

# This Day in History... July 11, 1861

## Birth of George W. Norris

Senator George W. Norris was born on July 11, 1861, in York Township, Sandusky County, Ohio. Norris was the 11th child born to poor, uneducated farmers. He attended Baldwin University and went on to earn a law degree at Valparaiso University.

Norris moved to Beaver City, Nebraska, in 1885 to practice law. He served as a county attorney and district judge before being elected to the US Congress in 1902. In 1910, Norris led the political battle to free the House from the control of Speaker Joseph Cannon. After serving in the House of Representatives for 10 years, Norris was elected to the US Senate.

Although he was a Republican, Norris was one of the greatest independent politicians in American

history. Norris opposed America's entry into World War I and the League of Nations. He is best remembered for sponsoring the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Rural Electrification Administration (REA).

Having been raised on a farm himself, Norris took a special interest in preserving America's first homestead, that of Daniel Freeman. In 1925, he joined the growing number of people in Nebraska that were calling for the site to be made into a national park. A decade later,

*Stamp issued in 1983 for the TVA's 50th anniversary.*

he introduced his legislation to the House of Representatives. Months later, in 1936, the Homestead National Monument was established.

But that was not the end of Norris's fight for the homesteaders. Around the same time, he joined with other senators and congressmen who believed that homesteaders and other rural Americans were not getting a "fair chance." At the time, only 10 percent of American farms had electricity, and in Nebraska, only 5.9 percent. He once remarked that the people in rural America were "growing old prematurely; dying before their time; conscious of the great gap between their lives and the lives of those whom the accident of birth or choice placed in towns and cities."

To help these farmers, Norris created the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which controlled floods and created electricity in the area by drainage from the Tennessee River. The TVA, in turn, inspired the Rural Electrification Act (REA), which Norris also promoted. The REA eventually delivered electricity to farms around the country.

*Stamp issued in 1985 for the 50th anniversary of the REA.*

Norris also helped create the Norris-La Guardia Act, which outlawed companies from making prospective employees agree not to join labor unions. He was crucial in passing the 20th Amendment, often called the "Lame Duck" amendment, which shortened the time between congressional elections and the first meeting of the new Congress. This reduced the influence of congressional members who had been defeated in elections. The rise of Fascism and Nazism greatly concerned Norris, and he supported sending aid to Great Britain during the early years of World War II.

After 30 years in the Senate, Norris retired in 1943 saying, "I have done my best to repudiate wrong and evil in government affairs. He died on September 2, 1944.

Norris was one of eight senators that John F. Kennedy profiled in his 1957 book *Profiles in Courage*. A group of scholars that same year also said he was the top choice for the best five senators in US history.



*Issued on Norris's 100th birthday. It pictures the Norris Dam, which was named in his honor for his role in the TVA.*



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