

## Chapter 23

# La Follette for President

WHEN not devoting time to congressional matters during the spring months in Washington, Norris turned his attention to Nebraska and his political future. He brought mailing lists up to date and sought suitable lists in other congressional districts. He sent the people on these lists copies of one of several of his speeches—"The Caucus and the Rules," "The Valorization of Coffee," or his views on Canadian reciprocity. The tariff speech was the most popular, but Norris thought it advisable to circulate as well copies of his speech calling for the direct election of senators.<sup>1</sup>

By this time Norris was certain that Taft could not win Nebraska in 1912; only a progressive candidate stood a chance to hold the state in the Republican electoral vote column. Though he had doubts as to the possibility of preventing Taft's renomination, he was encouraged by reports indicating rising sentiment against the president. Like other former Taft supporters, he had lost faith in the president's claim of following the Roosevelt policies. His sympathies and associations, Norris argued, had been with wealthy people despite the fact that the president was a comparatively poor man: "He has never yet known what it is to work or to be dependent upon the sweat of his own face for support." Though Taft had lost the support of "the Cannon and Aldrich machine" on the Canadian Reciprocity Agreement, Norris believed he would make no effort at reconciliation with the progressive members of his party. Norris thought, too, that the president had "a personal dislike, if not a personal hatred" of him, because Taft thought, with some justification, that Norris was one of the individuals responsible for much of his discomfort.<sup>2</sup>

On Sunday, April 30, 1911, Norris and other prominent progressive Republicans in and out of Congress attended a conference in Senator Bourne's office in the Capitol. At this lengthy meeting all agreed that Taft could not be re-elected in 1912, though they conceded that the president probably had, through his control of the federal patronage,

sufficient strength to bring about his renomination. As to the question whether to try to nominate anyone else, all agreed it would be better to make the effort and fail than to make no attempt at all. They agreed, too, that the fight should be made in the name of Theodore Roosevelt, but were promptly informed by Gilson Gardner, a friend of Roosevelt and Washington correspondent of the Scripps papers, that under no circumstances would the former president consent to the use of his name. Senator Cummins then said, "There is but one man who should be considered as the Progressive candidate, and that is Senator La Follette." Once again everyone agreed. Norris promised to do all in his power to further the Wisconsin senator's cause in Nebraska. La Follette, after further discussion, consented to make the attempt, provided funds could be found to support his efforts.<sup>3</sup>

When the Progressive Republican League of Nebraska invited Norris to attend a meeting at Omaha at the end of May, he suggested that if Nebraska emphatically endorsed the candidacy of a progressive Republican her voice would have great influence in the selection of delegates from other states. But he quickly learned that all was not well among Nebraska Republican leaders and that the friction between them involved him. Victor Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Bee*, whom Norris had never regarded as a political friend, claimed he favored Norris for the Senate in 1912. Rosewater had engaged in a bitter patronage quarrel with Senator Norris Brown and now supported Norris as a means of evening the score. Norris was thus pressed to announce his intentions.<sup>4</sup>

Until this time he had been noncommittal, but by mid-June he was more specific about his plans. He expected "in due time" to announce his candidacy, even though 1912 looked like a Democratic year. Norris thought that he could get the nomination but would be defeated by a Democratic landslide in the election. Meanwhile, until an opportune time arose to announce his candidacy, he championed the cause of La Follette and, in this way, kept his name before the voters as the outstanding progressive Republican in the state.<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of these political developments Norris celebrated his fiftieth birthday, an event which caused him to do some serious reflecting on his past, present, and future. He felt that he was now "going down the other side of the hill." In one respect, the financial one, he considered himself a failure. Though he had no desire for wealth and did not believe money to be "the chief object in life," he was disturbed about his inability to provide for his old age. On the positive side, outweighing his financial worries, were his accomplish-

ments and the knowledge that they were appreciated. "The greatest happiness that can come to a man," he said, "is a consciousness of having done his duty fully and fearlessly." <sup>6</sup>

During the special session he had supplemented his income by occasionally delivering speeches. Unwilling to be away from Washington for any length of time, he limited his engagements to nearby areas. He delivered the commencement address at the Rockville High School in Maryland, spoke for the National Progressive League in Pennsylvania and Maryland, and addressed the Winter Chautauqua at Binghamton, New York, and the Boston City Club. His topic at most of these lectures was Cannonism, and audiences were disappointed when he spoke on anything else. <sup>7</sup>

Despite his unwillingness to leave Washington, progressive Republican politicians in Nebraska urged him to return for the state convention in July, announce his candidacy for the Senate, and assume a prominent position in the Nebraska progressive movement. But Norris, using the pressure of legislative duties and lack of funds as an excuse, preferred to watch the fluid political situation from his vantage point on the Potomac. There he could benefit from any feuding that might occur among Nebraska Republicans and at the same time maintain a statesman-like posture that would impress the average voter. <sup>8</sup>

As county conventions chose delegates for the state convention, efforts were made to place Norris supporters on prominent committees. While sentiment for Taft or Norris Brown was not particularly strong, McCarl was worried lest the organization choose a "stand-patter" or a "crazy" progressive as temporary chairman. The Republican press was trying to portray all progressives as this latter type—as radicals. Norris was concerned lest the convention endorse reciprocity and the Taft administration. If it began to take this direction, he intended to go to Lincoln and asked to be placed on the Red Willow County delegation so that he could gain admission on the convention floor if necessary. <sup>9</sup>

Norris' request, however, arrived too late for McCarl to get him on the delegation. The Red Willow County convention on July 19, following the lead of several other conventions, had endorsed La Follette for president and Norris for the Senate. <sup>10</sup> Delegates at the state convention, fearful of an open split in the party, refused to pass any resolution endorsing Taft and his policies. While Norris sentiment was evident, many delegates thought he had done enough for La Follette and too little for himself. All expected an announcement of his senatorial candidacy at any moment. Summing up the convention for his chief, McCarl wrote:

No one seemed to think you had been injured. Everybody seemed to think that you got through fine, considering the fact that you had endorsed La Follette. However, this came from the Taft men. Many of them like you and will do you some good next April. All in all, I am satisfied with conditions at this time. If we can only improve them and not let them get worse.<sup>11</sup>

The sentiment shown at the convention helped Norris resolve his decision. He first informed friends he would announce his candidacy after Congress adjourned, but then changed his plans and made the announcement late in July. His evaluation of the forthcoming presidential race was substantially correct:

It looks as though it is going to be a Democratic year, and unless Taft can be defeated for the nomination and assuming also, that Woodrow Wilson, or some other progressive Democrat is nominated, Nebraska will surely go Democratic by an overwhelming majority, and will very likely carry everything with it on the ticket. I hardly expect La Follette to be nominated. The chances are all in favor of the renomination of Taft, but I think it will pay to make the fight anyway.<sup>12</sup>

Thus when the special session of the Sixty-second Congress ended on August 22, Norris was committed to the cause of La Follette and to a long and arduous campaign for the senatorial nomination. In a sense he had been campaigning since March, 1910, when he forcefully came to the attention of all Nebraska voters. From what he had been able to discern, he believed that sentiment in the state was more united behind his candidacy than behind that of any other candidate for major political office in 1912. On leaving Washington he asserted that he would win the primary by a great majority, but added that the party could avoid disaster only by preventing Taft's renomination.<sup>13</sup>

His first talk was scheduled for Sioux City, Iowa, on September 4. Next he was to speak at the State Fair in Lincoln, following Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson. The secretary, it was announced, would defend the Canadian Reciprocity Agreement and show that duty-free farm products and protected manufactured goods were designed to benefit Nebraska farmers. Norris had hoped the issue would remain in the background until after the 1911 election since it had no place in a campaign for justices of the Supreme Court and members of the Board of Regents. But once Wilson had said he would speak, Norris agreed to present the other side.<sup>14</sup>

Thus on September 6, before several thousand people, he scathingly denounced reciprocity. The speech was similar to others he had delivered on the subject, but familiarity with the topic made it all the more effective. His remarks were frequently interrupted by loud bursts of applause. From this time on until the end of October he spoke throughout Nebraska chiefly on the subject of Canadian reciprocity.<sup>15</sup>

On September 21, Canadian voters turned out of office the government of Sir Wilfred Laurier, responsible for negotiating the reciprocity agreement. The victorious Conservative party abrogated the measure, and President Taft found that his efforts were in vain, his prestige at low ebb, and his party irreparably divided. Norris thought that, despite the defeat of the measure in Canada, voters would still remember with displeasure those who had favored it, Senator Norris Brown among them.

Norris tried to show that free trade in agricultural products was detrimental to the American farmer and that tariffs on such items raised their value. He used wheat as an example and compared its price in different parts of the United States, Canada, and in Liverpool. Farmers, he claimed, were selling wheat on the domestic market and not on the world market; the price outside of the United States was not the American price plus the cost of transportation, but was lower than this total and sometimes lower than the American price itself. As conclusive evidence of the relationship between the presence of tariffs and higher market value, he cited the fact that the day after Canada rejected reciprocity, the price of wheat rose from three to seven cents in every market in the United States. It went down a little in Winnipeg and remained stationary in Liverpool. Through these speeches Norris introduced many a Nebraska farmer to the complexities of tariff legislation and nurtured seeds of hostility toward the Taft administration and the reciprocity measure.<sup>16</sup>

Early in October, Taft appeared in Nebraska on a western tour to arouse sentiment in favor of arbitration of international disputes. On October 1, he spoke in Omaha and Norris was among the guests seated on the stage. The next day a reception was held for Taft in Lincoln, but Norris was not invited to attend this meeting or to travel on the president's train. In order not to seem piqued, Norris sent a note claiming he had other business requiring his attention. The note did not prevent the circulation of reports that he purposely snubbed the president but, having attended the Omaha meeting, Norris felt he had done all that political etiquette required.<sup>17</sup>

Norris' absence at the reception in Lincoln merely heightened the chilly welcome Taft received. Three bands, two hundred Civil War veterans, and six automobiles took part in the procession, and crowds lined the streets. But, an ardent La Follette supporter noted, there was a minimum of applause during the parade and after Taft's speech. The only burst of applause came when the president mentioned Bryan and his support of arbitration treaties. Gilson Gardner reported that 75 per cent of the Nebraska Republicans were for La Follette.<sup>18</sup>

Striving to arouse progressive sentiment, Norris worked under a heavy handicap. He lived in the less populous western part of the state, and had never campaigned in Omaha or in other prominent eastern towns. Another drawback was the fact that progressive sentiment in Nebraska was not yet as vigorous as in Kansas and Iowa, and Nebraska Republicans were more opposed to Taft than they were in favor of La Follette. Norris claimed that "the great common people of Nebraska" were not as progressive as the rank and file he had met in the East. "In all my travels," he explained, "through Pennsylvania and other eastern states, I found that when Republicans were opposed to Taft, they were invariably for La Follette."<sup>19</sup>

On October 16, the Conference of Progressive Republicans convened in Chicago with delegates from thirty states. The resolutions adopted declared that the progressive movement was a struggle on behalf of the people to wrest control of government from representatives of special privilege. To achieve this end they aimed to nominate and elect men who would truly represent popular will and carry out the progressive policies pledged by the Republican party. Favoring a presidential primary law or any other scheme by which the people would gain the right to express their choice, the conference enthusiastically endorsed La Follette's candidacy. The meeting, according to Senator Moses Clapp of Minnesota, "was a most unqualified success."<sup>20</sup>

Although speaking engagements prevented Norris from attending the conference, he did offer some suggestions. He put forth a plan asking supporters for one-dollar subscriptions; this method would improve finances, show voters that funds for the "people's campaign" were coming from the people themselves, and encourage supporters to work for the success of the cause. Norris also suggested the writing and circulating of a pamphlet that would explain La Follette's views and combat the lack of publicity for him in the press. Norris was confident that La Follette could win the Nebraska primary by a

large majority and was gaining admiration and affection for "the little fighting Senator" to whom, he felt, "the progress and advancement of liberty and justice" already owed so much.<sup>21</sup>

Between speeches, he participated in the state campaign, advocating the election of candidates without regard to partisan politics. He argued that no man's vote in 1911 should be controlled by his views on the presidential nominee. Most of these so-called non-partisan campaign speeches, delivered in the southern part of the state, were in answer to those made by Bryan requesting support for all Democratic candidates. Bryan had argued that progressive Republicans could help La Follette's cause by voting the Democratic ticket in 1911. A few voters challenged Bryan to commit himself to La Follette if the Democratic convention in 1912 nominated a conservative candidate. Bryan refused to make such a commitment, though some people claimed his remarks tended in that direction. While Norris was relaxing his political partisanship with every passing year, Bryan was unrelenting in his.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of October, Norris returned to McCook for a brief rest. He spent part of November speaking in Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Montana. Though he would have preferred to speak about other subjects, he was resigned to spending the month discussing Canonism. He knew from previous experience it would be futile to discuss anything else. Whenever possible, he tried to deliver speeches on behalf of La Follette.<sup>23</sup>

With little respite since Congress had adjourned, Norris was busy speaking and making himself known to large numbers of people who knew him only through reputation. He had done little campaigning on his own behalf, preferring to criticize the Taft administration and support the progressive program and principles of the Wisconsin senator. As Congress gathered in December, 1911, Norris seemed willing to have his destiny determined by La Follette's success or failure in Nebraska.

In this campaign as in later ones, Norris made no great effort to appeal personally to Omaha voters, though he did not ignore the population center of the state. He preferred to campaign actively in the farm areas and smaller towns, seeking the rural vote and leaving Omaha to the machine politicians. In this way he was able to maintain freedom from compromises and commitments and to pursue his campaign with a minimum of political interference. But as Congress convened, Norris, though not forgetting politics completely, became absorbed with pressing congressional business and left McCarl in McCook to manage the primary campaign.