

3-1948

President's Page...William Jennings Bryan -- An Eye-Witness Report

E. C. Buehler
University of Kansas

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Recommended Citation

Buehler, E.C. (1948). President's Page...William Jennings Bryan -- An Eye-Witness Report. *The Gavel of Delta Sigma Rho*, 30(3), 43-44.

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President's Page . . .

"William Jennings Bryan - - An Eye-Witness Report"

This is a request number. For some time our editor has been urging me to tell some of my personal experiences with the boy orator of the Platte. I have always admired Mr. Bryan as an orator. He was from my home state and lived 35 miles from us. Therefore, I had several opportunities in my early youth to hear Mr. Bryan at political meetings and at the Lincoln Epworth Assembly. Later I was crew boy on the Redpath Horner Chautauquas, and Bryan was a sure-fire feature attraction. Although I heard him many times, there are three incidents which stand out above all the others. The first was a political stump speech, the second a Chautauqua oration "The Prince of Peace," and the third a double feature lecture on "Evolution" and "Prohibition," which was delivered shortly before his death.

The first time I heard Mr. Bryan was in 1908 on his Presidential campaign tour against William Howard Taft as he spoke from the rear platform of a railroad train. I was in the seventh or eighth grade of the country school, and we were in the midst of the corn husking season. However, on the day when Mr. Bryan was scheduled to appear at the nearest town, almost everyone, Republicans and Democrats alike, took time off to hear the great Commoner. There was an immense crowd at the little railroad station, mostly country folks in calico and overalls. To me the crowd was a bit awesome and terrifying. Flags and bunting were flying everywhere. The train was a little late, and the engineer seemed to be worried about the masses which were over-running the railroad track. His whistle shrieked wildly when the train was still blocks away, but the people finally managed to get off the tracks and I presume for safety reasons he over-ran the station some hundred yards. There was a wild scramble as hundreds rushed to get a close-up view of Mr. Bryan. My cousin, who was a few years older than I, had the good fortune to be in the front ranks and being fleet of foot was among the first to reach the rear platform of the train. Mr. Bryan was standing there waving and smiling and at once reached out to shake hands with a few of his admirers. Among the few that shook his hand was my cousin, Arthur. I recall how we looked with awe and admiration on my cousin for having touched the hand of Mr. Bryan, for to us Mr. Bryan was more than a political candidate running for the Presidency. To many of us he was greater than the President of the United States. We somehow felt that he had Providence on his side

and that he had a divine calling to lead the common people against the evils of Wall Street. In our simple faith, Mr. Bryan was a man of high ideals and unquestionable character. His speech on that day was only five minutes long; and of course, no one ever remembered anything he said, but I am sure no one could ever forget the friendly manner and the spiritual warmth which radiated from him. He won many hearts and many votes in that Republican community.

The second incident I want to tell about took place several years later on the Chautauqua platform. Although Mr. Bryan was defeated three times at the polls, he still was a great American hero. He was considered by almost everyone to be the greatest orator of the day. He drew vast crowds on the Chautauqua, and his success on the platform was unrivaled. On this particular Sunday night he was appearing at eight o'clock at Fort Scott, Kansas, as our headline feature. It was a hot day with a temperature of 106 in the shade. On that Sunday afternoon he spoke at Parsons, Kansas, which was some seventy miles away. It was all in a day's work for Mr. Bryan to make two or three speeches and drive from town to town in a model-T Ford over the dusty, hot Kansas roads. When Mr. Bryan stepped out of the model-T Ford, he was no weary traveler. After going promptly to his hotel room to freshen up, he would enjoy a hearty dinner. He was a big eater, often placing a double order with the waiter. On this particular evening when he stepped on the platform all fresh in his white flannel trousers, he looked as clean and fresh as a bathed and powdered baby. His cool, calm appearance was almost breath-taking to his perspiring audience.

This was my first experience in preparing the stage for Mr. Bryan. The instructions were to have a simple background of flags with no furniture, no chairs or speaker's stand on the stage. All he wanted was a simple, four-legged stand with a wash basin containing a big cake of ice beside which there was a tall glass water pitcher full of ice water and a tall glass tumbler. I recall that it took some time to round up these few simple stage properties. As the moment arrived for Mr. Bryan's appearance that evening, the audience seemed to polarize itself into a mood of hushed expectancy. Hundreds of people were standing. Suddenly people seemed to stop talking. Conversation died down, and everyone was waiting for the dramatic and impressive entrance of the Chautauqua Superintendent and the speaker of the evening. At

last the moment arrived, but the Superintendent stepped out on the platform alone. There were muffled groans. People began to wonder if Mr. Bryan had failed to make it in his trusty Ford. The Superintendent made a short introductory speech of about thirty seconds, but Mr. Bryan kept out of sight. He was hiding behind the backdrop of bunting and flags.

He waited about fifteen seconds after the Superintendent stepped off the platform and then modestly and in stately manner strolled towards his place beside the water pitcher and the cake of ice, carrying a big palm leaf fan. There was a long, loud swell of applause which Mr. Bryan acknowledged with the grace of a prima donna taking curtain calls at a premier performance. How he charmed that audience with his bows and smiles even before he said a word! He was the most impressive person on the platform. We felt about him as Carlyle felt about Webster. We wondered if any man could be as great as Bryan looked.

I'll never forget that speech. The setting with respect to the mental attitude of the audience was perfect. The European War with its hate and destruction gave an ironic background to this rhapsody of love and peace. It was just what the people wanted to hear. For a whole hour and a half Mr. Bryan poured forth in his best style and grandest oratorical manner his story about mankind living at peace. He gave words of comfort and assurance. There was that spiritual glow to the ideas of love and brotherhood. How perfectly his manner blended with his message! It was poetry for the eyes as well as for the ears. Here was this magnificent figure against the background of the Stars and Stripes. His every movement was an expression of grace and poise. With his left hand he fanned himself with his big palm leaf fan, and with rhythmical regularity with his other hand he would wet his fingers on the cake of ice and soothingly stroke his brow and bald head. It was soothing and cooling for the audience just to watch him. From time to time he would reach the climax of a point, and the audience would punctuate his oratorical highlights with bursts of applause. Mr. Bryan would take advantage of these moments and pour out a tumbler full of water and gulp it down in two swallows, almost unnoticeably. Before long the pitcher of water was empty, and the flannel trousers had a big perspiration spot a foot long on each knee. He lost himself in his message as he approached the climax, and forgot about his fan and his cake of ice. There was a magic spell over all listeners as he took them out of this world. For both speaker and audience, there was that "fling at the moon" that no speech teacher or psychologist can yet explain.

The third incident which I want to

tell about is a striking contrast to the former two. It took place in Evanston, Illinois, when I was a graduate student in the School of Speech at Northwestern University. It was four o'clock Sunday afternoon on a particularly bright day in the month of May in the 20's. It was a perfect day to be out of doors, and to spend such a beautiful afternoon in a stuffy old church didn't make sense. But Mr. Bryan was scheduled to appear on a community lecture course at four o'clock in the Methodist Church. At three o'clock the church was full. Standing room only! People wanted to hear the former Secretary of State, the thrice defeated Presidential candidate, the man who still was perhaps the most influential politician on the American scene and who undoubtedly was the greatest orator of the time. It was a different Bryan from the Chautauqua days. Here was a man, mellowed by years of rich experience in public life, filled with the sense of comedy. He was still the master orator. He talked about Evolution. Perhaps not one in ten agreed with what he said. Any college debater could detect the holes in his arguments, and yet he charmed his listeners and held them spell bound for an hour and a half. After the close of his address, there was generous applause, and Mr. Bryan gulped down two or three glasses of water. Then smiling graciously, he turned to the Chairman and calmly announced that he would now make a second speech on his favorite subject, Prohibition, and for another hour and fifteen minutes he continued to cast the magic spell over that packed house. The standing audience did not leave. I recall walking back towards the campus with Mr. Ralph Dennis, Dean of the School of Speech of Northwestern University, after this double feature. The Dean offered one final word of appraisal. "There is only one man who could hold this smug complacent audience of Evanston for two hours and forty-five minutes on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, and that man is William Jennings Bryan."

E. C. Buehler,

University of Kansas

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