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Article Summary: Norris wrote this letter to James E Lawrence just after leaving public office. It describes his arrival in Nebraska as a young man and the bruising defeat he suffered when the people he considered his own voted against him in 1942.

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NEBRASKA:
A Reflective View by George W. Norris

Edited by RICHARD LOWITT

Defeated in the 1942 election for a sixth term in the United States Senate, George W. Norris, by the provisions of the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution for which he was largely responsible, left public office on January 3, 1943. In this letter of January 5, 1943 to his close friend and recent campaign manager, James E. Lawrence, editor of *The Lincoln Star*, Norris tells of his decision, despite his defeat, to return and spend his remaining days among the people from whence he came. In relating his decision to return to McCook, Norris recalls in nostalgic terms that reach at times a level of poetic intensity the impact and meaning of the Nebraska experience for him.

This letter, found in the voluminous collection of Norris material in the Library of Congress, is quite unusual in that most of his correspondence deals with matters and problems that were current at the time he was writing. Rarely as a public official did he have time to reflect and probe the essential meaning of an experience as he does in this letter.

After his return to McCook, he again concerned himself with more current problems. And when he wrote his autobiography, *Fighting Liberal*, with Lawrence acting as his

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editor, both men recalled this letter.¹ Nevertheless, the account of Norris' coming to Nebraska in 1885 and the impact this experience had on him is not nearly as pervasive, powerful, or reflective in the autobiography as it is in this letter. The letter concludes with a return to Norris' current concerns. In this respect, it is typical of the man who as a public figure and private citizen was always intensely involved in the present—with people and their problems—seeking ways to meliorate the lot of the common man he knew so well.

At the time he wrote this letter, Norris was eighty-one years old and had less than two years of life left to him. He was in the process, as the letter poignantly reveals, of readjusting to the fact that he would live out his remaining days as a private citizen. The causes for his defeat he tended to equate in personal terms; either he had failed his constituents or they had failed him. This view pervades the letter and helps give it a bittersweet quality wherein the good intermingles with the bad and positive aspects are tempered by negative ones. It is this quality that helps raise the letter to a level of intensity encompassing the essence of what Nebraska meant to George W. Norris, and thereby also gives it value as a document of some historical significance.

January 5, 1943

*Mr. James E. Lawrence,
The Lincoln Star,
Lincoln, Nebraska.*

DEAR JIM:

Ever since I returned from Nebraska to Washington right after the election I have been thinking of writing to you and postponing it from day to day. One reason was that after the election I was completely

1. See Chapter VII, in which Norris recounts his first impressions of Beaver City.

overwhelmed with letters that I received from all over the nation. There were so many that I knew it was a physical impossibility to answer them all and yet each and every one of them deserved a personal answer. They came from an unknown world of friends that I did not know existed in such vast numbers at least. For quite a number of years my correspondence has come from men and women in different parts of the United States, but they were people who had made a study of government and of governmental policies and had evidently followed my work with considerable feeling of gratitude and even of enthusiasm. But these letters came from a new class of people—mostly people whom I have never seen and people who have never seen me nor heard my voice, except over the radio. They were the finest set of letters I have ever seen since I have been in public life. They came mostly from young people—students in colleges all over the United States—from colleges I did not know were in existence—and also from high schools. Many of them came from men in the service. They were so filled with love and admiration that I was not able to read them. Jack² had to read most of them to me.

Another reason I have not written you has been because I could not understand—and I confess I do not yet understand—the situation. I do not know why it was or how it came about that I received such an overwhelming defeat—a defeat so overwhelming that it seems to me to be almost disgraceful. Naturally I was very much shocked, not because I was losing the office, but because I did not believe it was possible that my people for whom I have worked and whom I have learned to love by an experience of over forty years in public life should turn against me.

I went to Nebraska when I was a young man, before I was married—before I had commenced the practice of law. I remained a few months in Beatrice and then went on farther west. I thought I wanted to go into the new west and grow up with the country; expand as the country expanded. I went to Beaver City. At that time

2. John P. Robertson, Norris' son-in-law and for almost twenty years his executive secretary as well.

there was no railroad. I'll never forget that trip. I had to drive from Arapahoe. It was Saturday and before we reached Beaver City the sun had just about disappeared before the western horizon. There were few regular roads in those days. While the law provided for a road on every section line, the roads mostly were short cuts to avoid draws and such interruptions. It was a common thing that such a road should be opened right through a corn field. The owner of the corn field made no objection to this. It was a country thinly populated, but populated by a people who were different from those I had lived and grown up with in Ohio. There was an openness of heart, a fellow sympathy, a sort of fraternity that I know you will understand. You have seen it in your experience, although I do not believe to the same extent because it was a country that was newer than the one you grew up in.

Just before we reached Beaver City we went diagonally across a corn field. It was late in September.³ The corn was made and I never saw such corn grow out of the ground. I knew all about corn; I knew all about farming; I had spent my life on a farm. I had plowed; I had planted; I had cultivated; I had harvested. I had done everything that farmers have to do in order to get a corn crop. I had plowed and cultivated among stones and rocks and stumps, in soil that had to be fertilized every year or two. Here was a different world.

The next morning—Sunday morning—I got up and went up on the slope. Beaver City is located in the valley. Just beyond its limits the country rises gradually and gently to the north. I walked up this incline; I lay down on the buffalo grass. I could see the beautiful valley both ways. There was the Beaver Creek winding through it, fringed with timber. There was a soil that was fertile beyond anything I had seen. There were no stumps; there were no stones. All that was necessary, it appeared, was to turn up that soil and produce anything that would grow in that climate. I remembered how I wondered at the time if I had not

3. The year was 1885.

made a mistake. I was a true farmer. I knew all that was known about farming. I knew how to cultivate and to harvest and to stow away the harvest for future use. I wondered if I had not made a mistake in starting on another field of operations. I was leaving something with which I was familiar and going into a new activity of life. I had chosen the law. I had been admitted to the bar. I intended to open an office in this little town. My idea was that this country could not help but develop rapidly. It would be settled by a contented lot of farmers who would get their land for practically nothing, who could produce crops with a minimum amount of labor. It seemed an easy thing to be a farmer in such a country. The air was pure—almost intoxicating—and I was carried away. I was enthusiastic over the prospects and I almost felt as though I should get a team and a plow, instead of law books, and turn up this beautiful soil to this pure air.

At the time I came into this country, thousands of other people, young people like myself, came in too. They were a high class of people. Some were graduates of eastern colleges. Some of them were women, girls who had read about the great west and who wanted to get a part of the land that was almost free for the taking. I saw these people grow up; I saw them in their enthusiasm starting a new life in a new country with a joy and a feeling of pride and admiration that at last they had found an answer to their hopes; that they could have a home of their own; that they could own some of this fertile soil; that they could enjoy the fruits of their labors. I became acquainted with these people—thousands of them. I became a part of them. I learned to love them. I saw them get married and raise families. But it was not such a haven as I had thought. There came the hot winds, the dry weather, the lack of rain. I saw farms where the crops had been raised almost to maturity only to be stricken down with two or three days of hot winds, burned to a crisp. I saw the fruits of an entire year's labor disappear in a few days. I saw the disappointment that came over the faces of these people and I could see the despair that was in their hearts. I was there when the little children came. I saw them grown and become men and women and their

fathers and mothers become old. I saw them fail; I saw them lose their homes, not from any fault of their own, but because nature was cruel and hard-hearted. Often I have thought of what Shelley said about nature—"How strangely the course of nature tells by its small heed of earthly suffering that it was fashioned for a happy world." It seemed that nature was out of joint. It was operating under a cruel law that took no heed of mental agony and human suffering. I shared the trials and tribulations of these people. I did not suffer as much as they because I was not engaged in farming.

I saw the good crops come in occasional years. Then I saw them partially fail and I saw them again when they completely failed. Men with high and noble aspirations were gradually worn down, discouraged, disconsolate. I could see a feeling of discontent that grew into hatred when men who had lost all they had would not pay the proper respect to those who had not lost—men who had influence and power because they had money. I saw the people lose respect for some of these men and I saw some of these men—hard-hearted and cruel—take advantage of every unfortunate circumstance. There were others, of course, who had a different view, who shared the sorrows of their fellowmen. When I read *The Grapes of Wrath*,⁴ I could see in my mind's eye the characters who came right from the country I knew. I had seen these men start out with noble intentions. I had seen them fail. I had seen the look of despair that came over them when they were not able to supply their wives and children with the necessities of life. I have seen the cruel hot winds of summer as these children, dressed in rags, hanging onto the skirts of their mothers, looked into the sky hunting for a cloud that might mean rain. They often looked in discouragement and finally gave up in despair. There is not a character in *The Grapes of Wrath* whom I have not seen—not the identical person, but the typical person, starting with honest intentions, without any thought of disrespect for the property or rights of any other person. I have seen them gradually lose that respect. I have seen some of them go to prison and I

4. John Steinbeck's famous novel was published in 1939.



U.S. Senator George W. Norris,
from an autographed photo for his old friend, James E. Lawrence.



Beaver City, Furnas County, as it looked when Norris lived there.

knew how they got into that condition. I could see these characters as they went into California and paid but little heed or respect to the property rights of the owners of the fertile soil in that God-blessed country. I knew how it all came about. In my heart I thought I could understand just how these people became criminals and just how these people with property did not always consider how nature had so cruelly treated these men and women and made vagabonds of people who would otherwise have been respected citizens in the community where they lived. It seemed to me I could see the wrong that came. I could see the violation of these property rights was sometimes misjudged. They did not see what had made up the men and the women, and how they became characters almost disrespectful. It was all nature. On each side she had been cruel and they never understood each other. But all this time I lived with my people. I suffered their agonies, trials and tribulations. I rejoiced when a rain came and crops were plentiful. I suffered with them when I knew that, without any cause coming from them, they were getting lower and lower in the grade of manhood and womanhood. I have been more successful than some of my companions and my associates, but I never could forget that after all in the beginning their hearts were all right, they meant no wrong to anyone. They were possessed with the abilities and faculties which, properly guided, made good citizens, made high class men and women. I learned to love these people. I was part of them and if I had been offered all the wealth of a kingdom or the power of a dictator, I would not have left them. I was going to stay with them; I was going to live with them; I was going to die there. I loved it all, I thought they loved me.

I had many opportunities in my lifetime to leave the state to go elsewhere. If I had been moved by a desire for money, I might have been a millionaire. Although some of these offers were very attractive, they never tempted me a particle; they never had any effect on my mind and my heart. I loved the people I lived with and whom I had represented and I had no idea of ever deserting them or leaving them. When the election came and these people whom I love so dearly and for whom I

would have given my life to protect their interests turned against me, it seemed more than I could bear. I had felt as though this tie of affection could not be severed by anyone, except by nature itself when death comes. My eyes were opened all at once and I found that I had been wrong. I found that my affection was not reciprocated after all by these people and without any cause, without any reason, this bond of affection was torn asunder. It may have been nature's cruel way of meeting the situation and I confess a change came over my heart and my soul. To me it seemed that if this bond of affection was worth anything, it should have been reciprocal and I was so disappointed that it was not. I thought I could not help but see that those whom I had loved so truly, so faithfully, as far as my ability went, had turned their backs on me and without any reason had said they were done with me. I was cast out in the cold and notwithstanding its heart-breaking agony, it impressed me with the idea that after all I was wrong, that I did not owe this tender affection that I had—silently perhaps, but fervently nevertheless—for these people and I no longer felt and do not now feel as though, under all these circumstances, I am in any way bound to remain as a citizen of our great state. I was just a little disappointed, however, when I received your letter in which you said I should not return to the state. Notwithstanding I feel that I have been wronged, I cannot cast out of my heart and out of my soul the feeling that has been part, if not all, of my life for more than forty years. Even though I feel they have been unjust, I try to make myself believe that it is nature operating again under her cruel laws. She pays no heed to earthly suffering.

I do not want to be understood as making any complaint against anyone for my defeat. It was done in a perfectly legal, constitutional way. It was done by the exercise on the part of the people of the fundamental right of every citizen of a democracy—a right I have always defended and that I still believe in as fervently as ever. The only home I have that I could call home is back among those hills and those valleys where I have lived and loved for forty years. I cannot cast it out of my heart. It seems, after all, still to have possession of

me. I have no desire at all to thrust my presence on my friends or my influence, if I have any, upon those who will not heed it and who do not want to hear it. I have had a great many offers made to me since my defeat. Considered on a financial basis, they are very enticing, but I do not want to make money. I have no desire to be rich. I would like to know that I would have enough to live on and that when I die my wife can live in comfort upon the income from the small investments I have been able to make.

It seems to me when I return home I will hesitate to greet with an open heart those who have been my friends. I know there are many of them left, but I would not always know who they were. I feel just a little like I felt when I voted against our entrance into the first world war. I met men upon the street who had been my friends and when I expressed—and I think showed—a gladness at meeting them again, I looked into faces that were not friendly. Some of them were extremely unfriendly. Some of them refused to accept in friendship my extended hand and gradually I became filled with hesitation about even speaking to those who had been my closest and dearest friends. I did not know whether I would meet with a willing reception or whether I would meet with a scornful ingratitude. So I was in rather an unfortunate condition. I am in that condition again. I know that many of those who were supposed to be my friends have helped to cut the cord of affection that bound me to my people. I do not know who they are, but I know there are thousands of them.

In these various offers that have come to me, some have been attempts to have me write my autobiography. They have come from publishers and non-publishers, who are anxious to have me do this. Other offers have come from newspaper syndicates and from newspapers themselves asking me to write for their columns. Others come from magazine publishers. I do not believe I am qualified to do much of this work. One of these publishers who wrote me about writing my autobiography mentions your name and I learn

from them that they have been in correspondence with you with reference to such a book. I have never written you on this subject. They asked me if you would be a satisfactory person. Of course, I told them the truth and that is that I have unlimited faith and confidence in you and that I knew of your ability in that direction. I am wondering if I ought not talk this matter over with you. I am wondering if we might not reach some common ground and perhaps do something of this kind.⁵ I have made no contract with anyone. I have several appointments during the next two weeks with representatives of various concerns. I have to be in St. Louis on the nineteenth. That will be on my way home....

5. *Fighting Liberal* was the result of a collaboration between Norris and Lawrence. It was published by The Macmillan Company in 1945, after Norris' death.