

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

*Whistles, Crowds, Free Silver*  
**Election Night – 1896**

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**Fall, 1992**

**Volume 27, Number 3**

The  
Mexican-  
Americans  
and their  
Roots in  
St. Paul's  
Past

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Growing Up  
on The  
East Side

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*Mexican women attending a class in English presented by the St. Paul WPA's adult education department—April 23, 1936.*



## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 27, Number 3

Fall, 1992

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**his issue of *Ramsey County History* matches in diversity the varied fall colors we now see all around us. Jane McClure writes in fascinating detail about the history of our Mexican American neighbors on the West Side of St. Paul. Tom Buckley reminds us that the presidential election of 1896, matching Republican McKinley with Democrat Bryan, involved in its day as much hoopla, politics and suspense as the election of 1992 appears to have so far.

Two of our regular features—Growing Up in St. Paul and the Historic Site essay—highlight the colorful East Side neighborhood. And finally we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church and its century of service to St. Paul's African American community in A Matter of Time for 1892. The Editorial Board hopes you will enjoy the richness of Ramsey County's history found in this issue.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board



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## Whistles, Crowds and Free Silver

# St. Paul's Noisy Election Night in 1896

Thomas C. Buckley

As we move toward the close of the twentieth century in this presidential election year, much is being said about the absence of clear plans to rebuild the economy, lack of feeling for the unfortunate, the need to maintain traditional values, dangerous plans to enlarge governmental power, and the failure to get decisive action out of our national leaders. There has been a call for the candidates of both parties to focus on the two or three vital issues, and present the American voters with better programs to lead the nation into the new century.

As we closed out the nineteenth century, many similar concerns were voiced. In 1896, ninety-six years ago, the country was in a depression and an election was held which provided the public with a clear choice between presidential candidates with quite different positions on the vital issues. Advocates of sound money based on gold, a protective tariff to safeguard American products and limited government regulation of the economy supported the reliable Republican candidate, William McKinley. Those who favored more substantial regulation of business, tariff reduction and the unlimited coinage of silver as the way to raise wages and prices rallied around the charismatic candidate of the Democrats, the Populists and the Silver Republicans, William Jennings Bryan.

With a smaller electorate, politics was taken more seriously in those days, but particularly in 1896. With the Bryan candidacy, the Northeastern Establishment had not felt as threatened since 1800 when Jefferson was elected to the presidency. Election night, November 3, 1896, was one of great apprehension in St. Paul and around the country.

In downtown St. Paul, citizens by the thousands assembled in the public places and around the newspaper offices to await the election returns in a contest compared in significance to the one which preceded

the Civil War. Above downtown, in his Summit Avenue mansion, disgruntled Democrat and railroader James J. Hill waited to hear the outcome of the election. Though for him and thousands of others in Ramsey County, it wasn't necessary to join the crowd downtown. It was possible to know the trend of the election by listening for the blasts of a mighty steam whistle.



In downtown St. Paul, citizens by the thousands assembled in the public places and around the newspaper offices to await the election returns in a contest compared in significance to that which preceded the Civil War.



The whistle was from the forward stack of the large Great Lakes passenger liner, *North West*. Although the big ship had been laid up for the winter in Duluth, the whistle, with a fifteen-mile range, was mounted in downtown St. Paul to announce the returns on perhaps St. Paul's noisiest election night.

How Hill, a long-time Democrat and supporter of President Grover Cleveland, and how the whistle off the *North West* came to contribute to the evening's celebration of the McKinley victory provides a glimpse on the local level of some of the things that occurred on a national scale during that colorful campaign.

In the period following the Civil War, the transition of the country to a major industrial society and a national market economy found the two parties very similar in their views toward business, economic growth, the role of government,

etc. Their principal difference was over the tariff, with Democrats seeking reduction and Republicans supporting protection, as they had done for years. As a result, campaigns since Reconstruction had highlighted such issues as the Civil War military service of the candidates, their lack of public or private rectitude, or the degree to which the Democratic or Republican Parties were pro- or anti-British. Since both major parties were supportive of business expansion, business leaders contributed generously to the campaign funds of both, and that policy continued into the election of 1892. Then as now, not all businessmen were Republicans, but an ominous aspect of the 1892 election eventually tipped the business community from Minnesota to Maryland decidedly toward the Republicans.

In 1892, a former Civil War general, James Weaver, was the candidate of the new People's Party of America. The People's Party was better known as the Populists, and Weaver received a total of 1,027,329 votes for the presidency. In those days it was very impressive for any third party candidate, let alone the candidate of a new third party, to receive more than a million votes. The preamble to the new party's 1892 platform was written by Minnesota's perennial reform candidate, Ignatius Donnelly, and attacked the sham battles of the major political parties which failed to address the real needs of a "plundered people."

The platform which followed included opposition to subsidies, or national aid, to private corporations, which was probably not all that alarming to Mr. Hill. Unlike his predecessors in the transcontinental railroad business, he was in the process of completing the Great Northern railway without federal land grants. However, he could not support Populist proposals to restrict immigration, since he was actively engaged in bringing such people to the



northwest to settle and use the railroad. Furthermore, he had contempt for their proposal that prosperity could be built by inflating the monetary system with the free and unlimited coinage of silver dollars, and he was definitely opposed to their platform declaration that the government own and operate the railroads.<sup>1</sup> However, Hill could take some comfort from the fact that Weaver only got 22 electoral votes, but third party candidates seldom got any. Hill's candidate, Democratic President Grover Cleveland, advocate of tariff reduction and economy in government, was returned to office.

As a man whose principal business was building his railroad and moving goods, James J. Hill stood against measures which restricted trade, and particularly tariff duties that eliminated from America low-priced European-made rails. Therefore, he was opposed to the Republican policies to maintain or raise the protective tariff. To Hill it was too high, and he supported Cleveland and the Democratic Party promises of 1892 to lower the tariff, instead of Republicans like Benjamin Harrison and Congressman William McKinley who had raised the tariff to an all-time high. Beyond that, Hill supported Cleveland because he stood for sound money and minimal government meddling in the private sector. Hill was a man of high personal rectitude in his private life, but was not deterred from supporting Cleveland by the fact that Cleveland had led a rather promiscuous private life in earlier years. That issue had been trotted out by the Republicans in 1884, in Cleveland's campaign against James G. Blaine. It had not proved any more scandalous to voters than Blaine's lack of public rectitude in accepting stock in an Arkansas railroad, for which he had supported a federal land grant.

Cleveland's second term, like those of all two-term presidents, was more controversial than his first. The panic of 1893 turned into the depression of the mid-1890s, Cleveland was denounced as ineffective, uncaring, and a tool of Wall Street. In 1896, he was repudiated by his own party as the reformers captured control. The reform Democrats supported the idea that an increase in the monetary supply was the way to restore prosperity, and

enhancement of the regulatory powers of the government was a way to reform the economy. They included features in the platform similar to those of the Populist Party, and they nominated William Jennings Bryan as their candidate.

Among the planks of the platform that aroused Hill were those for the enlargement of the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the free and unlimited coinage of silver. Hill had supported the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act as ruinous to the nation's international credit, and now the Democrats and their nominee were pledged to flood the country with the stuff.<sup>2</sup> For a businessman like Hill, regularly engaged in borrowing money in the United States, Canada and Great Britain, a stable monetary system was essential. The choice was clear; he could no longer support the Democrats. They had absorbed the free silver and business-hostile planks of the Populist Party platform to become the "Popocrats." Hill moved over to support McKinley and the high tariff Republicans.

Marcus Alonzo Hanna of Cleveland, businessman in the coal, iron ore, Great Lakes shipping and ship building industries, was the manager of the McKinley campaign. Hanna, a long time friend and business associate of Hill, had kept the Great Northern locomotives well supplied with fuel. Hanna also had an interest in the Globe Iron Works, run by his brother, Howard Hanna. Globe had built six freighters and two passenger liners for the Great Northern Railway's Northern Steamship line.

William Jennings Bryan, nominee of the Democrats and Populists, was also endorsed by the National Silver Republicans of the western states who had left the Republican Party. Hanna had a tough campaign ahead to promote sound money, the protective tariff, and the colorless William McKinley as the nation's "advance agent of prosperity." He needed all the help he could get, and Hill was ready to assist, particularly to combat free silver. According to journalist Herbert Croly, Hill stated that he met a discouraged Marc Hanna by accident in New York, as Hanna was trying to raise money early in the McKinley campaign. He had planned an elaborate campaign, but wasn't having much luck with

the New York financiers. Hill was a well-known figure on Wall Street and took Hanna around from office to office over the next five days. They collected all the money necessary for the immediate campaign needs, and thereafter Hanna didn't need any help gaining an entree to America's leading financiers.<sup>3</sup> The McKinley campaign was to be one of the best financed in American history.

Beyond introducing Hanna around Wall Street, Hill assisted the McKinley campaign in the Upper Midwest. The votes of the region from Minnesota to Ohio were seen as crucial to Republican victory, and the outcome was not all that certain. Minnesota was, after all, one of the centers of the agrarian protest movement, and many farmers were suffering due to low crop prices. Oliver H. Kelley, founder of the National Grange, had been from Minnesota, as was that ardent Populist and egalitarian reform candidate, Ignatius Donnelly. Hill, therefore, helped to coordinate the acquisition of the campaign contributions from this area, as well as organize speakers and articles to counter the oratory of the eloquent Bryan and other proponents of the "free silver heresy."<sup>4</sup>

As the campaign moved toward its exciting climax, the pro-McKinley *St. Paul Dispatch* newspaper sought a way to augment its election night coverage of the balloting. The newspaper had on previous election nights given the latest returns by using a powerful stereopticon, or magic lantern, to project the vote totals across Fourth Street to a screen on the wall of the original Germania Bank building, now demolished. For those who couldn't get downtown on November 3, 1896, a powerful whistle and simple set of signals would provide a convenient signaling system. Hill was in a position to help.

In June of 1894, Hill opened a new chapter in Great Lakes travel by introducing the steamship *North West*, part of which played a role on election night two years later. It was the largest vessel on the lakes, being some 384 feet long, 44 feet wide, and 4,200 tons displacement. With the first powerful Belleville boilers and quadruple expansion steam engines on the lakes, the ship developed 7,000 horse power and was capable of top speeds reported from twenty-two to twenty-seven miles per





The steam passenger liner North West. The whistle system that was moved to St. Paul for election night, November 3, 1896, can be seen on the forward smokestack.

hour.<sup>5</sup> Unlike other Great Lakes ships, it was exclusively devoted to carrying passengers between Buffalo and Duluth, and did not carry any freight. The food, decor and service were hailed as equal to the best of the trans-Atlantic liners. But its most useful feature that election night was its magnificent set of whistles, operated by steam from its powerful boilers. The main whistle could be heard for a distance of fifteen miles, just the thing to signal the trend of the election.

In 1895, the *North West* was joined by her sister ship, the *North Land*. The two ships provided twice weekly passenger service to Duluth. With fogs and delays at the Soo locks, they weren't quite able to attain a regularity comparable to passenger trains, but their quality of service exceeded that of any train in the country, and they brought thousands of people to Minnesota on the new route. To promote this new service, the Northern Steamship Company employed a variety of advertising, scheduling, and public relations strategies. Ads were liberally placed in the newspapers of large East Coast and Midwest cities, and the sailing schedules were coordinated with passenger trains along the route. Opportunities were extended to writers to tour and sail the ships, resulting in numerous favorable articles. In addition, free passes were distributed to influential people and special group rates were given for excursions at the beginning and end of the tourist season. In September, 1896, such an excursion was arranged for one of the most important groups to sail on the ships,

### The newspaper had on previous election nights given the latest returns by using a powerful stereopticon to project the numbers on the wall of the Germania Bank building.



and hear Hill's views on the coming election, the Minnesota Editorial Association.

On September 12, 1896, it was arranged for 140 Minnesota newspaper editors and printers, their wives/husbands and/or sisters and/or sweethearts (significant others were not recorded) to board the *North Land* at Duluth for a cruise down the lakes to Mackinac Island and back. On the voyage to Duluth to pick up the group, the *North Land* struck a log which bent the propeller and put the trip in jeopardy. However, Hill saw to it that a propeller was taken off the *North West*, which had been laid up for the season, and put on the *North Land*. After an eight-hour delay, the group headed off in the face of a nor'easter blowing in gale force.

James J. Hill, a workaholic, was aboard the *North Land* with the members of the Editorial Association, which marked it as a gathering of particular importance, for it was rare for Hill to make non-business trips of any kind. At the beginning of the tourist season in June of 1895, the *North West's* first trip carried perhaps the greatest assemblage of American businessmen/in-

vestors/millionaires ever gathered together in one place. The occasion was a special excursion to Duluth of the investors in the Minnesota Iron Company, and more than 160 were on the *North West* when it left Chicago. However, Hill was too busy to take the time for the cruise, and he met his guests at Duluth.

In September, 1896, the campaign was at its height and the editors were of such special importance that Hill was aboard, but he was able to go only as far as the canal locks on the St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. There several business telegrams awaited him, and he left the ship to take the train back to St. Paul. However, on the way to the Soo the editors were able to hear the sound money views of Hill and Henry P. Upham, president of the First National Bank of St. Paul, who came along as Hill's special guest. In addition, they were able to hear the whistles of the *North Land*, particularly when they reached the St. Mary's River and found it enveloped in fog. Once the Soo was behind them, the editors could contemplate Hill's advice as they listened to the melodies of Hoare's orchestra from Duluth and the Masonic Quartet of Minneapolis. The editors came from all over the state, but seventeen members of the group were newspapermen and women and printers from St. Paul.<sup>6</sup> No doubt one of them conceived the idea of mounting some of those powerful ship whistles in downtown St. Paul.

The 1896 election was generally seen to be the most important since that of Abraham Lincoln, and the imaginative employ-



ment of the steam and electric technology enabled the newspapers to deliver election returns more rapidly to an anxious electorate. In late October it was reported in the *Duluth Evening Herald* that the engineers had been ordered to remove the fog whistles, which were nearly as large as a man, from the *North West* and *North Land*. The paper went on to state that the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* was going to borrow the whistles to announce the election returns. The *Duluth Herald*, which supported Bryan and the Populist/Democrats, reported that they were intended as a surprise for the people of St. Paul, and would blow for all they were worth if McKinley were elected. However, the paper predicted that there would only be noises of celebration for Bryan, the whistles would preserve a discreet silence, and be smuggled back to Duluth.<sup>7</sup> The *Herald's* facts, like its predictions of the election results, weren't quite accurate.

The whistles were taken only from the *North West* and were not destined for the *Pioneer Press*. They were to be mounted on the building of the *St. Paul Dispatch*, but because they found the steam power in the building insufficient to give the whistle the desired range, that plan was changed. They were placed instead on top of the steam powered electric generating plant of the Twin City Rapid Transit Company on Hill Street, overlooking the Mississippi River. At that site the steam boilers were calculated to deliver sufficient power to enable the whistle system to be heard as far as Stillwater to the northeast and Minneapolis on the west. In accord with the views of the paper, the whistle system was actuated on election night by an electrical switch from the offices of the *Dispatch* to give "Toots for McKinley, wails for Bryan."<sup>8</sup>

Not to be outdone, the managers at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* added a new dimension to their election night coverage through a colored light system set up on the flag pole atop their building, 220 feet above the street. That newspaper also favored McKinley, and arranged a display of red, white and blue lights if he was ahead in the nation, and blue and white if he led in the Minnesota returns. If Bryan was ahead nationally, the lights would appropriately flash red, and if ahead in Minnesota

**HEAR THE WHISTLE**  
 With which the Dispatch will announce Election Returns  
 ← TONIGHT →  
**Gigantic Steam and Electric Whistle,**  
 Loaned by the Steamer "Northwest." Will be heard for Fifteen Miles. This whistle is erected on the roof of Newspaper Row, and at intervals tonight will shriek the returns.  
**MARK THE CODE OF SIGNALS:**  
 Succession of Sharp, Short Toots if Returns Favor McKinley.  
 A Long, Dismal Wail if Returns Favor Bryan.  
**McKINLEY'S ELECTION CERTAIN—**  
 Will be indicated by prolonging the Sharp, Quick Toots.  
**BRYAN'S ELECTION CERTAIN—**  
 Will be indicated by prolonging the Wail.  
 The Whistle will be heard at every point within a radius of 15 miles of the Dispatch Office. No effort at listening. The tremendous blast will cleave the air like a salvo of artillery and carry the message of the election.  
**STEREOPTICON DISPLAY.**  
 The Dispatch will Bulletin Election Returns, as usual, with a Magnificent Displaying Via Stereopticon, showing the result across Minnesota Street upon a screen on the Vermontia Life Building. The public invited to see the most complete returns in the city.

The announcement from the St. Paul Dispatch's 5:00 o'clock edition of Tuesday, November, 3, 1896.

the colors were to be red and white.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the *Pioneer Press* supporters on the September cruise aboard the *North West* got the idea from watching its powerful search light sweep the shores as the vessel cruised the Soo narrows between Lakes Superior and Huron.

The day of the election, activity around the polling stations was very crowded but surprisingly calm, according to the reports in the newspapers of both St. Paul and Minneapolis. Lines existed when the polls opened at six o'clock in the morning. But the political parties had expended so much energy orating and circulating literature to the voters before the election, that the hand-bill distributors were not to be found at their customary positions one-half block away from the election sites. By noon, 50 to 60 percent of the registered voters in both cities had cast their ballots. By three o'clock in the afternoon, more than 80 percent had voted in St. Paul, and by four o'clock it stood at over 90 percent, according to the newspaper reports.<sup>10</sup> However, the restraint of the daylight hours gave way as night fell and crowds assembled in the public places downtown.

Around seven in the evening, the lobbies at the Ryan and Merchants Hotels began to fill, as those seeking shelter from the

sharp night air waited for the hotel clerks to announce the election returns from around the country. Ladies in the lobby were reported blowing horns discreetly when returns favored McKinley. At the Grand Opera House, people clogged the aisles and filled all the boxes. The theater company presented the play, "A Boy Wanted," but the high attendance related to the news that the niece of Republican vice presidential candidate, Garret Hobart, would announce the election returns. When she was unable to perform the task, the theater manager appeared between the acts to announce the vote totals. The seating capacity was 1,800, but the *Pioneer Press*, with perhaps some exaggeration, reported that 2,500 people were in the audience. When the performance, was over people lingered in the theater to hear more election results.<sup>11</sup>

The largest crowds were found on Fourth Street between Robert and Cedar. The *Dispatch* reported that by ten o'clock eight thousand people were reading their bulletin board. The *Globe* and the *Pioneer Press*, like the *Dispatch*, were using the stereopticon to project election returns on the walls of nearby banks, so large crowds milled along Fourth Street, "newspaper row," and didn't break up until midnight.



In spite of the seriousness of the election, all newspapers, including those covering the night in Minneapolis, reported that people were good-humored and enjoyed the occasion. Newsboys and "street arabs" in both cities were partial to William Jennings Bryan. They cheered and blew whistles when returns indicated he was carrying a particular state, but were soon answered by older members of the crowd when returns favored McKinley. Several younger members with horns, no doubt McKinley supporters, went on to form a band and marched about the city. Meanwhile, the downtown cafes did a brisk business, and provided an opportunity to escape the din outside.<sup>12</sup>

The great steam whistle system of the *North West* blew a succession of joyful toots. The *Pioneer Press* reported that fortunately the election results did not permit the blowing of a succession of "wails" to announce the election of Bryan. They went on to report that the good news of McKinley's election meant that their colored light system for rapid election news was able to display, "colors of patriotic safety, the red, the white and the blue."<sup>13</sup>

Whether the people of Minneapolis could hear Jim Hill's steamship whistle isn't quite clear. The *Minneapolis Journal* reported that a crowd of fully 5,000 people assembled in the Exposition building, scene of the 1892 Republican national convention, for an evening of entertainment that continued into the morning hours.<sup>14</sup> However, the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported that the crowds downtown could hear the big throated whistle operated by the Twin City Rapid Transit Company. Since the streetcar company ran steamboats on Lake Minnetonka, they could have easily mounted one of their own whistles in downtown Minneapolis. However, the whistle system of the *North West* was operated by steam from the Twin City Rapid Transit Company's power plant in downtown St. Paul, and it would not be unusual for a Minneapolis newspaper to refrain from crediting a rival paper in St. Paul for conceiving such a communications novelty.<sup>15</sup>

In the morning calm following the election, James J. Hill had an extensive chat with a reporter from the *Dispatch*. With McKinley clearly the winner, Hill was in

a good frame of mind. The weekend before the election he had predicted that McKinley would carry Minnesota, both Dakotas, Oregon, and possibly Washington state.<sup>16</sup> That morning his predictions appeared almost right on the mark. McKinley defeated Bryan in Minnesota by 194,000 to 140,000 votes. He also carried North Dakota, and Oregon, and was thought to have won South Dakota, which he later lost by a few hundred votes. It was considered critical that McKinley carry the Midwest and he carried every state, along with the entire Northeast and four of the five border states. Hill's efforts in the Upper Midwest had paid off.

James J. Hill told a reporter from the *Dispatch* that we had faced one of the greatest perils ever to confront the country. Hill felt that the stability of the republic had been at stake, but the American people had proved equal to the crisis. To Hill the triumph of the people would restore confidence, and prosperity would return very quickly. In his view, the excitement over the silver issue had arrayed class against class and caused people to hoard \$380 million which they were afraid to invest. But now, he predicted, there would be a loosening of the money strings and an increase in wheat prices. Furthermore, Hill saw silver as a mere blind put forward to cloak socialism. Never one to mince words, he stated, "There is just one way to deal with the poxious plant of socialism in this country and that is to pluck it out by the roots."<sup>17</sup>

St. Paul didn't have another election night comparable in noise to November 3, 1896. The whistle system was put back on the forward smokestack of the *North West*, and the ship enjoyed great popularity on the lakes for another fifteen years. McKinley, the advance agent of prosperity, advanced to the White House, sound money was assured, prosperity returned, and the threat of radical economic reform was averted.

When McKinley was assassinated in 1901, the reform-minded Theodore Roosevelt took over. To Mark Hanna, Teddy was, "that damn cowboy"; to Hill, he was a meddling opportunist. The powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission were expanded and the anti-trust law more vigorously enforced. It became more

difficult to meet the competition of the Canadian and American railroads as well as operate steamships without losing money. By early 1903, Hill had sold the freighters of the Northern Steamship Company, but he couldn't find an acceptable buyer for the *North West* or the *North Land*. They were popular and good advertising, if unprofitable, so they continued to cruise the Great Lakes until fire damaged the *North West* in 1911, and the World War I shipping crisis brought some acceptable offers for both ships.

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16. "J.J. Hill's Predictions," Minneapolis Journal, 31 Oct. 1896, 1.

17. "Chat With J. J. Hill," St. Paul Dispatch, 4 Nov. 1896, 3.

This is Thomas C. Buckley's third article for Ramsey County History. He is an associate professor in social and behavioral sciences and adjunct associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota.





*Saint Paul, Minn. Public Baths, Beach and Bathers, Harriet Island*

*The public baths, beaches and bathers at Harriet Island. Views of St. Paul's parks, as well as the city's vibrant downtown, were popular with postcard publishers, Robert J. Stumm observes in his article beginning on page 18.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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