

FREE SILVER COMES TO PENNSYLVANIA

The Election of 1896 as seen through the eyes of four Pennsylvania newspapers: *The Public Ledger and Daily Transcript* (Philadelphia), *The Pittsburg Post*, *The Sun* (Williamsport), and the *Pottsville Daily Republican*

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THE election of 1896 was one of the most significant in our history. Since 1868 few important differences had existed between the parties and elections had offered little alteration of the trend of government policy and administration. In 1896 this changed.

Pennsylvania, like the rest of the nation, had been hard hit by the panic of 1893. In Western Pennsylvania many mills and mines were still closed or only working part time.¹ People desired a return to prosperity, and throughout the West and the South the Populist movement with its panacea of the free and unlimited coinage of silver appeared to be winning new converts. While there was no general sympathy toward free silver in Pennsylvania, it was noted that the Populists had polled 19,000 votes in the state in 1894.²

While the state evidenced a definite conservative force held firmly in check by Republican boss Matthew S. Quay, nevertheless if one of the two major parties should fall under the control of its free silver wing, Pennsylvania might provide a laboratory to test the ensuing struggle. It was a powerful industrial state with labor difficulties but also an agricultural commonwealth with large and varied economic interests.³

As the Populist movement spread eastward, both the Republican and Democratic press in Pennsylvania remained openly hostile to the doctrine of free silver. Though the tariff question would play a major part in the election, most newspapers realized that the central issue

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1 Marian Silveus, "The Election of 1896 in Western Pennsylvania," *WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE*, XVI (May 1933), 99.

2 *Ibid.*, 100.

3 S. K. Stevens, "The Election of 1896 in Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History*, IV (Apr. 1937), 67-68.

would revolve around the currency problem. Each newspaper hoped its party would support sound money and questioned the integrity of the opposition on the money issue.

The Republican national convention was scheduled to open in St. Louis on June 16. William McKinley of Ohio, supported by Mark Hanna, had early begun to make a bid for the nomination without the support of the party regulars including Quay. To prevent his nomination the regulars had met and agreed to put forth favorite sons, believing that if McKinley could be stopped on the first ballot, perhaps one of the favorite sons might be pushed through. Quay was to hold Pennsylvania, and the state Republican convention endorsed him in April.⁴ The Philadelphia *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, which the New York *Evening Post* called, "the ablest Republican newspaper in the foremost high-tariff State in the Union,"⁵ refused to take the Quay candidacy seriously and while realizing that the campaign for the nomination appeared to be McKinley against the field, harbored a distrust of McKinley. He had not clearly stated his position on the money question and, furthermore, for the past two years he had strenuously campaigned for "the office which no man having a decent regard for political ethics and personal dignity should bid for or seek with this . . . unpatriotic . . . zeal which might be excused if the aspirant were a man of extraordinary ability or conspicuous fitness for the great office."⁶

While many newspapers such as the *Pottsville Daily Republican* were early supporters of McKinley, the Democratic papers were not long in criticizing the probable Republican standard-bearer. The *Pittsburg Post*, a sound-money Democratic daily with the largest circulation of any paper in the state outside of Philadelphia,⁷ hoped McKinley would get the nomination because his unknown money views and his business sympathies would make him the "weakest G. O. P. candidate."⁸

If the Pennsylvania dailies were making known their hostility to free silver, the same could not be claimed for McKinley. He remained absolutely silent on the money question, possibly testing the political winds, or more probably, hoping that his silence would win for him both the sound-money and cheap-money Republican delegates. He

⁴ Silveus, 104.

⁵ *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript* (Philadelphia), microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., 26 Mar. 1896, 8. Quoting New York *Evening Post*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24 Mar. 1896, 8.

⁷ *The Pittsburg Post*, microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., 19 Aug. 1896, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12 Mar. 1896, 4.

seemed, rather, to hope he could base his campaign upon a high protective tariff which he had championed since the days of Harrison. The *Public Ledger*, while favoring an upward revision of the tariff, realized that any Republican nominee would probably stress protection and demanded that McKinley make known his currency beliefs. In a pointed editorial the *Public Ledger* summed up its belief on the major issue demanding "that the Republican candidate shall be the unchangeable advocate of honest, sound currency . . . based on . . . gold, which is recognized by all the great powers of civilization as the only safe one. Mr. McKinley does not appear to be that kind of a candidate." ⁹

The Democratic press did not hesitate to question McKinley's financial policy, but it was quite willing to fight part of the battle on the tariff. To *The Pittsburg Post* it was a matter of "the Wilson tariff, which is daily vindicating its wisdom, as against the McKinley tariff — or a revenue tariff as against the boodle tariff of the trusts and monopolies." ¹⁰ But not losing sight of the major issue, the Democratic Williamsport *Sun* reminded its readers that "McKinley's silence cannot be said to be golden." ¹¹

By the first of May, scarcely a possibility remained that McKinley could be stopped. While Quay still held Pennsylvania, he had journeyed to Canton to make his peace with McKinley, and Hanna knew he could count on Quay if needed.¹² Meanwhile, as more and more states fell to the liberal free-silver element of the Democratic Party and the possibility grew that the Democrats might nominate a free-silver candidate, businessmen began to pressure the Republican platform committee to write a strong sound-money plank and urged McKinley to declare himself for sound money. But McKinley remained silent and continued to gather delegates. The *Public Ledger* was forced to admit that "At the present rate of progress McKinley will soon be strong enough to decide whether he is for gold or silver." ¹³

The Democratic press, led in Pennsylvania by *The Pittsburg Post*, delighted in McKinley's evasiveness on the money question and began to question whether he might not, indeed, be for free silver. After all, hadn't he supported the Bland Act, voted to override Hayes' veto of the silver bill, denounced Cleveland for opposition to free coinage,

⁹ *Public Ledger*, 24 Mar. 1896, 8.

¹⁰ *The Pittsburg Post*, 12 Mar. 1896, 4.

¹¹ *The Sun* (Williamsport), microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., 26 May 1896, 4.

¹² Silveus, 106.

¹³ *Public Ledger*, 2 May 1896, 8.

and finally voted for the Sherman Silver Purchase Bill? These actions were a matter of record, and the *Post* made frequent reference to them and McKinley's actions as "the great straddle bug." During these last few weeks before the Republican convention, the *Public Ledger* continued to hope that some dark horse might yet turn up, and capture the nomination.

However, Hanna and McKinley had done their work well. The Republican national convention, meeting on June 16 in St. Louis, nominated McKinley as their candidate on the first ballot. The Pennsylvania delegation, despite the landslide to McKinley, remained steadfast to Quay. The *Public Ledger*, unenthusiastic about the candidate, found little comfort in the money plank supporting the "present standard." The Republican party could, it felt, afford to alienate the South and silver states by an unequivocal stand supporting the "gold standard."¹⁴

As McKinley now began his much publicized front-porch campaign from Canton, Ohio, the focus of attention shifted to the Democratic Party, scheduled to make its nomination in Chicago in early July. Unlike the Republicans before them, no front runner had thus far emerged from the field. Cleveland had made known his unwillingness to run. As the Democratic Party was captured by the more liberal western element and colored by the doctrines of Populism, the character of the party changed and it appeared that Boise of Idaho, Bland of Missouri or Teller of Colorado might emerge as the nominee. Clearly though, the situation was ripe for a dark horse.

In the Pennsylvania Democratic Party there was little sympathy for the free-silver sentiment. Pennsylvania had become a power in the national Democratic Party despite prevailing Republican power at the ballot box. The state convention endorsed a vigorous sound-money plank and presented the name of former reform governor Robert E. Pattison as their candidate.¹⁵

As July 7, the date of the national convention in Chicago, drew near, it became obvious that the free-silver Democrats would be in control of the proceedings. This caused the Democratic newspapers of Pennsylvania to re-examine their positions. Almost without exception they had opposed free silver and now it looked as though they might have to choose between party and principle. "Will *The Sun* indorse and support the nominee of the Chicago convention, regardless of the platform on which he may be nominated?" asked *The Gazette* and the *Bul-*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1896, 8.

¹⁵ Stevens, 71.

letin, two Williamsport Republican dailies. An unexpanded "No" was all *The Sun* could manage.¹⁶ But the more loyal *Pittsburg Post* elected to remain with the Democratic nominee, no matter who he might be. *The Post* firmly believed that while a free-silver platform could possibly cause danger and disintegration of the party, it nevertheless would represent the decision of the people for the time being and *The Post* would accept the majority's wishes. "And suppose as appears probable," *The Post* continued, "that the issue may be narrowed down between a free-coinage Democrat nominated at Chicago and McKinley, what choice is there in the alternative for sound-money Democrats? An honest and capable free-coinage candidate may command respect. What of the shuffling, evasive and cowardly McKinley? Only contempt. He is as weak as water, unstable as the winds, and today an object of almost universal derision and ridicule by the sound-money element of all parties absorbed in that one issue, as so many are."¹⁷

The Post's philosophy was not shared by the Republican journals who saw in the Chicago fight the breakup and destruction of the Democratic Party. The *Pottsville Daily Republican* at first urged the sound-money Democrats to bolt but then realized that to do so would be to surrender the party to Populism. The sound-money Democrats were, with an air of self-righteousness, urged to stay and "take their medicine."¹⁸

As the convention opened in Chicago, there was still no positive indication who the candidate might be. On July 7, the first date of general sessions, all *The Post* could report was that certain candidates had been eliminated. It reported that "Mr. Bryan, of Nebraska, was very emphatically rubbed out today. Mr. Bryan will probably be made a member of the convention, but it will not be until after the convention has had its temporary organization. It will be too late for his most enthusiastic friends to thrust him forward as a prominent figure in its affairs."¹⁹

It is common knowledge how William Jennings Bryan so inspired the convention by his speech closing debate on the silver issue that he went on to capture the nomination on the fifth ballot. Pennsylvania throughout held for Pattison. While on the fourth ballot Pennsylvania recorded eleven votes for Bryan, they were all kept in the Pattison

¹⁶ *The Sun*, 27 May 1896, 4.

¹⁷ *The Pittsburg Post*, 8 June 1896, 4.

¹⁸ *Pottsville Daily Republican*, microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., 10 July 1896, 2.

¹⁹ *The Pittsburg Post*, 7 July 1896, 1.

column because of the unit rule. Some gold Democrats left the convention.²⁰

The nomination of Bryan made McKinley appear much more appealing to many of his reluctant supporters. The *Public Ledger* considered Bryan very dangerous because of his oratorical ability to spread "false doctrines" and urged all true Democrats to vote for McKinley.²¹ The *Pottsville Daily Republican* expressed delight with the Democratic ticket, "because it is an easy one to beat."²²

Following Bryan's nomination, the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania embarked on difficult times. Many state Democrats denounced the platform and deserted. On July 17, a coalition of conservative Democrats met in Philadelphia in one of the earliest steps in the country to combat Bryanism. It later took up the name of the Jeffersonian Party and sent 64 delegates to a convention of bolting Democrats in Indianapolis in early September.²³ This ticket was endorsed by President Cleveland. In spite of this faction which *The Post* derisively called the "boltocracy," the actual state Democratic Party organization did remain loyal to Bryan. There is, however, room for belief that the state party did not carry out a campaign with much vigor. The lukewarmness continued to the eve of the election.²⁴

The Populist convention had met on July 22 in St. Louis. Faced with the problem of maintaining their own identity by nominating a candidate who would undoubtedly pull votes from Bryan or relying on the free-silver panacea and subordinating their entire program to that one part, they chose the latter course. They did, however, attempt to maintain some independence by nominating Thomas E. Watson of Georgia for vice-president rather than by following the Democratic nomination of Arthur M. Sewall.

Mid-July was the panic month for the Republicans, but in the months that followed they began to calm down as they began to realize they would almost certainly win. Pennsylvania was considered safely Republican so the Republican organization did not use prominent men to campaign there. They were needed elsewhere.²⁵ Even Bryan did not campaign in Pennsylvania although he did cross the state in early August and spoke while on his way to make his acceptance address in New York City. His speeches in Pennsylvania had

²⁰ Silveus, 111.

²¹ *Public Ledger*, 13 July 1896, 8.

²² *Pottsville Daily Republican*, 11 July 1896, 2.

²³ Stevens, 82.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁵ Silveus, 119.

little effect on the campaign.²⁶ Large crowds turned out to hear him in Pittsburgh but the *Public Ledger* reported that he had made the "same old dreary speech."²⁷ *The Pittsburg Post*, not ready to admit defeat claimed that Bryan's reception proved that there was "little hope for McKinley." He would never be President of the United States, it predicted.²⁸

The Republican campaign was well-organized and managed. McKinley remained at home presenting the image of the office seeking the man. "Going to Canton" became the popular form of amusement and people came away much impressed by McKinley tact.²⁹ By June 30, when his nomination had been formally given to him at Canton, McKinley had given his unequivocal support to the Republican platform and the sound-money plank. This had served to pull the sound-money newspapers like the *Public Ledger* solidly in line with him and, following Bryan's nomination, the Republican press began to attack him with every weapon at their command.

The campaign which the Republican press carried out actually took two forms. First, through an extensive program of propaganda the public was bombarded with literature aimed at proving the necessity for supporting a sound-money president. Almost every phase of American life was touched upon in daily editorials which might range from an essay on "The Farmer and Silver Inflation,"³⁰ or "The Working Man and Cheap Money,"³¹ to "Free Silver and Free Trade."³² The *Pottsville Daily Republican* published a series of forty-three articles which it advised the reader to clip from the newspaper and put in his pocket for reference. This series contained such timely items as "What Will Happen if Bryan Is Elected"³³ and "Why You Should Support McKinley."³⁴

The second part of the Republican plan was an outright attack on Bryan and his party, even going so far as to question their loyalty. To attack the Democratic Party as disloyal, however, might harm the Republican cause. To meet this obstacle the *Public Ledger* denied that the party of Bryan was, in fact, the Democratic Party. The party represented, claimed the *Public Ledger*, the Populists and anarchists

26 Stevens, 83.

27 *Public Ledger*, 14 August 1896, 8.

28 *The Pittsburg Post*, 10 August 1896, 1.

29 Silveus, 120.

30 *Public Ledger*, 10 August 1896, 8.

31 *Ibid.*, 28 August 1896, 8.

32 *Ibid.*, 14 October 1896, 8.

33 *Pottsville Daily Republican*, 29 October 1896, 2.

34 *Ibid.*, 2 November 1896, 2.

and had ceased to be Democratic in anything but name.³⁵ The branding of the Democrats as "anarchists" stemmed from a plank in the Democratic platform, obviously included as support for Governor Altgeld of Illinois in his dispute with President Cleveland after Cleveland had sent troops to put down the Pullman strike. The plank condemned "arbitrary interference by Federal authorities in local affairs as a violation of the Constitution." The Democratic Party feared "this government by injunction as a new and highly dangerous form of oppression."³⁶ The eastern Republican newspapers had felt that anarchists were in control of the strike in Illinois and had supported Cleveland's action. Equating the Democrats with anarchy continued until the election.

The Democratic dailies were quick to take note of this name calling and rushed to the defense of the party. "It [the money question] is not answered when you call names and say people who differ from you are anarchists, socialists and repudiators, dishonest and brainless," reminded *The Pittsburg Post*.³⁷ But while defending Bryan and the party, the Democratic papers were not too busy to criticize the opposition and particularly McKinley. In daily political cartoons, McKinley was caricatured as a small child with a too-large Napoleon hat covering his eyes, carrying a banner labeled "protection," and being led by a pot-bellied Mark Hanna. And no editorial page was complete without again pointing out how McKinley had once been a spokesman for free silver.

The Democratic papers were also flooded with literature explaining their platform. It is interesting to note that Democratic papers were printing articles on the desirability of a Sixteen to One gold-silver ratio at the same time the Republican papers interpreted other facts to prove its undesirability.

During the last stages of the campaign, the issues ceased to be free coinage vs. the gold standard and free trade vs. protection. Bryan made the appeal that he was for the people against the moneyed aristocracy.³⁸ The *Public Ledger* decried this attempt to divide the country into classes and the "class prejudice" encouraged by Bryan.³⁹ The Republicans urged the people to vote against anarchy and other un-American doctrines of the Democrats, and identified the gold standard with the honor of the nation.

³⁵ *Public Ledger*, 23 July 1896, 8.

³⁶ *Pottsville Daily Republican*, 23 July 1896, 2.

³⁷ *The Pittsburg Post*, 14 July 1896, 4.

³⁸ Silveus, 122.

³⁹ *Public Ledger*, 5 August 1896, 1.

As the election neared, a new note was injected into the campaign. Charges of actual intimidation of employees appeared, and public notice of intention to close plants if Bryan would be elected were sometimes posted.⁴⁰ The McCormick harvesting machine company of Chicago announced that if the "free-silver delusion" were successful, they would have to run their shops half time.⁴¹ On September 15, *The Post* took note that some high railroad officials had told their employees from the pay cars that their wages would be reduced by one-half should Bryan be elected, and that the number of employees would be cut down.⁴² The railroads disclaimed any knowledge of this. *The Post* also charged that many corporations had formed McKinley Clubs and on threat of their jobs had forced workers to join. Many of these same workers were ordered to wear McKinley buttons and journey to Canton with the group.⁴³ *The Post* predicted that these people would indicate their support of Bryan in the secrecy of the ballot box.

As election day, November 3, approached, the parties finished off their last flurry of campaigning, and the dailies issued their last bit of instructions to their readers. Each paper urged its readers to vote the straight party ticket and explained just how to mark the ballot. The *Public Ledger* went so far as to include a sample ballot on the editorial page with a check by McKinley's name so even the most backward voter would understand. The Williamsport *Sun* expressed belief that "whether the verdict is for Bryan or McKinley, the great and glorious country inhabited by seventy millions of people will survive and prosper."⁴⁴

Bryan, of course, was defeated in the election. He earned 20,000 fewer votes than Cleveland had in 1892 while McKinley had 200,000 more than had Harrison.⁴⁵ In Pennsylvania, Bryan carried only twelve counties.⁴⁶ Election studies indicated an absence of any social or economic interest in the state as a basis of political cleavage. Traditionalism evidently dictated the majority of ballots.⁴⁷ There appeared to be a tightening of political bonds among those who were small or

⁴⁰ Stevens, 84.

⁴¹ *The Pittsburg Post*, 4 September 1896, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15 September 1896, 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13 October 1896, 8.

⁴⁴ *The Sun*, 3 November 1896, 4.

⁴⁵ Stevens, 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* The counties carried by Bryan were Berks, Clarion, Columbia, Crawford, Fulton, Greene, Monroe, Montour, Northampton, Pike, Sullivan, and York.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

large holders of property against socialism and anarchism as portrayed by Hanna. Others were swayed by fear of loss of jobs, effects of inflation upon wages or loss of savings.⁴⁸ The agrarians failed to carry the government and never again would they be a serious threat.

To *The Sun*, the verdict meant that the Democratic Party must now throw off the yoke of the Populists and return to its old principles.⁴⁹ *The Post* in a philosophical mood accepted defeat gracefully. Congratulating the victor she said, "We wait patiently on the count and everyone accepts it. That is loyalty to American institutions and the American principle of government. God save the republic."⁵⁰ To the *Public Ledger*, though, it was much more than a political victory, and on November 4 it featured the following on the editorial page:

*Bow Down, dear Land, for thou hast found release.
Thy God, in these distempered days,
Hath taught thee the sure wisdom of
His ways
And through thine enemies hath wrought
thy peace!
Bow down in prayer and praise!*

—LOWELL⁵¹

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The Public Ledger and Daily Transcript (Philadelphia), microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., Mar.-Nov. 1896, was the largest of the two Republican dailies used. While it was not an early backer of McKinley, the nomination of Bryan by the Democrats put it securely in the Republican column. The *Pottsville Daily Republican*, microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., Mar.-Nov. 1896, was one of McKinley's earliest and staunchest supporters. Its fine editorial page gives a good picture of small-city Republican philosophy.

The Pittsburg Post, microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., Mar.-Nov. 1896, was the only Democratic daily in Pittsburgh and had a circulation larger than any paper in the state outside of Philadelphia. Its editorials, while highly partisan, were much more objective than those of the *Ledger*. *The Sun* (Williamsport), microfilm, Pattee Lib., P. S. U., Mar.-Nov. 1896, while not entirely in favor of Bryan, advertised itself as "a Democratic daily" and remained loyal to the party.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁹ *The Sun*, 4 November 1896, 4.

⁵⁰ *The Pittsburg Post*, 7 November 1896, 4.

⁵¹ *Public Ledger*, 4 November 1896, 8.