

GEORGE W. NORRIS

The Making of a Progressive

1861-1912

Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinions high respect; their business unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfactions, to theirs,—and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own.

But his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure, —no, nor from the law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

From the Speech to the Electors of Bristol
November 3, 1774
by EDMUND BURKE

In the Beginning

YORK TOWNSHIP, Sandusky County, Ohio, about three and a half miles east of Clyde, which was Sherwood Anderson's prototype of small towns in the Middle West, was the birthplace of George W. Norris on July 11, 1861. On the western fringe of the Western Reserve and on the eastern border of the "Black Swamp" area, Sandusky County as part of northwestern Ohio comprised the last frontier area in the state.

Immigrants started penetrating and transforming it during the decade of the 1820's. Many were en route to lands in Illinois, Indiana, and southern Michigan; others settled, despite agues and fevers, in this level and wet region. The extreme northwestern corner of Ohio had, by the census of 1830, a population of three thousand.¹ While the original settlers had come chiefly from New York out of New England, during the 1830's others from Pennsylvania and southern Ohio were arriving along with Germans who had in the 1820's settled along the Sandusky River in Seneca County, due south of Sandusky County.

The area in which Norris was born was inhabited largely by Pennsylvania Dutch farmers. At the time of his parents' arrival in 1846, northwest Ohio was rapidly emerging from the pioneer stage but it still retained and reflected the simpler social and economic conditions associated with the frontier.

Sandusky County was primarily a wheat area; during the Civil War years it produced from two to five hundred thousand bushels of wheat.² It was also a vegetable and orchard district, and Clyde became a milling and later a canning center. Sherwood Anderson, who lived there some twenty years later, succinctly summed up its agricultural experience: "The soil on the farms about the town was a light sandy loam that would raise small fruits, corn, wheat, oats or potatoes, but that did particularly well when planted to cabbages."³ Cabbages, which provided a staple for many a poor farm family and which became a major crop during Anderson's childhood, were not known to

many of the earlier farmers. Stands of timber were numerous and included beech, oak, and walnut.

Into this agricultural area moved the parents of George Norris in the summer of 1846. They had been married on Christmas day, 1838, in Monroe County, New York. Chauncey Norris was thirty-one years of age at the time of his marriage and had lived most of his life in nearby Cayuga County.⁴ His bride, Mary Magdalene Mook, a Pennsylvania Dutch girl of twenty, is supposed to have met Chauncey at a house-raising ceremony. The couple started their life together on a farm in Monroe County. In 1846, at the time of their departure for Ohio, they lived in Batavia, New York, with a family of four children. The youngest child, a month-old daughter, died shortly before Chauncey loaded family and furniture into a wagon and headed west to join his wife's brothers as a farmer in Sandusky County.

Chauncey succeeded on his York Township farm. He cleared the land of trees, stumps, and rocks. He planted crops of wheat, corn and vegetables, along with fruit trees, and built a modest but substantial home, still standing today.⁵ And Chauncey and Mary Norris increased the size of their family in Ohio. Twelve children were born of this marriage: two died, Elizabeth just before they left New York for Ohio, and Ida, less than three years old and the last child in the family, in 1867. Eight children were born in Ohio; besides Willie—as George William was called by his parents—the only other male child was the eldest, John Henry, born in 1839. In July of 1861 when Willie was born, his father was fifty-four and his mother forty-three. His two eldest sisters were already married.

During the early years of Willie's life, the Civil War raged. The people of Ohio were bitterly divided over the issues involved. Sandusky County, in almost every major election throughout the nineteenth century, gave its votes to Democratic candidates, though not by large majorities.⁶ Most of the farmers in the township—the Norris family included—were Republicans.⁷ While there were antislavery and abolitionist families in the county, they did not dominate, nor was there overwhelming Unionist sentiment manifested when war was declared. The Norris family certainly were antislavery in their views, and the nearby city of Sandusky was a terminal point for the Underground Railroad.

The county, despite opposition to the Civil War, contributed its share of soldiers. Among over twenty-three hundred men who enlisted was John Henry Norris. At the outset of the struggle, he had promised his mother that he would not volunteer. However, in Janu-

ary, 1864, he broke his promise and joined the Fifty-fifth Ohio Volunteer Infantry. The Fifty-fifth Ohio had participated in some major engagements in Tennessee in the autumn and winter of 1863 at Missionary Ridge and in the Knoxville campaign immediately afterward. It enjoyed a brief furlough in Ohio in January and February of 1864, when John Henry enlisted. In the spring the regiment participated in the "March to the Sea." At the battle of Resaca, Georgia, in mid-May, John Henry suffered seemingly inconsequential wounds in the right hip and left thigh. Within a fortnight he was dead at the age of twenty-five.⁸

Thus the tragedy of war struck the family. Before the year 1864 was over, however, an even greater blow was inflicted upon the family circle. Chauncey Norris, on December 1, 1864, contracted pneumonia, and before the week ended, he was dead and buried in the little community cemetery, with neighbors, Mary Norris' kin, and his family as mourners. Norris later wrote this description of the family situation at that time: "Three of the girls had married and had established homes of their own. Six sisters—Henrietta, Mary Adelaide, Elizabeth, Effie Ann, Emma, and Clara—and I remained with my mother on that cold and bleak December day when my father was buried, to share the heritage of the Ohio farm."⁹ Within a year Willie Norris, age three and a half, found himself the only man left in the family.

Mary Mook Norris, age forty-six, now became for her younger children the heart and soul of the family. There was an eighty-acre farm to be maintained and Mary, although pregnant with her last child, assumed this task along with her household duties. She was a loving, anxious, and above all a hard-working mother. Although she had no spare time to herself, she made some available to her children, insisting that they receive an education. The family's lot was not an easy one. Mary Norris was not only the center of the home, but she quickly became for her son home itself. She made almost every piece of clothing worn by any member of the family. At harvest time she would take her place in the field. "Her hair was unstreaked; she walked erect"; her son could never remember a song upon her lips, nor ever recall her humming a tune.¹⁰ Her sensitive, rather melancholy temperament became a part of the little boy which he retained for the rest of his life.

Mary Norris, while providing little intellectual or cultural stimulation for her children, did much to mold their moral and social values. Her concern for the poor and their problems was later reflected in

her son's concern with problems of social justice. Her interests were neither selfish nor limited to the present, and she passed on to her children a feeling for the importance of planning for the future.¹¹

Though she was not a church member, she raised her children believing in the absolute goodness and righteousness of the Lord. She read the Bible aloud on Sunday afternoons to her children. It was probably at this time the only book in the home. She believed the Bible literally and frowned upon dancing and card playing for many years. Indeed, her son never attended a dance until after he left home. He was not duly impressed with the Gospel teachings he heard at home or at the church services and occasional revivals he attended. He was disturbed and confused over matters of church and religion which he later resolved, like his mother, by not joining any church and, unlike her, by reading volumes which stressed science as opposed to supernaturalism, such as John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*.¹²

Even by prevailing standards the Norris family was poor. Cash on hand was always very meager and the family was a large one. But nobody was rich there or then; they lived in the simple abundance of that time and place, and did not consider themselves poor. In July, 1867, less than three years after her husband's death, Mary Mook Norris married a neighbor, Isaac Parker, whom her son later characterized as "an elderly, quiet Pennsylvanian of Dutch blood, and an expert wood-worker." Now the family circle was again complete, and part of the burden was removed from the mother's shoulders. Little is known of this marriage, except that after twenty-five years it ended in divorce.¹³ Norris barely mentions the marriage itself in his autobiography, but devotes many pages to his schooling, labors, and pleasures while at home after his mother's second marriage.

Young Will Norris very quickly assumed his place in the fields, and took pride and pleasure in the work. He developed into a sturdy youngster, and though he was the "favorite" of his mother and his older sisters, there was too much work to be done for him to be coddled in any noticeable way. Every summer during his school years while living at home he worked as a farm hand either on the family farm or on neighboring ones. Long before reaching maturity he was able to do a man's work, having early acquired the strength and ability to perform the most difficult of farm chores. He also became an expert marksman in a place where squirrel hunting was considered a supreme sport.

The family farm was already well stocked with fruit trees: apple, peach, and cherry, yet his mother one warm spring afternoon called

him to assist her in planting another. Will could not understand why his mother toiled to plant a tree when there were seemingly enough trees on the farm and when it probably would bear fruit only after her death. His mother's remark that somebody would see the tree blossom and enjoy the fruit impressed her son. Here was planning and concern for future generations.¹⁴

Will Norris attended the Mount Carmel district school, a mile and one-half from the farm house. He enjoyed school and studied almost every evening by candle light. He remembered his teachers with gratitude and corresponded with some of them in later years. And it was in the classroom that he was introduced to two subjects which would stand him in good stead later on—oratory and parliamentary procedure. From that time on, while pursuing his education, Norris was always active in the debating society, furthering his forensic ability and at the same time increasing his knowledge and understanding of parliamentary procedure.

During his years at the district school, Norris became interested in the law and in politics. He saw cases tried in the courtroom in Clyde and, enjoying this experience immensely, decided he wanted to become a lawyer. Colonel J. H. Rhodes, a local attorney, may have influenced his decision and helped to develop his interest in Republican politics. Will was an ardent supporter of President Hayes, and had followed the entire 1876 campaign through the pages of the *Cincinnati Times*. By devious means he had managed to get to Fremont, the county seat, to hear Hayes deliver his acceptance speech. The rallies, parades, bands, and oratory all aroused his intense partisanship.¹⁵

In the fall of 1877 Emma, Clara, and George Norris appeared in Berea, Ohio, to enroll as students at Methodist-sponsored Baldwin University. John Henry Norris had attended the University between 1858 and 1860. Baldwin advertised itself as an institution "within the reach of the poor young man and young woman."¹⁶ This fact, plus its relatively short distance from home, must have provided an additional impetus to Mary Norris in agreeing to let her children attend. The school was in dire financial difficulties and its campus was not a particularly impressive one. Its president, Dr. Aaron Schuyler, mathematician and writer of textbooks, was an able scholar and wrote the algebra text through which Will Norris struggled. The student body for the academic year 1877-78 numbered 241. Mary Norris would have been delighted to know that the college catalogue commended Berea as a town of "moral salubrity" with "no grog shops or seductive lounging places in the village."¹⁷

The young students in Berea rented the second story of a house

on the edge of town where they proceeded to set up housekeeping, dividing the chores among them. They lived as frugally as possible and devoted most of their time to studying. Norris and his sister Clara were enrolled in the Preparatory Department, while Emma was registered in the College Department. Norris was officially listed as a junior student in the classical course, and his record as a student at Baldwin was outstanding. At the end of the academic year, he received a perfect "10" grade for seven courses and "9.85," "9.8," and "9" for the others. Latin and mathematics were the most important subjects in the classical course of study, although Norris also studied American history, grammar, physiology, and botany.¹⁸

Outside of the classroom, as in Mount Carmel district school, Will participated in the debating society. However, there were now other forms of diversion available, and the sixteen-year-old scholar was quick to seize them. Singing popular songs, engaging in that most important of extracurricular activities, the "bull" session, participating in an occasional prank—these were activities that the young farm boy had rarely been able to indulge in at home. They satisfied his gregarious inclinations, especially after a period of hard academic work.

After a most satisfying year at Baldwin, Norris spent the summer working on the farm. He found this work a bit more arduous after a winter of sedentary activity. Since his funds were exhausted and his mother unable to supply him with any more, Will sought a teaching position for the fall to earn the wherewithal to continue his education. His first teaching job was in the Long School district near Whitehouse in Lucas County, Ohio, where his oldest sister, Lorinda Castle, lived with her family.

Norris enjoyed teaching school. Occasionally, especially in his first job, he had discipline problems, but in most instances his pupils were eager, attentive, and relatively tractable youngsters. Their young teacher was not always a stern, scholarly taskmaster. Living in the community with the family of one or the other of his pupils, he made friends easily. Most evenings he devoted to reading; his determination to become a lawyer was still strong. During the year at the Long School district he spent weekends with his sister in nearby Whitehouse, a gathering place for young teachers in the vicinity. Emma and Clara also spent time with the Castle family. Here the young folk would enjoy the weekend free from the socially imposed restrictions on unmarried schoolteachers in rural villages. Will Norris blossomed forth as an actor in play productions, sang in the various entertainments, and engaged in sprightly conversation, something he was usually unable to do while teaching school or working on the

farm. Also, against his mother's dictates, he learned to dance.¹⁹ Will and the other young teachers, after such pleasant weekends, would return to their students for another week of school.

Having saved as much of the \$150 salary as possible from his teaching position, he declined the invitation to teach the following term. He spent the summer working at home on the farm. In the fall of 1879 he entered the Northern Indiana Normal School and Business Institute at Valparaiso, Indiana. The school, later known as Valparaiso University, was located in the southeast part of town overlooking miles of marshlands. It was administered as a nonsectarian, self-supporting, and self-governing coeducational college, even though it was endorsed by the Methodist Church and Porter County, Indiana. Its president, Henry Baker Brown, an excellent administrator and educator, developed the plant and strengthened the faculty. The institution became known as the 'poor man's Harvard' and in 1914-15 boasted a student body of six thousand, second only in size to that of the older eastern university.²⁰

Two main features characterized the institution: the absence of entrance requirements and the low cost of living. There were four terms of eleven weeks each and a fifth lasting six weeks, so that a student could start or resume his studies at any one of five times during the year. The duration of a course of study leading to a degree depended on the student's previous preparation, but at least one year of residence was required. By eliminating middlemen and purchasing in quantity and by producing some of its own foodstuffs, the school had lowered the cost of living for students and staff. Board and room in Flint Hall cost \$1.40 a week and tuition was \$18 per term.²¹ Norris completed the classical and elocution courses before turning to the law. During his years at Northern Indiana Normal School, Will was one of the more popular students, liked and respected by his peers.²² In 1880, aged nineteen, he received a college degree and was admitted to the law course.

Norris found in Valparaiso the same spirit of social equality and democracy that he knew in Ohio. Few students came from backgrounds that were markedly different from his. Most were serious about their studies, though few were so serious that they would ignore the opportunity to engage in gregarious extracurricular activities. Will joined the debating teams and enrolled in a course devoted to debating. He developed a florid style and learned many of the tricks of oratory that were so prevalent in that period. In this way he increased his self-assurance.

Elocution courses with Professor M. E. Bogarte gave him an op-

portunity to discuss and debate politics. The election of 1880 occurred while Norris was teaching school at Monclova, Ohio, prior to entering law school. He participated as a member of a horse troop in a large torch light parade for James A. Garfield. Garfield was something of a hero to Norris and his assassination moved him deeply. While national politics aroused Norris' intense Republican partisanship, campus politics at Valparaiso were much more important and aroused even more intense partisanship.²³

In keeping with his interest in campus politics and debating, Norris joined the Crescent Literary Society. Every Friday night there was a public program of speeches, essays, and music in which the Crescent and other literary societies participated. Rivalry was keen among societies and within each society. Will Norris and Charley Hyde, representing opposing factions within the Crescent, were chosen as the society's candidates for the oration contests against the other groups. Bitter feeling was intensified and, when Norris won the contest with an address, "The Traitor's Deathbed," Hyde's supporters sought revenge. This they achieved by defeating Norris by one vote in the election for president of the society.

While the Hyde faction was celebrating its triumph, Norris and his nine supporters met to form an organization which would have a great influence on all their lives, the L.U.N.—the Loyal United Nine or, as their opponents called it, the Lunatics Under Norris. The organization, to which no new members could be admitted, was officially launched with a banquet in the Merchants' Hotel at Valparaiso on August 6, 1883. It was agreed that every August the members would have a reunion and a banquet. As the years went by these reunions came to be treasured. Norris and Ermon E. Smith of Dodge City, Kansas, who were the last survivors, attended a total of fifty-nine banquets, the last one in 1941 at Norris' cottage overlooking Rainbow Lake, one of a chain of sixteen lakes near Waupaca, Wisconsin. In the early years of the organization, most of the reunions were held at lake resort areas in Iowa and Wisconsin; in the twentieth century, however, most were held in the L.U.N. cottage overlooking Rainbow Lake. Here the members and their families built summer houses and spent their vacations. Here their children and grandchildren became acquainted and formed friendships that continued after the deaths of the original members.²⁴

The year the L.U.N. was formed was also the year in which Norris obtained his law degree and was admitted to the Indiana bar. Thus in the late summer of 1883, George Norris, age twenty-two, returned to his mother's farm in York Township, Ohio, with a law degree in

his possession and his college years at an end. It must have been a very proud mother who greeted her son on his return from Indiana.

His plans were uncertain. Norris no doubt puzzled over what the future held for him and where he would practice. Colonel Rhodes in Clyde was willing to let him clerk in his law office until he made a decision. Norris accepted this offer. In Clyde he continued his studies and acted as Rhodes' office boy. He also taught a term at Mount Carmel school where he had been a pupil. It was his mother, however, who made the suggestion that brought about his departure from home. Mary Norris, learning of the booming opportunities in the Pacific Northwest from colonizing agents, conceived the idea of selling the farm and starting anew. Her son decided to go to Washington Territory, establish his law practice, and then, if all went well, he would send for her.

Using almost all his savings, Norris purchased a ticket to Walla Walla in Washington Territory and traveled across country on the recently completed Northern Pacific Railroad in an emigrant train—sleepers attached to a freight—from St. Paul. The journey lasted an entire week, and he arrived at his destination tired and dirty with his funds running low. Walla Walla, he quickly decided, was no place for a young lawyer and his aging mother to settle. The town was desolate and uninviting. Land was expensive and jobs were scarce. Norris sought a teaching position to replenish his funds and, accepting the only one available, boarded a train for Bolles Junction in a remote part of the country. Though Bolles Junction appeared on the map to be a sizable community, it was anything but that. He spent his first night there sleeping on the floor in the house of a Mr. Lee, president of the school district. The next day Norris set up housekeeping in a crude shack, formerly used by a maintenance crew on the railroad and now serving as a storeroom for railroad equipment.

The schoolroom was equally crude. Since there were but seven pupils in the district, Norris conducted school only in the mornings. The afternoons he had to himself and often went hunting or fishing with Mr. Lee. Norris found that he still was a crack shot, especially with a revolver. Occasionally on sunny afternoons, he would sit back in his chair at school and fire at woodpeckers who darted in and out of the room.²⁵

Norris was not pleased either with his teaching position or with Walla Walla. He had decided to return east as soon as he could replenish his funds. At the end of the school term he went to the nearby community of Dayton to investigate the possibilities of establishing a law practice. There he managed to get involved with a logging boss

in a quarrel which almost resulted in gunplay. This incident, coupled with his dissatisfaction with his job and location, convinced him once and for all that Washington Territory was not the place for him.

Thus George Norris, at the age of twenty-three, eager to put his legal talents to the test and his training to use, purchased a ticket on the Oregon Short Line and the Union Pacific to the city of Lincoln in the Cornhusker State of Nebraska.²⁶ He chose this state because his mother owned eighty acres of land in Johnson County, in the southeastern part of the state, and because he had a kinsman, David Mook, in the area. It also appealed to him because his late sister Effie had gone there after her marriage. Nebraska now seemed a logical place for the young lawyer to further himself in his chosen career.