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THE POPULIST CONVENTION.

The Populist National Convention was held on July 22, 1896, and presented a striking contrast to the other two. Mr. Henry D. Lloyd, a sympathetic observer, has described the convention in these words: (From Caro Lloyd's Life of H.D. Lloyd, Vol. I P. 263) "When Mr. Lloyd studied it sympathetically he saw a convention of poor men. He learned that some, lacking funds, had walked all the way, that others had gone without sleeping places in order to save their nickels for meals, and were suffering from the need of food. He marvelled at their devotion. Many were 'blacklisted' railway employees, hoping to make their hero, Debs, a candidate. The prevailing expression on the faces was, he said, anxiety, fear of the unknown. The majority feared betrayal; the traitorous members who had planned fusion with one or the other of the old parties feared the many resolute radicals opposing them; and the radicals, in their turn, feared lest by insisting too much on their sweeping reforms might prevent a co-alition which would later prove invaluable. The main sentiment was an intense craving to effect a union of all forces, and thus insure a victory. For in all minds trembled the hope that this was really the rising of the people. All feared to check it. Mr. Lloyd threw his influence to make it name a candidate and a platform of its own, and to prevent the blunder and 'the crime' of the independent movement of 1872. But, now as then, he was powerless."

Regarding Bryan's nomination he said: "I may vote for Bryan as the knight of the Disinherited, like Ivanhoe, but he will not be the next President, and I am content." As a matter of fact, he voted the Socialist Labor Party ticket. (Ibid, 264, 265)

Stanwood, in his "History of the Presidency", P. 550, says: "In the view of many of the leaders of the (Populist) party, the principles of the Populists were most effectively to be promoted by accepting the candidates nominated at Chicago. Yet there was an earnest faction of the party which deprecated alliance or association with any other organization. The picturesque term 'middle-of-the-road men' was applied to and adopted by them as indicating the independent course between the two old parties which they thought it judicious to take."

Buck, Agrarian Crusade, P. 182: "Gone were the hopes of the past months; the Populist party would not sweep into its ranks all the anti-monopolists and all silverites—nor one of the old parties had stolen its loudest thunder! It was an error of political strategy to place the convention after those of the two great parties in the expectation that both would stand on a gold platform. Now it was for these delegates to decide whether they would put their organization behind the Democratic nominee with a substantial prospect of victory, or preserve intact the identity of the Populist party, spit the silver vote, and deliver over the election to a gold Republican."
The fusion element in the convention won its first victory when Senator Allen was elected as permanent chairman of the convention. Allen's opinion of fusion was as follows: "If by putting a third ticket in the field you would defeat free coinage; defeat a withdrawal of the issue power of national banks; defeat Government ownership of railroads, telephones and telegraphs; defeat an income tax and foist gold monometallism and high taxation upon the people for a generation to come, what would you do?--When I shall go back to the splendid commonwealth that has so signally honored me beyond my merits, I want to be able to say to the people that all the great doctrines we have advocated for years, have been made possible by your action, and do not want them to say that the Populists have been advocates of reforms when they could not be accomplished, but when the first ray of light appeared and the people were looking with expectancy and with anxiety for relief, the party was not equal to the occasion; that it was stupid; it was blind; it kept to the middle of the road, and missed the golden opportunity." (Bryan, P. 270)

This made the nomination of Bryan a forgone conclusion, and hence the more radical delegates determined that at least Sewall should not become the Populist nominee for Vice-President. The objection to Sewall came from the fact that he was "president of a bank, director in railway companies and other corporations, and a wealthy employer of labor." Furthermore this was a last desperate attempt to keep the party from losing itself entirely in the Democratic party. The rather unusual motion was put forward to select the vice-presidential candidate before voting for a presidential candidate. The motion was carried and Thomas E. Watson, a prominent Georgia populist and country editor, was nominated.

General Weaver then made a speech in which he nominated Bryan as candidate for the Presidency. He said: "This country has recently witnessed a new Pentecost, and received another baptism of fire. The recent convention at Chicago sounded a bugle call for union which can neither be misunderstood nor go unheeded. In its patriotic utterances and action it swept away all middle ground and opened the road to a formidable organic alliance. They not only made union possible--thank Heaven, they have rendered it inevitable.

"From the very beginning our organization has made party fealty subordinate to principle. We will not here reverse ourselves and refuse to accept victory now so easily within our reach. -- The Populists have already shown their prowess in many engagements during twenty years of struggle. If our allies can strike sturdier blows at plutocracy than we can; if they can scale the battlements of the gold power more gallantly than our old veterans, and are able to plant their colors one foot nearer the citadel of the enemy than we can ourselves, let every Populist cheer and support them in their heroic work."

"After due consideration--I have failed to find a single good reason to justify us in placing a third ticket in the
field. The exigencies of the hour imperatively demand that there shall be but one. I would not endorse the gentleman named at Chicago. I would nominate him outright, and make him our own, and then share justly and rightfully in his election." (Bryan, P. 277-278) Bryan was nominated by a vote of 1048 to 340 for Norton.

Naturally fusion arrangements had to be made in the various States, with the Democratic party, due to the workings of the electoral system. This was generally successful, although in Florida and Texas arrangements could not be made, so that many Populists in those States voted the Republican ticket. And that was the end of the Populist party. "The great event of 1896 politically was the adoption of free silver as an issue by the Democratic party. -- Thus the Populists won their greatest victory, while at the same time they lost their identity as a political party. Their work of 'permeation' eclipsed all the records of previous independent movements by giving to one of the great parties its chief issue and its presidential candidate. No greater success could be obtained." (Haynes, 285) Again, "It remained for the political events of 1896 to decide which way the current of populism would flow, whether it would maintain an independent course, receiving tributaries from every source, eventually becoming a mighty river, and, like the Republican party of 1856 and 1860, sweeping away an older party; or whether it would turn aside and mingle with the stream of Democracy, there to lose its identity forever." (Buck, 170-171)

As far as the making of a platform was concerned, there was not much trouble in the Populist convention. Their main issue had been the money question and that had been settled by the Democrats. "The real problem was the endorsement of the Democratic candidates upon a platform largely adopted from the program of the Populists. A few items in the Populist platform that were no to be found in the Democratic, but these were recognized to be issues of the future rather than immediate importance, as was the free coinage plank. The government control of railroads and telegraphs, the initiative and referendum and the election of President, Vice-President and United States Senators by direct vote of the people comprised the more important of these future issues." (Haynes, 292-293)