



# “Get Ready for ’96”

The Decatur County Press,  
Partisanship,  
and the Presidential  
Campaign of 1896

by Robert B. Mitchell



**T**wo days after Iowans filed to the polls in 1895 to vote in state elections, the *Davis City Advance* of Decatur County, Iowa, offered readers some simple advice: "Get ready for '96." As the *Advance* crowed about setbacks suffered by Democrats in the recent balloting, it claimed momentum for the Populists in the upcoming presidential and congressional elections. But the comment also foreshadowed a remarkably energetic and colorful year of political journalism in Decatur County.

The presidential campaign of 1896 pitting William Jennings Bryan against William McKinley came during a period of change and economic tumult in Decatur County. Hilly terrain and a lack of rich topsoil meant that Decatur and its neighboring counties along the Missouri border ranked among the poorest in the state. Nonetheless, Decatur County, like most of the rest of Iowa, had enjoyed steady growth in the decades after the Civil War. That trend continued in the first half of the 1890s, when the county's population increased by 6 percent. In 1895 Graceland College held its first classes in Lamoni, the center of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the county's second-largest town, with a population of 1,153. The following year, the 1,651 residents of Leon, the county seat and largest town in the county, looked forward to communicating by telephone with Des Moines, Council Bluffs, and Omaha. The Methodists of Garden Grove were building a new church. In Davis City, the town council voted to expand the city's sidewalks.

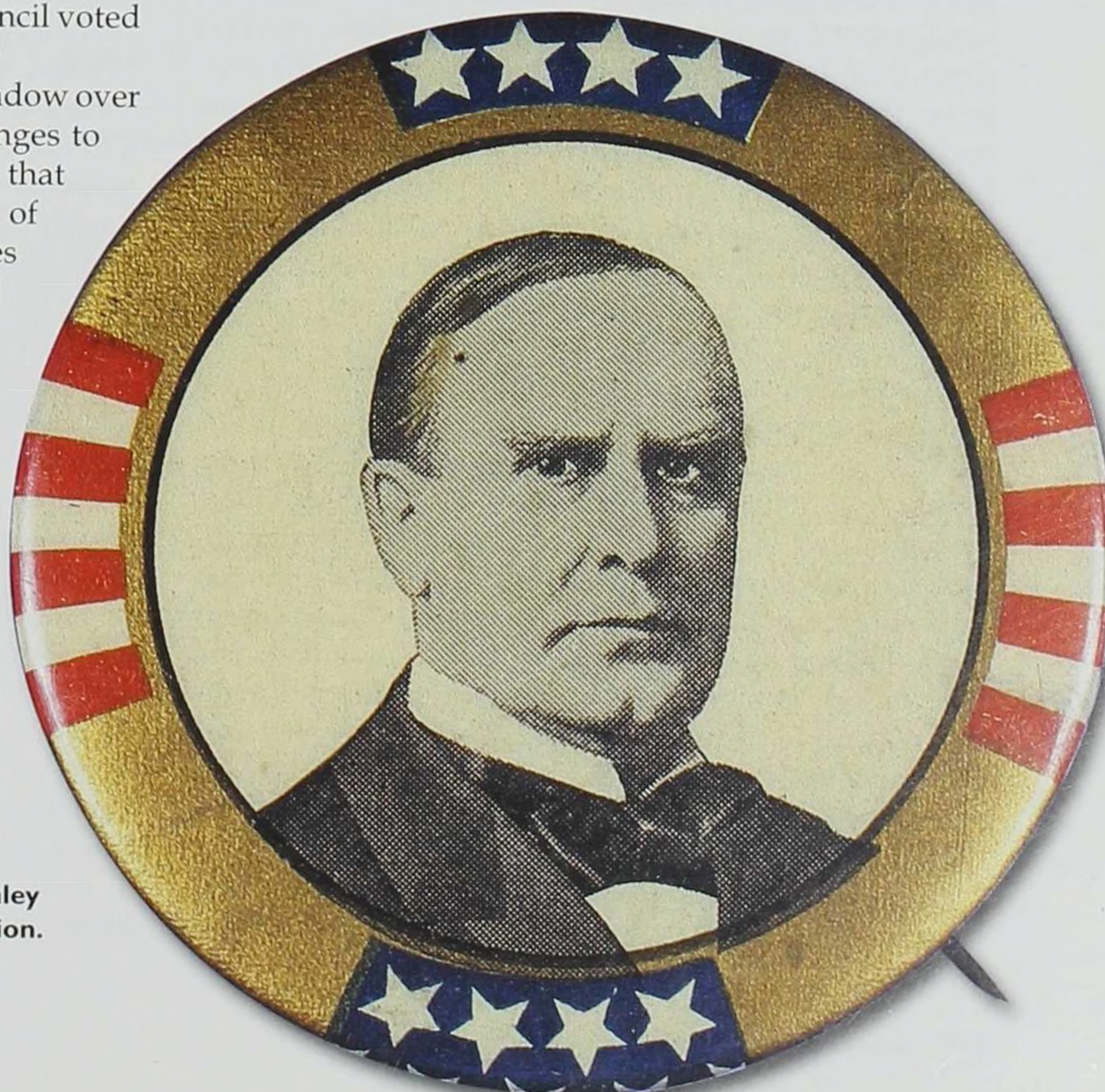
The Panic of 1893, however, cast a long shadow over this period of growth, posing serious challenges to Decatur County farmers and the businesses that depended on them. The stock market crash of that year led to the failure of major businesses and investment houses throughout the United States. Banks and other financial institutions collapsed in record number, setting off serious financial distress across the country. The depression hit farmers particularly hard because it came at a time of declining commodity prices.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Decatur County's recovery from the depression proceeded unevenly. A Leon bank proudly advertised in 1894 that it had survived "the worst financial panic ever known to the present generation." A year later, the *Advance* observed that many farm-

ers had not been so lucky. Reviewing the state of commodity prices, the paper scoffed: "Prosperity, you bet." As the presidential election approached, the depression and its aftermath remained a troubling reality for many Decatur County residents.

Despite the Panic of 1893, the strength of the Republican Party in Iowa left most of the state immune to the agrarian revolt that swept Populists to power in nearby Plains states. Populism prospered, however, in Decatur County, where voters had long been attracted to insurgent third-party movements. In 1881, the gubernatorial candidate of the Greenback Party received 23 percent of the vote in Decatur County, nearly equaling the 26 percent garnered by the Democratic standard-bearer. More than a decade later, in 1892, the Populist presidential candidate, James B. Weaver of Iowa, received 11 percent of the vote in Decatur County. The combined Populist-Democratic percentage of the vote in the county that year narrowly topped the 49 percent received by President Benjamin Harrison, who lost nationwide to Democrat Grover Cleveland.

The Populists backed a platform that called for some fairly radical solutions for the time, such as government ownership of railroads, an income tax, and the unlimited coinage of silver. The movement's real goal, however, was not overhauling American society along socialist lines but protecting the economic position of farmers



**William Jennings Bryan (left) and William McKinley (right) faced off in the 1896 U.S. presidential election.**

BOTH BUTTONS: SHSI (DES MOINES)



and laborers. "Many wage earners by 1892 were convinced that their pockets were being picked by giant corporations and their lackeys in government," historian Ray Ginger writes. "Lots of farmers felt the same way."

By the mid-1890s, Populists were firmly established as a potent political force in Decatur County. In 1894, the Democrat–People's Party unsuccessful fusion candidate for Congress gained a larger portion of the vote in Decatur County than in the district as a whole. In 1895, the Populist gubernatorial candidate received 13 percent of the votes cast in Decatur County—five points ahead of his statewide percentage—and outpolled the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in several townships. The showing of the Populists in Decatur County led the *Davis City Advance* to ask in its post-election analysis: "Who said the pops were dead?"

Contributing to Decatur County's political volatility, a vigorous and varied collection of weekly newspapers developed to serve the county's readers. No fewer than 11 locally published newspapers brought the news of the day to Decatur County's 16,639 residents in the mid-1890s. Five stand out as particularly significant.

In the county seat of Leon, where two papers fought for dominance, Republican Millard F. Stookey edited the *Decatur County Journal*. Stookey had lived in Leon since 1877. In 1893, along with his cousin, he took control of the *Journal*, which routinely skewered Democrats and championed Republicans. Stookey's main rival in Leon was O. E. Hull, publisher of the *Leon Reporter*. Hull bought the paper with a partner in 1887 and assumed full control in 1890. He proudly—and accurately—claimed that the *Reporter* was "the only Democratic paper in Decatur County."

Just 15 miles away, in Lamoni, residents could also choose between two papers promoting divergent views. The *College City Chronicle* became an energetic advocate for the Republicans, reflecting the views of its editor and publisher, W. H. Deam, a self-described lifelong supporter of the party of Lincoln. Deam and the *Chronicle* fought for supremacy in Lamoni with the *Independent Patriot*, edited by local educator Daniel F. Lambert. The *Independent Patriot* steered clear of party affiliation, making it unique among Decatur County papers. Yet Lambert's paper did not hesitate to wade into the controversies of the day—particularly those involving currency—with great energy.

In Davis City, roughly halfway between Leon and Lamoni, the leading paper stoutly supported the inter-



STILL BEGGING FOR BREAD.

A Scene in the Rear of a Chicago Restaurant—Yes, Good Times Are Here.

"Yes, Good Times Are Here," chides this cartoon in Decatur County's *Davis City Advance* in mid-July 1895. The 1890s were divisive times, economically and politically, and Decatur County's 11 newspapers did not shy away from partisanship.

ests of the Populist Party. The *Davis City Advance* was owned and edited for much of the period by Charles A. Wickes, a local businessman who was no stranger to controversy. He had been expelled from the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints and later published a sectarian newspaper in Davis City that promoted the interests of a church faction. Wickes sold the *Advance* in the spring of 1895 but reacquired the paper in 1896. Throughout the period, the *Advance* energetically advocated Populist positions.

The multiplicity of editorial voices in Decatur County reflected the changing nature of American journalism at the end of the 19th century. By the mid-1890s, newspapers had evolved from purely partisan undertakings published solely to advance the interests of a political party or faction, into businesses whose success or failure depended on their ability to attract readers and advertisers. The trend toward what historian Gerald Baldasty has called the "commercialization" of news was apparent in the content of the county's newspapers, which carried serialized novels, sports, and national and international news. The *Journal* and the *Chronicle*, for example, featured the sermons of the Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage, the nationally renowned preacher from Washington, D.C. The *Journal* ran *Heart of the World*,



by H. Rider Haggard, author of *King Solomon's Mines*. The *Reporter* published a mid-winter "Baseball Letter" with "gossip of the national game" for sports-starved readers. Many of the papers offered discounted subscriptions on the local paper and major newspapers from the East or Chicago.

This movement toward the commercialization of news did not mean, however, that editors had abandoned older editorial traditions of political advocacy. Indeed, "partisanship reflected newspaper market variation," Baldasty writes. "Where partisanship paid . . . it flourished." Decatur County's newspapers often explicitly linked partisan orientation to business success. Under the headline of "Populists, Attention," the *Advance* in June 1895 detailed a discounted subscription offer. "A few minutes work would get up a club of short time subscribers at ten cents each," the paper noted. The following year, the *Journal* urged Republicans to subscribe and ask friends and neighbors to do the same. The prospect of courthouse business doled out to friendly publishers added another economic consideration to political advocacy. In November 1896, the *Reporter* complained that the *Journal* "has for many years been enjoying undisputed all the advantages to be had in the way of county patronage by reason of the county offices being filled with republican officials. If it had not been for this patronage the Journal would have had

a hard road to hoe." Local publishers and editors often saw partisanship as a tool for building profitable newspapers.

But business considerations alone did not drive the county's editors to political partisanship. Most clearly believed that the forthright declaration of partisan views was an essential part of their duty as journalists, and partisan considerations sometimes trumped business goals when there was a conflict. One week after Wickes assumed control of the *Advance*, the paper commented on a sudden decline in advertising that it attributed to its newfound Populist convictions. The *Advance* vowed to stay the course, declaring, "we are not at all disheartened. In fact, we expected it. . . . To our Populist friends we would say, you have wanted a paper in the county which would advocate your principles squarely. You now have such a paper, but it takes money to run it." More often, however, editors saw no conflict between partisanship and business goals. In Lamoni, W. H. Deam stayed away from partisan affiliation during the state elections in 1895 but declared in February 1896 that the *Chronicle* was officially joining the ranks of Republican papers. "This course is adopted because it is believed to be the best for the publisher, the patrons and the public in general," Deam explained.

On the subject of partisanship, the *Decatur County Journal* spoke for the vast majority of county editors

when it proclaimed in April 1896 that the straightforward promotion of political opinions was a "Mark of Patriotism." "There is a mistaken notion abroad that earnest partisan convictions unfit a person for citizenship or public office, and that some exclusive and popular virtue attaches to non partisanship, or rather to an individual who can truthfully boast that he has no clear and positive political persuasions. The impression is due to pharisaical bigotry and an erroneous

#### REPUBLICAN IDEA OF FINANCE.



The man with SMALL income, who pays BIG interest and taxes.

The man with GREAT income, who RECEIVES big interest and pays small taxes.

OPPOSED TO INCOME TAX, BUT INTEREST MUST BE PAID IN GOLD.

Billing itself as "the only Democratic paper in Decatur County," the *Leon Reporter* ran this cartoon on August 27, 1896, faulting the Republican Party and the gold standard.





Gold lettering on shell badges for McKinley and silvery white campaign ribbons for Bryan (opposite page) echoed the key issue of the 1896 election: the gold standard versus bimetallism, the use of both gold and silver for currency.

idea of the duties of an American citizen. . . . No one can point to a single reform in this country which has ever been brought about by a non partisan leader or organ. Partisanship freed the slave, gave 160 acres to every poor man, and suppressed a gigantic rebellion."

Reflecting their commitment to political advocacy, most of the Decatur County newspapers devoted their front pages almost entirely to political news and partisan commentary. Front pages became platforms for their party and venues for attacks on the opposition. Political parties stoked the partisan inclinations of editors, preparing special material for publication by newspapers. As elections approached, Decatur County papers printed the names of the candidates leading the favored

party ticket on the front page along with locally written commentary and editorials culled from out-of-town newspapers. There could be no mistaking the political orientation of the *Journal* in November 1895 when it reported on the Republican sweep of state offices. Under a front-page cartoon of a rooster crowing about the GOP victory, the paper's account of the election results began, "Thank God, it is another Republican landslide."

So as they reported and commented on the rich tableau of personalities and issues that dominated the 1896 campaign for the White House, editors in Decatur County felt no need to pull their punches. In Leon, Millard F. Stookey's *Decatur County Journal* sought to rally readers to the Republican cause, praising the party's candidates and positions and excoriating Democrats. O. E. Hull, at the Democratic *Leon Reporter*, emerged as a strong advocate for the party of Jackson and Jefferson and rivaled Stookey in his contempt for political opponents. In Lamoni, W. H. Deam's *College City Chronicle* joined the Republican ranks and lobbed salvos at Democrats, while Daniel F. Lambert, in the pages of the *Independent Patriot*, stayed above the partisan fray but argued vigorously for currency reform. Meanwhile, in Davis City, the *Advance* crusaded for the Populists. As Decatur County's editors battled for influence, the 1896 presidential election emerged as a high-stakes news event in which hard-edged partisan commentary and reporting became both a business requirement and a civic duty. For newspaper readers in Decatur County, this meant an extraordinary year of lively political journalism.

Decatur County newspapers provided early indications of their highly charged partisan approach to the presidential campaign in their assessment of President Grover Cleveland's record on dealing with the economy. As Cleveland returned to the White House for a second term in 1893 after losing the office to Republican Benjamin Harrison for an intervening term, the national economy spiraled into depression. In Decatur County as well as in the rest of the country, views on the Democrat Cleveland were colored by opinions about the currency system.

To remedy the deflation that plagued the American economy in the decades after the Civil War, debtors—farmers in particular—favored "bimetallism," the use of both gold and silver for currency. Pumping unlimited quantities of silver—"free silver"—into circulation, silver advocates believed, would increase the supply of money, inflate prices, and make it easier for farmers to pay mortgages and other loans. "Nobody is satisfied



with the price of labor or farm products; and no wonder. These things have been measured by the single gold standard," an item in the *Davis City Advance* complained.

On the other hand, banking and business interests opposed the use of silver, arguing that it threatened to undermine the soundness and stability of the currency system. In Lamon, the *Chronicle* asserted that the interests of bankers and farmers were identical on the currency question. "Every business man is glad when the farmers are prosperous with good crops and good prices. It is to the interest of financiers that we have a revival of business and prosperous times. The best financiers say silver will not restore confidence."

Cleveland antagonized silver supporters because he opposed using the precious metal to expand the money supply. In 1893, Congress, at the urging of the White House, repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, a measure that authorized the limited use of silver for currency. When Treasury gold supplies began to dwindle, the president further enraged silver supporters by purchasing gold from J. Pierpont Morgan and other bankers through the sale of bonds on terms highly favorable to the financiers.

While the administration's pro-gold stance infuriated silver supporters, many Republicans were also unhappy with the Democrats for the repeal of the highly protective McKinley Tariff Act of 1890. In its place the Democratic-controlled Congress passed legislation that lifted tariffs on items such as raw wool and lumber but left them in place on commodities such as iron, glass, chemicals, and sugar. The measure also eliminated reciprocity provisions of the McKinley Act that farmers had hoped would promote exports. "Farmers," historian Ray Ginger concludes, "were sacrificed." Because it retained many protectionist provisions, Cleveland refused to sign the bill, but Republicans blamed him anyway when it became law without his signature. In 1894, powered by widespread discontent with Cleveland, Republicans made massive electoral gains in the House and Senate to regain control of Congress.

By early 1896, the assessment of the president made several years earlier by Andrew Carnegie—"Cleveland is a pretty good fellow"—seemed wildly erroneous to most Decatur County editors and many other Americans. In November 1895, the *Chronicle's* "Letter from Washington" saw in the Republican gains of that year, as well as in the Republican recapture of Congress a year earlier, clear evidence that voters had shaken off "the hoodoo under which they elected Mr. Cleveland President." The *Decatur County Journal* attributed the depletion of Treasury gold reserves, the subsequent controversial bond sales, and the nation's depressed economic condition to the repeal of the McKinley Tariff Act—and put the blame for repeal squarely on the president and his Democratic congressional allies. A long item in the *Journal* complained that Cleveland had not learned that high tariffs protect prosperity at home, "the most obvious lesson of the democratic panic of 1893." The *Journal* also took delight in noting Cleveland's unpopularity in a humorous item in December 1895. "Correspondence from London to the leading daily papers asserts that 'England likes President Cleveland still.' Well, the democrats in the United States like him that way too, but he will look up and make a noise occasionally."

The *Populist Advance*, likewise, left no doubt where it stood on the president. "Patrick Henry said, 'Give us liberty or give us death.' Grover says, 'Give us gold and we will give you bonds and take the boodle.' One was a patriot, what is the other?" Cleveland's ample girth provided an easy target for the *Advance* when it printed an item referring to the president as "Old Tub-of-Fat." But nothing made the paper's contempt for bond deals, the gold standard, bankers, and the administration plainer than a vitriolic item announcing that financier J. Pierpont Morgan's "10,000 dollar dog drowned itself the other day while the master of hounds was out exercising his lordship's pups. Any self respecting dog would rather die than eat the food bought by money stolen from the United States in the last bond deal."

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



**BRYAN.**



**D**ecatur County editors, like their counterparts elsewhere, kept close watch on political developments and assessed the situation according to their partisan inclinations as the campaign took shape. As county editors searched the field of presidential hopefuls, their gaze fell initially on two of Iowa's favorite sons. For the Democratic nomination, the *Leon Reporter* backed former Iowa governor Horace Boies (the only Democrat to be elected governor in Iowa between 1854 and 1932). In February 1896, Hull's paper hailed his endorsement by Buchanan County Democrats and predicted that Boies would prove "the strongest candidate that the democracy can put up." Another item in the *Reporter* informed readers that Boies's support extended well beyond Iowa into the South, largely due to his support for silver. Similar reports continued to appear in Hull's paper despite Boies's protest in March that he was not seeking the Democratic nomination.

Meanwhile, in the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, Ohio governor and former U.S. congressman William McKinley faced a number of rivals. Decatur County's Republican editors initially favored U.S. Senator William Boyd Allison of Dubuque. A rooster displayed on the front page of the *Journal* in November 1895 is pictured as saying, "I crow for . . . Allison for president in 1896." Nevertheless, it soon became apparent that McKinley was winning the battle for the nomination. An item in the *Chronicle* in March 1896 reflected his growing strength. While the paper hailed Allison's stand on trade and currency questions and proclaimed him "one of the greatest statesmen of the age," it acknowledged that McKinley would be an acceptable candidate. The *Journal* argued in April that the choice of McKinley or Allison mattered little to Iowa Republicans. They were "not so much concerned whether Allison or McKinley shall be president as they are to rid themselves of the free trade curse which is . . . bringing hard times and bankruptcy to every hearthstone."

McKinley's emergence as the Republican front-runner also caught the attention of the *Democratic Reporter*. In March the paper attacked McKinley's record on tariffs. "Just as people suffering from alcoholism crave more of the ruinous stimulant, so now the people who are suffering from McKinleyism are thirsting for more of the deadly poison," the *Reporter* warned on March 26. The paper also ridiculed the politics of McKinley's home state. Informing readers that the Ohio state legislature had recently passed a law banning the wearing of high hats in theaters, the paper commented, "The fool killer has plenty of work to do, and he shouldn't neglect it."

The partisan edge of Decatur County's newspapers sharpened as the parties selected their presidential nominees. In June, the Republicans nominated McKinley on the first ballot in St. Louis. In July, William Jennings Bryan's stirring "Cross of Gold" speech won the hearts of the delegates at the Democratic convention in Chicago and earned him the party's presidential nomination. Two weeks later he received the nomination of the Populist Party. Party platforms, detailed coverage of the proceedings, and engravings of the candidates appeared in the newspapers. Decatur County editors seasoned their convention coverage with plenty of pointed front-page commentary and continued to portray the campaign in starkly partisan hues through the summer and fall.

Republican papers loyally lined up behind McKinley after he won that party's nomination. The *Journal* could barely contain its excitement. "The Ticket Will Be A Winner," a *Journal* headline confidently forecast on June 25. On the same day, the *Chronicle* proclaimed in Lamoni: "The convention at St. Louis simply ratified the wishes of the people. Next November there will be another ratification of McKinley, protection and sound money."

As for the Democrats, Bryan burst Boies's bubble when he seized the Democratic nomination with his "Cross of Gold" speech. The *Reporter* grudgingly noted the Nebraskan's "special luck in speeches" in its first post-convention issue but soon became an enthusiastic supporter of the Nebraska orator. At the end of the month, the *Reporter* reprinted an item from the *Red Oak Sun* that likened Bryan to Lincoln. The *Journal*, however, dismissed Bryan's chances, calling the Nebraskan "unquestionably the weakest candidate ever presented to a democratic national convention." Nor did the paper think much of Bryan's intellect. "Bryan is not a profound thinker. He is merely a man of lively parts, quick observation, and profusely endowed with the gift of gab."

In the months following the conventions, Bryan and McKinley campaigned in dramatically different styles. Bryan traveled 18,000 miles and spoke to 5 million people. McKinley campaigned more traditionally, staying at home in Canton, Ohio, and making speeches from the front porch of his home to visiting delegations.

The Republican *Journal* took a dim view of Bryan's campaign. In Chicago, the paper noted, a campaign appearance had to be canceled due to heat and a disorderly crowd, and in New York City "a vigorous use of clubs [by] police" secured "a semblance of order." The Democratic *Leon Reporter*, on the other hand, noted the "vast assemblage" that turned out to hear Bryan in New



York but made no mention of chaos in its news story.

The *Journal's* coverage of McKinley never strayed from boosterism. Typical in this regard was its fawning account of a delegation of Pennsylvania workers visiting McKinley at his Ohio home, where McKinley detailed his views on tariffs and currency. The newspaper noted the workers' enthusiastic endorsement of his views parenthetically (as "tremendous cheering") throughout its transcript of his remarks.

McKinley's "front porch" campaign left little for Democratic editors to aim at, but that didn't stop Hull's

*Leon Reporter* from attacking the Republican nominee for his ties to Ohio financier Mark Hanna and other well-heeled Republican supporters. McKinley "Is Owned by Hanna," the *Reporter* harrumphed in an October headline. "M'Kinley Will Never Be Our President."

**I**n Decatur County, as elsewhere, economic questions—tariffs and currency—dominated the campaign as the nation struggled with the aftermath of the depression. As part of their campaign coverage, editors from Leon to Lamoni gave detailed attention to these issues, offering readers extensive commentary, with prescriptions for economic recovery depending on the paper's political orientation.

The Republican papers initially had stressed a return to the protectionism of the McKinley Tariff Act as the best cure for the nation's economic woes. The *Journal's* support for protectionism led to a brief feud with the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* that highlighted what was at stake for Iowans in the debate on tariff policy. Under the headline "Free Trade Yawp," Stookey's *Journal* derided the *Gazette's* criticism of sugar tariffs imposed under the McKinley Act. Stookey, claiming that Iowans spent more than \$7 million annually to buy 180 million pounds of sugar, argued that the tariff promoted the development of a sugar beet industry in the United States. Iowa, he added, contained "a vast area of soil" ideal for growing sugar beets; with properly protectionist tariff policies,

"there is no reason why we should not produce what we can consume ourselves and keep our millions in our own pockets." The *Gazette* responded by charging that "the Leon Journal is in favor of taxing Iowa farmers who raise cheap corn, cheap oats, cheap potatoes, cheap horses and hogs and cattle that pay none too well in order to pay a bounty to the sugar trust." Stookey remained unperturbed. He dismissed this attack by one of the state's leading papers as a "specimen of falsehood and misrepresentation."

The county's Republican papers also highlighted the difficulties experienced by the Meek woolen mill in Bonaparte as an example of the suffering caused by free trade in Iowa. In an item reprinted from the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* in March, the *Decatur County Journal* detailed layoffs at the mill and attempts by its owner to sell a \$25,000 dam to the state. Making the Van Buren County mill's plight more remarkable, the *Journal* noted, was that its owner was a well-known champion of free trade.

As the campaign continued, the currency controversy supplanted trade as the major issue for Decatur County editors and the national press alike. The debate about gold versus bimetallism emerged as the primary issue of the campaign after Republicans adopted a "sound money" plank at their national convention in June, declaring support for the gold standard until or unless silver was accepted for use as currency overseas. The phrase "16-to-1," referring to the ratio of silver to gold needed to mint a dollar coin, became a campaign rallying cry for Populists and Democrats.

Before the Republican convention, the *Journal* had asserted the primacy of the trade issue. "Whether we have gold or silver mono-metallism, or bimetallism, there will be no permanent prosperity among the people until the tariff is adjusted on protection lines," the paper wrote in February. As McKinley and the Republicans embraced gold and sound money, so did the *Journal*. A June 25 headline proclaiming "Free Silver Not Satisfactory" signaled this change in emphasis. A similar change occurred in the pages of the *Chronicle*. On



In the 1896 campaign, brass "goldbugs" were popular lapel pins and watch fobs for supporters of the gold standard. (Size: one inch wide.)

SHSI (DES MOINES)



June 18, Deam's paper assailed the Cleveland administration's trade policies as the "cause of hard times" but gave more prominent play to the Republican "sound money" platform plank.

The *Journal* stepped up its attack on silver advocates after the Democrats nominated Bryan. In a front-page editorial on July 16, the *Journal* declared that the currency issue was of prime importance to Iowa and avowed that "The People Want Prosperity—Not Free Silver." "The people of Iowa, and especially the farmers and laborers of Decatur county, have been robbed of thousands of dollars under democratic rule which certainly ought to make them conservative in their political judgments. To add the free silver humbug to the list of democratic experiments is not to supply a panacea for the distress and starvation which has attended a democratic free trade policy. . . . Let no honest man be deceived by the free silver shriekers and the long haired, beer guzzling anarchists who have temporarily obtained control of the democratic party. They are just now making windy appeals to our farmers and laborers but they will make but little headway."

The *Journal* turned to a variety of sources to make the case against silver as the campaign continued. In August, it heralded a speech by Ohio's senator John Sherman, the "Great Financier" (and brother of prominent Des Moines businessman Hoyt Sherman), who appealed for a "safe, sound and stable currency" and warned against the danger of free silver. In September, the *Journal* turned to a higher authority. In an article headlined "The Bible on 16-to-1," the paper cited Deuteronomy to conclude that those who support the free coinage of silver "are an abomination unto the Lord thy God."

Anticipating that the Democrats would adopt a pro-silver platform plank, the *Reporter* in early July began to trumpet the virtues of bimetallism. Attacking McKinley on the issue, the paper chuckled that, having embraced the gold standard, "the little Napoleon has indeed met his Waterloo." After the Democratic convention, the *Reporter* printed the party's currency plank, sometimes on the front page and sometimes on inside

pages, with a decorative border around the text to highlight the item.

The *Reporter* also played to the frustrations of farmers. In October, Hull seized on a resolution passed by the "Creston Railway Men's Sound Money Club" that endorsed the Republican currency plank as the best means of protecting the value of railroad stock and rail-

road jobs. "Do the farmers want to cast their votes in aid of the railroads?" the *Reporter* asked. "Do the farmers want to keep the price of their produce which the employes of the railway corporation have to buy down to the present starvation prices . . . ? If not we fail to see how they can blindly close their eyes to their own interests and vote in favor of a single gold standard policy."

The currency question also emerged as the major campaign issue in the pages of the Populist *Davis City Advance*, where the issue had long preoccupied of the paper. Occasionally its feisty attacks on anti-silver banking interests strayed into anti-Semitism: "Eighteen hundred years ago the Jews crucified Christ. They have improved since then; instead of killing they take a mortgage, which gives them all of the proceeds of labor above a bare living," the paper had snarled in 1895.

With the campaign swinging into high gear, the *Advance* maintained its focus on currency. As a loyal Populist paper, it dutifully reprinted the party's platform, with its call for government ownership of railroads and a graduated income tax, on its front page for four straight weeks beginning in early August. Otherwise, however, the paper paid little heed to tax, transportation, and other reform questions, editorializing instead on currency and silver.

Shortly after the Republican convention, the *Advance* derided the party's "sound money" plank in ringing tones. "Great Gods and little fishes! Somebody has been guilty of a lying record that would put the imps of satan to shame," the paper thundered in early July. The *Advance* compared gold supporters to the followers of Aaron, who fashioned the golden calf in the desert and worshiped it as a god. Like the *Journal*, the *Advance* cited scriptural authority, turning to the Book of Mormon to find an endorsement



Thin celluloid covers the portrait of the nominees ratified in Des Moines. Celluloid first appeared on campaign buttons in 1896.



of free silver in an attempt to appeal to the Reorganized Latter Day Saints concentrated in the southern half of Decatur County. "If our Latter Day Saint friends are well posted and consistent, we do not see how they can avoid favoring Bryan in the present contest," the paper argued in October. "How a man can honestly claim to believe that book, and yet vote for the present Republican platform, is a mystery."

The Lamoni *Independent Patriot* offered perhaps the most dramatic example of the primacy of the currency question in Decatur County. While Daniel Lambert continued to maintain the paper's editorial independence, he left no doubt about the paper's support for silver. As the campaign year progressed, commentary in the *Independent Patriot* became increasingly focused on currency questions. The paper had long espoused bimetallism, but the importance Lambert attached to the use of silver and gold became especially apparent in late June after the Republican convention, when he argued that the upcoming presidential campaign should be a referendum on currency. In September, he published a remarkably detailed explication of the paper's support for bimetallism. According to the its analysis, the "appreciating dollar" produced by the gold standard threatened Americans' prosperity and political independence. This loss, in turn, jeopardized prospects for freedom throughout the world "because it is our duty and privilege to be a political light and largely a political savior to the world." As a result, Lambert concluded, the currency question "is of as great or greater consequence to the world than the question of slavery; and demands of every patriot a bold, fearless and if necessary defiant stand for what he believes to be right and just, and for the greatest good of his nation and the world."

**A**fter a year of reading about the presidential campaign and the issues, on November 3 Decatur County voters rendered their verdict on Bryan and McKinley, silver and gold. Voter turnout throughout Decatur County was 31 percent higher for the presidential election than for the gubernatorial race in 1895. While McKinley easily carried Iowa with 56 percent of the vote, defeating Bryan by more than 55,000 votes, Bryan eked out a narrow victory in Decatur County, defeating McKinley by 95 ballots and capturing slightly more than 50 percent of the vote.

Reaction to the results was as spirited as the coverage of the campaign. Only a year earlier the *Chronicle* had offered the briefest rundown of election results on its front page and poked fun at overtly partisan papers.

The *Chronicle* showed no such restraint this time, running a series of pointed items heralding the Republican victory and mocking Bryan. "McKinley is elected. Ha, ha," typified the tone of the *Chronicle*. In Leon, Hull was clearly overjoyed by the local results, which included a sweep by Democrats in county races. The *Reporter* tweaked William Allen White, the Kansas editor whose famous "What's the Matter with Kansas?" editorial mocked that state's Populists. "What's the matter with Decatur County?" Hull gloated November 5. "The 'anarchists' have captured Decatur County." Nor could Hull resist taking a shot at his Leon rival, the *Journal*. Hull speculated about the business implications of the county Democratic victory on his rival. "Will the *Journal* reduce the size of its paper and discharge part of the office force?" While pleased with Bryan's showing in Decatur County, Hull conceded that the Nebraskan had not fared as well nationally. "Boodle and coercion

## IT'S M'KINLEY!

He carries the solid East, together with Illinois, California, Iowa, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

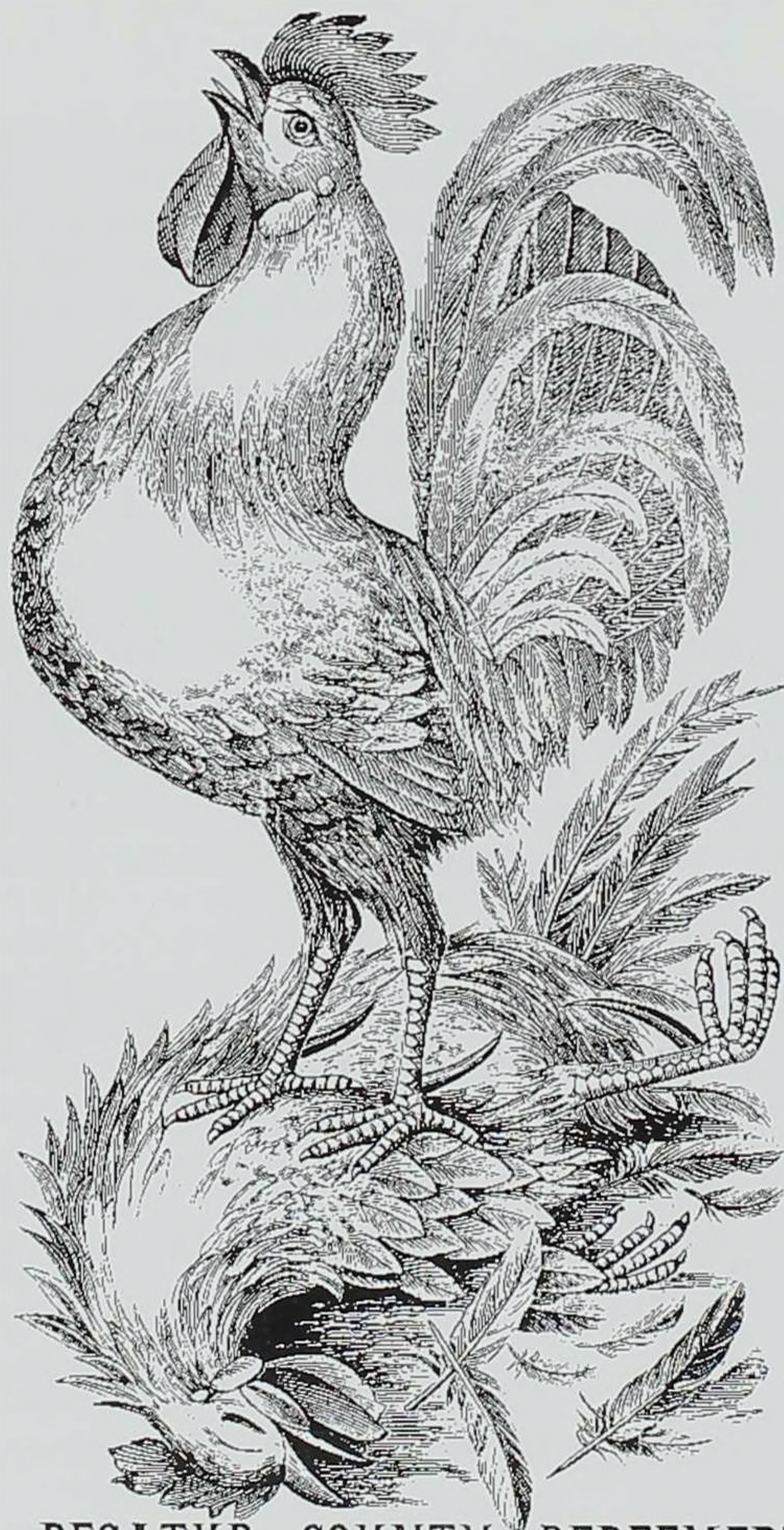
Iowa Goes Republican 40,000

Missouri Gives Bryan 60,000 and Nebraska 15,000.

The result will be close and it may take the official canvass to decide in several States.

On November 5, 1896, the Democratic *Leon Reporter* announced McKinley as the national winner, in a story and headlines in the upper corner of the front page. But dominating that same front page was an enormous crowing rooster and the results for Decatur County—where Bryan and free silver were the winners. (See next page.)





## DECATUR COUNTY REDEEMED!

The County Swept Clean by the Free Silver Ticket.

**BRYAN HAS AN EVEN 100.**

Every Candidate on the County Ticket Elected!

**FREE SILVER MAJORITIES.**

Bryan	-	100.
Robb	- -	88.
Baker	- -	253.
Sears	- -	245.
Garber	-	225.
Stockton	-	81.
Niece	- -	81.
Bruce	- -	24.



has been successful, the voters of the cities flocking to the support of Mark Hanna's candidate."

Like Hull, Stookey saw the dark hand of graft in the results—but he discerned corruption at the local level. Bryan's victory in Decatur County, the *Journal* claimed, was the result of "illegal voters and the unlimited use of boodle and whiskey." Strong support for Bryan among impoverished small farmers—dismissed by Stookey as "long-haired, popocratic hickory-peelers"—also played a role in Bryan's local triumph, the editor conceded. The outcome clearly embarrassed Stookey, who noted that most of the state's counties had favored McKinley. "Decatur county is one of the few counties which has everlastingly disgraced itself by rolling up a majority . . . for free trade, hard times and a debased currency," the *Journal* complained.

Stookey's shame would prove short-lived. When McKinley cruised to a re-election victory over Bryan in 1900, he carried Decatur County along with the rest of Iowa. As prosperity returned, the Populist movement fizzled across the country. Republicans held on to the White House until 1912, when Woodrow Wilson—the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry Iowa in 60 years—was elected president.

As for the county's newspapers, many continued well into the next century but went for years without political storms of the size that produced the editorial thunderbolts of 1896. The *Advance* had proved more prophetic, perhaps, than it realized when it urged readers to "Get Ready for '96." The confluence of journalistic and political trends in that fateful election year produced a uniquely colorful chapter in the history of Decatur County and Iowa journalism. When the ballots were counted, that chapter came to a close. ❖

The author is an editor with the Los Angeles–Washington Post News Service and a graduate of Grinnell College. He lives in Woodbridge, Virginia.

### NOTE ON SOURCES

Background on the economic conditions and issues of the 1890s came from Ray Ginger, *The Age of Excess: The United States from 1877 to 1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1975). Background on the campaign of 1896 came from Paul W. Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991). Joseph F. Wall's *Iowa: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), provided background on Iowa. Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), offered insights into the evolving state of American newspapers during the period. Biographical material came from several sources: *A History of Decatur County*, vol. 2 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1915); Joseph Anthony, *Lamoni's Passing Parade: Stories of Lamoni and Lamoni's People* (Lamoni: Blair Printing Co., 1948); *The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III (1832–1914)*, ed. Richard P. Howard (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1979); and other archival material from the Community of Christ church library in Independence, Mo. The newspapers themselves—the *Decatur County Journal*, *Davis City Advance*, *Leon Reporter*, *Lamoni Independent Patriot*, and the *College City Chronicle*—exist in microfilm at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Des Moines. Annotations to the original manuscript are held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (SHSI-Iowa City).