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## George Norris, Going Home

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# George Norris, Going Home

Reflections of a Progressive Statesman

GENE A. BUDIG AND DON WALTON

*Preface by George W. Norris*

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London

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# Contents

*List of Illustrations* vi

*Preface* vii

*Introduction* ix

One 1

Two 8

Three 14

Four 19

Five 24

Six 28

Seven 33

Eight 38

Nine 50

Ten 55

Eleven 65

Twelve 73

Thirteen 84

Fourteen 89

Fifteen 97

Sixteen 105

Seventeen 112

# Illustrations

*Following page 46*

1. Grave of George W. Norris
2. Norris family home in McCook, Nebraska
3. George Norris at the building of a Tennessee Valley Authority dam
4. George Norris at his cabin in Wisconsin
5. Norris family photo
6. George Norris speaking to a crowd
7. George Norris at the National Rural Electric Convention
8. Senator and Mrs. Norris getting off the Zephyr in McCook
9. George and Ellie Norris relaxing on the porch
10. George Norris in the sun room at his home in McCook
11. Sculptor Jo Davidson working on the bust of Senator George W. Norris

# Preface

*Defeat was a word George W. Norris seldom used, even after his people rejected him at the polls in 1942. Few Nebraskans realized the impact of their decision upon the senior senator from McCook.*

*From his rocking chair in his Southwest Nebraska home, Norris exposed his broken heart for the first and only time.*

I wrote this on Thursday, before Christmas, and regarded it as complete, but the next day, being the day before Christmas, I listened to the President of the United States make his famous speech over the radio to our armies fighting in various battle fronts all over the world. I was completely overcome by the eloquence of the President's address. In this address the President said that within the next two or three weeks he expected to deliver an official message to Congress, in which he expected to go into more details about the things he had to say about the conferences that had taken place in Cairo and Teheran with Churchill, Chiang Kai-shek, and Josef Stalin.

Like a dream it seemed to me I was sitting again in the capital of the United States, listening to the voice I knew so well, eloquently detailing his report of those conferences. Surrounded by my senatorial associates, I could hear again so plainly that analy-



sis of the international situation, and in my dream, for dream it was, I applauded the sentiments that had carried me into dreamland, and by my own applause I was awakened and it dawned upon me like a flash piercing my very heart that I was no longer a member of the Senate, listening to the President's eloquent voice, but that after all, I was just a private citizen, sitting in my home at McCook, Nebraska. I realized then that I would not be present when that official message was delivered, that my own people whom I loved and whom I had tried to serve for the major part of my adult life had made it impossible for me to longer represent them in the capital of the United States, and as I passed from dreamland into reality, I likened myself to the private soldier who had fought during the entire war, and that just as victory had come to our embattled soldiers, and just as the rising sun of civilization was shedding its sunlight of human liberty over the mountains, across the sea and through the jungles, when the struggle was all over, when the war had been won and the last charge that had brought victory, he fell, pierced by an enemy bullet, and slowly sank into an honored but unknown grave.

*McCook, Nebraska*

*G. W. Norris*

*December 24, 1943*

# Introduction

This project began nearly fifty-three years ago when two young newspaper reporters from the *Lincoln Star* became intrigued by the remarkable achievements of George W. Norris, the United States Senator from Nebraska who, among other great accomplishments, fathered the Tennessee Valley Authority Act and the Rural Electrification Act for the federal government, and the Unicameral legislature for the state of Nebraska.

Much of this book was the product of lengthy interviews with Ellie Norris, the political legend's wife. She gave freely of her time and insight during conversations at the Norris home in McCook, Nebraska, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The conversational narrative and thoughts attributed to Norris, along with the detailed scene setting, are based on Mrs. Norris's recollections and memory. This is a story largely told through her eyes.

Mrs. Norris described the senator as a complex human being and steadfast public figure with a far-reaching impact on national and international events. She saw George William, as she called him, as an inspirational leader who counted members of the Congress and the President of the United States as colleagues and friends.

Norris was unbending when it came to doing what he thought

was right. He always saw his role in elective politics as one based on trust, believing that the people of the Cornhusker State chose him to vote his conscience. He knew that he would be the target of intense criticism from time to time. But he also knew that he must remain true to his convictions. He never relied on polls.

Norris was born in 1861 on a farm in Sandusky County, Ohio, the eleventh child of poor, uneducated farmers of Scots-Irish and Pennsylvania Dutch descent. He graduated from Baldwin University and earned his bachelor of laws degree in 1883 at the Law School of Valparaiso University in Indiana.

He moved to McCook in 1900 where he became engaged in the law and Republican politics. As a steel-willed young congressman, Norris led the revolt against Speaker Joseph G. Cannon in 1910. By a vote of 191 to 156, the House created a new system that took autocratic power away from the speaker and replaced it with a system of seniority that automatically moved members ahead, even against the wishes of leadership.

Later, Senator Norris was a staunch supporter of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs, particularly the Tennessee Valley Authority. The TVA is still the nation's largest public power provider, founded to address a wider range of environmental, economic, and technological issues, including the delivery of low-cost electricity and the management of natural resources. Its service territory includes most of Tennessee and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia. Norris was such a committed supporter of the TVA that the massive dam built for the project was named in his honor, as was a city in Tennessee.

The man from Nebraska was the prime Senate mover behind the Rural Electrification Act, which brought electrification service to underserved and unserved rural areas across the United States. Norris lit the countrysides, which enhanced the quality of

life immeasurably. He always believed in “public power,” and today Nebraska remains wholly served by public energy. The REA grew to represent over nine hundred electric cooperatives in forty-seven states and ultimately served 12 percent of the population across the country.

Many of his usually conservative followers were apprehensive about the direction of the Roosevelt presidency, but in the end they generally lined up behind the senator. Norris never forgot that act of faith in his vision, and he mentioned it often when in Nebraska. The New Deal, he thought, was essential if America was to survive and move toward full recovery.

Norris also believed in the wisdom of common people and power of new ideas. “To get good government and to retain it, it is necessary that a liberty-loving, educated, intelligent people should be ever watchful, to carefully guard and protect their rights and liberties,” he said in 1934 while campaigning for creation of a single-house, nonpartisan legislature in Nebraska.

State Senator Richard Marvel of Hastings, longtime chairman of the Unicameral Budget Committee, observed that the Nebraska Legislature “did much to keep everyone in line—legislators and lobbyists. It provided a transparent form of government.”

No other state followed suit, but most applauded its concept. Legislators outside Nebraska were reluctant to vote themselves out of office; it was that simple, according to Governor John Connally of Texas, who invited his gubernatorial counterpart from Nebraska, Frank B. Morrison, to address the two-house legislature in the Lone Star state.

Norris also dared to oppose President Roosevelt’s Judiciary Reorganization Plan of 1937 to pack the Supreme Court, and he often railed against corrupt patronage.

The great senator’s work was widely recognized in his day. When the Senate established a special committee in 1955 to select

five outstanding former members whose portraits would be permanently displayed in the Senate Reception Room, it turned to 160 American historians and biographers for recommendations. More of those scholars recommended Norris than any other senator.

He was one of eight senators featured in John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, for opposing Speaker Cannon's autocratic power in the House, for speaking out against arming U.S. merchant ships during the United States' period of neutrality preceding its entrance to World War I, and for supporting the presidential campaign of Democrat Al Smith of New York, who just happened to be Catholic.

Theodore C. Sorensen, the renowned speechwriter and political advisor to President Kennedy, who helped write *Profiles in Courage*, told two reporters from Lincoln that George W. Norris made him proud of his Nebraska heritage.

So much can be said about the historic professional achievements of Norris, but Ellie Norris also brought keen insights to who he was as a man. In so many ways, this is her book. It is part of her tribute to her husband, whom she saw as a "broken man" after being turned out by the Nebraska electorate.

The interviews with Mrs. Norris, along with accompanying research, resulted in a series of articles for the Lincoln morning newspaper and the Associated Press. The writers were pleased with the readership and hoped to someday publish a book on George W. Norris, but those plans never materialized.

The writers took different professional paths. But they kept in contact and from time to time, talked about their resolve to bring closure to the Norris matter. It was Gretchen Budig, wife of one of those two once-young men, who found the manuscript, yellowed by time, in the corner of an attic. She read it and was struck by its relevance; she found it to be a moving story about an Ameri-

can hero and pushed the two authors to complete the literary venture with publication in a book.

The authors thought it time to remind the people of Nebraska and the Midwest, and all others, especially the younger ones, of the remarkable role George Norris played in the history of the nation and his state.

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# George Norris, Going Home



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# One

The clackety-clack of steel against steel jarred him.

He was slumped in the overstuffed comfort of a two-room compartment speeding west across the valleys of the East. The rails led toward home, but first to St. Louis, where he would be toasted tenderly in the Mississippi Valley. He was tired—but they were kind enough to ask him to stop, and he would.

Peering into the dark, George William Norris could spot fringes of winter clumped along the tracks. It was January. And it was cold, he thought, perhaps colder than any winter month he could remember. The wind was bitter and the warm comfort of the train soothed him. The sudden jerk that signaled the beginning of a long journey halfway across the continent had jolted him.

Now the rhythmic clatter of cold steel pounded at his senses, and Norris began to realize once again that it was really true. Was this the beginning of a journey or the end?

The trip to the station at Silver Spring had been quiet. Jack Robertson, his loyal son-in-law and, as Norris often said, the most proficient secretary on the Hill, had driven him down in the 1937 Buick. Daughter Hazel had come with him. And, of course, Ellie.

Leaving the lovely garden at the Dodge Hotel had not been easy—but then, nothing would be easy from now on. It had been

a painful two months, and much sorrow lay ahead, Norris quietly assured himself.

It was a little difficult to comprehend. No more would he walk the streets of Washington; no more would he be privileged to rise on the floor of the Senate to voice his indignation against those he believed would surely sap the nation's strength and sack its resources if a voice were not raised.

Now, he was stripped of the power to battle for what he believed. Yes, he could still talk. He could shout and cry out—but would they hear his voice a thousand miles away? Oh, there were others in the Senate who could speak for the people, others to stand guard over the public's property. But Norris had been doing it for so long that he had already made his enemies, and perhaps it was easier for him to speak without the hesitation that might confront another. He'd been doing it for forty years, the last three decades as a member of the Senate. In the Senate, they had to listen to you. It's too easy to ignore a private citizen, especially if he is one who has been rejected by his own people. That is what hurt.

George Norris felt no bitterness. Only pain—and it gnawed at his vitality, robbed him of his strength, burned like a hot coal or steel in the sun. He had resolved never to speak of it. He would live with it, accept it as an unwelcome but constant companion that would walk with him, talk to him, eat with him, sleep with him the rest of his days.

He would never try to explain why he lost. There were plenty of political reasons that he would hear again and again. He had entered the 1942 Senate race too late. He had campaigned too little. He had vacillated too long during the long summer months that had led to his decision, and he had lost the support of friends who in the meantime had committed themselves to Ken Wherry.

He was the victim of an anti-Roosevelt vote that had swept the vast flat spaces of his beloved state. The nation was at war, and

perhaps Nebraskans were disappointed at the performance of his friend in the White House. Norris was eighty-one, and that may have cost him votes. But all these political considerations did not matter.

George Norris would never try to evaluate the meaning of this defeat for one reason: he was deathly afraid. He feared what it might mean. He shuddered to think of it. The voice of the people had been raised against all that Norris stood for, against all that he had labored for and battled and endured. That's what he feared: all the progress that had been hammered out through the sweat and tears of forty years of social struggle might go by the board. Were the people ready to toss away progress, turn their backs on it just when it needed them most? Were the benefits of the Rural Electrification Administration to be overlooked, and its strength bartered away in the houses of Congress? And was the Tennessee Valley Authority—a creature of George Norris that had died a thousand deaths on its long road to reality—to be suddenly ignored, allowed to slip into degeneration and ruin?

Perhaps, Norris gloomed, the end had come for such dreams. Even if they were allowed to continue, the lesson learned from their service would surely be discarded. There would be no more TVA's, no more public control of the vast resources of the land if the people had voted against the TVA when they rejected Norris. All of it stood in mortal danger of dropping by the wayside, falling into the ruins of the past. It might be ignored when it needed nurture, a weak and growing child who demanded new strength if it were to survive. Ah, that's what hurt—was the end now in sight for it all?

Steadily, the train rolled west, leaving farther behind in darkness many of the things that had made Washington home for Norris.

There was the big green Buick that faithfully served him on

daily trips to and from the Senate chambers and on long Sunday afternoon excursions through the country. It symbolized the life of Norris—one of motion.

Even on that cold January night, the oversized 1937 sedan glistened farewell. Its gleam flashed back memories of many a long and tedious car-polishing session with Norris attentively supervising.

Ellie knew that the car had meant much to George William, as it had to the rest of the Norris brood. It became a member of the family, meriting continual respect and care. That was why Norris found it hard to understand Ellie's apparent lack of concern in getting it to McCook as soon as possible. His frequent suggestions for possible transportation for the Buick drew a quick shifting of subject by Ellie. Much as it hurt her, Ellie realized that George William's days behind the wheel were over. The car would stay with Hazel and Jack in Washington, and Ellie would be taxed to think of new reasons for the delay in shipment. But convincing reasons grew hard and Norris grew impatient.

Only Ellie knew that George William's shattered heart and searching eyes grew weaker by the day. And what was she to do but wait at his side, pray, and try to understand the hand of God?

The Buick symbolized many pleasant memories. Norris could remember well the day he purchased the shiny green machine. They had gone to Woodbridge, Virginia, to procure the car from a dealer who had long wanted to sell him an auto. Since then it had shared his journeys, traveled the streets of the capital with him, and housed many a famous passenger and those he dearly loved. Norris wanted very much to take the car back home this time. But Norris's old cronies along B Street in McCook were never to see or ride in the big Buick that George William had so often referred to with a sense of pride. Nor were they to see many of the other belongings that he often spoke of and held sacred.

The roughly bound set of law books he had used as district judge at McCook, the pen FDR had given him after signing the TVA into being, and the crudely penciled letter from the Kansas farm wife who beseeched his continued support of the REA—all were to remain behind in Washington.

And only the good Lord knew how much George William wanted these at his fingertips at the end. Though slight in monetary value, these odds and ends symbolized priceless achievement and tearful disappointment.

But the delegation of close friends and associates begged him to leave them behind. Loud and often, they told him that he owed it to posterity; that he owed it to other young men seeking to follow his footsteps in government; and that he owed it to Nebraska and his country. They flattered with words of a possible national shrine and lasting international recognition. Norris listened politely as he had throughout his career on the Hill; only this time he remained silent. Finally he nodded; they sighed; and Ellie saw another blow to his already strained heart.

True, the belongings remained and are still on display, but the vivid memories went home with the tired old gentleman from Nebraska. He knew that he could never forget the many hours spent over the crinkled, yellow law texts; the quick wink and sincere handshake of FDR; the almost pathetic words of hope from the Kansas farm wife. These and hundreds of other recollections chaperoned him to the end.

The wintry winds gently tapped on George William's compartment door as the massive coal-fed giant sped on westward. Except for the light rap and clicking flashlight of the tireless conductor, George William and Ellie sat alone in a voiceless world. Their thoughts now were on the future.

Broken, crushed, and tossed into the rubbish of defeat were his golden plans for tomorrow. The TVA, he believed, could be

just a beginning. The Missouri, the Mississippi, and all the nation's major channels could be harnessed in the same manner. Flood control, navigational aid, and public power could be provided to all the people at low cost. Great dams would be erected to hold the water's surge; vast power plants would arise to light the land; the water would be controlled, and fields would flourish.

Why not develop all of America's rivers in the same manner that had brought prosperity to the Tennessee Valley? Of course, it would be a real battle. The opposition was ready, strong, firm, adamant. But had not the TVA itself been a long and weary war? It had proved itself, and now (or as soon as the war came to an end) was the time to expand it to other valleys. Norris had anticipated the struggle with zeal. Now his banner was gone. He could not lead the charge—and who else would? A cloud of woe settled over the dejected traveler.

Washington had been one long adventure for Norris. He had counseled with presidents, debated all the major issues of these turbulent times with his colleagues in the Senate, and fought the trusts. It had been an arduous task, but it had also been exhilarating. A crusade, a mission, a sense of devotion to duty had nourished Norris and kept him hard at the stern.

He would miss the man in the White House. That visionary giant, Norris thought, that devoted humanitarian. They had shared lunch together many times on trays in the President's office and discussed one broad topic—the world. The President confided in him, unfolded his dreams before him, spoke of politics, strategy, and the distant future now shrouded in the fog of war.

Roosevelt could be kind, Norris knew. But he could also be hard, firm, resolute, unbending, unyielding, even harsh. The President won his battles because he believed in them enough to pour all the resources at his command into the struggle. The greatest of these weapons was the people.

They had responded to Norris too—in five campaigns for a seat in the House and five bitter Senate struggles. Now, they had turned a deaf ear, shown him their backs, denied him their confidence, wheeled and walked away. Was this also to happen to Roosevelt? This too worried George Norris, for it was FDR who had finally pushed the TVA off dead center and given it life. It was Roosevelt who had turned the switch that brought REA electricity to the farms of the nation. It was the President who had launched the republic on the road to social justice.

If Roosevelt were to be turned down in 1944, Norris thought, this would be the end of it all. The barons of private exploitation would return to their thrones. The public's property would be divided and distributed, hacked to pieces, taken from the people. Norris could endure his defeat, but he could not bear to think of the hazardous future that might lie ahead for his nation.

In Washington that cold January night, Roosevelt too wondered what the election in Nebraska might mean.

Regularly, the senator's furrowed brow would fall, leaving his pronounced chin buried in the crease of his freshly starched white shirt. He dozed, gasping breaths of uneasy air. Ellie watched and hoped that the night's weight would remain on his heavy eyelids until the train screeched to a halt in St. Louis. Her hopes went for naught. The conductor's nagging cough, the leaking water fountain, and the hungry infant down the corridor all keyed George William's shifting of positions. He would open his eyes, look around, and then drop back into mental seclusion.

Never had Ellie felt more compassion for a human being than she did for George William. But how could she help? It was done—his people had answered his desire to serve again with a thoughtless nay. The wound had been inflicted, the damage done.