JOSEPH C. SIBLEY, DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL ASPIRANT IN 1896*

LEWIS W. RATHGEBER

As we approach the time for the presidential nominating conventions this year (1952), western Pennsylvanians can look back to an earlier time when some of them were even more directly concerned with such gatherings, especially with the Democratic convention in 1896.

It was that convention which set the pattern for the Democratic party in the following years, and which, to a large extent, created the political basis of victory that was to triumph in 1912 and again in 1932. In 1896, the Democratic party repudiated the administration of Grover Cleveland, who had been reëlected in 1892. It turned its back on many of the leaders in the East, the city political machines, and placed the control of the party in the West and South under the leadership of William Jennings Bryan.

Pennsylvania was vitally interested in the Democratic convention that year. The chairman of the Democratic national committee, chosen by Grover Cleveland in 1892, was William Harrity of Philadelphia. Besides, Pennsylvania had at least two candidates interested in the nomination. One was ex-Governor Robert Pattison. Pattison had been elected in 1877, at the age of twenty-five, as the city controller of Philadelphia, and was greatly aided by the reform element of the city. In 1882, he had been elected governor of Pennsylvania, again with the aid of the reform elements. He had been unable to run for reelection in 1886, due to the constitutional provision of Pennsylvania which prohibits a governor from succeeding himself. In 1890, he duplicated this feat and was again elected governor, serving until 1895.

The other candidate was a man of great interest to western Pennsylvanians. His name was Joseph Crocker Sibley. He was born in western New York in 1850, but came to Franklin, Pennsylvania, about 1870 and lived there until his death in 1926.

Sibley presents a most intriguing study. He did not become active in state and national politics until about 1890, although in 1879 he was

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elected mayor of Franklin as a low tariff Republican. His early years in Franklin were spent between his two great interests—the oil industry and agriculture.

Sibley's wealth, estimated at the time of his death at $3,000,000, came primarily from his interests in the oil industry. In 1873, he invented a process for the refining of oil to be used in railroad signal lights. It was reputed to be far superior in light, safety, and cold test to the oils then in use. He also, along with General Charles Miller, his brother-in-law, refined an oil which was used in railroad cylinders. According to one newspaper account at the time, it had virtually replaced tallow, the previous lubricant, and was used by over one-half of the American railway mileage. In later years, Sibley joined the Galena and Signal Oil Companies with the Standard Oil system and was closely associated with the Standard Oil Company. This action did not come, however, until after his participation in the 1896 campaign.

Sibley first entered the Republican party, then joined the Prohibitionists, next was a great friend of the Populists, then a Democrat and finally he rejoined the Republican party. Sibley's second great interest—agriculture—was undoubtedly one of the most important factors leading him away from the Republican party. It may seem strange today, when the farmer is considered one of the strongest supporters of the Republican party, even to hint that at one time they were close to the Democratic party in Pennsylvania. However, voting figures in Smull's Legislative Hand Book, predecessor of the Pennsylvania Manual, show that for many years prior to 1932, the strength of the Democratic party in Pennsylvania, such as it was, happened to be concentrated in the rural areas.

Sibley was probably the outstanding farmer of northwestern Pennsylvania. Along with General Miller he had three farms in Venango County: the Fair Ground farm of 190 acres, where the annual county fair was held; the Galena farm, of 25 acres, on the west side of the Pittsburgh Pike between Franklin and Uniontown; and the Prospect Hill farm of 200 acres, six miles southeast of Franklin. In later life, after becoming unhappy and disillusioned over politics, he returned to farming with great relish. In 1911, he bought 760 acres and named it the River Ridge farm. This farm is between Oil City and Franklin and can

1 Venango Citizen Press, September 1, 1887.
2 Charles A. Babcock, Venango County, Pennsylvania, 184 (Chicago, 1919).
be seen from the highway on the other side of the Allegheny River as one drives between the two cities.

The scope of Sibley’s interests in agriculture was vast. He built the first silo west of the Allegheny Mountains. He had great herds of Jersey cattle, Shetland ponies, and the largest herd of pure bred Angora goats in the United States. By 1886, he had one of the De Laval cream separators, and all of his barns, stables, and grounds were lighted by electricity. He was greatly interested in thoroughbred horses. He was a featured speaker at many agricultural meetings. He was a director of the Venango County Agricultural Society and of the American Jersey Cattle Club, a member of the Pennsylvania State Board of Agriculture, and president of the Pennsylvania State Dairymen’s Association.

Thus it was that Sibley, far from being primarily an industrialist, was intimately connected with agriculture. As a matter of fact, Sibley seemed, during the period 1880-1890, to be drifting away from industrial influences. Yet this should not seem too strange because the greater part of his youth, prior to arriving in Franklin, was spent as a laborer on his father’s farm in western New York. These agrarian influences can be summed up in certain conclusions.

First, he developed a definite sympathy for and understanding of the problems of the farmer. He desired to see the farmer receive more income for his products. And the farmers of northwestern Pennsylvania were in a more unfortunate economic position with regard to the price situation than were the farmers of eastern and southwestern Pennsylvania because they were farther from the big city markets. In addition, they had considerably poorer railroad connections than farmers in other sections of the state.

Secondly, Sibley had a better understanding and comprehension of the Populist and other radical tendencies of the western farmer, especially free silver, than did most Pennsylvanians. It should be noted in this respect that Populism was stronger in northwestern Pennsylvania than anywhere else in the state. This is shown by the fact that the highest Populist vote in the 1892 presidential election was in the counties of Crawford, Erie, Venango, and Warren. Thus, Sibley had more opportunity to come in contact with Populism than most Pennsylvanians.

Sibley’s real entrance into active politics came in 1892, when he

3 Venango Citizen Press, April 28, 1898.
ran for Congress from the 26th District, formed from Erie and Crawford counties, having been nominated by the Prohibitionists, the Populists, and the Democrats of that district. Such unanimity was unusual and no doubt Sibley's wealth helped to pave the way for such action. The Republicans had nominated Dr. Theodore L. Flood, of Meadville, who was the distinguished editor of the *Chautauquan*.

In the election of 1892, Sibley carried both counties in the district with a majority of 3,367. On the other hand, Cleveland, who ran for President, lost both counties in the district. Harrison had a plurality of 2,315 votes over Cleveland and James B. Weaver, the Populist candidate. Weaver had 1,751 votes in the two counties. The Populists had helped greatly in the election of Sibley, who was friendly to their agrarian demands, especially that of free silver which the farmers believed to be cheap money.

Sibley gained considerable renown throughout the state. In December he went to Philadelphia to attend a celebration in honor of Harrity and sat in the same box with Governor Pattison and Senator Gorman. The Harrisburg newspaper correspondents in suggesting candidates for governor in 1894 brought out Sibley's name. Sibley's victory in a Republican district had brought him state fame, and he was soon to achieve national fame from the floor of Congress.

In 1893 Cleveland called the 53rd Congress to meet in special session to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. The west and south, under the leadership of Bryan of Nebraska and Richard P. ("Silver Dick") Bland of Missouri, rallied to oppose repeal while the eastern interests led by Bourke Cockran of New York and William L. Wilson of West Virginia, supported Cleveland. Into this conflict stepped the new Congressman from Pennsylvania, "Joe" Sibley, who firmly allied himself on the side of free silver and the masses. His maiden speech on August 18, 1893, was reported by the free silver press as "attracting general attention throughout the country. Probably no other speech in Congress since the Civil War has had so wide a circulation."7

This speech of Sibley's is very interesting. It indicated a distrust of urban interests with their great banking houses. He decried the concentration of wealth, twisted the British lion's tail, and assailed other foreign influences. He even suggested that it had been a good idea for

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6 *Venango Citizen Press*, January 26, 1893.
Christ to have driven the money changers from the temple. This last suggestion is reminiscent of a similar suggestion made in the early days of 1933. Throughout the speech there was a definite note of Bryanism. How much influence Bryan may have had on Sibley is not clear, but they were no doubt closely allied because when Sibley's time ran out during the speech, it was Bryan who asked for an extension.  

Sibley's assumption of the cloak of the defender of the Common Man along with his espousal of free silver had two results: first, it immediately split his strength in Pennsylvania where the old-line Democrats, including Harrity and Pattison, would have nothing further to do with him; second, it catapulted him to national fame and gave him national status. During the remainder of the special session and the regular session, beginning in December, 1893, Sibley continued to be an active leader in the free silver fight and for other progressive legislation. For instance, he favored the income tax provision of the Wilson-Gorman Tariff bill.

As the elections of 1894 approached in Pennsylvania, Sibley realized the full effect of his actions. The Populists of Pennsylvania asked him to be their candidate for governor, but he declined because he could not count on the support of the Democrats. He was endorsed by the Democrats of Westmoreland and Crawford counties, but the Democrats of his home county attacked him bitterly. It seemed as if the prophet was without honor in his own county.

Sibley was renominated for Congress from the Erie-Crawford district by the Democrats and Populists but refused to accept. His name remained on the ballot and he was defeated in November. It was claimed that the old-line Democrats, supporters of Cleveland and the gold standard, voted against him.

Sibley returned to Washington for the last session of the 53rd Congress in December, 1894. He was not the only "lame duck" because Bryan had also been defeated.

He refused to be changed by his defeat. On the afternoon of January 8, 1895, he took the floor of the House and proceeded to deliver a scathing rebuke to Cleveland. He opened his attack by saying: "The government reserves in both money and veracity are seriously depleted." Then he followed with such statements as, "He has trampled down the prerogatives of the people . . . Cleveland is like a blind man at the rudder . . . The Democratic Party is diseased in a single member . . .

8 Congressional Record, 53 Congress, 1 session, 467.
cut it off and cast it from thee." The free silver press commented: "His speech of January 8, 1895, is considered by the adherents of free silver to be one of the most logical, powerful, and comprehensive answers that has ever been made to the contentions of the gold monometallists."

Regardless of the free silver support which Sibley might have gained by his bitter attacks on Cleveland and his administration, it should be observed that Sibley was violating one of the great maxims of the successful politician. He was rendering compromise between the Cleveland group and himself impossible. One should remember that Bryan did not fall into this trap.

Sibley now began to take the case of free silver, and incidentally, his own presidential candidacy, to the people. In March, 1895, he consented to head the American Bi-Metallic League which demanded free coinage of silver at 16 to 1. By April, the press reported that his presidential boom was well under way. He attended a meeting at Denver and spent April and May campaigning on the Pacific slope. In June he debated with Venango County's Democratic leader, J. D. Hancock, on free silver. Hancock upheld the single standard. Sibley was now being pushed openly by the silverites for President, and the American Magazine of Civics carried an article on him as a presidential possibility. He spoke at Memphis, Tennessee, Topeka, Kansas, and in North Carolina. In November, 1895, the Ohio Silver Democrats announced that they would nominate him for President.

The Sibley publicity was not confined to the local newspapers. On May 7, 1896, while at the Windsor Hotel in New York City, he was interviewed by the New York Daily Tribune. It was pointed out by the newspaper that Sibley was being considered by the more radical silver men as a nominee for the presidency on a free silver ticket. Sibley's comments in this interview revealed that he was still bitterly opposed to Cleveland. He said, "If Grover Cleveland is nominated again—I care not who opposes him—I will vote for the opponent." He also said that he thought the gold standard delegates would control the Democratic convention and that Cleveland would be renominated. Unfortunately for Sibley's candidacy, Bryan did not share his feeling that the

9 Congressional Record, 53 Congress, 3 session, 116.
10 Irwin, American Magazine of Civics, 6:619.
12 Irwin, American Magazine of Civics, 6:619.
gold standard group would dominate and was quietly lining up delegation after delegation.

On Monday, May 25, 1896, Sibley was in Pittsburgh where he addressed the National Reform party, a fly-by-night group led by Daniel Swoger. The next day the Pittsburgh Press reported that he had delivered a two-hour address to a fair-sized and enthusiastic audience attracted by the news that the distinguished champion of bi-mettalism was to speak.

Meanwhile, Sibley's greatest obstacle to the nomination—his inability to gain any votes from the Pennsylvania delegation—was becoming more and more apparent. In April, 1896, the Democrats of Pennsylvania had met in state convention. They drew up a strong gold platform and endorsed ex-Governor Pattison as their candidate for the presidential nomination, and what was very important, decided to cast their 64 votes as a unit.14

Undoubtedly the chief factor which led Pennsylvania to cling to the gold standard was the fact that few of the causes which actuated the demand for free silver in the west were present in Pennsylvania, and where they were present, they operated to a lesser degree. A good example of this is northwestern Pennsylvania where certain factors creating Populism, and the demand for free silver, did operate, but never involved a majority of the voters. The thrifty German farmer in eastern and central Pennsylvania, basically conservative along financial lines, was aghast as he heard about what would happen to his money and investments if free silver were permitted.

Besides the lack of positive causes working in favor of free silver there were other causes which rendered the movement weak and rather innocuous. The press of Pennsylvania was almost solid against free silver. Then there was the important factor that the Democratic party was controlled by William H. Harrity, Democratic national chairman, and eastern money interests. It is significant that Dr. Sylvester Stevens, in writing of the situation, claimed that Pennsylvania Democrats were more conservative on the gold issue than were the Pennsylvania Republicans.15 Another factor was the influence of the patronage which was handled by the national administration.

As the month of May passed and the free silver men won victories

in state primaries such as Kentucky's, it began to look as if they might control the Democratic convention. One cannot blame Sibley for entertaining thoughts that he might be the presidential nominee. He had poured large sums of money into the free silver movement; he had led the fight in Pennsylvania, and he had shown his devotion to the cause on the floor of the House. The Citizen Press of Franklin observed in July that Sibley was a dark horse and stressed the fact that Senator Henry M. Teller's free silver followers who had bolted the Republican national convention were favorable to Sibley. However, they also pointed out that Governor Pattison's candidacy was a serious handicap to Sibley since the Pennsylvania delegation voted as a unit. They went on to add that, "after a few complimentary votes for Pattison, the Pennsylvania delegation may cast all votes for Sibley."16

Sibley arrived in Chicago on Monday morning, July 6, in his own Pullman car, a handsome figure in his white suit and white hat. Silver Republicans were in town and were working for Senator Teller. It was well known that their second choice was Sibley. Lafayette ("Lafe") Pence and Jeremiah ("Sockless Jerry") Simpson, both Populists, were urging Sibley's nomination. The convention was called to order at high noon on July 7, 1896, in the Coliseum Building at Chicago, by William H. Harrity. It soon became obvious that the silverites were in control.

On July 9, Bryan spoke in favor of the committee report favoring the coinage of silver at 16 to 1. This was his famous "Cross of Gold" speech. Within five ballots, Bryan was the nominee. Sibley had been unable to get his name placed in nomination because the Pennsylvania Democrats stuck to Pattison; in fact, they even refused to vote for Bryan on the last ballot when his victory was assured. Bryan's victory was not entirely spontaneous. He had been out "beating the bushes" for delegates over a year prior to the convention, and was especially successful with the western and southern delegations.

In retrospect, the factors working against Sibley are quite evident. Bryan had consistently worked with the Democratic party organization; Sibley had wavered back and forth. Party loyalty is highly valued at convention time. The Pennsylvania unit rule prevented any solid core of votes for Sibley; Bryan's temperament and political keenness were better and greater than Sibley's; the Democratic party had passed under the control of its western and southern wing and away from the eastern Cleveland wing; and Pennsylvania had usually been lost to the Demo-

16 Silveus, ante, 16:110.
crats. Therefore, why not try to win states where Democrats had some chance of success by slating candidates from those states?

Sibley returned to Franklin a disappointed man. There is every reason to believe that he could have had the nomination for Vice President. The delegates would not have objected to this going to an eastern man. In fact, the eventual nominee was a banker from Maine. Sibley, however, said he did not want the nomination and left as soon as he knew that he had lost the main prize. He led in the balloting for Vice President with 163 votes, but this fell off after the delegates realized that he did not want the nomination. After the third ballot, he telegraphed his refusal, and Arthur Sewall of Maine was nominated.

It is probable that, even though Sibley campaigned for Bryan and ran for Congress as a Democrat in 1896 only to be defeated, he bore considerable resentment at failing to obtain the nomination. This resentment must have been especially strong against the Democratic leaders of Pennsylvania. Like many scorned radicals and liberals, he later made a complete break with his earlier political career and rejoined the Republican party.