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Article Summary: In 1877 George Norris enrolled at Baldwin University. He could only afford to stay one year, but that opportunity provided a base for his role as a distinguished political leader.

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GEORGE W. NORRIS AS A STUDENT AT BALDWIN UNIVERSITY

BY DAVID LINDSEY

IN THE fall of 1877 a sixteen-year-old farm boy appeared in Berea, Ohio, accompanied by his two sisters. Nothing in his appearance marked this boy as greatly different from hundreds of other farm boys who came to Berea in the latter part of the nineteenth century to enroll as students at Methodist-sponsored Baldwin University. Yet some fifty-odd years later, the young farm boy of 1877 had become known throughout the country as one of the most distinguished and constructive of American political leaders, hailed by another eminent American as "one of the major prophets of America."¹ He had become Senator George William Norris of Nebraska.

But back in 1877 George William Norris was simply a bright-eyed youngster seeking an education. He had been raised on a farm near Clyde, Ohio, some sixty miles west of Cleveland. His father had died when George William was only three, leaving his mother to rear a family of seven

¹ Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt at McCook, Nebraska, September 22, 1932, quoted in Richard L. Neuberger and Stephen B. Kahn, *Integrity: The Life of George W. Norris* (New York, 1937), pp. v-vi.

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young children. His brother, John H. Norris, had attended Baldwin University between 1858 and 1860, thereby setting an example for the Norris children.² A Confederate bullet in 1864 had killed John Norris and left George William the only remaining male member of the family. From the time he could remember, Will, as he was called at home, knew more than his share of work, hard work and more work. He later wrote: "There on the farm I lost all fear of poverty. I learned to live simply, and I learned to get a great joy out of work. It never occurred to me in those years that the lack of money was of any consequence."³ And he remembered well the lessons of life learned in his rigorous days on the farm. "I grew up to believe wholly and completely in men and women who lived simply, frugally and in fine faith. . . . Unconsciously there developed in that pioneer Ohio region a great respect for justice and a great sympathy for the oppressed. As a boy I saw with my own eyes the struggles of a democracy where the first problem is not protection of the strong and powerful but instead encouragement and inspiration for the weak and unfortunate."⁴ This early faith in the purpose of democracy, as he saw them, remained strong in Norris for the rest of his life.

George William Norris wanted an education badly. "I was . . . ambitious and hungry for education," he wrote later.⁵ After attending the local school near home, Will and two of his sisters, Emma and Clara, enrolled at the beginning of the fall term in 1877 at Baldwin University in the quiet, Puritan town of Berea, located on the outskirts of the rising industrial metropolis of Cleveland.⁶ "It was my first adventure beyond the parental roof."⁷ Will chose Baldwin University not only because his older brother had attended

² *Baldwin University* (Berea, Ohio), catalogs, 1858-59, 1859-60; also John P. Robertson (G. W. Norris' secretary) to Francis F. Mills (Baldwin-Wallace College alumni secretary), Washington, D.C., March 13, 1937.

³ George W. Norris, *Fighting Liberal: The Autobiography of George W. Norris* (New York, 1945), p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶ *Baldwin University Catalog*, 1878-79; William G. Rose, *Cleveland: The Making of a City* (Cleveland, 1950), pp. 361-427.

⁷ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

here but also because it was advertised as an institution "within the reach of the poor young man and young woman,"⁸ and because it was near enough to the Norris home so that traveling expenses would not be prohibitive.⁹

Baldwin University in the 1870's showed little promise of the robust educational institution it would become three-quarters of a century later. Indeed, in the decade before Norris arrived, the Civil War had drained off large numbers of students and inflation in the war's wake had plunged the school into financial difficulties. In the hope of increasing enrollment, a college of pharmacy had been established in 1865.¹⁰ But again a dearth of students had caused its abandonment ten years later. To meet financial obligations the University trustees had in 1865 sold off one of the valuable stone quarries that founder John Baldwin had generously given the college. A year later John Baldwin (then living at Baldwin, Kansas) presented the University with another twenty acres of quarry land, valued at \$100,000.¹¹ The vexing problem, however, was how to secure profits from the quarries. For a time one quarry was leased to a professor of the college, who had it worked to supplement his meager salary. The trustees tried to rent out other parts of the quarry land and to organize a stock company to work the quarries—but to no avail in the mid-seventies when business and building construction were virtually at a standstill following the Panic of 1873. It was not until 1888 that the trustees finally sold the quarry land to the Cleveland Stone Company for \$100,000.¹²

The Baldwin University campus that Norris found on arrival in Berea was not particularly impressive. It was located on the south side of what is now the business center

⁸ This was in keeping with the intention of the founder John Baldwin, who had established the school in 1845 as an institution where students could work and learn simultaneously. (Amos R. Webber, *Life of John Baldwin, Sr. of Berea, Ohio* [n.p., 1925], pp. 52-58, 63-69.)

⁹ Neuberger and Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Baldwin University catalog*, 1865-66.

¹¹ Webber, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹² Clyde Feuchter, MS history of Baldwin Wallace College, in office of Mrs. Dorothy McKelvey, alumni secretary, Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, Ohio.

of Berea in an area once underlain with Berea sandstone but now filled with the waters of Lake Baldwin in Cleveland Metropolitan Park.¹³ The original college building erected by John Baldwin in 1846 had been abandoned as unsafe for use in 1869.¹⁴ Old South Hall had been renovated in the early 1870's as a residence for men students. A new building, described as "an elegant and commodious Boarding Hall for ladies" was under construction in 1877.¹⁵ The building known then as the Chapel Building, but now called Hulet Hall was almost completed when Norris arrived on the campus.¹⁶ It was on the top floor of this building where chapel services were held, while the lower floor held the class recitation rooms. Dr. Aaron Schuyler, famous mathematician and author of several textbooks, had begun a difficult ten-year term as University president in 1875.¹⁷ Student enrollment had dwindled from 326 in 1865 to 149 at the depth of the depression in 1874-75. It had crept up to 241 in 1877-78 and remained at approximately that level for the rest of the decade. The college catalog advertised Berea as a town of "moral salubrity" and added: "we have no grog shops or seductive lounging places in the village."¹⁸

In this atmosphere many students found it convenient to rent rooms in houses in town and either get their own meals or eat at one of the boarding houses. Boarding rates were advertised as \$2-\$2.50 per week in boarding clubs or \$3-\$3.50 per week with private families, while room rent in South Hall came to \$6.50 per term.¹⁹ But Norris and his sisters found even these bargain rates too high. They rented the upper floor of a house on the edge of town and there,

¹³ See "Map of Berea, 1884," in Baldwin-Wallace College alumni office. Also *The Delphian* (Baldwin University yearbook) for 1893, Baldwin-Wallace College Library; personal correspondence with Miss Frances Mills, former alumni secretary of Baldwin-Wallace College.

¹⁴ Webber, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁵ *Baldwin University catalog*, 1877-78.

¹⁶ George W. Norris to Willard H. Shaw, letter published in *Historical Facts Concerning Berea and Middleburgh Township* (Berea, Ohio, 1936), p. 36.

¹⁷ Feuchter, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Baldwin University catalogs*, 1865-66, 1874-75, 1877-78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1877-78.

according to Will Norris, they "completely solved the domestic questions pertaining to housekeeping."²⁰ "We rented the second story of a house—three rooms—including two small bedrooms and a larger one in between that had to serve as kitchen, dining room, and living room."²¹ Will chopped wood in the back yard and carried the kindling and water upstairs to the kitchen. His sisters took care of the cooking, cleaning and mending.²² Laundry was a cooperative affair, Emma and Clara doing the scrubbing and rinsing and Will hanging the wash out on a line strung between two trees in the back yard.

All of them were scrupulously thrifty. They had to be. They ate and lived frugally to avoid a too rapid drain on their small exchequer. Will wore the same suit of clothes day after day, and when it became ragged, his sister would mend it for him.²³ There was no money for amusements or frivolities. They simply had to live economically. Comparatively few boys and girls in rural Ohio of that day could afford a college education. The Norrises were willing to make the necessary sacrifices. The living arrangements worked out well enough, although occasionally there were some embarrassments. Norris recalled later: "Both sisters were very attractive, and the closeness of the quarters embarrassed me because when men students called upon them there was no place where I could go except that tiny bedroom."²⁴

With the problems of living under control, Norris concentrated on the important business of getting an education. He was officially enrolled as a junior student in the classical course of the Preparatory Department, where students from the common schools were ordinarily given a chance to secure the proper basis for study on the collegiate level. One sister, Clara, was also in the Preparatory Department, while Emma was registered in the College Department.²⁵ Norris' record as a student was outstanding. Latin and mathematics formed

²⁰ Norris to Shaw, in *Historical Facts Concerning Berea*, p. 36.

²¹ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²² Alfred Lief, *Democracy's Norris* (New York, 1939), p. 21.

²³ Neuberger and Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁴ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²⁵ *Baldwin University Catalog*, 1878-79.

the major portion of the classical course of study. With these subjects young Norris wrestled tenaciously. "I worried myself red in the face," he remembered later, "to master the problems contained in *Schuyler's Algebra*. Our class was taught by Clara Schuyler, the daughter of the president [Dr. Aaron Schuyler] of our institution."²⁶ Norris also struggled through *Caesar's Gallic Wars* under the patient, persistent tutelage of Professor Archie M. Mattison. In addition, he studied courses in English Grammar, United States History, Physiology and Botany. At the end of the year his record showed a perfect "10" grade for seven courses and "9.85," "9.8," and "9" for his three other courses.²⁷ The intellectual atmosphere of the college community Norris found most stimulating under the inspiration of such able teachers as Carl Riemenschneider, Professor of Greek Language; Victor Wilker, Professor of German and French; James A. Dodge, Professor of Natural Sciences; not to mention President Aaron Schuyler, Professor of Philosophy.²⁸

Outside the classroom Norris joined one of the flourishing literary societies. Here during the evening meetings Norris participated enthusiastically in discussion and debate on the current controversies of the day. His speaking 'was regarded as convincing if not flowery.'²⁹ Undoubtedly this training in public speaking and debate stood Norris in good stead during his later career in law and politics.

Other evenings the Norrises gathered with their friends in the kitchen-living room of their apartment. Here around the large table they sat and talked over their classwork and traded bits of campus chit-chat. Many times they spent the evening singing popular songs—a form of recreation that Will Norris enjoyed heartily. Often he was urged to do a solo in his rich voice while others joined in the chorus.

That Will Norris was an average student, typical of that day as well as this, is shown by an incident that made a

²⁶ Norris to Shaw in *Historical Facts Concerning Berea*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²⁷ Records for 1877-78 in Registrar's Office, Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, Ohio.

²⁸ *Baldwin University Catalog*, 1877-78.

²⁹ Neuberger and Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

lasting impression on him. One night Norris and a group of prank-planning fellow students climbed the chapel tower where they found some loose boards left by workmen that day. "This gang of night raiders," Norris wrote later, planned to throw the boards to the ground and start a bonfire.³⁰ However, when the boys got down from the tower, they discovered that several of the boards in dropping had fallen through and broken several of the large chapel windows. Fearing detection, the boys now scattered. Later it appeared that one boy, P. P. Hardy, was tracked down as one of the culprits. Hardy had worn a black, long-tailed coat with two buttons on the back. On the night of the raid when Hardy climbed through the window, one of his coat buttons had caught and dropped to the floor unnoticed. The next morning the janitor who opened the chapel door found the button. As students gathered around the chapel entrance to view the previous night's wreckage, the janitor spotted Hardy's coat with only one button where there should have been two. At the close of the chapel service President Schuyler called Hardy to his office and confronted him with the evidence. Hardy made a clean breast of his part in the affair but refused to reveal the names of his co-conspirators, despite a lengthy grilling. President Schuyler gave Hardy back his button with the warning that the next time he undertook such a stunt he should wear a coat without buttons. And, concludes Norris, "No one, so far as I know, ever knew how all this happened."³¹

With one year's training at Baldwin University behind him George William Norris, like many another student of his time, finding his funds exhausted, left Berea to look for a teaching position. He landed one in the Long School district in Lucas County, Ohio. One of his older sisters was married and lived in that district. Her son, Clark Castle, told the local school board about his uncle Will at Baldwin University. The Board members assumed that Will was a man of mature years and hired him without an interview. They were amazed to discover when Norris appeared at the opening of school

³⁰ Norris to Shaw, in *Historical Facts Concerning Berea*, p. 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

that he was still in his teens.³²

Although invited on several occasions, Norris never returned to the Berea campus.³³ He did, however, in his declining years hold "the most pleasant memories of the year I spent at Baldwin University."³⁴ His ultimate testimonial to John Baldwin's institution came in 1936 when Norris wrote: "Baldwin University will always remain a pleasant memory. . . . The good it has done will never be fully known or appreciated. Its students, imbued with the spirit of progress and honesty, are scattered all over the Union, and today there are thousands of citizens everywhere whose hearts beat in unison, in pleasant . . . recollections of old Berea."³⁵

³² Lief, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³³ Norris to Albert B. Storms (president of Baldwin-Wallace College) Washington, D.C., March 15, 1932. Personal interview with Miss Frances Mills.

³⁴ Norris to Shaw, in *Historical Facts Concerning Berea*, p. 36.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.