

Primary Victory

WITH the perplexing questions of Republican presidential candidates and convention delegates clarified by the end of February, Norris could now pay more attention to the senatorial primary campaign. Remaining in Washington, he watched unfolding events with great interest because of the embittered feelings aroused by the La Follette-Roosevelt controversy.

McCarl reported conditions in Nebraska to be considerably improved. He had returned to McCook early in March from a trip throughout northern Nebraska, where he found men in all walks of life favoring Norris' candidacy. Particularly encouraging was the support businessmen were giving Norris. McCarl had contacted men in the southern and western counties, but had done very little as yet in the populous northeastern part of the state.¹

Norris' chances were also improved by the support of Joseph Polcar, editor of the Omaha *Daily News*. Norris suggested that Polcar alert readers to possible confusion that might arise between the names Norris Brown and George Norris, differentiating between the two men. He wanted Polcar to stress the fact that while Brown stood for machine control, Norris believed in "absolute independence." Norris thought that such stress would create a better impression of the work he was doing in Congress and the odds against which he fought. But unless Brown indulged in a personal attack, Norris had no desire to make an all-out fight against his opponent.²

By early March, F. P. Corrick of the La Follette League had decided that the movement was more important than the man. He tried to maintain a neutral posture and to devote his energies to obtaining funds from all interested groups. His enemies, however, thought he was convinced that Roosevelt would be nominated and therefore did not want to fight lest he lose his chance for patronage.³

Norris agreed with Corrick. In North Dakota, where the first primary of the presidential campaign was scheduled for March 19, supporters of Roosevelt and La Follette were rumored to be very

bitter toward one another. In Washington, leaders on both sides deprecated this feeling but seemed unwilling to compromise to any degree. To avoid a similar occurrence in Nebraska, Norris argued that progressive leaders ought "to take the bull by its horns" and do what was best for the cause, regardless of the wishes of either faction. Since both factions were supposedly striving for the same thing, he thought it foolish that their ranks should be split by a conflict over personalities. Frank A. Harrison disagreed with Norris' position, claiming that there were "a whole lot of La Follette men who would not vote for the Colonel under any circumstances." La Follette's name, he argued, should remain on the ticket until the outcome of the North Dakota primary presented a means of further evaluating his strength.⁴

Further confusion occurred on March 12, when Corrick received a telegram from La Follette announcing that he could not consent to any combination on the delegate slate or to the printing of the name of any other candidate upon petitions or ballots in connection with his own. Corrick burned this telegram, intending to go through with "the compromise ticket business." He explained the Nebraska situation to the Wisconsin senator, noting the steps already taken toward the goal of electing a delegation that would assist in writing a progressive platform at the Republican National Convention, and concluding with a statement that he thought it unwise for any presidential candidate to interfere or attempt to defeat that purpose. Norris agreed that no candidate had the right to dictate what course progressives should take in any given locality.⁵

While he admired La Follette, Norris was grieved at the course he was pursuing. Norris believed that the principal object was to prevent the renomination of Taft by placing a progressive Republican at the head of the ticket, and he had no further intention of supporting a person who was no longer the most available or the most popular candidate. Convinced that he was battling for a principle, Norris wanted to do everything possible to insure its triumph without destroying a candidate's chances by factional strife.⁶

Meanwhile, Norris' campaign was proceeding satisfactorily. There was strong Norris sentiment throughout the state, though McCarl was worried that the newspapers were not paying him sufficient attention. The difficulty, of course, was that extensive interest in the presidential controversy overshadowed the senatorial race. McCarl suggested that Norris improve his newspaper coverage by returning to Nebraska for five or six days before the primary election on April 19. By campaigning in Nebraska, he would compel the newspapers to present his record. By appearing in Omaha, preferably with Roosevelt, Norris

could solve the difficult and as yet untackled problem of appealing to voters in the most populous community in the state. His candidacy thus would be well publicized shortly before the voters made their decision in the primary election.⁷

Despite McCarl's pleading, Norris thought it unwise to return to Nebraska, where he would be in the middle of the La Follette-Roosevelt controversy, and thought he could better serve his cause by remaining in Washington. At this time North Dakota voters went to the polls in the first primary election of the campaign. Out of 49,264 votes cast in the Republican primary, La Follette received 28,620, Roosevelt 19,101, and Taft, 1,543. The results created a sensation in Nebraska. Harrison was besieged by well-wishers assuring him that if La Follette spoke in Nebraska the Roosevelt boom would be "busted." Many observers now believed that La Follette had a good chance of winning the Nebraska primary election.⁸

By the end of March the bitterness that Norris feared became evident in the Nebraska campaign. W. L. Houser, La Follette's campaign manager, delivered a vitriolic speech against Roosevelt. Houser attacked Governor Aldrich in an attempt to force him to request Roosevelt's withdrawal in Nebraska. Norris feared that the La Follette men, who seemed desperate and more anxious to fight Roosevelt than Taft, might attack him. To Norris, some of La Follette's supporters now seemed "insanely mad" and determined to undermine the progressive cause.⁹

In the Wisconsin primary on April 2, the La Follette ticket carried the state by almost three to one over Taft. With no Roosevelt slate in the field, the former president received only 628 votes. Fresh from this victory, La Follette made plans for a vigorous campaign in Nebraska, starting with an evening rally in Lincoln on April 5. McCarl wanted Norris to announce that he would return to Nebraska to help elect progressive Republican delegates. But Norris, convinced that his views on this matter were correct, and convinced that his nomination was fairly sure, did not respond to this suggestion, but remained in Washington continuing his campaign through correspondence.¹⁰

Norris believed his nomination to be assured because he thought the great majority of Republicans to be either for Roosevelt or La Follette. He was convinced that the support for Taft and Brown came from the "old wheel-horses of the party," prominent men in many communities. A stranger observing the political situation in many Nebraska towns might readily conclude that everybody was for the administration ticket, but closer observation, Norris believed, would reveal deep and bitter resentment toward the Taft administration. In

his own case, Norris surmised that while the voters did not actively dislike his opponent, they wholeheartedly approved Norris' own aggressive stand on important issues. The fact that some postmasters—appointed by the regular Republican organization—offered to contribute to his campaign convinced Norris he could capture the votes of Taft supporters as well. Because he was against reciprocity while Brown favored it, Norris was virtually assured of the farm vote.¹¹

La Follette conducted an arduous four-day campaign in the state beginning on April 5. To the relief of Norris and other worried observers, he did not stoop to personalities but discussed issues. Indeed, he endorsed Norris in all of his speeches except that in Omaha, where he erroneously supported Brown until he was told of his mistake. La Follette canvassed the state with six other speakers, including his daughter, Fola. No one launched a personal attack on Roosevelt.¹²

As reports of La Follette's tour reached Norris, his anxiety about bitter factionalism in the progressive camp eased considerably. La Follette was well received in Nebraska. Traveling by automobile over dusty country roads, he spoke in the open air and had to contend with wind and dust. But he spoke well and, though somewhat hoarse, made a good impression. In Sutton, in the Fifth Congressional District, he gave Norris a strong recommendation, whereupon the audience cheered and threw hats in the air. If similar sentiment existed throughout the state, a friend assured him, "you would go in a whooping."¹³

As the primary campaign moved toward its climax, McCarl stepped up his activities by taking frequent trips. While most of the reports he received claimed that Norris' prospects were good even in Omaha, he did not know whether to believe them completely. He explained his dilemma:

Well, I have been having a hell of a time. Possibly you have an idea it isn't a job to try to perfect a sort of a working organization in about seventy-five counties in which you don't know a total of fifty people. Well, that's been my job and I have been working at it for many long, weary days, but I believe I am getting things in rather good shape, hope so anyway.¹⁴

Norris had begun to worry about the effects upon his candidacy of the Roosevelt-La Follette controversy. La Follette had repeatedly endorsed him, but Norris knew he would lose a great deal if Roosevelt ignored him when he spoke in the state. If, on the other hand, Roosevelt also endorsed Norris, his senatorial nomination would be assured. With Roosevelt scheduled to speak on April 17 and 18, just before the

primary, tension mounted. The day before the former president was to appear, Norris received an urgent telegram from Aldrich requesting him to issue a statement calling upon La Follette men to support Roosevelt in order to prevent a division of the progressive forces and a Taft victory. Norris wired back, "Such advice should be given by state Progressive League not by me."¹⁵

Governor Aldrich was concerned about a story in the Sunday *State Journal* of April 14, reporting that Norris had advised Nebraska Republicans to vote for La Follette "first, last and all the time." Norris issued a flat denial and so informed R. B. Howell, who was traveling with Roosevelt. Whether Roosevelt learned of this denial is not known, but the former president did not endorse Norris when he spoke in Nebraska.¹⁶

Norris did not expect Roosevelt to speak in his behalf. He did not think it right to ask him to take any part in local elections. If Roosevelt chose to endorse him, he would be more than pleased, but under no circumstances would he request such support. Norris would not publicly endorse either of the progressive presidential candidates for fear of losing some of his own supporters. He believed that a vote for La Follette in Nebraska might be construed as half a vote for Taft, but thought that most progressives would vote for Roosevelt.¹⁷

Friday, April 19, saw 133,603 voters go to the polls in Nebraska to cast their primary ballots. The total number of males of voting age in 1912 was 364,132. The percentage of those voting at this primary was 36.69 which compared with 28.38 per cent at the first primary in 1907. Though the returns came in slowly, it was soon evident that Roosevelt would win by an overwhelming majority. He received 46,795 votes to 16,786 for La Follette and 13,341 for Taft. Thus all sixteen of the state's Republican delegates would support his candidacy at the Chicago convention. Norris' majority was not as impressive as the former president's. He defeated Brown by more than five thousand votes, 38,893 to 33,156, while Aldrich and Howell, progressive Republicans, defeated their more conservative opponents for governor and national committeeman by more substantial majorities. In the Democratic primary Champ Clark won the Nebraska delegation, while Norris' first congressional opponent, former Governor Shallenberger, was designated to be his opponent in the senatorial campaign.¹⁸

Messages of congratulation poured in upon McCarl in McCook and Norris in Washington. Norris was delighted to learn that he had acquired a substantial lead long before returns from distant western counties, which he was almost certain to carry, began to arrive at

party headquarters in Lincoln. He carried Douglas County, in which Omaha is located, by a small majority, though it had been predicted that Brown would carry it by a 2-to-1 majority.¹⁹

While others were happy or sad depending on the fate of their favorite candidates, McCarl and Norris had little time for emotion. McCarl immediately started preparations for the coming campaign, while Norris was still involved with congressional duties. But he too was looking ahead, particularly to the Republican convention in Chicago, where he predicted a fierce fight to nominate Roosevelt. Now that the former president had won so impressive a primary victory, Norris openly endorsed his candidacy as representing the desire of the overwhelming majority of Nebraska voters.²⁰

The La Follette supporters in Nebraska, more than any other group, had reason for bitterness and recrimination. They had started a movement which others would now direct and control. Frank Harrison offered no excuses; they were overwhelmed by the Roosevelt bandwagon. He did point out, however, that La Follette had done very well in communities where he had spoken, and that railroad workers had stood by his candidacy. He also claimed that "Aldrich men knifed Norris all over the state," and that consequently the senatorial race had been much closer than originally anticipated. But Harrison observed the result was "good enough for Norris" who had straddled the presidential issue.²¹

Thus Norris, though his majority was the smallest among candidates seeking state-wide Republican nomination, successfully crossed the first hurdle in his race for a seat in the Senate. While Senator Brown had been generally consistent as a progressive, his friendship for President Taft was the weak spot in his armor. At various times he had resolved doubts by standing with the president. He had not been slavish about it, and more often than not he had voted with the progressives. But on the Payne-Aldrich Tariff and the Canadian Reciprocity Agreement, issues which aroused much antipathy in Nebraska, Brown had supported the president on the final vote.

On the other hand, Norris, as a congressman, was regarded as one of the staunchest fighters for the progressive cause. He was one of the prominent victims of the administration's attempt to ruin the progressives politically by withdrawing patronage. He had been the leader of the fight against Cannon and machine rule in the House, a firm friend of the farmer, and a leading figure in the fight against reciprocity with Canada.²² Voters in Nebraska knew and understood this. In the primary they chose Norris despite the fact that he was per-

sonally unknown in the larger communities of the state. Undoubtedly the deciding factor was Brown's friendship with Taft and Norris' opposition to the administration; Nebraska Republicans in 1912 wanted nobody suspected of friendship toward the Taft administration.