



William Jennings Bryan's First Nebraska Years

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WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN'S FIRST NEBRASKA YEARS

BY PAOLO E. COLETTA

WHEN William Jennings Bryan moved from Illinois to Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1887, he stepped from one life into another, quietly closing the door upon the East and opening that to the West. Not far beyond the depot at which he met Adolphus Talbot, a law school classmate and now his law partner, lay the last frontier. Thousands of settlers were coming to claim the million acres yet available under the Homestead law, flowing in so fast that twenty-two counties had been created in the last seven years, although Indian outbreaks had not yet ceased. Most of the people were farmers, with corn and wheat the great staples, and ranching an important adjunct, especially in the western part of the state. Lincoln itself had only lately emerged from frontier life; a mere hamlet called Lancaster twenty years before, it was now the state capital, its population nearing the forty thousand mark.¹

Nebraska's laws were similar to those of Illinois. Since her original constitution had been remodelled after that of Illinois of 1870, Bryan qualified easily for the bar and was

¹ Everett E. Dick, "Problems of the Post Frontier City as Portrayed by Lincoln, Nebraska, 1880-1890," *Nebraska History*, XXVIII (April-June, 1947), 132-143.

admitted to practice only two weeks after reaching the state.²

Bryan felt himself very fortunate in having Talbot as a partner. They still possessed similar professional and political ambitions. Talbot was a Republican and a Methodist and Bryan a Presbyterian and a Democrat, but this in no way marred their amicable relations, and they joked about the manner in which baldness was attacking them, Talbot in back, Bryan in front. They worked together harmoniously. Bryan, following his predilection for the negative, would ferret out the possible line of attack of the opposition. Talbot would then outline the positive arguments to be made at court. At the end of the month each would total up income and outgo and write "settled" across his ledger, the one with the larger income giving the other half of the larger amount. Talbot was an attorney for the Missouri Pacific but Bryan refused to work for the railroad corporations. Talbot's income from the railroad was therefore not included in the firm's accounts.

Once again, as he had done when he first started practice in Jacksonville, Illinois, Bryan went through the narrows. With money furnished by his father-in-law, John Baird, later repaid with interest, he commissioned the building of a house on D Street, about half a mile from his office. The house and barn, to cost \$3,290, were to be completed by June 1888, when he would be joined by his family³. Meanwhile he slept on a folding lounge in the office and ate only two meals a day. From October through December 1887 he earned only \$82.55, and he distinctly remembered when receipts justified three squares a day. He went to Jacksonville for the Christmas holidays of 1887, arranged for the sale of his property there, and returned to Lincoln in January 1888. He tried to avoid the collection business by writing to all the county attorneys and requesting them to engage

² Thomas S. Allen to Mrs. Ruth Bryan Rohde, February 16, 1944, Rohde Papers.

³ Contract dated March 15, 1888, Silas Bryan Papers. These are the papers of Charles Wayland Bryan, made available to the writer through the courtesy of his son, Silas Bryan.

him as their agent in Lincoln. A few did, but most of his work remained in collections and in tax foreclosure cases. His first fee came from a former Illinoisan who had heard him make a stump speech in which he had advertised himself as a lawyer. Soon afterwards he wrote a letter to a man who had failed to pay his grocery bill and asked him to call. Several days later the grocer himself appeared, smiling in such a way as to cause Bryan to think that the bill had been paid. "Well, I sent him the note," said Bryan. "Did it stir him up?" "Stir him up!" replied the grocer, removing his hat and revealing a lump the size of an egg on his head, "I should think it did." The offended debtor had called upon him instead of Bryan and had hit him on the head with a brick!⁴

Talbot and Bryan appeared in each of the hierarchy of courts—Justice, County, and Supreme Court of the State—and in all branches of the law—civil, criminal, and equity. Most of their cases dealt with collections and foreclosures. Of the nine Supreme Court cases they handled between 1888 and 1891 six involved political disputes; it was in these that Bryan appeared at his best.⁵

In one of his earliest cases Bryan fought a justice of the peace who would not serve some papers unless certain fees were paid. Bryan got a judge to issue a writ of mandamus ordering the justice to serve the papers without payment. The defendant appealed and the case went to the Supreme Court, where, using the state's motto, "Equality Before the Law," Bryan won his case. Bryan received no payment, but the defendant had a post office named after him when he moved to Oklahoma.⁶ Bryan took another case because he objected, as his father had before him, to the granting of bounties to private industries. The new sugar beet factories of Nebraska had obtained a state bounty and were seeking county and precinct bounties. An opponent retained Bryan

⁴ William Jennings and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Philadelphia, c. 1925), p. 77.

⁵ Jesse E. Boell, "William Jennings Bryan Before 1896" (Ms. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1929), pp. 31-35.

⁶ Bryan, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-79.

to test the constitutionality of the county bounties. He filed a brief in which he contended that the work of the sugar factories could not be classed as a work of internal improvement within the laws of the state and that they were therefore not legally entitled to bounties. The court followed his line of reasoning and decided the bounties unconstitutional. A still more important case involved a county seat election. The Union Pacific, which ran through Scotia, on the edge of Greeley County, opposed the Burlington, which wanted to move the county seat to Greeley Center, in the middle of the county, through which its line ran. Bryan noted that every voter in the county was at the polls—"plus others." Because of fraudulent ballots the case went to the Supreme Court, before which Bryan successfully pleaded the case of his clients from Scotia.⁷

Bryan's ideals as a lawyer are better illustrated by what he thought and said about the law than by his practice. All his emphasis was upon morality, not upon winning cases. Honesty, truthfulness, and upright conduct, he felt, paid greater returns than the law. A lawyer, he said, was an officer of the court who should aid in the administration of justice. No lawyer could afford to make an argument he did not believe in himself, nor try to mislead either judge or jury. "One who repeatedly attempts to prove that 'black is white,' " he stated, "in time becomes color blind and cannot himself distinguish between right and wrong."⁸

Contemporary lawyers like Charles G. Dawes agreed that Bryan was a good lawyer, especially a good jury lawyer, and that he might have built up a successful practice as a pleader.⁹ He himself thought that his experiences at Jacksonville were so brief that they could not be counted as a test of his ability.¹⁰ In Lincoln he earned eight hundred

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-81.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233, 236; W. J. Bryan, *Heart to Heart Appeals* (New York, 1917), pp. 148-149.

⁹ Charles G. Dawes to writer, September 28, 1948; interview with W. H. Selleck, Lincoln, Nebraska, July 7, 1948; Boell, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Bryan, *Memoirs*, p. 75.

dollars in 1888, between fourteen hundred and two thousand dollars during 1889 and 1890, and almost twelve hundred dollars for the first eleven months of 1891.¹¹ But in Lincoln he gave much more of his time to politics than to law. "Those who complain," wrote Mrs. Bryan, referring to those who said he was a failure at the bar, "should consider that he entered the practice at twenty-three and left it at thirty, and during that period began twice, and twice became more than self-supporting."¹² In Jacksonville he had been able to save some money; in Lincoln he added to his savings. To him the law subserved politics, was merely a means to an end and not the end itself, and his success in politics in Nebraska so overshadowed that at law that he abandoned it by 1895.

In many ways Bryan's early life in Lincoln was a repetition of that in Jacksonville. He was again the plodding lawyer anxious to earn enough to support himself and his family, the diligent handshaker in search of friends and clients, a member of most of the town's social and fraternal organizations, a pillar of the church, a temperance crusader, and a devoted party worker. But in Jacksonville he had gotten nowhere in politics in three years, while in Nebraska he was elected to Congress at the end of a similar period. No sooner had he settled in his new office than he wooed politics intensively, shedding his objective of financial independence as he would a coat that had caught fire. He studied the political situation in Nebraska, began a voluminous correspondence with the makers and purveyors of public opinion, introduced himself to the leading politicians of the state, and took an active part in organized politics.

Nebraska, he learned, was divided by geographical features but united under railroad and Republican control. The Platte River, winding in its shallow bed from east to west, split the state north and south; the loess prairie

¹¹ Bryan, "Memorandum Book," Bryan Papers, Library of Congress.

¹² William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle* (Chicago, 1897), p. 48.

of the east was different from the semi-arid lands of the west. But all sections early had lost control of their political destinies to the railroads, with the Burlington and the Northwestern in the saddle in the north, the Union Pacific in the south.¹³ One Senator handled the patronage of the north, the other of the south. The history of Nebraska was distressingly similar to that of Illinois since the Civil War. From the beginning of statehood the Republican party had, except for one Congressman, won every state and national billet in Nebraska between 1868 and 1890.¹⁴ Moreover, the Democrats were split into two factions. The situation did not seem hopeless to Bryan, however, because the problems of the people of Nebraska were to a large extent those of the people of Illinois, and, more important, were the very ones which he had debated at Sigma Pi, his college literary society, and upon which he had cut his political teeth—the tariff, prohibition, direct election of senators, woman suffrage, and the currency question. Furthermore, the people of Nebraska were beginning to writhe in the throes of a new upheaval. What the Grange and Greenback movements had meant to Illinois in the seventies and early eighties the Farmers' Alliances meant to Nebraska in the late eighties. Bryan felt fully prepared to lead the people in discussing methods of reform.

Bryan got much better acquainted with the prominent politicians of Nebraska than he did with his clients. He carried letters of introduction from Congressman William M. Springer of Illinois to J. Sterling Morton and from Judge Carl Epler of Jacksonville to Jefferson H. Broady, the popular Democratic lawyer. In Omaha he knew Edward L. Merritt, editor and general manager of the Omaha *Daily Herald*, who was on friendly terms with Morton and a frequent

¹³ Charles Gates Dawes, *A Journal of the McKinley Years, 1893-1913* (Chicago, 1950), pp. 12, 15; Arthur Mullen, *Western Democrat* (New York, 1940), p. 63.

¹⁴ J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1913), III, 42.

visitor at Arbor Lodge, Morton's palatial residence on the outskirts of Nebraska City.¹⁵

While waiting for a favorable opportunity to meet Morton and Broady, Bryan wrote letters to Democratic politicians and to editors of Democratic newspapers in which he described his views and asked for first-hand accounts of the way the political game was played in Nebraska. He received many answers, some quite illuminating, from which he learned the details of the split in the Democracy and that the big issue of the forthcoming presidential campaign would be the tariff.¹⁶ He injected politics into his legal correspondence and found many of his correspondents in agreement with him on the need for tariff reform. In the spring of 1888 he spent many evenings over the *Congressional Record*, filled a notebook with the schedules of the Mills bill, then under consideration in Congress, and became letter perfect on tariff reform arguments. He wrote Morton early in November 1887 that "Your efforts in behalf of a reduction of the tariff have made your name well known in Illinois," and expressed his desire to meet him in person.¹⁷ By May 1888 he was corresponding on intimate terms with Morton, who said that Republican opposition to tariff reform would lose them (the Republicans) many votes and that what was needed was enlightenment "as to the diabolism of tariff taxation."¹⁸ This "diabolism," Bryan replied, he stood ready to prove.

Because Morton agreed with him on tariff reform and many other matters Bryan came to look upon him as the outstanding Democratic leader of the state. Morton was in no way the idol of the entire state, however, but of that group called the "slaughterhouse" Democrats, in opposition to the "packinghouse" Democrats. Morton had already fig-

¹⁵ Merritt to Bryan, March 16, 1890, Bryan Papers; Henry W. Clendenin, "Hon. Edward Livingston Merritt, 1836-1920," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XIII (October, 1920), 426-427.

¹⁶ See J. L. McDonough to Bryan, February 29, 1888, Bryan Papers.

¹⁷ Bryan to Morton, November 15, 1887, Morton Papers, University of Nebraska Library.

¹⁸ Morton to Bryan, May 23, 1888, Bryan Papers.

ured in Nebraska history for a generation. In his early years he had published the *Nebraska City News* and begun the agricultural and arboricultural work which obtained him world-wide renown as the founder of Arbor Day. His efforts to maintain the Democratic organization steadfast against Republican encroachment dated from the Civil War and earned him honor as one of the state's foremost leaders until his death in 1902. Yet he was a conservative rather than a radical and only occasionally went beyond his party in demands for reform. His engagement by the railroads as a Washington lobbyist was well known, but he joined Bryan in opposing subsidies of any kind. He went beyond Bryan, who wanted tariff reform, by demanding absolutely free trade, but agreed with Bryan on the traditional Democratic policy of opposing sumptuary legislation. He was nominated for governor in 1880, 1882, and 1884.¹⁹ Here was a man to whom Bryan could well hitch his star.

Bryan was much less impressed when he looked over the anti-Morton Democrats, the "packinghouse" or "administration" Democrats led by Dr. George L. Miller, who had broken with Morton on the tariff and patronage questions. Miller, owner-editor of the *Omaha Herald* until 1887, was long recognized as a prominent western member of the Tilden machine. He had the ear of Daniel Manning in Cleveland's cabinet and of James E. Boyd, Democratic national committeeman, and thus had much to say in regard to the patronage. But he was a Randall-type protectionist, even if he accepted Cleveland as Tilden's rightful heir. When Bryan came to choose between these leaders, one a man of principle who could not reward him, the other a man of neo-Republican principles who could, he chose Morton.

Bryan began his political career in Nebraska by speaking at local meetings. In his very first speech, in Lincoln, he likened the tariff to a cow fed by Western farmers and milked by Eastern manufacturers.²⁰ He soon became city

¹⁹ James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* (Lincoln, 1942), p. 331; Morton-Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, III, 287.

²⁰ *Nebraska State Journal*, October 12, 1890.



THE BRYAN HOME AT 1625 D STREET, LINCOLN
(Photo taken, March, 1938)

chairman.²¹ Within six months he was speaking outside of Lincoln.²² Within a year Morton thought highly enough of him to note in his Journal that "Bryan . . . is a remarkably promising young man. He has gifts. He will be, with good habits and right directions, a benefactor to good government."²³

Bryan's forensic talents were put to full use in the campaign of 1888 for the benefit of Morton and Cleveland. He planned to convince the voters of the state of his superiority over others even if the "right directions" which Morton wished to provide clashed with the directions in which he himself wanted to go. He gained his first recognition in the Lancaster County Democratic convention in April, 1888, in which debate centered upon a motion to endorse Morton as delegate-at-large to the national convention. Morton won over the Boyd opposition and Bryan himself was elected a representative to the state convention, which would meet in Omaha on May 3.²⁴ There he gave a "spirited address" on the tariff in which he declared that victory could be won if Cleveland's tariff message of December 1887 were made the basis of a vigorous campaign. If the Democrats went out to the farmers of Nebraska and showed them the iniquity of the tariff system, he felt, they would rally around the cause which their noble leader, Grover Cleveland, had championed. The crowd "went wild." "The youngest member of the convention was a bright young Democrat from Lancaster county . . . who was rocked in a cradle made of hickory," commented the Omaha *Herald*.²⁵ The speech thrust Bryan from a position as a promising lawyer to a prominent place in Nebraska politics. By those who believe his success in life resulted from oratory alone, the speech is characterized as a precursor of the "Cross of Gold" in effect, launching

²¹ Bryan, *Memoirs*, p. 82; Wayne C. Williams, *William Jennings Bryan, A Study in Political Vindication* (New York, 1936), p. 62.

²² Bryan, *First Battle*, p. 49.

²³ Morton, Arbor Lodge Journal, September 27, 1888, Morton Papers.

²⁴ Omaha *Daily Herald*, May 2, 3, 1888.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1888.

him "fairly upon the tumultuous seas of politics just as in later days a single impassioned address won for him a presidential nomination."²⁶ A truer estimate is that it earned for him "somewhat of a state reputation."²⁷ It was enough to cause the State Central Committee to invite him to stump the state for Cleveland and tariff reform.²⁸

On May 22 Bryan wrote Morton that he would soon go to Illinois to get his wife and daughter and would like to stop in Nebraska City to meet him and some of his friends. Morton replied to come, to stay overnight if he wished. After the visit Morton logged in his journal, "He came—we liked him. Pleasant day."²⁹ Bryan looked forward to pleasant days, too, for while business was not very brisk, as he wrote Mary, "You don't know with what infinite pleasure I contemplate this termination of my widower life."³⁰

No sooner had Bryan settled his wife, daughter, and in-laws in their new home—a three-story structure with an observation tower on the roof—than he left them to attend the Democratic National Convention, held June 5-7 in St. Louis. As a follower of Morton he was entitled to a place on the floor. While Cleveland was renominated, Bryan came away from the convention impressed mostly by a dark man who, supporting on crutches a body shattered by four wounds received at the battle of the Wilderness, made an excellent nominating speech. He and the speaker, Senator John D. Daniel of Virginia, would soon become good friends.³¹ From Daniel's speech, and from others made in the convention, Bryan obtained additional ideas for his tariff reform speeches, with which he set out to stump Nebraska.

Bryan spoke first in the eastern part of the state. Then, in response to the invitation from the State Central Committee, he commenced a tour that took him eventually into thirty-

²⁶ Willis John Abbot, "William Jennings Bryan—A Character Sketch," *Review of Reviews*, XIV (August, 1896), 164-165.

²⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

²⁸ Euclid Martin to Bryan, September 26, 1888, Bryan Papers.

²⁹ Bryan to Morton, May 22, 1888; Morton to Bryan, May 23, 1888; Arbor Lodge Journal, May 30, 1888, Morton Papers.

³⁰ Bryan to Mary Bryan, May 11, 1888, Rohde Papers.

³¹ Bryan, *Memoirs*, p. 99.

four counties. On July 20 he delivered a tariff reform speech in Columbus in which he held his audience for two hours, placing his facts "in a clear and forcible way, dispensing with the usual stump oratory, but illustrating his address by apt stories and bright quotations."³² In a speech at a Saturday night rally at Weeping Water, after Morton had already spoken for an hour and a half, he answered demands for additional "entertainment" with a speech in which he so "captivated his hearers that they hung upon his words for over an hour and when [he] wished to stop they would not have it so."³³ He increased his reputation as an orator and extemporaneous speaker when he addressed the Omaha Democratic Club, an organization boasting two thousand members, on the tariff, closing with a laudation of Cleveland. The Omaha *Daily Herald* editorialized that he would soon be as prominent as Thurston or any other Republican speaker in the state. This was quite a compliment, for John Thurston was deemed "the untamed orator of Nebraska" and "the Demosthenes of the West," and was being mentioned as a possible member of Harrison's cabinet if the Republicans won the election.³⁴ By the middle of August an Omaha paper noted that "no young men in Lincoln are doing better work for the party than William Jennings Bryan is doing for the democracy. He is in great demand as a political speaker and deserves his popularity."³⁵

As Bryan's reputation for ready wit and convincing oratory spread, Democrats everywhere began to ask him for information. "I want statistics . . . and figures," wrote one. "Can you help me out?"³⁶ Bryan in turn wrote to William M. Springer, who was defending the Mills bill in Congress, for a *Compendium of the Census* and for a *Tariff Compilation*. Springer told Bryan to give the Republicans "your best licks,

³² Omaha *Daily Herald*, August 15, 1888. The speech, delivered on July 20, was not reported by the newspapers until August 15, evidence that Bryan wrote up his experiences on the road and handed them to the press upon his return from tour.

³³ *Ibid.*, August 6, 1888.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, December 31, 1888.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, August 18, 1888.

³⁶ Ed P. Smith to Bryan, July 26, 1888, Bryan Papers.

and it will count in time.”³⁷ Ten days later, after receiving a newspaper report of one of Bryan’s speeches, Springer wrote, “That’s right. Give them thunder. . . . You and I used to double team on the natives—but as we are separated we’ll have to go it alone.”³⁸

Morton took an almost paternal interest in Bryan and pushed him forward, and Democrats throughout the state invited him to speak to them. “The meeting and pole-raising is at Verdon, Richardson County, on the 16th,” wrote Morton on August 10. “I do wish you would go, it will do you good and Tariff Reform good.”³⁹ “Bryan,” wrote Morton to a friend, “is a fine speaker. He came here with a letter of introduction to me from Springer, who endorses very highly his ability as a lawyer, his integrity as a man and his soundness and eloquence as a faithful Democrat.”⁴⁰

The Democrats of Barada, McCook, Palmyra, and David City were completely taken with Bryan.⁴¹ The McCook Democracy invited Bryan to address them again, this time at the large gathering expected at the county fair. “Can you come and meet the Enemy for us? . . . The Republicans will have Thurston if he can be gotten—If not the next biggest. You are our choice—*Bryan the Invincible*.”⁴² In this letter is found the first reference in Bryan’s correspondence to the Republicans as the “Enemy,” a designation which he picked up and employed with good effect in the West but with poor results in the East when he became a presidential candidate. After September he spoke under the auspices of the State Central Campaign Committee; he could not possibly meet the flood of invitations which poured upon him from all quarters of the state. A man who had been out of the state for a short time found upon his return that the Democrats of Nebraska had suddenly become enthralled with a new man.

³⁷ Springer to Bryan, August 14, 1888, Bryan Papers.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, August 24, 1888, Bryan Papers.

³⁹ Morton to Bryan, August 10, 1888, Bryan Papers.

⁴⁰ Morton to J. W. Stump, August 10, 1888, Morton Papers.

⁴¹ Thomas Colfer to Bryan, September 13; J. H. Morehead to Bryan, September 6; W. S. White to Bryan, September 13; editor *Butler County Press* to Bryan September 15, 1888, Bryan Papers.

⁴² Thomas Colfer to Bryan, September 24, 1888, Bryan Papers.

"I am delighted with the laudations given by every one I met, even Republicans," the man wrote Bryan after hearing him speak. "By your personal magnetism you won all hearts and by the force of your Eloquence and the irresistible character of your logic and argument you *vanquished* the Enemy."⁴³ Audiences "fairly exploded" when he spoke.⁴⁴ No man in Nebraska history had risen so high in Democratic estimation as rapidly as had Bryan. To the harassed and despondent Democrats of Nebraska this new and gifted talker was manna from heaven. He was the "darling of the Democrats." He was young, healthy, strong, capable of sustaining almost any strain to which he subjected himself. Tirelessly he traveled across the prairies, impressing his hearers with his exuberant spirits and energy. He poured his words out in red-hot haste, cramming the utmost of meaning into the smallest compass. He was remembered not only because of his smooth voice, eloquent gestures, and wit, but also because he spoke in words his hearers understood, because he spoke to them as an equal, not a superior. He therefore appeared the embodiment of honesty and sincerity, one possessed of an emotional impact not possible in a dishonest demagogue, of undying faith in the righteousness of the causes he sponsored, of the correctness of his decisions. He generated faith in himself as well as in causes, and when he asked people to follow him they followed in admiration, respect, and love, in many instances in idolatry.

The first indication of his exceptional power over an audience came during a speech at Chadron, in western Nebraska, in the fall of 1888. He had gone to Chadron on legal business in connection with the building of a new Dawes County courthouse. There he met Sheriff James C. Dahlman, a slight, wiry ex-cowboy.⁴⁵ Dahlman liked Bryan at once and invited him to accompany him to a rally in Gordon, Sheridan County. Upon arrival it was learned that the main speaker of the occasion had failed to appear. Dahlman

⁴³ *Ibid.*, October 8, 1888, Bryan Papers.

⁴⁴ *Omaha Daily Herald*, August 25, 1888.

⁴⁵ Fred Carey, *Mayor Jim: The Life of James C. Dahlman* (Omaha, 1930), pp. 57-60.

was asked if any of his delegation could make a speech. Dahlman replied with an emphatic "No!"—not to such a large gathering. Bryan suggested that he be allowed to help out, and the chairman of the meeting decided to "take a chance." After a local orator's words had fallen lifeless as wet sand into the sunburnt faces of his audience, Bryan's words came as a rushing flood from the Niobrara River nearby. His torrential swirl of words quickly stilled the noisy crowd. Soon oldtimers sat on the edge of their seats and nodded their heads in approval at the unknown strippling before them. This was no paunchy politician, this was one with the makings of a man. Bryan held them enthralled for two hours with tariff talk, and when he finished they surrounded their new-found prophet and barely let him go in time to catch his train. Dahlman commented that such oratory had never been heard before in northwest Nebraska. "I believe they would have listened all night."

Bryan reached home as day was breaking. He entered the bedroom and awakened his wife. Sitting on the edge of the bed he told her about the trip and the effect of his speech upon the audience. "Mary," he said, "I have had a strange experience. Last night I found I had power over the audience. I could move them as I chose. I have more than usual power as a speaker. I know it." Then the influence of his religious being surged within him and, bowing his head in prayer, he said, "God grant I may use it wisely."⁴⁶

On August 25, 1888, Bryan attended the Lancaster County convention at Lincoln and was chosen a delegate to the state convention which would meet a few days later. In the latter he moved to make unanimous the nomination of John A. McShane for governor. His own reputation had earned him serious mention as a likely candidate for a state office, but a state post did not appeal to him. Therefore when he was named for the offices of lieutenant governor and attorney general, he declined. He appreciated the mark of favor granted a comparative newcomer and the fact that

⁴⁶ Interview with J. C. Dahlman by Jesse E. Boell, reported in Boell, *op. cit.*, p. 49; Bryan, *Memoirs* p. 249; Carey, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

his name had been spread before men from all parts of the state, but he felt that he could not afford a campaign, that he would suffer defeat if he ran, and besides, he felt it wiser to bide his time until bigger game came into view.⁴⁷

When no candidate came forward or appeared willing to be drafted in the First District congressional convention, held in September at Nebraska City, Morton was induced to accept the standard for the third time. Bryan sought to oil the friction between the Morton and the Miller-Boyd groups, but his motion calling for the creation of a resolutions committee lost to one which accepted the state platform for the district. He didn't like the idea of the state machine writing the rules for the congressional district, but was powerless to change the situation. When Morton began an active campaign he supported him in a speaking tour which carried him first along the southern boundary of the state to Franklin County in the west, then north to the Platte River, and so back to Lincoln. By the end of October he had spoken in twenty-five counties and was being referred to as a "wheel-horse."⁴⁸ Many Republicans and Independents as well as Democrats thought highly of him. They liked his courage in challenging opponents to debate the issues and noted that on several occasions those rash enough to accept had failed to appear.⁴⁹ When one opponent waved the bloody shirt and wandered from the tariff the crowd called out "Tariff, go back to the tariff."⁵⁰ Many Republicans confessed that they saw light where darkness had been before and now would "cast their vote . . . for their interest instead of being guided by partisan blindness."⁵¹

⁴⁷ *Omaha Daily Herald*, August 26, 30, 1888.

⁴⁸ *Omaha Daily Herald*, September 28, and October 26, 1888; *Arbor Lodge Journal*, September 27, November 3, 1888; Norbert R. Mahnken, "The Nebraska Congressional Delegation and Tariff Legislation, 1880-1900" (Ms. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1939), pp. 47-58; Morton-Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, III, 218-219; Thomas W. Tipton, *Forty Years of Nebraska*, Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Second Series, IV (1902), 461.

⁴⁹ *Omaha Daily Herald*, September 4, October 2, 13, 1888.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, October 5, 1888.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Bryan's efforts were nowhere matched by the managers of the national campaign. Still, an analysis of the "sweeping" Republican victory reveals that a slight shift in the vote of four states would have re-elected Cleveland.⁵² The final factor in Cleveland's defeat was the use of bribery in New York and Indiana.⁵³ Said Cleveland, "I don't regret it. It is better to be defeated battling for an honest principle than to win by cowardly subterfuge."⁵⁴ Bryan wrote him that "we would rather fall with you fighting on and for a principal [sic] than to succeed with the party representing nothing but an organized appetite. Your position was so wisely and bravely taken that I believe the party will look back to you in after years with gratitude and not with reproach." If he would move to Nebraska and run in '92, suggested Bryan, he could be elected. "As a Western man with friends you have in the East, we can elect you. Why not come to Omaha or Lincoln."⁵⁵

Bryan gained a state-wide reputation in the campaign of 1888 despite inadequate Democratic newspaper coverage from the state capital and with the good wishes of only one Omaha newspaper.⁵⁶ He received congratulatory letters from friends in Illinois, from college and law school classmates now scattered throughout the nation, and for the first time gained support for an appointive office. Morton recommended to the state's attorney general that Bryan be placed on the Railroad Commission as "a representative of the cleanest and most advanced economic thought in the party."⁵⁷ His name appeared on the list of candidates for secretary to the Board, and he received two votes in the first seven ballots, but then the Board disagreed and ad-

⁵² The Republican plurality in Indiana was 2,348, in Rhode Island 4,438, in New York 13,002, and in Ohio 19,599.

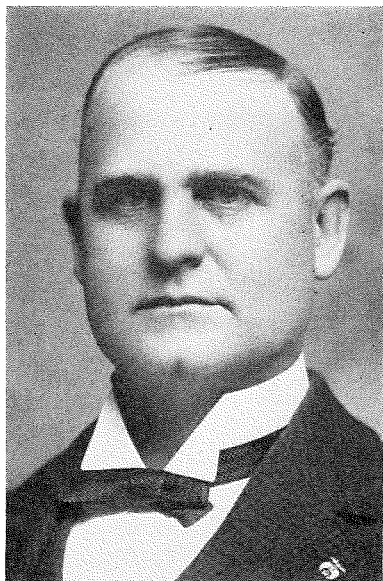
⁵³ Nathaniel Stephenson, *Nelson W. Aldrich* (New York, 1930), pp. 72-73.

⁵⁴ Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York, 1933), p. 439.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

⁵⁶ See Arthur B. Hayes and Samuel D. Cox, *History of the City of Lincoln* (Lincoln, 1889), pp. 327-328.

⁵⁷ Morton to Attorney General Leese, January 5, 1889, in Kenneth E. McIntyre, "The Morton-Bryan Controversy" (Ms. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1943), p. 12.



A. R. Talbot
Law Partner



James C. Dahlman
Political Friend

TWO OF BRYAN'S CLOSE ASSOCIATES

journed until April 1, 1889. At that time an entirely new set of three secretaries was chosen, much to the disgust of Bryan and of those in favor of railroad regulation: one, a son of a former governor, had recently been a railroad employee; another, a former member of the legislature, had, it was charged, a notorious record as a railroad plugger; the third had for long years been a railroad attorney.⁵⁸

While learning that he was the "darling of the Democrats" Bryan found that he had not greatly impressed all the Nebraska Republicans. At the St. Patrick's Day celebration in Lincoln Governor John M. Thayer presided over a program which included instrumental music, vocal renditions, and declamations as well as speeches. Since Bryan had made more than fifty speeches against Thayer in the recent campaign he felt a bit nervous while waiting his turn to speak on the program. Finally the Governor announced, "The next number is by Mr. W. J. Bryan." Bryan stepped forward with extended hand. Thayer also advanced with outstretched hand, a gesture Bryan interpreted as forgiveness for his opposition. When the Governor grasped his hand tightly, pulled him up close, and whispered, "Do you speak or sing?" the light dawned. Stifling an impulse to laugh in Thayer's face, Bryan began his speech with great effort. Although a joke on himself, he told this story many times, and no one enjoyed it more than he.⁵⁹

With customary civic mindedness and energy the Bryans devoted themselves to the social, intellectual, and religious life of Lincoln. As soon as Mrs. Bryan had recovered fully from the birth of her second child, a son named William Jennings, Jr., born June 24, 1889, Bryan invited to his home ten intimate friends whom he directed in the organization of a Round Table Club. At first this appeared to be strictly a Democratic group, for of the original founders only Talbot was a Republican. Of the other charter members three were

⁵⁸ Omaha *Daily Herald*, January 11, 1889; *Lincoln Call*, April 1, 1889.

⁵⁹ Bryan, *Memoirs*, p. 234; interview by writer with Mrs. T. S. Allen, Lincoln, July 23, 1948.

Democrats of state-wide renown, three were Democrats of local reputation, and one was a Democrat suspected of Independent leanings. But when Charles G. Dawes, Dr. J. H. Canfield, Chancellor of the University of Nebraska, C. H. Gere, editor of the *Nebraska State Journal*, S. H. Burnham, Republican lawyer, and others were admitted the club became non-partisan. The meetings were held in turn in the homes of members. The discussions, held on political, religious, literary, scientific, and philosophical subjects, centered about a paper read by one of the members. The whole scheme began to pall until Charles Dawes one evening informally served doughnuts and sweet cider. At the next meeting "light refreshments" were served, and within two years, instead of beginning with talk and ending with food, the meetings began with a banquet and concluded with post prandial oratory.⁶⁰ Bryan transferred his membership in the Y.M.C.A. and was rewarded with his first Nebraska office by being put in charge of the Boys' Division.⁶¹ He was also a Knight of Pythias, Elk, Mason, Odd Fellow, Moose, Royal Highlander, Modern Woodman, and Rotarian, a member of the Lincoln Bar Association and of the Chamber of Commerce.⁶²

Mrs. Bryan joined with Mrs. Albert Sawyer, wife of Lincoln's mayor, 1886-87 and postmaster after 1888, in founding the Lincoln Sorosis, dating from November, 1889. Membership therein was limited to twenty-five. Of its various departments Mrs. Bryan thought those dealing with government and political economy most important.⁶³ Neither the Round Table nor Sorosis were allowed to degenerate into mere gossip groups. Rather they stressed such timely topics as agricultural distress, financial depression, currency reform, railroad abuses, woman suffrage, and the direct election of Senators. They provided a type of lyceum of civic value and may have proved of political value to the Bryans,

⁶⁰ Mrs. T. S. Allen, Scrapbook; *Nebraska State Journal*, December 30, 1906; Dawes, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 10-11, 17, 19, 27.

⁶¹ Bryan Scrapbook No. 11, Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁶² M. R. Werner, *Bryan* (New York, 1929), p. 22.

⁶³ Mrs. H. H. Wheeler to Mrs. Ruth Bryan Rohde, n.d., Rohde Papers; *Nebraska State Journal*, November 19, 1893.

although not designed to be. Meanwhile, after two and a half years of study—and taking care of a house, a husband, parents, a daughter, and moving from Illinois to Nebraska and bearing another child—Mary took the bar examination and passed, the only woman among seventeen examinees, among whom she ranked third.⁶⁴ She studied law, she sweetly explained to those who asked her why, simply in order to be able to help her husband in his work.⁶⁵

With few exceptions the men who made Nebraska famous throughout the world in the twentieth century were part of Bryan's social group. In 1890 John J. Pershing became commandant of the cadet corps at the University of Nebraska. While teaching cadets he took the law course at the University and obtained an LL.B. It was in Lincoln that he was nicknamed "Black Jack," a name which became a by-word in Army circles.⁶⁶

There was also the young Republican teetotaler named Charles Gates Dawes, a native Illinoisan like Bryan, graduate of the Cincinnati Law School, who had hung his shingle out in the Burr Block simultaneously with Bryan. In the same building was William E. "Pussyfoot" Johnson, lifelong temperance worker and organizer. On slack days Bryan, Dawes, and Johnson, all famous drys, would visit and talk.⁶⁷ Neither he nor Bryan, recalled Dawes, "was overburdened with clients and we used to debate with each other on current questions, mostly in Talbot and Bryan's offices. . . . Bryan and I, as I remember, used to debate chiefly on the tariff question. I remember, at one time, he suggested that we were not wise to waste our eloquence in an empty room, but should seek opportunities for a joint debate. My reply was that nobody wanted to hear us."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Thomas S. Allen to Mrs. Ruth Bryan Rohde, February 16, 1944, Rohde Papers.

⁶⁵ Omaha *Daily Herald*, December 8, 1888.

⁶⁶ Everett T. Tomlinson, *The Story of General Pershing* (New York, 1919), pp. 44-48, 50-60; *Lincoln Star*, July 15, 1948.

⁶⁷ Paul R. Leach, *That Man Dawes* (Chicago, 1930), p. 44; J. C. Long, *Bryan: The Great Commoner* (New York, 1938), pp. 49-50; Victor Rosewater, *Edward Rosewater* (privately printed), pp. 219-220.

⁶⁸ Charles G. Dawes to writer, September 28, 1948.

There was no rivalry between Bryan and Dawes in either politics or law. Throughout their lives, despite differences in politics, they neither discussed politics nor had any but friendly personal relationships. Dawes did not take part in politics in Lincoln, and he was interested in Bryan then only because of his demonstrated "wonderful ability as an orator." Often, when the meetings of the Round Table Club were held in the homes of other members, the Bryans and Dawes would walk home together. The women, walking ahead, would have to wait for their husbands who, immersing themselves in continued debate, would forget to walk. During these years, when the Bryans owned a three-story house and the Dawes rented a cottage for eighteen dollars a month, Bryan appeared to Dawes as a "predatory plutocrat" while he represented the "proletariat." The relations between the two families became intimate. The Bryans, sporting a one-horse surrey, would take the Dawes out riding. The Dawes were one of the select number of couples who were invited by the Bryans on the occasion of their fifth wedding anniversary. During the evening the Bryans and a Presbyterian minister withdrew. They reappeared, Bryan in a dark suit, Mrs. Bryan in her wedding gown, and renewed their marriage vows before their friends.⁶⁹

Later Charles Bryan, William's brother, and William Dawes, Charles' brother, joined the Bryan circle. There in Lincoln, all friends, were Bryan, a civilian who would be a colonel before Pershing, and who would do as much to keep us out of a war which Pershing would do so much to win. There was Charles Dawes, who won the only jury case Bryan lost in Lincoln, who caused Bryan to lose Illinois in the election of 1896, whose debates with Bryan on the money question stimulated him to make a thorough study of that question, a study which, in part, qualified him for the post of Comptroller of the Currency, to which McKinley appointed him.⁷⁰ There was Charley Bryan, who would be

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Long, *op. cit.*, p. 49, states that judgment in the case in which Dawes beat Bryan was for \$1.27. See Charles G. Dawes, *Banking System of the United States and Its Relation to the Money and*

governor of the State of Nebraska and who would battle unsuccessfully against Charles Dawes for the vice-presidency of the United States.

The two years between important elections⁷¹ left Bryan relatively free to return to his practice, to engage in community life, and to prepare for the next congressional campaign, in which he prophesied that the tariff would be the major issue dividing Democrats from Republicans. He continued his studies by reading omnivorously in history and economics, devouring biographies, pouring over the orations of the English masters of eloquence, buying what he could, borrowing what he could not. In addition to the local and Omaha newspapers he read the *New York World* and the *Atlanta Constitution*, and he subscribed to *Public Opinion*. He learned the *ad valorem* and specific customs duties and took great interest in congressional action being taken on the McKinley bill. So full did he feel of the subject that he contemplated publishing a book entitled *Tariff Essays*, and wrote to Walter H. Page, of the *New York Post*, about undertaking publication. Page had advertised for information which would help the cause of tariff reform. Bryan answered the call and Page printed his letters.⁷² "What you wrote," said Page, "was precisely the kind of information we seek and precisely the kind that we think will be of great encouragement to tariff reformers everywhere."⁷³ Since the *Post* did not publish books, Page referred Bryan to G. P. Putnam's Sons, which declined to undertake publication as an investment of its own.⁷⁴

Business of the Country (Chicago, 1894). Mr. Dawes attributed his selection as Comptroller to his work for McKinley in Illinois in 1895-96 rather than to his knowledge of the currency. (Dawes to writer, September 28, 1948.)

⁷¹ The Nebraska legislature provided for annual elections in 1879, but only judges of the Supreme Court and regents of the University were elected in the odd-numbered years.

⁷² Bryan, Scrapbook No. 2; Burton J. Hendrick *Life and Letters of Walter H. Page* (New York, 1923), I, 64-72.

⁷³ Page to Bryan, August 16, 1889, Bryan Papers.

⁷⁴ Page to Bryan, August 27, 1889, G. P. Putnam's Sons to Bryan, September 3, 1889, Bryan Papers.

Of course Bryan received numerous invitations to speak at local functions, at which he met many Irishmen who insisted upon calling him O'Brien. Thinking it wise to correct the erroneous impression that he was a full-blooded Irishman, Bryan told a typical son of the Emerald Isle that "My name is not O'Brien, but Bryan." "It's all the same," was the reply. "When Bryan Borou became king his descendants put on the 'O'. The Bryans are the same stock, but just plain common people." Bryan liked that.⁷⁵

There was little in the political field which escaped Bryan's attention. In his Fourth of July speech of 1889 he dealt with the antagonism between capital and labor. He warned his hearers of the dangers in monopolies and the evils of municipal corruption, closing with an exhortation to all to be vigilant in the performance of their civic duties. It was his "Eternal Vigilance" speech again—written while in law school—but he never tired of repeating it nor ever saw the time when it was inapplicable.⁷⁶ He gathered information on sugar bounty laws in the beet raising states.⁷⁷ And he worked hard during the off-year campaign of 1889, as willing to labor in smoke-filled committee rooms as to shine in the light of publicity on convention floors. Soon he was called upon to aid in the determination of policy as well as to spellbind the public. Morton asked him to prepare for the state convention "a declaration against Beet Sugar and all other bounties which beat the state revenues." He himself was preparing the tariff, prohibition, and pension planks, but thought Bryan, in the capital city, could "best assault state abuses." "Do not fail," warned Morton, "to be . . . ready for fight against the trimmers and timeservers."⁷⁸ Morton also asked Bryan to write a plank against all special legislation, be it for stockyards, packing houses, insurance companies, water and light companies, or railroads. This was no time to dodge any vital question.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Bryan, *Memoirs*, p. 206.

⁷⁶ "Speech, July 4, 1889," Bryan Papers.

⁷⁷ See Bryan to William Higgins, August 2, and Higgins to Bryan, August 5, 1889, Bryan Papers.

⁷⁸ Morton to Bryan, October 10, 1889, Bryan Papers.

⁷⁹ Morton to Bryan, October 11, 1889, Bryan Papers.

Bryan meanwhile had been asking Democratic leaders throughout the state to indicate their favorite candidates.⁸⁰ Armed with this information he attended the convention, in October, and took a prominent part in its proceedings. He was made a member of both the credentials and resolutions committees. He, Morton, and three others wrote the platform, in which they attacked the protective tariff as being hostile to the interests of an agricultural state and denounced the Nebraska sugar bounty law.⁸¹ Bryan had trouble with only one plank, the one on prohibition. He and Morton both opposed prohibition, but because the Republicans took no stand on this issue Bryan thought a declaration against sumptuary legislation would suffice. He did not agree with the several influential Democrats who wanted to follow the Republican lead. "By declaring against prohibition we will lose a good many votes, while we will not gain Republican votes. We tried that last fall in our county; declared in so many words against prohibition; and the saloons went solid against us."⁸² The plank as written favored a well-regulated high-license system as the best solution of the liquor question.

Press reports of the convention described the "glowing speech" Bryan made for his candidates. He may have warmed himself with hope as he walked through the rain to cast his vote on the chilly day of November 6, but the returns showed that although the Democrats had made a clean sweep in Douglas County, which contained Omaha, the usual Republican majorities had carried the state.⁸³ However, the storm warnings of the closing years of the

⁸⁰ See, for example, the answers in J. H. Broady to Bryan, October 12 and 14, 1889, Bryan Papers.

⁸¹ The committee was composed of Morton, chairman, Bryan, George Hastings of Crete, Euclid Martin of Omaha, and Frank Martin of Richardson County. For details see Henry T. Johnson, "History of the Beet Sugar Industry in Nebraska" (Ms. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1934). Rosewater championed the industry in the *Omaha Bee* while Gilbert M. Hitchcock opposed it in the *Omaha World-Herald*.

⁸² Bryan to Morton, October 11, 1889, in Rosewater, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-172.

⁸³ *Nebraska State Journal*, *Omaha World-Herald*, November 7, 9, 14, 1889.

decade were becoming strident and he would rise in the vanguard of successful protest when the agrarian crusade swept through Nebraska and the western country the following year.

