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Article Summary: Reprint of Edgar Howard's eyewitness account of the 1896 convention and Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech, originally published in *The Papillion Times*, July 16, 1896

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Photographs / Images: Edgar Howard; sketch by John T McCutcheon of the demonstration following Bryan's nomination; Bryan house at 1625 D Street, Lincoln, decorated in bunting, 1896

The Cross of Gold Reburnished

A Contemporary Account of the 1896 Democratic Convention

Edited by William E. Christensen

Political convention oratory seldom achieves an enduring place in American history, but an exception occurred in the Democratic national convention of 1896 when the advocates of the gold standard clashed with the free silverites over the platform. In the concluding speech of that debate William Jennings Bryan, the Nebraska delegate on the platform committee, delivered his famous "Cross of Gold" speech, flailing the gold Democrats for their support of a financial system that oppressed the farmers and laborers, and so stirring the delegates that they nominated him for the presidency on the fifth ballot.

The events of the convention and of Bryan's speech have been described in highly partisan terms by many writers, but few eyewitness accounts could exceed in intensity and enthusiasm the following narration by Edgar Howard, one of the alternates in the Nebraska delegation. The account appeared in the July 16, 1896, issue of *The Papillion Times*, the little weekly newspaper Howard edited, immediately following his return from the convention.

Howard's admiration for Bryan was more than mere party loyalty, being based on a long personal friendship. He had served as Bryan's private secretary during the latter's first term in Congress in 1891, and he later served six terms in Congress himself, 1922-34. His account of the 1896 convention is of value not only as a narration of an important



Edgar Howard. NSHS-L514

event in American history, but as an illustration of the intense devotion that the silver Democrats felt for Bryan. For Howard that devotion never dimmed, and he continued throughout a long political and journalistic career that lasted until 1951 to preach the doctrines of Bryanism and the free silver Democracy.

The Great Convention

It marks an era in a nation's history. It put forth a platform which must be hailed as a new declaration of independence. It nominated for president one of the ablest, purest, and grandest statesmen our land has ever produced. It bearded the Goliath of gold in his den,

and drove him from place and power in the great party he has hitherto controlled, raising up in his place the David of democracy—the will of the common people.

I have been asked by many friends to tell the convention story. I cannot do it. In common with countless thousands I was so overjoyed by the triumph of the people over the cohorts of Wall Street and monopoly that for once in my life I am unable to find words which will fittingly portray the scenes incident to this greatest convention in our country's history. I say it was the greatest convention of modern times because it was the only great political gathering in recent years which was not controlled by the representatives of the monied interests in our land, and to me there is no grander day than that in which the people rise in their majesty and break the cords which bind them to the enemy of mankind—the power of gold.

I frankly confess that we of the Nebraska delegation did not go to Chicago with strong hopes for success. We were ready to plead, pray, or fight for Bryan, and yet we scarce dared hope that our pleas, prayers, or our fights would avail. When we reached the convention hall we found in our places on the convention floor a lot of unclean spirits styling themselves democrats, placed there, not because they had a shadow of right to seats, but because they were abject tools of Wall Street, which had a secure grip on a majority of the national committee. But the cuckoos were soon driven from the hall. The credentials committee, comprising one member from every state in the union, declared

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without a dissenting vote that Euclid Martin and his kind had no title to seats. This unanimous decision leaves the cuckoos not a leg on which to stand, not the slightest encouragement to ever again raise their hydra heads above the Nebraska grass.¹

When the Bryan delegation was seated the audience gave vent to its approval by lusty cheers and hearty handshakes with the free-silver delegates, showing that throughout the convention hall there was a kindly feeling for the "Black Eagle of Nebraska" and his followers.² It has been said that Bryan could never have secured a nomination had he not made a speech. I am frank to admit that his speech went far to push him on to victory, but I also know that several states had resolved to support him before he made his speech, and I firmly believe he would have been nominated if he had never opened his mouth. He was not a candidate in an active sense. He refused to permit his friends to urge his name, begged the Nebraska delegates not to wear Bryan badges, and persistently refused to let us place his name before the convention, or before the delegates in hotel headquarters. He argued that if the people wanted him as their candidate they would call him to the leadership. Even after he had made his great speech, and when his name was on every tongue, he told us to say to the convention that he could not and would not accept a nomination unless it was tendered by a two-thirds vote of all the silver delegates. He said if we of his delegation were his true friends we would refrain from making any sort of combinations with or promises to any other delegations. In short he was in Chicago the same, noble, clean, christian gentleman that he has ever been in Nebraska, spurning all proffers of place and power, the receiving of which would be repugnant to his high sense of honor.

But about Bryan's great speech. There are no words in our language to picture the effect it produced upon the vast multitude which heard it. It was in

reply to the great New York senator, David Hill. It was entirely impromptu.³ Bryan sat by my side taking notes while Hill was talking, but he never referred to those notes while speaking. As I said before there was plenty of Bryan enthusiasm in the hall before he uttered a word. He was known and loved in every state and territory, and this was evidenced by the fact that when he rose to speak, the vast audience gave him an ovation lasting fully ten minutes. Up to this time there had always been confusion in the house. Even the great Senator Hill was unable to hold the attention of more than half the people.

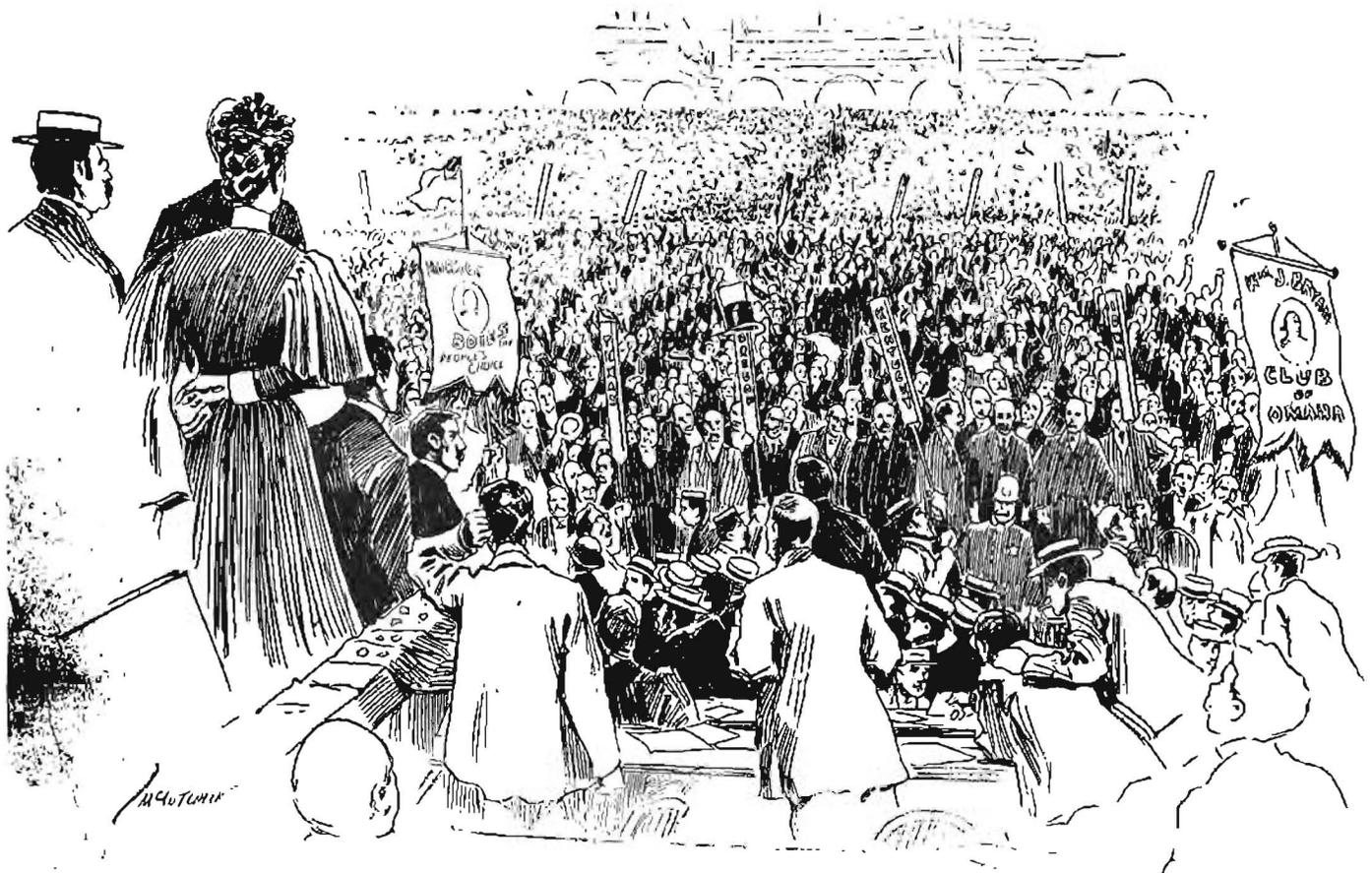
At Bryan's first utterance all was still. The silence was broken at the close of his first beautiful paragraph by a powerful wave of approval, which made the great iron building quiver. It was the polished effort of the day, and yet so plain and clear that the most untutored hearer could understand. Again and again the convention broke forth into the wildest demonstrations of approval, ceasing only when the speaker begged for opportunity to proceed. Then the thousands would be silent, every ear being bent to hear the wonderful flow of words, every eye straining to see the majestic man who was hurling defiance in the teeth of the money power, and at the same time declaring in burning eloquence that the hour had arrived for the enfranchisement of the farming and laboring masses, and the bursting and breaking of the yokes which had been placed upon their necks by the capitalistic classes. Men who had loved Bryan before almost worshipped him now. He could not talk three minutes at a stretch. His every sentence was followed by applause, and at the conclusion of his speech—well, there's no use of a country editor like me trying to tell you about it.

For ten seconds a death-like silence prevailed. Then like a great cloud that monster assemblage rose to its feet. The cheers were deafening. Old gray-haired men stood on their chairs and hurled their hats toward the ceiling, never caring where they would come down

Women took off their hats, thrust their umbrellas through them, and swung them high in the air. Suddenly a big delegate from Georgia seized his state standard and brushing all obstacles aside, swept across the hall and planted it beside the Nebraska guidon. Over to the right of us, rising high above the awful din, we heard the mighty war-whoop of Sam Houston, nephew of General Sam Houston, of Texas fame, and the next instant we saw the big Indian running upon the heads, shoulders and knees of the delegation of New York dudes, eager to be second at our side with the standard of his territory. Then came our frenzied friends from other states, until the banners and standards of thirty of them were gathered around Nebraska.

Meantime a hundred hands had seized our Bryan and were bearing him aloft in triumph. So great was the crush at the Nebraska standard that Bryan and several of his delegates were almost suffocated. Finally, headed by the Georgia delegation, the various state delegations began a march around the hall to the music of all the bands. The demonstration continued nearly half an hour, only ceasing when the participants became exhausted. At length quiet was restored, and the convention proceeded to business, in the midst of which some man in the gallery raised high a newspaper picture of Bryan and shouted in a voice which penetrated every ear, "Hurrah for Bryan, the young Gladstone of America!" At this the demonstration began again, but the shouters were too weak to keep it up very long. When quiet had been restored the platform was adopted by a two-thirds vote and the convention adjourned until 8 o'clock.

When we went out upon the streets that night the air was full of Bryan enthusiasm, and especially among the laboring classes, who had already memorized his immortal words in his closing sentence: "You shall not press down this crown of thorns on labor's brow; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." At our hotels we had hundreds



Chicago cartoonist John T. McCutcheon sketched the demonstration following Bryan's nomination.
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of callers who begged us to get out a band and make a Bryan demonstration on the streets. We told them that neither Bryan nor his friends had money enough to hire a Chicago band.⁴ At this an enthusiastic young Chicagoan, who had long been one of Bryan's admirers, volunteered to hire a band, or a dozen of them if necessary, at his own expense. He said he had never met Bryan, but that he had watched his career for a half dozen years, and regarded him as the cleanest and ablest statesman in America. We accepted his kind offer, and that evening the entire Nebraska contingent (except the cuckoos) marched to the hall behind the 2d regiment band. Everywhere the people cheered when they saw the Bryan banners, and when we reached the hall the

gate-keepers had caught the fever, admitting all who followed the Bryan banner, never waiting to ask us for tickets.

The great hall was packed to suffocation and the Nebraska rooters were compelled to take standing room away up among the rafters. But they didn't remain there long. Suddenly the big blue banner of the Bryan club was seen to rise high above the heads of all, borne aloft by a one-armed, bald-headed Nebraskan, none other than our own Henry Lefler.⁵ From the pit on up to the place where we were standing ran at an angle of 45 degrees a 2x4 railing. Lefler mounted it, raised high his banner, and then, followed by 500 Nebraskans, made a mad rush down that narrow plank toward the pit where the delegates sat. A hundred policemen tried

to stop him. He brushed them aside as readily as he would knock a fly off his hairless pate, and in less time than it takes to write these lines he had reached the delegate pit, where thousands rallied 'round his banner. How he kept foot on that narrow railing I do not know; neither does Lefler. His daring effort swelled the rapidly-rising Bryan tide still higher, and was not a small factor in the grand result which followed.

At last the balloting began. Bryan had forbidden us to present his name to the convention. He said he did not want to appear as a candidate. We wanted to tell the convention how much we loved him and to ask everybody to vote for him, but we respected his wishes, and did not publicly ask for a vote. But it was not necessary for us to present his name.



The Bryan house at 1625 D Street in Lincoln decorated in bunting, 1896.
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That work was performed by a delegate from Georgia, and it was the prettiest nominating speech of the day. It was short, pointed, patriotic, happily free from the objectionable features peculiar to the average nominating speech.

Then the balloting began. We expected Bryan to get a few dozen votes on the first ballot. Judge of our joy when he scored 135. By an error the secretary credited him with only 105, but this was good luck for us, because when he scored 197 on the second ballot his gain appeared all the greater. There's no use telling the balloting in detail. Bryan gained steadily from the start, reaching the necessary two-thirds on the fifth ballot, and was later declared the unanimous choice of the convention. Throughout the balloting there were wild demonstrations of approval at every mention of Bryan's name. And when victory came at last the scenes following the great speech were enacted over again. I was anxious all the time to see Bryan nominated, but I did not want to see him win in a stampede, for then the enemy could say it was all the work of enthusiasts, carried away by his eloquence. It was not a stampede. Bryan was in the hearts of all the delegates who were not controlled by Wall street. Of course, his speech was effective. One gentleman, speaking of the balloting, said:

Those inspired words of his burned in the bosoms of the delegates. They filled the chambers of the mind and touched at the thrilling chords of the heart. His noble, classic face, transfigured by the lofty thoughts that swelled up from his innermost feelings, was constantly before their eyes. That cry of anguish, mixed with holy rage, was to them the wailing of the oppressed classes whom they represented. It possessed, controlled and directed them. Fight as they would, they could not escape the crowding emotions that his oratory had called from slumber, and when at last their political and personal obligations were discharged, they turned with one glad acclaim and bade him take the standard and lead them to victory at the polls in November. It was not a stampede, accepted in the vulgar sense. It was a spontaneous uprising, kindled in sober judgment and fanned into life by calm reflection. The hour and the man arrived to-

gether as if heaven-sent to solve the complication that had arisen.

There had been doubts and misgivings in the minds of many before he came. The matchless Hill, the scholarly Vilas and the foreboding Russell had somewhat shaken the faith in the deliverance of the body that had constructed the declaration of principles for the party.⁴ The skein was tangled and the vision was obscured. But before the magic of his eloquence all doubts and misunderstandings were swept away as mist before the rising sun. The touchstone of his philosophy dispelled the sophistries that skill has conjured up and the way was clear and bright for all.

Those who remember the scene when Garfield won the presidency by a speech can imagine the circumstances that surrounded the selection of this convention. When he finished his magnificent effort with the immortal climax against the crucifixion of mankind, the prophecy was made that he was a second Garfield. But there was no taint of self aggrandizement or double purpose to his utterances. Honesty, pristine and pure, could alone have prompted his immortal words. Some invisible and mighty power arranged the circumstance so that he was forced into prominence at the right moment. The opportunity was there, and he proved his ability to seize it. In a nutshell, that is the story of the nomination of the great Nebraskan for the highest office in the gift of the people. His genius shown when light was needed, and the convention followed the beacon into the harbor of safety.

M. H. Hancock, once a Papillion boy, now resides in Chicago. He is red hot for Bryan and money reform. He is foreman in a large printing house, and he tells me that more than seventy-five per cent of all laboring men in Chicago are for Bryan and silver.

I would like to say something here about that grand old gentleman—Arthur Sewall, Bryan's running mate, but lack of space forbids.

I cannot close this article without complimenting the Nebraska boys who did so much to win the victory. The Nebraska delegates did all that mortals could do for their favorite. Especially effective was the work of Harry Boydston, Billy Thompson, C. J. Smythe, Uncle Bill Oldham, C. J. Bowlby, Jim Dahlman and George Luikhart.⁵ Every Nebraskan in

Chicago did his duty, and that, too, without hope of fee or reward, but solely because they loved the cause and the man they nominated to lead it.

Edgar Howard

Notes

⁴ The Democratic Party in Nebraska had been divided since 1894, when the free silver Democrats under Bryan's leadership captured control of the party organization, and the supporters of the gold standard, claiming to be the true Democrats, bolted and formed their own organization. In 1896 both groups sent delegations to the national convention, and the national committee, controlled by the gold forces, voted twenty-seven to twenty-three to seat the gold delegation. This is the group referred to by Howard as "the cuckoos." When the convention had formally organized, the silverites were in control, and the credentials committee reversed the decision of the national committee and seated the Bryan delegation. Euclid Martin was chairman of the Democratic state committee at the time of the 1894 split and subsequently was one of the leaders of the gold Democrats.

⁵ In reporting Bryan's nomination the July 11, 1896, edition of the *Omaha World-Herald* used the expression here employed by Howard in a headline which read "HONORS THE 'BLACK EAGLE.'" Origin of the term is uncertain, but may refer to a famous Nez Perce Indian, one of several chiefs who entertained Lewis and Clark in Oregon Territory in 1806 and who, at a dinner given for the explorers, served as the speaker to advise them that his tribe wished to be friendly with them. This role, in addition to the fact that he was sometimes called Speaking Eagle, suggests an ability as an orator and would account for honoring Bryan with his name. Black Eagle further appears in history as one of four Nez Perce Indians who journeyed from their homes to St. Louis in 1831 to ask for instructions in the Christian religion. He died in St. Louis, having been baptized a short time before. The request lodged by him and his fellows gave impetus to missionary work among the Nez Perce.

⁶ The suggestion that Bryan's speech was impromptu is misleading, because Bryan himself stated in his book about the election, *The First Battle*, and in his *Memoirs* that the speech was very similar to numerous speeches he had been making in the fight for free silver. The setting was different in that he was replying to the speeches of the gold Democrats who had participated in the debate, but since no new arguments were advanced by them, no new answers were required. The arrangement of the speech and the adaptation of it to the preceding speeches were extemporaneous, but the ideas set forth were familiar ones to Bryan, and he had rehearsed them beforehand in hopes that he might have opportunity to use them at some point

in the convention. All these factors enabled him to take the fullest advantage of the circumstances in the debate over the platform.

⁷ Bryan noted in both his *Memoirs* and *The First Battle* that his personal expenses in attending the convention were less than \$100, suggesting that this was indeed a modest expenditure for a candidate who had succeeded in securing a nomination.

⁸ The personal reference to "our own Henry Leller" was for the benefit of Howard's Sarpy County readers. Leller was from Springfield, in Sarpy County.

⁹ Reference is to Bryan's opponents in the debate, Senator David R. Hill of New York, Senator William F. Vilas of Wisconsin, and Governor John E. Russell of Massachusetts, gold standard Democrats who upheld the minority report set forth by dissenting members of the platform committee. Bryan was supported by Senator Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina, who opened the debate for the silverites.

¹⁰ All these men were delegates with the exception of Boydston, who, like Howard, attended the convention as an alternate-at-large.