

Chapter II

Congressman Norris

AS A FRESHMAN in Congress, assigned a seat in the rear of the chamber, Norris had to worry about getting re-elected almost before he could learn the rules and procedures of the House of Representatives. Congressman Wesley L. Jones of Washington, whose seat was next to Norris, guided him whenever possible and quickly disillusioned him about the statesmanship of Joseph W. Babcock, of whom Norris had thought highly. Norris was amazed to learn that Babcock's wonderful orations had never been delivered but were merely inserted into the *Congressional Record*.¹

Equally amazing to the new member was the knowledge that no bill could be discussed on the floor unless the Speaker, as Chairman of the Rules Committee, gave his approval. When Chairman Charles W. Gillet of Massachusetts called the Committee on Public Grounds and Buildings together, the group discussed the possibility of drafting and presenting an omnibus building bill. The senior Democratic member of the committee, John H. Bankhead of Alabama, presented a motion, which carried unanimously, that the chairman seek a conference with the Speaker and ascertain if the committee could introduce a public building bill.²

As a freshman member, Norris, of course, had no illusions about what he would be able to accomplish. However, with the country relatively prosperous, and with the virtual assurance of federal funds spent in the district through an omnibus building bill, Norris believed his constituents would be satisfied and contented enough to reward him with another term in Congress. He had no reason to speak, let alone to challenge his party; yet that is exactly what he did when he rose on June 13, 1904, "with no little embarrassment and some hesitancy . . . to say a word or two in favor of the Civil Service Commission and the civil-service law."³

President Theodore Roosevelt on November 17, 1903, had changed the removal rule giving the president and department heads greater discretion and power to remove incompetent employees. At least one

member of the Civil Service Commission doubted that this change was an improvement.⁴ And those members of Congress who were not in sympathy with the merit system began an attack on the civil-service system. Previously, in the Fifty-seventh Congress, the Civil Service Commission had been criticized after an effective investigation of post office scandals aroused spoilsmen in both parties. Norris, by defending the Civil Service in his maiden speech, sided with the president against the standpatters in his party. Repeal the law, Norris concluded, "and you put on the bargain counter of partisan politics the appointment of all the officers under the Government."⁵

If his first speech in Congress de-emphasized partisanship and was indicative of his later career, his only other extensive statements on the floor were intensely partisan. They were devoted to lambasting the Democrats for their continual opposition to rural free delivery. This speech is significant because it revealed an aspect of Norris that was inherent in his background and which remained with him throughout his life. It is summed up by the following sentence, delivered at the close of the address: "It is at the rural fireside that virtue, morality, and patriotism have reached their highest state."⁶

That the rural life represented the "good life" and that the city was the source of crime, disease, disloyalty, and anarchy was an attitude that prevailed throughout nineteenth-century rural America. Indeed it lingered on in the new century. Norris expressed it here in order to cast aspersions on the Democrats for their opposition to rural free delivery, but he firmly believed that he was voicing a fundamental truth when he uttered it. This partisan speech represented Norris' major oratorical effort in his first term as a congressman. But before the session ended, he was focusing on Nebraska politics and his campaign for re-election.⁷

He returned to Nebraska at the end of the session confident that the voters would approve his service in Congress. He returned as he had left, a partisan Republican and a devoted supporter of Roosevelt, seeing no incompatibility in these two positions. He also returned with as much of Speaker Cannon's approval as did any other freshman in Congress.⁸

The 1904 Republican Congressional Convention for the Fifth District was scheduled to convene at Hastings on May 12. Thus before Norris returned to Nebraska many chairmen had called county conventions and had already chosen delegates favorable to his renomination. When the Hastings convention met, Norris was renominated by acclamation, though the Hastings *Daily Republican* claimed there were two dissenting votes.⁹

With the nomination safely secured, Norris was able to observe national political developments before he launched his campaign. Because he could not afford a trip to the Republican National Convention in Chicago, he refused the invitations of Congressman James R. Mann and of an old friend of his to be their guest during the convention. He thought that the Republican convention would "prove to be a tame show, as compared with the three ringed circus at St. Louis" where Bryan had pledged a battle to keep control of the Democratic party.¹⁰

As Norris predicted, the Chicago convention, which on June 23 nominated Roosevelt and Senator Charles W. Fairbanks of Indiana, was a tame show. The Democratic convention witnessed the return to power of more conservative eastern leaders. Bryan lost control, and a New York judge, Alton B. Parker, who favored the gold standard, received the nomination. Parker's nomination left many devoted supporters of Bryan in the Democratic and especially in the Populist party in Nebraska and elsewhere with no choice but to vote for Roosevelt, who was closer to Bryan in his views than was Parker.¹¹

The nomination of Judge Parker hastened the demise of the Populist party in Nebraska. The party had been so greatly reduced in membership that the basis of representation to the convention that chose the delegation to the Populist National Convention in Springfield, Illinois, was one delegate for each two hundred votes cast for Weaver in 1892. As one Nebraska editor remarked at this time, "The Populist party has reached the point where it is nothing with fusion and nothing without it."¹²

If the Populist party in Nebraska was in the process of deteriorating, the Democratic party, owing to Bryan's loss of control at St. Louis, was in a weakened position. Thus Populist candidates were able to dominate the fusion process. And strong Democratic campaigners, like A. C. Shallenberger in the Fifth District, decided not to participate in the election. They feared that Roosevelt would pull to victory the weaker members on the Republican ticket.

Populist ideas, after years of agitation, had gradually penetrated the Republican party hierarchy. Many of the leaders in Nebraska and on the national scene now accepted the view that government would have to play a larger role in promoting the general welfare. Certainly in 1904 the Republican party appeared as the more liberal of the major parties. And many a former Bryan supporter now made his way into the party and became a devoted follower of Roosevelt. These developments redounded to the benefit of Norris and numerous other Republican nominees.

One aspect of the campaign in Nebraska no doubt disturbed

Norris. This was the fact that Senator Dietrich, who had been so instrumental in his first campaign, did not receive party support for a second term. He had become a liability because he secured the removal of the Hastings post office into a building that he owned. Furthermore, it also became known that he had collected a salary as governor while he was already serving as United States senator.¹³ Congressman Burkett of the First District received the Republican endorsement. Railroad opposition to Burkett helped to convince many voters that the Republican party was now following Roosevelt's brand of progressivism.

Norris conducted the early part of his campaign, as in 1902, by speaking before various nonpartisan groups. By midsummer local leaders were optimistic and their enthusiasm was quickly communicated to the candidate. With the lack of cooperation between Populist and Democratic state organizations, with Alton B. Parker heading the Democratic ticket and Theodore Roosevelt leading the Republicans, with abundant crops, adequate rainfall, and good prices making for a satisfied farm population, Republican leaders in Nebraska certainly had good reason for optimism.¹⁴

George Allen, Norris' campaign manager, worked long and hard. He arranged transportation for individuals who might be able to get votes, contacted editors throughout the district, arranged to collect funds from the postmasters, and visited disgruntled Republicans, remedying their grievances wherever possible. He also made surreptitious efforts to appeal to rank and file members of the opposition, who were ready to reject fusion. He noted, "They could fuse when Bryan was in the lead as he stood for many things that the Pops did or at least pretended to and they could follow him with very good grace, but Parker being antagonistic to everything that the Pops advocated—why it simply deadens the whole deal." In addition to these activities, Allen, a veteran, visited old soldiers and spoke in favor of Norris.¹⁵

The Democrats and Populists held their congressional conventions at Hastings on August 24, and soon Norris learned that his opponent would be H. H. Mauck. Shallenberger had been offered the nomination of both parties, but declined. Mauck literally had obtained the nomination through default; none of the other fusion leaders desired it. As a result, most observers believed that it would be "practically impossible" to defeat Norris.¹⁶

By mid-September there were four candidates seeking to represent the Fifth Congressional District in Washington, a Socialist and a Prohibitionist candidate having been chosen by their respective party conventions. The appearance of these two new candidates meant

further difficulties for the fusionists as some former Populists would be attracted to both of these reform candidates. While the Republicans would gain some fusion votes, very few of their supporters would be attracted by either of the new candidates. Their appearance further improved Norris' position, and led his manager to believe, "We will catch them coming and going."¹⁷

Norris and his supporters were certain of ultimate victory when it became evident that Harry Mauck was a most uninspiring campaigner. He aroused little of the enthusiasm and attracted none of the crowds that Shallenberger had. Furthermore, Norris learned that Congressman Babcock, chairman of the Congressional Campaign Committee, considered Norris' race one of the closest in the nation and was determined to carry it on election day. With this end in mind, Speaker Cannon agreed to speak in the district for three days at the end of September.¹⁸

By mid-October Norris already had stumped throughout the district, speaking six days a week and appearing in a different community every day. Occasionally he spoke in two or more villages on the same day. In the last weeks of the campaign, Allen traveled with Norris, briefing him on local situations and introducing him to leading citizens in the eastern end of the district, which Allen knew better than Norris. Allen thought the crowds were good and that Norris spoke very well, even though the weather at the end of October was far from satisfactory for campaign purposes. Norris, in his speeches, stressed the point that those who went into the Populist movement in good faith could not conscientiously support Parker and the Democratic ticket in 1904.¹⁹

Despite lack of widespread editorial support and notwithstanding his colorless personality, Harry Mauck, through the efforts of his manager, waged a vigorous campaign by hurling numerous irresponsible charges at his opponent. And in the week before election Shallenberger took the stump with Mauck. As a last-ditch effort to stave off defeat, the Democratic National Committee contributed five hundred dollars to his campaign, and Bryan came to speak on Mauck's behalf. Norris heard that Bryan attracted large crowds but generated little enthusiasm. Bryan did not touch on national issues and made no mention of Parker or Roosevelt in his speeches. So confident was Allen of victory that he did not plan to spend election eve with Norris. Even Merwin, much more cautious than Allen, predicted victory. And Norris himself had no reason on election eve to doubt his chances.²⁰

On election day, November 8, 1904, the Republican ticket won an overwhelming victory. Roosevelt had 336 electoral votes and a plurality of more than two and a half million votes. Republican candidates won

all major offices in Nebraska. All six candidates for Congress defeated their fusion opponents and Congressman Burkett was assured of a Senate seat by polling 107,595 votes in the preferential primary. George Norris in the Fifth Congressional District received a majority of more than five thousand, polling 19,645 votes. Not a single county in Nebraska cast its vote for Parker, nor did Norris lose a single county in his district. In Perkins, one of the remote and thinly settled counties, the vote was a tie, standing 161 for each candidate. A prominent Nebraska historian commenting on the campaign wrote, "The final figures in the nation announced the death of the People's party and foreshadowed the return of Mr. Bryan as leader of the Democrats."²¹

Norris, delighted with this splendid victory, in contrast to his 181-vote plurality in 1902, claimed that aside from the president, Speaker Cannon deserved credit for the "land-slide" election results. He believed that Cannon's "able, honest and wise administration" of his position had been "one of the great elements" in the national Republican triumph. Norris wrote the Speaker, "Your position is the second one in the nation, and the confidence that all have in you has made many votes for the Republican ticket all over our country, because it has been recognized that Republican success meant the retention of yourself in that high and honorable position." Grateful to Cannon for his visit during the campaign, Norris assured the Speaker that if in his humble way he could help advance Cannon's interests he would find it an "extreme pleasure" to do so.²²

After the election Norris had almost no time to relax before returning to Washington for the third and lame duck session of the Fifty-eighth Congress, scheduled to convene on December 5, 1904. This time Norris planned to bring his wife and three children with him. He hoped to be in Washington by the first of December, to get his family settled and the older girls, Hazel and Marian, registered in a public school before Speaker Cannon brought the House of Representatives to order.²³

The third session of the Fifty-eighth Congress started in a most disagreeable way for the re-elected gentleman from Nebraska. Washington weather was damp and cold and soon his entire family was sick. Norris also found that his official duties involved much harder work. Merwin, who was on hand to aid him, noted at the end of January, "The Judge is mighty busy with affairs of state." Norris summarized the situation more succinctly when he remarked, "I have had my hands full."²⁴

Work on the Committee on Public Lands and Buildings consumed much time. Norris was a member of the subcommittee which was con-

sidering the erection of public buildings. The subcommittee, after reviewing the Nebraska situation, recommended two buildings, at Grand Island and at York, and three sites for buildings. Within a month the House appropriated \$100,000 for a public building at Grand Island. Thus Norris fulfilled a 1902 campaign pledge even though the bill ultimately was enacted into law without this item included.²⁵

During this session he also showed for the first time an interest in improving the processes of government by amending the Constitution. Though House Joint Resolution 166 died in committee, his concern with it did not. The resolution provided for a national election every four years, at which time all of the members of the House of Representatives and one-half of the Senate, one member from each state, would be elected directly by the people. Every eight years there would be a presidential election. The great reform in this resolution, Norris thought, would be the election of senators by the people, though the other changes seemed equally important to him. Since his resolution lengthened the term of senators by two years, he thought it might receive favorable consideration by that body. The lower house, Norris realized, would undoubtedly agree to any resolution which doubled the term of its members, while a single eight-year term for the chief executive could readily be defended.²⁶

Though he was investigating national and constitutional issues, Norris voted with his party on all major pieces of legislation and devoted most of his time to the affairs of his district. The appropriation for a federal building helped him as did his concern for Union veterans and their pensions. Since Congress was in no mood to benefit a dwindling segment of the population, many of whom were already being cared for at public expense, Norris actually could do little to aid dependent veterans. Nevertheless, he "stood ready to support any measure" which would serve to treat with more liberality and consideration these "brave and noble boys."²⁷

Moreover, Norris was faced with the loss of potent patronage in his home town. In 1904 an agent of the Department of the Interior conducted an investigation of the McCook land office and shortly thereafter it was closed. The work of the McCook office, it was announced, would be included in the Lincoln land district, comprising southern and southeastern Nebraska.²⁸

Sentiment in McCook was against the removal of the office. Many citizens were disposed to hold their congressman responsible. Residents having business at the land office would now have to travel to Lincoln, at the other end of the state. People were also charging that

the deeds to available government lands now could be placed within easier reach of the railroads and "that crowd of grafters and swindlers," and were now beyond the reach of the people. The land office had been located in McCook since 1882, and while some citizens realized it was only a question of time before it would be closed, few were willing to admit that the time had come.²⁹

Norris, realizing that the loss of the McCook land office could counteract popularity he would gain from the Grand Island federal building, set out to explain the government's policy in this matter. He claimed that its closing was legal, that other land offices were being discontinued, and that it was the intention of the Department of the Interior eventually to cancel all the Nebraska land offices except the one at Lincoln. Whether this explanation soothed aroused citizens, Norris was not able to discern. Fortunately the closing came almost immediately after the 1904 election, so that it would not be a burning issue in the next congressional campaign.³⁰

Thus most of Norris' activities in the Fifty-eighth Congress were routine and pertained largely to the affairs of his district. He concentrated, as every congressman must, on serving constituents. As a freshman, however, he did speak several times on matters of more than local or sectional interest, and was becoming interested in improving the processes of government by making it more democratic and responsible. He performed his job conscientiously and may have worked harder than most members. He was in the good graces of Speaker Cannon and accepted as well the leadership and policies of Roosevelt. There was little to indicate in his first term that he would later lead the insurgency movement in the House of Representatives. It was only when the party's executive leadership broke down and senior members in Congress tried to assume it that Norris emerged as an outstanding figure.

When the lame duck session came to an end in March, 1905, Norris, his family, and his secretary were glad to return to Nebraska. They may have witnessed Roosevelt's inauguration, but, since the Norrises were not interested in participating in Washington society, it is doubtful that they attended the evening festivities. In Nebraska at the end of March, Merwin resigned as secretary because his newspaper was losing business. His resignation was unexpected and Norris would have been at a loss to replace him, had Merwin not mentioned as his successor a young lawyer in McCook, Ray McCarl, a recent graduate of the University of Nebraska Law School and an experienced stenographer.³¹

With the matter of a successor to Merwin quickly settled, Norris now had at least eight months of freedom from legislative duties and the prospect of a summer free from campaigning. In short, he could enjoy his first extended rest since his honeymoon in 1903. This vacation brought with it an opportunity to travel to Europe.