

Henry Wallace, editor of *Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman* (and often known as "Uncle Henry" Wallace)

SHAMEFUL VENALITY

IT IS NOT altogether uncommon for election campaigns to deteriorate into little more than acute instances of mutual character defamation. Such was the case in Iowa during the presidential campaign of 1896. Numerous accusations of bribery, fraud, and libel were hurled back and forth, but not between presidential candidates William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. Rather this vicious battle involved Iowa's two most influential agricultural press leaders: James M. Pierce, who controlled the editorial policy of the *Iowa Homestead*; and Henry Wallace, editor and part-owner of *Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman*. The election of 1896 provided the opportunity for the most antagonistic installment in an ongoing war of character defamation between Pierce and Wallace — a conflict played out in the pages of the *Homestead*, *Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman*, and the newspapers of Des Moines.

Originally the two men had been associates on the same publication. Wallace was a Pennsylvania-born Presbyterian minister who had retired from the ministry in the 1870s because

The Pierce-Wallace Controversy and the Election of 1896

by Joel Kunze

of ill health. He had moved to Winterset, Iowa, and embarked on a new career in farming. Wallace had soon begun writing agricultural editorials for a local paper. In 1883, at the age of forty-seven, he had accepted the position of contributing editor for the *Iowa Homestead*, a Des Moines-based agricultural journal. Two years later, thirty-seven-year-old James M. Pierce became part-owner and business manager of the *Homestead*. Prior to this Pierce had built a career by publishing and editing small county-seat newspapers in Missouri and in Taylor and Clarke counties of Iowa. Under Pierce's management and Wallace's editorship, the *Homestead* quickly became the leading agricultural journal in the state.

In spite of the success of this association, tensions developed in the early 1890s over editorial policy. That such a conflict arose was perhaps inevitable. Wallace, the ex-minister, used the pages of the *Homestead* as a surrogate pulpit. He preached agricultural improvement and crusaded against those who hindered his vision of rural development. Pierce, on the other hand, viewed the journal as a product



James M. Pierce, editor of *Iowa Homestead*. The journal was based in Des Moines, as was *Wallaces' Farmer*.

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that had to appeal to as many readers as possible. More importantly, the poor economic climate of the early 1890s heightened Pierce's urgency for the *Homestead* to survive as a business. To ensure solvency, Pierce no doubt avoided actions that might have offended paying advertisers but that the moralistic Wallace would have interpreted as inappropriate at best.

In February 1895 disagreements reached such a peak that Wallace stepped down as editor. Pierce announced to readers that "the *Homestead* had felt obliged to rid itself of an incubus." Wallace joined with his sons, Henry C. and John, in expanding a small dairy paper published at Iowa State Agricultural College and renaming it *Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman*. In his first editorial Wallace presented his reasons for having left the *Homestead*; he proclaimed that "no grief or loss of any kind has ever befallen me that has given me so many sleepless nights as the fact that I was suspected of being privy to deals of a corrupt character in connection with the *Homestead*." These two editorials mark the beginning of the public conflict of Pierce and Wallace. Each tried to persuade readers that the other lacked integrity and honesty and was, therefore, not deserving of readers' patronage.

A major factor in the continued animosity following Wallace's departure was that Wallace owned a 30 percent share of the *Homestead's* controlling company. He attempted to sell his interest to Pierce and Pierce's associates, but they refused to buy. In Wallace's opinion, Pierce did not want to provide him with any funds that could have been used to promote and publish *Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman*. As a minority stockholder Wallace had no say in the management of the *Homestead*, and he

HENRY WALLACE, Editor.

H. C. WALLACE, ASSISTANT EDITOR.

Mr. Wallace was for ten years, up to February, 1895, the editor of the Iowa Homestead. His withdrawal from that paper was the culmination of trouble between him and the business manager as to its public editorial policy, Mr. Wallace wishing to maintain it in its old position as the leading western exponent of anti-monopoly principles. Failing in this he became the editor of WALLACES' FARMER over the editorial policy of which he has full control. He invites the co-operation of his old Homestead friends in making the FARMER AND DAIRYMAN the leading western authority on agricultural matters.

Both weekly papers pushed for reader loyalty and new subscribers. In the section devoted to subscription rates and mailing permits, Wallace routinely printed an explanation about his departure from the *Homestead*.

believed that Pierce manipulated the finances so that all profits went to pay salaries and to make improvements. With no dividends from his stock, Wallace's investment earned him nothing while it was trapped in the *Homestead* company. Wallace entered into a lengthy litigation to force an eventual buy-out.

PRIOR TO the nomination of the presidential candidates in the summer of 1896, numerous skirmishes between Pierce and Wallace had already been played out in the pages of their respective journals. Early in the year they argued about the

operation of farmers' institutes and the management of the State Agricultural College in Ames. Pierce, in the midst of this quarrel, described Wallace as a person "who is without any politics so far as principles go, but who manifests a surprising aptitude for politics of the personal, scheming, place-hunting kind."

In March the chief contention was proposed revision of state railroad regulations. Wallace questioned the *Homestead's* lack of comment on this topic, stating that "silence under these circumstances . . . might well awaken the suspicion of guilty knowledge of a scheme to rob the people." He also claimed that the only reason Pierce had permitted an anti-railroad editorial in the *Homestead* in the past was because it was the only stance that sold subscriptions in Iowa. Pierce defended his journal's silence by calling the railroad regulations a non-issue. He labeled Wallace's accusations fraudulent, totally unfounded, and an attempt "to deceive the farmers of Iowa into believing that [Wallace] is lying awake nights watching their interests."

Wallace next focused his barbs on the page layout of his competitor, calling attention to the

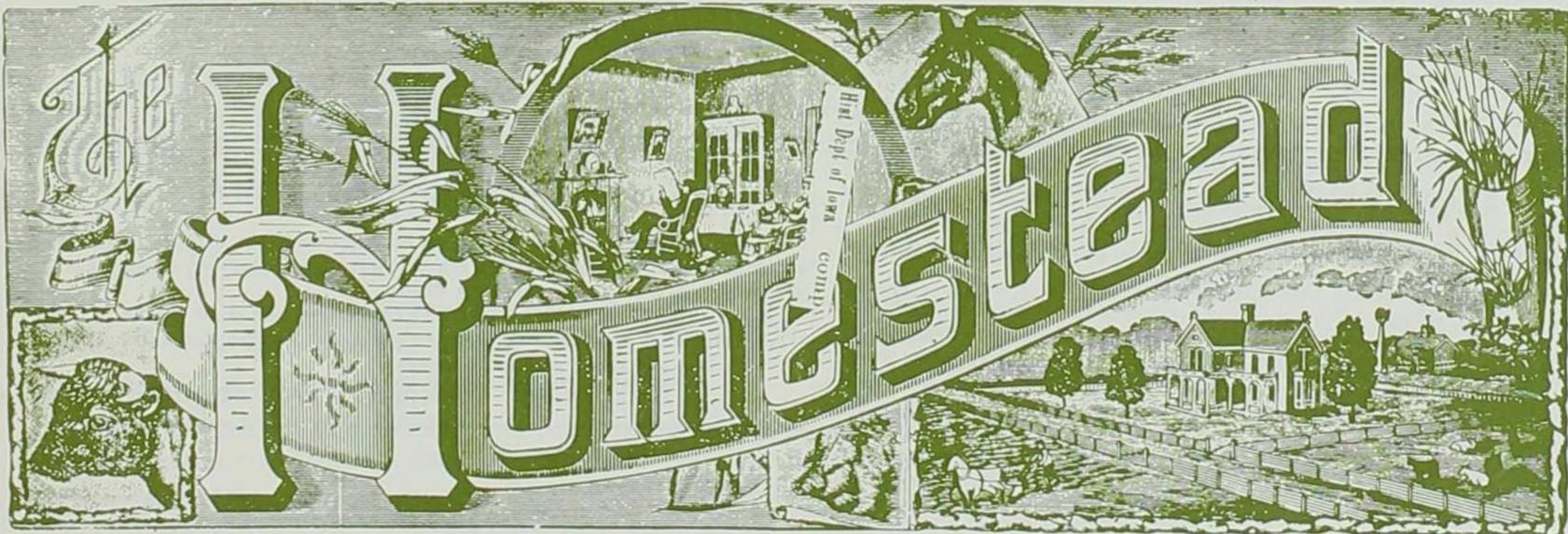
Homestead's practice of highlighting certain article titles in red ink. The following notice appeared on the front page of *Wallace's Farmer and Dairyman*: "The paper that is obliged to call attention in red lines across its front page each week to the articles it thinks worth reading leaves broad room for the inference that the rest are not worth reading."

HENRY WALLACE'S actions during the presidential campaign generated the most hostile and vindictive accusations in the feud. With the nomination of William McKinley by the Republican party and William Jennings Bryan by both the Democratic and Populist parties, the decisive campaign issue became monetary reform. The Republican party platform stated that the current monetary system, a de-facto gold standard, was to be maintained and that

The headline above the masthead of the October 2 *Homestead* directed readers to Pierce's first political cartoon attacking Wallace and his weekly silver series.

It's as good as a Show! The Acrobatic Antics of a Non-partisan Agricultural Editor on Silver. Page 5.

<p>HARD TIMES</p> <p>ONLY INCREASE THE VALUE OF THE HOME-STEAD, AND MAKE IT MORE NECESSARY IN EVERY FARM HOME.</p>	<p>MR. FRANK LOWN, of North English, Iowa, writes: "We have taken the HOMESTEAD seven or eight years and could not do without it. It is good from beginning to end."</p>	<p>\$1.00</p>
	<p>MR. FRED KIECHEL, of Johnson, Nebraska, writes: "The HOME-STEAD is one of the best farm journals published. There are none I prize more highly."</p>	



the addition of a silver standard was possible only through international agreement. The Democratic platform advocated the coinage of silver unilaterally by the United States at a ratio of sixteen ounces of silver to one ounce of gold — the “free silver” position. With such a seemingly complicated issue, Wallace viewed it his duty to present impartially the pros and cons of each position to his readers.

In the August 14 *Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman*, Wallace replaced the weekly report on the Farmers' Alliance with the first in a series of twelve installments titled “Silver and the Farmer.” Wallace explained the reason for the new series: Economic prosperity, both in the United States and overseas, depended on the outcome of the election, and it was therefore absolutely necessary to educate the voter on this complex issue. He promised to present the facts in a nonpartisan manner because, as he stated, partisan politics were “alien” to him. He also declared that he had not yet taken a position on either side of the monetary question; once he did, he would publish his opinion.

By mid-September, it was obvious which side Wallace supported. He believed that those groups advocating free silver were being manipulated by mining and banking interests. In his view, free silver was not the cure for farmers' economic ills. If the free-silver advocates won, Wallace was convinced that the nation would suffer great harm. Consequently he supported the Republican party and

William McKinley, a position that he presented in the September 25 installment.

At the end of the series, in late October, Wallace urged his readers to draw their own conclusions from the evidence and then to do their patriotic duty and vote. They were to cast their ballots with the awareness that their decision would determine the fate of not only the United States, but of foreign nations as well. He even recommended that those who did not fully understand the issues of the election should either not vote at all or vote only for local and state offices. Too much was at stake, Wallace believed, for votes to be cast in ignorance.

While Wallace was publishing this weekly series, Pierce presented nothing in the *Homestead* concerned with the election. There were no editorials about the candidates or the silver issue. The only mention appeared the week before the election: Pierce stated that once it was over, farmers could finally get back to work and concentrate on farming.

Even though Pierce never discussed the campaign issues, in October he renewed his attacks on Wallace by questioning Wallace's conduct regarding the weekly series on the silver issue. In the October 2 *Homestead* there appeared a cartoon of a man with Wallace's likeness, balancing on a fence and carrying a pole labeled “silver” on one end and “gold” on the other. The cartoon was titled “AN AGRICULTURAL EDITOR IN HIS GREAT NON-PARTISAN ACROBATIC ACT.” Below this a short

In an accompanying ad for “energetic” subscription agents, Wallace with typical zeal proclaimed, “Our SILVER ARTICLES now running should be read by every farmer in Iowa.”

Silver and the Farmer.

A Series of Articles on the Silver Question as it Affects the Farmer.

The Fall of Silver. Continued.

In our article in last week's issue we called attention to the large amount of human nature there is in the discussion of the silver question and the fact that when the placer mines of California, Australia, and Russia began to pour out their treasures, nation after nation began to hedge against gold, some of them to demonetize it, and were disposed to regard silver, at that time the dearer metal, as the most desirable measure of value. We called attention, also,

denness of the change from gold to silver and the reason of it, we print in parallel columns the speeches of Senators Stewart and Jones, both of Nevada, in 1874 and 1876, together with the silver output of the Nevada mines and the market price of silver at those dates, which we think will fully confirm our statement in last week's issue that the farmer of the United States has little ground for sympathy with the mining kings of the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific coast:

Extract from the V. Senator Jones in the

AGENTS WANTED.

We want an energetic agent to canvass for subscriptions in every township in the state and at every county fair.

Our SILVER ARTICLES now running should be read by every farmer in Iowa.

Write at once for terms.

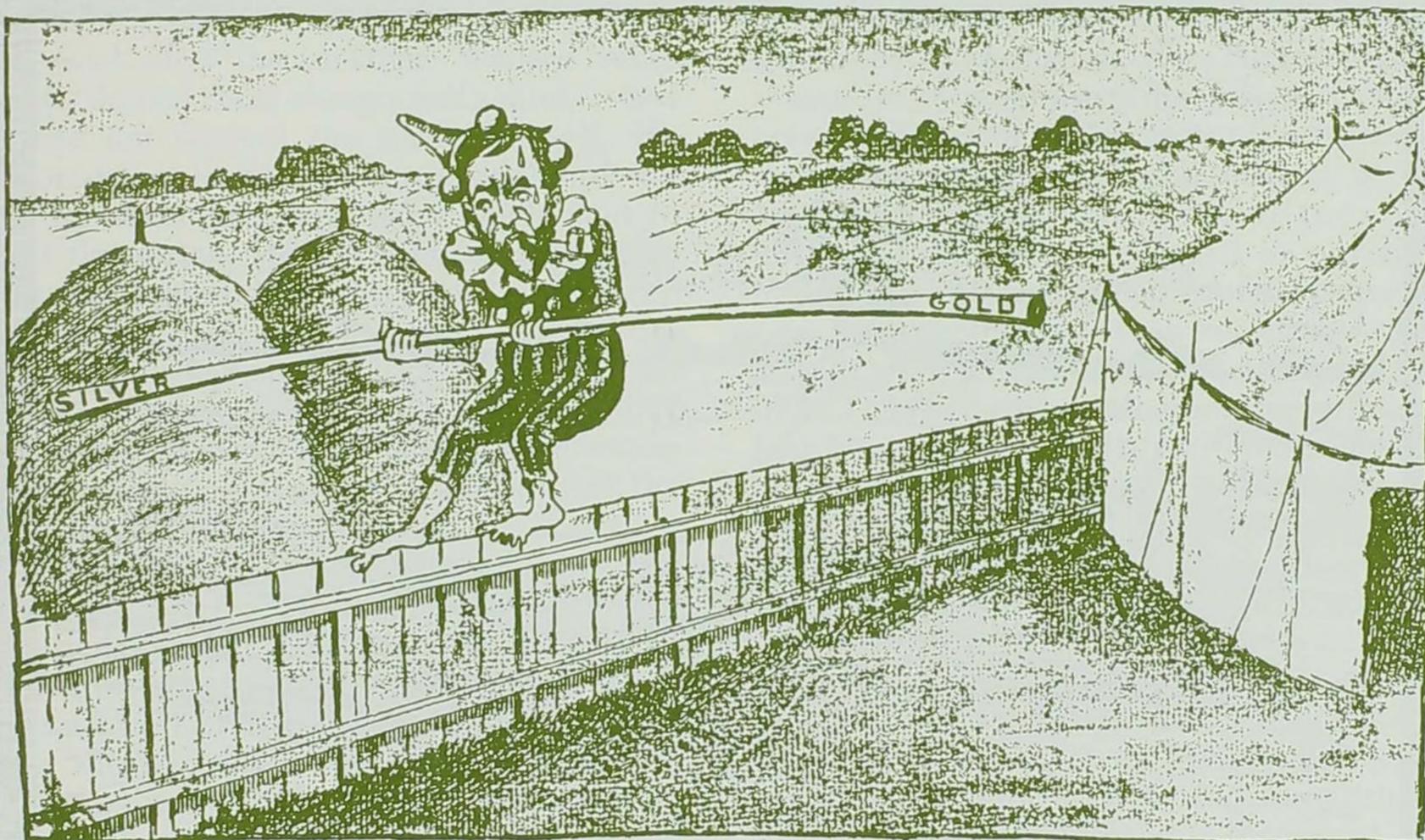
WALLACES' FARMER, Des Moines, Iowa.

of Germany, France, Belgium, and Great Britain, demanding the use of silver not as subsidiary coinage but as primary money on an agreed international ratio. This seems to us to be the natural, logical, and absolutely invincible position of the farmer who

“Don't farmers buy silver watches as they used to?”

“A farmer past middle age may, but the young fellow wants either a gold or a gold filled watch.”

“Please state what other changes have taken place in the relative use of silver and gold in the jewelry business



AN AGRICULTURAL EDITOR IN HIS GREAT NON-PARTISAN ACROBATIC ACT.

Great Cæsar! how this fence does shake;
I may fall off before I'm ready,
With clinging fast my toes do ache,
My knees with trepidation quake,
This beastly fence is so unsteady.

I know the side on which I'll drop;
Ere I set out I knew it.
But I'll keep up the "impartial" yawp
Till the very last, when down I flop,
If this shaky fence will let me do it.

I may fall in the mud—or worse—
And soil myself quite badly.
To a little filth I'm not averse.
When "lofty tumbling" will fill my purse
I undertake it gladly.

And if the "family name" is tarnished,
And loses something of its luster,
I'll have it freshly gilt and varnished—
The wherewithal thereto being furnished—
And make it so it may pass muster.

But the farmers whom I've farmed for years
See through "non-partisan" pretenses.
They'll spew me out—they'll close their ears
When next I play on their hopes and fears—
Oh! why are made such shaky fences?

And when they next my "rousements" scan
They'll put their thumbs upon their noses,
And they'll the air with fingers fan,
And say, "We all know how 'non-partisan (?)'
Is this self-appointed Moses."

When with sham fervor I essay
To move their hearts or jil their senses,
"What are you giving us?" they'll say,
"And what are you getting for it, pray?"—
Oh! this is shakiest of fences!

I wish I hadn't been so "slick."
Nor tried "non-partisan" pretense,
Been honest, nor sought to trick
The few that trust me—I am sick;
Would I were down from this shaky fence!

I should feel shame, but I do not.
My head is in a perfect jumble.
I guess it's fear of being caught
In my "non-partisan, impartial 'rot,'"
Look out! I'm going to tumble.

poem appeared, purporting to state the fence-walker's thoughts:

" . . . I know the side on which I'll drop;
Ere I set out I knew it.
But I'll keep up the 'impartial' yawp
Till the very last, when down I flop,
If this shaky fence will let me do it.

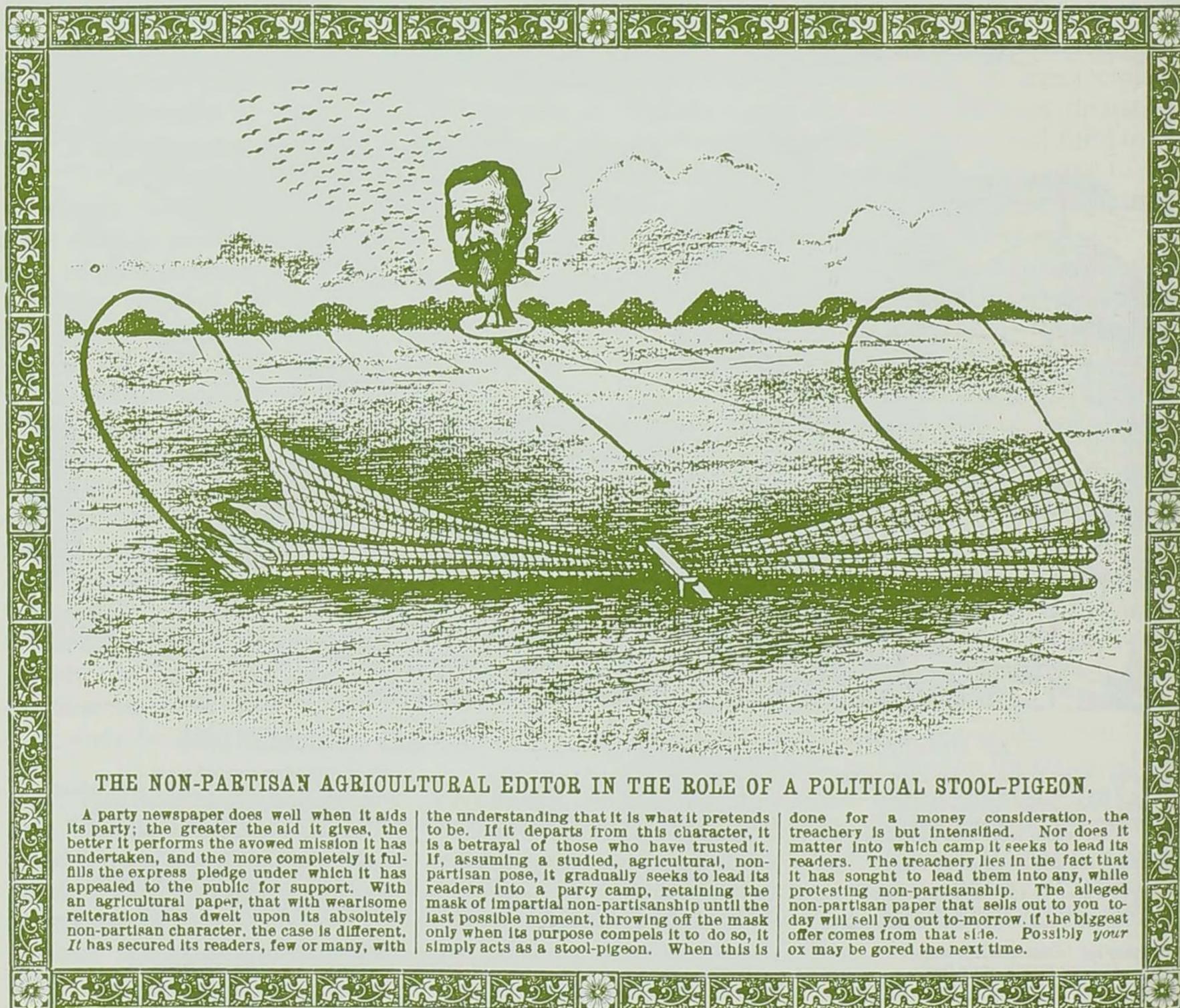
I may fall in the mud — or worse —
And soil myself quite badly.
To a little filth I'm not averse.
When 'lofty tumbling' will fill my purse
I undertake it gladly. . . ."

Pierce, without mentioning him by name, accused Wallace of not having been impartial or nonpartisan in the silver series and of having

The poem with Pierce's October 2 cartoon calls the bearded clown on the fence a "self-appointed Moses."

known from the very start which side he supported. Pierce charged that Wallace had maintained a pretense of impartiality to deceive readers. The cartoon appeared the week after Wallace's September 25 installment, in which he had clearly stated his support for the Republicans. Pierce believed that Wallace had already opposed the free-silver stance before the series had begun and that he intended to lead readers to the same conclusion under a guise of nonpartisanship, for which he had been paid.

Wallace responded with a vitriolic editorial titled "The Satanic Instinct." Like Pierce, he



THE NON-PARTISAN AGRICULTURAL EDITOR IN THE ROLE OF A POLITICAL STOOL-PIGEON.

A party newspaper does well when it aids its party; the greater the aid it gives, the better it performs the avowed mission it has undertaken, and the more completely it fulfills the express pledge under which it has appealed to the public for support. With an agricultural paper, that with wearisome reiteration has dwelt upon its absolutely non-partisan character, the case is different. It has secured its readers, few or many, with

the understanding that it is what it pretends to be. If it departs from this character, it is a betrayal of those who have trusted it. If, assuming a studied, agricultural, non-partisan pose, it gradually seeks to lead its readers into a party camp, retaining the mask of impartial non-partisanship until the last possible moment, throwing off the mask only when its purpose compels it to do so, it simply acts as a stool-pigeon. When this is

done for a money consideration, the treachery is but intensified. Nor does it matter into which camp it seeks to lead its readers. The treachery lies in the fact that it has sought to lead them into any, while protesting non-partisanship. The alleged non-partisan paper that sells out to you today will sell you out to-morrow. If the biggest offer comes from that side. Possibly your ox may be gored the next time.

mentioned no names. He lashed out at those persons who, when they could not fault another's statements, attacked one's integrity and personal character. He called these persons cowards and declared that he felt no threat from these people with "the Satanic spirit" because good people "instinctively fear the man, whatever may be his station in life, on the farm, in the city, in politics, or in journalism, who manifests the Satanic type of character."

Pierce continued his accusations on October 23 by publishing another cartoon and a short article, "THE NON-PARTISAN AGRICULTURAL EDITOR IN THE ROLE OF A POLITICAL STOOL-PIGEON." Pierce charged that "the agricultural editorial stool pigeon perches himself on his alleged non-partisan tripod and goes

Another Wallace caricature on October 23. The "party net" is set to spring as Wallace, with pipe and tapered beard, acts as stool pigeon to an approaching flock.

through a lot of alleged impartial, non-partisan flutterings, positively in the interest of precious truth, and not in the interests of any political party, as he loudly and with much protestation proclaims, while all the time his gyrations and flutterings have been planned from the very beginning to lead his readers into the party net. . . . The real stool pigeon betrays its fellow innocently, without intending or even being conscious of its treason; the editorial stool pigeon consents to be a stool pigeon for a cash payment." Now, ten days before voters would go to the polls, Pierce

again accused Wallace of deceiving farmers and of accepting payment for it.

A week after the election, Wallace vehemently denied these charges and a third — that he had not written the series himself. He declared that he had written every word and that he never had accepted a single cent to print the series. He did acknowledge, however, that a number of extra copies of *Wallace's Farmer and Dairyman* had been sent to non-subscribers, that some of these had been paid for by a number of different groups, including the Republican party, but that no advance notice of the content or conclusions of the series had ever been given out.

Wallace then switched to the offensive. He attacked the *Homestead's* editorial silence during the campaign. "In a great crisis like that through which we have passed, when party lines are broken up, when the people thought their future financial welfare depended on knowing the truth," he wrote, "the paper that is not willing to tell it on the earnest request of its readers, and tell it honestly, lacks something of being a genuine paper worthy of the confidence and respect of its readers."

EVEN THOUGH the election was over, Pierce's attacks were not. On Saturday, November 21, Pierce published a special eight-page edition of the *Homestead*. He declared that a special edition was necessary because he did not want "to either cumber or soil the columns of the regular [Friday] edition." He devoted its entire contents to exposing Wallace as a hypocrite who had changed his political views in return for a cash payment. In large letters the headline read: "Shameful Political Venality! Henry Wallace Charged with Selling His Opinions and Changing Them to Make Them Salable. The Hireling and Mercenary Element in Politics Exposed and an Agricultural Stool Pigeon Unmasked. Non-Partisan Pretense Hereafter at a Discount, Only Causing the Inquiry, 'How Much Does He Get For It?'" Pierce related that the Republican party had offered to pay agricultural journals in Iowa to run favorable

articles. He knew this first hand, he claimed, because the *Homestead* itself had been approached with such an offer. There had been a number of meetings from July to October between Pierce or the *Homestead's* advertising manager and an unnamed official of the National Republican Committee. The unnamed official had offered to purchase upwards of 15,000 extra copies of the paper at a rate of \$30 per thousand each week if anti-silver articles were published. Pierce explained that he had allowed the negotiations to continue so long because he wanted to learn the full details of the plan and report them to the farmers of Iowa. October 2, the date he had ended negotiations, was also the date when the *Homestead* had published the first cartoon attacking Wallace.

Most of the special issue set out to demonstrate Wallace's apparent change of opinion on the silver issue. Selections from Wallace's earlier writings on financial matters were printed next to Wallace's statements in the recent "Silver and the Farmer" series. Again Pierce accused Wallace of changing from an early pro-silver stance to a later pro-Republican position, and that he shifted in return for cash. Finally, Pierce explained that exposing Wallace was not done for political reasons but out of every patriotic citizen's desire for clean campaigns. He considered it his duty to expose "the guerilla element in politics." If not brought to the public's attention, these "venal mercenaries . . . will return to plague the country in each succeeding campaign; their methods will grow more and more unblushing and their hypocrisies more and more shameless, if that be possible."

In two editorials, "The *Homestead* Boomerang" on November 27, and "The Biter Bitten" on December 4, Wallace defended himself. "Each and every allegation is a brazen and baseless falsehood," he asserted. Wallace admitted that his position had in fact changed, but long before the campaign had begun. He noted that his pro-silver writings used in Pierce's special edition of the *Homestead* had been taken from 1890 and earlier. Wallace also reprinted newspaper interviews with Albert Cummins (noted Des Moines attorney and National Republican Committee member in

charge of newspaper advertising) and with state Republican party officials, who denied any agreement to pay Wallace for changing his views. Cummins reported that Pierce, however, had repeatedly offered Republican officials the editorial services of the *Homestead* for a fee, but that the offers had not been accepted. Wallace attributed Pierce's allegations to a "superfluity of naughtiness" and to a conspiracy by Pierce and the current *Homestead* management to ruin his reputation and rob him of his investment.

PIERCE'S accusations came to naught. On the same day that his special issue was published, Des Moines newspaper editors (who had read Pierce's charges in the previous day's *Daily News*) viewed the special-edition allegations as little more than another episode in the continual Pierce-Wallace feud. One editor complained that the animosities had gone on far too long, having been "spread out *ad nauseum* in the courts and in the columns of the newspapers." Another editorial expressed the same sentiment: "This fight among agricultural papers in Iowa has already gone beyond all endurance. Why should the farmers of the state be made parties to an endless controversy over stock in this or that paper in Des Moines?"

Pierce had accused Wallace of a common campaign practice: allowing political parties to buy additional copies of newspapers for distribution to voters. According to Republican officials, however, Pierce himself had tried to arrange this for his own publication. Moreover, his accusation that Wallace had been bribed to change his stance on the silver issue proved groundless. Wallace (and his attorney, Albert Cummins) sued Pierce for libel on this count, originally demanding damages reportedly as high as \$500,000. In July 1899, the litigation was settled in Wallace's favor, but he was awarded a much reduced sum of \$1,500.

On Pierce's other allegation, that Wallace deceived the Iowa voter under a guise of non-partisanship, the verdict is less clear. To his

credit, even though Wallace had apparently not notified Republican party officials of his stance on the silver issue (as Pierce had implied) anyone familiar with Wallace might have assumed that he would have backed the Republicans. Wallace had supported Republican candidates long before becoming an agricultural editor in 1883. The Republican party was the party through which Iowa farmers had most often implemented their reform agenda in the 1880s. Wallace, as editor of the *Homestead* from 1883 until early 1895, had been a strong supporter of the Farmers' Alliance in Iowa and had actively pushed for its proposed reforms. At the same time he had distrusted farmers forming a third party. As the *Homestead's* editor he had urged farmers to work within the two-party system, especially with the Republican party, and not to organize a new party such as the Populists. On the other hand, Wallace admitted to an anti-silver stance long before August 1896; his nonpartisan introduction to his silver series could have been interpreted as deception.

DID WALLACE purposely deceive his readers? The evidence leads me to say "no." He had stated that he would publish his personal opinion along with discussion of both sides of the issue. Farmers were still free to reach their own conclusions. Furthermore, he did not view the campaign issues as solely political. The seriousness of the silver issue, in his mind, transcended the boundaries of political parties. Rather, for Wallace the former minister, the question was more appropriately a moral one. The Republican party, a party he had supported since the Civil War, represented for Wallace a future of agricultural and, more importantly, national improvement. He wholeheartedly supported McKinley because the Republicans represented progress, while Bryan represented stagnation and possible ruin. The election was therefore not Republican versus Democrat; it was Good versus Evil. With the issue posed in this manner,

there would be no way for Wallace to have viewed his support of McKinley as partisan because it was the only position morally acceptable to him.

This episode also represents the differing approaches of Wallace and Pierce to their agricultural papers. Wallace as editor used his journal to promote his vision for agriculture. In this way he appealed to a more select readership and was not afraid to take stands that might not please everyone. A farmer who disagreed with the editorial bent could simply stop subscribing. Pierce, on the other hand, viewed his journal as a product that should reach as wide an audience as possible. To avoid offending readers and advertisers, he did not publish strong opinions or controversial issues — unless he thought it could damage his major competitor. Pierce was more likely to weigh the consequences of controversy in terms of readership appeal and advertising, whereas Wallace simply published what he thought was the correct stand, believing that his readers would agree with him.

The presidential campaign of 1896 was a novel and contentious process dependent upon educating the voting public about a complex issue. This was no less true in the state of Iowa, but in this particular episode the actual campaign message became less significant than its

presentation. Henry Wallace felt a critical need, a moral duty, to inform the Iowa farmer of exactly what was at stake in the coming election. In doing so, he provided an opportunity for his chief competitor, James M. Pierce, to attack his integrity and personal character. Pierce, however, greatly exaggerated and misrepresented the circumstances in order to carry on his personal feud with Wallace. For Pierce the campaign of 1896 was perhaps not so much a great political struggle as it was the most acrimonious episode in a series of animosities and quarrels conducted publicly on the pages of the agricultural press of Iowa. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources used are Des Moines newspapers; *Daily News*, *Iowa State Register*, and *Leader*; the *Homestead*; and *Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman* (originally *Farm and Dairy*). Wallace's account can be found in Henry Wallace, *Uncle Henry's Own Story of His Life: Personal Reminiscences*, vol. 3 (1919). Other sources on Pierce and Wallace are Russell Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa* (1947); Donald R. Murphy, "The Centennial of a Farm Paper," *Palimpsest* 37 (Sept. 1956):464-74; and Gerald L. Seaman, "A History of Some Early Iowa Farm Journals (Before 1900)," master's thesis, Iowa State College, Ames, 1942. For background on the election of 1896, see Paul W. Glad, *McKinley, Bryan, and the People* (1964); and Stanley L. Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896* (1964).