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# Free Silver and Jews: The Change in Dan De Quille

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The free silver movement was one of the most prolonged and vehement issues of American politics in the late nineteenth century. If they know about it at all, Americans today are likely to associate it with the famous 1896 “cross of gold” speech of William Jennings Bryan. That bit of oratory, however, came toward the end of more than two decades of increasingly rancorous debate. Before the bid for free silver received a decisive setback by the election in 1896 of William McKinley, the country had been polarized into passionately opposing camps. Over the years, both sides had gotten into the habit of imputing sinister motives to each other. One of the by-products of this duel of propaganda was the emergence of anti-Semitism as the specter of devious and behind-the-scenes Jewish moneyed interests was invoked. The tale is a familiar one; nevertheless the unfamiliar account of Dan De Quille casts some light on how far the poison spread and how even a distinguished man of good will and a friend of Jews was brought to the breaking point.

Dan De Quille (the pen name of William Wright) was one of the best known and most respected journalists of the Old West. A quondam friend and colleague of Mark Twain, De Quille lived from 1862 to 1897 in Virginia City, Nevada, the center of the Comstock lode, one of the richest silver deposits that has ever been mined. He earned his livelihood partly by straight reporting and partly by free-lancing. He was the most popular and influential journalist of the Comstock and Great Basin areas, and was widely read elsewhere in the country: for many years he supplied feature articles and fiction to newspapers and magazines from coast to coast. At a time, therefore, when anti-Semitism was on the rise, it is instructive to see how and why De Quille eventually succumbed to it only several years after publishing one of the strongest and most eloquent statements of friendship toward Jews in Western journalism.

Although De Quille worked for the *Virginia City Enterprise* from 1862 to 1893, the circulation of that paper declined with the fortunes of the region it served, and in the mid-1880's, he began to "moonlight" as a regular correspondent for the larger and more important *Salt Lake City Daily Tribune*. His weekly articles in the *Tribune* covered a large variety of topics: mining, weather, local color, historical anecdotes about the West, and free silver. Free silver was a cause De Quille championed with fiery fervor. His advocacy of it was natural, for the town, the state, and the region in which he spent most of his life were highly dependent on silver mining, and he believed that the gold standard which the federal government supported was ruining the nation and destroying the American way of life.

De Quille is usually thought of as a mild-mannered and gentle individual, and so he usually was; the exception was his hatred of the gold standard. Although he appears not actually to have joined the Populist movement he was sympathetic to some of its goals and used its inflammatory and anti-Semitic rhetoric in the many articles he devoted to the gold standard at the end of the 1880's and the beginning of the 1890's. Like the Populists, he imagined a conspiracy of England (which was the world's financial center and also adhered to the gold standard), Germany, and Wall Street. Like the Populists, he wrote darkly of international plutocracy. He denounced bankers and moneylenders as "Shylocks" and "Pharisees," made reiterated use of the pound-of-flesh allusion, and blasted what he saw as an intentional and orchestrated plan to import cheap labor, put native Americans out of work, and subjugate them by poverty.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting, therefore, that while he was using this highly charged rhetoric to storm against the gold standard, De Quille wrote an unusually long, strong, and historically detailed account of Jewish history which portrayed Jews in a highly sympathetic light. This piece, "America the True Canaan," was published in the *Salt Lake City Daily Tribune* of July 7, 1889, and went out of its way to assure Jews that they were welcome in America. It is important as an unusual document even at face value, but considering that it was written at a time when anti-Semitic overtones were becoming more evident in Populism in general, the free silver movement in particular, and also in the Republican backlash at the free silverites, it may have greater though less obvious significance as a political statement.

It seems highly unlikely that De Quille was motivated to write this article by anything other than principle. He had known Jews in Virginia City, as there had been a community of them, mostly merchants, during the town's heyday. But there is no evidence that he was unusually friendly with any of them.

He and Mark Twain had, in fact, once been dunned by a Jewish furniture dealer by the name of Moses Goldman. The two writers shared an apartment together in 1863 when they both worked for the *Enterprise*. Twain had decided to use delaying tactics to put off paying the bill for furniture they had bought, but they were forced to settle up when Goldman sued them. De Quille summed up the conclusion of the episode in a memoir of Twain he wrote in 1893: "Mark said we might have known better than to try such a trick with 'a man whose front name was Moses and whose rear name was Goldman.'" <sup>2</sup>

Over the years De Quille rarely mentioned Jews in his journalistic feature columns. He sometimes brought up Jewish beliefs and ideas in his occasional references to religion, and he sometimes used Jews as stereotypical characters in jokes. He did not single out Jews for humor, however; like many other writers he composed or related ethnic anecdotes about blacks, Irish, Germans, English, etc. But when he did this he drew the line at being malicious.

No biography of De Quille exists and very little detailed information was known about his personal life in his latter years until quite recently.<sup>3</sup> It is nevertheless possible to make some reasonable inferences about the significance of "America the True Canaan" on the basis of his extensive writings and his lifelong interest in the ethnic diversity that abounded in Virginia City. Seldom if ever had De Quille previously manifested calculated bigotry. When it was commonplace to despise Indians, Irish, Mexicans, and Chinese, De Quille made it a point to befriend them and learn about their ways. He wrote about them familiarly and with sympathy. "America the True Canaan," therefore, may be best read as De Quille's tactful but firm way of distancing himself from the anti-Semitic overtones of the free silver controversy.

The article itself appears to reveal an unusual amount of knowledge about Jewish history. It is certain that De Quille did not have all that information at his fingertips; most of it came from his extensive reading and available reference sources.<sup>4</sup> The genesis of his article is identi-

fied internally as a recent story in the *New York Herald*. Whatever the sources were for his information about Jewish history, it is unlikely that De Quille began from nothing. His interest in the subject and his point of view must have preceded the article and were distinctly his own.

Some of the statements the article makes would not be widely accepted today, as, for example, the one that Martin Luther was for the Jews "the best Messiah they have yet seen." De Quille was apparently unaware of Luther's hostility to Jews, as would have been most non-theologians of his day. Most of what he knew probably came from general sources which imparted to him his basic orientation in favor of the Reformation. Similarly, what appears to be his basic assumption, that America is the true Canaan for Jews, need not be taken with absolute literalness.

It is probably impossible now to know for certain what was behind De Quille's apparent conclusion that America was the Jews' promised land. There was no reason except for intellectual curiosity for him to be aware of the growth of Zionism at the end of the century; it is highly doubtful that he would have had any first-hand experience in Virginia City with any of its advocates or opponents. If I am correct, however, in interpreting his article as a dissociation of himself from anti-Semitism, then a motive for this position emerges.

The very fact that De Quille seized upon the *New York Herald* article for a commentary says much more about his own concerns than it does about those of the Western readers who read his columns. Free silver, mining news, local history, folklore, and fiction were topics, after all, that would have been of consequence to them, but not Zionism, as such. The implications, however, that Jews were somehow behind the silver controversy and were benefiting from it would have been of interest to them, as would the charge that American Jews were not fundamentally loyal to America. The accusation that Jews would sacrifice American interests to further their single-minded desire to return to a homeland of their own existed then, and is still with us. De Quille must have decided that it was desirable and necessary to separate support for free silver from bigotry and to give his readers the means to make the distinction.

What De Quille did, therefore, was to oppose the imputation of Jewish disloyalty by a four-phased rhetorical strategy. First, he began

and ended with a speculation, which he decided to treat seriously, that the Jewish community was about to endow America with a university in commemoration of the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. He thus began and ended on a topic which proclaimed the loyalty and devotion of the Jewish community to America.

Second, he reviewed Jewish history, emphasizing the consistent presence of certain outstanding virtues: the fundamental dedication of the Jews to “the one living God” and to the Ten Commandments, their valor in battle and martyrdom, and their association with education and progress. Conversely, he characterized the persecutions of Jews as ignorant but murderous bigotry. Third, he called up the cultural preferences of his readers when he linked toleration of Jews with the Reformation and with progress. Finally, he returned to his original point, now richly supported with historical detail and favorable associations, and buttressed it with one more positive argument: that Jews have always had a patriotic love for their birthplaces. Because America was singularly hospitable to them and their spiritual and educational values, he inferred that this was really the country of their dreams, where they could maintain their traditions and flourish. The intention of Jews to endow America with a university, therefore, he ultimately treated as irrefutable evidence of their gratitude, patriotism, and value to America.

De Quille was a good essayist, but “American the True Canaan” shows him at his best. Only a few of his extended discourses on the gold standard compare to it in length. It is highly atypical of his usual columns in rhetorical skill and complexity as well as subject matter. Whether or not Jews at that time actually endowed a university (as was done later with Brandeis and Yeshiva universities) or considered America the true promised land were probably not the real issues he was confronting but were only means to an end. From both external and internal evidence it appears that the end De Quille had in mind and wanted his readers to have as well was an America that did not scapegoat or persecute Jews.

Unfortunately, the story does not end here. Although he had built a reputation over a period of thirty years as a man of good will, the demise of silver mining apparently brought De Quille to an emotional and moral crisis. A world surplus of silver kept the value of silver

below the official federal exchange rate of 16 units of silver to 1 of gold. As a consequence, the federal government was unwilling to reverse its decision of 1873 to discontinue coining silver dollars at the official rate.<sup>5</sup> Since before 1873, it had ceased being an automatic market for the production of silver mines. As the price of silver remained low, silver mining became first a marginally profitable operation, and by the early 1890's, it ceased being profitable at all. De Quille saw the end of a way of life in the end of silver mining, and he was torn between his life-long habit of benevolence toward all men and his outrage at what he believed was a deliberate oppression of the masses by a sinister plutocracy.

On De Quille's behalf, it should be conceded that the silver question had greater significance than benefit to the silver mining industry. What else it meant was buying power. A series of economic depressions in the latter half of the nineteenth century had made money tight. America's adherence to the gold standard, regardless of the good reasons for it,<sup>6</sup> kept money tight. From the perspective of the free-silverites, if the country became bimetallic, money would be more plentiful, and people who borrowed money would be able to pay back their loans more easily. Not only were silver miners affected adversely by the gold standard, therefore, but also farmers, small businessmen, and many other citizens. This is why the free silver issue had such a wide base of support and affected people so emotionally. Not just the West wanted free silver, but also the farming Midwest and the South.

De Quille fought hard and with the utmost sincerity for silver, but it was not a good fight. The terminology he used from the very beginning was that concocted by the anti-Semitic, anti-foreigner wing of Populism. It posited a cabal, and it recklessly charged a plot without being able to prove one. It is likely that De Quille originally used loaded terms like "Shylocks" and "Pharisees" in an abstract, generic sense. He meant moneylenders and bankers, but did not specifically intend Jewish moneylenders and bankers. If so, his article "America the True Canaan" was his way of making his intentions clear to his readers.

Even as late as August 21, 1892, De Quille wrote an article in which he discussed speculations that Columbus might have been Jewish. But around June 1893 a dramatic change occurred in his columns that was probably triggered by a sequence of related events. On June 26, as had

been predicted, the British suspended the coinage of silver in India. A commercial panic resulted almost immediately in America and developed into the major depression of 1893–97. Silver mines were shut down, Comstock miners were laid off, and exodus from the area accelerated. In August, President Cleveland convoked a special session of Congress to fight the panic by repealing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. De Quille had long warned of impending disaster, but its arrival seemed to unsettle him. In the place of his usual discursive and entertaining columns appeared one shrill diatribe after another, an extended series of demagoguery and abuse. For the first time, he became specific in blaming Jewish targets. His column in the *Daily Tribune* of June 4 criticized “President Cleveland and His Partner Levi.” On July 2 he denounced the “Shylock Rule of the Rothschilds.” On July 9, he claimed that “the prime movers and leaders in this war are the descendants of the money-changers who were scourged out of the Temple at Jerusalem by the Son of God.”

To one who has read De Quille over a period of years, these articles are shocking and painful. Jews are not the only target of his attacks. After decades of writing friendly copy about the Chinese, De Quille on June 18 startlingly justified the killing of Chinese if they continued to come to America. It had come down to simplistic slogans and black-and-white issues: the “bloodsucking parasites” and “Shylock plutocracy” versus the oppressed masses, cheap imported labor versus the the “race of hardy frontiersmen,” America versus an international cabal, good versus evil. The contrasts between the articles of 1893 and those that go back as far as the early 1860’s are extreme. Format, content, tone, and attitudes are so different as to almost suggest a personality change.

There is some evidence that his haranguing became counterproductive and that it was indulged at the end only because he was old and sick and the entire rest of his career had made him beloved on the Comstock. One of his colleagues in Carson City described him, in an otherwise favorable editorial, as “becoming personally something like Don Quixote.”<sup>7</sup> Also, other later fictional works by De Quille suggest that when he managed to turn his mind and pen away from his *idée fixe*, his good humor and his good will returned to him.

But for his unbalanced advocacy of free silver, De Quille might have taken his place with such other contemporary authors whose toler-

ance was never shaken as Mark Twain, George Washington Cable, William Dean Howells, and Ambrose Bierce. It was not malice or envy or mean-spiritedness which turned De Quille out of his lifelong path but, ironically, a patriotic zeal for home and country which led him to love “not wisely but too well.” De Quille’s intentions were honorable, but that was not enough. He had apparently forgotten his earlier conclusions about Jewish devotion to America and his earlier characterizations of persecution of them as ignorant and murderous bigotry. He was “turned” in the classical way, by being driven by economic hard times to look for a scapegoat, and by allowing himself to use and eventually to be carried away by the rhetoric of what he himself knew to be the most discredited canard in history.

De Quille’s case may be an object lesson in the subtle but compelling ways that bigotry can be masked as some transcendent ideal and how it can deceive even an unusually good man in whom it finds a lodging. It would be unjust and inaccurate, however, to let a tragic but atypical lapse negate an entire lifetime of benevolence or wipe out a record of good will. “America the True Canaan” is De Quille at his best. If his harangues show how someone like De Quille can lapse from his own ideals, then this essay should be remembered for the impressive way it articulates what those ideals truly were.

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### Notes

1. C. Vann Woodward noted that although Populist agitators were bitterly critical of Wall Street, England, and Jewish bankers, they “bore down with peculiar viciousness on the Semitic symbol.” Quoted in Milton Friedman and Ann J. Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867–1960* (Princeton, 1963), p. 115.

2. Dan De Quille, “Salad Days of Mark Twain,” with an introduction by Lawrence I. Berkove, *Quarterly News-Letter* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 35.

3. I have attempted to summarize what little there is in the introduction to my edition of Dan De Quille’s newly discovered novella, *Dives and Lazarus* (Ann Arbor, 1988).

4. William Hickling Prescott is one of the historians referred to in the article. If, as seems likely, his *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella* (1837) was one of De Quille’s sources, De

Quille would have encountered there an animus against bigotry and cruelty and a moderately sympathetic view of the Jews as victims. Besides the other historians named in the article, it is also possible that he used Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) as a source for his description of the desolate condition of Palestine.

5. Free silverites called this decision the "Crime of '73." They insisted upon regarding it as the evil machination of an international conspiracy, even though it was not opposed at the time, and no hard evidence has ever demonstrated that Congress knew in 1873, when silver was selling for *more* than the official 16 to 1 ratio, that silver prices would shortly drop.

6. The free silver issue remains a complicated and debatable subject today. Suffice it to say that there were compelling reasons for retaining the gold standard. Among them: the international popularity of the gold standard, the continued weakness of the price of silver, the danger that an America which accepted bimetallism at 16 to 1 would be raided of its gold by those who bought the cheaper silver and demanded gold in exchange, and the problems that would occur if creditors were repaid in devalued dollars.

7. An undated and unsigned newspaper clipping in the William Wright Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California - Berkeley. Internal and circumstantial evidence, however, suggests that it was written no earlier than 1893 by Sam Davis, an old friend of De Quille's and the editor of the *Carson Morning Appeal*.