



The Nebraska Democratic State Convention of April 13-14, 1892

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Article Summary: The Democratic Party in early Nebraska was divided into two groups, one led by J Sterling Morton, the other by Dr George L Miller. This division was a large factor enabling Republican control. Except for the election of Democrat John A McShane from the First Congressional District in 1886, Republicans held every important state post and every federal office in Nebraska between statehood in 1867 and 1890. During the Democratic convention of 1892, a new force arrived on the scene: William Jennings Bryan. He changed the direction of the party away from the "straight" conservative, gold, Cleveland wing, foretelling the future of the party in Nebraska.

Cataloging Information:

Names: J Sterling Morton, Dr George L Miller, John A McShane, William Jennings Bryan, Gilbert M Hitchcock, Albert Watkins, William H Thompson, Jefferson H Broady, A M Post, J W Edgerton, Horace Boies, Nathan S Harwood, Euclid Martin, C J Bowlby, Robert Clegg, Milton Doolittle

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THE NEBRASKA DEMOCRATIC STATE CONVENTION OF APRIL 13-14, 1892

BY PAOLO E. COLETTA

EXCEPT for John A. McShane, who was elected from the First Congressional District in 1886, the Republicans controlled every important state post and every federal office in Nebraska between the advent of statehood in 1867 and 1890. Part of the reason for Republican success was the division of the Democrats into two groups, one led by J. Sterling Morton, the other by Dr. George L. Miller.¹ In 1887 there moved from Illinois to Lincoln a young lawyer named William Jennings Bryan who rapidly

¹ Morton and Miller had earlier been friends, but in the 1880's they parted because Morton was a free trader and Miller a protectionist, Morton opposed and Miller sponsored Cleveland for President, Morton abetted and Miller objected to fusion with the Anti-Monopoly party in Morton's third race for governor, in 1884, and Morton, as chairman of the Democratic state central committee, competed for the state's patronage with Miller, who had good connections in the Cleveland administration and was supported by James E. Boyd, the national committeeman. (James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* [Lincoln, 1942], pp. 283-328.)

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earned a reputation as an eloquent supporter of tariff reform and other principles sponsored by the Morton group and who was elected to Congress with Morton's support in 1890.² Two years later, however, Bryan and Morton parted company, and Morton and Miller joined to oppose Bryan. Bryan's advocacy of free silver and of Democratic-Independent fusion were the catalysts which provoked a new alignment of Democratic forces, the Morton-Miller group representing the "straight," conservative, gold, Cleveland wing, Bryan and his followers the progressive, silver, fusionist, anti-Cleveland wing. The bitter fight that occurred in the state convention of April 13-14, 1892 was to determine whether the silver question would replace tariff reform as the major issue in the national campaign of 1892 and whether the Morton-Miller or the Bryan wing truly represented the Democratic party in Nebraska. Although the conservatives won, the outcome of the convention clearly foretold the eventual success of the progressives.

Morton had been pleased when Bryan supported him as the congressional nominee for the First District in 1888 and stumped twenty-five counties for him during the campaign. He endorsed Bryan "As representative of the cleanest and most advanced economic thought in the party"³ and asked him to help draft the resolutions to offer at the state convention to be held in Omaha in October 1889. The major issue there was tariff reform. The silver issue was not mentioned, and Morton and Bryan reached rapid agreement on the currently hot prohibition issue.

When Bryan was nominated, Miller, who had lately resumed friendly relations with Morton, asked "Who the hell is Bryan?" The Sage of Arbor Lodge replied: "Mr.

² Paolo E. Coletta, "William Jennings Bryan's First Nebraska Years," *Nebraska History*, XXXIII (June 1952), 71-94, and "The Morning Star of the Reformation: William Jennings Bryan's First Congressional Campaign," *ibid.*, XXXVII (June 1956), 103-119.

³ Morton to Attorney General Leese, January 5, 1889, in Kenneth E. McIntyre, "The Morton-Bryan Controversy," (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1943), p. 12.



William Jennings Bryan



J. Sterling Morton



Dr. George L. Miller



Gilbert M. Hitchcock



Albert Watkins



William H. Thompson

Bryan is able, eloquent and of the most pure and untainted character. His election, which I consider quite probable, will do honor to every citizen in this district. And to elect him I am doing all that it is in my power to do.”⁴

The Morton-Bryan relationship was a pleasant one until 1891. When Bryan began to talk free silver, however, Morton, Miller, and other conservatives shied away from him. Morton, who believed that opposition to silver would revive his sagging political fortunes, wrote antisilver articles for various Nebraska newspapers, Miller openly opposed Bryan, and even Gilbert M. Hitchcock, editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*, who had aided greatly in Bryan's election, advised Bryan to go slow, saying, “The *World-Herald* would like to see Mr. Bryan fight for free silver coinage against eastern gold bug advocates, and at the same time resist the demand of the wealthy silver mine owners who seek to get a bounty of 25 per cent out of the American people.”⁵

As the only Nebraska Democrat in a state or federal office, Bryan had been mentioned often as the future leader of the Nebraska Democracy by the silver Democrats, the silver Republicans, and his many Independent friends. He apparently earned that position in the Democratic state convention of September 1891. Although the major issue was railroad control, he urged the delegates to adopt a vigorous silver plank. Miller proffered the advice that the convention “meet the clamor for a ‘cheap and nasty’ silver dollar with a bold and broad declaration for honest money,”⁶ and Morton agreed with him. Nevertheless, as chairman of the committee on resolutions, Bryan threat-

⁴ Morton to Dr. George L. Miller, August 20, 1890, quoted in Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

⁵ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 23, 1891, p. 4, col. 2. Morton's articles appeared in the *Johnson County Journal* (Tecumseh, Nebr.) and the *Nebraska City News*. Arbor Lodge Journal, March 21, April 27, 1891, Ms., J. Sterling Morton Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁶ *The Daily Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln, Nebr.), September 18, 1891; *The Lincoln Daily Call* (Lincoln, Nebr.), September 18, 1891.

ened to bring recalcitrant gold members to heel by making a minority report to the convention. The gold men then approved his proposition that silver currency, coin or notes, should be made full legal tender for all debts, public and private, and were willing to take free but not unlimited coinage. Bryan agreed to the compromise, and the convention adopted the plank.⁷

Shortly thereafter, Judge Jefferson H. Broady, whom Bryan had nominated for the Supreme Court, declined to run, and it fell to the Democratic State Committee to fill the breach. The Republicans had named Judge A. M. Post and the Independents J. W. "Our Joe" Edgerton. The Democrats could go on record as opposed to railroad control, said Bryan, by refraining from naming a candidate and by endorsing Edgerton. Hitchcock buttressed Bryan, asserting that "if the Independent element of the Democratic party can assert itself at this juncture the Democratic element in the Independent party may reciprocate at some future time,"⁸ but Morton decided that the time to break with Bryan had come.

Morton had accepted Anti-Monopolist support but had opposed fusion when he ran for governor in 1884. He had supported Bryan on a free coinage platform in 1890 because he believed the silver question relatively unimportant.⁹ Now, alarmed at Bryan's success with the silver issue and his espousal of fusion with the Independents, he wrote Bryan that "Free silver beckons Democracy to disaster in 1892."¹⁰ Bryan accepted the challenge. He did not deny Morton the right to oppose him on principle, but by his actions he showed that he had no further use for the Sage. He refused Morton's advice, brazenly recommended him to President Harrison as a fit appointee for a federal

⁷ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, September 15, 1891; *The Daily Nebraska State Journal*, *The Lincoln Daily Call*, and *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, September 18, 1891.

⁸ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, October 1, 1891.

⁹ Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

¹⁰ Morton to Bryan, September 28, 1891, Morton Papers.

judgeship,¹¹ and declared that "hard shell" Democrats like Morton were little better than "assistant Republicans."

At the state committee meeting, on October 5, 1891, with Bryan, Miller, and Boyd present, Miller spoke for the conservatives in insisting upon naming a Democrat in Broady's place. Boyd and Bryan advocated leaving the place vacant and instructing Democrats to vote for "Our Joe." They won their point, but by an exceedingly narrow margin—of the sixteen men present, nine voted against naming a candidate.¹²

The importance of the campaign of 1891 lay less in the railroad regulation issue than in the dismay of conservative leaders like Morton at Bryan's willingness to countenance fusion. His stumping for silver, his support for free silver legislation in the House, and his favoring of the silverite, Horace Boies, rather than Grover Cleveland as the presidential candidate, further alienated them. Morton lost hope of saving Bryan from his financial vagaries, and jealousy of Bryan may have widened the breach between the two men. William Connell had beaten Morton in the First District congressional campaign of 1888 by about 3,500 votes. In 1890 Bryan had defeated Connell by almost double that number.¹³ Bryan's position as the only Democratic congressman in the state controlling some patronage and his appeal to Democrats, Independents, and to the progressive Republican element as well, threatened the leadership of those who had controlled the destinies of the Democratic party since the Civil War.

The Conservatives concluded that it was time to "Unhorse the Silver Knight," but were not ready to cause Bryan's absolute political death. They opposed Bryan on his silver policy and his willingness to fuse, but they found

¹¹ Bryan to Benjamin Harrison, September 28, 1891, William Jennings Bryan Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

¹² *The Omaha Daily Bee*, October 6, 1891.

¹³ Paolo E. Coletta, "The Morning Star of the Reformation: William Jennings Bryan's First Congressional Campaign," *Nebraska History*, XXXVII (June 1956), 116.

him in general agreement with them on other issues, admired and admitted his vote-getting qualities, and believed that he had been converted to free silver by primarily Independent friends. They felt that he must be chastised, yet he must not be drummed out of the party to the party's loss.

In the primaries for the Democratic state convention of April 1892, Morton and Bryan won equal if paradoxical victories in Otoe County, in which Morton lived. The delegates were instructed for Cleveland, who opposed silver, and they also endorsed Bryan, who favored silver. Then Tobias Castor, the Burlington's own and new Democratic national committeeman, attempted to cripple Bryan by suggesting that the election of delegates to the state convention be made by congressional districts rather than by the customary county conventions. If Bryan were endorsed by his district, even though it had been organized by the gold men against him, he would then be "sat down" upon by the leaders in the state convention. A squabble in the state committee tipped Bryan off as to the intention of the gold men. However, even those like Miller who objected to Castor's novel procedure agreed when Albert Watkins, staunch gold man, said that "The prayer of true Democrats in the First district is that Mr. Bryan may be delivered from his fool friends."¹⁴

In the primaries in Lancaster, Bryan's home county, the conservatives tried to purify Bryan with punishment. Nathan S. Harwood, rather than he, was elected to the First District convention, which chose Harwood and Robert Craig as delegates to the national convention and instructed them to support Cleveland, whose name was greeted with tremendous applause. The tariff was the only issue before the people, said Harwood, and silver was never mentioned in the convention. Then Bryan was elected to the state convention and endorsed as a delegate-at-large to

¹⁴ Omaha *Morning World-Herald*, April 8, 1892.

the national convention "as a concession to harmony."¹⁵ Writing in later years, Morton and Watkins said that they were "unwilling to deal too harshly with so promising and popular an acquisition to the party as Mr. Bryan had become." They also confessed that they had not appreciated at the time "the length to which his audacity might hurl itself, [and had] magnanimously put him on the delegation."¹⁶ Bryan marked the Lancaster convention as the beginning of the fight in the state between the two wings of the party.¹⁷

Bryan had been placed in an extremely embarrassing position. He opposed Cleveland, but the state delegation was instructed for Cleveland, and he was being sent as delegate-at-large to the national convention that would support Cleveland, thereby leaving him muzzled and without personal choice. He was open to the charge of inconsistency if he accepted the situation. Moreover, he felt he could not be re-elected if renominated on a silver platform and opposed by the state organization, yet if he failed to run on a silver platform he would be defeated by defections from Independents and silver Democrats. "If bad blood does not result it will be a wonder," said Hitchcock.¹⁸

The gold-silver fight was spreading rapidly throughout Nebraska. In some primaries, as in Cass, Bryan's course in Congress was endorsed; in others, as in Saunders, a spirited and bitter fight took place between Bryan and Boyd factions. In Douglas, the battle between Boyd and Euclid Martin, both conservatives, resulted in the sending of contesting delegations.¹⁹ C. J. Bowlby, editor of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, March 9, 10, April 8, 1892; *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 9, 10, 1892; Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska, The Land and the People* (Chicago, 1931), I, 712.

¹⁶ J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1905), III, 239-240.

¹⁷ William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle* (Chicago, 1897), p. 72.

¹⁸ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 7, 1892.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, April 9, 10, 1892; *The Omaha Daily Bee*, April 14, 1892. Martin favored Cleveland for President while Boyd refused to commit himself. The major contest, however, was over who would be elected delegate-at-large.

Crete *Democrat*, resented the aspersions cast at Bryan and accounted for the opposition to him as follows:

Nobody doubts that the free coinage men of the First district will vote for Bryan; then it must follow that the "goldbug" outfit of bankers, loan agents, and a few ex-postmasters are the ones who will bolt him if he should be a candidate for re-election, unless they can force him to abandon his honest views on the question and stand for election on a "goldbug" platform. . . .²⁰

Bryan arrived in Nebraska from Washington on April 12 but kept his mouth shut while Hitchcock intimated that all he had to do was to say he wanted to go to the national convention and he would go. An Independent wrote in answer to Watkins that the "fool friends" of "the brilliant statesman" would be found to be "fighting friends" in November, and Rosewater spoke of the impending "Democratic Donnybrook."²¹

At the state convention, Bryan "smiled those broad, free silver smiles for which he has become famous,"²² and when he consented to go to the platform he was greeted with the chant of "Bryan! Bryan! Bryan! Bryan! Bryan!" and shouts of "WHOOOP-E-E! YOW! WHOOOP!" When he faced the delegates, they stood up as one man. Hats came off, and the delegates became still, as though something inexpressible was to occur, but he merely said that he would speak "When the time comes . . . on what may come up in this convention. And I will say what I think need be said. . . . We may have our differences here but we will settle them like men." He asked the delegates to follow their own consciences and pointed out that the only way to settle differences was by majority rule. As for the contested delegations, he felt that "The Convention will settle this matter and settle it right."²³

²⁰ Quoted in *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 10, 1892. Watkins had earlier been postmaster of Lincoln.

²¹ *Ibid.*, April 12, 1892; *The Omaha Daily Bee*, April 13, 1892.

²² *The Omaha Daily Bee*, *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 14, 1892.

²³ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 14, 1892.

Bryan was never more wrong, for the State Committee, knowing that it could control the proceedings only if it controlled the delegates, had prepared lists of men they wished admitted and assigned to committees and instructed the chairman of the convention, Robert A. Batty of Hastings, to ram these preconceived lists down the delegates' throats. It took all night and until noon of the following day for the committee on credentials to find for the Boyd rather than the Martin faction. Bryan stood to lose either way, for the victor in Douglas controlled one hundred and three votes bound by the unit rule and both Boyd and Martin opposed silver.²⁴

The division between gold and silver revealed in the Lancaster County primary provoked Bryan to lead the fight against the gold men in his own delegation in a meeting held during the afternoon of April 13. He successfully opposed Watkins' motion instructing for Cleveland. When the gold men asked for silence on silver, he turned on them and accused them of treachery. Saying that they were sincerely sorry for the necessity of opposing the "promising young man," Andrew J. Sawyer, Watkins, and Harwood tried to argue with him, but he would not listen and said he would bring up a free silver resolution no matter what they did. Sawyer was elected to the committee on resolutions by eleven votes to seven over Bryan, but an amendment from the floor added Bryan to the committee and sent him single-handed to fight its six gold men.²⁵

Meantime the delegates voted for representatives to the national convention. The First District nominated Harwood and Robert Clegg, one gold, one silver man. Bryan stated that some recognition should be granted young Democrats and nominated William H. Thompson, the "little giant" from Grand Island, as delegate from the Third District, which had been unable to agree upon a man. In the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, April 14, 15, 1892; *The Omaha Daily Bee*, April 14, 15, 1892; *The Daily Nebraska State Journal*, April 16, 1892.

²⁵ *The Daily Nebraska State Journal*, April 14, 15, 1892.

proceedings with regard to the delegates from the First District he exchanged some heated words with Governor Boyd.

"That free silver plank in the platform upon which I was elected didn't mean anything, and you know it," said Boyd.

"What was it put in for if it didn't mean anything?" demanded Bryan. "I wasn't a member of that committee. You can't accuse me of putting it there."

Saying "Don't discuss the matter any more," Charles Offutt led Boyd away while others took Bryan in another direction.²⁶

Bryan adamantly refused to let his name go before the convention as delegate-at-large to the national convention, so Boyd, Castor, Milton Doolittle, and Thompson were chosen. Then, prior to the selection of alternates, Bryan asked that the platform be read. It proved a copper-bottomed document closely following the national platform of 1888. Having served notice that he would present a minority report, Bryan now stepped forward.

I am here on a painful duty. I came to agree with all that has been said and to ask the adoption of the principle which has been a part of our platform heretofore and I do not believe it is good policy to drop now as a Democratic tenet. I therefore submit the following resolution which I ask to be made part of the platform—"We declare ourselves in favor of the free coinage of silver."²⁷

The delegates reacted as though a bomb had been dropped into their midst. One delegate moved that Bryan be given twenty minutes to defend silver and that twenty minutes be given to any person chosen by the gold men, another asked if it were Bryan's intention to bring up the silver issue and start a fight in Nebraska after the issue had been shelved by Congress. Bryan said:

²⁶ *The Daily Omaha Bee*, April 15, 1892.

²⁷ *Ibid.* *The Daily Nebraska State Journal* for April 15 did not print a word of Bryan's speech but quoted from the speeches made against him.

Gentlemen, I do not believe it is noble to dodge any issue. It was dodging it that defeated Republicanism in Nebraska. If, as has been indicated, this may have an effect on my campaign, then no bridegroom went with gladder heart to greet his bride than I shall welcome defeat. It has been said that God hates a coward and I believe it is true. Vote this down if you do not approve it, but do not dodge it, for that is not Democratic.²⁸

Many delegates favored Bryan's position, and when men besides Bryan demanded to speak in his support, the convention came dangerously near splitting. William H. Thompson tried to avoid the danger by calling for a vote on the minority report, but the delegates shouted "We are here to hear Mr. Bryan. We came here to hear him, and we want to hear him," or cried "Gag law! Gag law!"

"I do hope you will not cut off debate," said Bryan. "We ought to have this matter discussed. It is an important question. We ought to talk this over quietly and see what there is in it. I was but one of seven on this committee. The other six ought to be given an opportunity to tell their reasons."²⁹ His plea for fairness was greeted with thunderous cheers, Thompson withdrew his motion, and it was agreed to give Bryan unlimited time, the other six men on the committee ten minutes each, and Bryan again unlimited time for rebuttal. But it took half an hour for the screaming delegates to reach this decision. Meanwhile Bryan sat on the stage, a fixed smile on his face, watching two dozen men trying to address the convention at the same time. When order was finally restored, he came forward.

I might say in the language that we used when we were boys, "Hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear." I am here in discharge of a painful duty. Had the Democratic party not taken this as a part of its platform I could not have sought to inject it into this platform. But when it was shown that a committee could be formed and formed solely on that question of silver, and when the opposition could only get a representative on that committee by electing him to that committee, it seemed to me that I should perform the duty to the end, whatever the cause.

²⁸ *The Daily Omaha Bee*, April 15, 1892.

²⁹ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 15, 1892.

There should be a reason given for all things, but you have here a platform which ignores silver without cause.³⁰

He then told the delegates that silver had been "struck down" in 1873 and that the Democratic party had been trying for nineteen years to get silver restored, but that the money power had proved too strong. The Democrats were fighting for the principles of Thomas Jefferson, who, in the teeth of the storm raised by banks and moneyed corruption, established the silver standard. The Democratic party had always been fighting for the reinstatement of silver. Why abandon it now? Grover Cleveland had been elected on the platform of 1884, which demanded free coinage. He had predicted disaster because of the Bland law, but his prophecies had been disproved.

They will tell you that the tariff should be the paramount issue. Well, I never disown any of my children and turn them out in the cold because I may have a favorite. If you want to make silver the paramount issue the way to do it is to dodge it and the other side will make it the issue of issues and you will be always defending it. I believe in the tariff. I believe in all things Democratic, but that does not make me afraid to meet the silver question.³¹

Sawyer then spoke for the gold side. "This morning we passed a resolution in favor of Cleveland. Do you wish to stultify yourselves by presenting a platform which must be in direct opposition to his views?" he asked. Offutt spoke in the same vein, and then asked Bryan directly if he favored Grover Cleveland. "Well, it was a picture," wrote a reporter. "There wasn't a man there but was stirred by what followed. In two steps Mr. Bryan was before him, and with flashing eyes and hand aloft, he said in a voice that was low, but that was heard clear to Chicago: 'I am first for Horace Boies.'"³² Pandemonium prevailed. When the convention settled down, Offutt stated that the Democratic party favored bimetallism but not free coinage, an altogether different proposition. Batty said that the tariff should be the only issue. Then Boyd was called to

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

speak against Bryan, but he was out of the hall, and Watkins, Harwood, and Judge Crawford gave Bryan his final pummelings. But the crowd called for Bryan, and again he stepped forward.

Do not put off the issue. I am told much of the 70-cent dollar, but I am unable to get one from any of these gentlemen for less than 100 cents. The Republican party gave the bondholders money worth 100 cents and paid the soldiers 30-cent dollars. Those are the men who tell you to beware or you will hurt the soldier in paying his pension on a free coinage basis. . . .

In the Southern states, where they voted solidly for free coinage, there isn't a silver mine. No, they represent an agricultural community which realizes that under demonetization it is paying its debts in a commodity that is worth far less than at the time the debts were contracted. . . .

Now, if you refuse to put free coinage in the platform Nebraska will be declared to be against free coinage and when you meet the Eastern representatives at Chicago you will get nothing because it will be considered that the West has capitulated and has no backing and you will have no pressure to get anything that you want and need. . . .³³

Bryan also spoke in favor of Boies, putting in "some licks . . . that counted noisily." Boyd, he declared, was the only Democratic governor Nebraska ever had, and he had been elected on a free silver platform. "Don't vote against free coinage, then," he concluded, "don't change this until another governor shall be elected on an anti-free silver platform. You have the demands of the people on the one side; on the other you have the threats of the money power. Choose. If the Lord be God, follow him. If Baal be God, follow him."³⁴

Then the roll was called on the minority report. Men shouting at the top of their voices filled the hall with deafening noise. Men rising to vote would be questioned; others were boisterously attacked as unauthorized delegates whose votes should not be counted. The voting had to be stopped until order was restored. When Douglas County was called, it voted "One hundred and three votes 'No!'" amid hisses

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

and jeers by the silverites. Bryan held his hand aloft and called for peace. "It is all right. They came here to act as a unit and"

Before he was finished he was cut off by Offutt, who came toward him waving his cane: "Are you representing Douglas County, too?"

"No, sir."

"Then, for God's sake, give somebody else a chance to say something."

Unabashed, Bryan explained to the convention that the free coinage men in the Douglas County delegation were powerless because bound by the unit rule. Offutt's rejoinder was cut off by the announcement of the vote: for the minority report, 267—against it, 237. Bryan had won!

Then the convention became like "a hot chamber in hell," went "mad—absolutely insane." The tally announced by Chairman Batty agreed with one kept by Secretary Tom O'Brien, with one kept by Boyd, and with the count kept by three others on the stage. But Secretary Hildebrand's tally was 247 for and 257 against. The silver men, convinced that they were to be victimized, became a howling mob: they called Batty a fraud, villain, and liar, and some of them rushed to the platform and shook their fists under his nose. Bryan tried to quiet the convention. Impossible. When it was finally decided to take another count, Boyd objected, but Bryan and Offutt favored another count and the delegates demanded one. The recount resulted in 229 yeses and 247 noes. Bryan had lost.³⁵ Morton and Watkins recalled that "Bryan's livid face, compressed lips, and defiant eyes were a vivid reminder of Edwin Booth in his most dramatic moments."³⁶

Unless unsuspectedly large defections had occurred from the majority vote that added Bryan to the resolutions

³⁵ *Ibid.*; *The Omaha Daily Bee*, April 15, 1892; *The Daily Nebraska State Journal*, April 15, 1892.

³⁶ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, III, 240-241.

committee, the evidence seems to uphold the silver men's contention that they had been robbed. A close inspection of the evidence, however, leads more directly to the conclusion that the minority report lost because so many of its advocates left the hall too soon. Of the 600 delegates, only 504 voted on the first roll call; on the second, after additional delegates had left, the total was only 476.

After the majority platform was accepted, the convention heartily adopted William H. Thompson's motion endorsing Bryan.³⁷

The gold Democratic and Republican press naturally gloated over Bryan's defeat. Edward Rosewater's headline in the *Omaha Bee* read: "Free Silver Fails. Congressman Bryan's Plank Very Firmly Sat Upon by the Convention."³⁸ Said the *Nebraska State Journal*: "Sat Down on Silver While Good Democrats Grow Very Angry . . . Bold Billy Bryan Still Breathing Defiance."³⁹ Rosewater merely said that Bryan would find it humiliating to return from his constituency to the capital "with his eye in a sling," but editor Gere of the *Journal* called Bryan one of the pronounced demagogues in Congress from the Western states: "His stand on the silver question is admitted by his warmest friends to be merely a vote catching dodge. He is continually posing and talking to capture the miscellaneous crowd, and not the thinking, reasoning men who are found in every community."⁴⁰ The news that Bryan's resolution favoring free coinage had been rejected "on a square vote" encouraged Cleveland's managers. According to a Cleveland biographer,

³⁷ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 15, 1892.

³⁸ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, April 15, 1892.

³⁹ *The Daily Nebraska State Journal*, April 15, 1892. In contrast, the headlines of John C. Calhoun's Democratic newspaper, the *Lincoln Weekly Herald*, read: "The Convention Ruled and Robbed by a Petty Despot [Batty]. A Free Coinage Resolution is Twice Fairly Passed, Only to Be Counted Out by an Unscrupulous Chairman. A High Handed and Cold Blooded Outrage upon the Honest and Earnest Mass of the Democracy." April 16, 1892.

⁴⁰ *The Daily Nebraska State Journal*, April 20, 1892.

Mr. Bryan's boundless personal popularity, which equalled in Nebraska Mr. Cleveland's popularity in the country at large, could not save him. He was on the floor, and in the lobbies of the convention; he was everywhere, with personal appeal for himself, and he was beaten—beaten by the power of a Cleveland wave which had swept over the state, inflaming public opinion with a desire to see the ex-President restored to the White House. Indeed, only the fear that New York would be lost should Cleveland be nominated, prevented the Nebraska Convention from instructing for him.⁴¹

The Republicans were happy because one of their candidates might now win the First District from Bryan. Said *The Wilber Republican*: "Many Democrats themselves hold the opinion that young Mr. Bryan committed political suicide when he persisted in forcing the free silver issue . . . against the advice of members of his party who have had more experience in Nebraska politics than he. In his attempting to take the lead of his party after only four years' residence in Nebraska he is altogether too fresh, and they will salt him down in Nebraska."⁴² How happy Bryan would be "if" he had stayed in Washington and "if" Boyd had not interfered with the canvass of delegates, added Gere; neither gentleman had any call to mix himself up with the mob at Omaha, and would have been safer elsewhere.⁴³ Few men of political insight underestimated the strength of the control exercised by the State Committee in the selection of the chairman and in the virtual management of the convention, and reflection upon this control made those on the losing side angrier than if they had lost in a fair fight. In addition, the Republicans were concentrating on means to "knock out Billy Bryan" and make his defeat the issue of the campaign of 1892. They chanted:

O here's to Billy Bryan, turn him down, turn him down!

O here's to Billy Bryan, turn him down!

O here's to Billy Bryan, for free coinage he is dyin',

Turn him down, turn him down, turn him down!⁴⁴

⁴¹ Robert McElroy, *Grover Cleveland: The Man and the Statesman* (New York, 1923), I, 332.

⁴² Quoted in *The Daily Nebraska State Journal*, April 25, 1892.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, April 15, 1892.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, April 16, 1892.

To Bryan and his friends, however, it appeared that Boyd, Miller, Castor and the rest of the state machine now composed a closed corporation which, allied with Wall Street, had settled the status of Nebraska politics for the year 1892. They had pledged the state to Cleveland and made it a cold night for the hewers of wood and drawers of water. By manipulating the machinery and making combinations the old leaders had shaped the action of the convention and denied the delegates from reflecting the people's demand for silver. They had won their last fight, however, for the convention marked the end of an old era in Nebraska Democratic politics and the beginning of a new one.

The power of men like Morton, Miller, North, Boyd, and Castor, who had directed the Democracy's battles along conservative lines for a generation, had been challenged and shaken, and it would soon pass into younger hands. Almost all the older and more prominent men in the convention had opposed silver, but young men had led the fight on both the gold and silver sides and enjoyed the hearty encouragement of a majority of the delegates. The convention thus foreshadowed the future triumph of comparative youngsters like Bryan, Offutt, Mahoney, and Watkins. None matched Bryan for his fervid, earnest, and even passionate determination and capacity to fight for what he considered "right," and subsequent history proved that he would stand out head and shoulders above the others.