthusiasm. Sidney Clarke, former congressman from Kansas, who had been an active Boomer, and who was now busily fishing in the muddy waters of Oklahoma politics, was elected president of the league; M. L. Bixler, prominent Norman editor, was chosen vice-president; and Leo Vincent, territorial organizer and publicist for the Populist party, was named secretary. After adopting ringing resolutions favoring free silver and thanking Bryan for his appearances, the meeting adjourned in the early hours of the morning.<sup>6</sup> The meetings at Enid, Guthrie, and Purcell were equally successful and enthusiastic.

Bryan completely captivated his audiences during his first tour of Oklahoma Territory, and won the undying loyalty of many of his hearers. The avid interest aroused by his visit is shown both by the lengthy discussion of his appearances in the press, and by the sudden revival of the organized free silver sentiment in the territory. Local editors went to great lengths to picture this rising star on the political horizon to their readers. Numerous pen sketches, some of them hardly recognizable, were printed. Detailed descriptions of Bryan's appearance, mannerisms, speaking techniques, and line of argument on the silver question appeared everywhere. The comments found in the *Guthrie Daily Leader*, a leading Democratic journal, were typical:

Mr. Bryan is a portly, handsome man, with firm, determined features. His hair is dark, his mouth is large, and his

<sup>5</sup> Oklahoma City *Daily Times Journal*, June 26, 1895. This was the conservative estimate of a generally unfriendly newspaper.

<sup>6</sup> Edmond *Sun-Democrat*, June 28, 1895.

voice clear and silvery as a bell. The resemblance between the Nebraska silverite and the late Sam Randall is striking indeed [how that comment must have pained both Bryan and the soul of the late Pennsylvania arch conservative!] He held the closest attention of his audiences, and made a most profound impression on his hearers. His arguments were backed up by statistics, his logic was forceful and convincing, and his speech sparkled with wit and wisdom. Congressman Bryan is, to use the street vernacular, a "hot thing" . . . It is not unlikely that Mr. Bryan will shine as a presidential possibility next year. . . .

During the next months Bryan's popularity mounted steadily. He was the "young knight of bimetallism," the "noble champion of the common man," and the "idol of the west"—phrases which appear over and over again in the writings of that period. That Bryan was presidential timber, and deserved the support of western Democrats, was a generally accepted feeling—as one editor stated it when summing up Bryan's first visit, "To Hon. Wm. J. Bryan: Dear Bill: You are all right. You can put your clothes in Oklahoma's trunk."<sup>8</sup>

The territorial convention of the Democratic party, held at Oklahoma City on May 25, 1896, was a bitter and turbulent one. Cleveland supporters from among the ranks of appointive officials in the territory sought to get a resolution adopted which would endorse the Cleveland administration. The convention emphatically voted it down. Another attempt to weaken the convention's declaration in favor of free silver also collapsed. The victory for the reformers was complete. There was much sentiment at the convention for Bryan as presidential nominee, but eventually the convention instructed its six delegates to the Democratic national convention to vote for Richard P. Bland of Missouri, the long-time leader of the congressional silver bloc.

In the Indian Territory section of the future state of Oklahoma much the same thing was happening. The Democratic Indian territorial convention was described as "the largest and stormiest gathering ever held in the territory."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Guthrie *Daily Leader*, June 27, 1895.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, June 28, 1895.

<sup>9</sup> Norman *State Democrat*, May 28, 1896.

<sup>10</sup> Claremore *Progress*, June 13, 1896.

A series of progressive resolutions was finally adopted. The delegates to the national convention were instructed to support Bland "as long as there is in their judgment any possibility of his nomination," and thereafter were authorized to cast their votes "for any candidate in harmony with our silver platform."<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Owen, later senator from Oklahoma, and Joe M. LaHay, a talented and aggressive Cherokee Indian, were the acknowledged leaders of the delegation, and both were sympathetic to the candidacy of Bryan. Several of the delegates from Indian Territory, led by Owen, deserted Bland for Bryan on the second ballot, and all six had drifted into Bryan camp by the time that the last roll call was taken.<sup>12</sup>

Oklahoma Democrats were well pleased with the outcome of the Chicago convention. The repudiation of Cleveland, the adoption of a progressive platform, and the nomination of their hero—what more could they ask? Oklahomans felt that they had played a vital part in the nomination of Bryan, both because of the early and active support given Bryan by the delegates from Indian Territory, and also because the timely shifting of the six votes of Oklahoma Territory gave Bryan the required two-thirds majority and set off the mad demonstration in his behalf. Oklahoma had insured the nomination of Bryan!

Interest in the 1896 elections was intense. The future of silver, the qualifications of Bryan, the question of whether the Democratic party could shake off the handicap of Clevelandism and the blame for the Depression of 1893 were heatedly debated throughout the territory. When the election returns revealed a victory for McKinley and the national Republican ticket, the veil of gloom became thick and heavy throughout most of Oklahoma. Many, however, were inclined to be philosophical rather than bitter about the defeat of Bryan. Typical comments on the Republican

<sup>11</sup> South McAlester Capital, June 11, 1896.

<sup>12</sup> Bryan reported that he "had the promised support of half of the delegation on the second ballot."—William J. and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Chicago, 1925), p. 106.

victory were: "It was a victory for the trusts"<sup>13</sup> or, "We were crucified on a cross of gold."<sup>14</sup> Most penetrating of the post-mortem pronouncements of Democratic editors, and certainly the most accurate from the historian's point of view was the verdict of M. L. Bixler, that "Bryan rescued the party from the paralysis into which the depression and Mr. Cleveland placed it."<sup>15</sup>

Oklahoma voters, because of their territorial status, were only observers as far as the presidential race was concerned. They could, however, express their convictions in local elections for members of the territorial legislature, and for county officials. In these contests Oklahoma voters dramatically indicated their sympathy for the type of program Bryan advocated. Democrats and Populists put fusion candidates in the field, and won all thirteen seats in the territorial council. Only three Republican members out of a total of twenty-six were returned to the lower house, a very sharp break from the previous legislature, in which the Republicans had controlled both houses with sizeable majorities. Bryanism, free silver, the income tax had proven popular with the voters.<sup>16</sup>

Bryan's second visit to Oklahoma, a very brief one, came in 1897. While on the first of his many paid lecture tours, the Nebraska orator stopped at several Oklahoma points. Traveling along the Santa Fe's main line to Texas, Bryan made numerous rear-platform appearances, shaking the hands of the faithful, and making a few remarks to the eager crowds that gathered at stations along the way—Newkirk, Ponca City, Perry, Mulhall, and Orlando. Bryan's major address was delivered at Guthrie, the territorial capital. In spite of the cold and sloppy December day, the gathering at Guthrie was a "red letter event." Inevitably, the First Regimental Band was there "in full force" to lead the parade from the depot through the business section. At

<sup>13</sup> *South McAlester Capital*, November 12, 1896.

<sup>14</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, November 5, 1896.

<sup>15</sup> *Norman State Democrat*, November 12, 1896.

<sup>16</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, February 6, 1897. To demonstrate their appreciation, the newly-elected members of the legislature invited Bryan to address them, but he was unable to accept their invitation.

the Opera House Bryan, after a flowery introduction by Roy V. Hoffman, Assistant U. S. Attorney for the territory, delivered his usual vigorous and moving silver speech. He did, however, couple with it support for a free homes bill, and immediate statehood for Oklahoma—both of which were currently popular in the territory.<sup>17</sup>

Following Bryan's appearance at the Opera House, a reception in his honor was held at the home of H. H. Hagan, prominent Guthrie citizen. The list of guests included all the leading figures of the territory—Governor Cassius Barnes, the Supreme Court justices, leaders of the legislature, and outstanding editors. The mellowing effects of the evening's gathering were noticeable, and even Frank Greer, editor of the arch-Republican *Oklahoma State Capital* and possessor of the most vitriolic pen in the territory, commented rather graciously that, "Mr. Bryan is a magnetic orator, it is a pleasure to hear him, whether you agree with him or not."<sup>18</sup> There was some complaint from among Bryan's followers that they should be required to pay fifty cents to hear their champion,<sup>19</sup> but generally it was agreed that his visit was a huge success, and that it was a real honor and pleasure for the people of the territory to have an opportunity to see and hear the "next president."

This 1897 visit of Bryan is mentioned only because it is typical of the half-dozen visits of Bryan during the next decade. On his various lecture tours Bryan could always be assured of large audiences in Oklahoma. In 1902 and 1903 he spoke on "A Conquering Nation" before at least twelve different audiences.<sup>20</sup> In 1906 and 1907 he made numerous

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<sup>17</sup> Guthrie *Daily Leader*, December 5, 1897.

<sup>18</sup> This attitude was expressed in typical, if not too literate fashion, by the editor of the Orlando *Weekly Herald* (December 10, 1897): "The majority of people do not care to pay an admission price to hear a political speech by the young free silver apostle [sic]. Many a good honest vote that was Mr. Bryan's in 1896, and possibly would of been his in 1900 stood on the streets, either not having or not choosing to pay the half dollar required to hear their idol expound his famous theories."

<sup>20</sup> These were at Blackwell, Perry, Kingfisher, Enid, Medford, Guthrie, Norman, Chandler, Shawnee, Oklahoma City, Hobart, and Lawton, under varied auspices—e.g., a Baptist College, an Epworth League, an Elks Club, a committee to raise funds for a school piano, and at Shawnee the Six O'clock After Dinner Business Men's Club.

platform appearances while discussing "Non-Partisan Politics" or "The Old World and Her Ways." Always there were with the paid speeches these smaller gathering of friends and supporters, at which contacts were renewed, party plans and policies discussed, and political fences mended all around. There is no point in discussing in detail the subsequent appearances of Bryan before Chautauqua groups, for they all followed the same pattern.

Interest in political affairs fell off sharply in Oklahoma between 1897 and 1900. The Democratic-Populist legislature of 1897, checked by an unfriendly governor and Congress, failed to usher in the political millenium. The rains again fell and barns and granaries bulged in hitherto improvident Oklahoma. New gold discoveries and their corresponding increases in circulating medium coupled with the impact of the Spanish-American War raised the prices of farm commodities. The result was, as one ardent partisan sadly pointed out, that "the starch has gone out of politics, even in Oklahoma."<sup>21</sup> Not only that, but the war produced a new rival for the affections of Oklahomans in the ebullient Theodore Roosevelt. A sizeable group of Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" were recruited in Oklahoma, 80 of them in Oklahoma Territory, and 125 from Indian Territory. Local interest in their accomplishments was understandably high.

Under these circumstances Bryan was moved from the center of the local stage. Occasional paragraphs dutifully reported his organization of Nebraska volunteers, and his tribulations with an administration that seemed to find no opportunities for military glory for the famed Nebraskan. These accounts, however, made drab reading when compared with the glorious tales of Roosevelt's exploits, Rough Rider victories, and the valorous deeds of home town heroes.

The territorial party conventions of 1900 were uneventful. It was generally agreed that Bryan would be the candidate, and that the 1896 platform and imperialism would be the issue as far as the Democrats were concerned. Both Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory, after routine local

<sup>21</sup> Guthrie Daily Leader, April 13, 1898.



THE PLEA OF THE PARTISAN

(The Commoner, May 24, 1907.)

meetings, sent delegations to the national convention pledged to Bryan. When the national convention, meeting at Kansas City, gave the nomination to the Nebraskan, few Oklahomans evidenced much interest in its activities. Oklahoma City was witnessing a more exciting event—the annual reunion of the Rough Riders, complete with Teddy Roosevelt himself. It was estimated that 15,000 Oklahomans descended on Oklahoma City to enjoy the bands, parades, speeches, and all the colorful nonsense that made a Rough Rider reunion something for the city fathers to anticipate with mixed feelings of joy and trepidation.

Bryan's defeat in 1900 did nothing to weaken his position among Oklahoma Democrats. By now the party in Oklahoma had assumed a pattern of beliefs and traits which it was not to abandon for many years. Shaped by the yearnings and feelings the Great Commoner so well expressed during these years, and strengthened numerically by accessions from Populist ranks, the Democratic party in Oklahoma was a typically agrarian progressive force—"dangerous western radicals" to eastern observers. To its members Bryan was in the best party tradition of Jefferson and Jackson. There was no criticizing or challenging his leadership. One of the interesting manifestations of this sentiment was the attempt to induce Bryan to move to Oklahoma. Thomas H. Doyle and other leading Democratic advocates of immediate statehood in 1902 attempted to persuade Bryan to move to Oklahoma, head the drive for immediate statehood, and incidentally strengthen still further the party's position in the territory. In return Bryan was promised that as soon as statehood had been won, he would be sent to Washington as senator, so that he could rebuild his political fortunes by way of a senatorial career. Bryan graciously declined the offer, pointing out that he could not easily remove his journal, *The Commoner*, and his other interests to the politically more favorable climate of Oklahoma.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The details of this incident were related by Doyle himself several years later. See *Guthrie Daily Leader*, December 27, 1907.

Theodore Roosevelt's record as a reform president posed a serious problem for the Democratic party. For two successive elections the party had offered itself to the voting public as the party of reform as opposed to Republican "stand-pattism." Now, after 1901, it found itself faced by a Republican president who proclaimed himself in favor of a "square deal" for labor, and a program of trust busting. While Teddy's actions might not always be as bold and daring as his verbal blasts, they were effective enough to convince many people that progressivism was no longer the trait of a single political party. This change in the character of the Republican administration resulted in a revival of the old conservative forces in the Democratic party. The result in 1904 was the rejection by the Democratic convention of Bryan's leadership, the resurgence of the Cleveland type of Democracy, the formulation of an uninspiring platform, the selection of the drab and unimaginative Alton B. Parker of New York as the candidate, and finally, the most decisive defeat the Democratic party had ever suffered since the Civil War. Bryan and his western associates had fought vainly to prevent the party from drifting off into such a hopeless position, and when the returns finally indicated how disastrous the defeat had been, they were inclined to agree with the Oklahoma observer who remarked:

We are frank to confess that we did not endorse all that Judge Parker stood for. We are of the breed of Democracy represented by Thomas Jefferson in its foundation, and represented by William Jennings Bryan today, if you please.<sup>23</sup>

Bryan's greatest service to the Democratic party was undoubtedly rendered in the years between 1905 and 1908. His campaign—at first waged almost single-handedly—to revive the spirit of liberalism within the party bolstered the hope and courage of those who wished to make the organization once more the symbol of reform. That Bryan by 1907 had again restored himself to the position of leadership in the party, and that no one seriously challenged his right to a third nomination in 1908 is evidence enough of

<sup>23</sup> Guthrie *Daily Leader*, November 14, 1904.

the startling success of his efforts. His defeat in 1908 in the final analysis was perhaps not as important as the fact that the party again had been committed to the liberal tradition, and this time more firmly. The election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912 was the real victory of Bryanism. For Wilson reaped the harvest of the seed that Bryan had sown. He rode into the White House on the shoulders of Bryan and his friends just as he had previously ridden into lesser positions in New Jersey on the shoulders of other friends.

Bryan's greatest service to Oklahoma also came during these same years, specifically during 1906 and 1907. These were years which brought the final struggle and victory to the movement for Oklahoma statehood. After 1900 the question of statehood for Oklahoma had been the chief topic of interest to the people of that area, all of whom felt that they were now politically mature and entitled to admission. Various factors delayed statehood—the question of single or double statehood, that is, should Indian Territory be organized as a separate state or included with Oklahoma Territory; the widely varying economic and political pattern of the two areas; the future status of the Five Civilized Tribes and their institutions. Even more important had been the attitude of national party leaders. Democrats and Republicans alike had approached the question of statehood from the point of view of what it might do to their party's strength as a whole. Many Republican leaders, fearing that Oklahomans would elect Democratic officials, had procrastinated, using every sort of delaying tactic. Occasionally they openly had stated that they wanted no senators and representatives coming to Washington from this unstable region, if those senators were to be Democratic, and even worse, Democrats who for many years had been riders on, or even drivers on the Bryan bandwagon.

By 1905, however, it was apparent that statehood could not with good grace be further delayed. The Dawes Commission had virtually completed its work of allotting in severalty the lands of the Five Civilized Tribes; nine out of ten settlers agreed on single statehood as the desirable

plan as of that date; there were almost 1,500,000 people in the two territories, a number so large that their claims of statehood hardly could be denied. After lengthy debate, Congress finally passed and the President signed on June 16, 1906, the enabling act which outlined the path to statehood for Oklahoma. Indian Territory and Oklahoma were to be combined and admitted as one state. The important election of delegates to a constitutional convention to formulate the basic law of the state was to be held November 6, 1906.

With statehood assured, everyone immediately became interested in the question of the personnel of the constitutional convention, and the type of document they would write. During the long years of territorial status and "carpet-bag rule" Oklahomans had acquired definite ideas as to what they wanted in their basic law. Pressure groups such as the Farmers Union, the United Mine workers, the prohibitionists, the women's suffrage advocates, the Sequoyah delegates,<sup>24</sup> and railroad and other corporate interests all had evolved demands which they wished to see incorporated in the constitution. The result quite naturally was widespread interest, both locally and on a national scale, in the trend of events in Oklahoma.

No one displayed greater interest in these events than William Jennings Bryan. Four times during the next sixteen months he appeared in the state to add finishing touches to Democratic campaigns or plans. His active interest was further displayed by the many news stories and editorials which kept readers of *The Commoner* aware of controversies and trends in the newly-formed commonwealth. The Nebraskan was to make significant contributions to the Democratic victories in Oklahoma, and at the same time the active participation of Bryan in Oklahoma in turn played a vital role in restoring him to his position of leadership in the party on a national scale.

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<sup>24</sup> This was the name given to those delegates from Indian Territory who in 1905 had drawn up a constitution for a separate state, the state of Sequoyah.

As November 6, 1906 approached, it was apparent that the contest for positions as delegates to the constitutional convention were to be unusually bitter. The Republican party, finding itself on the defensive and losing influence in both Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory, made an extraordinary effort to elect a large portion of the delegates. Likewise, the Democratic party, sensing victory in the fall election, conducted a vigorous campaign. The result was an electoral contest characterized by much mud slinging and vicious political infighting. Democratic orators, noting that several of the Republican aspirants for convention seats had served as legal advisors to railroad corporations, immediately charged that all Republican candidates were "tools of the corporations." Republicans in turn denounced the Democrats on the one hand as being the representatives of Southern reactionary bourbonism and, on the other hand, as being dangerously radical. These verbal barrages produced hard feelings, damaged reputations, and an occasional libel suit.

Both major parties invited leading national figures to support their party candidates. Vice President Fairbanks came from Washington and filled several speaking engagements in both territories in support of the Republican candidates. Kansas Republican leaders also appeared on numerous platforms. Not to be outdone, the Democrats also imported widely known orators, among them, "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman of South Carolina and Governor Jeff Davis of Arkansas. Democratic leaders had kept a watchful eye on the journeys of William Jennings Bryan. The Great Commoner had just returned from his triumphal world tour on August 30, 1906. Among the various delegations waiting to speak to Bryan on his arrival in New York City was a group of Oklahoma Democrats headed by Thomas H. Doyle, W. L. Eagleton, George Whitehurst, T. F. McMechan, and Roy Stafford of the Oklahoma City *Daily Oklahoman*. They asked Bryan to visit Oklahoma and speak in support of the Democratic candidates for the constitutional convention. He agreed, and promised that he would take several days dur-

ing the latter part of September to make a tour of the Twin Territories.<sup>25</sup> This news made headlines in every Oklahoma newspaper as the editors reminded their readers that they would be presented with another opportunity to see "a president of the United States—the next one."<sup>26</sup>

Bryan entered the heated campaign on September 26th. He came to Indian Territory from Arkansas, where he had just delivered a major address at Little Rock. His tour through the territories called for a speaking itinerary that must have taxed even the powerful Bryan vocal cords. From the time that he entered Indian Territory and made his first address at Wilburton until he left Oklahoma Territory two days later, Bryan made sixteen speeches, ranging from one-half hour to an hour in length, in addition to several short talks at whistle stops along the way. The tour was a gigantic success, such as is usually reserved for the conquering hero. Contemporary accounts reported audiences of several thousand at every stop, with the largest gatherings at Enid and Oklahoma City, where some 18,000 were estimated to have heard the silver-tongued orator. The size of the audiences was a notable tribute to the leader who had so completely won the loyalty of the southwestern frontier.

The details of the tour had been carefully worked out by the territorial chairman, Jesse Dunn. At each of the appearances in Indian Territory, Bryan was introduced by one of the chiefs of the Five Civilized Tribes, all of whom rode on the special train through the territory. There were few formal receptions, and to save time the local committees were instructed to arrange for a meeting place as near to the railroad station as possible. Time might be at a premium but under these circumstances it was still possible to arrange for the parades so dear to the politicians of this period.

<sup>25</sup> Guthrie *Daily Leader*, September 1, 1906.

<sup>26</sup> Wilburton *News*, September 28, 1906. The places at which Bryan spoke, together with the local estimate as to size of crowd (highly unreliable) follow: Wilburton, 3,000; South McAlester, 5,000; Eufala, 2,000; Muskogee, 2,000; Vinita, 10,000; Tulsa, 12,000; Pawnee, 8,000; El Reno, 4,000; Clinton, 5,000; Geary, 6,000; Alva, 6,000; Enid, 15,000; Blackwell, no estimate.

Thus, at McAlester, coal miners in their work clothes with their miners' lamps alight and followed by bands and the usual torch light parade, marched in a colorful procession. At Vinita the parade was headed by Major J. B. Turner's "horsemen" who thundered up and down the streets as many a "round-up club" was to do at a later date. Schools were dismissed, shops closed, and entire rural communities emptied until the Bryan entourage had passed.

Bryan's speeches followed a set pattern. In each of them he appealed to his hearers to vote for Democratic delegates to the convention as representatives "whose sympathies are with the people and who are not representative of such interests as may prove antagonistic to your wishes."<sup>27</sup> Such delegates would write into the constitution provisions for the initiative and referendum, the control of corporations, and the protection of labor. With the usual peroration praising the Democratic party, Bryan would retire amid the cheers and shouts of his audience.

The local committees had received one interesting set of instructions from Party Chairman Dunn:

There will be no handshaking. There is a limit to human endurance, and Mr. Bryan will closely approach it if he keeps these speaking engagements, without being racked and torn by the glad hand. On account of the many meetings he is holding, his hands and arms are now swollen so it is impossible for him to shake hands.<sup>28</sup>

The arm and hand might be weak, but the voice still had its old-time fire. Bryan's physical stamina was truly amazing. On September 27, when he spoke at Vinita, Tulsa, Pawnee, Perry, Guthrie, Oklahoma City, and El Reno, he delivered his first address at 8:30 A.M. and his last beginning at 11:30 P.M. In spite of this strenuous program, Bryan was ready to speak early the next morning before a throng of 5,000 at Clinton. After appearing at five widely scattered points in western Oklahoma, Bryan did not finish his schedule for that day until 2 A.M. the next morning. After considering how taxing such a tour must have been, one wonders at the correctness of a contemporary observer who

<sup>27</sup> *Tulsa Democrat*, September 28, 1906.

<sup>28</sup> *Guthrie Oklahoma State Capital*, September 26, 1906.

noted that Bryan "is older than he was and looks it, and his voice is hardly as strong as it was in 1896."<sup>29</sup> Among those who heard him on this tour, there was probably general agreement with the same editor's further comment that Bryan "has lost none of his magnetism nor his directness—he is the greatest living American."

The extent of the Democratic victory in the November election was a surprise to everyone. Democratic leaders had predicted that they might have a majority of thirty in the constitutional convention, yet the body was finally made up of 99 Democrats, 1 Independent, and 12 Republicans—the twelve apostles, as the press at once labelled them. It is not difficult to explain the collapse of Republican strength. The long delay in statehood for which the Republicans were held responsible, the many "carpetbag" officials, the fact that many strong Republicans as federal officeholders were disqualified from seeking convention seats, the supposed sympathy of some Republicans for negro equality, and the identification of other Republicans with corporate interests—these proved insurmountable handicaps in the campaign. The Democratic successes, however, were due not only to these negative factors, but also to the positive appeal of the liberal program advocated by Bryan, by local Democratic leaders, and by pressure groups such as organized labor and the Farmers Union.

The members of the constitutional convention assembled at Guthrie November 20, 1906. The convention was organized and moved ahead under the leadership of William H. Murray, Charles N. Haskell, and the other members who had participated in the unsuccessful movement to create Sequoyah as a separate state. Although these men had no doubts as to their ability to formulate an adequate basic law without outside interference, they did send letters to several important politicians asking them to present their views as to what should be incorporated in the constitution. Bryan was also invited to appear before the convention. Although prearranged speaking engagements made it impossible for

<sup>29</sup> *Vinita Leader*, October 4, 1896.

him to do so, he sent a lengthy letter in which he discussed in considerable detail the items and clauses which he believed should be included in the constitution.<sup>30</sup> Examining the letter is tremendously interesting, not only because it shows how the lines of thinking of the Great Commoner and the Oklahoma agrarians were completely parallel, but also because virtually every item suggested by Bryan was eventually incorporated into the constitution.

The major portion of the letter dealt with corporations and the powers of a proposed corporation commission. The commission should be empowered to prohibit the issuance of watered stock, to limit intercorporate stock holdings, to check interlocking directorates, to require publicity for specified types of corporate operations, and to impose a wide range of related restrictions. Other sections expressed his support of the initiative, referendum, recall, direct primary, and clauses authorizing municipal ownership of utilities. For labor he suggested clauses guaranteeing trial by jury in contempt cases, and sections authorizing the legislature to fix wages and hours standards and to establish a board of arbitration in labor disputes. The letter is carefully written, shows much thought, and is a rather effective answer to those hostile critics of Bryan who insisted that he never was able to think through carefully any specific problem. The effect of the letter on members of the constitutional convention cannot be evaluated, of course, though it certainly strengthened the convictions of those members whose thinking ran along the same lines.

When the Oklahoma constitution was completed and put before the public, it was at once obvious that it was a unique document in many ways. It was lengthy—the longest state constitution of its day. It was detailed—with the powers of various state officials carefully defined and limited. It had an unusually long list of elective officials—probably a natural reaction to the many years under appointive territorial officials. It was progressive—progressive to

<sup>30</sup> The letter is found in the *Journal of the Constitution Convention of Oklahoma*, pp. 389-396.

the point where it appeared dangerously radical to many people. The constitution authorized the direct primary and the widest possible use of the initiative and referendum; it included numerous protective clauses for the benefit of labor and provided that "the right of the state to engage in any occupation or business for public purposes shall not be denied or prohibited."<sup>31</sup> The section on corporation control was very detailed, almost equal in length to the entire federal constitution. There was considerable national interest shown in the constitution since it was so typical of the thinking of the western agrarian groups.

After considerable bickering over submitting the constitution to popular vote, Governor Frank Frantz and the members of the constitutional convention finally agreed that on September 17, 1907, Oklahomans should vote on ratifying the constitution, and at the same time elect a ticket of state officials. The Democrats hurriedly arranged a party primary (financed by party funds since no appropriation was available) and selected a slate of candidates headed by Charles N. Haskell, who sought the gubernatorial chair, and Robert Owen and T. P. Gore, who were the party's designees for the two senatorial positions. The Republican convention chose Frantz as the party's nominee, and decided to follow the path of opposing the constitution while at the same time urging the selection of Republican officials.

The contest over ratification of the constitution saw Oklahoma inundated by another wave of oratory. Members of the constitutional convention enthusiastically defended their handiwork. Pointing out that the convention had been guided by the slogan "Let the People Rule," Democratic leaders supported the document as the most progressive and democratic of its day, ideally suited to local conditions and needs. Republicans, on the other hand, attacked the constitution for its great detail, its "radical" character, and the fact that it would handicap the state's development by discouraging capital from entering the state.

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<sup>31</sup> Article II, Section 31.

As the contest over ratification became more heated, and became almost a national issue, "visiting statesmen" in large number were brought in once again. The Republicans induced Senator Chester Long of Kansas, and Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield to appear at several places and condemn the constitution. The major blast on the Republican side, however, was delivered by Secretary of War William Howard Taft, who spoke in Oklahoma City on August 24, 1907. Since Taft was already being mentioned as a presidential possibility for 1908, and because he was assumed to be the "political phonograph of the Roosevelt administration"<sup>32</sup> and representative of administration opinion, a large crowd gathered at Oklahoma City to see and hear the administration stalwart. Taft left no doubt as to his convictions. To his point of view the constitution had no merit. He denounced its length and detail by terming it a "code of by-laws;" he criticized the form of the clauses authorizing the initiative and referendum; he described it as dangerous to business interests. He urged his audience to reject the constitution, wait until the next session of Congress should pass another enabling act, and then rewrite the constitution under more balanced leadership.

Sponsors of the statehood movement were much disturbed by this statement of policy, not so much because of its possible impact locally, but because Taft's views might represent administration hostility, and might produce an unfavorable reaction throughout the nation. Their answer was to import the outstanding figures they could obtain to appear and defend the constitution. In steady streams congressmen from Arkansas, Iowa, and Missouri traveled through the territory. Champ Clark, congressman from Missouri who was later to serve as a popular speaker of the House of Representatives, was a tremendous success in his appearances at Oklahoma City and elsewhere. The star performer, however, was William Jennings Bryan. Bryan had been given the honor of keynoting the Democratic campaign. While on a Chautauqua tour through the territory,

<sup>32</sup> Oklahoma City Daily Oklahoman, August 27, 1907.

Bryan stopped at Oklahoma City, June 18, 1907, and spoke to the Democratic state convention which had been called to work out details of the coming campaign. His stirring speech left no doubts as to his enthusiasm for the Oklahoma constitution:

I tell you that you have the best constitution of any state in this union, and a better constitution than the constitution of the U. S. This constitution is written from the standpoint of the people. . . . Do not be afraid to trust the people. . . Our government must either be dominated by the few or the many, and I prefer to risk the many. . . . You have made a constitution your people can control.<sup>33</sup>

During the first week in September Bryan was called back to make another series of appearances throughout the state. At this time he was brought back specifically to reply to Taft's speech, and to try and counteract the possible national effect of that speech. Seven scheduled appearances were arranged—at Vinita, Tulsa, Sapulpa, Chandler, Oklahoma City, Woodward, and Alva. It was the usual triumphal Bryan tour. Crowds numbering 3,000-5,000 appeared at each of the smaller towns, while at Oklahoma City some 6,500 people crowded into Convention Hall. Here Bryan in particular directed his attack against Taft's comments. The sections and characteristics of the constitution with which the Secretary of War had found fault were defended in detail, by argument, by pointing out that Republican states had incorporated similar clauses, and by appealing to local pride and prejudice. Taking a sly poke at Taft's suggestion that Oklahomans reject the constitution, and wait for a new enabling act and a new convention, Bryan remarked that such a suggestion could naturally be expected from one who was inclined to postpone everything. "The Great Postponer" was Taft's label for many years in Oklahoma. Chairman J. D. Jennings, of the Oklahoma County Democratic committee, summed up what he considered the likely effect of Bryan's latest appearance: "The banner of victory was already nailed to the flagstaff of the Oklahoma democracy, but Bryan clinched the nails last night."<sup>34</sup>

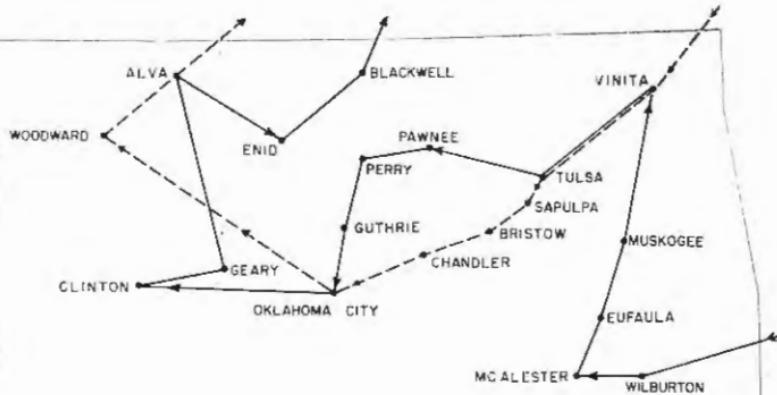
<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, June 19, 1907.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, September 7, 1907.

BRYAN IN OKLAHOMA 1906-7

← ROUTE OF BRYAN'S TOUR ON BEHALF OF  
DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES FOR THE  
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION,  
SEPTEMBER 26-28, 1906.

↔ ROUTE OF BRYAN'S TOUR ON BEHALF OF  
RATIFICATION OF THE CONSTITUTION,  
SEPTEMBER 5-6, 1907



The election returns of September 27 showed an overwhelming victory for the forces that had drawn up the constitution. The document was approved by a vote of 180,-333 to 73,059. The entire slate of Democratic candidates for the executive offices was elected. The legislature, which was to meet in its initial session December 2, 1907, was made up of 93 Democrats and 16 Republicans in the lower house, while of the 44 members of the Senate 39 represented the victorious party. Here was a victory which must have pleased Bryan greatly, one of the few he was to enjoy. *The Commoner* reflects the enthusiasm of Bryan and the staff. Not only did its columns report the travels and speeches of its editor while in Oklahoma, but news accounts, cartoons, and editorials all gave support to the victorious group. When the votes on ratification were tabulated and the extent of the victory apparent, Will M. Maupin, traveling correspondent for *The Commoner*, and a versifier of some ability, dashed off lines which had some of the exuberance of the title song of a later-day Rodgers and Hammerstein musical:

Got some word from Oklahoma on the Wednesday morning  
wire  
Just some facts about th'election and they filled us full of  
fire,  
Just some good election figures, and we just leaned back  
and laughed  
At the way young Oklahoma handed limes to William Taft.  
  
Got some word from Oklahoma, and we've swept the platter  
clean  
Licked the grasping corporation and the carpetbag machine.  
Three times three for Oklahoma, Forty thousand, Hully gee!  
Please excuse us if we holler, for our souls are filled with  
glee.

There's a new star on the banner and it's shining mighty  
bright  
And she's safely democratic—Oklahoma, you're all right!<sup>35</sup>

When the first Oklahoma legislature met, one of its earliest resolutions was to invite Bryan to appear before it. He agreed and December 21, 1907, was designated as the date for his appearance. The occasion was to serve two

<sup>35</sup> *The Commoner*, September 27, 1907.

purposes—first, to thank Bryan for his energetic services in behalf of statehood, and second, to pledge formally the support of the Democratic party of the new state to Bryan's candidacy for the president in 1908. It was a great day for all concerned. The legislature met at 2 P.M. in joint session at Guthrie's Brooks Theatre. Standing room was at a premium as everyone sought to witness the gala occasion. Even the chaplain of the House of Representatives fell in with the spirit of the occasion. The local paper's account of his part in the brief morning session of the legislature is a gem. The chaplain, after a lengthy prayer on Bryan's behalf, concluded:

"Lord . . . if it is according to Thy will, let him be the next president of the United States."

There was a unanimous "Amen" from the Democratic side at the conclusion of the prayer, and Speaker Murray said, "All in favor of that make it known by saying "Aye!"

Shouts of "aye" came quickly, followed by a loud applause.<sup>36</sup>

Overwhelmed by the answer his petition had received (from the members of the House—not the Divinity) the chaplain repeated it at the afternoon joint session. Lieutenant Governor Bellamy presided, and Speaker Murray introduced Bryan, and presented him with an elaborate scroll, signed by all the leading officials of the state, listing and expressing appreciation for the many contributions of Bryan to Oklahoma statehood, and to the victory of 1907.

The ceremony was, for all of its somewhat flamboyant character, a genuine and sincere expression of the local feeling that Bryan had made a real and important contribution to statehood, and the formulation of the state's basic law.

At an evening "dollar dinner" prepared for some 400 loyal Democratic workers, the party formally pledged Bryan its support in 1908. After a series of short speeches acknowledging the state's debt to the Nebraskan, Robert L. Williams, chief justice of the state supreme court, announced, "We want no novice for our standard bearer in 1908. We want a man whom we know and can trust."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, December 21, 1907.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, December 22, 1907.

Bryan's visit also called attention to another instance of the close identification of interests and action between himself and Oklahoma's political leaders. One of the outstanding bits of legislation of the Haskell administration had been the bank guarantee law. This measure, passed in an attempt to prevent a repetition of the many bank failures that had accompanied the Panic of 1907, was the pioneer law of its kind in the nation. Bryan enthusiastically applauded the measure, and on the occasion of this visit to Oklahoma reminded his hearers that he introduced such a law in Congress some fifteen years earlier,<sup>38</sup> and that he still considered it an ideal law to be applied on a national scale. It became a major issue in the 1908 presidential campaign.

Oklahoma Democrats played a very active part in the 1908 contest. Governor Haskell was the featured speaker at the Lincoln meeting on January 15 which launched the Democratic state campaign in Nebraska, and which was interpreted as formally starting the Bryan bandwagon.<sup>39</sup> Haskell also sought, and finally obtained, the position as chairman of the national convention's resolutions committee. As the date of the convention approached, the "Big Four" of Oklahoma's political machine, Haskell, Murray, Robert Williams, and J. B. Thompson, journeyed to Lincoln, and discussed with Bryan the details of the planks to be included in the platform.<sup>40</sup> Oklahoma's two senators were featured speakers at the convention, Senator Gore producing a rousing rally for Bryan, and Senator Owen discussing in detail the operation of Oklahoma's bank guarantee law. The inclusion in the party platform of the national bank guarantee clause was largely the work of Owen and Haskell.

Shortly after the convention adjourned Haskell was appointed to the position of treasurer of the national com-

<sup>38</sup> The bill was H. R. 3378, *Congressional Record*, Vol. 25. Editorials in *The Commoner* had immediately revived the proposal after the panic of October, 1907, and aggressively advocated it in every issue.

<sup>39</sup> *The Commoner*, January 24, 1908.

<sup>40</sup> Guthrie *Oklahoma State Capital*, July 2, 1908.

mittee. In that position he proved something of an embarrassment to Bryan. For Haskell rather than Bryan for a time threatened to become the chief issue in the campaign. The opposition accused Haskell of being unduly friendly to the Prairie Oil and Gas Company, a Standard Oil affiliate, and also charged him with fraudulent dealings in Indian land titles. The charges proved so embarrassing that Haskell was asked to resign.<sup>41</sup>

Collaboration between Bryan and Oklahomans reached its highest point in 1907 and 1908. Throughout succeeding years much the same pattern applied. Everyone is familiar with the manner in which Bryan on the one hand and Oklahoma Democratic forces on the other shifted the national convention of 1912 away from Champ Clark and over to Woodrow Wilson.<sup>42</sup> Many of the later social movements in which Bryan became interested were sympathetically treated in Oklahoma—his interest in world peace and neutrality, his support of fundamentalism in religion, his advocacy of the temperance movement. If anything, Bryan's popularity grew in Oklahoma during later years. As he turned away from the political field and confined his activities to the non-political realm of Chautauqua addresses, many who had formerly been hostile for political reasons now came to admire him. At the time of Bryan's death in July, 1925, many Oklahomans felt that they had suffered a personal loss.

Bryan indeed had influenced Oklahoma history as has perhaps no other national political figure. The character of the Democratic party in Oklahoma, its program for an entire generation, local laws such as the bank guarantee law, and the Oklahoma constitution itself were guided in varying degrees by the hand of the Great Commoner.

<sup>41</sup> Details of this incident are best recorded in Josephus Daniels, *Editor in Politics* (Chapel Hill, 1941), pp. 543-545.

<sup>42</sup> The author is aware of attempts by recent writers to minimize the influence of Bryan and his supporters. Careful study and discussion with several of the participants, including "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, seems to bear out the fact, however, that the traditional historical interpretation is far more accurate.

Oklahomans in turn regarded Bryan as highly as they have ever respected any politician from outside the state. That regard was demonstrated in countless ways—by the action of the first legislature; by the active support given to Bryan's political campaigns, especially in 1908; by the contest in the constitutional convention to determine which county should have the honor of being named "Bryan County." Most of all, though, it is demonstrated by the fond memories of Oklahomans today. Virtually every resident of the state who lived through those years has his own memories of Bryan, his own anecdote to tell. In those tales and anecdotes one can sense the high regard for Bryan's sincerity, for his never losing the "common touch," for his ability to laugh, even at himself, and for his conviction that rural America was the only basis on which a sound and stable nation could be built. Bryan was indeed the Voice of Rural America. Therein lay his greatness, and his weakness as well.

Perhaps it would be well to let the parties involved speak for themselves. In 1908, while on their way to a national convention at Denver, a group of Oklahoma admirers stopped in Lincoln to pay tribute to Bryan. Still celebrating their recent victory of statehood, the group presented Bryan with a new flag with 46 stars, and a specially-inscribed, leather-bound copy of the Oklahoma constitution.<sup>43</sup> To this group of admirers Bryan made one of his shortest and most sincere speeches:

Politically, I suppose I am nearer kin to Oklahoma than to any other state in the union, and I can say that without hurting the feelings of anybody in Nebraska. Nebraska Democrats will tell you, and the Republicans will not deny that I am nearer Oklahoma Democrats and politics than I am to those of Nebraska.<sup>44</sup>

And what of the Oklahomans of that day? Their collective attitude was probably best expressed by an editor who penned a few lines in a cluttered print shop out on the high plains of Oklahoma's southwestern frontier. He was

<sup>43</sup> This well-worn document is to be found in the library of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>44</sup> Guthrie *Oklahoma State Capital*, July 5, 1908.

P. Y. Brinton, editor of the Hobart *Weekly Chief*, who wrote after Bryan's visit to Hobart in 1903:

Bryan has come and gone . . . He will go down in history as one of the truly great, whether he is chosen president of the United States or not, without a blemish or stain upon his character, leaving as a legacy new and advanced ideas and theories of government.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hobart *Weekly Chief*, January 21, 1903.