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Article Summary: Former Governor Crosby's 1985 speech, reprinted here, explains why the West Legislative Chamber of the Nebraska Capitol bears the name of George Norris. The late senator's personal prestige and vigorous campaigning had led to the passage of the 1934 constitutional amendment establishing the non-partisan, one-house Legislature.

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Photographs / Images: Senator George W Norris and Robert B Crosby, Speaker of the Nebraska Legislature, March 10, 1943



*Senator George W. Norris (left) and Robert B. Crosby, Speaker of the Nebraska Legislature, March 10, 1943, at the front of the west legislative chamber, now named for Senator Norris. Courtesy of Robert B. Crosby.*

# Dedication of the George W. Norris West Legislative Chamber

*By Robert B. Crosby*

*The following speech was delivered January 11, 1985, at the Nebraska State Capitol, Lincoln, by Robert B. Crosby, Governor of Nebraska from 1953 to 1955.*

A visitor from another state is likely to ask, "Why name your Legislative Chamber for George W. Norris?" The reason for naming this chamber after Norris is compelling and should not be forgotten. To put it simply, without Norris this state would not have a nonpartisan one-house Legislature.

In the early history of our country, the trend was away from the notion of a one-house Legislature. Most of the colonial assemblies had originated as one-house bodies, although they gradually shifted over to the two house system. The continental congresses had been unicameral. However, by the time state constitutions were being adopted only Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Vermont adopted one-house Legislatures. They later changed to two houses, although Vermont did not change until 1836. The organization of our national Congress into two houses, the Senate and the House, undoubtedly had a strong influence on those who drafted state constitutions.

Early in this century there was a great deal of criticism of the use of conference committees between the two houses. When Norris campaigned in Nebraska in 1934 in support of a nonpartisan one-house constitutional amendment, he said that the argument that a two-house Legislature provides checks and balances does not work out in practice. Rather, he said it has developed that "through the conference committee, the politicians have the checks and the special interests the balances."

It is interesting that in Nebraska, conservative in so many ways, there had been several efforts to change our Legislature to the one-house system before Senator Norris took up the

cause. In 1915 a joint committee of the Legislature declared that "one body can more directly represent the public will of a democratic people than two or more," and recommended submitting a single-chamber amendment to the people. Instead, the Legislature voted to hold a constitutional convention. At the 1919-20 constitutional convention the proposal for a single-chamber Legislature was beaten by only one vote, the president of the convention breaking a tie. In 1923 an initiative petition was circulated to amend the constitution to have a one-house Legislature, but not enough signatures were obtained. Legislative efforts failed in 1925 and again in 1933.

In 1934 at the urging of a small group in Lincoln, Senator Norris agreed to put his immense prestige behind an initiative petition for a one-house Legislature. At that time his prestige was indeed immense. He had been in Congress 32 years, 10 in the House and 22 in the US Senate. His achievements in the National Capitol had been impressive, astonishing in fact. While still in the House he had brought about a change in the rules that broke the autocratic control of Speaker Joe Cannon. Almost alone he had voted against this nation's involvement in World War I and had survived the disapproval of most of Nebraska's newspapers. His leadership had brought about the adoption of the 20th amendment to the US Constitution which eliminated "lame duck" sessions of Congress. Norris' dogged persistence had achieved the Tennessee Valley Authority. He had led the effort for enactment of the Rural Electrification Act thus allowing rural America to have electricity.

Four years earlier his prestige had been enhanced by his victory in the 1930 elections. He then faced determined opposition not only from the Democratic Party but also from influential members of his own Republican Party. In the 1930 primary election there occurred the infamous trick of getting a grocery clerk in Broken Bow named George W. Norris also to file for the Senate. An action filed in the Supreme Court kept "Grocer Norris" off the ballot. His chief opponent in the primary, State Treasurer W. M. Stebbins, was supported by the Republican leadership, even by former Governor Sam McKelvie. Norris, however, obtained the renomination with about 60 percent of the votes. In the final election in 1930, he faced former US Senator Gilbert M. Hitchcock, who was added to the Nebraska Hall of Fame last month [December,

1984]. Hitchcock received substantial support from many Republican leaders. Norris proved his political strength by overwhelming Hitchcock with not much less than 60 percent of the votes. Thus, being at the peak of his popularity, it seemed in 1934 that Norris might be able to carry an initiative petition to success even though it had failed several times earlier.

The form of the amendment included the non-partisan feature. Some members of the group that had enlisted Norris' support argued that the non-partisan feature might cause the defeat of the amendment., Norris insisted upon it. One wonders whether he foresaw that he would be running for reelection as an independent two years later.

The non-partisan feature of the amendment brought opposition from the leaders of both political parties. Further, some farm groups opposed the amendment on the ground that the proposed membership, limited to not more than 50 members, was too small to give agriculture adequate representation. Most of the newspapers including the *Omaha World-Herald* opposed the amendment. The only daily newspapers supporting the amendment were the *Lincoln Star* and the *Hastings Tribune*. The editor of the *Lincoln Star*, James Lawrence, was a close friend and ally of Senator Norris.

When the initiative petition was ready for circulation Senator Norris gave it his full support. He visited every section of the state. Fifty-seven thousand signatures were required. Before the deadline more than 75,000 persons had signed the petition.

Once the amendment was on the ballot the opposition to it was intensified. Both political parties saw the amendment as a direct threat to their influence and an assault on the traditional two-party system of government in this country. It was argued that no other state had a non-partisan one-house Legislature. It was argued that the proposal was a dangerous experiment and a rejection of the tried and true American legislative formula used by our National Congress.

It is a demonstration of the stature of George W. Norris in Nebraska in 1934 that the constitutional amendment carried by a vote of 286,086 to 193,152, a majority of almost 60 percent.

The amendment assigned to the 1935 Legislature the task of setting the number of members, which was agreed to be 43,

and then dividing the state into 43 districts. The first unicameral Legislature was elected in 1936 and commenced its first session on January 5, 1937. Senator Norris was here in this Chamber on that day to address the opening session.

What manner of man was Senator Norris, whose entire career was fraught with controversy? Both his father and his older brother died when he was three years old. His mother did not remarry. By dint of hard work he managed to obtain a law degree from a northern Indiana Normal School at the age of 22. He went west in 1884 to the territory that later became the State of Washington, but could not make a living. He came back to Beatrice, Nebraska, early in 1885 and tried without success to start a law practice. Then in September of 1885 he moved to Beaver City in Furnas County and was able to establish a law practice. Five years later, in 1890, he ran for County Attorney in Furnas County and lost. That was the same year when my great-grandfather, John H. Powers, was the Populist Party candidate for Governor in Nebraska and also lost—actually won according to historian Addison Sheldon, who said my great-grandfather was counted out by manipulation of the ballot boxes by the railroads. In later years Norris and my great-grandfather Powers were political friends.

After giving him three daughters, his first wife died in the 11th year of their marriage. During that marriage he had again run for County Attorney of Furnas County and had been elected in 1892. He was elected District Judge in 1895. In 1902 he was elected to Congress. During his second year in Congress he married a teacher in the McCook public school system who raised his three daughters and who was a tremendous help to him throughout his life.

He was small in stature. He dressed plainly, usually wearing a baggy black suit and a string bow tie. His talk was quiet. He avoided the social life in Washington DC, spending most of his evenings at home reading.

From the beginning of his career he might be said to have been non-traditional. His service as District Judge was during the drought of the 1890s. Once when a farmer appeared in court explaining that he could not meet his mortgage payment because he "didn't get enough rain in July and August to grow weeds," Judge Norris is said to have replied from the bench, "I

don't think we should hold you responsible for dry weather. It wouldn't be fair. We'll extend the payment." The banker who held the mortgage was unhappy, but it is reported that "the people loved the little Judge."

Although he was a Republican all of his life he refused to conform to the party mold. Before the end of his first term in the House of Representatives he had cast votes against the Republican Party leadership and was in disfavor. Even today there are Republicans who will scold me when they hear that I have made these remarks in praise of Mr. Norris. In 1928 he had openly supported Al Smith, a Catholic and a Democrat, in the days when being a Catholic was not recommended for Nebraska politicians. In that election Herbert Hoover carried Nebraska by a large margin. After Norris was reelected on the Republican ticket in 1930, he nevertheless in 1932 openly supported Franklin D. Roosevelt, and supported Roosevelt again in 1936 and 1940.

Norris' reelection in 1936 is a curious chapter of Nebraska's political history. The rift between Senator Norris and the state and national Republican Party had become so wide that he did not try to bridge it. Instead in 1936 Norris ran for reelection as an independent. Robert G. Simmons, former Congressman and later Supreme Court Chief Justice, was the Republican nominee. Terry Carpenter had won the senatorial nomination in the Democratic primary. However, Norris had the strong support of President Roosevelt, who was able to get the Democratic State Convention to endorse the independent candidacy of Senator Norris. In that year President Roosevelt himself came into Nebraska to urge the reelection of Norris. Norris was reelected. Carpenter ran a poor third.

Six years later, in 1942, Norris again sought reelection as an independent. The Republican nominee was Kenneth S. Wherry, a former Legislator and a former chairman of the State Republican Party. Wherry was elected. By then the political climate in Nebraska had changed. Support from President Roosevelt and the New Deal was no longer enough. The State Democratic Party was not willing to give its official blessing to Norris as it had done in 1936, although the *Lincoln Star* strongly supported him. The Democratic nominee was a popular Omaha radio commentator, Foster May, who retained the official Democratic Party support. The progressive

Republican support which had aided Norris' reelections on earlier occasions had lost its strength. Further, in 1942 Senator Norris was 81 years of age, although he was still vigorous and looked much younger. . . .

Most of the national press berated Nebraskans for refusing to reelect Senator Norris. President Roosevelt expressed deep disappointment. Years later one of his fellow Senators, Lister Hill, reflected the sentiment of many people throughout the nation when he said of Norris, "His commitment to his fellow men was total, with no reservation. George Norris wanted a better life for all people. That was his single goal. Throughout his life he worked to achieve it." . . .

On March 10, 1943, I, as Speaker of the Legislature, invited him to address the members. It was his last appearance in this Legislative Chamber. He died the following year from a cerebral hemorrhage. Some thought that rejection by his beloved Nebraska voters at the 1942 election had broken his heart.

Speaking as one who has done some chores in elective politics, the most meaningful tribute to Norris was one paid by a veteran member of the Senate Press Gallery. He said something like this: "If I were ever elected to the Senate I would be grateful that the alphabet would cause my name to come after the name of Norris. For if I entered the chamber when a roll call was in progress, and my name was next, I would simply ask how Norris voted. If I voted as he did, then I could be sure that I had served my country well."

The Nebraska Legislature today reflects credit on its members and on the State of Nebraska by naming this Legislative Chamber for a great statesman, George W. Norris.