

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS

Free Silver candidate Bryan 11-7-18 attracted attention at Knowlesville

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Amidst the Gilded Age, American workers experience a spike in perceived prosperity as average wages rose above those in Europe and immigrants flooded into the United States. Yet, as the name suggests, the Gilded Age provided the outward appearance of growth and success while a run on currency, closing banks, and overextended industry led to a severe economic crisis extending from 1893 to 1897. The appointment of receivers for the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad on the advent of President Grover Cleveland's inauguration indicated a serious and extended financial situation looming on the horizon.

The issues facing many Americans, circulating around questionable capitalist practices, produced an environment in which political candidates such as William Jennings Bryan could rise to prominence. Born in Salem, Ill., to Silas and Mariah Jennings Bryan, young William became familiar with politics at a young age, his father aligning himself with Jacksonian Democrats and serving several terms as an Illinois senator.

Bryan spent his post-law school years campaigning for Democrats such as Julius Morton and Grover Cleveland, but his interest in standing on the periphery waned and he turned to his skills as a respected orator to run for Congress in 1890. Facing the incumbent Republican candidate, William Connell, Bryan successfully ran on a platform that included reduced tariffs, limitations on trusts, and currency backed by gold and silver. He ran again in 1892, earning support from Populist candidates as Cleveland defeated Benjamin Harrison for the presidency.

During his second term in Congress and amidst the financial uncertainty of the Panic of 1893, the once crazy idea of "free silver" that Bryan promoted during his first campaign began to take root with many Americans. The result was his decision to forego a third congressional campaign in 1894 in favor of a bid for the presidency in 1896. During his pursuit of the Democratic nomination, he strategically sought to cultivate relationships with Populist leaders in an effort to prevent the nomination of a rival pro-silver candidate. He was relatively unknown in national politics, lacking large coffers to run an expansive campaign, and worked to remain in the periphery as to not draw attention from prominent political leaders.



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William Jennings Bryan's campaign stops in New York state included a day trip to Orleans County on Aug. 28, 1896.

On July 9, 1896, Bryan delivered his fiery "Cross of Gold" speech, relying upon his reputation as an accomplished and respected orator and becoming the first candidate the press the silver issue at the Democratic National Convention; "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." The following day he was officially selected as the Democratic nominee and set the date of Aug. 12, 1896 as the date in which he would formally accept the nomination at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

On his return trip through Upstate New York, Bryan made a number of stops including a day trip to Orleans County on Friday, Aug. 28. At the annual picnic of Orleans County farmers, the great orator and "Silverite" was scheduled to address a crowd of several thousand people. The day's festivities were to start at 9:30 a.m. with a band concert followed by an address by Gen. A. C. Fisk of New York City. Bryan's 1 o'clock address was the featured event and the evening was to conclude with a concert at 7 o'clock.

James Hanlon of Medina was placed in charge of arranging the program and set the location of the picnic at "Slawson's Grove" just north of Knowlesville. The location,

also known as Lewis' Grove, was situated upon the farm of Otis Lewis, who lived on Eagle Harbor-Knowlesville Road just east of Knowlesville Road. The grove consisted of approximately 25 acres and sloped towards the center forming a natural amphitheater. Despite the logical placement of the event, Medina Democrats were infuriated that such a monumental visit would take place outside of the village.

The grove was arranged in a way that would provide adequate gathering space for over 10,000 people who would arrive from Niagara Falls, Buffalo, and Rochester by train or canal boat. Lines from Rochester ran at ½ rates and made frequent stops at hamlets to accommodate the influx of travelers. Various reports claimed that Bryan arrived at Medina while others stated that Knowlesville's station would provide a shorter trip to the grove. Regardless, an open carriage drawn by a team of four white horses was ready for the orator's arrival. James Hanlon, Medina Mayor Seeley Cook, and Charles Hart of Albion accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Bryan to Knowlesville, "... and with the bands ahead and a barouche following, in which was carried a banner bearing the most horrible portrait of the free silver candidate yet shown..."

The carriage stopped for

lunch with Mrs. Eugene Woodford, a sister of Mrs. T. Morey Hodgeman who was a neighbor of the Bryans from Lincoln, Nebraska. The late arrival of Bryan's train and the lunch delayed his arrival to Slawson's Grove by nearly an hour, while a crowd of around 8,000 impatiently waited for the candidate. Upon his arrival, Bryan was met by an anxious crowd that quickly swelled to over 10,000 people as he approached the platform.

As one local paper reported, "Mr. Bryan was introduced by Mark Phillips, the Hulberton man who has enjoyed all the offices that he could probably ever get through the Republican Party and is now posing as a shining example of conversion to free silver. The people didn't want to hear him, though, and after he had tried to speak a little he gave it up and introduced Mr. Bryan." He quickly mounted a reporter's table so the massive crowd could catch a glimpse, and his hoarse and weakened voice was a far cry from his great oration at Chicago the month prior.

The fervor of the crowd was likely reminiscent of Andrew Jackson's 1829 inauguration party, where 10,000 to 20,000 people mobbed the Capitol as part of a massive celebration. One paper reported, "It was probably the roughest crowd [Bryan] has been in since Jersey City, and he was hustled and jammed about on his way over the uneven pathway in a most unpleasant way. Once the candidate was nearly run into a tree, but he avoided it in time. At another he stubbed his toe on a root and nearly went down, but was caught in time by one of his bodyguard."

The attentive and preoccupied crowd became a draw for pickpockets as well. The cries of one poor farmer who lost his wallet and \$700 within grabbed the attention of a group of onlookers who quickly apprehended the thief. In 1912, John Craddock was reported to have cut down a tree in Slawson's Grove revealing a wad of cash, likely stashed by a pickpocket during Bryan's visit.

Although residents from across the county traveled to see Bryan at Knowlesville, even leaving Hulberton as a virtual ghost town for a period of time, not everyone supported his platform. On the evening before Bryan's arrival in Orleans County, a ratification meeting was held at Albion and chaired by Marcus Phillips of Hulberton. "The meeting was not a large one and little enthusiasm was shown...small boys blew horns in the gallery which the speaker disapproved of."