

Greater Tragedy and Readjustment

THE YEAR 1901 started auspiciously enough for George Norris. While holding court for Judge H. M. Grimes in North Platte in the Thirteenth Judicial District, Norris was pleased to receive a letter from State Senator E. N. Allen informing him that if the bill recently introduced in Congress providing for another United States district judge for Nebraska was enacted, he would procure for Norris the endorsement of as many members of the state legislature as possible. Though the proposal came to naught, it revealed that other office-holding Republicans deemed him worthy of a higher office than the one he occupied.¹

He planned to adjourn court in mid-February for two or three weeks so that he could be on hand when Pluma had her baby. Since court was held in McCook prior to adjournment, he was able to be at home for at least a month prior to the birth of the baby. Early in March Norris canceled the coming term of his court because "there was nothing of great importance" on the docket. This cancellation enabled him to spend at least two more weeks in McCook after the baby arrived.²

On March 21, 1901, a third daughter, Gertrude, was born to the Norrises. Five days later Pluma, age thirty-seven, was dead and Norris was left with three little girls. The suddenness of her death again threw the household into chaos and made it impossible for more than a few friends to attend the simple funeral held in the parlor of the Norris home. Once again Norris was overcome with grief, and had to rely on others to attend to the necessary details and arrangements.³

Overwhelmed though he was, Norris had too much to do and too many pressing and immediate matters to handle to give full vent to his sorrow. He bore his loss remarkably well, considering his reaction to his mother's death the previous year. By April he had recovered enough to tackle some of his legal correspondence.

Fortunately for the family, Norris' sister Emma came from Toledo to live with them in McCook. After the nurse left, Emma devoted most of her time and attention to the newborn infant, and Norris hired a girl

to perform the remaining household chores. Emma, however, supervised, if she did not perform, all the necessary activities. The children liked her, and Norris felt no undue anxiety when he left home. He knew his family was under loving and capable surveillance.⁴

To complicate matters even more at this trying time, Hazel, age six, broke her arm. Then Pluma's sister in Arkansas, who had been unable to attend the funeral, wrote requesting various heirlooms and other items that had been borrowed from her. She stated that she was glad he had decided not to break up his home, but, if he ever changed his mind, she wanted to care for the children.⁵

By July the hired girl had left and Norris had to find someone to help his sister manage the household. Despite his difficulties, he was determined to provide a home for his daughters. Under no circumstances would he send them to live with relatives. This summer, as in the previous one, he turned down all invitations to deliver public addresses. But this summer he did make plans to attend the annual L.U.N. meeting, and in August he was again chosen as a delegate to the Sovereign Grand Lodge IOOF.

Household arrangements proved so satisfactory that shortly after Pluma's death Norris was able to pick up the threads of his disrupted life. A year later Emma went to Ohio for an operation and placed baby Gertrude with another sister in Ohio until she had recovered and was able to return to McCook. Norris took care of Hazel and Marian until her return and claimed that he and the children got along very well without any supervision, though they had the help of another hired girl.⁶

Since smallpox was rampant in parts of his judicial district, Norris canceled three sessions of his court in 1901.⁷ Unable to drown his sorrows in judicial work, he turned his attention to financial affairs. He did not philosophize, as he later did, about death, nor did he seem in any outward way unduly affected by his great loss.

It was at the end of September in a letter to United States Senator Dietrich that Norris inadvertently revealed some of his anxieties and inner tensions. He commented on his recent loss, his heavy insurance burden, and other debts. He explained that he found the expenses connected with his office unduly heavy and his salary hardly adequate. It was with the hope of increasing his income that he inquired of the senator about judicial or legal positions available in the Philippine Islands. By changing his environment and by plunging into a new job, Norris hoped to solve his financial problems and begin a new existence. Dietrich, however, was unable to aid him, chiefly because Norris knew

no Spanish. The matter was never brought up again, although Dietrich later helped him get elected to Congress.⁸

In the fall there was politics to absorb and interest him, but the 1901 campaign was not a major one. In August, Norris attended the Republican State Convention at Lincoln where he met United States Senator J. H. Millard and other high officials in the party. During the campaign, he worked for the Republican ticket by conversing with candidates and voters, but he did not participate in any formal way. The campaign, despite the dry weather and hot winds, was unexciting, even for an off-year election. The fusion movement was waning and Republican candidates easily won the few state-wide posts available. In the short-grass country the party recaptured county and local offices from Populist or Democratic incumbents. The lone exception to this pattern in the Fourteenth Judicial District was in Gosper County where Populists maintained all but three of the offices at stake in the election.⁹

Once the campaign was over and Norris saw how handily the Republicans won, he rather regretted that he had not become a candidate for Supreme Court judge. He consoled himself by reflecting that service on the Supreme Court would have meant working much harder for the same pay. The only object in seeking such a position, he mused, would be to enlarge and improve his practice in the future—since Norris presumed that he would eventually drift back into private law practice.¹⁰

Thus as the year 1901 drew to a close George Norris, who had previously envisioned better things for himself in the new century, found himself in a rut. Trying to raise three daughters after the sudden death of his wife, holding court and tending to numerous fraternal and financial matters, he was active enough. But his expenses were exceeding his income and this worried him. Furthermore, though he found satisfaction in his work, his children, and his friends, there was something missing; he was not being challenged to the full extent of his ability. Given his ambition, a larger stage than the Fourteenth Judicial District was necessary to make full use of his talents and compensate for the loss of his wife. He had inquired about the possibilities of judicial or legal work in the Philippine Islands and had regretted that he did not seek the Supreme Court nomination; now he would have to bide his time and make sure that he did not let the next opportunity bypass him.

At least until early in 1902 Norris' life did not markedly differ from the pattern that it had previously followed. Court sessions kept him away from home. With his sister's help he was maintaining a home for

his children, although the household did not always run smoothly. Most of the hired girls neglected their chores, and Emma, whose health was not of the best, had to perform their work as well as her own.¹¹

The mill at Beaver City was an old problem which he hoped to solve by selling the property. No purchaser appeared and by the summer of 1902 Norris and Shafer were willing to sell it on almost any terms, allowing payments to be made to suit the purchaser. They were anxious to get rid of what they now considered a "white elephant." To add to Norris' anxiety, in January, 1902, there was a fire in Beaver City that burned out nearly all the south side of the square except the Norris Block, which was slightly damaged.¹²

During this period, Norris became interested in the school systems of Beaver City and McCook. He met an attractive McCook teacher, Ella Leonard, and tried unsuccessfully to persuade her to accept a position in the Beaver City schools. In April, 1902, Norris was elected to the McCook School Board, and, seeing Miss Leonard more frequently, he soon began to take a more personal interest in her.¹³

Seeking a greater outlet for his talents and ambitions, Norris, early in 1902, had "practically decided" to seek the Republican congressional nomination. Fletcher Merwin, editor of the *Beaver Valley Tribune* and one of the few persons to whom Norris had confided this decision, was sure that he would win not only the nomination but the election as well.¹⁴ Though only one Republican had been elected from the congressional district since its creation in 1892, and though he had served but a single term, Merwin's optimism was not entirely misplaced. Since 1900 the Republican party had been wresting political power throughout Nebraska from the hands of the Democrats and Populists. W. S. Morlan, who had never held public office and was considered by some to be a tool of the Burlington and Missouri, had been defeated in the congressional campaign in 1900 by less than five hundred votes. With Republicans in control of the national, state, and many county governments, and with Norris' impressive 1899 judicial victory in mind, Merwin had a basis for optimism in his realistic appraisal of the political situation.

Since Morlan had previously let it be known that he did not intend to seek the congressional seat again, Norris now had an opportunity to announce his own candidacy. Merwin agreed to make the initial announcement in the columns of the *Tribune*. Norris, however, requested that Merwin make no mention of Morlan's decision not to run. He believed that other papers would bring this out and that, if the

first announcement of his candidacy noted Morlan's decision, it might appear to Morlan's enemies that he was running with Morlan's approval and backing.¹⁵

Before the story of his candidacy appeared, Norris was busy laying the groundwork for his nomination. He wrote numerous letters to prominent Republicans throughout the eighteen-county congressional district which embraced all of southwestern Nebraska and several southcentral counties. He claimed that he had been urged by "quite a large number of Republicans in different parts of this Congressional District" to enter the race. He said that he would take no offense should any individual oppose his candidacy, but that he preferred to know in advance how his correspondent felt about it. Norris, as in the past, did not wish to engage in a political fight unless he felt reasonably assured of attaining his goal.¹⁶

As he prepared for the contest, Norris thought he would be the only candidate from the western end of the district and that he would probably have the support of the delegates from the eight counties comprising his judicial district. He requested Judge H. M. Grimes in the Thirteenth Judicial District, a small portion of which was in the Fifth Congressional District, to keep him informed of political sentiment in this area. When Grimes replied that he too was about to enter the congressional race in his district, Norris wrote back, explaining what he believed to be true in his own case as well: "Your judicial district will go with you . . . and with that judicial district at your back I do not believe there will be any difficulty in getting the nomination."¹⁷

Along with party workers, Norris contacted lawyers and bankers who, through their daily work, usually came in contact with large numbers of people. He concentrated his efforts on his judicial district, convinced that if delegates from these counties went to the convention solidly in his favor, the nomination was assured. He continued through correspondence and courthouse conversations to let as many Republicans as possible know of his candidacy, while claiming that he had no intention of making a personal canvass for delegates. And whenever a correspondent's reply was encouraging, Norris suggested that he talk to the Republicans in his particular precinct and use his influence in securing a delegation favorable to his candidacy. In this way, while maintaining an impassive pose, Norris worked incessantly for the nomination.¹⁸

Late in March one development made Norris realize he would have to engage in a more vigorous campaign. Morlan came out in favor of State Senator Allen of Furnas County, and, in Frontier County, a

Dr. Andrews announced his interest in obtaining the nomination. By backing both Allen and Andrews, Morlan seemed determined to prevent Norris from receiving the nomination.

Since Morlan was the chief railroad attorney in the area, his opposition could be damaging. It meant that Norris would be unable to obtain passes while his opponents could use them freely. Neither Morlan nor Norris, however, appeared to have the support of the Burlington and Missouri. G. W. Holdrege, its general manager in Nebraska, was supporting a candidate from the eastern end of the congressional district. Despite these developments, Norris did not become unduly pessimistic. He believed in several instances that Morlan had "overdone the matter," and that Morlan's opposition could redound to his favor.¹⁹

Why Morlan suddenly opposed Norris is not clear. The two had never been close associates and Morlan, in their previous relations, had always been the senior figure. Perhaps Morlan thought that by opposing Norris he could deadlock the convention and, despite his official statement that he did not intend to run, obtain the nomination for a second time. Whatever the reason, Norris knew that Morlan's opposition would be most effective in Furnas and Red Willow counties, where he had considerable prestige and influence among local Republicans.

One aspect of this development was of inestimable benefit to Norris. The fact that the Burlington and Missouri Railroad officials were supporting other candidates meant that he would gain support among farmers and shippers who had grievances with the railroad and harbored increasing resentment against it. Also, the fact that he temporarily lost the ability to obtain transportation for friends and supporters made it easier for him to oppose free passes. He also gained the experience of engaging effectively in politics despite the loss of an important source of patronage, something that would stand him in good stead in later years.

Even with Morlan's help, Allen's candidacy did not make much headway. Only one newspaper, the Arapahoe *Mirror*, supported him. In a widely distributed April issue, it charged, without presenting any details, that Norris had made a "deal" for the purpose of selecting his successor. Norris quickly denied the allegation claiming it was "absolutely groundless and without any reason whatever." He added that if elected to Congress he would take no part in the selection of his successor. In this way Norris was able to keep the support of Republican attorneys who were interested in his judicial position. A

statement to this effect was sent to the *Beaver Valley Tribune* and was widely distributed.²⁰

By mid-May, before the county conventions met, there were more than a dozen candidates in the field. Norris, however, had a larger following than any other individual. If he received the support of all the delegates from his judicial district he would have fifty-three of the eighty-nine votes necessary for nomination. Allen, backed by Morlan, was his only opposition in the entire judicial district, and Norris did not believe that they could control many delegates.²¹

On May 20 the Furnas County convention met at Beaver City and passed without opposition a resolution instructing the delegates to the congressional convention to support Norris' candidacy. Allen appeared and withdrew his name. The activities of this convention virtually assured that all other county conventions in the judicial district would follow suit. Norris was now convinced he would have the largest number of delegates at the Hastings Convention.²²

When the convention assembled at Hastings on June 10, every delegate from the eight counties comprising the Fourteenth Judicial District was for George Norris. The other ten counties had instructed their delegates for different candidates. Captain Adams from Superior in Nuckolls County at the extreme eastern end of the congressional district seemed to be his strongest opponent. On the first ballot Norris received seventy-one votes, while his nearest opponent, Adams, had but twenty-nine. On the fifth ballot Norris received the nomination with 122 votes, a large majority. His nomination was not obtained at the expense of party harmony; good feeling prevailed both before and after the convention which one newspaper called "one of the prettiest free-for-all political races ever run in the Fifth congressional district."²³

Norris was largely successful in maintaining his original posture of having the office seek the man. He accomplished this with a minimum of friction and therefore could count on unified party support in the fall campaign. Further omens that augured well were abundant rainfall (over twenty-one inches, the best rainfall in over a decade), a large wheat crop, and an increasing demand for grain. Thus Norris felt confident of success in November.²⁴

Before he could take a well-deserved vacation, he had to organize a congressional committee and get acquainted with party leaders in the eastern end of the congressional district. Norris chose his devoted friend Fletcher Merwin as chairman of the committee, and J. E. Kelley of McCook as secretary. Norris believed one of the officers of the

committee should live in his home town so that there would be no difficulty in communicating. Indeed, the completed committee contained a representative of each of the eighteen counties in the district, but only one of its officers came from outside of Norris' judicial district.²⁵

With this important task disposed of, Norris, less than ten days after the Hastings Convention, made a cautious campaign promise designed to win him support in Hall County, the most populous county in the Fifth Congressional District. He pledged that if elected he would direct all of his efforts toward securing funds to erect a federal building in Grand Island, the largest city in the district. The claim of Grand Island for a public building, Norris said, should take precedence over that of any other community within the district.²⁶

Before the Democrats and Populists held their convention, Norris had perfected his organization for the hard campaign to come. He had committed himself to a public building for the largest city in the district. He had contacted individuals who traveled throughout the district in the course of their business and had persuaded them to inform him of political conditions. He had also prepared a statement and affidavits to send to Republican editors when the need arose, presenting the facts in regard to the 1895 disputed election.²⁷ Thus when the opposition nominated, as expected, the incumbent congressman, A. C. Shallenberger, Norris was fully prepared to engage in the most difficult campaign of his budding career, a campaign that would determine whether he could move on to the larger stage that he sought as an outlet for his talents and abilities and as a solution to his financial and personal problems.