Congressman-Elect

SINCE the Fifty-eighth Congress would not convene until November, 1903, Norris had a year to wait before taking a seat in the House of Representatives. The year emerged as one of the most eventful in his life, a period of endings and of new beginnings in both his private and public life. The most obvious change that occurred in the congressman-elect was in his physical appearance. When he appeared at the bar of the House in November, 1903, Norris sported a weeping-willow mustache; the beard was gone and his hair was now heavily tinged with grey. Behind the noticeable change in his appearance lay the events, some tragic and others happy, of the year of waiting by the newly elected congressman from the Fifth District of Nebraska.

After the election, Norris had the leisure to look after his personal affairs. Most nagging was the long-standing problem of the mill at Beaver City. In July, 1902, the dam to the mill was washed out by floodwaters on Beaver Creek and a new one had to be installed. In September the partners thought they had a buyer, but he had very little cash, and they did not want to sell the mill on time unless some security was given. Negotiations were also made with other potential purchasers in Pennsylvania and Iowa, but none proved satisfactory. Finally in the spring of 1903, an agreement was worked out with George E. Hotchkills of Loup City, Nebraska, whereby he paid the partners \$1,000 in cash and gave them a mortgage for the balance, amounting to \$4,000. Before the final details were completed, Hotchkills came to Beaver City and was operating the mill.

Both partners knew the mill property was worth more than \$5,000, but neither Norris nor Shafer was a miller. Norris was no longer a resident of Beaver City and Shafer did not care to look after its over-all operation. Furthermore the partners had been unfortunate in their experience of renting the mill. They had found that as a rule the lessee, when his term was about to expire, let the property run down. This usually meant that Norris and Shafer had to devote time and energy to redeeming the good name of the mill. Therefore they decided to

sacrifice to make the sale. Thus, after thirteen years, Norris was finally free of this property which had caused him irritation and annoyance and which he never really wanted.¹

Norris' real estate also needed tending. Fults and Hopping continued to look after his property in Beaver City. Occasionally Norris asked Merwin to perform a chore for him in this connection. Norris' relationship with these men was informal and friendly. Neither Fults, a lawyer, nor Hopping, a druggist, derived his livelihood from this work. They helped Norris more from friendship than for anything else. Both men continued this arrangement after he moved to Washington, D.C.²

During the campaign Norris was not pressed or embarrassed for want of money. He was able to give twenty-five dollars to the Odd Fellows Home Fund, though this contribution no doubt had political overtones. In October he promptly paid the premiums on two large insurance policies which totaled almost five hundred dollars. After the election Norris found, too, that he could afford to remodel his home in McCook and take his first real vacation, albeit a short one, since the death of his wife. He took a trip into Colorado and possibly New Mexico. Though his financial condition was satisfactory, he still found it necessary to request payment from people who owed him money.³

Norris also began to again take a more active interest in McCook affairs. In September, 1902, a public library had been opened. It was housed in the basement of the Red Willow County Courthouse where Norris held court and maintained a judicial chamber. From this vantage point he had ample opportunity to observe the large numbers of people using the library. He wrote to Andrew Carnegie the following June, requesting a donation for the erection of a separate building in the city. Eventually Carnegie did contribute and McCook today boasts a handsome public library building.⁴

Besides his personal business affairs and his emerging role as a public figure of consequence in the short-grass country, Norris was plagued all through the campaign with a health problem. Since his teeth were extraordinarily sensitive, he sought a dentist who could drill them without pain. In December, before leaving on vacation, he wrote to Dr. H. C. Miller, a dentist and also postmaster of Grand Island, inquiring whether Miller could care for teeth in a painless way and, if so, whether he could arrange an appointment. Two weeks later, Dr. Miller assured Norris that he could treat his teeth without undue pain.⁵

Norris, delighted at finding such a dentist, went to Grand Island late in April. For nine consecutive days Dr. Miller fixed his teeth,

afterward claiming that it was "the largest and most severe operation" he had ever performed at one time. At the end of the eighth day Norris was taken with chills followed by fever. In spite of this he had the work completed the following day and was consumed with a fever while in the chair. Miller's fee was \$125.6

Theodore Roosevelt arrived in Grand Island at this time and Norris appeared with him despite his illness. As soon as Norris returned to McCook, he become much more seriously ill, took to his bed, and almost died from blood poisoning and other complications. He was dangerously ill for over three weeks and did not fully recover for several months. In addition to blood poisoning, he suffered from nervous prostration and was very weak and debilitated. Fletcher Merwin came to look after him and quickly sent for Doctor C. C. Green of Beaver City. The doctors were afraid that the infection would reach the brain, in which case "the termination would have been fatal and sudden." Fortunately the blood poisoning was arrested and on May 18, 1903, Merwin wrote, "We consider Judge Norris now out of all danger." ⁷

With his nervous system seemingly shattered, Norris, though he was out of immediate danger by the end of May, was still a very sick man. Microscopic examination indicated kidney trouble, though the doctors thought this to be only temporary. Norris took various tonic prescriptions to regain his strength and equilibrium, and was told by doctors and friends to get adequate rest, sunshine, and care. Dr. Green suggested that he give up smoking, and Norris did not object. At the end of May, Dr. Green announced that his patient had no need of more medicine and that, if he did not overexert himself, he would be well on the way to a complete recovery.⁸

From all over the state came letters inquiring about Norris' illness.⁹ Governor Mickey requested Merwin to convey his hope for a rapid recovery and suggested that Norris, when able, call upon him in Lincoln. Merwin, who remained with Norris in McCook, handled most of the correspondence and kept the patient abreast of political developments. By June 4, Norris was again handling his own mail and informing correspondents that he expected to leave for a long Wisconsin vacation at Delavan Lake as soon as he regained a bit more strength.¹⁰

In his correspondence he told no one the secret which he must have divulged to those who cared for him during his illness—that he planned to be married before going to Wisconsin. After the death of Pluma in 1901, Norris, with three young children to look after and an intensive political campaign to wage, certainly had little time for romance. Yet it was obvious that he eventually would remarry, since

he was desperately in need of companionship, a helpmate, and a mother for his girls. That he was considered a most eligible bachelor is evident from correspondence with a young lady in Lincoln who signed her letters "Jeanette," and of whom very little is known. She invited him to several occasions in Lincoln and, although it is not known whether he attended these particular events, it is certain that they saw each other several times. That Norris was not romantically interested in her is indicated by the fact that he did not tell her of his illness. From her letters she appears to have been much too flighty and too deeply involved in the doings of Lincoln society to suit Norris' tastes.¹¹

However, Norris was becoming romantically interested in the McCook schoolteacher Ellie Leonard, who knew the first Mrs. Norris. Miss Leonard was well liked by her students in McCook, and after Pluma's death, Norris began to notice her in more than a casual way. In March, before his visit to Dr. Miller, Norris wrote A. J. Green, a watchmaker and optician, about purchasing a ring. Thus they may have considered announcing their engagement before his illness. Possibly his illness and convalescence, when Miss Leonard was undoubtedly on hand often, led them to fix a wedding date.

Contemplating remarriage two years after Pluma's death must have caused Norris some trying moments. In March, at the same time he was purchasing a ring, he was also completing arrangements for the erection of a monument on his lot in the McCook cemetery. Also in March he received word that his eldest sister Lorinda, at whose home he had enjoyed such pleasant times while teaching school in Ohio, had died. He must have undergone great emotional confusion and upheaval during this period.

After the school term ended, Miss Leonard returned to her parents' home in San Jose, California, and Norris, announcing his intention of vacationing in Wisconsin, left at the end of June for the Pacific Coast. In the home of Ellie's parents, on July 8, 1903, Ellie Leonard and George Norris were married.¹³

Their Wisconsin honeymoon gave Norris a chance to recover his strength and to introduce his L.U.N. friends to his new wife when they gathered for the annual reunion. During this reunion one decision was made which pleasurably affected the L.U.N. members and their families for the rest of their lives. They decided, chiefly upon Norris' investigation and prodding, to purchase an island in Rainbow Lake where members might build cottages and where the annual meetings would henceforth be held. Only four members, including Norris, felt they

were able to contribute toward the \$950.00 asked for the island. The price seemed a small consideration for such a wonderful site. 14

Rainbow Lake, a perfect vacation setting, is one of a chain of twenty-three lakes southwest of Waupaca, Wisconsin. Its clear waters still attract fishermen seeking pickerel, bass, trout, and other varieties. The entire chain, spring-fed, cold, and clear, is set in deep hollows between low rounded hills. The lakes offered opportunities for rest, relaxation, and escape from intense summer heat, and Norris came to cherish his days there as the years went by. With the purchase of the island the problem of annual meetings and vacations was forever solved for Norris and his fellow L.U.N. agitators from the old days at Valparaiso.

Meanwhile most of the friends of George and Ellie Norris read of the marriage in the McCook paper, where a brief announcement appeared. After Norris' departure for California, neither Merwin nor Norris' children, who remained in McCook with their aunt, knew his exact whereabouts. After this marriage, Norris wrote, "There came into my home . . . a real mother to my motherless children." Once again his family circle was complete and his children quickly came to love Ellie as their new mother. Indeed she soon became for these youngsters the only mother they knew, and, as Norris later wrote, "Never was there a more considerate or more tender hearted, loving mother." ¹⁵

September found Norris and his bride back in McCook redecorating the house to suit the taste of its new mistress. Norris at this time also indulged himself and bought a fine bound set of the collected works of one of his youthful heroes, Robert W. Ingersoll, the famed Republican orator and agnostic. ¹⁶ But most important of all, the return to McCook brought with it preparations for a new life in Washington, D.C.

Not that Norris had neglected to prepare for his new role. Since the election he had been attending to political matters. One of the first things he had to consider was resigning as a district judge. He had promised not to recommend any candidate, but to allow a Republican governor to appoint whomever he desired. Norris kept this pledge in good faith. When, after the election, Governor-elect John Mickey asked him about a successor, he refused to express any choice and wrote to the governor restating his position.¹⁷

His first official action as a newly elected congressman was to support, along with the other Republican members of the Nebraska congressional delegation, the candidacy of Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois for the speakership of the House of Representatives. Cannon wrote him a grateful personal note, claiming that his help, along with

that of the delegation, went far toward settling the contest. Norris showed no trace of independence in this matter, since Joseph W. Babcock of Wisconsin was also seeking this position, and Norris had good reason to be grateful to him. As chairman of the 1902 Congressional Campaign Committee, Babcock had helped him with funds and literature. 18

With the defeat of Congressman Mercer in the Second District a position on the Committee on Public Grounds and Buildings became vacant. Senator Dietrich advised Norris to put in a request for this vacancy "as quickly as possible" to Speaker Cannon. Since First District Congressman Elmer Burkett was a member of the Appropriations Committee, Dietrich thought it essential that Norris secure this position to retain for the state of Nebraska membership on key committees, thereby maintaining its influence in Congress. ¹⁹ Norris made every effort to obtain it.

At this time he was unaware of any cleavages within his party. Indeed, as a freshman congressman, he was more interested in securing favorable committee assignments than in anything else, desiring above all an appointment to the Committee on Public Lands and Buildings. But as a newly elected congressman, he did not consider it wise to ask directly for the position. He therefore let Dietrich and Burkett know of his desire and requested that they discuss the matter with the new speaker before he approached Cannon.²⁰

In February of 1903 Norris made a brief trip to Washington, where he talked to Cannon about service on this committee. The Speaker asked Norris to contact him again some time before the convening of Congress. When Norris later wrote to Cannon he presented his case in a way that undoubtedly appealed to the politically astute Speaker. He noted that all the other Nebraska districts that had elected Republicans to Congress had done so by large majorities, that he had been elected by a majority of only 181 votes and was the only Republican, "with one exception," who had represented the district since the advent of the Populist party. Furthermore, Norris suggested the necessity of an appropriation for a public building at Grand Island if the district were to remain in the Republican fold. This goal could best be achieved, he argued, by his serving on the Public Lands and Buildings Committee. By way of conclusion he frankly stated to the Speaker:

There is no doubt but that the appropriation by Congress of money for the building of a public building at Grand Island would make my re-election sure, and while it is of no particular importance to the country or the Republican Party that I should be

returned any more than any other person, yet it is of considerable importance that a Republican should be elected in this district, which I think could be easily secured if this one matter were attended to. I think these matters have, perhaps, been brought to your attention by the senators from this state, and while I do not want, in any way, to embarrass you in your difficult task, still I sincerely hope you may be able to give the matter consideration which I believe it deserves, and decide it as you may think best under all the circumstances.²¹

Norris also requested information about his new duties from Charles F. Manderson, former U.S. senator (1883–95), and now chief attorney of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad in Nebraska. He confessed his ignorance of the customs, rules, and regulations of the Congress and hoped that Manderson would aid him in learning about these subjects. He told Manderson of his desire to serve on the Committee on Public Lands and Buildings and hoped that the ex-senator could be of assistance in this matter. Thus Congressman-elect Norris did his best before he went to Washington to put himself in good standing with the Burlington Railroad and the Republican organization, two of the most powerful agencies in the political structure of the state.

Another important task which faced Norris at this time was that of securing the services of a competent secretary who knew the district and could keep him abreast of local developments. For this difficult job Norris wanted Merwin, who had served as chairman of his congressional committee in the recent campaign. After the election he had presented Merwin with a typewriter and a desk as a token of gratitude and soon thereafter tried to convince him to take the job. Merwin, who wanted to remain in Beaver City and edit his paper, claimed that he could not live on the salary, though he recognized that service in Washington would provide valuable experience for a newspaper editor.

Norris suggested that Merwin serve as his secretary only when Congress was in session and continue to write for his paper when in Washington. With slight modifications Merwin agreed to the plan, and Norris obtained the competent services of a seasoned political observer and a personal friend.²³

Even though the Fifty-eighth Congress was scheduled to convene at the end of 1903, Norris' service as a member of Congress actually started the day after election when district patronage problems were literally thrust in his lap. The request for free transportation was a familiar one. But other patronage matters—primarily concerning pensions and postmasters—were new, and he set about familiarizing himself with them. Soon after his election he wrote the commissioner of pensions requesting information about the rules and regulations pertaining to the work of the bureau.²⁴

In the matter of postmasters he had much more work to do. First he had to determine the politics of all the postmasters in the district, since not all were Republicans. Then there was the matter of rural routes, the granting of which had been so helpful in the campaign. By the end of 1902 Norris was explaining to irate citizens that work on rural routes had been suspended owing to a small appropriation and that nothing could be done until more money was granted by Congress. He wrote to officials in the Post Office Department requesting that the twenty-six approved rural routes in the district be put into operation and that the petitioned routes be acted upon as quickly as possible.²⁵

Finally, before his departure for Washington, Norris participated in a sensational murder trial that brought him to the attention of citizens throughout Nebraska. In March, 1903, he agreed to assist the prosecuting attorney of Frontier County in stating the case for the family of the victim, a young girl named Tracy Puls, and in trying to prove that her death was caused by a bullet and bruises inflicted by one Charles Frymire.

The case came to trial in October, laden with political significance. Congressman Norris was assisting Prosecuting Attorney L. H. Cheney, while the defense was represented by J. L. White, the fusion candidate for district judge in an election that was a month away. Presiding in the courtroom was Judge R. C. Orr, appointed by Governor Mickey to fill out Norris' unexpired term, and now seeking the office in his own right. Attorney White brought these implications before the court while presenting the defense's side. He warned the jury in a harangue that lasted more than an hour that they should not be swayed "by the silent, secret influence that would be present in the prosecution of the case in the person of Congressman Norris." ²⁶

In presenting the case against Frymire, Norris recounted the details, including the little known fact that "Tracy Puls gave premature birth to a child of five or six months gestation, the child of Charles Frymire and that the premature birth was caused by the bullet wound in the wall of the uterus or womb." The jury returned a verdict of manslaughter, and Judge Orr sentenced Frymire to ten years at hard labor. Throughout his term he was to be placed in solitary confinement on each February 1, the anniversary of Tracy Puls' death.²⁷ Norris' part in this dramatic case served as a farewell before his departure for Washington to start his career as a congressman.

On November 9, 1903, George Norris, in a neatly pressed black suit, stiff white shirt and collar, and black string tie, appeared before the bar of the House of Representatives and took the oath of office. His grey hair and his neatly trimmed weeping-willow mustache added to his serious demeanor and gave increased maturity to his forty-two years. The oath was administered at the opening of a special session of the Fifty-eighth Congress. At this time he officially learned that newly elected Speaker Cannon had been most generous in his committee assignments, giving Norris the coveted place on the Committee on Public Grounds and Buildings, as well as an assignment to the Committee on Election of President, Vice-President and Representatives. Thus George Norris, the new Republican congressman from the Fifth District of Nebraska, at last had arrived on the national scene and now would have the opportunity to put his talents to the test on a broader scale than ever before.