

Gilbert C. Fite. Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman. 1948, reprint Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2005.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Originally published in 1948 as a revised Ph.D. dissertation done at the University of Missouri, Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman remains one of the few biographies ever written about a prominent South Dakota politician, and one of the best. Its author, Gilbert Courtland Fite, from Wessington Springs, went on to a long and distinguished career as a college professor, university president, and author, gaining recognition as one of the United States' foremost agricultural historians.

This authoritative biography, the first book to usher from his pen (today we'd say from his laptop), provides a straightforward and insightful look at the politician who, at the time of its writing, clearly stood out as the state's most powerful, influential, and popular governor in its history. Since its publication, the only governor challenging him for that designation has been William Janklow. The book ranks as a minor classic, both for its subject matter and for its treatment.

Peter Norbeck, a Scandinavian farmer's and preacher's kid from Vermillion and Charles Mix County, turned out to be a highly creative and ambitious businessman and politician—a prototypical Horatio Alger-type hero—despite the meagerness of his formal education. Although he had only about three months a year in elementary school and several semesters at the university in Vermillion under his belt when he ventured out into the world, Norbeck possessed a thirst for knowledge and a love of reading that enabled him to become a self-taught expert in a variety of fields. He possessed a unique capacity, however, for covering up his braininess and erudition behind his thick Norwegian accent, careless wardrobe, and rough-hewn manners. Interested more in substance than in style, Norbeck fooled many people on first meeting with his utter lack of pretence. As he succeeded in business, earning a quick fortune as a well-driller, and rose through the political ranks to the United States Senate, his personal presence came to hold a great deal of heft. His weight, fluctuating between 220 and 240 pounds on a six-foot frame, did nothing to diminish the effect.

Possessed of native intelligence, cunning, and solid common sense, Norbeck threw himself with gusto into every task he took on. An unsurpassed workaholic, he left little time for family and small talk. People loved him despite this, because he seemed tuned in to their interests and concerns, evidencing a capacity for empathy that proved to be a huge asset both as a businessman and as a politician. Rather than being a formidable or distant presence, he remained “Good Old Pete” to thousands of people, high and low.

His choice of vocation setting him on the path to riches was largely accidental. One of the greatest necessities on the turn-of-the-century Dakota prairie was water. Well-drilling outfits operating during the 1890s often charged thousands of dollars for their services. The purchase of a second-hand, broken-down drilling rig by Norbeck's father set the son on a path that elevated him out of poverty and put him on the way to money and power. He typically charged only \$300 to \$500 for his wells. Gilbert Fite compares Norbeck to Henry Ford in his methods: give people a product they want and need, keep prices low, apply technological innovation, and make your operation as

efficient and quality-oriented as possible. Had the author been writing a few decades later, he might have used Sam Walton or Bill Gates for comparison.

Having accumulated a nest egg of around \$300,000 and with almost fifty drilling outfits in operation after little more than a decade in the business, Norbeck began turning his attention toward civic affairs. Significantly, around 1908, he engaged in a major reading program to enhance his understanding of and capacity to analyze social and economic affairs. Not coincidentally, this was Theodore Roosevelt's last year in the White House. Norbeck, who had grown up in a solidly Republican household, discovered in the hero of San Juan Hill his model for political leadership. He would always call himself a "Roosevelt progressive" in politics (by 1932, when he backed FDR for the presidency, he had to clarify *which* Roosevelt he meant).

By 1908, when he was elected for the first time to the state senate, political progressivism was running at high tide in the United States, and Norbeck hitched his wagon to its star. He would never abandon his initial identification with the progressive stance in politics and, in fact, would generally move in a leftward direction over time. Coe I. Crawford had been instrumental in promoting the movement in South Dakota when he declared himself a progressive in 1904 and then succeeded in winning the governorship in 1906. From then until Norbeck's death in 1936, the Republican party, which almost always dominated politics in South Dakota, was split between a progressive or "insurgent" faction and a conservative or "stalwart," or "Old Guard," faction. In the former camp were people like R. O. Richards of Huron, W. R. Ronald of Mitchell, and Norbeck's closest political ally, S. X. Way of the Watertown Public Opinion. Editor C. M. Day of the Sioux Falls Argus Leader had the most visibility as champion of hard-core conservatism. Because most elections were practically determined in primary elections (Democrats seldom won in the general election), the most important political battles in the state went on between competing factions of Republicans most of the time.

Norbeck rose steadily through the ranks: four years in the state senate, four years as lieutenant governor, four years as governor, and then a decade and a half in the United States Senate, where by 1932 he had become one of the more prominent Midwestern progressive Republicans in that body. His chairmanship of the Senate Banking and Finance Committee put him in the headlines in investigating Wall Street shenanigans after the Stock Market Crash of 1929. This was one of the few times a South Dakotan has served as chairman of a prominent congressional committee. The political tsunami resulting from the Great Depression made Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal the touchstones of American politics for the next decade. Norbeck followed his progressive inclinations rather than adhere to strict party regularity, and joined several of his Republican colleagues in Congress—such as Robert La Follette, George Norris, and Hiram Johnson—in frequently backing Roosevelt's New Deal during the early 1930s.

Norbeck did not simply respond to issues and questions in knee-jerk fashion. He grounded his political philosophy and ideas in careful thought and wide reading. Fite notes some of the books and periodicals he read: La Follette's magazine (later The Progressive), Herbert Croly's The Promise of American Life, William Allen White's The Old Order Changeth, and Benjamin DeWitt's The Progressive Movement. His own experience as a businessman, constant discussions with people of all kinds, and interaction with his colleagues in Pierre and Washington all added to his storehouse of knowledge and ideas. Norbeck's seriousness, good intentions, integrity, horse sense, and

desire to know the facts provided a good model for political leadership. This does not detract from the fact that at times he veered from rationality and principle in his actions. His prejudice against Latin Americans, his ruthless attacks on the Non-Partisan League, his excessively optimistic hopes for the rural credits program, and his confused thinking on agricultural policy, e.g., simplistic confidence in the McNary-Haugen Plan, are examples of political failure.

In the final reckoning, Norbeck stands out as an outstanding example of the correct working of democratic politics in the United States. If we assume that democracy is a self-correcting system, a few more politicians like Peter Norbeck would be a recipe for an improved way of life in the United States.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe Peter Norbeck as a person? What were the major influences upon him? Describe his relationship with his parents.
2. Where do you think he got his ambition? Do you know people like him who have a thirst for knowledge and schooling despite little encouragement or opportunity for obtaining it? Where do you think that impulse comes from? What might we or others do to elicit that kind of thinking and behavior?
3. Why do you think Norbeck became a progressive? What were the influences that led him in that direction?
4. What were the characteristics and actions that led to Norbeck's success as a businessman? Is there anything he did as a businessman that might be criticized?
5. How do you read his relationship with his wife and children? Were his aloofness and distance understandable and justifiable? Have expectations about family life changed since the early 1900s? How do you feel about Lydia? Would you like to live the kind of life she did? Do you think there might be more to the story of the couple's family life than Fite is able to tell us in this book?
6. What sort of understanding do you get of the South Dakota political system from reading this book? Has reading it changed your view about South Dakota politics? In what way?
7. Why do you think Norbeck's rise up the political ladder was so seemingly smooth? What assets and qualities did he have to help him along the way?
8. Gilbert Fite notes some of the specific books and periodicals that Norbeck read to expand his views about American society and politics. How important do you think it is that our political leaders have an informed picture of social and economic affairs? Is it enough for them to have been successful in some field of endeavor, to be practical-minded citizens, and to be able to "pick the brains" of the people they talk to? Can you think of any examples of politicians you know or have read about that might help answer this question?
9. What do you think about Norbeck's rural credits program, which eventually cost the state \$57 million to liquidate? Might it have been successful had it been better managed? Should government get involved in these kinds of economic programs?

10. What do you think about Norbeck's programs for hail insurance, a coal mine, and a cement plant? Was it accurate to label them "state socialism," as some did at the time? Were they desirable or understandable?

11. How do you judge Norbeck's reaction to the Nonpartisan League, defeating them by labeling them too radical and unpatriotic? Weren't these "McCarthyite" tactics? How far should a politician be allowed to go in smearing his or her opponents?

12. Norbeck was one of the state's first great conservationists. How do you evaluate his commitment to conservation, Custer State Park, the Needles Highway, and Mount Rushmore? Where do you think he obtained his creative energy in these areas?

13. Although Fite doesn't exactly put it this way, the McNary-Haugen Plan was an effort to relieve America's problem of agricultural surpluses by "dumping" them on overseas markets at lower prices than the products could have obtained in the United States. Do you think this made sense, and why do you think this proposal might have become such a popular idea during the 1920s? Are there any historical lessons to be learned from this?

14. Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal created a whole new political equation after his inauguration in 1933. How did Norbeck respond to the situation? Are you surprised?

15. What is your final evaluation of Peter Norbeck as a person and as a civic leader? What might we learn from his life and example?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR

Born in 1918 in Santa Fe, Ohio, Gilbert Fite grew up in Perkins and Jerauld Counties, South Dakota, with parents who were both farmers and schoolteachers. After graduating from high school in Wessington Springs, he continued in junior college there for awhile, before finishing his bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of South Dakota. His Ph.D. work at the University of Missouri focused on agricultural history. He published a revised version of his dissertation as Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman in 1948. He received two prestigious Fulbright Fellowships as well as ones from Ford and Guggenheim. During the course of his distinguished career, he served terms as president of the Agricultural History Society, the Southern Historical Association, the Western History Association, and Phi Alpha Theta. He was president of Eastern Illinois University for five years before finishing his active career as the Richard B. Russell Chair in American History at the University of Georgia. Besides being co-author of seven books and editor of three volumes, he authored more than sixty articles and nine books, including The Farmers Frontier, 1865-1900 (1966), American Farmers: The New Minority (1981), and Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980 (1984). He died in 2010 at the age of 92.

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