

Presidential Campaigns Remembered By A Printer—1896

By LeROY ARMSTRONG

AND then came the Bryan campaign. It will be the last of this series. You remember the rest of them.

There was a man named Harvey, and he issued a book called "Coin." I don't suppose you could find one today, but they circulated by the tens of thousands then. Harvey had a curious knack of "making the worse appear the better cause," and he had everybody quoting his arguments in favor of some empirical scheme of money which may or may not have been good. Bryan had been arguing for the "free and unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of sixteen to one without the aid or consent of any other nation."

Of course, Bland of Missouri had been the prophet of free silver for many a long and weary year. One of the newspaper wits put it this way:

There is a happy Bland,
Far, far away;
Jingling silver in his hand,
All night and day.

And they sang it to a familiar tune. There was, of course, a great deal more Bland than Bryan in the ante-convention argument. And yet the star of Bryan was rising. He had been in congress but one term, and Bland had been there for many years. These were but two of the many in the Democratic party; and the Republican party had taken up the cry, and many of the noisy members of that organization declared themselves for the white metal, and did it with such eloquence and with such argument as made the gold-standard people very uncertain as to what might happen.

As a matter of fact, the Democratic party, if it kept to its traditions never ought to have been an advocate of free silver. That was a new thing, and if anybody could take it up, it must have been the Republican party. But there was a growing sentiment in that organization against what was called the "heresy."

And so the campaign waxed warmer as the sun came north, and the Democrats assembled in Chicago for their national convention. They were a daring lot of fellows, and they proposed to declare themselves whether anybody else did or not. They wanted silver, and they wanted it bad. They believed the country was with them, and what they called the advocates of a gold standard is hardly yet fit to print.

They held their meeting in what was called the Coliseum, which was at that time down at Sixty-third street, and which was later burned. Old man Gunther, a candy-maker, had the Libby Prison where the Coliseum is now. We went down there in newspaper numbers. The old Herald had been mighty good to me, and the boys gave me a place close to the presiding officer's stand. The convention went along for a day or two, as conventions will, the struggle between the gold men and the silver men getting hotter and hotter, the galleries mad for free silver, and the delegates

divided. I suppose there has never been better convention oratory than was heard in the Democratic session of 1896. Bragg of Wisconsin, hoarse as a fog horn, pleaded with the delegates not to abandon the old-time principles of Democracy at the urging of apostles of the new. Hill of New York stood before their contending forces and repeated the slogan which had made him famous: "I am a Democrat—" and was interrupted with a howl of cheers so that they never heard his addendum: "But I am not a revolutionist."

Massachusetts was divided with George Fred Williams on the silver side, and all the rest of the delegates sitting in reproachful silence when the cheering went on.

Up town the committee on resolutions was struggling in half the rooms of the old Sherman House, and Senator Stewart of Nevada was keeping the newspaper boys in line by practicing with them at the bar.

Altgeld of Illinois unconsciously prepared the convention for the spectacular result, for his speech against compromise was a classic in its way. He had no voice or presence, but he was the dominating figure in the work of preparation, in the crystallizing sentiment in favor of all that Bland and Bryan and Harvey had been working for.

The details of that big session in the Coliseum are familiar to you. They have been printed a million times. But there was a phase of it that impressed me. That was Bryan's argument on the adoption of the resolutions—the platform. He rose in his place with the Nebraska delegation, and began his address there, but was called to the platform by the presiding officer, Richardson of Tennessee, I think. And Bryan knew "as robins know the coming of the rain" that this was his opportunity, his hour. He was white as he will be in his coffin as he walked down that aisle, the convention shouting his name, for Bryan had spoken once or twice, and there was that in the presence of the man, in his voice, in his delivery, which satisfied the imagination. It buided Democratic hope in those breasts where love of triumph dwelt. I do not mean in the New York delegation, where "what do we get out of it?" is more important than the chances of victory. That house was truly Democratic by a big majority, and the Democrats wanted to win. And Bryan made them think they could win, just as the soldiers believed they could win when Grant came along; just as the Children of Israel believed they could win when King David led them.

He was white of face but firm of step as he mounted to the platform. And the silence that greeted him as he faced the multitude was the very first of its kind that the convention had known from the opening hour. His speech is a classic. The logic of it was close-knit and convincing.

Granting his promise—and many granted it—Bryan was right in every conclusion. He was in no hurry. He lacked some of the mild humor, some of the smiles, that have made his later speeches effective. But it was no time for laughter. They were in no mood for jokes. It was serious as one of the old Abolition meetings I can remember as a small boy. But as he proceeded I saw a man get up away back there toward the rear of the California delegation. Then two or three stood, leaning forward and listening intently in the Ohio crowd. Then the rising and the tense attending were common all over the big body of the house.

Now and then you could hear the clapping of hands—just one clap—up in the gallery, or down on the floor, as if sentiment had grown too strong for control, but not strong enough to silence the desire to hear the rest of it.

There was that strange silence in the presence of thousands whenever Bryan paused at the end of one of his telling sentences. The thing got on my nerves. It is appalling, that utter stillness of a multitude, that perfect attention to the speech of one man. The people who didn't believe him were still, of course. Far be it from them to aid in his applause. That might sound like approval, like acquiescence. And these who believed his doctrine were thirsty for it. They wanted all of it. It was gospel to them.

And so there was little wonder they roused to frenzied acclamation as he came to his peroration. But they never heard that sentence complete: "You shall not press down on the brow of my people a crown of thorns. You shall not crucify them on a cross of gold."

Long before he came to the end of the striking figure the pent-up waters of their enthusiasm tore away the barriers of restraint, and a rising volume of noise burst on the ear beyond anything I ever heard from human lips. They didn't hear all of it, but they knew it was the crowning and the climax of his fine oration. And it seemed impossible that any man could sit unmoved when that fire of indorsement mounted with the hurrying seconds.

The galleries were simply wild. Neither man nor woman there seemed to have the slightest sense of time or place. They were one waving, screaming, leaping mass of maniacs. And the body of the house, where the delegates had been seated, was little better. Bryan walked down the steps, the rich red of conscious success flushing the cheeks that had been so white before, and the eyes blazing across that assembly as if gauging the strength of opposition still remaining for him to overcome.

But his work was finished, so far as that assembly was concerned. He could add nothing. He couldn't even have checked it then. I doubt if, in

that mood, the people would have permitted even him to guide and direct them. They were as uncontrollable as they were uncontrolled. After some few minutes of yelling some one snatched the standard of his state—there always has been dispute as to which state started—and came down the aisle at the left side of the floor. They were on chairs in every direction, and before that first banner had turned the corner and reached the front of the presiding officer's desk half a dozen states were in the procession. They waved their hats, or swung their coats, or tossed their arms, and they all yelled "Bryan."

They called on other delegates to fall in. They swore in the fervor of their enthusiasm. They screamed and seized hold on delegates still sitting. They hooted when they passed Senator Hill of New York. They tried to lift George Fred Williams on their shoulders, but George Fred is a very big man, and they abandoned the attempt. But they laughed in the faces of the rest of the Massachusetts men—the silent, disapproving bunch that refused to pay tribute.

Maybe their paroxysms nowadays continue longer. These things grow. I don't remember how long the uproar lasted, but it was an age. And from the time it began till the end of the convention there was never an instant of uncertainty as to candidate or platform. It was Bryan, and free silver. And these remained.

Poor Bland got just what LaFollette got in the present year. He had built the free silver house, and Bryan moved into it. And the beginning of the busiest campaign in the history of American parties was on.

Few people in the ranks believed the Republicans would dare declare for the gold standard after the chorus of approval for the Bryan platform and the Bryan name. It seemed as if free silver would sweep the country. And there was where Mark Hanna proved the wisdom of his making. He was not a nice man, that man Hanna. And his methods were hardly what can be called ethical. But he did see the way to win first the St. Louis convention, and then the campaign that followed. How well he worked at St. Louis we all remember, for Teller of Colorado, Dubois of Idaho and Cannon of Utah went weeping out of the convention rather than give their approval to the gold standard plank. And it was a gold party that adjourned when McKinley was nominated.

The issue was squarely drawn. I don't know what would have happened if Palmer and Buckner had not been nominated as gold-standard Democrats. Maybe that helped to divide the Democratic vote. I don't know what would have happened if the country had not been covered to its uttermost corner with disciples of sound finance. But Hanna was a man of many—and much—resources; and he left nothing undone. The result is now known.