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Article Summary: US Senator George W Norris (1861-1944) was born in the country and remained basically a country boy, but had an influential career in an increasingly urban nation. Highlights of his career included his influence in the creation of the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority), the Rural Electrification Administration and his role in the creation of the unicameral legislature in Nebraska.

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Photographs / Images: George William Norris at eight years old with his mother



George William Norris, when eight years of age, lived on a farm in Sandusky County, Ohio, three and one-half miles east of Clyde. His mother was Mary Magdalene Mook Norris (1818-1900).

GEORGE W. NORRIS: A COUNTRY BOY IN AN URBANIZING NATION

By RICHARD LOWITT

This article is a revision of a paper read by the author before a biography session at the Western Historical Association in Omaha in October, 1969.

I F, AS Richard Hofstadter wrote in the *Age of Reform*, "The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city," then the biographies of most Americans born in the West and achieving prominence in the twentieth century should follow this pattern. And I suspect that most do. John D. Hicks in his delightful autobiography, *My Life with History*, writes as one who left the country for the city and explains that "to understand our urban present, we still need to know something about our rural past." It is with a sense of nostalgia that Hicks presents his autobiography, recounting a youth completely alien to most of his readers, pervaded with a feeling that while it might be of interest, it will be almost irrelevant to their background, experiences, and current dilemmas. Hicks' hope in writing the story of his life is that what has happened to him "will reflect to some extent what has happened to many others." And, again, I suspect the same might be said of most twentieth century "western" biographies. They reflect a background and experiences alien to the world in which we find ourselves; they inform us about what *was* and not *is*; they are read either by those engaged in one way or another with Clio, the muse of history, or by

those with a sense of curiosity or nostalgia about the past which in many instances seems preferable to the present.

None of these assertions has much validity when applied to the career of George W. Norris (1861-1944), whose biography I am writing. He was born in the country and maintained his home as well as his heart there for the rest of his life. Northwestern Ohio was "country" in the 1860's and 1870's when Norris was coming of age; southwestern Nebraska, where he lived his adult life (aside from time spent in Washington, D. C.) and where he now lies buried, is still "country" today. Moreover, there is little that is nostalgic, alien, or irrelevant about Norris' career. With his rural or country background and point of view he spoke in a relevant way to the situations, events, and problems that Americans grappled with during the forty years he functioned on the national scene, years during which the United States became an urban nation. He was able to do this for several reasons. First, when he examined the plight of the farmer in the 1920's, he saw it as part of a larger pattern whose focus was not necessarily located in rural America. The underpaid producer was balanced by the overcharged consumer with the profits of exploitation siphoned off by powerful agencies functioning as middlemen and processors. The overcharged consumer was an urban dweller, and he, like the farmer, all too often was exploited by overbearing utility companies, banks, railroads, courts, and governmental agencies that were not basically interested in his outlook or welfare. By combining his concern for the consumer with that of the producer, Norris waged battles that did not remove him from the main currents of American politics. He was a staunch friend of both the farmer and the working man. He was an arch foe of monopoly capitalism and of government in which this interest predominated to the virtual exclusion of all others.

Second, Norris changed the institutional apparatus of American life in three ways—none of them original with him. Nevertheless, he was responsible for three institutional developments which play a role today and which could play an even larger role on both the national and international

scene. As the father of TVA, he showed that a government corporation severed from political and other connections with Washington could be a significant factor in the advancement of underdeveloped river valleys everywhere. The idea of multiple-purpose river valley development is exportable, and other nations still send people to examine the system with the hope of applying it in whole or in part to their peculiar problems. To aid them former TVA officials have banded together in a private corporation and seek to sell their services to nations in Asia, Africa, and South America hoping to improve their growth potential.

As the person in Congress most immediately concerned with making the Rural Electrification Administration a permanent part of our governmental apparatus, Norris helped further a concept of federalism somewhat different from that propounded by the founding fathers. The idea of government helping people who wished to help themselves can be traced back at least to the Newlands Act of 1902. Developed within a rural context—and furthered by Norris within this context—it is today a primary instrument of the welfare state. And it also expands the democratic concept in the modern world. People at the grassroots level would get together with the purpose of creating a cooperative that would bring electricity to regions never before brightened or powered by it. To receive loans—in the rural context the money originally was to be paid back to the Treasury—the members of the cooperative had to abide by rules and regulations designed to insure the success of the operation. While the REA co-ops are meaningful to rural America, the idea behind them is also an exportable one, as the work of Clyde Ellis and others amply illustrate, and the concept of government helping people to help themselves has been expanded beyond the rural areas where it was first applied. Now Norris neither originated nor first used this approach. But he helped to expand it and in doing so helped to add a new institution to American life that, like TVA, already has a rich and interesting history of its own.

A third way in which Norris affected the institutional apparatus of American life was his dominant but not exclusive role in the creation of the unicameral legislature in Nebraska.

Again the idea was not original with him. But the Nebraska Unicameral is the only one that has been rooted in receptive soil and has become a germane, indeed the basic, institution of the Nebraska political structure. While this idea is also an exportable one, no other state has deemed it worthy of copying. But, as state government costs rise, as state governments become more complex, and as citizens become noticeably tired of inefficiency and waste at the state capitol, interest in the Nebraska unicameral rises. Delegates from various states come or write to Lincoln for information. The unicameral system has been and is now discussed with increasing interest in many states. Who knows what the future will bring!

These reasons alone suggest that a person born in the country and basically a country boy at heart could have an influential career in an increasingly urban nation. Norris, however, had further handicaps to overcome. That he was successful in overcoming them makes his career even more exciting and important in the highly organized, structured, and managerial world in which we live. Norris' career reveals that the individual still counts and possibly can effect significant change, given the right set of circumstances. Rather than review his career, which itself would illustrate the point, I shall quote part of an editorial from the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* for April 22, 1928, which I think will suggest why Norris' career might seem attractive to "fighting liberals" today. The editorial characterized Norris as "a Republican who is almost never Republican, always wanting to retire and always being re-elected; refusing to be a leader yet always having leadership thrust upon him; politically omnipotent in his state, yet never a boss, never maintaining a machine, never using patronage; a pacifist by nature yet always fighting." In short, he was the very model of an independent progressive politician whose courage, ability, persistence, and prudence can serve as a guide to reformers of both urban and rural backgrounds in a United States that has moved to the city. Felix Frankfurter attributed to him "a statesman-like capacity to make effective, general ideas for the public welfare."

Franklin D. Roosevelt understood the appeal of Senator

Norris to Americans in his day, an appeal which has not dimished with the passing years. In the 1932 campaign Democratic Candidate Roosevelt, speaking about its leading citizen and his career before the largest crowd ever gathered in McCook, said this of Norris: "He has been thinking of the rights and welfare of the average citizen, of the farmer, the laborer, the small business. . . . But especially it has been an unselfish fight, and directed to the fact that it is the little fellow who has been forgotten by his government." He sought, in short, a community in which all human beings would be necessary and valued.

Running through Norris' career is his conviction that only the strongest sense of the value of individual integrity, rather than autocratic power and mass weakness, would prevent the abuse of power. Recognizing the necessity for his own political independence and his great responsibility to the nation, he was able to reach a high level of political dignity and social usefulness. Cherishing traditional values which he sought to improve and make more efficient, Norris also helped forge new social approaches which have attracted disciples whose loyalties to their principles enable them to develop and expand their ideas both at home and abroad. The insights to be gained from studying Norris' life provide the historian a great opportunity in understanding both rural and urban America in comprehending his time as well as our own.