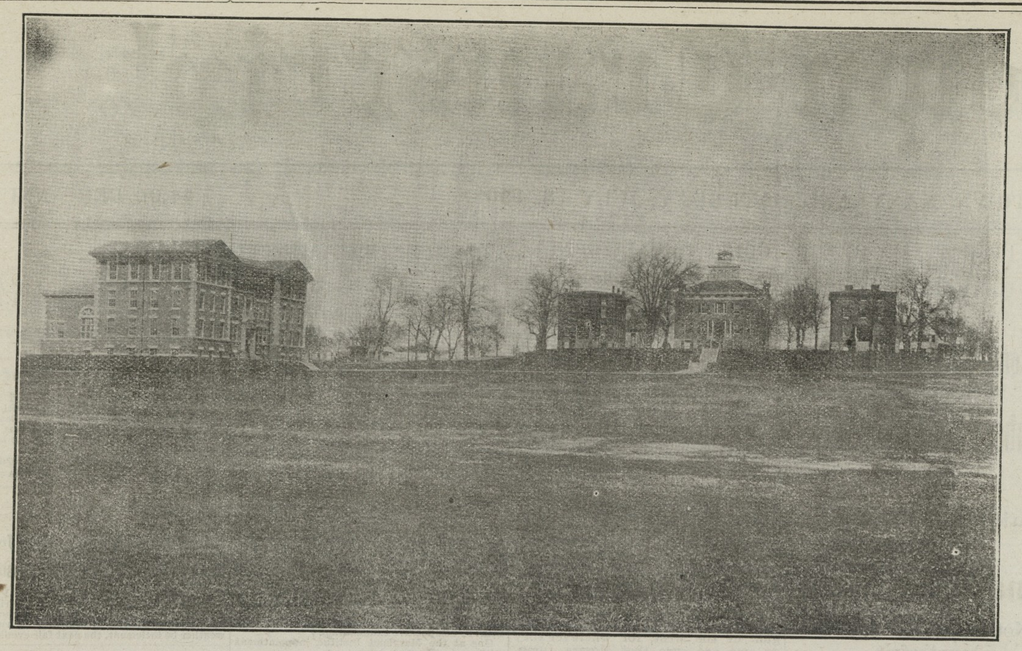

WASHINGTON COLLEGE AS IT IS TO DAY.

The Early Life of W. J. Bryan

His Birth, Boyhood and First Years In Law and Politics ∴ **His Creditable Career In Congress and His Work In Journalism**

His Birthplace, Salem, Ill.

By ROBERTUS LOVE.

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"HE has spoken face to face beyond all question to more hearers than has any other man in the world's history," says one who traveled with William Jennings Bryan during the presidential campaigns of 1896 and 1900, and there is no doubt as to the truth of the statement.

The purpose of this article is briefly to sketch the life of Mr. Bryan up to the age of thirty-six, when he was nominated by the Democratic party for the presidency of the United States. It is a life possible only to American politics, and, whether or not Mr. Bryan shall reach the presidency, it is an interesting chapter in United States political history.

The town of Salem, Ill., is the birthplace of Bryan. Judge Silas L. Bryan, a substantial, intellectual settler from Virginia, was his father. Maria Elizabeth Jennings was his mother's maiden name. The child was born March 19, 1860. Judge Bryan lived on a farm near the edge of town. He had nine children, of whom William Jennings is the fourth. The boy grew up outdoors, drinking the daily medicine of sunshine and the open air. His physical constitution, a marvel of robustness and energy, came by inheritance and was nurtured by wholesome and healthful environment in boyhood. Bryan attended the public schools in Salem until he was fifteen, when he entered Whipple academy at Jacksonville, Ill. Two years later he matriculated in Illinois college, in the same city, from which institution he was graduated with honors at the age of twenty-one. During his college course his oratorical abilities made him prominent in middle western collegiate life. He won the honor of representing his school in the state contest of college orators. He won that contest and represented Illinois in 1887 at the interstate oratorical contest, held at Galesburg, Ill., where he achieved second honors. He was class orator at graduation.

Jacksonville has a female seminary in that school Miss Mary E. Baird was a student while young Bryan was in Illinois college. She was from Perry, Ill., and was of excellent family and an ambitious student. A bright young man and a bright young woman attending college in the same town sometimes emphasize the aphorism that like attracts like. Perhaps that explains why Bryan, after attending the Union Law college in Chicago and reading law at the same time in the office of Judge Lyman Trumbull, the celebrated associate of Abraham Lincoln, returned to Jacksonville to begin the practice of his profession. Bryan and Miss Baird were married shortly after his return. Mrs. Bryan studied law in order to assist her husband in his professional work. After the Bryans removed to Lincoln, Neb., in 1887 Mrs. Bryan was admitted to the bar. Mr. Bryan became junior partner in the law firm of Talbot & Bryan. He believed there was more opportunity for a rising young lawyer in a new state—a belief assuredly well grounded in his own case.

Bryan plunged into politics in the spring of 1888, and that became his life vocation instead of the law. He was elected a delegate to the Democratic state convention at Omaha, where he made a speech strongly advocating free trade; also he made a reputation as a speaker. He was only twenty-eight years old, yet the very next year the party leaders offered him the nomination for the lieutenant governorship of Nebraska. He declined the offer, but made a stumping campaign for the ticket throughout the state.

The next year, 1890, the young Democracy thrust upon the young Demosthenes from Illinois the nomination for congressman from the First district. J. Sterling Morton, who in his time was father of Arbor day and a member of President Cleveland's cabinet, had been defeated in the race for congress from that district in 1888 by a Republican majority of more than 3,000 votes. Scarcely anybody expected young Bryan to win. He was not so very sanguine himself, but he made an oratorical campaign and defeated Congressman Connell by nearly 7,000 votes. In Omaha, where Connell lived, Bryan was sneered at as "that Lincoln boy." It was the reaction against the new McKinley tariff that elected Bryan—that and the silver tongue of the Lincolnian lad.

So at thirty Bryan was chosen to the national house of representatives. He delivered his first speech in the house the 12th of March, 1892, on the subject of free wool. Senator Burrows of Michigan, temporary chairman of this year's Republican national convention, declared that it was the best speech on the tariff he ever had heard. Newspapers of all political persuasions called it a masterpiece. The chairman of the ways and means committee was William M. Springer of Illinois. Springer was so delighted with Bryan's free wool talk that he procured the appointment of the young Nebraskan on his committee. Old graybeards have sat in the house for a generation without achieving that coveted honor. Here was a youngster member so honored in his first term. And when Bryan was returned to congress for a second term he was continued on that most important committee.

In the interim the Nebraska districts had been reapportioned so that Omaha was eliminated from the First district. The district in its new shape was conceded to be Republican by about 3,500. Judge Allen W. Field of Lincoln, one of the ablest and most popular Republicans in the state, was nominated to run against Bryan. He resigned from the bench, so sanguine of success was he, but Bryan beat him by 140 votes.

When President Cleveland called an extra session of congress in the summer of 1893 to push through the repeal of the Sherman silver bullion purchasing act of 1890, the Democratic president of the old school unwittingly gave to the man of destiny in the new school of Democracy an altitudinous stepping stone toward the presidency. Bryan of Nebraska, aged thirty-three, delivered in the house on the 16th of August a speech against the repeal of the purchasing clause of the Sherman act. The whole house and most of the senate heard it. When Bryan ceased speaking he was picked up by enemies and friends alike and borne around the hall on the shoulders of enthusiasts who liked a ripping fine oration when they heard it regardless as to whether it suited their politics. Nobody disputed that it was the greatest speech of the extra session.

Bryan declined a renomination for congress in 1894 and became editor of the Omaha World-Herald. He wanted to go to the United States senate. The World-Herald business office made a contract to run daily on the editorial page two columns of "stuff," paid for by Republicans, which was inimical to Bryan's prospects. Bryan resigned the editorship after a fierce legal fight against the advertising contract. He was nominated for the senate by the unanimous vote of the state convention, despite the fact that many of them disagreed with him on the silver coinage issue. With John M. Thurston, the leading Republican candidate for the senate, Bryan engaged in two joint debates, having challenged Thurston. The forensic duels took place in Lincoln and Omaha. The tariff was the sole topic of discussion. Bryan defended the Wilson tariff, which as a member of the ways and means committee he had helped to create. At Lincoln the enthusiasm was such that Bryan was carried from the platform outside and down into the street, where howling mobs of "overflow" admirers awaited him. Thurston was elected by the legislature. Mr. Bryan remained a private citizen. He had challenged William McKinley also to a joint debate on the tariff, but the Ohio tariff builder declined. Mr. McKinley was destined to meet the Nebraskan in a broader contest a little later.

In the meantime Mr. Bryan was happy at home with his little family, the helpful wife and three children. The children now are grown up. Ruth is Mrs. William H. Leavitt and has made her father a grandfather. William junior is eighteen, and Miss Grace is a budding belle of seventeen years.

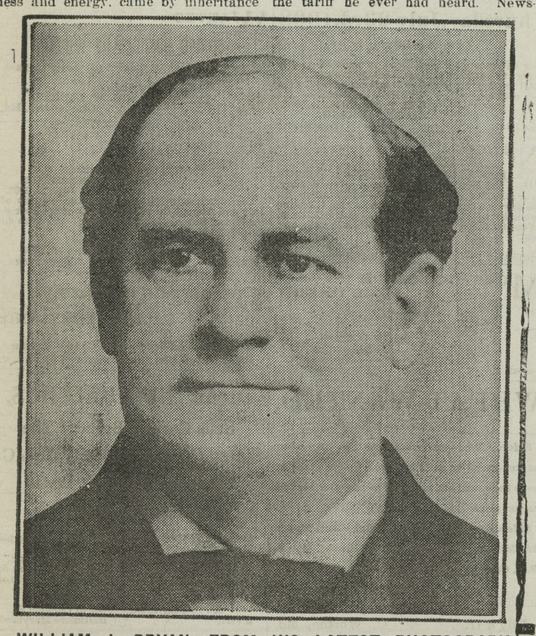
Young Mrs. Leavitt herself is something of a politician. She has been elected a delegate to the Democratic state convention in Colorado, her home being in Denver. Young William is a student in the Nebraska State university at Lincoln. Miss Grace, who in the event of her father's election to the presidency will become "the young lady of the White House," is at home with her estimable mother on the Bryan farm near Lincoln, known as "Fairview," where the head of the family some years ago built a handsome residence. Prior to that the family had occupied a modest cottage in Lincoln, where Mr. Bryan returned to his law practice after his unsuccessful campaign for the senatorship.

When in 1896 the Republican convention which nominated McKinley for president met in St. Louis, William J. Bryan held no office whatever. He still had a connection with the Omaha paper, and he went to St. Louis as a press correspondent. At the Planters hotel the clerk looked over the plainly garbed young man who signed "W. J. Bryan" on the register and made him pay in advance. The clerk put Bryan in a room with seven Republicans. Under date of June 16 a correspondent of the New York Tribune sent to his paper from St. Louis this highly interesting paragraph:

Ex-Congressman William J. Bryan, the leader of the free silver wing of the Nebraska Democracy, was one of yesterday's arrivals. The appearance of Mr. Bryan in a hotel corridor in consultation with several Republicans from free silver states of the far west excited much comment. In response to a question concerning his mission Mr. Bryan remarked, "I have nothing to say now except that these gentlemen and I will be found next November voting the same ticket."

Senator Henry M. Teller of Colorado and others were the free silver Republican leaders indicated by the Tribune correspondent. It was an accurate prediction by Mr. Bryan that they would be voting the same ticket with him in November, for they walked out of the Republican national convention when the gold standard platform was adopted and aligned themselves with the free silver Democracy.

But neither the New York correspondent nor the free silver seceders nor the Nebraska correspondent and free silver leader himself could foretell that the seceders would vote for William Jennings Bryan as the presidential candidate on the ticket which was to be nominated at Chicago a few weeks later.



WILLIAM J. BRYAN, FROM HIS LATEST PHOTOGRAPH.

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