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Article Summary: The home of William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, was dedicated on September 26, 1964. James Sellers' remarks at the dedication are the content of the article, presenting Bryan and his home in the context of the city of Lincoln of his day.

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Photographs / Images: Fairview Dedication, September 26, 1964; Nebraska Historical Marker "Fairview;" the Tower Room at Fairview set up as a classroom

FAIRVIEW DEDICATION

JAMES L. SELLERS

TODAY Fairview, the home of William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, is recognized as a state and national Historic Landmark. It is most fitting that this recognition should be imprinted upon the home of the Great Commoner. As congressman, Secretary of State and three times candidate for the Presidency, he aroused the hopes and the fears of his fellow countrymen as probably no other political leader has been able to stir them.

To understand Bryan's appeal one must see him in the setting of his day. The Bryans came to Lincoln when Nebraska was a new state. People were building railroads, towns, and businesses, but life was still rural and rustic. Society was changing, but domestic outlook and ways were not greatly changed from a century earlier. Money was scarce and debt was common.

Charles G. Dawes, Bryan's neighbor and friend, described the Lincoln of 1893.

"We are living in rapid time. Changes in the business world are more numerous and portending than ever before. The tendency is toward consolidation and concentration of wealth and power into the hands of the few; and we are striving with might and main to become one of the "few"—often at the entire sacrifice of all efforts looking toward a better condition of mind and morals."¹

The changing times, the concentration of wealth and

¹ Charles G. Dawes, *A Journal of the McKinley Years*, (Chicago, 1950) p. 3.

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power, the dividing of society into the "few" and the "many" created new complex social and economic problems. These called for governmental and political solutions.

Bryan by birth, by education, by profession, and by talents belonged among the "few". By inclination and by choice he espoused the causes and the interests of the many. He became and remained to the end the Great Commoner. He favored the anti-trust law, the reduction of tariff rates, the regulation of railroad rates, income and inheritance taxes, minimum wage laws and free text books. He saw in declining prices of the 1890's an exploitation of the debtors and the poor through our inadequate monetary system. No nation had solved the monetary riddle to provide a stable, elastic, and adequate currency. The coinage of silver could hardly have worsened the financial and economic ills that society suffered in the early 1890's.

When legislatures refused to enact relief and remedial legislation, Bryan proposed and supported measures to put governmental power more completely under the control of the voters. The Australian secret ballot, the direct primary for nominating public office holders, direct election of U. S. senators, the initiative and referendum, the recall of officials, all received his blessing.

None of these measures, where adopted, have ushered in the millenium, but many of our most important reforms have been secured through their use.

While Secretary of State, Bryan secured the first survey of the Central Nebraska area by the Bureau of Conservation at the urging of Charles W. McConaughy, George P. Kingsley, and other Nebraska boosters of irrigation. The report opened the great struggle on the feasibility of irrigation in the Tri-County area south of the Platte.²

After Dewey's startling victory on Manila Bay and Colonel Roosevelt galloped up San Juan Hill, imperialism was at flood tide. Bryan, with the Declaration of Independ-

² Gene E. Hamaker, "Irrigation Pioneers: A History of the Tri-County Project to 1935," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Nebraska 1958, pp. 43-52.

ence and equal opportunity for man, stood in its course. He called on the British in their own Imperial capital to "Behold the Republic." Forty years later Franklin Roosevelt warned Britain and France that the days of colonies were numbered. And now, 60 years after Bryan's prophetic challenge, scores of new nations fly their colors as independent nations and voice their ambitions before the Assembly of the United Nations.

Bryan's firm stand for peace cost him his cherished post in the cabinet, and this threw him into the arms of the religious zealots who supported his views. He became their spokesman and soon voiced their position as Biblical fundamentalists. It is difficult to reconcile Bryan's position in the Scopes trial with the great leadership which he had displayed for 30 years. One must remember his non-scientific denominational background at Illinois college and his defense of the simple faith of the common man. That unfortunate final scene at Dayton, Tennessee served as an anticlimax, and to many, cast a shadow over a towering figure who had laid out new boundaries across our spectrum of social and political thinking.

Writing in the *Review of Reviews* in 1908 Willis J. Abbot in substance declared that the specter of anarchy was unjustly raised in the campaign of 1896; the fundamental issues of that day were still fundamental and some of them had been given legislative effect by President Roosevelt. Abbot wondered whether it was a new Bryan, or a newly awakened public conscience and public interest which the electorate would have to consider in the campaign of 1908.³

But Bryan was an agrarian, and agrarianism had lost much of its appeal and some of its importance by 1908.

A close student of this period, James A. Barnes, has recently written:

"The scholars who have really studied Bryan these recent years have almost without exception come to say that he was a consistent and persistent leader of the democratic party who wandered much less than most of

³ Willis J. Abbot, "The New Bryan," *The Review of Reviews*, July 1908, pp. 41-44.

his contemporaries, that, though not brilliant, he comprehended better than most people the fundamental issues of the day. They even admit that he was at all times following basic democratic doctrine. Better than anyone else he pointed out the ideas, though perhaps not the guiding principles of these years we are in now. Certainly the roots of what we call 'social justice' are to be found in the dusty soil of Nebraska and the whole region then referred to as the great West. Personally it was his misfortune that he came at the end of the agrarian dominance and the beginning of the urban era. Yet he was a brilliant summarizer and even translator of those human values that were absolutely essentials in saving the modern urban world from becoming a huge city slum. The monetary principles that he and his friends condemned, the economic practices that they decried, and the respect for human beings that they demanded were essential changes for the city workmen . . . and for the city itself. They saw things dimly; they expressed them crudely; and often they erred in method - but they had the mind to sense these things, the heart to feel them deeply, and the courage to speak them out. In these issues, despite the charge of his critics, Bryan was not the moralist, he was the human analyst. He was the moralist only on liquor and religion and there he demonstrated his greatest weakness and his poorest comprehension. In his fight for peace, regardless of his method, he was back again as a human analyst."⁴

Without attaining the Presidency he was the effective leader of one of our great parties longer than any other man in our history.

The organization and program for peace are still in the experimental stage, but Bryan was one of the first in his generation to oppose economic and military imperialism as the obvious antithesis of freedom and peace and this at a time when imperialism was running full tide at the beginning of the century.

Lincoln is fortunate to have been the home of William Jennings Bryan and we are proud that his house is a registered national and state Historic Landmark. The city, the state, and the nation owe a debt of gratitude to the Bryan Memorial Hospital Board, the Junior League of Lincoln, and the Nebraska Historical Society for their splendid work in preserving and restoring Fairview as a monument to the memory of the great humanitarian who has dignified the life of mankind.

⁴ James A. Barnes to writer, September 14, 1964.



Fairview Dedication, September 26, 1964.

NEBRASKA

HISTORICAL



MARKER

FAIRVIEW

Home of William Jennings Bryan

William Jennings Bryan was born in Salem, Illinois in 1860. He moved to Lincoln in 1887, entered into law practice and was elected to Congress in 1890. He won the first of three presidential nominations with his "Cross of Gold" speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1896. Fairview was built in 1901-1902 with the proceeds from his publications. Construction costs were more than \$10,000.00.

Bryan visualized Fairview as a new Monticello and accepted the 1908 presidential nomination on the front steps of the home. Woodrow Wilson visited here during the 1912 campaign and a steady parade of political personalities came to consult with "The Great Commoner". Here he collected the mementos of his unsuccessful political campaigns and world tour of 1905.

Fairview was the scene of many lawn parties held by the Bryans for their friends. The surrounding fields were farmed under his watchful eye. Mrs. Bryan's health forced the family to leave Nebraska in 1917 after Bryan had served as President Wilson's Secretary of State. In 1922 Fairview was deeded to the Lincoln Methodist Hospital, now Bryan Memorial Hospital. William Jennings Bryan died in 1925 after the famed Scopes trial and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Junior League of Lincoln

Historical Land Mark Council



The Tower Room at Fairview as a classroom.



North 11th Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 1876. View toward University Hall.