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Article Summary: His wife's personal recollections provided the basis of this account of the final days of George Norris.

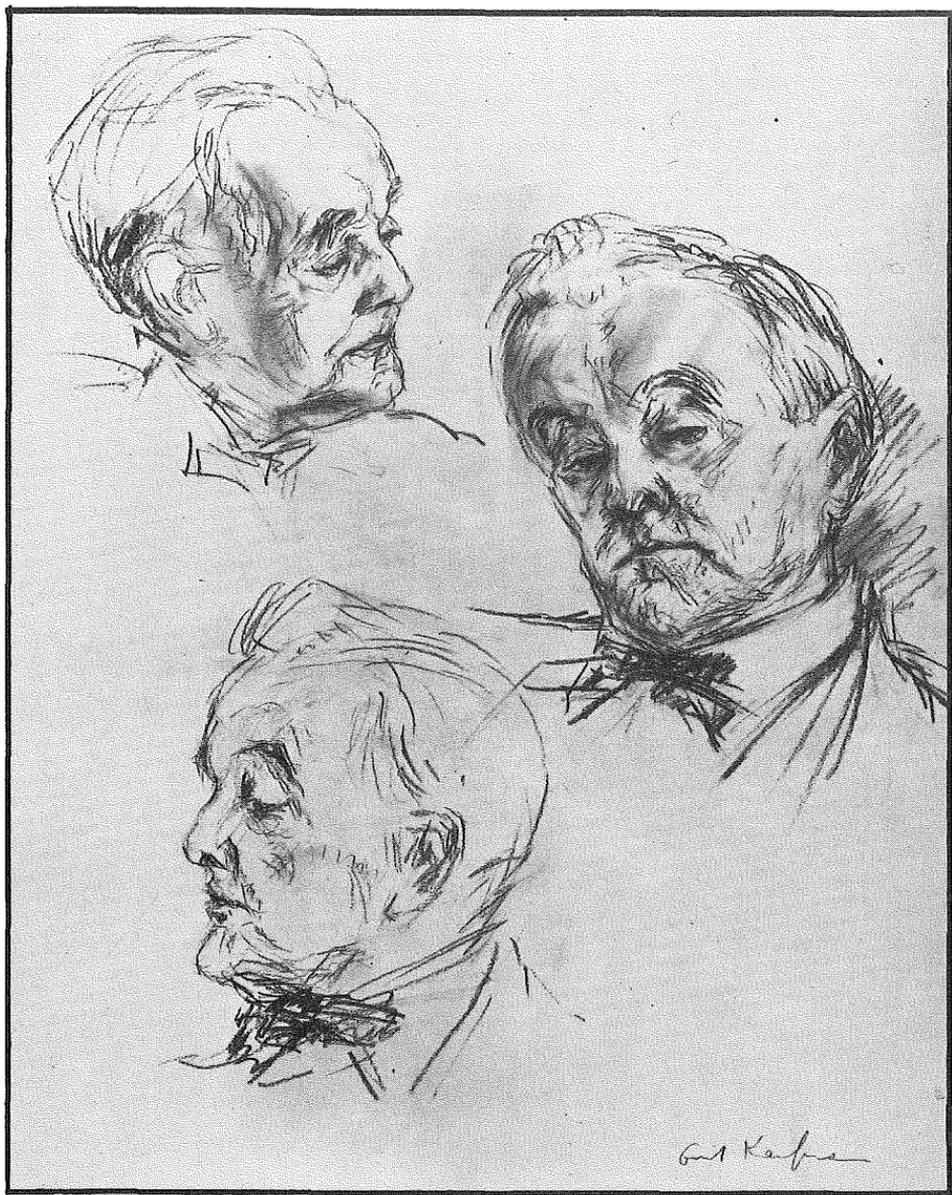
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Photographs / Images: three sketches of George Norris; Norris with his sisters, Emma and Clara; a 1902 Norris campaign card; Norris in a committee meeting while serving in the House of Representatives; Norris during a 1932 rally held in California for F.D.R.; Norris with President Roosevelt and others visiting the TVA project; Norris, his wife and his daughters; Norris visiting Norris Dam in Tennessee; Carl Marsh meeting Senator and Mrs Norris in 1943 as they returned from Washington to McCook



George Norris.

The Day George Norris Died

By GENE A. BUDIG and DONALD B. WALTON

It was a moonlit evening.

Ellie, his wife, and the Senator read to one another under the pear tree. In turn, they listened to the written voice of Henry Morgenthau. The bright glow of the moon provided almost all the light they needed. In every way, it was a pleasant August evening.¹

As the night wore on, they debated whether to remain outside and enjoy the lovely moonlight or go indoors. It was the warm and soothing summer evening which prevailed. They sat outside until nearly 10:00 P.M.

Dr. Budig is Administrative Assistant to the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska and an Assistant Professor of Educational Administration. Mr. Walton is a political reporter for the Lincoln Star. Both authors acknowledge the assistance of Mrs. George Norris, whose personal recollections form the basis for this article.

When at last they had come inside, Ellie and Norris went to bed. As they drifted off to sleep, dark clouds began to move toward McCook, dropping rain on dry farmland as they rolled across the Republican Valley.

Later that night, Ellie awoke to the frenzied patter of the falling rain. She arose, walking softly into the hall to close the window.

Then Ellie went to her husband's bedroom. From the hall she inquired whether she ought to close his window too. He did not answer.

So, Ellie crept quietly into the bedroom and shut the window about halfway. George William, she believed, was asleep.

But as she returned to the hall, Ellie heard Norris call to her. She stopped. He had said something, but she had not understood. She waited for him to repeat himself, but he did not speak again. He has drifted back to sleep, she thought.

Back in bed, Ellie listened for awhile to the drops of rain as they clattered on the rooftop. It would be a cool and lovely morning, she decided.

It was the 7:00 A.M. whistle which awakened her. Slipping out of bed, she called to George William: "There's our whistle." It was the usual time to arise.

Norris did not answer. For once, she thought, he is going to oversleep. Ellie began to dress. Then all of a sudden, without warning, panic struck her. It was not like the Senator to sleep past seven. Something was wrong.

Ellie rushed to his side. She called, but he did not hear. Her world crumbling about her, Ellie hurried to the telephone.

Dr. Leininger was out of town. His wife told Ellie she would call Dr. Shank² and he would be over immediately. Mrs. George Norris returned to her husband's side.

It was, Dr. Shank said, a cerebral hemorrhage. He had apparently been stricken sometime during the night. Members of the family should be summoned.

Meanwhile, Dr. Leininger rushed back toward McCook.

It was August 29, 1944, a Tuesday. The *Gazette* was filled with the news that American troops were ripping through France to the German border.³

Now the days passed slowly. Norris lay in a semi-conscious condition. He was listed as critical. Messages poured in from throughout the nation. The President phoned.

Then a telegram arrived.

"So sorry to hear you are under the weather and I hope much that you will be on your feet again soon," it read.

"Affectionate regards. Franklin D. Roosevelt."

Ellie took it to the bedroom. Before it was read aloud to him, Ellie leaned over the bed and spoke softly into George William's ear. If you understand, she said, press my fingers. Then, as the wire was repeated aloud, Ellie held her husband's hand. When it was finished, she waited. Suddenly, pressure tightened upon her fingers. Ellie smiled down.

Later, to gain the benefit of a cool breeze, they moved the Senator to the east bedroom.

The stroke had been a surprise to Dr. Leininger. Norris had seen the doctor regularly every two weeks before his attack, and there had been no hint of any immediate trouble.

The Senator remained unconscious most of the time. Paralysis affected his speech. He apparently could hear and seemed to understand what was said to him, but much of the time Norris was beyond comprehending.

The doctor called on his patient each morning and evening. The daughters, Hazel, Marian, and Gertrude, and Hazel's husband John P. Robertson were always on hand. The President telephoned a couple of times while the doctor was there.⁴

Norris had been Dr. Leininger's patient since July of 1943. He had never been fleshy from the beginning, but he had lost a good deal of weight in fifteen months.

There had never been any question in the doctor's mind but that Norris was considerably broken up by his defeat, even though he never talked about it. The Senator's broken heart might well have had an effect in triggering the stroke, Leininger thought.⁵

Norris had been a good patient. He usually came to the office for his check-ups. The Senator was very unassuming, but still very impressive, the doctor thought. He always dressed well and was obviously a deep thinker. And sometimes he talked of trees and natural beauty.

Now he was flat on his back. Flowers filled his room. Ellie was constantly at his side.

The doctor recalled his slight coronary attack in July. He had restricted Norris pretty much after that, for he knew the Senator was generally failing.

Worry can be hard on a man. It mercilessly drains his strength, and it strains the vital organs of his body. It robs him of sleep and destroys any opportunity for relaxation. Worry may not have killed George Norris, but it certainly did not help.⁶

The Senator's condition worsened to very critical as the first day of September arrived. The *Gazette* told of the pell-mell rush of American troops ever nearer to the enemy border. The end was not far off.

On September 2, the swan-neck rocker stood empty and motionless. At its side in the glass smoking jar was

a handful of big black cigars, each tucked away under cellophane.

The Oriental rugs, for many years a conversation piece, lay unnoticed.

Rows of books, occupying every available shelf, stood intact. Several texts on the sun porch, however, lay open.

The Norris home was silent.

In the Tennessee Valley, great dams gleamed in the late summer sunlight. Farm wives worked under the light of electric bulbs powered by an upstream dam. Water flowed through lush fields, irrigating the soil. There would be no floods this year.⁷

Outside McCook, wires stretched from pole to farm house, carrying the energy of public power at low cost to the man who tilled the soil.⁸

On a bloody field on another continent, the next day, the first few American tanks smashed across the border into Germany, the first penetration of enemy soil and the beginning of the end for the Nazi aggressors.

In McCook the day was clear and warm. The clock in the Norris home stood at 4:25 P.M.

In the east bedroom where his cherished Chinese tables flank the bed, George William Norris died.

His two bedroom bookcases and the heavy wooden bureau stood against the wall. They still do.

His tobacco jar was half full. It still is.

A giant, beloved tree looked in from the window. It still does.

NOTES

¹ On five different occasions, in March, April, May, and June of 1961, Mrs. Norris met with the authors to discuss her statesman husband, giving special attention to his twilight years. The discussions, ranging in length from two to five hours, were held in the living room of the Norris home in McCook.

² Dr. E. F. Leininger and Dr. F. W. Shank, McCook physicians.

³ Copies of the *McCook Daily Gazette* were reviewed from the period when Norris returned home after his defeat at the polls until his death in 1944. References to the acclaimed legislator were few; in the words of one old friend, "Senator Norris did not seek publicity . . . he only sought privacy after his defeat."

⁴ The Associated Press carried a story of the Presidential telephone calls to McCook, noting that Roosevelt was "deeply concerned."

⁵ Among his closest friends, it was generally agreed that the senatorial defeat of 1942 had dealt Norris a crushing blow. One neighbor, who had known the Senator for twenty-seven years, remembered him as "a broken man."

⁶ After listening to a radio speech by Roosevelt on December 24, 1943, Norris wrote:

Like a dream it seemed to me I was sitting again in the capitol of the United States, listening to the voice I knew so well. Surrounded by my senatorial associates, I could hear again so plainly that analysis 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 capitol 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.

Norris Dictation, in possession of family.

⁷ Norris led the campaign which culminated in 1933 in the passage of the act creating the Tennessee Valley Authority, an act he had written. The first T.V.A. dam to be completed was named for him.

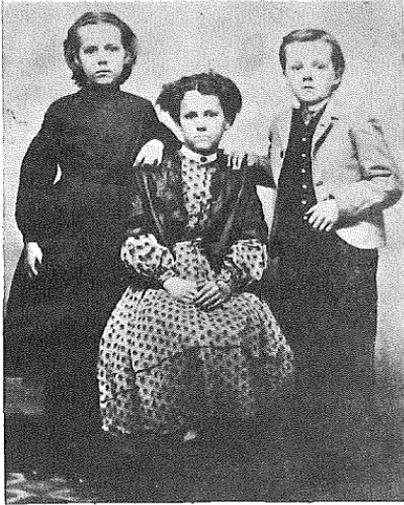
⁸ As coauthor, Norris also led the fight for passage of the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, which authorized financing for the construction of rural electric facilities to serve rural populations lacking central-station electric service. The *Washington Post* tabbed the man from Nebraska as "the one who lighted the way for rural America."

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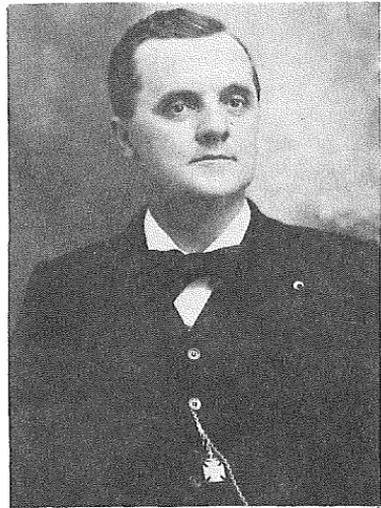
NORRIS

ALBUM

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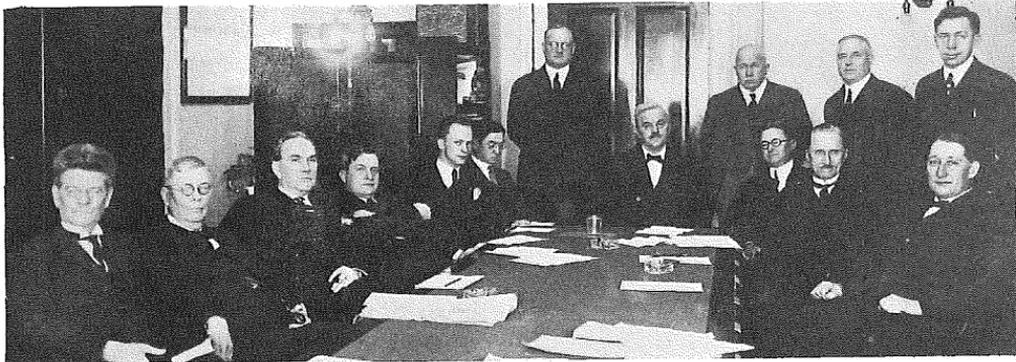


*Norris, with his sisters,
Emma and Clara.*

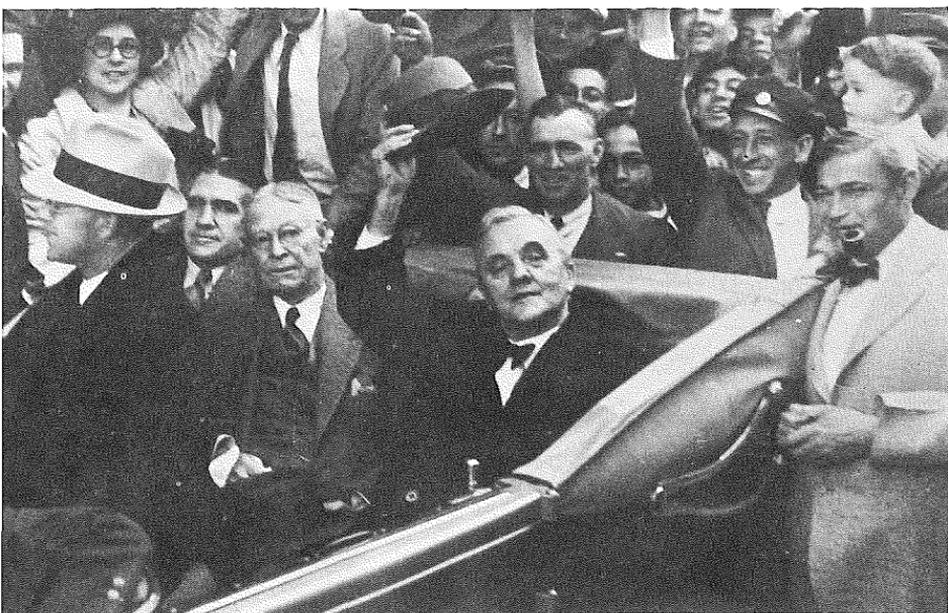


George W. Norris,
Republican Nominee
FOR CONGRESS.
FIFTH DISTRICT NEBRASKA

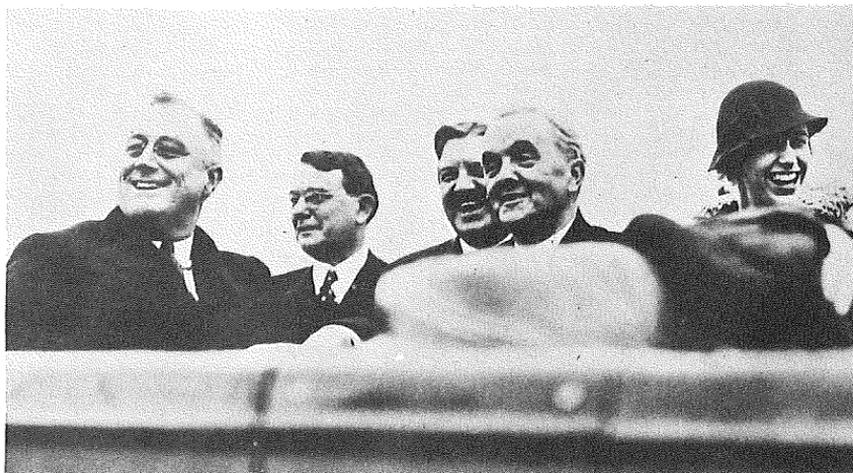
A 1902 Norris campaign card.



*Norris, at end of table, in a committee meeting, while
serving in the House of Representatives.*



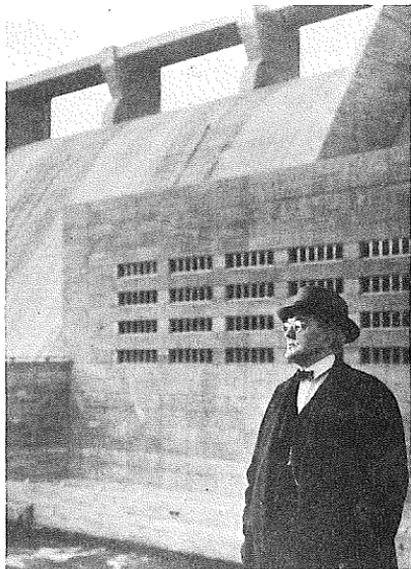
Senator Norris pictured during a 1932 rally held in California for F.D.R. Pictured are Yale B. Huffman, Sr. (dark coat); seated left to right Ralph G. Sucher, Francis J. Heney and Senator Norris.



President Roosevelt; Senator McKellar, Tennessee; Senator Dill, Washington; Senator Norris; Anna Roosevelt Dall; and Representative Hill, Alabama, visiting the TVA Project.



Senator and Mrs Norris, with his daughters, DeWitt, Hazel, and Marian. 1936.



Senator Norris visits Norris Dam in Tennessee, a TVA project.



Carl Marsh meeting Senator and Mrs. Norris, in early 1943, upon their return to McCook from Washington.