

Chapter 5

The Family Man

DURING the campaign, the ensuing litigation, and general confusion following his contested victory, George Norris was too busy to fully enjoy his infant daughter, Hazel. Since Mrs. Norris had previously given birth to a stillborn child, the parents were especially delighted with Hazel, born in January of 1895. In February of 1897 another daughter, Marian, blessed their household. Pluma Norris proved herself a devoted wife and mother and the family circle was a very happy one.

After her mother's death in 1894 Pluma found the house too large for the needs of her family. Norris had difficulty selling the property because of the depression, but at the end of the century he was finally able to make a satisfactory arrangement. The family then moved to a house more suitable to its needs in McCook, the seat of neighboring Red Willow County.

Though he was busy with judicial and family responsibilities, Norris did not ignore his mother in Ohio. Whenever he went east, usually to attend IOOF conventions, he arranged to visit with her and his nearby sisters. He spent the entire month of August, 1896, visiting with his mother on the family farm and seeing old acquaintances in Clyde and other nearby communities. In 1897 his mother and a sister vacationed in Nebraska.¹

In 1892 his mother had divorced Isaac Parker, charging him with gross neglect of duty on the grounds that he did not adequately provide her with clothing and other necessities.² In order to ease the financial burdens of his mother, who was allowed to resume the name of Norris, her son suggested that she apply for a pension as the needy mother of a gallant soldier who had died for his country.³

Norris was solicitous about his mother's welfare and continually inquired about her in his letters to Melissa, who lived in Clyde. Mary Norris, after her divorce, claimed that she wanted to sell the farm and spend the remainder of her days in Nebraska. But because of her

failing health, the lack of a good offer for the farm, and her son's financial difficulties, she made no effort to move.⁴

By the end of the century Mary Norris was living with her daughter Melissa. She made periodic visits back to the farm, which was then operated by a tenant, and delighted in the atmosphere. She examined the fruit trees, drank in the balmy spring air, and tasted the fruit as it ripened. She discussed the prospects of the wheat crop with the tenant. Visits to the farm made her nostalgic and she talked about moving back to the old place and selling or renting the fields to nearby farmers so that she could live in the house. Her health, as she approached her eighth decade of life, was slowly deteriorating, and frequent colds depleted her strength. Her interest in her grandchildren was great, and she was full of advice on how to raise them. After a trip to Ohio in 1897, Hazel talked for months about her grandmother and was eager to visit her again whenever the opportunity arose.⁵

As a thirty-four-year-old judge, Norris found that his greying hair and recently grown beard helped to give him a more mature appearance, and made him a known figure as he traveled through the eight-county judicial district. On formal occasions he wore a wing collar, though he avoided it whenever possible in the interests of comfort. He was not yet sporting the cigar which characterized his congressional career, but was experimenting with pipes during this period. Since he preferred thinner soled shoes than he could buy in Beaver City, he bought his shoes, along with baby furniture and other items, from a mail-order catalogue.⁶

Norris enjoyed music, and after his marriage he rented and later purchased a piano. Now he could enjoy to the utmost an evening at home with friends, neighbors, and later children to harmonize with his baritone voice. Together they sang what later generations would call "the old favorites." Effervescent water and lemon sour which he ordered in Iowa added to the merriment on these occasions. It is interesting to note that shortly after he purchased a piano, Norris tried to sell his pool table, probably a relic of bachelor days.⁷

During the difficult years of the 1890's, Norris increased his library and kept abreast of current events. He purchased many law books, although shortly after his election to the bench, he was forced to sell a number of them to the West Publishing Company in order to pay his debts to that firm.⁸

Besides local newspapers, Norris subscribed to the *Nebraska State Journal*, published in Lincoln, which he relied upon for state and national news. To obtain a volume of letters by his favorite humorist, Petroleum V. Nasby, he subscribed to the *Toledo Weekly Blade*, which

offered the volume. To obtain a Lincoln volume, he subscribed to the *North American Review*. He received other national periodicals, such as the *Literary Digest*, and much children's literature to encourage his youngsters as they learned to read. During the expansionist decade of the 1890's, he became so interested in Hawaii that he entered a subscription for the Honolulu *Advertiser*. Thus, in Beaver City, George Norris achieved what he had missed on the Ohio farm: the solace of music, an entrance to the world of literature, and a broader perspective on current events.⁹

During their residence in Beaver City, the growing family experienced the usual illnesses, aches, and pains. Since Norris had to be away from home for long periods of time (when court was in session he rarely managed to remain at home for more than a week), he was concerned about Pluma and the children if they were ill. In September of 1896 Norris himself was bedridden for several weeks with a lame back which mended very slowly.¹⁰

In March of 1897 the entire family, including the hired girl, came down with an affliction that kept Norris too busy attending sick people to open his mail. Confusion and chaos reigned in the household. In February of 1899, every member of the family, except Norris, again became sick. Pluma remained ill over a month and by mid-April she still had not fully recovered. In May, Norris used a railroad pass provided by Morlan to take her to Lincoln to seek further medical attention and to have her dental work done.¹¹

When his family was in its usual good health, Norris looked forward to brief visits at home when court was in session. He relished the longer intervals when it was not in session. Norris was indeed a doting parent, watching with pleasure the development of his two daughters, Hazel and Marian. He wrote, "No sweeter nor nicer girls have the privilege of residing on this earth." Hazel looked so much like him that he claimed, "If she belonged to any other family than the one of which I am the head it would be a good cause for divorce from me." By the end of the century Hazel was taking an interest in the community and was terribly concerned about the health of a barefoot boy who went by the house, while Marian, a healthy and chubby three-year-old, talked the family almost to distraction.¹²

A few diversions also took Norris away from the family circle. Trips to IOOF conventions were an example, though Norris usually deposited his family with his mother or sister in Ohio before proceeding to the convention city. Before the children were born, Pluma and George in June of 1893 had a wonderful trip to the Chicago Fair. On the Fourth of July and other such occasions Norris indulged his

oratorical talents, keeping his name before the public in a favorable way. The L.U.N. reunions, another diversionary activity, soon came to be a family affair as the members appeared with their wives and children.

It was the pressure of world events, particularly the Spanish-American War, that threatened most ominously to take Norris away from his family. He wanted to enlist and undoubtedly could have obtained a field commission, but he knew it would probably shorten his mother's life if a second son went to war. Norris was grateful that his judicial duties overwhelmed him with work at this time. He wrote to a sister, "I am afraid I will get the war fever if I am not kept busy." Though he supported the war and its results, he did not let them preoccupy his thoughts. He contributed twenty-five dollars to help pay the traveling expenses of the First Regiment Nebraska Volunteers, which had participated in crushing the forces of Aguinaldo in the Philippine Islands.¹³

Norris' major diversion, aside from his children, was the organizational life in which he participated. Occasionally this became so time-consuming that it ceased to be a diversion. But usually he delighted in it and formed many lasting friendships. In an indirect way it aided his political ambitions; lodge brothers had supported him in all of his campaigns and would continue to do so in the future. Membership in various organizations gave him a wide range of contacts throughout the state, while fraternal activities enabled him to travel and renew these acquaintances. The IOOF, the Odd Fellows, was the organization to which he devoted most of his attention while a resident of Beaver City. At the outset, Norris participated in Knights Templar conclaves in Holdrege, but by the time he became a judge his free time was almost exclusively devoted to IOOF affairs. He served as a delegate to the Sovereign Grand Lodge from Nebraska in the IOOF and attended annual sessions of that body in Boston and Detroit. In 1896-97 Norris served as Grand Master of the Odd Fellows in the jurisdiction that included Nebraska and part of South Dakota. This job, he estimated, consumed about three-fourths of his time, and he was thankful as his term drew to a close. His active interest in the IOOF declined after his service as representative to the Sovereign Grand Lodge. This was a position to which he was elected without opposition and by acclamation, an extraordinary occurrence and one which Norris deeply appreciated. His experiences, which he never explained, in the Sovereign Grand Lodge had not been what he anticipated; he became disillusioned and had no desire to be re-elected. By the end of the century Norris, though a member of several fra-

ternal and benevolent associations, was no longer an active participant in any of them.¹⁴

Other than his election as a judge, most aspects of Norris' adult life in Nebraska were not very different from those of other young western lawyers. His interest in politics, concern with family, and participation in various organizations were and still are typical of lawyers in small towns throughout America. The office of county prosecuting attorney was and still is for many lawyers the first rung on the ladder of political advancement. Typical too, during this decade of drought and depression, were the financial problems and accompanying worries. After 1896 his affairs, like other people's, began to ease owing to the return of adequate rainfall, good crops, and, according to Republican politicians, "McKinley Prosperity."

When Norris was elected to the bench he was heavily in debt and was preoccupied for several years with the need to pay off these obligations. He owned property on which he had realized very little and which he either hoped to sell or to rent profitably. His salary as a judge was \$2,500 a year, and by 1897 he was able to pay the premiums on \$9,600 worth of life insurance.¹⁵ The struggle to get out of debt was a long and difficult one. Throughout his life the memory of it and the fear of its recurrence made Norris conservative about fiscal affairs. This conservatism and his belief that no one should spend more than his income were noted in his public life from that time on.

Meanwhile, though on the bench, Norris maintained a lively interest in his business transactions. Though he could no longer engage in the mortgage-loan business, he continued to speculate—to buy and sell real estate and to manage various holdings for himself and for members of his family. When he first came to Nebraska he borrowed money from some of his sisters. Later he invested funds for them. When he was heavily in debt he again borrowed money from his sisters, though he never told his mother of his financial embarrassment.¹⁶

Because of his financial difficulties, Norris tried to sell some of his land. During the campaign of 1896 he found it unsalable because of the political excitement. It was equally difficult to borrow money on land; one company wrote, "If McKinley is elected, we think we will be in the market but we do not care to make any investments while there is an uncertainty as to what kind of money a person will be paid back in." Norris was also informed by one of his creditors that unless McKinley was elected, he would have to pay his note when due and could expect no extension. After McKinley's election, he was able to renew it on generous terms.¹⁷

When his land was occupied by a farmer, Norris usually helped decide what crops would be raised. He preferred alfalfa and sometimes gave instructions on how to plant it. When the crops were harvested, Norris received an "owner's part of the crop." At times, he would write to the Department of Agriculture making inquiries and requesting seed samples.¹⁸

Occasionally he had to take legal action against land purchasers who did not make payments on their notes. He did this only after giving repeated extensions and accepting numerous promises which were not fulfilled. When a case came to court Norris preferred, if possible, to reach a compromise solution. In one instance, a pair of debtors unable to meet their obligation assigned him some of their real estate in Beaver City. Other debtors made other arrangements. By 1898 conditions had improved so much that Norris told Miles, "Good level land on the bottom suitable for alfalfa cannot be bought anywhere in Furnas County for much less than \$20.00 per acre and most of it is higher than that." Moreover, if the 1898 crops were good, real estate anticipated "the greatest rush" in the history of the short-grass country by the spring of 1899. Consequently Norris urged Miles to purchase land, and he tried with whatever funds he could scrape together to obtain either land or mortgages.¹⁹

Renting space in the Norris Block was a continuing and embarrassing problem. The empty building stood as a monument to Norris' lack of financial wisdom. After the failure of the Furnas County Bank, he assumed ownership of its safe and other fixtures; these he offered to sell to a prospective buyer if he would agree to establish a new bank and rent the space at a reduced rate. This plan, however, met with no success. Another office in the building was left vacant when its occupant, a doctor, left town without paying his rent, suggesting that Norris collect it from patients whose accounts were unpaid. However, by March of 1898 the building was fully rented and Norris' financial worries declined. He now was able to liquidate his obligations and derive some income from his real estate holdings.²⁰

His most perplexing and difficult financial problem, while not fully settled at the end of the century, had turned out far better than he had expected. The death of Pluma's mother had left Norris with two items to dispose of—the Beaver City mill and the house in which the family was living.²¹ The family resided in the latter until 1899 when it was finally sold, after a long search for a buyer.

The history of the mill was more complicated. In 1888 Pluma's father had given a mortgage to James H. Tallman on 240 acres of land for \$2,500. This land contained Lashley's original residence, the

mill, a barn, a small house for a tenant, and other improvements. At Lashley's death in 1890, his widow inherited the mill and the buildings and assumed the mortgage. Pluma's brother, Charles P. Lashley, inherited the balance of the property, which Norris later bought from him. The deed of conveyance distinctly stated that he was not to pay any part of the mortgage. The mill property, believed to be worth about ten thousand dollars, consisted of the buildings and the water power, mill race, and dam, and twenty acres of land. The mill was almost at the center of the twenty acres. At the time of her death, Sarah Lashley had not paid off the \$2,500 mortgage, and it was this mortgage which caused the difficulty in settling the estate.²²

When Mrs. Lashley and later owners sold the mill property, the conveyances all stipulated that the grantee assumed and agreed to pay the \$2,500 mortgage. The owners in 1898 had improved the property and were beginning to show a profit on its operation. They were, however, unable to pay the mortgage, and the holder, after several extensions, was about to begin foreclosure proceedings in March, 1898.

At this point Norris, after borrowing funds from Miles, suggested a compromise. He proposed to pay \$2,000 cash for the assignment of this mortgage, but before this offer was accepted Norris bought the mill outright from the owners. He then offered the property for sale at \$4,000. Unable to locate a purchaser, he accepted the offer of George Shafer, who gave him a note for a half interest in the mill. With the help of Miles, the partners then installed modern machinery and renovated the mill. Shafer handled its management, but Norris took a lively interest in it.²³

Drain though the will was on his time and energy, Norris was learning, almost against his will, about milling. By the summer of 1899, business was so good that the partners could not meet the demand for their flour. They installed a gasoline engine so the mill could always operate at capacity. When Norris returned to Beaver City after holding court, he immersed himself with mill business until he had to depart for another court session at another county seat. The income from the mill undoubtedly assuaged Norris for the need to work even during brief respites from judicial duties.²⁴

By the end of 1899, Norris and his partner agreed to rent the mill if the right man could be found. Since the partners had spent over twenty-five hundred dollars in repairs, neither was willing to sell at a price that attracted potential buyers. The best means of getting back their investment and making a profit, they thought, was to rent the property to an experienced miller. Such a person was W. W. Tallman,

who had previously worked at the mill when Norris first came to Beaver City. Norris had faith in Tallman's experience and ability and hoped eventually to sell the property to him. Thus when Norris moved from Beaver City to McCook in 1899, arrangements were being made to rent the mill,²⁵ and a costly, complicated, and contentious problem seemed to be on its way toward a satisfactory solution.

Though the mill consumed most of his spare time, it helped relieve Norris' financial embarrassment. In the twentieth century private business matters would not preoccupy him to the extent they did at this time. As he moved on to the national scene, Norris' financial position became more comfortable, though he rarely could afford luxuries of any kind. Fortunately his tastes were simple and moderate, and he was able to provide for the modest needs of his family without suffering the pangs of anxiety and the curse of debt he had experienced in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

By 1900 he was paying off his long-standing obligations, receiving his greatest pleasure from settling accounts with his L.U.N. friends. He returned the money formerly borrowed on his life insurance and increased the amount he held—a final measure of his improving financial status. In November, 1899, he took out an \$8,000 policy with the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York, acknowledging the fact that he was beginning to experience the prosperity that seemed to be pervading the United States. With his private life now on a financially secure basis, Norris could devote a greater portion of his time and energies to his career as judge of the Fourteenth Judicial District of the State of Nebraska.²⁶