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Article Summary: Charles W Bryan worked tirelessly behind the scenes to support the activities of his brother, William Jennings Bryan. A gifted organizer and political consultant, Charles published *The Commoner*.

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CHARLES W. BRYAN:  
"HIS BROTHER'S KEEPER"

BY LARRY G. OSNES

CHARLES W. Bryan is one of those political figures who has been lost in the historiographical shuffle.

At least two reasons help to account for this. In 1924, Bryan became an early statistic by being defeated in his only attempt at national office—the Vice-Presidency of the United States. Secondly, and more important, Charles W. Bryan was the younger brother of the "Great Commoner,"

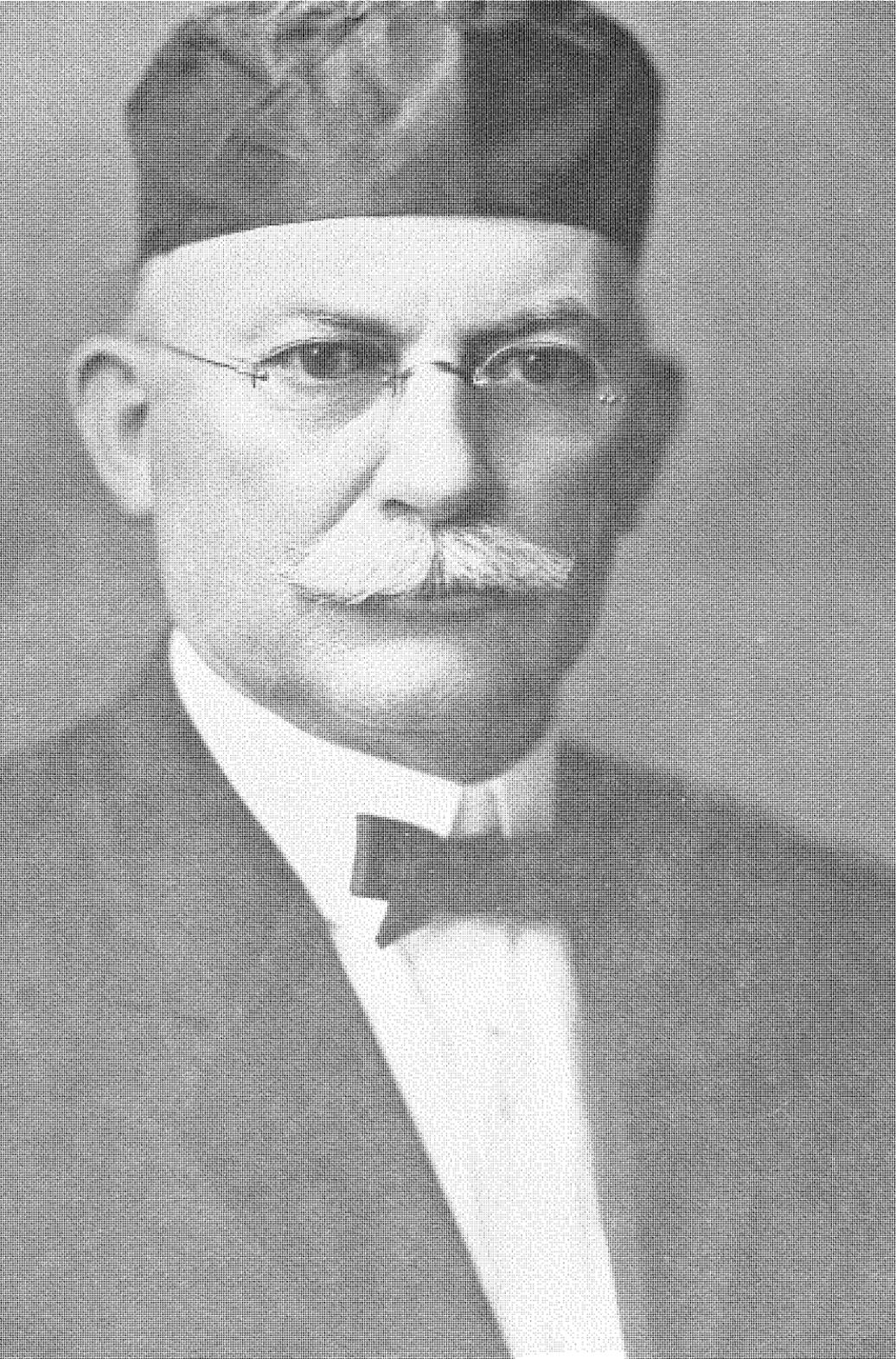
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William Jennings Bryan.<sup>1</sup> Charles did not share the spotlight with W. J., but rather remained in the shadows until his older brother's political fortunes had begun to wane. One part of the Charles Bryan story deals with the contribution that he made toward the success of his older brother in the national political arena. Even the recent Bryan biographers have not considered this fraternal relationship as a factor in W. J.'s success. It is a serious omission not to give Charles W. Bryan credit for the assistance he gave to W. J. during the latter's political career. Although this relationship is only one aspect of the long and significant life of C. W. Bryan, its discussion suggests that he deserves more than an occasional mention in the roster of those who "also ran."

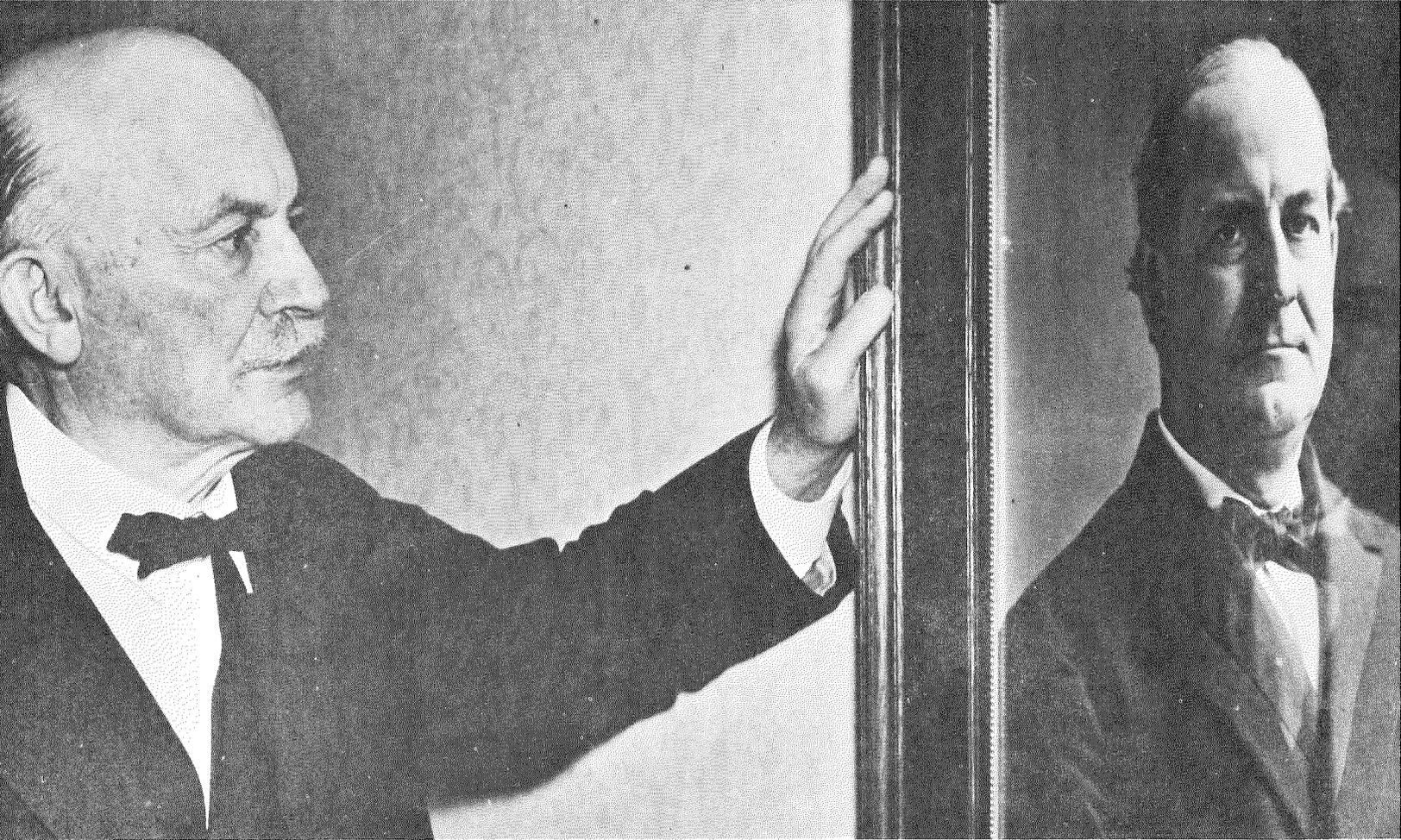
William Jennings Bryan was seven years old and living with his family on their farm near Salem, Illinois, when on February 10, 1867, his brother, Charles Wayland, was born. On March 1, 1867, eighteen days after Charles' birth, Nebraska was admitted as the thirty-seventh state of the Union. Nebraska and the Bryan brothers were to have a mutual impact upon one another until the brothers died; W. J. in 1925 and C. W. in 1945. The relationship affected the history of Nebraska, the United States, and the lives of the Bryan boys. Their father, Silas Bryan, was a deeply religious, well-educated man who was occasion-

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<sup>1</sup> William Jennings Bryan was also a defeated candidate for national office who for many years was neglected by historians. W. J. Bryan was defeated in 1896, 1900 and 1908 as the Democratic candidate for president. Despite these defeats, he was a strong and vocal influence in the activities of the Democratic Party from 1896 until his death in 1925. As Secretary of State under Wilson, he believed that the President's strong stand for U. S. rights as a neutral would draw the nation into World War I. He disagreed with the policy and resigned in 1915. He retained a large national following and was an outspoken advocate of four ideas later to become amendments to the Federal Constitution. They include: income tax, direct election of senators, woman suffrage, and national prohibition. The major biographies include Paul W. Glad, *The Trumpet Soundeth* (University of Nebraska Press, 1960); Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan* (University of Nebraska Press, 1964); and Lawrence Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1965).



Charles W. Bryan



Charles W. Bryan with portrait of W. J. Bryan

ally involved in Illinois Democratic politics. Silas held several elective offices in Illinois but was best known in his community as Judge Bryan. Thus, the Bryan brothers were introduced early to the rough and tumble of politics.

William and Charles were not close as brothers during their years in Illinois. The seven-year age span between them helps to explain their differing interests. William went to college and Charles began to develop the independent attitude that marked his entire career. Nevertheless, Charles harbored a deep respect for his older brother who always seemed to be doing interesting things.<sup>2</sup> Throughout their relationship, William was the dominant partner and exerted great influence over his younger brother. However, Charles contributed his share to their mutual success. Their compatibility grew as time elapsed. Charles would listen to the advice of W. J., as he usually admiringly called him, when he would not heed anyone else.

Charles attended the Salem Public Schools, establishing for himself no outstanding academic record. His interest in school was slight, and his nervous disposition left little patience for formal study. At the age of sixteen, upon the urging of his family, Charles entered Whipple Academy in Jacksonville, Illinois, a preparatory school for Jacksonville College. He attended the Academy during the years 1883 and 1884.<sup>3</sup> There is no record of the course of study he pursued at Whipple, but he left in 1884, presumably to get a job. His father had died in 1880 when Charles was thirteen years old. The elder Bryan had not left a large estate, but through careful management by Mrs. Bryan, it was sufficient to care for her and the younger children. Money had been set aside for each of the Bryan children and family pressure pushed Charles back to school

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<sup>2</sup> For information on W. J. Bryan's youthful activities and the early boyhood period of the brothers see Glad and Coletta, *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Official college records (Jacksonville College, Jacksonville, Illinois).

in 1885, this time to the University of Chicago.<sup>4</sup> His continuing desire for money and the accompanying independence was sufficient to persuade him to drop out of the University before completing one year.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, William J. Bryan had gone to Lincoln, Nebraska, to open a law firm. Feeling somewhat responsible for his fatherless younger brother, he concurred with Charles' desire to drop out of the University of Chicago. Upon leaving the University, Charles managed his father's farm near Salem, Illinois, until 1891 at which time he decided to move to Lincoln. William Jennings Bryan was already serving his first term as a United States Congressman from Nebraska when he urged Charles to make such a move. William had often talked with his younger brother about the opportunity that Nebraska presented to young men and the politically minded William hinted that Charles might be of some help to him. Upon his arrival in Lincoln, Charles took a job as a salesman and secretary of the Purity Extract Company, selling such wares as soap, tobacco, flavoring extracts, and baking powder. The firm also distributed gum and candy causing his friends to chide him by referring to him as the "bubble-gum salesman."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, he made his brother's affairs his business and helped in any way W. J. desired.

In 1892, Charles returned to Salem to marry his boyhood sweetheart, Bessie Louise Brokaw. The wedding took place in Salem on November 29, 1892, whereupon

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<sup>4</sup> Official university records (University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois). The present University of Chicago was not in existence until 1892, but at that time it absorbed the old University of Chicago (founded by Stephen A. Douglas in 1859) where Charles had attended.

<sup>5</sup> Franz Radke, personal interview, May 21, 1965. The late Mr. Radke, Lincoln, Nebraska, attorney was C. W. Bryan's personal secretary during his three terms as governor of Nebraska.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Maupin, personal interview, June 15, 1965. Louis Maupin, the son of Will Maupin who was an associate editor of *The Commoner*, was a copy boy for *The Commoner* for several years and knew Charles Bryan well. He has edited several newspapers and is currently the editor of *The Oil Jobber*.

Charles immediately returned to Lincoln with his young bride. They later had three children; Virginia, Mary Louise, and Silas Millard.<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Bryan was a shy, retiring, but gracious woman, not inclined toward politics. Her family was Republican and even when Charles ran for the Vice-Presidency in 1924 on the Democratic ticket, he admitted that he did not know for sure if he had "converted" her.<sup>8</sup> In 1893, the newly married Bryans moved from Lincoln to Omaha where Charles took a good paying position as a broker for an Eastern manufacturing firm.<sup>9</sup> He continued, while in Omaha, to assist William in political affairs in a general fashion until 1896 when he became even more closely associated with his brother's career.

By 1894, William Jennings Bryan was emerging as a leading exponent of Midwestern, democratic, progressive ideas. He had become particularly well known as a crusader for free silver. His magnificent voice, magnetic personality, and alignment with Populist ideas made him a national figure to be respected. The Democratic National Convention of 1896 set the stage for the now famous "Cross of Gold" speech. He emotionally expounded, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." This eloquent speech resulted in the Democratic presidential nomination going to the "Boy Orator from the Platte," who at the age of thirty-six became the youngest man ever to achieve the distinction.

Charles W. Bryan was vitally interested in W. J.'s candidacy in 1896, but was busy trying to lay a financial foundation for himself. He was not included in the political planning of that campaign. As the campaign wore on, William Jennings Bryan found the weight of suddenly

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia died in youth. Mary Louise is the late Mrs. V. E. Harnsberger, wife of an Ashland, Nebraska, banker. Silas Millard died in 1957. He was a Minneapolis attorney who had once been Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota.

<sup>8</sup> *Omaha World Herald*, September 30, 1924.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, January 5, 1940.

being thrust into national politics very heavy; so heavy, in fact, that he sought relief. In October of 1896, W. J. quietly told his problems to brother Charles. W. J. urged him to leave his Omaha job and return to Lincoln to help with answering the approximately three thousand communications a day that were arriving at his office. Charles agreed and hurriedly made arrangements to aid his brother in the burdensome task of answering some 186,000 letters, post cards, and telegrams that had accumulated.<sup>10</sup>

This experience in 1896 was Charles' first formal participation in the arena of national politics. It was tedious, time consuming, and unglamorous work, but it proved to be mutually satisfying to both Charles and William. W. J. was undoubtedly amazed at the thoroughness and efficiency of his younger brother. Charles was dismayed at the organizational errors he found had been made in the campaign. The experience gave Charles first-hand acquaintance with political organization on a grand scale, while affording him personal contacts with important people in the Democratic Party.<sup>11</sup>

The campaign effort resulted in failure, but it fortified W. J.'s confidence in Charles and strengthened Charles' devotion to his older brother. It was quietly understood that if William Jennings Bryan were ever again to become involved in national politics, Charles would figure in the mechanics far more than he had in 1896.

Charles W. Bryan became, among other things, business and political manager for his brother; publisher and associate editor of W. J.'s political newspaper, *The Commoner*; Nebraska farmer and cattle breeder; twice mayor of Lincoln, Nebraska, (1915-1917 and 1935-1937); thrice governor of Nebraska (1923-1925 and 1931-1935); and the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 1924.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Kansas City Star*, November 26, 1922.

The most striking personal features of C. W. Bryan were his shiny bald head<sup>12</sup> and his heavily moustached upper lip. He was neither as large nor as impressive looking as his older brother, but the Bryan determination soon made itself known. C. W. was quick and direct in his manner and would make a less active man appear lazy. His impatience and aggressiveness were feared by opponents. Bryan's personality, however, did not appeal to many of those who knew him. He appeared pompous, egotistical, and self-centered. He credited himself with ideas obtained from others. A friend and one time employee, Louis Maupin, described him as a "high octane extrovert."<sup>13</sup> Bryan spoke to nearly everyone he met, but was always in a hurry. Those who understood him could not remain angry but his peculiar temperament on occasion alienated needed support. Charles Bryan spoke more rapidly than most men, though the eloquence of William Jennings Bryan was obviously lacking. In conversation, he projected an overbearing personality and was a poor listener. Those who remained his friends had to adjust to his verbose arrogance and to be satisfied with a subordinate position. (All except his wife and William Jennings Bryan!) He had extreme confidence in his own abilities and appeared to be cocky and authoritarian. He rarely delegated a task he could find time to perform himself. He was a hard worker and demanded the same dedication from those who worked for him. Franz Radke, an attorney who was Bryan's secretary said of him, "Oh, he was a hard taskmaster. When he wanted something done, he wanted it done now! He took work home at night and he expected all of us to."<sup>14</sup> Will Maupin, a newspaper man who worked with Bryan as associate editor of *The Com-*

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<sup>12</sup> A campaign symbol for the Democrats in 1924 was Charles Bryan's black skull cap. Bryan had a nervous ailment that was aggravated by light shining directly on his bald head, causing severe headaches. When outside, he was rarely seen without a hat, and he nearly always wore his skull cap when inside. Mrs. Bryan made the skull cap from a double thickness of black silk.

<sup>13</sup> Louis Maupin, personal interview, June 15, 1965.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Radke, personal interview, May 21, 1965.

moner for ten years commented in an editorial in his *Gering Midwest*: "Charlie has the average number of faults common to humanity. I used to get so mad at him, I felt like throwing the typewriter at him. Were I to mention one thing about Charlie that always got on my nerves, it was his insistence that he was always right."<sup>15</sup>

Charles was not a religious person. Unlike his puritanical brother, he was never a member of any church during his adult life. Mrs. Bryan was an active and dedicated member and worker in the First Baptist Church in Lincoln and C. W. sometimes went with her. His attendance was irregular. One of Charles' friends who was a devoted church member thought that C. W. was an agnostic.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Bryan was morally upright and refused to drink or smoke.<sup>17</sup>

Charles W. Bryan's unpredictable and sometimes obnoxious conduct helps to explain why many of those who knew him discounted him as a "crack-pot." However, his outward eccentricities camouflaged his serious intentions. Indeed, some of his unique qualities, when properly controlled, served to supplement the talents of his older brother. C. W. had the ability to see many sides of a situation which enabled him to quickly detect the vulnerable areas of an opponent. He loved the rough and tumble of politics and was always prepared for a fight. Charles' fighting ability enabled W. J. to entrust the seamier side of political contests to him in order to concentrate his own energies on tasks more compatible with his congenial nature.

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<sup>15</sup> *Gering Midwest*, Gering, Nebraska, September 18, 1922.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Hyde, personal interview, May 18, 1965. Mr. Hyde was a prominent Lincoln insurance man who knew both W. J. and C. W. Bryan well.

<sup>17</sup> Bryan was sent a case of tobacco by a Kentucky tobacco farmer during the 1924 Presidential campaign. Charles thanked the donor by letter saying he did not smoke and was against the use of tobacco, but would leave the gift in his office to supply his colleagues who did. *Chicago Tribune*, September 4, 1924.

William Jennings Bryan's livelihood was sustained primarily by his speaking tours throughout the nation, often making from \$500 to \$1,000 per speech. Even as Secretary of State, he traveled the Chautauqua circuit expounding the ideas he had advocated since the 1880's. Such a life prevented him from spending much time at his Fairview home in Lincoln, which under normal circumstances would have resulted in organizational chaos. However, Charles Bryan's untiring and efficient organizational efforts helped to make the Bryan element of the Democratic Party a smoothly running machine. Between 1896 and W. J.'s death in 1925, Charles performed for his brother thousands of detailed tasks of varying importance. Had W. J. been forced to tend to the personal routine tasks accomplished by Charles, the factor of time would have rendered him less effective.

There was a close kinship and bond of trust between the brothers. W. J. nearly always began communications to Charles with "My dear brother Charles," and signed them "Affectionately Yours, W. J." From the intimate nature of the constant flow of letters and telegrams between them from 1896 until 1925, one senses that Charles was "all things to W. J." The thorough understanding between them permitted Charles to make statements to the press for W. J. and answer his mail. Charles handled virtually all of the scheduling of speaking engagements for his older brother. Most of W. J.'s business dealings were left in the hands of Charles for disposition. Charles paid his brother's personal bills, invested his money as he saw fit, and released his money for charitable causes as

directed by the generous W. J.<sup>18</sup> C. W. attended to minute details for his famous older brother, such as getting a comfortable chair for his Washington office in 1913,<sup>19</sup> and buying gifts for friends and relatives. Though not politically significant, these details reveal the working compatibility of the brothers. Probably neither C. W. nor W. J. were millionaires but a family friend suggested that he would estimate W. J. may have had assets valued at \$500,000 while Charles' assets may have been valued at near \$100,000. Nevertheless, the source indicated that whatever money the Bryan brothers had, Charles handled it, and did a better job of handling W. J.'s than he did his own.<sup>20</sup> Will Maupin editorialized in his *Gering Midwest*:

Many people imagine brother Will[iam] is a millionaire, but if I had a quarter million dollars, I would hate to offer Will a quarter of it for all his possessions. And, he wouldn't have nearly that much if brother Charlie hadn't looked after his business affairs. Brother Will is really a wonderful man but his bump of business is a dent.<sup>21</sup>

These sources suggesting the close personal relationship between Charles and his brother are important. But, significantly more important are the relationships which directly influenced W. J.'s political career.

A long-time friend of the Bryan family explained the relationship of the brothers this way: "W. J. was the statesman and C. W. was the politician."<sup>22</sup> There may be

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<sup>18</sup> William Jennings Bryan Papers (MSS), (Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska). The W. J. Bryan papers include a microfilm copy of letters on file at Occidental College in Los Angeles. The microfilm was presented to the Historical Society by William Jennings Bryan, Jr. All letters cited are from this collection unless otherwise noted. W. J. Bryan to C. W. Bryan, San Francisco, July 25, 1915, directed C. W. to send a cancelled five hundred dollar note to Mrs. J. D. Calhoun, whose husband had borrowed the money from W. J. but had died. W. J. carefully explained that Mrs. Calhoun needed it worse than he did.

<sup>19</sup> W. J. Bryan to C. W. Bryan, Washington, D. C., March 31, 1913.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Hyde, personal interview, May 18, 1965. Mr. Hyde suggested that Charles' wife lived quite conservatively after Charles died, presumably because of lack of income.

<sup>21</sup> *Gering Midwest*, September 18, 1922.

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Hyde, personal interview, May 18, 1965.

truth in that candid statement. After W. J.'s defeat in 1896, C. W. organized an effective system of keeping abreast of what leading Democrats and Republicans across the nation said on important issues. The purpose of it was to remedy some of the errors that had been made in that campaign, just in case the opportunity presented itself again. The system took the form of an extensive card file index in which was kept a running record of notables and their ideas. In this way, C. W. could almost immediately find an inconsistency in a politician's record, if one existed. Charles Bryan personally attended to the card file index and even C. W.'s personal secretary, Franz Radke, was not permitted to work with it.<sup>23</sup> The system proved a valuable tool for both W. J. and C. W. in furnishing campaign speech material, as well as exposing opponents' vulnerable areas. Mr. F. A. Watkins, a newspaper colleague and a long-time friend of the Bryan family commented on C. W.'s card index:

... never in the history of the country has a man gotten so complete a record on political leaders, bosses and statesmen as this man. Charles Bryan, who many claim has indeed become a strategist, one who in the application of a persistent system of thoroughness and work has never been equalled in this country. When W. J. desires the political or corporation record of any political leader or official, it is Charles Bryan who sets in motion a system so thoroughly organized that the desired information is always obtained with the result that it is now claimed that the filing archives of his office contains the indisputable record of every leader or public man of prominence at every strategic center in every state of the Union. This method, personally conducted and directed by Charles Bryan, has enabled him to obtain such overwhelming proofs and evidence against deceiving and double playing statesmen as to make it possible for the elder brother to now and then put political charlatans down and out.<sup>24</sup>

When W. J. desired reliable information he went to his chief strategist, brother Charles. The evidence Charles produced took precedence over all other. When W. J. went to national conventions after 1896, he was armed with his

<sup>23</sup> Franz Radke, personal interview, June 15, 1965.

<sup>24</sup> *Hastings Daily Republican*, Hastings, Nebraska, November 12, 1912.

brother who in turn was armed with cards on every statesman and political boss indicating their ideas and favorite tactics. Charles' assignment was to assist in checkmating the moves of opponents.<sup>25</sup>

Another political effort in which Charles played a vital role was the Bryan newspaper. *The Commoner*, named to reinforce the leadership that William Jennings Bryan exercised over the common people of the United States, was a publication used as a political instrument for him from January 1, 1901, until April, 1923.<sup>26</sup> In it, W. J. Bryan spoke his mind on political, economic, military, moral, and religious questions. The paper changed little during the twenty-two and one-half years of continuous publication except that in the July 8, 1913, issue, it was announced that *The Commoner* would become a monthly rather than a weekly paper. As in other matters of business involving the Bryan brothers, Charles W. Bryan had greater influence in the paper's organization than did W. J. From 1901 until 1906, Charles Bryan was listed as business manager of *The Commoner*, while W. J. was referred to as owner and editor. In 1906, C. W.'s position was changed to publisher, and in 1914 he assumed the official role as associate editor and publisher. The specific position held by Charles throughout the life of the paper made little difference as he was in full organizational control of it from its inception until its death. He intimated in 1923 that during the life of the paper he had personally read every copy except two before it went to press.<sup>27</sup> W. J. wrote in the final issue of *The Commoner*, "My brother, as publisher, has from the beginning relieved me of all the work connected with this paper, except the writing of editorials."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *The Commoner* also endorsed C. W.'s political candidacies, which were later to come.

<sup>27</sup> *Lincoln Journal*, April 20, 1923.

<sup>28</sup> *The Commoner*, April, 1923.

The influence of the paper would be difficult to determine. W. J., though he did not maintain an office at *The Commoner*, wrote articles and editorials and sent them back to C. W. for publication. He often designated the date on which he wanted his articles printed. Charles, and the other staff writers for the paper, including Will Mau-pin<sup>29</sup> and Richard L. Metcalfe,<sup>30</sup> were responsible for the articles not written by W. J. The peak circulation of *The Commoner* was approximately 275,000 and at one time, it was reported to have been distributed to every state and "every county of every state" in the United States.<sup>31</sup> The publication's mailing list included several hundred Western European addresses. The paper allowed W. J. Bryan's followers throughout the country to keep abreast of his ideas on pertinent issues of the day, long after his potency as a political candidate had disappeared. The business organization of *The Commoner* was unique, a matter for which Charles Bryan was personally responsible. No capital was raised to cover initial publication costs of the paper. The daily cash receipts of paid-in-advance subscriptions at one dollar per year, together with a small revenue from advertising,<sup>32</sup> were sufficient to pay for the entire publication including editorial, business staff, and personnel at one time totaling about seventy-five at the office of publication. *The Commoner* paid cash as it went, had a minimum of labor troubles, paid liberal salaries and wages in cash each Saturday evening, and gave all employees a cash bonus of one month's salary in advance when *The Commoner* ceased publication. Because the Bryans felt it important to disseminate their ideas preced-

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<sup>29</sup> Later C. W.'s opponent in the Nebraska State Democratic Convention for the gubernatorial nomination in 1922.

<sup>30</sup> Later to be appointed, upon the recommendation of W. J. Bryan, Civil Governor of the Panama Canal Zone (June, 1913), by President Woodrow Wilson. (*Nebraska State Journal*, June 4, 1913).

<sup>31</sup> *Nebraska Democrat*, Lincoln, January 1942.

<sup>32</sup> Sponsors of ads were carefully selected, often from among publishers of Bibles and religious materials, food companies, clothing manufacturers and other innocuous enterprises. No advertising from liquor companies, tobacco companies, or monopolistic trusts were accepted.

ing important elections, the subscription rate of *The Commoner* often went down to as low as twenty-five cents per year to effect greater circulation.<sup>33</sup>

In the July 23, 1908, issue of *The Commoner*, W. J. wrote the following in relation to his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States:

To the readers of *The Commoner*,

My candidacy makes it necessary for me to suspend editorial work, and I desire to have it known that I should not be held responsible for matters appearing in *The Commoner* during the campaign, except that which appears over my signature.

My brother, Mr. Charles W. Bryan, who has had charge of the publication since its establishment, will assume control until November and the associate editor, Mr. Richard L. Metcalfe will, during that time, be editor.

All profits from *The Commoner*, over and above actual expenses will be turned over to the Democratic National Committee for the benefit of the campaign.<sup>34</sup>

*The Commoner* served as an instrument enabling W. J. to criticize those leaders and their ideas with which he did not agree. The card index file that Charles had developed provided source material for many such articles. Many politicians came to regret contradictory speeches and public utterances they had made after the Bryan card index exposed their inconsistency. *The Commoner* provided a medium of expression for such exposure. "W. J. knew their faces and I knew their records," Charles later said of their working relationship. "I was the business man of the firm, the practical one. W. J. was the educator, the John the Baptist."<sup>35</sup>

*The Commoner*, being a political instrument, was the target of much criticism from the regular press, particularly in Nebraska, and, on occasion, throughout the na-

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<sup>33</sup> *Nebraska Democrat*, January, 1942.

<sup>34</sup> *The Commoner*, July 23, 1908.

<sup>35</sup> *Lincoln Journal*, March 5, 1945.

tion.<sup>36</sup> As in so many of W. J.'s exploits, had it not been for C. W.'s organizational efforts, *The Commoner* would have been less successful and probably would have had a shorter life. This is substantiated by the fact that when Charles became governor of Nebraska in March of 1923, the paper ceased publication the following month. Although W. J. and C. W. had discussed discontinuance of the paper on several earlier occasions, C. W.'s new position as governor seriously limited the time he could devote to the paper. Consequently, publication was forced to cease.<sup>37</sup>

When W. J. had an uneasiness about his business or political desires, he insisted that C. W. give it his personal attention. A case in point was the organization of the 1908 Presidential campaign. During the forepart of the year 1908 and into the summer, Charles quietly organized the progressive Democrats of the nation into Democratic clubs pledged to secure the election of progressive Democrats as delegates to Democratic conventions at all levels.<sup>38</sup> As the National Convention drew near, conservative party leaders began to assemble in Denver to organize. They were outspoken in their ideas relative to the future of the

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<sup>36</sup> *The Houston Daily Press*, October 7, 1909, accused C. W. of exploiting readers by using W. J.'s old speeches to increase circulation for business purposes. C. W. countered by accusing the Texas newspaper of being a member of the "Corporation Press." The editor of the *Fort Worth Record*, October 4, 1903, accused C. W. of exploiting the name of W. J. and his ideas to make "private money" for himself. The *Omaha World Herald*, January 20, 1916, accused C. W. of using *The Commoner* for a campaign against Wilson's Preparedness Program.

<sup>37</sup> *The Commoner*, April, 1923.

<sup>38</sup> *Sioux City Journal*, Sioux City, Iowa, January 26, 1911; *The Commoner*, April 23, 1908. C. W. Bryan used the subscription list of *The Commoner* as a ready-made base of support and signed W. J.'s name to the communications. This was a normal practice for C. W. In most election years he published frontpage articles in *The Commoner* saying, "*The Commoner* will furnish a form of constitution and membership blanks for the use of Democratic clubs and when such clubs are organized, it should be reported to this office." On February 14, 1908, C. W. wrote W. J. from Lincoln to Indianapolis telling him his ideas for keeping the 1908 political situation in their hands. He stated, "In the past sixty days I have sent out 120,000 letters to influential Democrats urging them to stay in the Bryan train of thought."

Democratic Party. W. J. became alarmed at their conservatism and contacted Charles, who was then conducting the campaign organization from Lincoln. W. J. suggested that Charles should go to Denver to emphasize the Bryan point of view and to solidify delegate support. Charles agreed, and he immediately left for Denver to set up the Bryan convention headquarters. Charles organized the convention, making sure that no details were overlooked. On July 5, 1908, during the Democratic National Convention of that year, the *Denver Sunday News-Times* reported, "Next to The Commoner himself, Bryan's brother Charles knows more about 'the things that are' than anybody that has registered up-to-date."<sup>39</sup> The delegate support on the first ballot was sufficient to nominate William Jennings Bryan for president. The conservatives were defeated and one of the more progressive platforms that had ever been offered to the voters by either major party was adopted by the Democrats. Charles Murphy, boss of Tammany and leader of the conservatives, in bidding Charles Bryan farewell after the convention admitted:

Mr. Bryan, you had the delegates and you had them organized. I have been attending conventions for twenty-eight years, but this is the first time they ever dealt the cards on top of the table and told me in advance what I was going to draw. I confess, it beats me.<sup>40</sup>

W. J. appreciated Charles' work in connection with that convention. At the close of it, W. J. sent C. W. a telegram from Lincoln saying, "Now that you have completed the most important work you had in hand and before you leave for the convention hall, let me express my satisfaction with your superb management; and my gratitude—W. J."<sup>41</sup>

When acting for W. J. or when in his public presence, Charles usually stayed in the background. During the two Democratic conventions Charles directed (1900 and 1908),

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<sup>39</sup> *Denver Sunday News-Times*, July 5, 1908.

<sup>40</sup> *Lincoln Daily News*, November 15, 1912.

<sup>41</sup> *Nebraska Democrat*, Lincoln, Nebraska, January 1942, p. 9.

few present at the conventions were aware of the organizer. The Denver correspondent of the *Lincoln Star* assigned to the Democratic Convention of 1908 stated:

Here in Denver, Charlie Bryan is doing just as effective work for brother Bill as Charlie Taft did for brother Bill [William Howard Taft, Republican nominee in 1908], but Denver hardly knows of his existence. He does not get his name in the paper and his picture has never been published. Yet, he controls the convention as surely and as certainly as if the delegates were all tied fast to him by political appointment.<sup>42</sup>

Charles had a political sensitivity that sealed his lips in tight situations. What opponents would have given to have known what was behind his slight grin! Nevertheless, Charles was affable and learned to know political leaders so well that he seemed to be able to immediately predict their moves and counter them as rapidly.

The confidence that W. J. had in C. W.'s direct, detailed, and efficient organizational ability is further shown by an incident early in the presidential campaign of 1908. Norman E. Mack of Buffalo, New York, was selected as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee and Mr. Mack opened the National Headquarters in Chicago. There was some delay in working out the plans concerning organization and finance and W. J. became uneasy. He suggested that Charles should go to Chicago to help get the campaign under way. W. J. then wrote the following letter to Norman Mack:

My dear Mr. Mack,

Charlie is coming to Chicago to confer on matters of organization. He understands such matters better than I do and I intend to be responsible for any mistakes he makes.

Yours truly,

W. J. Bryan<sup>43</sup>

An instance of rare importance indicates that on one occasion, at least, Charles influenced the thinking of W. J.

<sup>42</sup> *Lincoln Star*, July 5, 1908.

<sup>43</sup> *Nebraska Democrat*, January, 1942.

and it had national repercussions. The 1912 Democratic National Convention was unique for the excitement and personal exchanges that took place. W. J. had been nominated for the presidency by three previous National Conventions (1896, 1900, and 1908), and still had a large personal following. Although he did not expect to get the nomination again, he was interested in seeing a progressive Democrat lead the party. The leading contenders for the nomination were Champ Clark of Missouri and the novice in practical politics, Dr. Woodrow Wilson, Governor of New Jersey. W. J.'s association with Champ Clark had been quite strong through the years but Clark's policies were not as progressive as Bryan wished.<sup>44</sup>

Champ Clark led on the first day of convention balloting. Wilson had support but it was unstable. W. J. Bryan, present as a delegate from Nebraska, was pledged by the Nebraska primary election to vote for Clark. But, when the New York delegation dramatically turned to Clark, Bryan no less dramatically turned to Wilson.<sup>45</sup> The Bryan support for Wilson and the manner in which it was engineered was sufficient to throw the nomination to Woodrow Wilson on the forty-sixth ballot.<sup>46</sup> On the third day of the convention Bryan had prepared the ground for Nebraska's switch to Wilson by introducing the following formal resolution which read in part:

Resolved that in this crisis in our party's career, and in our country's history, this convention sends greetings to the people of the United States and assures them that the

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<sup>44</sup> A contemporary account of this convention by the chairman of the Democratic National Committee is William F. McComb, *Making Woodrow Wilson President* (Fairview Publishing Company, New York, 1921).

<sup>45</sup> This action which disregarded the choice of the Democratic primary in Nebraska by the Bryans was a deed for which several Nebraska Democratic leaders never forgave them—particularly Arthur F. Mullen as he relates in his reminiscent *Western Democrat* (Wilfred Funk, Inc., New York, 1940), p. 173-174.

<sup>46</sup> Arthur S. Link's published works on Wilson take the position that Bryan's move was not the only significant factor in the nomination of Wilson, and he is undoubtedly right. However, there is much evidence to support the traditional view that the Bryan strategy was the most significant factor in Wilson's nomination.

party of Jefferson and Jackson is still the champion of popular government and equality before the law. As proof of our fidelity we hereby declare ourselves opposed to the nomination of any candidate for president who is the representative of, or under any obligation to J. Pierpont Morgan, Thomas F. Ryan, August Belmont, or any other member of the privilege hunting and favor seeking class that controlled the Republican Convention at Chicago and dictated the nominee of that Convention.

Be it further resolved that we demand the withdrawal from this convention of any delegate or delegates constituting or representing the above named interests.<sup>47</sup>

Thomas Ryan was a convention delegate from Virginia and August Belmont from New York. Both were associated with big business, finance and "privilege." The resolution, with the last paragraph withdrawn, was adopted by the Convention. Bryan's successful move emphasized his influence in the Convention and placed him in a position of leadership.

There is evidence to show that the strategy of that move was planned not by W. J. Bryan, who read the resolution to the convention, but by C. W. Bryan. In speaking of that strategy in his memoirs, W. J. wrote: "When I returned to headquarters Wednesday night, my brother, Charles W. Bryan, who had been closely associated with me in Nebraska, laid before me the information he had secured and the resolution which I introduced the next night."<sup>48</sup> In the C. W. Bryan papers in the Nebraska State Historical Society is a typed copy of that resolution, word for word as W. J. read it to the convention. At the bottom of it is the personal signature of Charles W. Bryan.

When Governor Wilson contacted William Jennings Bryan to thank him for bringing about his nomination and especially praising his spectacular plan publicly denouncing Ryan, Belmont, and Morgan, W. J. replied, "Governor Wilson, you will have to thank my brother Charlie

<sup>47</sup> Charles Wayland Bryan Papers (MSS), *loc. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (John C. Winston Company, Chicago, 1925), p. 174.

for that convention plan of strategy. He suggested it to me."<sup>49</sup> Some newspapers credited Charles with the resolution scheme but not until after the smoke had cleared from the convention.<sup>50</sup>

After Woodrow Wilson had been nominated in 1912, he invited W. J. Bryan to come to his Sea Girt, New Jersey, home to discuss the selection of a campaign committee. Bryan replied, "You had better have Charlie come. He knows more about the men [Democratic politicians] than I do and he has been doing this work for me for the past fifteen years."<sup>51</sup> At Governor Wilson's request, C. W. Bryan went from the Baltimore Convention to Sea Girt, New Jersey, and conferred with Wilson about the personnel of the campaign committee. When he returned to Lincoln, he received the following letter:

Sea Girt, New Jersey  
July 19, 1912

Mr. Charles W. Bryan  
Lincoln, Nebraska

Thank you for your telegram of yesterday. I hope sincerely that you will like the personnel of the committee as I have worked it out. I had constantly in mind our conversation when you were here.

In haste,

Cordially and Sincerely Yours,  
Woodrow Wilson<sup>52</sup>

Charles W. Bryan served a variety of other political functions for his brother. The correspondence between the brothers reveals an almost constant discussion of issues and strategy. The *Lincoln Journal* reported on September 18, 1912, that "Charlie, in recent years, has become the only man who can really speak for W. J. on matters of policy."

<sup>49</sup> *Nebraska Democrat*, loc. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Two examples are: *Hastings Daily Republican*, November 11, 1912; *Lincoln Daily News*, November 12, 1912.

<sup>51</sup> *Nebraska Democrat*, loc. cit.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Wayland Bryan Papers (MSS).

W. J.'s travels made it difficult for him to control the Democratic Party in his home state of Nebraska, a recognized prerequisite for a politician of national significance. The Hitchcock-Mullen-Gooch faction of the Nebraska Democratic Party was always vying with Bryan for state leadership. The political struggles in the Nebraska Democratic Party from 1896 until 1925, were not fought by W. J. himself, but rather by brother Charles.<sup>53</sup> Charles also served as W. J.'s Nebraska adviser on patronage.<sup>54</sup>

The correspondence before the 1920 election revealed that W. J. and C. W. disagreed somewhat over the use of prohibition as an issue in that campaign. W. J. thought it should be an issue but Charles did not. Charles tried to discourage W. J. from making his prohibition speech at the Democratic National Convention but W. J. made it anyway. Viewing the reaction of the delegates to that speech, C. W.'s judgment was probably better. There is no evidence to show that this disagreement was serious. On May 22, 1920, W. J. wrote in a letter to C. W., "At any rate, remember that family relationships should not be disturbed by differences of opinion on political matters. Each one should do what he thinks is right and be charitable toward those who do not agree with him."<sup>55</sup> After W. J. made the prohibition speech, C. W. endorsed his position without reservation.

Later, W. J. once more expressed the faith he had in C. W.'s political advice when he wired him on May 10, 1924, from Miami, Florida, concerning the Democratic political situation in that presidential election year. The telegram ended by saying, "I will wire you from Washington

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<sup>53</sup> Contemporary Nebraska newspaper accounts support this. Evidence is also shown in the contemporary account of Mullen, *loc. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> W. J. Bryan to C. W. Bryan, Hermosa Beach, Calif., July 12, 1915.

<sup>55</sup> William Jennings Bryan Papers (MSS).

where to meet me for I am anxious to talk over the situation with you.”<sup>56</sup>

During the Democratic National Convention in 1924, Will Rogers was reminiscing to some friends at a social gathering in New York City about his close friendship with W. J. During previous national conventions, when both W. J. and Will were reporting for the same newspaper, they had shared hotel rooms. Will recalled that each time he and W. J. got together, W. J. was excited to report about the boundless energy and recent activities of his younger brother, Charles. Each time the convention would get disorganized, W. J. would turn to Will and say, “If brother Charlie was in charge, this would run smoothly.” On one occasion, when some political jockeying had resulted in chaos, W. J. said to Will, “If C. W. was directing things here, this trouble could not have happened. He plans things so carefully down to each detail that they don’t get out of control.” Will Rogers summed up W. J.’s feelings for Charles by saying that, “W. J. was prouder of his brother Charlie than a boy was of his first pair of red top boots.”<sup>57</sup>

F. A. Watkins, one of the first newspaper men to publish an account of Charles’ political activities summarized the relationship between the Bryan brothers as follows:

During all the years that W. J. has been battling for political reforms and Bryan ideals, his brother Charles has stuck loyally by his side and been the one man that William Jennings Bryan has most trusted—has depended upon—to personally direct and carry into execution many things in relation to his work along moral lines. One who has not visited his office and has not been in touch with the part delegated to Charles Bryan can have no adequate idea of the part he has and is playing in the political arena with his brother.<sup>58</sup>

Will Maupin, an associate editor of *The Commoner* for ten years and friend of the Bryan family agreed. “I happen

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Nebraska Democrat, loc. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> *Hastings Daily Republican, November 11, 1912.*

to know," he said, "that Charlie's keen political foresight has enabled brother Will to avoid doing things that might have spilled the political beans. Charlie, I'll tell the world, is a shrewd politician."<sup>59</sup>

History has noted William Jennings Bryan's oratorical talent, personal warmth, and ability to appeal to the common people as factors in his continuing influence in the Democratic Party. The story of his career is incomplete without relating the untiring work of Charles W. Bryan. The specific abilities of Charles have received little publicity but are important to whatever success may be attributed to W. J. It is true that C. W.'s contribution was often blurred by the nature of his behind-the-scenes maneuvering, as well as his rather eccentric personal behavior. Nevertheless, a newspaper editor, who throughout his career followed and supported the Great Commoner, concluded, "From the day William Jennings Bryan was nominated for the presidency, Charles was his admirer, friend, manager, and 'man of all work.'"<sup>60</sup> Viewing the multitude of significant and insignificant tasks performed for his crusading brother, Charles was indeed, "his brother's keeper."

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<sup>59</sup> *Gering Midwest*, September 18, 1922.

<sup>60</sup> *Raleigh Observer*, Raleigh, North Carolina, August 18, 1923.