

# 1897 political argument was won by a nose

Back in the 1890s, Washington Township was having a serious public relations problem. The area was the favorite target for white-cappers, self appointed vigilantes who engaged in attitude adjustment. Hardly had the emotions stirred up over the last of those incidents died down when the township residents got wind of another atrocity in their midst.

The latest incident was related to a political issue, rather than the moral ones that provided excuses for the whitecappers. In fact, the politics that inspired the argument



## Looking back

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had nothing to do with any local elected officials.

Few nationally known orators of that time could match the eloquence of William Jennings Bryan. He enthralled the delegates to the 1896 Democratic convention with his

emotion-charged declaration, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

The issue to which he referred was the abundance of silver and its ratio to gold. Specifically, the Democratic Party platform at the nominating convention called for the unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of 16 to 1 with gold.

American cities and hamlets were not immune to the effects of the inflation of that period. And Washington Township was no ex-

ception. The issue inevitably gave rise to local debate around the general store in Modesto and elsewhere.

Two young men, who should have known better, let their argument about free silver get out of hand. Robert Baugh, 20, and Silas Hartman, 17, were the debaters. Though neither one was old enough to vote, Baugh espoused the Republican cause, and Hartman that of the Democratic Party.

According to the *Bloomington World* of Jan. 9, 1897, it was Baugh's see *Looking back*, Back page