

DUSTY ROADS®

STORIES OF

KEWANEE

PAST & PRESENT



Dean Karau

November 2021

William Jennings Bryan

The First Presidential Candidate to Campaign in Kewanee

What do Kewanee, the 1896 presidential election, *THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ*, and the Scopes Monkey Trial all have in common?

Famed orator and three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan appeared in them all.

Bryan was born in 1860 in Illinois and raised in the state. He practiced law in Jacksonville before moving to Nebraska in 1887. There, Bryan was elected to Congress in 1890.

Bryan was known as a gifted debater. He opposed high tariffs and became a national leader of the “*Free Silver Movement*,” supporting the old silver standard against Eastern bankers and industrialists who embraced the new gold standard.

Bryan’s opponents characterized him as a demagogue, while supporters saw him as a populist championing liberal causes. He identified with Western agrarian interests against the urban East.

In the 1896 presidential election, Bryan’s fiery “*Cross of Gold*” speech against the gold standard at the Democratic convention secured him the nomination against the Republican candidate, William McKinley.

McKinley conducted the then-traditional “*front porch*” style of campaigning, literally staying at home while allowing dignitaries and the press to

meet with him on his front porch. In contrast, Bryan barnstormed the country, focusing on the Midwest, delivering speech after speech to small and large groups alike.

Kewanee first entered the picture through well-known Kewanee attorney Charles K. Ladd, an ardent Democrat. (See my story, *REDISCOVERED – KEWANEE’S FIRST LAKE*, for more about Ladd. It’s on my Dusty Roads® Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/dusty.roads.kewanee>.) Ladd and Bryan met and developed a deep friendship, and mutual friends commented on their similar appearance in



William Jennings Bryan

Charles Knox Ladd



Photo of scene at the Kewanee Fairgrounds where William Jennings Bryan spoke

addition to their similar political philosophies. Ladd would occasionally stump with Bryan and, in at least one instance when Bryan took ill, Ladd spoke from the back of a train and was mistaken for Bryan.

As a result of Ladd's friendship with Bryan, the presidential candidate stopped in Kewanee on October 24, 1896. (In Bryan's book on his campaign, he referred to Kewanee as "Mr. Ladd's town." Bryan also stopped that day in Ottawa, La Salle, Spring Valley, Ladd, Buda, Galva, Rock Island, Alpha, Alexis, Monmouth, Bushnell, Macomb, and Quincy.)

Kewanee's *INDEPENDENT* newspaper wrote that the day was, "without doubt, the biggest day in the history of Kewanee . . . [n]ever before has there been such crowds in the streets, never before has Kewanee had the honor of welcoming a presidential candidate . . ." People from 30 to 40 miles away streamed into Kewanee via wagons, buggies, and carriages. Bryan's train was scheduled to arrive at 10:30 a.m. but did not reach the station until noon where he was met by a large crowd. He was driven to the Fairgrounds,

and noted Kewaneean James K. Blish introduced Bryan. Because he was running behind schedule, Bryan only spoke for a few minutes, focusing on the "silver question." Ten minutes later, he was back in his carriage and on his way to board his train.

The celebration, however, continued. After a din-

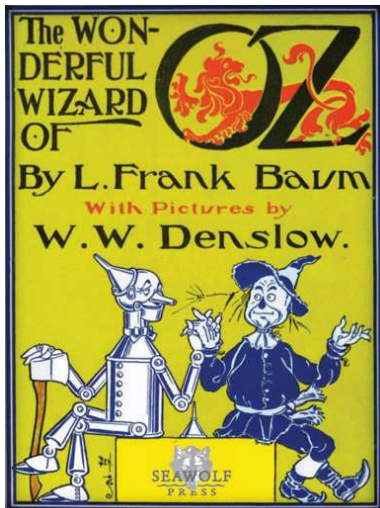


This may be a photo of the procession to the Fairgrounds, at the corner of Third and Tremont Streets.

ner, another procession formed, walking through the “*principal*” streets and then headed for Railroad Square near the train depots. Judge Powers of Utah and Judge Prentiss of Chicago spoke in the afternoon to a large crowd of supporters. Dr. Morgan from Moline spoke that evening to a similar-sized crowd before rowdies from the saloons across the street starting “*hooting and yelling.*” That ended the Bryan rally.

During his campaign Bryan traveled more than 18,000 miles through 27 states and attracted large crowds. But a well-financed Republican party garnered 271 electoral votes for McKinley to 176 for Bryan. (Bryan lost to McKinley again in 1900, and to William Howard Taft in 1908.)

What about *THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ*? In 1900, Frank L. Baum published his book, which later became the 1939 classic movie. Many commentators



Baum, L. Frank, THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ, 1900 illustrated first edition by George M. Hill Co., cover by W. W. Denslow.

believe Baum was writing a political allegory about the 1896 presidential election. Dorothy was the innocent, naive Midwesterner; the tin man was the factory worker; the scarecrow represented Midwestern farmers; Glenda the good witch was universal goodness; the wicked witch of the East represented the industrial capitalists; the Emerald City was Washington D.C.; and the Yellow Brick Road stood for the gold standard. The cowardly lion was Bryan, a man with great orator-

ial skills but an unsuccessful politician, all bark but no bite.

The Scopes Monkey Trial? In 1925, Dayton, Tennessee, high school science teacher John Scopes was accused of teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution in violation of state law. Bryan, a fundamentalist, volunteered to assist the prosecution. Soon, the famous attorney Clarence Darrow agreed to join the ACLU for the defense.

The trial became national news and Dayton soon became inundated with press and supporters for both sides. Darrow called Bryan as his sole witness, and worked to discredit Bryan’s literal interpretation of the bible. Then Darrow asked the jury for a guilty verdict, depriving Bryan of the opportunity to make his long-practiced closing argument. Scopes was convicted but merely fined \$100, the minimum allowed by the law. Bryan died five days later in Dayton, laying down for an afternoon nap and never waking up.

What was William Jennings Bryan’s legacy? Though he lost three presidential elections, Bryan helped usher in progressive reforms such as the popular election of senators, the income tax, the creation of the Department of Labor and the Federal Reserve, railroad regulation, banking reform, and women’s suffrage. His populist vision led to the furthering of progressive policies by future presidents.

Oh, yes, and William Jennings Bryan also spent “*a cup of coffee*” in our hometown.

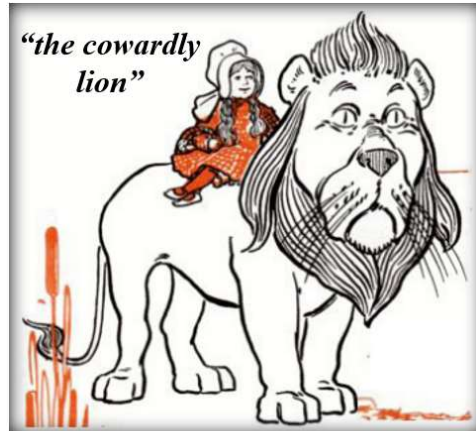


Illustration by W. W. Denslow as appearing in the 1900 George M. Hill Co. first edition of THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ.



Darrow and Bryan in Dayton, Tennessee