



## From Nebraska to Florida—A Memorandum

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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# FROM NEBRASKA TO FLORIDA

A Memorandum Written By  
William Jennings Bryan

EDITED BY SAMUEL PROCTOR

Mr. and Mrs. William Jennings Bryan had visited Florida many times before they decided in 1912 to purchase a winter home in Miami. "Villa Serena," as they called it, became one of the city's showplaces, and it was not unusual for the Bryans to entertain as many as five hundred guests at their weekly Friday afternoon open house. As Bryan's national political power declined after he retired as Secretary of State from Woodrow Wilson's Cabinet, his interest in the political, religious, and social life of Florida increased, and he and his family began to spend more and more time in the State. Bryan's various speaking tours carried him into almost every Florida county where thousands flocked to hear him talk and where his advice and counsel were constantly solicited.

After Bryan transferred his legal residence from Nebraska to Florida in 1921 many people and several newspapers encouraged him to throw his hat into Florida's political ring and to announce his candidacy for either Gov-

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ernor or United States Senator. There are several letters in the Bryan correspondence at the Library of Congress which indicate the interest that was being taken at this time in his political career. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise of New York wrote, urging Bryan to accept the nomination for the Senate,<sup>1</sup> and former United States Senator Nathan P. Bryan of Florida pledged his support.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. William S. Jennings, the wife of a former Governor of Florida, outlined in a letter the plans for setting up a Bryan-For-Senator headquarters, and revealed the efforts being made to secure the support of influential state newspapers.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt but that Bryan gave serious consideration to these proposals, and in a letter to J. Fred Essary of the *Baltimore Sun* he admitted that the thing that "has made the Senate attractive is the fact that it would give me a forum to discuss national questions and a platform from which I could reach the nation."<sup>4</sup> He was reluctant, however, to risk the chance of being defeated, and after long consideration he finally announced that he would not become a candidate. "Defeat," he said, "would not only impair my ability to aid the party as a private citizen but it would very much lessen the pleasure of my remaining years in Florida."<sup>5</sup>

In the following year there were new rumors that Bryan would enter Florida politics, this time as a candidate for delegate-at-large from the state to the Democratic National Convention of 1924. Late in October he confirmed the report at a news conference and intimated that he might

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, Stephen S. Wise to William Jennings Bryan, January 20, 1922. Bryan Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>2</sup> Letter, Nathan P. Bryan to William Jennings Bryan, January 14, 1922. Bryan Papers.

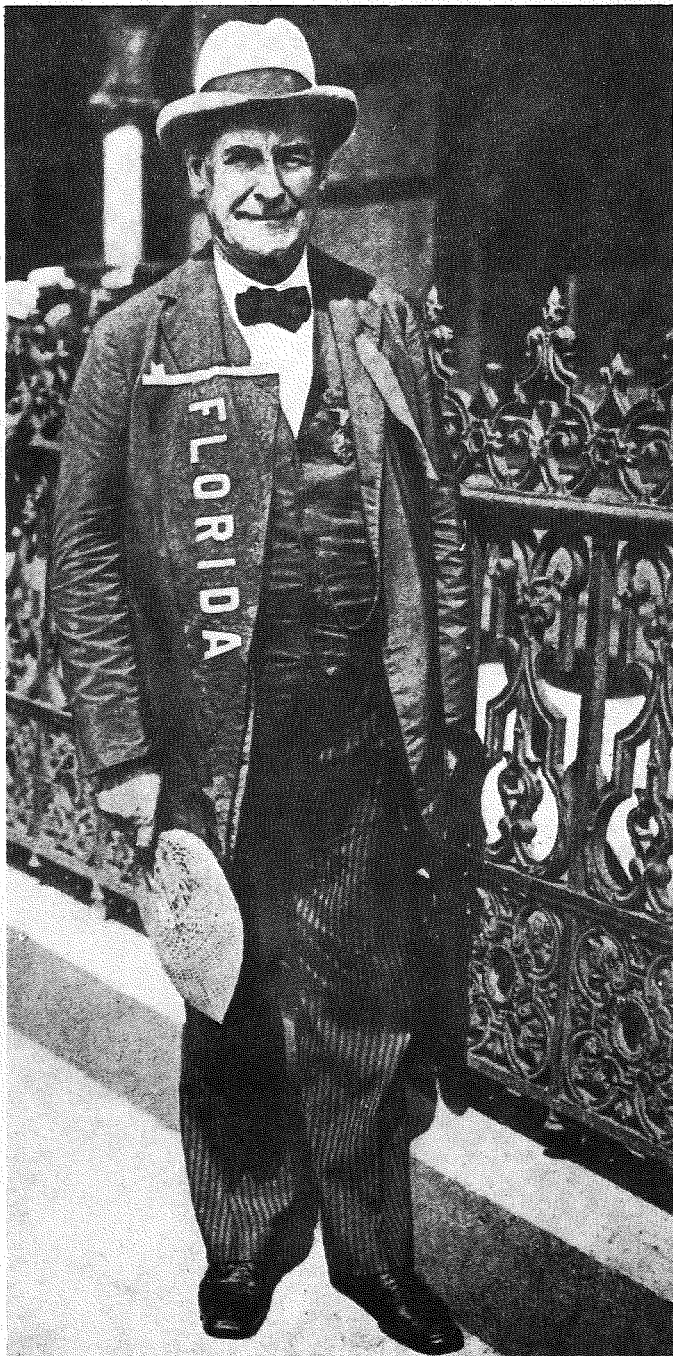
<sup>3</sup> Letter, May M. Jennings to Bryan, December 15, 1921. Bryan Papers. Mrs. Jennings referred to the efforts to secure the support of the *Florida Times Union* (Jacksonville) and the *Tampa Tribune*. Frank Harris of the *Ocala Banner* had used his paper to support Bryan's candidacy. *The Haines City Herald* (Polk County, Florida) announced on February 28, 1924 that a Bryan-For-President Club had been organized in the community. A letter to Bryan from John H. Carter, April 15, 1921 (Bryan Papers), suggested that he should run for Governor of Florida.

<sup>4</sup> Letter, Bryan to J. Fred Essary, February 15, 1922. Bryan Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Letter, Bryan to O. B. Howse, April 13, 1922. Bryan Papers.



William Jennings Bryan's Bible Class under the Palms  
(Photo courtesy the John C. Winston Company, publishers of *The  
Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan*)



Bryan as Florida Delegate to the Democratic National  
Convention of 1924

(Photo by Underwood and Underwood)

support a southern candidate for President.<sup>6</sup> A few weeks later he revealed that if he were elected he would nominate President Albert A. Murphree of the University of Florida.<sup>7</sup> Not the least surprised was Dr. Murphree, who insisted that "the whole thing is a fiction. Of course, nobody expects a Southern man to be nominated President, much less a Florida man. I have been very much embarrassed by the publicity of this whole affair. I wish it had never occurred."<sup>8</sup>

Many people charged that Bryan had brought Murphree's name into the campaign merely to assure his own election, although Murphree in a letter to a friend, wrote: "I have never accused him of using my name as a 'doormat' to bolster up his political fortunes. I have never for a moment entertained the thought that I had anything to contribute to William Jennings Bryan's political fortunes."<sup>9</sup> Bryan conducted an intensive statewide campaign, speaking in all but two of the counties. When the final ballot was counted he was elected by an overwhelming majority, and shortly afterward he started for New York in his Ford automobile. He was dressed in a black alpaca suit, and to the lapel of his coat was pinned a large Florida pennant, which he wore throughout the convention and all over New York.

The Democratic Convention of 1924 was a tragedy for Bryan. His suggestion that President Murphree should be considered as a candidate was received by the delegates with laughter and contempt. He later told a friend that "he had never been so humiliated in his life, and he had tears in his eyes as he said it."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Miami *News-Metropolis*, November 1, 1923.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, January 14, 1924.

<sup>8</sup> Letter, Albert A. Murphree to Frank Spain, Jr., January 31, 1924, Murphree-Bryan Correspondence, University of Florida Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Letter, Murphree to Frank Spain, Jr., June 14, 1924. Murphree-Bryan Correspondence. Murphree made reference to these charges in a letter to J. Archy Smith, January 29, 1924. Murphree-Bryan Correspondence.

<sup>10</sup> M. R. Werner, *Bryan* (New York, 1929), p. 280.

Bryan's embarrassment did not interfere with his political ambitions. By the summer of 1925 he was again considering the possibility of becoming United States Senator from Florida. Writing to the editor of the Sanford, Florida *Herald*, he said: "I dread the idea of taking on any additional load of care but I feel that this is my last opportunity to render a service to the party which has made me what I am and given me all I have . . . I believe I can render the party more service than any other person now in the Senate or likely to be there during the next few years . . . I feel that I can be of service to Florida because of my intimate acquaintance with those who are in sympathy with Florida's interests and development."<sup>11</sup> In another letter to the editor of *Labor*, a Washington publication, he said, "The term in the Senate would enable me to help lay the foundations for the next Presidential campaign and for the Presidential campaign following."<sup>12</sup>

Bryan's political plans were suddenly interrupted by the efforts of a group of men in Dayton, Tennessee to break a state law prohibiting the teaching of evolution. He accepted an invitation to become a counsel for the prosecution and journeyed to Tennessee for the last dramatic incident of his life. The sensational and exhausting Scopes trial ended on July 21, 1925, and five days later, shortly before he was scheduled to make a speech denouncing the Darwinian theory, Bryan died. His family, after his death, continued to live in Florida, and his daughter, Mrs. Ruth Bryan Rhode, later served as Congresswoman from the State.

The following news story and memorandum, written by Mr. Bryan, and dated May 31, 1921, explains his decision to make his home in Florida. Previously unpublished, the original of this document is in the Bryan Papers, Library of Congress. Publication permission was granted by Bryan's daughter, Mrs. Ruth Bryan Rhode, prior to her death.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.



## THE MEMORANDUM

Mrs. Bryan's health is such that it is necessary for us to live in the South, and, having tested Miami's climate for eight years, we have chosen that city for our permanent home. For some time I have been, politically speaking, in a state of suspended animation, living in Florida but voting in Nebraska. Being as much interested as ever in the problems of government and desiring to make my remaining years as valuable to my country as possible, I have decided to transfer my citizenship to Florida, and thus make my actual residence my legal residence also.

It announces a decision reluctantly reached after months of deliberation. For more than thirty-three years I have registered from Lincoln, Nebraska, and my name has been associated with the name of the State as I have been introduced to speak at gatherings of every kind. I look back over a third of a century with feelings of profound gratitude to the people of Nebraska, as well as to the members of the Democratic party, and the attachment based upon appreciation is not lessened by the separation which I have felt it my duty to make.

Begining in 1888 the Democrats of Nebraska have expressed their confidence in me time and time again. Twice they nominated me for Congress, once for the Senate, three times they have supported me for President, and many times for delegate to National Conventions. Only once have I been defeated by Democrats for any position to which I aspired, and that was in 1916, when the prohibition question was beginning to be a national issue. In 1920 when prohibition was an established policy in both Nebraska and the nation my party not only selected me as a delegate to San Francisco but elected eleven delegates out of sixteen in sympathy with the policies which I advocated. This was the last expression of my party, and I shall treasure the compliment while I live.

I shall not lose interest in the welfare of the State and its attitudes on political questions. On the contrary, I shall not only remain in touch with public sentiment there, but will return as frequently as I would if I were still a legal resident of the State. I can never be indifferent to the interests of the State or to Nebraska's position in the councils in



the nation. By transferring my citizenship to Florida I shall increase my capacity for usefulness because, living there, I can take part in the politics of the State and share also in determining the State's position on national questions. This will require no change in my attitude on public questions because the South has been a loyal supporter of every reform in which I have been interested. With the exception of equal suffrage, the South has stood with the West—even against the Northeast—and in the case of suffrage the South's attitude was determined by the race question rather than by any difference between the sections in the appreciation of woman's influence and duty.

On pending issues, such as the enforcement of prohibition, the establishment of universal peace through disarmament, the reduction of taxes in a manner equitable to the masses, and in the elimination of monopoly and privilege, the South and West are in hearty accord, and on these subjects I shall find myself as much at home in Florida as in Nebraska.

I first learned of Florida through letters written by my wife before we were married; I next learned of Florida when my regiment was stationed there for a few months during the Spanish War;<sup>13</sup> my visits there during the past eight years have increased my fondness for the State as they have increased my acquaintance with it. I have found there unexpected opportunities of reaching the entire country in religious matters through my Sunday School class, which meets under the palm trees and is attended by citizens from nearly all the States of the Union.<sup>14</sup> I have opportunity there, also, to meet political leaders who visit the magic city in which we dwell, Miami's increase of 440% during the last ten years entitles her to be called "Magic Miami" and an increasing multitude are drawing within her extending boundaries.

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<sup>13</sup> William Jennings Bryan was a colonel in the Third Nebraska Volunteer Infantry which was stationed in Jacksonville, Florida, for about two and a half months during the summer of 1898.

<sup>14</sup> Bryan's Tourist Bible Class became one of the distinctive features of Miami's winter season. It was held in a public park and attracted between two and six thousand people each Sunday morning.

It is probably too much to hope that at my period of life I can ever become as well acquainted with the people of Florida as I am with the people of Nebraska, but during my stay in the state I have found many congenial friends who will vie with the friends in Nebraska in adding pleasure to the days that lie between me and the sunset. My heart is large enough to love both the great West and the great South, and there is then affection enough left to bestow upon the devoted colaborers who, in the states of the North and East have shown a courage and devotion to principle not inferior to that which I have found beyond the Mississippi and south of the Ohio.