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Article Summary: George W Norris subscribed to an agrarian ideal and its values. But his affection and nostalgia for the family farmer blinded him to the realization that the advance of a new technology was rapidly creating the factory farm. Refusing to come to grips with that agriculture's diminishing importance in the social and political scene. His fundamental error was failure to see that agriculture is not a simple, homogeneous unit of society but encompasses many different groups with complex problems.

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Photographs / Images: George W Norris Commemorative Stamp; George W Norris bust in the Nebraska Hall of Fame by Jo Davidson

GEORGE W. NORRIS: PROGRESSIVE FROM THE PLAINS

BY NORMAN L. ZUCKER

GEORGE William Norris, like so many other Americans since Thomas Jefferson, believed that the ethos of American democracy was epitomized in the independent farmer. As a child of the expanding frontier and later as a son of the Middle Border he was nurtured on an agrarian ideology which regarded agriculture as logically prior to all other economic activity. The permanent stability and security of agriculture were considerations of utmost concern to all citizens and to the government because the farmer "has made invaluable contributions to the design of American living, and of democratic government itself."¹ The Nebraskan cherished the ideal of a life lived close to the soil and nature, for in his opinion political democracy

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¹ George W. Norris, *Fighting Liberal: The Autobiography of George W. Norris* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), p. 372.

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could not exist without an agrarian base. Agriculture possessed special virtues and assumed national concern because it was the backbone of the American democratic faith and of all civilization.

Farming was indispensable to the welfare of all, materially, psychologically, and politically. If farming was not given its just share of the material rewards of American society, it was the obligation of the government to correct such an inequitable and harmful situation with positive action. Agriculture was entitled to government protection, not as charity, but as a matter of justice and right. The Senator always emphasized, and often rhapsodized, the central tenet of the agrarian myth that "it is at the rural fireside that virtue, morality, and patriotism have reached their highest state."² He accepted the fullest implications of the agrarian philosophy: "the foundation of all prosperity, and all security is land."³

Agriculture was the first industry; the farmer, the base of the economic pyramid, was first in importance because he fed and supported all other vocations and industries. One of the hardest working members of the population, denied the amenities of city living, the farmer was subject to the vicissitudes of both nature and the market. In a memorable address to the House of Representatives, the Nebraskan in florid phrases summarized his agrarian ideology:

We ought to legislate so that the tendency of going from the farm to the city will be reversed and make life in the country more enjoyable and more profitable, that the growing population of the cities may take advantage of this condition and move toward the farm. There is no doubt in the mind of any man but what is desirable [sic] (is) to have as large a rural population as possible . . . Danger to our republican institutions will surely come if we legislate so as decrease the rural population and drive the people into the already overcrowded cities. It is in the city, where the population is most dense, that there

² *Congressional Record*, 58th Congress, 2nd Session, 4:3257. For an excellent description of the agrarian myth see: Richard Hofstadter. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), pp. 23-46.

³ *Cong. Rec.*, 62nd Cong., 2nd Sess., 12:300.

exists the most danger to the perpetuity of our institutions . . . it is also in the city that we have the slum and breeding places of anarchy, ignorance, and crime. It is there we have the mob. It is in the city that we have the machine politician and the political boss, where, by organization and machine control, the elective franchise is seriously interfered with. On the other hand, upon the farms are located the conservative, patriotic, and thinking voters of our country. Uninfluenced by the machine control or the political boss, they are the balance wheel of our form of government. In time of danger and in time of war we lean with confidence and pride upon the strong arm and the willing and patriotic heart of the American farmer.⁴

The frontier was fading when Norris entered Nebraska local politics and by the time he came to Congress the promotion of agriculture was a settled policy. For the better part of a century after the founding of the Republic, agriculture was the most important industry in the United States and absorbed the largest amount of capital and the largest working force. But by the beginning of the 20th century the farm was forced to compete with the factory and government compelled to recognize that the attenuation of an agricultural economy meant the adoption of new farm policies. (The Reclamation Act of 1902 signalized this significant change in American land policy.) As a freshman Congressman, George W. Norris knew that the era of pioneer farming was nearing its close and that most of the nation's good farm land had come under private ownership, leaving only submarginal or exceedingly remote lands available for homesteading. The more fertile and productive valley lands had been settled and, in order to support a family, it had become necessary for the farmer to cultivate additional acres of the less productive remaining land. To make it easier for the family farmer, Congressman Norris outlined a plan to increase the homestead rights from the original 160 acres to 640 acres. This proposal ultimately was incorporated in the Kinkaid Act of 1904.⁵

⁴ *Cong. Rec.*, 61st Cong., 3rd Sess., 5:A136-137.

⁵ Murray R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States, 1790-1950: A Study of Their Origins and Development* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1953), p. 126.

When the 1910 census demonstrated that the population in the cities had been increasing and that the rural population, though still in the majority, was decreasing, the Nebraskan was exceedingly distressed. The cities were the cesspools of American society; it was of immediate concern to Congress to rectify this dangerous situation. The progressive perfection of American democracy could not continue unless the trend toward the cities was reversed. In order to perpetuate civic virtue and widen the agrarian base, Representative Norris, knowing that Wisconsin and Nebraska had just passed major legislation concerning cooperatives, introduced in the House a joint resolution to provide for the appointment of a Farmers' National Cooperative Credit Commission which would investigate and report upon the plans and results of the German Raiffeisen system and all other European systems of rural cooperative credit associations. He hoped that some of these credit systems might be adaptable to conditions in the United States. Although well intentioned, the Norris Cooperative Credit Commission Resolution was not unique and it is exceedingly doubtful if it in any major way influenced the subsequent course of the American cooperative movement. Of considerably more significance were the earlier recommendations of President Theodore Roosevelt's Commission on Rural Life which not only endorsed the cooperative principle but also specifically urged the states and the Congress to pass legislation promoting cooperatives.⁶

Immediate plans for the rural cooperative movement, however, were never brought to fruition, primarily because shortly before and during World War I agriculture entered a period of inordinate prosperity. It was not until the farm depression of the 1920's that Norris' and other cooperative marketing plans were again given serious consideration.

The flush prosperity of the war years concealed the full dimensions of the agricultural problem which was to

⁶ *Cong. Rec.*, 62nd Cong., 2nd Sess., 12:302.

plague the nation during the lackluster Harding-Coolidge-Hoover era, when the farmers, suffering from a sharp inequality with other economic groups, sought in vain to improve their fundamental position. The agricultural depression which began in the summer and fall of 1920 and continued through the Great Depression—Nebraska farmers again burned corn for fuel as they had done in the bad days of Populism—was caused basically by a war-stimulated high production and a declining export market for basic crops. Specifically, “the removal of price guarantees as of May 31, 1920, the end of deficit financing, the unwillingness of the American government to continue foreign loans, the revival of European agriculture, and the increasing ability of non-European nations to compete in the world’s markets accounted principally for the ever lower prices at which American farmers were obliged to sell.” Furthermore, the nature of both consumption and farming was beginning to change. Millions of acres which formerly had been devoted to the growing of oats and other horse feed, now no longer needed for such crops because of increasing mechanization, were freed for commercial crop production.⁷ When President Harding failed to offer a satisfactory agricultural program, to meet the growing challenge of the agricultural depression, Senator Norris, in May 1921, joined with senators of both parties from the dominantly agricultural states to help create a loose Congressional organization which became known as

⁷ John D. Hicks, *Rehearsal for Disaster: The Boom and Collapse of 1919-1920* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1961), p. 77.

the farm bloc.⁸ To many, at the time, the formation of the farm bloc was thought to be a dangerous departure and a threat to the traditional two-party system. Events, however, soon proved otherwise. Despite the outward manifestation of solidarity, attachment to the farm bloc fluctuated from issue to issue, for among its members there were wide divergencies in ideology. Senators Norris of Nebraska, LaFollette of Wisconsin, and Ladd of North Dakota had little more in common with Senators Kellogg of Minnesota, Swanson of Virginia, and Capper of Kansas, than sympathy for agriculture.⁹

The other members of the farm bloc, along with Norris, shared the basic assumption that the prosperity of agriculture was fundamental to the prosperity of the nation and that it was imperative to raise agriculture to a status of equality with industry and other groups in the population. The Nebraskan scoffed at charges that the formation of the farm bloc created an unholy alliance which sought to extort special privileges from the government. The farm bloc, he claimed, was a necessary protective measure because the railroads, the trusts, and all other forms of big business were in "dirty politics . . . spreading propaganda from one end of the country to another." The ills of the

⁸ See Benedict, *op. cit.*, p. 181. Those in attendance at the initial meeting of the farm bloc in addition to Norris were: Kenyon of Iowa, Kendrick of Wyoming, Gooding of Idaho, Capper of Kansas, Smith of South Carolina, Fletcher of Florida, LaFollette of Wisconsin, Sheppard of Texas, Ladd of North Dakota, Ransdell of Louisiana, and Heflin of Alabama. The number of Senators belonging to the bloc varied. The effective number in the Senate at any one time probably was not more than twenty-six or twenty-seven. In the House there were ninety-five or ninety-six strong supporters plus a score more who were sympathetic. Tactics varied; the Senate bloc usually held regular meetings at which cabinet members and experts spoke. The House group utilized key men on committees and in state delegations. Saloutos and Hicks, *op. cit.*, p. 324. Writing two decades after its creation Wesley McCune has commented: "The notion that the farm bloc is a group of willful Western and Southern Congressmen is a fallacy. When a legislative crisis impends it is the votes of congressmen from Eastern and Northern states, who also have rural constituents, that put the farm bloc over to its accustomed victory." Wesley McCune, *The Farm Bloc* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1943), p. 1.

⁹ James H. Shideler, *Farm Crisis: 1919-1923* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 156.

farmer were, to a large extent "caused by legislation or unequal application of laws."¹⁰ The inescapable alternative was to seek relief through legislative action.

Throughout the uninspired twelve Republican years of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, the Senator, as an articulate member of the farm bloc, constantly dunned the administration to take corrective action to aid the farmer. He correctly believed that the serious farm situation was not of the farmers' creation; it had not arisen because of the farmers' neglect or inability. It was a problem in which the ultimate solution resided in the larger economic sphere. "Politics and economics," Norris knowledgeably affirmed, "meet more often and more closely than is usually conceded, and political action can help to solve" the agricultural distresses.¹¹

Senator Norris' rationale for government aid to the depressed farmers and his proposed plans for amelioration were predicated on his understanding of the causes of the agricultural depression. Essentially he believed that the trouble with agriculture could be reduced to three elements: first, the tariff - the farmer did not get the benefit of the protective tariff; second, the farm surplus - the farmer, unlike the manufacturer, could not limit his production and consequently cultivated more edibles than could be consumed in the United States; and third, the cost of distribution - "between the producer and the consumer there is a multitude of middlemen, who neither toil nor spin and yet make enormous profits upon the food products of the country as such products travel from the producer to the consumer."¹²

Norris was concerned about the problem of giving the farmer the benefit of the tariff enjoyed by the manufacturer and the laborer. Acknowledging that tariff protection was a nationalistic device based on the theory that

¹⁰ George W. Norris, "Why the Farm Bloc," *The World Tomorrow* (June, 1928), p. 257-258.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹² George W. Norris, "The Farmers' Situation, A National Danger," *Current History*, XXIV, (April 1926), 10.

the American standard of living was higher than that of other nations, he boldly assumed that the United States "must maintain that difference in the standard of living by a protective tariff."¹³ If it was just, he reasoned, to levy a tariff on manufactured goods in order to enable factory owners to pay higher wages to their workers, then the farmer ought not to be compelled to buy what he consumes in a protected market yet sell what he produces in a free-trade market. The farmer buys inside the tariff wall and is forced to sell outside it; the prices of his purchases are fixed, but the prices of his agricultural sales are subject to dictation by the markets of the world. It is unjust for the farmer to have to sell his surplus in a world market which can depress the price of his products.¹⁴

The farmer is a consumer, like other elements of the population, and is subject to the same increase in the cost of things he purchases. The manufacturer, the Senator contended, can increase his selling price until it is raised to the level of the tariff barrier, which means that the industrialist meets no competition from the foreign manufacturer unless he raises his price above the tariff. This added cost is passed to the retailer who in turn passes it to the consumer. "If the consumer be a laboring man," Norris wrote in *The Nation*, "the additional price that he pays is to some extent reflected in a higher wage, but when it reaches the farmer it stops. He cannot pass the additional burden to someone else."¹⁵ If the tariff enabled the farmer to add the duty to the selling price of his produce he would then be able, in part, to meet his additional cost. The agricultural surplus, however, must find a market in the trade centers of the world in competition with produce grown at a lower cost.

But basically, the Senator felt that industry was over-protected. He was willing to grant the benefits of protection only on the condition "that every rank in the social

¹³ George W. Norris, "The Tariff and the Farmer," *The Nation*, CXXIII (September 1, 1926), 192.

¹⁴ Norris, "The Farmers' Situation," *loc. cit.*, 11.

¹⁵ Norris, "Tariff and the Farmer," *loc. cit.*, 192.

strata of America may get the benefit of it equally."¹⁶ He feared the consequences of overprotection, not only for the farmer, but also for the consumer. "One of the dangers," he maintained, "that follows the levying of a high-protective tariff is that it enables the producers and the manufacturers of the article upon which the tariff is levied, this side of the tariff wall, to form combinations and monopolies, and thus exact unfair and unjust prices from the consumer."¹⁷

The difficulties of arriving at an equitable tariff were compounded by the existence of the second interrelated element of the farm problem - the agricultural surplus. Prior to the New Deal agricultural legislation the Senator firmly believed that "the farmer can not limit his production like the manufacturer."¹⁸ It was necessary for the farmer to cultivate to the limit of his energy, for he could not know in advance whether nature would enable him to reap a large or a small crop. He did not know if there would be a surplus or a shortage, and it often occurred that the farmer was financially better off when there was a shortage. Furthermore, the farmer was, in general, in the untenable situation in which "his business is so unprofitable that he is nearly always compelled to borrow money to produce a crop, and to a great extent he is then

¹⁶ *Cong. Rec.*, 71st Cong., 1st Sess., 4:4671.

¹⁷ Norris' concern for the welfare of the public ultimately crystallized itself into an amendment to the 1930 tariff act. The amendment attempted to protect the consumer by assuring the maintenance of conditions of competition by establishing the Office of People's Counsel and also by permitting any citizen of the United States to file a complaint in the United States Customs Court. Should the Court after taking evidence on the complaint find the charge substantiated, then "it shall be the duty of the President within one month to issue a proclamation suspending the imposition and collection of the duty or duties levied . . . upon such article." In arguing for his amendment the Senator expressed his rationale quite succinctly: "No manufacturer, no producer, is entitled to a protective tariff as a matter of right. It is a legislative favor; and when the object of levying a protective tariff is circumvented by the beneficiaries of the protective tariff and monopolies are formed and unjust prices demanded it is not only the right but the duty of the Government that gives those favors under such circumstances to take them away." *Cong. Rec.*, 71st Cong., 2nd Sess., 6:5689.

¹⁸ Norris, "The Farmers' Situation," *loc. cit.*, p. 11.

subject to the control of the man or the institution that holds the mortgage."¹⁹ Rarely was he in the fortunate financial condition in which such borrowing was unnecessary.

The third problem facing agriculture, Norris believed, was the high cost of distribution paid by the farmer. "As the product travels from the producer to the consumer it goes through the hands of too many middlemen, each one of whom exacts his profit, sometimes an exorbitant and unreasonable one."²⁰ A key factor in the excessive cost of marketing is the railroad trust which operates a freight rate system which charges as much as the traffic will bear. The excessive freight rates, the Nebraskan charged in arguments reminiscent of earlier agrarian dissent movements, is in itself sufficient to wreck any industry; and when the industry is operating in depressed circumstances, or on a marginal basis, the freight rate assumes critical proportions. The farmer is harassed by dual freight charges; "the freight is added to everything which he buys," Norris asserted, "and it is deducted from everything which he sells."²¹ In an article for *The Nation* the Senator pointed out:

The railroad is perhaps the greatest of all middlemen . . . Its freight revenue is acquired by a levy upon the products of human consumption as they travel from the producer to the consumer. . . . the farmer has a greater interest in the freight question than any other class. All dealers, from the manufacturer down to the consumer, add the price of freight to the commodity they handle. When it reaches the farmer he has no opportunity to pass the increase on. He is at the end of the equation and therefore must absorb it. On the other hand, when he has anything to sell the freight charge is immediately deducted from his return. The price of his wheat at the farm is the Chicago or Minneapolis price, less the freight. The cost of his plow or his harrow or his clothes or anything else he has to buy is the manufacturer's price plus the middleman's profit, and always plus the freight. Thus he pays the freight twice, and he is the only class of our citizens who does this.²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁰ George W. Norris, "If I Were President," unpublished manuscript, n. d., p. 27, George W. Norris Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

²¹ Norris, "The Farmers' Situation," *loc. cit.*, p. 10.

²² Norris, "The Tariff and the Farmer," *loc. cit.*, p. 193.

Norris was concerned not only because others prospered, but also because the masters of finance and industry were indifferent to the farmers' plight. "When the great leaders of banking and industry can see no further than the artificial prosperity that comes to Big Business while those who toil on farms are getting no return for their labor, then indeed we have a right to question the wisdom of our financial leaders."²³

Beginning in the early 1920's and continuing to the New Deal, George W. Norris began introducing legislation designed to aid agriculture. In the late spring of 1921 he urged the passage of a bill creating an Agricultural Foreign Trade Financing Corporation. This corporation, with a capital stock of \$50,000,000, would be established to finance the sale of surplus crops abroad. The capital would be advanced by the government from the profits of the United States Grain Corporation and there would be an authorization under the bill to issue and sell debentures up to \$500,000,000. Loans would be granted to farmers on long-term credits so that their crops could be shipped to foreign markets. The farmers in turn would be required to purchase from the Corporation capital stock in the amount of ten percent of the value of their exports. Hopefully the Senator believed that, through this scheme, the farmers in a year or two would own the business and the government would have received the money lent from the Grain Corporation funds to start the agricultural financing corporation.²⁴

In June 1921, Norris' proposals were embodied in a bill for the creation of the Federal Farmers' Export Financing Corporation which would buy farm products in the United States and sell them abroad. The Norris bill initially received the farm bloc support, but Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover and Secretary of Agriculture

²³ Norris, "The Farmers' Situation," *loc. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁴ *New York Times*, May 16, 1921, 26:4.
Ibid., June 1, 1921, 16:8. See also: George W. Norris, "Farmers' Export Finance Corporation Act," *Senate Report No. 192*, 67th Congress, 1st Session, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, June 30, 1921).

Henry C. Wallace refused to support the measure. While hearings on the bill were in progress, President Harding sent a message to Congress suggesting that the War Finance Corporation be authorized to take care of agricultural needs through enlarged capital for financing exports. Administration pressures resulted in the substitution of this proposal, the Kellogg Amendment, for the Norris bill, and the farm bloc reluctantly went along with it.²⁵

Senator Norris, exceedingly unhappy about the substitution, grudgingly supported it because it was better "than no bill at all." However, there was a fundamental difference between the Kellogg measure and the Norris measure in that the corporation provided for by the Nebraskan would have been a link between the producer and the consumer while the new bill failed to provide such a link. Norris acerbically observed that the Kellogg bill was sharp practice, since it dealt with "bankers, with middlemen, with trust companies, and confers all favors upon them."²⁶ The Nebraskan was forever skeptical about "farmers who have viewed the crops from the twentieth story of a building on Wall Street."²⁷ The wisdom of hindsight shows that the Norris measure had little prospect of being passed by Congress or accepted by the Administration; in addition to being exceedingly crude and general, it committed the government to direct participation in agricultural production and marketing.

Aware now that the Republican administration would emasculate any suggestions for positive subsidization of agriculture, Norris again turned his attention to agricultural remedies based on the principle of cooperative marketing. In December 1922, he introduced a bill ambitiously designed to:

Provide a market for the sale of agricultural products, and to eliminate as far as possible the commissions and charges that are exacted upon agricultural products from the time such products leave the producer until same reaches the consumer, and to thereby increase the

²⁵ Benedict, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

²⁶ *Cong. Rec.*, 67th Cong., 1st Sess., 5:4379.

²⁷ *Cong. Rec.*, 67th Cong., 1st Sess., 5:4381.

price which the producer receives and decrease the price which the consumer pays.

These objectives, the Senator believed, could be achieved by establishing a government corporation with a capital stock of \$100,000,000 to be contributed entirely by the government. The corporation, controlled by a board of three directors appointed by the President by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, would have had the following powers: (1) To build, buy, lease, and operate elevators and storage warehouses; (2) To buy agricultural products from any firm or corporation, or cooperative organization in financing the sale, or exportation and sale of such agricultural products.²⁸ However, the Norris bill was speedily rejected.

In the winter of 1923-1924 there was a revival of interest in the export corporation idea previously embodied in the Norris bill of 1921. For the special session of the Sixty-seventh Congress, Norris with the assistance of Louis Crossette, confidential adviser to Herbert Hoover, and Carl Vrooman, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture under President Wilson, prepared new legislation. The new bill, now called the Norris-Sinclair Bill, received a favorable report from the powerful Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, of which Norris was chairman, but never secured passage in the Senate. The Norris-Sinclair Bill utilized the device of a government corporation to be financed through government funds. The corporation would have power to purchase agricultural and manufactured products in this country and sell them under generous terms of credit abroad. A board was to be created to administer the affairs of the corporation with the Secretary of Commerce to be the *ex officio* chairman of the board and have general charge of the business of the corporation. Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, would automatically have been in charge. The bill also provided that the merchant marine built during World War I by the U. S. Shipping Board (and now rotting in idleness along the eastern seaboard) should be turned over to the corporation

²⁸ *Cong. Rec.*, 67th Cong., 4th Sess., 1:666.

free of cost. The only conditions attached to the transfer of ships were that the corporation keep them in reasonable repair and surrender them to the government on demand. The Interstate Commerce Commission was to have authority to reduce rates upon all products dealt in by this corporation from the place of purchase to the point of exportation. Norris also included in the bill a provision that products sold on time should be paid for by debentures issued by the purchaser. These debentures were to be sold for cash and the cash in turn used to purchase more goods, thus establishing a stable practical period of operation.²⁹

By using Herbert Hoover as a symbol of respectability and conservatism, Norris attempted to stifle the charge that such a corporation would be an excessive governmental interference in the economy, but he was unsuccessful. "It was not necessary for the Republican Party leadership to use its influence against the bill so long as southern Democrats were repelled by Norris' 'socialism'."³⁰ The Republican slogan "Less government in business" carried the day.

The Norris-Sinclair Bill was countered by the McNary-Haugen movement which was the central farm legislation issue from 1924 to 1928. George W. Norris always felt that the McNary-Haugen plan did not get to the heart of the farm problem and would "not furnish a real remedy for the situation." Nonetheless he supported it in preference to the passage of no remedial farm legislation.³¹ The basic principle of all five McNary-Haugen bills that came under Congressional consideration involved the concept of a government export corporation which would purchase agricultural commodities on a scale sufficient to raise the domestic price to a defined "ratio-price" which would then create a

²⁹ George W. Norris, "Agricultural Export Bill," *Senate Report No. 193*, 68th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, March 5, 1924).

³⁰ Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

³¹ *Cong. Rec.*, 67th Cong., 4th Sess., 3:2895. Norris, "Why the Farm Bloc," *loc. cit.*, p. 257.



: W. Norris Commemorative Stamp



GEORGE W. NORRIS
1861 - 1944
STATESMAN
U.S. CONGRESS - HOUSE 1903-13
SENATE 1913-48
INITIATOR OF REFORM OF HOUSE RULES
ANTI-INJUNCTION LAW FOR LABOR
TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY
RURAL ELECTRIFICATION
TWENTIETH AMENDMENT TO
UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION
LEGISLATOR OF NEBRASKA UNICAMERAL LEGISLATURE
ELECTED TO NEBRASKA HALL OF FAME 1961
1960
00750000
DONOR CREDIT BY
00750000 000000

George W. Norris bust in the Nebraska Hall of Fame by Jo Davidson

situation of "equality for agriculture."³² The corporation, in short, was to subsidize the export of basic commodities so as to raise prices to a parity level. The costs of subsidized export were to be charged to producers through the equalization fee, and the parity-price goal was defined as a system of prices that would bear substantially the same relationship to the all-commodities index as prices of those commodities bore to that index during the prewar period 1905-1914.³³

In 1927 and 1928 the McNary-Haugen bills passed Congress, but were mordantly vetoed by President Coolidge on both occasions. In opposing the McNary-Haugen bills Coolidge maintained that the government should not engage in buying and selling farm commodities; such action, he philosophized admonitorially, was repugnant to America's commercial and political institutions. Coolidge's strong vetoes tossed the farm problem into the 1928 presidential campaign.

Like Coolidge, Hoover too denounced the McNary-Haugen equalization-fee principle, but he promised to aid agriculture through cooperative marketing. Hoover and other Republicans had committed themselves to cooperative marketing, not because they were dedicated to it, but because, of all the numerous remedies advanced to help agriculture, cooperative marketing was the least offensive to the large industrial interests. Despite the motivation, or lack of it, "the aid given the cooperatives by the Republicans was one of the few achievements of the otherwise lethargic administrations of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover."³⁴

After the election, Herbert Hoover called a special session of Congress in the spring of 1929 in order to remedy agrarian distress with the tariff structure. When the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 was before the Senate,

³² Benedict, *op. cit.*, p. 212. The phrase "equality for agriculture" was originally developed and publicized by George N. Peek and Hugh S. Johnson of the Moline Plow Company.

³³ Shideler, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

³⁴ Saloutos and Hicks, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

Norris vainly struggled to include in it an export-debenture amendment which essentially was a modified version of the equalization fee of the McNary-Haugen plan. Although the Administration was against it, the Senate accepted the export-debenture feature, but it was lost at the insistence of the House in the conference committee. The Nebraskan criticized the Farm Board because "it failed disastrously in its attempt to sell the surplus which it had purchased."³⁵ However, Norris failed to realize that the Farm Board experiment had been initiated during a time of deteriorating agricultural economic conditions and of growing world surpluses or that the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 was "the most important single piece of legislation ever enacted in behalf of cooperative marketing."³⁶

In 1932 Norris again proposed a debenture program similar to the one he had introduced in the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929. This suggestion, embodied as an amendment to the tariff legislation, was defeated.³⁷ This defeat marked the end of Norris' struggles with the Republican administrations concerning the farm problem.

With the coming of the Roosevelt administration, the Nebraskan's direct sponsorship of agricultural legislation ceased substantially. Perhaps this may be explained by his feeling that the farmers' viewpoint would henceforth receive an equitable hearing by the Administration and by the fact that he began concentrating most of his energies on the TVA and problems related to its extension. Although not in complete accord with FDR's agricultural policy (particularly when it attempted to reduce surpluses by destroying them), he developed a permissive attitude toward it. He realized that the extent of the general Depression was so overwhelming that it was necessary for him to support whatever action programs the New Deal devised.

³⁵ George W. Norris, "The Eagle or the Parrot," unpublished manuscript (1932), p. 8 Norris Papers.

³⁶ Saloutos and Hicks, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

³⁷ *Cong. Rec.*, 72nd Cong., 1st Sess., 10:10982.

George W. Norris unblushingly subscribed to an agrarian ideal and its values, when both the ideal and the values were being subjected to the heavy critical pressures of a society which was rapidly becoming industrialized and urbanized. He appreciated and understood the needs and desires of the dirt farmer, having once been one himself. But his affection and nostalgia for the family farmer blinded him to the realization that the advance of a new technology was rapidly making obsolescent the family farm while giving rise to the factory farm. Norris, like most farm spokesmen of the twenties, refused to come to grips with the ever more apparent fact that agriculture was steadily diminishing in importance in the social and political scene. Norris could not conceive, and would not have wanted to, of huge impersonal factories in the fields. To him they would be the antithesis of the yeoman farmer; they connoted not honest industry, hard work, economic independence, and equality built on close contact with the soil, but rather impersonal exploitation by a heartless corporation which had no reverence for nature and was only concerned with growing crops of profits to be eaten by the already over-fat absentee stockholder. Though Norris' enthusiasm for the yeoman farmer was genuine, it was based upon emotion rather than logic. He mistakenly believed that the values of the agrarian society could best be achieved by fostering an agricultural economy which was steadily losing its viability.

Senator Norris' understanding of the causes of the agricultural depression were hardly sophisticated and were markedly populist in that he laid much of the blame on the railroads and other middlemen. Furthermore, his comprehension of the scope of foreign forces on the domestic agricultural market was limited. But Norris' fundamental error was his failure to see that agriculture is not a simple homogeneous unit of the economy and society. He failed to recognize that agriculture encompasses many different groups with many different problems. His solutions to the farm problem, although honestly motivated, even if adopted, could not have stemmed the inexorable exodus

from the farm. The defects, as well as the virtues of his farm philosophy stem from his uncritical acceptance of the agrarian myth. While his advocacy of governmental support for farmers because of their fundamental economic position is logic subject to question, his support for farmers as people as hungry, tired people with multiple problems and needs is to his enduring credit.

Other important things also innure to his credit. Norris never was pro-farmer at the expense of the laborer and the other consumers. He advocated agricultural aid, not as a venal lobbyist, or as one thinking solely of his constituency interests, but because he sincerely believed that by helping the farmer the nation would be helped. He realistically acknowledged that his farm programs were "subject to the criticism that to some extent it puts the Government in business."⁸⁸ He recognized that, even with farm bloc support, his programs never had much political palatability with the business-oriented administrations of the 1920's. The Senator's advocacy of a marketing corporation, which would serve as a huge middleman, was actuated by the high purpose of performing economical marketing services and not for making profits. It was a well-formed plan to enlist urban support for farm relief and was in tune with his vision of progressive economic reform. His other programs, recognizing the depth of the problem, required government intervention and help. However, large-scale positive action to aid agriculture, as recommended by Norris, did not take place until the New Deal. But Norris' continued efforts on behalf of agriculture during the fruitless 1920's conditioned the country to the fact that effective aid to agriculture required some form of governmental intervention in the free market. These efforts ultimately bore fruit beginning with the New Deal. Norris' total effect on United States market agricultural policy is more important for his efforts and his failures, than for his direct legislative accomplishments to alter the market structure in behalf of agriculture.

⁸⁸ Norris, "The Farmers' Situation," *loc. cit.*, p. 12.