

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin • County Historian

9-23-81



L. Monacelli photo

## THE DAY WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN CAME TO KNOWLESVILLE

It was September 3, 1896, a beautiful sunny day and all roads led to Slawson's Grove just north east of Knowlesville. At daybreak a steady stream of carriages, wagons and bicycles from all over Orleans County started to converge upon the spot where William Jennings Bryan, that eloquent orator and master of rhetoric was to speak in the afternoon. Special trains on the New York Central and special boats on the canal were pressed into service, each carrying capacity loads. Bryan was running for President against William McKinley and this brought out the largest political gathering which ever assembled in our area. A special dancing platform was constructed for the occasion and several lunch counters did a thriving business while boys hawked Bryan badges and pictures. Many local farmers made extra income that day caring for the teams of horses. The program opened with band music at 9:30. At 10 o'clock Gen. A.C. Fish of New York spoke, followed by Marcus H. Phillips of Hulberton, James W. Lawton of Clarendon and Rev. John A. Copeland of Rochester. The committee for the occasion headed by Mayor S.A. Cook of Medina went to Niagara Falls to meet Mr. and Mrs. Bryan so as to accompany them on the train to Knowlesville. The train left Niagara Falls at 11:00 A.M. and was delayed at every station arriving in Knowlesville at 12:45. There were at least fifteen hundred people at the Medina station eager to catch a glimpse of Bryan when the train pulled in. At Knowlesville a hack drawn by four grey horses elaborately decorated with flags awaited the Bryans. They were taken to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Woodford for dinner and were greeted all along the way by a throng of people. Mr. Bryan had great difficulty entering the Woodford home because of the eagerness of the crowd assembled to shake his hand.

During dinner the guests were serenaded by a band concert and group singing outside the Woodford residence. Following dinner, until it was time for Bryan's speech, he shook hands from the porch. The band preceded him to Slawson's Grove followed by a long line of carriages. At the grove Mr. Bryan was picked up bodily by two strong men and carried to the platform over the heads of those who had come to hear him. Congressman William Sulzer (who was later elected Governor) and the committee had great difficulty reaching the platform through the throng. The shouting of the crowd was finally reduced when the Lockport Glee Club appeared and sang "America".

Mr. Bryan had such command of his audience through the art of public speaking that no one noticed several pickpockets until he was almost finished. Finally one loud voice hollered "pickpockets". Twenty-seven wallets had been taken at that point. Several were found later but were empty.

Following his speech Mr. and Mrs. Bryan were driven to the home of Mrs. Sexton for an informal reception while Mr. Bryan rested. They had intended taking the late afternoon train back to Niagara Falls but the crowd surrounding their carriage caused them to miss it. Instead they were driven to Medina to the home of Mr. and Mrs. M.A. Bowen where they were given supper prior to leaving on the 7:08 train back to Niagara Falls accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. James Hanlon.