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# Seymour Stedman: Socialist Candidate for Vice-President

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One night in 1885, a tired messenger boy, after a hard day's work tramping the streets of Chicago, went into the lobby of the old Grand Pacific Hotel. The clerk at the desk gave him a message to deliver to someone on an upper floor. He dragged his weary little body to the elevator, only to be pushed out by the elevator operator. Messengers in uniform had to walk.

Just then a well-fed and expensively clothed man stepped into the car, and it shot upwards, while the boy had to drag his leaden feet up to the interminable flights of stairs.

"And at that moment," said little 14-year-old Seymour Stedman, "if I had a bomb, I would have blown up the hotel, so mad was I, and so horribly tired."

Little Stedman was already a rebel, however, before his poverty-stricken family came to Chicago, about 1881. He was born in Hartford, Conn., on July 14 (significant date!), 1871; his ancestors were of revolutionary stock, and among his relatives were Edmund Clarence Stedman and William Cullen Bryant. His father was well enough off at first, but reverses drove the family West, and they settled in Solomon City, Kan.

A series of droughts wiped out the family fortunes, and young Seymour went to work tending sheep at the vast wage of \$5 a month.

When the boy was 10 years old the family came to the metropolis of the West, and he went to work, first for the Crane Brothers' Manufacturing Company at \$3 a week, and later as a messenger boy. His first strike experience was in 1883. General Grant was critically ill, and it was expected that he would die at any moment. The leaders of the strike movement arranged

for cessation of work at the message, "General Grant's dead." The message was sent, and that strike was called — but the General didn't die until 2 years later.

## They Went on Strike.

"We went on strike," said Stedman, "because the work was too hard. We went out for shorter hours. I was a uniformed boy and I had to work until 7:00 four nights a week, and to 9:00, 10:00, and 11:00 the other three nights. I knew what I was striking for."

Stedman was a messenger boy on the streets at the time of the Haymarket riots, and he just missed being present at the time the bomb was exploded and the firing was going on. He was on a streetcar at the time, and he got to the Haymarket Square, at Desplaines and Randolph Streets, just too late to see the event.

The Stedman family, poverty stricken though they were, long nourished the tradition of being great readers. Seymour himself was reading everything he could lay his hands on. He got a job peddling abstracts, and he thought that he could write them better than peddle them — and, likewise, better than the men who did write them. He was right, but he couldn't prove it.

Then he got a job with the firm of Baker & Greeley, where he had to dust desks, clean out spittoons, sweep floors — and read. The two members of the firm were writing lives of Lincoln and taking trips abroad, and there was little left for the curly-headed boy to do except to read.

At night he read works on economics, and he argued long hours, as thoughtful boys will, with philosophical anarchist, settling the affairs of the universe

every night. He was a free trader — the family was of that persuasion almost by tradition — and he soon became a single taxer. The works he read, headed by the free-trade, anti-Socialist works of Bastiat, gave him a grounding in economics.

### **Wanted to Become a Lawyer.**

At the age of 17 it entered Stedman's head that he wanted to be a lawyer. He went to the dean of the Northwestern University School of Law, told him that he had achieved the third grade of school and no more, and asked to be admitted into the law school. After an hour's quizzing on the boy's general reading and intelligence, the dean said, "I will pass you."

During the day Stedman held to his "cinch" job, reading law — Ingersoll, Herbert Spencer, and the rest of them — to while away his spare time, and attending lectures at night. He made a fine scholastic record, and whenever there were any students exempted from examination Stedman was one of them.

At the age of 18 the youth decided that he wanted to speak for the Democratic Party. "I knew the tariff thoroughly," he said, "from the nursing bottle to the brimstone tax of \$10 a ton."

He felt that a boy of his age could not get an assignment, so he sent his application via a friend to one Frank X. Branstetter, chairman of the Cook County Democratic committee on speakers. He got an assignment, and his eloquence, his mastery of the subject of free trade, and his enthusiasm secured him finally the best and the largest meetings in Chicago. Before he was 20 he was already known as a good speaker. In June 1891, he was secretary of the Executive Committee of the Democratic Campaign Committee.

Before he was 20, likewise, he was admitted to the bar, and tried his first case before Judge Altgelt.

Then came the great ARU strike.

### **He Left the Democrats.**

With the coming of the Federal troops under General Nelson A. Miles, sent by Grover Cleveland over the protest of Governor Altgelt, Stedman left the Democratic Party, never to return. In quitting the party he deliberately turned his back on a career of political

advancement that might easily have carried him to the United States Senate or to the Cabinet.

Stedman wanted to help in the strike. He went around to strike headquarters, but some of the men wouldn't trust a Democratic lawyer. Then he got a friend named Kelliher to vouch for him, and he was given the password, which was, significantly enough, "Read, think, and study."

He got to be one of the leading speakers for the ARU strike. He joined the union as a former telegraph operator, and he came into contact with the leader of the strike, Eugene V. Debs.

When Debs was sent to Woodstock jail for violating an injunction that would have deprived the workers of every one of their legal and constitutional rights, Stedman went to see him many times. He came back to Chicago with Debs on the triumphal journey when his term was over, and marched in the great procession of 150,000 workers who greeted their beloved leader on his return to Chicago.

It was at the great meeting in the armory on the lake front that Henry Demarest Lloyd began his great speech with these words: "From the very earliest times the bird of freedom has been a jailbird!"

From that time Stedman's work and Debs' was closely intertwined, even to the year 1920, when the two old comrades are associated on the national Presidential ticket.

In 1896 Stedman, together with most of the Socialists of the Middle West, were in the People's Party. He went to the St. Louis convention of that party, representing the 5th Congressional District. Stedman started a "boom" for Debs as candidate for President. At one time he had 412 written pledges out of the 1300 delegates, with Debs' stock rising fast. The Bryan forces offered Debs second place if they would take Bryan as candidate for President. But Stedman, Victor L. Berger, and others would not compromise. The Debs boom was killed by the simple trick of shutting off the gas lights, and the next morning Lloyd read a message from Debs declining a nomination that could easily have been his had he desired it.

In 1896, then, Stedman supported "Bryan, free silver, and wind," as he puts it. But in 1897 there were new developments.

### **Social Democracy of America.**

In that year the remnants of the ARU came together for a convention. It was nearly dead. Debs had become a Socialist, and at the ARU convention, which was in reality a membership meeting (June 18, 1897), the organization was changed into the Social Democracy of America and merged with a communistic organization, the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth. This latter had been organized by “Old Hoss” Wayland, and had at its object the colonization of a Western state by Socialists.

It was Victor L. Berger who sought to convert the Social Democracy into a political party of Socialism. A committee, including Debs, Stedman, Berger, and other old-time Socialists, met that night at McCoy’s Hotel, Chicago, perfecting the organization.

But in the meantime the colonizers were trying to destroy the political character of the organization and to continue as a communist organization, committed to colonizing Colorado and making it a Socialist state. They actually sold shares of stock in the colony. A number of anarchists and Utopian Communists utterly unfriendly to Socialism likewise joined for the purpose of “capturing” the organization.

The “showdown” came at the 1898 convention, held June 7th, at Uhlich’s Hall, North Clark Street, Chicago — the same hall in which the ARU had been launched and from which the great strike had been called. There were 70 delegates, and Debs presided. The colonizers had enlisted as delegates many out-and-out anarchists, including Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman, who had come there to swamp the convention and capture the organization. There were contested seats, charges of paper branches, and revoked charters. Among the active delegates were G.A. Hoehn,

George Koop of Illinois, William Butscher, Victor L. Berger, Morris Winchevsky, and others. The leading spirits of the convention were Debs and Stedman.

### **The Gold Brick Faction.**

The debate on the colonization scheme lasted until 2:30 am, Stedman closing the debate for the anti-“gold brick” faction in a memorable address. Then the convention voted 53 to 37 in favor of the “gold brick” — which was the name given to the colonizers. The 37 then withdrew, held a caucus, and at the Hull House next day launched the Social Democratic Party of America, with Eugene V. Debs as chairman of the Executive Committee, Theodore Debs as National Secretary, and an Executive Committee of Debs, Stedman, Victor L. Berger, Frederic Heath, and Jesse Cox. With the exception of Cox, who is dead, every one of these comrades is today active in the Socialist Party.

Since that day Seymour Stedman has continued his work as a loyal and devoted member of the Socialist Party. He has been a delegate to practically every party convention and in 1908 he received 46 convention votes for Vice President to 106 for Ben Hanford. He has run for nearly every office “except United States Senator,” he says, “and I suppose that I haven’t run for that because they are afraid I will be elected.”

In 1912 Stedman was elected to the legislature and served for one term. He was a member of the Judiciary Committee, and he made it a rule that no bill should die in committee. As a result every one of his bills was taken out of committee and debated affirmatively on its merits. He received not only 4 Socialist votes, but a number of non-Socialist votes for speaker, a number of old party members thinking that he could be elected to break a deadlock.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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