

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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## McKinley in Iowa

The 1896 presidential campaign was one of intense feeling and excitement. William Jennings Bryan, the "Boy Orator of the Platte," had swept the Democratic convention with his now-famous "Cross of Gold" speech. During the summer and fall Bryan campaigned widely for his free silver program, traveling some 18,000 miles in an unprecedented effort to win the election.

Meanwhile the Republican nominee, under the astute guidance of the Republican boss, Mark Hanna, staged a "Front Porch" campaign in Canton, Ohio, where he met selected delegations and gave carefully prepared speeches setting forth the conservative financial philosophy of his party. Iowans hoped that they would have a chance to see Major McKinley during the campaign. Several invitations were extended — one to attend the Republican state convention and another to visit the Iowa semi-centennial at Burlington.

McKinley did not accept these invitations, however, although for a time, when it was beginning



to look as though Bryan might carry the traditionally Republican states of this area, Hanna seriously considered a middle-western tour for his candidate should matters get "desperate." The danger passed with improving financial conditions and McKinley stayed in Canton.

It was not until 1898, then, that Iowans could welcome President McKinley. He was not a stranger to Iowa, however, for he had campaigned for the Republican party in the State in 1892. His 1898 trip was one of triumph and rejoicing. America had, in 113 days, defeated Spain in a hopelessly one-sided contest, and even as the President toured the country, peace commissioners of both nations were meeting in Paris. One question especially plagued McKinley as he left Washington — should he demand from Spain the surrender of the Philippine Islands? On this trip he was to find the answer.

The purpose of the journey was a visit to the Trans-Mississippi Exposition at Omaha. On October 12, the presidential special first entered Iowa over the North Western lines at Clinton, where Governor Leslie M. Shaw and Senators William B. Allison and John H. Gear boarded the train. The party was a distinguished one, including many of the cabinet members, several high-ranking military officers, and the ministers of China, Argentina, Brazil, and Korea.

At Cedar Rapids the President spoke from a



platform erected at the station. He talked briefly of the war and of the responsibilities of victory. From Cedar Rapids the train proceeded westward, stopping at Belle Plaine, Tama, Marshalltown, Ames, Boone, Carroll, and Council Bluffs.

When time permitted, McKinley spoke from a platform at the station; otherwise, he greeted the throngs who came to see him from the rear platform, in the time-honored tradition of presidential journeys. His good nature impressed those who met him. "He is so amiable and conscientious," the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* recorded, "that he sacrifices himself for the gratification of the public in ways that none of his predecessors have done. Between stations — when he ought to be resting and thinking over what he is going to say next time — he receives local committees who get aboard to pay their respects and explain the program and insist upon talking with him, which, in the dust and rumble of the train, is very wearing upon the voice. He . . . submits to all the arrangements they have made for his reception, regardless of his own comfort and convenience."

The general tenor of McKinley's talks during the trip was of the unity of the nation — a unity experienced for the first time since the Civil War. Two Confederate generals, Butler and Wheeler, now wore the uniform of the United States army. The South had responded as eagerly as the North to the call for men to fight against Spain. One of



the President's most telling speeches was made at Boone, where he reminded his listeners that there was "no north, no south, no east, no west," but one really united nation. He added: "The triumphs of war will be written in the articles of peace." This, to some, seemed a hint of the demand the United States would soon make — that Spain surrender the Philippine Islands.

After a short stay at Omaha, the presidential train returned eastward across southern Iowa on the Burlington lines. Seven stops were scheduled for the day's run to Burlington — Council Bluffs, Glenwood, Hastings, Red Oak, Creston, Ottumwa, and Burlington. But, and here was another instance of McKinley's good nature, "he was persuaded at the expense of his health and comfort" to make ten unscheduled appearances — at Malvern, Corning, Prescott, Afton, Osceola, Chariton, Albia, Melrose, Fairfield, and Mt. Pleasant.

Throngs greeted the train at each station and the applause and enthusiasm seemed to grow with every stop. "The people surged forward to grasp the hand of the president, and he smilingly accommodated as many as he could before the train started, reaching far out over the railing."

McKinley's speeches hinted ever more strongly that it was our duty as a great nation to assume our responsibilities in the world. The *Burlington Saturday Evening Post* commented, "Utterances



of the President on his journey through Iowa last week were such as to reveal the foreign policy of the administration very clearly. The Philippines are to become American colonial territory, and the American people are in hearty accord with this purpose. President McKinley will do for fifteen million yellow people what President Lincoln did for six millions of blacks, while the industrial development of the Philippines will furnish another parallel no less instructive and suggestive."

At Burlington, McKinley was spared another platform appearance, but instead was taken on a drive around the city. Two incidents illustrate the laxity with which he was guarded — a laxity which was to cost William McKinley his life three years later. A Burlington woman broke through the line of soldiers, rushed up to the President, threw her arms around his neck, "and implanted a kiss on his coat collar that sounded like a circular saw striking a knot." Again, after the drive through the Burlington streets, McKinley and his escort returned to the train to find it completely surrounded by people anxious for another glimpse of the distinguished visitor. "The President had to fight his way through with the rest of the party, which he did in a most energetic manner." Although the mayor and the city marshal were with him McKinley reached the car some time before they did. "It was a good natured crowd and apparently did not recognize the pres-



ident, for he was alone among them for several minutes, and their eyes were fastened upon the car."

The enthusiasm with which McKinley had been greeted throughout "his famous Western journey," evidently convinced him that the people would support the step he was about to take. On October 31, the United States peace commissioners at Paris presented to the Spanish delegates a demand that Spain surrender all of the Philippines.

McKinley's next visit to Iowa was just a year later, in October of 1899. Returning from a trip through Minnesota and the Dakotas, the President entered Iowa at Sioux City and traveled across the northern part of the State on the Illinois Central lines to Dubuque. The country was still filled with the excitement of a successful war. The Philippine revolt had not yet stirred up sufficient misgivings as to our new imperial policy. At Cedar Falls, McKinley said, "It is no longer a question of expansion with us — we have expanded. If there is any question at all, it is a question of contraction, and who is going to contract?" A voice in the crowd replied, "Not we!"

The President traveled with the members of his cabinet and — during the journey across Iowa — with Senators Allison and Gear and Governor Shaw. At all the stops the train was surrounded with the usual cheering throngs anxious for a



glimpse of the Nation's leader. At Dubuque, in spite of periodic showers, which dampened both the decorations and the spirits of the entertainment committee, the stop of 35 minutes was a huge success. The *Dubuque Weekly Times* reported that "more than ten thousand people saw the chief executive and more than half that number got within range of his voice." During a brief talk at the city park, McKinley praised the Iowa regiment in the Philippines which had consented to stay there as long as needed.

As in 1898, so in 1899, President McKinley was received by Iowans with enthusiasm, parades, bonfires, and a surge of patriotism. In 1900 Iowa would again cast her vote for McKinley. Within a year after that election McKinley's assassination at Buffalo would bring to the White House the dynamic and colorful Theodore Roosevelt.

MILDRED THRONE