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Article Summary: In 1924 the Democratic Party nominated Charles (Charlie) Wayland Bryan for the vice presidency. Best remembered as the younger brother of three-time presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan, Charles was a politician in his own right. The author tells the story of the campaign with an emphasis on South Dakota events and perspectives.

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Photographs / Images: Charlie Bryan and Charles G Dawes, 1940; Bryan with Edgar Howard; Bryan in his agrarian “uniform”

## CHARLIE, THE "OTHER BRYAN," IN SOUTH DAKOTA, 1924

*By Ralph R. Tingley*

The presidential election of 1924 had its share of colorful candidates. Least hopeful, but perhaps the most colorful, was Andy Gump. Andy was the comic strip character created by cartoonist Sidney Smith, and since the strip was syndicated and appeared from coast to coast, the paper hero was in a sense more of a national candidate than some others who were taken more seriously. Many thought the funny paper was a good place for presidential aspirants, and some newspapers accorded Gump additional coverage on news and editorial pages. From Dell Rapids, South Dakota, came the suggestion that Andy was delinquent in not having expressed "himself in favor of farm relief legislation," and a Vermillion, South Dakota, editor voiced the fear that the cartoon creature was "just a wee mite too late" in entering the race. "Andy," wrote that columnist after the end of the last major convention, "is going to have a hard time to stir up enough enthusiasm to make another convention interesting." The performances of some more seasoned politicians often seemed to rival the antics of Andy Gump.<sup>1</sup>

The Republican convention moved smoothly enough. Calvin Coolidge, elected vice president in 1920, had succeeded to the presidency after the death of the scandal-scarred Warren Harding in August, 1923. The party's majority accepted the admonition to "keep cool with Coolidge" and nominated him for a term of his own. With the Vermonter the Republican convention named Nebraskan Charles G. Dawes, general, lawyer, banker, former comptroller of the currency, and recently returned from Europe where he had formulated the Dawes Plan adjusting payment of the German war indemnities to the victorious Allied powers.

But the injunction to "keep cool with Coolidge" was altered by some Republicans. They carried the coolness to downright frigidity, and these malcontents followed Senator Robert

LaFollette Sr. out of the party and supported that liberal Wisconsin crusader for president as an independent candidate—or on the Progressive, Farmer-Labor, Non-Partisan, Socialist, or Labor party as the ticket was designated in various states. A Democratic senator, Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, agreed to run on the slate with "Fighting Bob."<sup>2</sup>

The Democrats met in New York's old Madison Square Garden—the place where in 1896 William Jennings Bryan had thrown the country into a frenzy with his "Cross of Gold" speech. The Garden had more recently housed "the Barnum and Bailey Circus, the six-day bicycle races, and a number of bizarre athletic events," which in the view of some was quite in keeping with the behavior of the Democrats in June and July, 1924. This convention, characterized by reporter Arthur Krock as a "snarling, cursing, tedious, tenuous, suicidal, homicidal rough-house," confirmed the opinion of the *New Republic* that "the way to promote harmony in the Democratic party is to keep the leaders apart, not bring them together." The convention broke several records it did not care to break: proceedings ground on for 14 days of tedious sessions, and 103 ballots were required to nominate John W. Davis of West Virginia and Wall Street. In the meantime, less well-heeled convention delegates gaped in dismay as hotel bills mounted far beyond expected totals. Eventually, of course, Davis and the Democrats as well as break-away candidate LaFollette went down to defeat in November. But before the voters registered their decisions, there was more to the story.<sup>3</sup>

Among the 59 persons receiving votes for the Democratic presidential nomination was Charles Wayland Bryan. Charlie (or Charley, depending upon one's spelling preference), as he was usually called, was commonly overshadowed by his elder brother, William Jennings Bryan. But Charles Bryan had a record of his own on which to run. His name, it was true, offended many delegates and others throughout the nation who viewed William Jennings Bryan unfavorably. To these critics Charlie was just a less able but thoroughly dangerous younger brother. The ranks of those who knew Charles Bryan included many who opposed him for what he was and for what he had done. He had edited *The Commoner*, the Bryan organ, for many years. He had attacked Nebraska's gas companies and had tried to secure a municipal ice plant for Lin-

coln—dangerous indications to many people of socialism. Besides, some found that he was “loquacious beyond endurance”; that was enough to alienate some. Then in 1922 by a 50,000 vote margin he won the governorship of Nebraska, a state he pointed out that was usually Republican by that margin. Now in 1924, at the age of 57, he was ready for bigger things.<sup>4</sup>

On 70 of the 103 ballots needed to nominate Davis, Charles Bryan received votes ranging from a single tally to 19. None of these votes came from the South Dakota delegation. South Dakotans voted chiefly for William G. McAdoo, one of the front-runners as well as President Wilson’s son-in-law. South Dakota votes also went to Thomas Walsh of Montana, Albert C. Ritchie of Maryland, Carter Glass of Virginia, and others. When the deadlocked convention finally chose John W. Davis and did not stampede to the younger Bryan, there was no need for the South Dakotans to feel uneasy about their failure to support a nominee from a neighboring state.<sup>5</sup>

Bryan did not seem a likely choice for the number two spot on the Democratic ticket, and when nominations were made, South Dakota ignored the Nebraska governor to the extent that William W. Howes, national committeeman from Wolsley, South Dakota, nominated James W. Gerard of New York. With a dozen names in nomination, the convention took time out to hear New York Governor Alfred Smith and successful candidate John W. Davis. Then a recess was called to give Davis a chance to confer with leaders about his running mate. Davis’ first two choices, Thomas Walsh and Edwin Meredith of Iowa, declined to run. The suggestion of Charles Bryan evoked divided opinion, but Davis indicated his approval, and the reconvened convention added Bryan to the list.

All 13 nominees and 18 others not formally presented as candidates received votes on the first and only ballot. South Dakotans who retired late, if they were also among the few owners of radios, heard the announcement of Bryan’s victory at 12:37 a.m. on July 10. With Davis’ wish known and the trend toward Bryan clear, enough states that had voted early shifted their votes to the Nebraskan so that only a single ballot was necessary. Radio devotees also heard confusion, shouting, tumult, and “applause mingled with hisses and boos” when the announcement of victory came. Something no one heard was the usual vote to make the nomination unanimous; such action



*Charlie Bryan (left) and Charles G. Dawes, 1940. Courtesy of Lincoln State Journal. . . (Below left) Bryan (left) with Edgar Howard, Nebraska legislator (1895), lieutenant governor (1917-1919), and six-term congressman (1922-1934). . . (Below right) Bryan, like his more famous brother, emphasized his agrarian background.*



was not taken in the badly fractured and extremely fatigued convention. Not all states that wanted to change their votes gained recognition from the chairman, and Bryan was declared the winner with 740 votes—just eight more than necessary for nomination. South Dakota's 10 votes had gone to Gerard and were not changed.<sup>6</sup>

Foes, and even some friends, pointed to the strange linking of Davis and Bryan. Naturally Republicans were especially harsh. "One can hardly conceive," reported the *Minneapolis Tribune*, "of John W. Davis and Charles W. Bryan swimming in the same ocean, to say nothing of running on the same ticket." The *Chicago Tribune* viewed the selection of Bryan as "a bribe to keep [W. J.] Bryan silent." Years later a seasoned historian wrote: "The incongruous teaming of the distinguished Wall Street lawyer and the radical from a prairie state provided not a balanced but a schizoid ticket; and because the selection of Bryan was reputed to be a sop to the radicals, many delegates unfamiliar with Davis' actual record came to identify the lawyer with a conservatism in excess even of that considerable amount he did indeed represent."<sup>7</sup>

In the light of these views, it was not surprising that many Coolidge supporters in South Dakota directed more fire against Governor Bryan than against candidate Davis. With each of the three presidential tickets likely to share electoral votes, the possibility of no one receiving a majority led to speculation about the selection of the president and vice president by the House of Representatives and the Senate, respectively.

One story reported maneuvering for a deal to secure the presidency for Democrat Davis and the second spot for Republican Dawes. Some claimed that LaFollette entered the race to throw the election into Congress.<sup>8</sup> A more fascinating theory came from the facile pen of George Harvey, editor of the *North American Review*. In an article titled "The Paramount Issue: Coolidge or Chaos," Harvey suggested that in the absence of a majority of electoral votes for anyone, the House of Representatives voting as states might deadlock with no candidate securing the support of the necessary 25 state minimum. Meanwhile, however, the senators voting on the top two candidates for vice president might choose Bryan if LaFollette and other liberal Republicans deserted their party. Thus, on inauguration day with no candidate certified by the House of

Representatives for president, the new Vice President Bryan would move in to fill the vacant spot. Here would be chaos indeed! Republicans fostered the fear that Bryan was a threat to good, stable, steady government. The fantasy was repeated across the nation as the Republicans broadcast the slogan, "A vote for LaFollette is a vote for Bryan, and a vote for Davis is a vote for Bryan. A vote for Coolidge is a vote for Coolidge."<sup>9</sup>

The *Argus-Leader* of Sioux Falls made light of the situation albeit at the same time reaffirming its commitment to the support of the Republicans: "After reading that the alternative before the people is either Coolidge or chaos," penned the editor, "some one asked, 'Who is this man Chaos?' The question should not be hard to answer. The reference is very obviously to 'Brother Charley' Bryan." Indeed, Brother Charlie was a more interesting and potentially exciting figure than Davis who seemed to have no chance of becoming president by any means.<sup>10</sup>

Other theories surfaced in the cauldron of rumor. Pro-Davis elements pointed to the constitutional independence of presidential electors and suggested that between the November balloting and the casting of electoral votes there might be agreement among electors of the several persuasions to avoid deadlock. "If a majority of them should decide . . . that Henry Ford or Jack Dempsey is the proper man to send to the White House," mused the *Sioux Falls Press*, "there is nothing in the federal law to prevent the man they selected from taking office." Further, wrote the editor, there was a rumor the Republicans were already casting about for an alternate candidate if Coolidge failed to win a majority.<sup>11</sup>

The aging Senator Robert LaFollette chose Sioux Falls for one of his few major campaign addresses. He appeared at the Coliseum on October 17. President Coolidge did not venture into South Dakota, but General Dawes invaded Sioux Falls on September 19 threatening to "spill enough beans to break the bean market." Again the well-filled Coliseum resounded to the cheers and applause of a partisan crowd. Like Coolidge, candidate Davis refrained from entering South Dakota, but like the Republicans, the Democrats were represented in the state by the vice presidential candidate.<sup>12</sup>

Democratic presidential chances in 1924 in South Dakota were inauspicious even with the schism in Republican ranks

because many Democrats found LaFollette more attractive than John W. Davis. Prospects for a good party vote declined even more with the burial on August 13 of Andrew S. Anderson, Democratic candidate for governor who was killed on his Clay County farm near Alsen by a young bull. Within a week the state committee named a successor, William J. Bulow of Beresford. Perhaps to recapture any momentum lost in the sad death of Anderson, the state committee invited Governor Bryan to lend his own brand of oratory to the fight in South Dakota.<sup>13</sup>

The governor agreed to speak, and State Chairman Louis N. Crill laid plans for a Labor Day rally on Crill's farm at River Sioux Park about 10 miles northeast of Elk Point. It seemed a happy combination with the liberal Bryan opening his out-of-state campaign on Labor Day in the bucolic surroundings of the state chairman's farm. The pastoral setting was considered no handicap for attracting a suitable crowd. River Sioux Park itself was the site of a two-day celebration of the holiday weekend with baseball games, a playground for children, zoo, golf course, bathing beach, picnicking, fishing, "free acts each afternoon," roller skating, and the grand finale of "a big dance with a nine-piece orchestra featuring two pianos." All this seemed likely to lure as many as 10,000 persons to the park, and a good number of these would surely leave their holiday festivities long enough to join the party faithful in hearing the Nebraska governor.<sup>14</sup>

Thus while Labor Day "was one of repose for General Dawes," Governor Bryan on the other hand boarded a train which took him from Lincoln to Sioux City. An automobile caravan then carried the candidate and party regulars through Jefferson and Elk Point to the park and farm by the Big Sioux River. Riding with Bryan in the lead vehicle driven by Senate candidate Ulysses Simpson Grant Cherry were the host Crill and William W. Howes, state Democratic national committeeman. Cherry's car in turn "was flanked on either side with motors with placards of the Sioux City-Davis-Bryan club," and behind came the vehicles of representatives from Iowa and Nebraska as well as South Dakota. To fortify himself for the politicking which lay ahead, Bryan dined "family style with Mr. Crill, his wife and children, a few of the neighbors, his campaign managers and associates and the Democratic leaders and candidates of South Dakota."

After the meal the rally commenced with the recently selected gubernatorial candidate William J. Bulow as master of ceremonies giving the opening speech of his campaign and of the gathering. He "sounded an alarm against . . . graft and greed at Washington." Band music, vocal solos by Sioux City Davis-Bryan Chairman George Finch, songs by the Davis-Bryan singers, including parodies employing such familiar tunes as "Ain't Got No Style" and "A Hot Time in the Old Town," further prepared the way for the main speaker. The preliminaries also afforded opportunity for additional listeners to make their way to the area around the Crill front porch near which "a plain little platform" had been built.

An estimated 2,500 or more people, unintimidated by late forenoon rain, were rewarded when the sun shone on the rally. Bryan, wearing his customary black skull cap, sent his voice out over the mass of people as he attacked "graft, greed and corruption in office," the "unjust tariff," "special privilege," the money policy of the Federal Reserve system, and especially the Republicans' consistent "opposing [of] every piece of legislation . . . which would put agriculture on an economic equality with other industries." The governor referred to former Nebraskan Charles Dawes as "my friend and former fellow-townsmen," and mentioned that Dawes had characterized the campaign as one of "brass tacks" while the president had called for the application of "common sense." "I say," stormed the Democratic leader, "that the Republicans have already gotten the farmer down to bedrock and it is time to apply common honesty in government as well as in private life." The largely partisan crowd responded enthusiastically to the attacks on the Republicans and seemed to agree that "labor is not a commodity—but it is human."

The candidate called the crowd "home folks," and the folksy character of the meeting was heightened by "two bobbed haired babies whose parents parked them . . . on the planked rostrum. . . . The tots played about the governor's feet all the time he talked, and one [nearly untied the speaker's] shoestring while the guest of honor was at the climax of his address." From the Democratic point of view it was a successful event from start to finish.<sup>15</sup>

Governor Bryan made another foray into the state in mid-October. The occasion was the dedication of the Missouri River

bridge at Yankton. The center of the \$1,250,000 structure on the Sunshine or Meridian Highway, as it was variously designated, seemed an appropriate place for Republican Governor William H. McMaster of South Dakota to meet his Democratic counterpart from Nebraska. And with an available crowd political oratory was clearly in order.

Traffic had flowed across the great interstate link since October 11, but on October 16 vehicular movement halted, and delayed travelers had little choice but to join those who had come as more willing observers. An estimated 13,000 witnessed the two governors accepting the span from the bridge company on behalf of the people of their two states, and the politicking followed. There was no need for either governor to be overly reticent in his remarks—McMaster's candidacy for United States senator and Bryan's for the vice presidency could both be pressed without personal affront to each other. Previously the two men had consulted each other about their common feeling that gasoline prices were too high and about their efforts to reduce prices.

Predictably, Bryan began with felicitous remarks about the bridge and its great value to the area. Then as he turned partisan, he warned Republicans to "put cotton in your ears or withdraw." He attacked the party of Coolidge for its agricultural policy, the recent scandals, Federal Reserve policies, and the Fordney-McCumber tariff. Then came his more positive pitch for votes as he pled for the party which during World War I "convinced the world it could function during the war and coordinate and administer without trace of robbery."

After Governor McMaster had his turn, and when other formalities at the bridge ended, dignitaries adjourned to the Yankton State Hospital for a banquet. Returning from the festive board, the Nebraska governor had an opportunity to demonstrate his humanity as he "played Good Samaritan to an injured man who lay by the side of the road." Both friendly and hostile newspapers carried identical dispatches relating that "Mr. Bryan jumped out and rushed to him almost before the car had stopped, picked him up and assisted in getting him to the hospital." Reporters were not interested in the identity of the victim or in the cause or nature of the injuries—the rescuer made better journalistic coverage. The press did report at first that the "injured man was not seriously hurt."<sup>16</sup>

By election day Republican fortunes and prospects rose while opposing tickets declined. Calvin Coolidge and Charles Dawes won a stunning victory. The electoral college handled the matter, with Congress filling only the simple role of opening and counting electoral votes, all of which were cast routinely for the popular choices in the 48 states.

In Bryan's home state the Republicans carried a plurality of presidential votes—47 percent, while Davis and Bryan outran LaFollette and Wheeler with almost 30 percent to a little over 23 percent. South Dakota did less well for the Democrats—only 13 percent, while almost 50 percent voted Republican and almost 37 percent supported LaFollette. In no county did the Democrats out-vote Coolidge, and LaFollette was outpointed by Bryan in only seven counties. The appearance by Bryan in Union and Yankton counties did not seem to have wrought any major shift of votes to the Democrats. Despite the Labor Day address, Union County gave Davis and Bryan only a little less than 24 percent of the vote while in Yankton County slightly more than 18 percent went to the Democrats. In both of these counties, the Democrats ran behind the Coolidge-Dawes and LaFollette-Wheeler tickets.<sup>17</sup>

When the voters thus chose Coolidge, George Harvey and other alarmists breathed easily once more. They could see no chaos on the horizon.

## NOTES

1. *Vermillion Dakota Republican*, July 10, 1924; *Dell Rapids Reporter* quoted in *ibid.* (All papers in South Dakota except where otherwise noted.)

2. *World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1928*, 865, conveniently lists the various designations under which LaFollette and Wheeler ran in the various states.

3. Krock quoted in David Burner, "The Democratic Party, 1910-1932," in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., ed., *History of U.S. Political Parties*, Vol. III, 1910-1945, *From Square Deal to New Deal* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers 1973), 1823; *New Republic*, quoted in *ibid.*, 1825; David B. Burner, "The Democratic Party in the Election of 1924," in Morton Borden, ed., *Political Parties in American History*, Vol. 3, 1890-Present (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 1071.

4. David Burner, "Election of 1924," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968* (4 vols.; New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971), Vol. III, 2476; *Literary Digest*, July 26, 1924.

5. *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic Convention . . . 1924 . . .* (Indianapolis: Bookwalter-Ball-Greathouse Printing Co., n.d.), 338-980. The odd votes cast by the South Dakota delegation were chiefly by P. J. Donahue of Bonesteel who frequently split the South Dakota vote. *Sioux Falls Daily Press*, July 3, 1924.

6. *Vermillion Plain Talk*, July 10, 1924; *Official Report of the . . . Democratic Convention . . . 1924, passim*; Robert K. Murray, *The 103rd Ballot; Democrats and the*

*Disaster in Madison Square Garden* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 208-213.

7. *Literary Digest*, July 26, 1924, 7; Burner in *History of American Presidential Elections*, Vol. III, 2476-2477.

8. *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1924.

9. George Harvey, "The Paramount Issue: Coolidge or Chaos," *North American Review*, Vol. CCXX (September, 1924), 1-9; reprinted in Schlesinger, *History of U.S. Political Parties*, Vol. III, 1880-1886; Burner, *History of American Presidential Elections*, Vol. III, 2485-2486; *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, October 18, 1924; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, October 6, 1924; *Vermillion Dakota Republican*, September 4, 1924.

10. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, October 10, 1924.

11. *Sioux Falls Daily Press*, October 9, 1924.

12. *New York Times*, September 19, 20, 1924; October 18, 1924; *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 1924; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, September 20, 1924; *Sioux Falls Daily Press*, October 16, 17, 1924.

13. *Elk Point Leader-Courier*, August 14, 21, 1924; *Vermillion Plain Talk*, August 14, 21, 1924; *Sioux Falls Daily Press*, August 12, 20, 1924; Herbert S. Schell, *History of Clay County, South Dakota* (Vermillion: Clay County Historical Society, Inc., 1976), 214.

14. *Sioux Falls Daily Press*, August 28, 1924; *Elk Point Leader-Courier*, September 4, 1924; *Vermillion Plain Talk*, July 17, 1924.

15. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, September 1, 1924; *Vermillion Dakota Republican*, September 4, 1924; *Elk Point Leader-Courier*, August 28, September 4, 1924; *Sioux Falls Daily Press*, September 2, 1924; *Vermillion Plain Talk*, August 28, September 4, 1924; *New York Times*, September 2, 1924; Cedric Cummins to Ralph Tingley, December 5, 1978. Bryan's explanation for wearing a black skull cap was that "years ago in my office the sunshine affected the nerves in the top of my head, bringing on severe pain in the eyes and severe headaches. Since that time any kind of light, either natural or artificial, proves troublesome to me, so that when it becomes necessary to remove my hat I put on the skull cap." (*Literary Digest*, July 26, 1924, 5.) The *Sioux Falls Daily Press* (September 12, 1924) poked good-natured fun at the Republicans and even Williams Jennings Bryan in its treatment of Charles Bryan's bald head. The *Press* rejected the Republican claim that the skull cap was to "cover up both a bald exterior and a bald interior." "Early man was hairy, very," said the *Press*, and the bald man "has gotten a little farther along in the process of evolution than the fellow who still rejoices in the flowing mane."

16. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, August 28, September 24, October 16, 17, 1924; *Sioux Falls Daily Press*, October 17, 18, 1924.

17. Schlesinger, ed., *History of American Presidential Elections 1789-1968*. Vol. III, 2581; *South Dakota Legislative Manual, 1925* (Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1925), 242-244. In an eight-man race, Governor McMaster was successful in his bid to move to the United States Senate; his Yankton appearance and whole campaign gave him favorable exposure. The tardily nominated William J. Bulow failed in his bid to be governor of South Dakota in 1924, but in 1926 he defeated Republican Carl Gundersen, who had triumphed in 1924. *Ibid.*, 237-238; *Ibid.*, 1927, 196, 216.