

Entering the Progressive Fold

EMERGING as a national figure in 1910, Norris presented a picture of a stockily built man of medium stature with a mass of black hair flecked with grey and a closely clipped reddish brown mustache. His appearance literally bespoke action. He walked briskly, talked tersely and to the point. His chin projected aggressively and his mouth shut in a thin fine line. His left eyebrow drooped deceptively, a result of the old hunting accident, but the sharpness of his eyes belied any implication of listlessness. He dressed simply, if not carelessly, usually in brown or black, and his coat generally fitted badly over a pair of muscular shoulders.

Norris gave the impression of energy personified. He had a queer trick of pursing up his mouth to emphasize points he wished to make. However, in personal appearance he still looked like a country lawyer. Simple in tastes, quiet in dress, he had little to distinguish him outwardly from other small-town business and professional men. His favorite exercise was mowing the lawn and his favorite diversion was reading Dickens' novels.

Whatever fame he had achieved was primarily the result of playing the parliamentary game against almost impossible odds. As a master strategist, he had helped to undermine boss rule in the House. Since believers in good government were engaged in similar struggles throughout the country, Norris and the insurgents conveniently served as a symbol of what a small intrepid group could accomplish. To a generation of Americans most of whom believed that the problems and evils in American life were not of a fundamental nature, Norris and his fellow insurgents showed that the cure lay in the readjustment of the mechanisms. While the reformers in the Senate stressed tariff changes, railroad regulation, and similar social and economic issues, the House insurgents, as previously noted, were split as soon as the question arose of removing Cannon from the Speaker's chair. Norris realized that the relaxation of the House rules provided freer debate. A change in the rules was not a panacea but merely an initial step,

necessary to the full and free confrontation of important social and economic problems.

Despite his sudden prominence Norris remained noticeably unaffected. He did not speak frequently, but when he arose from his seat in the southeast section of the House chamber in the "Cherokee Strip," a Republican pocket amid the abandoned society of Democrats, members listened attentively. Though he appeared to be an average man, and though his actions were not as enthusiastic and emotional as Victor Murdock's, no one doubted that he was a legislator of superior ability.

When not on the floor, Norris spent most of his time in his office, a cigar in his mouth and his heels on the desk. It was there that he pondered the question whether to be a candidate for a fifth term or to seek the Republican senatorial nomination from incumbent E. J. Burkett. From his arrival in Washington in December, 1909, to his departure at the end of June, 1910, Norris was besieged with requests to become a candidate in the senatorial primary. In the beginning he was noncommittal, though he did ask friends to sound out sentiment and keep him abreast of it. He soon learned that Burkett was regarded by progressive Republicans as a mere opportunist, "slippery and slimy Elmer," and that unless the party nominated a progressive candidate, almost any prominent Democrat, such as Bryan or Congressman Hitchcock, "could wipe the earth with Elmer."¹

The appearance of Burkett clubs which passed resolutions criticizing the insurgent movement angered Norris in February almost to the point of committing himself as a senatorial candidate. "If my insurgency is to be a test of my Republicanism," he was quoted as saying, "then I think the sooner we know where we stand the better." Since the primary law permitted voters to express their preference for United States senator, Norris thought seriously of entering the race, though personally, he confessed, he preferred to stay out of the fight.²

While he continued to express distaste for life in Washington, he also insisted that he could not retire or pursue a course that would show any indication of backing down or of cowardice. If he decided for a Senate seat, he intended to delay announcing his decision to keep the primary campaign as short and as inexpensive as possible. This indecision kept the political picture in Nebraska in a state of constant confusion, while Norris, exhausted, depressed, lonely, and ill, mulled the matter over in his mind.³

By June, Norris still had not announced his decision, but he had been talking the matter over with his "insurgent brethren." Almost without exception they urged him to be a candidate for the House and

not the Senate. He also discussed the problem with people outside of Congress, among them Gifford Pinchot. Their advice was practically the same. While all of his confidants invariably said they would have liked to see him in the Senate, they also claimed that because of his role in the rules fight he should remain in the House at least one more term. His district, they said, would be watched by the entire country. When the issue was presented as a challenge to ascertain whether people approved of the insurgents' course, Norris decided it was his duty to seek a fifth term as a representative.⁴

He arrived at this decision in Washington in mid-June, less than two weeks before Congress adjourned. Once it was made, he decided to speak for progressive candidates in some western states before returning to Nebraska and his own campaign. Leaving Washington, Norris felt certain that he would be re-elected in November. The promise of the coming campaign restored his mental outlook and alleviated his mood of depression. Though physically exhausted and desperately in need of a vacation, Norris nevertheless felt that he could thrive on campaigning, especially since he had an important issue to present.⁵

Believing that the welfare and success of the Republican party depended upon progressive members, he was determined to do his part by campaigning for such candidates. He also believed that an organization should be established with this purpose in mind. Thus, after speaking in New York State and elsewhere in the East, early in July Norris departed on a speaking trip through Kansas, Colorado, and Wyoming, and his secretary thought he might also campaign in Oklahoma, Washington, and North Dakota.⁶

On July 12, 1910, Norris' youngest daughter, Gertrude, was quarantined for scarlet fever. Her serious illness cut short his speaking trip. He returned to McCook to be with his family and to get a brief rest before launching his own campaign. McCarl was anxious to get him home, and wanted Norris to visit with friends, editors, and politicians throughout the district before campaigning began early in the fall. Since Norris was the only Republican candidate to enter the congressional primary, no campaign would be necessary until September.⁷

As Republican county conventions chose delegates for the state convention, many also passed resolutions endorsing Norris and his role in attacking Cannonism. Because of the quarantine period, Norris did not expect to attend the state convention at Lincoln at the end of July, though he was anxious for it to adopt a resolution condemning Cannonism.⁸

Progressive Republicans feared that there would be an effort to make the state convention "stand pat" and that Burkett and his followers would try to prevent an endorsement of Norris' work in Congress. Thus progressive hopes soared when on the afternoon of July 25 it was announced that the danger period was just about over and that Norris would be temporarily released from quarantine. Monday evening he boarded the train with the Red Willow County delegation for the convention which would convene the next morning in Lincoln.⁹

At the convention he was defeated by Senator Norris Brown for the position of permanent chairman. The conservative Republican press claimed this setback as a great victory for their cause. Since Norris arrived only a short time before the convention convened and made no serious effort to obtain the post, his defeat was no indication that the delegates were conservative. When John L. Webster, the attorney for the Omaha Street Railway Company and a standpatter, was placed at the head of the Platform Committee, progressive delegates thought that machine control would prevent any endorsement of Norris' work. But Norris himself prevented this from happening. Bypassing the Platform Committee, he secured recognition from the unsuspecting chairman, Norris Brown, and introduced from the floor a resolution condemning Cannonism and at the same time pledging Nebraska Republicans to the support of the insurgent cause. This resolution, which caught Burkett, Rosewater (editor of the *Omaha Bee*), and other standpat leaders offguard, was passed by an overwhelming majority and clearly indicated the temper of most Nebraska Republicans.¹⁰

As soon as he returned from Lincoln, Norris went back into quarantine for more than two weeks. McCarl returned to his campaign preparations and noted with some dismay the increased out-of-state mail. He knew that the National Republican Congressional Committee would not aid Norris with funds and that the state committee would supply little or no aid. Therefore he requested officeholders in the district to send contributions direct to the congressional committee.¹¹

Norris had been too busy with his own affairs to follow Theodore Roosevelt's activities as he prepared for his western trip. On August 23, the day Roosevelt started his trip, Samuel Merwin, the editor of *Success Magazine* in New York, wrote to Norris:

I suppose you know by this time about what is coming from T. R. in his western speeches. Have you seen a copy of his

Osawatomie speech? Confidentially, I read it through last week. While it is sometimes hard to tell from a manuscript just how it is going to sound when it is uttered and started around in the papers, it read to me like one of the most terrific progressive insurgent broadsides we have had so far. Apparently T. R. forced by circumstances as well as by his own temperament into the ranks of the progressives is going about it with his characteristic vigor to try and take the lead on the right side.¹²

Norris, however, did not take notice of Roosevelt's famous speech. Nor did he attend the Roosevelt speech in Omaha several days later; Norris, who had been invited to attend, was speaking in Wisconsin on behalf of La Follette and other progressive candidates whom he had promised to help "in the event the battle became too strong."¹³

Almost all of Norris' speeches during the campaign were on Canonism, a subject of great interest to his audience. It was an ideal topic because it could be presented as a nonpartisan discussion or explanation or, with very little effort, as a partisan campaign speech. Though John M. Nelson, an insurgent colleague, later criticized Norris on the grounds that he "placed himself decidedly in the front seat" and did not mention Nelson's own role in the fight, Norris' speeches and those of other prominent progressives were eminently successful in achieving their main goal—that of assisting La Follette. He was renominated in the September primary by a majority of over 102,000 votes.¹⁴

Norris left Wisconsin on September 3 to speak at a rally in Minneapolis on September 5. From there he went on to Nebraska. En route he was injured slightly in a railroad accident. Though he was hardly up to it, he left McCook on September 14, to begin his own intensive campaign. Norris now refused all out-of-state speaking requests, including one from Hiram W. Johnson, the progressive Republican candidate for governor of California. He remained in Nebraska busily campaigning until election day.¹⁵

Following his usual pattern, Norris generally traveled alone to meetings, stayed at the local hotel, and conferred with local leaders and citizens. McCarl remained in McCook, directing and coordinating the over-all campaign. Toward the end of September he wrote, "Conditions are splendid all over the district." He felt certain that disgruntled and disappointed Republicans would still vote for party candidates and that some Democrats would be likely to cross party lines and vote for Norris. In this campaign there was none of the anxiety and distress so prevalent in 1908.¹⁶

The 1910 campaign in Nebraska was complicated by the liquor issue which disturbed many voters and which Norris avoided in his speeches. When Governor Shallenberger in 1909 signed a law requiring all saloons to close at 8 P.M., he lost all chance of renomination. James C. Dahlman, the colorful ex-cowboy mayor of Omaha and a strong opponent of liquor legislation, obtained the Democratic nomination and campaigned by promising the voters free beer on the Capitol grounds at the time of inauguration. His opponent Chester H. Aldrich supported the Republican plank calling for county option. The Anti-Saloon League gave its support to Aldrich, while Bryan refused to support Dahlman because of his "wet" position. Bryan, a temperance man, favored county option and campaigned for the entire Democratic ticket, except the nominee for governor. The fact that many voters planned to split their tickets because of the liquor question probably benefited Norris by giving him many Democratic votes.¹⁷

Norris' meetings were well attended and his speeches well received. As McCarl noted, "When given an opportunity to get the facts before the people, he usually leaves with more friends than he had prior to his talk." Norris worked hard at campaigning, speaking twice a day for several weeks towards the end of October. But this time he had significant help. While Senator A. B. Cummins of Iowa spoke on three consecutive days at Hastings, Holdrege, and McCook, Congressmen Madison and Murdock from Kansas each devoted two full days to speaking at various points throughout the district.¹⁸

The major criticism hurled against Norris by R. D. Sutherland, also his opponent in 1906, and other Democratic speakers was the fact that he did not vote for the Burleson resolution to unseat Speaker Cannon. Norris, of course, always discussed this matter and explained his position. According to McCarl, once this had been done, the voters invariably approved his course. The Omaha *Daily News* aided considerably by publishing an editorial explaining his position on the Burleson resolution.¹⁹

On the other hand, James A. Tawney, who was in Nebraska in October, saw an account of one of Norris' speeches and was shocked to read that Norris had said Burleson presented a motion to depose the Speaker "after a conference with Representative Tawney, one of Cannon's chief supporters." Tawney claimed that this statement was "absolutely and unqualifiedly false" and hoped that he would correct the impression created by this misstatement of fact. Tawney's letter indicates that Norris may have been embellishing speeches to dramatize his position.²⁰

To prevent Irish-American citizens from voting the straight Demo-

cratic ticket merely to support Dahlman's "wet" position, McCarl asked former Congressman J. J. McCarthy to speak in the district at the close of the campaign. McCarthy gladly accepted.²¹

Norris maintained his stamina and voice throughout the entire campaign. A week before its ending he spoke for almost two hours at a small town in Nuckolls County, and those who attended, Democrats and Republicans alike, said it was the best talk they had ever heard. Then on November 3, five days before election, the Nebraska newspapers printed a strong endorsement of Norris from Senator La Follette, thus undermining Sutherland's charges that Norris was not a true progressive like La Follette. And Congressman Murdock informed Norris that his name had been mentioned in at least eighty-six of the ninety-one speeches he had delivered since leaving Washington. By continuing to fight to change "the vicious system of personal control" in the House, the insurgency revolt, said Murdock, would become "not a passing incident in politics, but epochal in the history of American legislation."²²

Norris returned to McCook on November 7, election eve, and closed his campaign in the Masonic Temple Theater that evening. Norris received a great ovation from the capacity crowd and was visibly affected by the tribute paid him. A visitor claimed that Norris' speech was equal, if not superior, to any given by Senator Beveridge. Norris had now done his part of the job; it remained for the voters to do theirs.²³

The results of the 1910 election in Nebraska gave neither party a decisive victory. Aldrich was elected governor and Republican candidates won all available executive offices. Hitchcock, however, defeated Burkett by almost twenty thousand votes in the preference vote for United States senator, and the Democrats also won a majority in both houses of the state legislature and elected their congressional candidates from three districts. Republican candidates were successful in the fourth, fifth, and sixth congressional districts. Norris rolled up a substantial majority in the Fifth District, defeating Sutherland by slightly more than four thousand votes. He carried all but three of the eighteen counties in the district.²⁴

In McCook, where almost one thousand votes were cast, less than two hundred were registered against Norris. He was elated with his victory since it showed that his constituents approved his course in Congress, but was cautioned against any celebration because there were "too many Republican funerals in the country to make any demonstration."²⁵ In the House the Democrats won a majority of sixty-three seats, while reducing the Republican majority in the Senate

from twenty-eight to eight. The Democrats also elected governors in many traditionally Republican states including New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Jersey, where Woodrow Wilson embarked on his political career. Only in the West, where the progressive movement was rampant, did the Republican party hold its own. Despite the one outstanding progressive defeat—that of Albert J. Beveridge—Miles Poindexter of Washington, John D. Works of California, and Norris' former Washington neighbor and colleague, Asle J. Gronna of North Dakota all entered the Senate and enabled the progressive membership of that body to hold the balance of power. Though Republican leaders expected to suffer reverses in 1910, no one was prepared for the magnitude of the defeat. Only two of the numerous candidates endorsed by Roosevelt were elected to office. Indeed, only the Democratic party could obtain solace from the results of the 1910 elections.

After the election Norris admitted to intimates that he regretted his decision not to enter the senatorial race. He did not comment upon his future course, but was pleased with suggestions that he enter the next senatorial race.²⁶

Since the lame duck session of the Sixty-first Congress was scheduled to convene early in December, Norris was able to spend little time in Nebraska before returning to Washington. His congressional career, which at the outset of 1910 seemed doomed to frustration and oblivion, now seemed to have vast potential as a result of the insurgency revolt and his re-election. Members in the coming session would greet a new, optimistic Norris—a national figure, interested in a wide range of reforms, whose advice and services were sought by progressives throughout the country. The election of 1910 had demonstrated the progressive temper of the citizens of Nebraska and other western states. Victory assured Norris that the voters approved his course and would support him in demanding further reforms. Victory convinced him that with the assistance of a few devoted, hard-working men he could handily defeat a Democratic opponent and surmount opposition in his own party despite his inadequate funds. It also assured him more than ever of his ability to win the senatorial seat. Thus when he left McCook, Norris was much more than the representative of Nebraska's Fifth Congressional District. He was a symbol, soon to become a spokesman as well, for progressive-minded citizens throughout the United States.