Great Plains Congressmen, 1933-36

by
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On March 9, 1933 the Seventy-Third Congress was called to order. Summoned into emergency session by newly inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt, this Congress was to enact an impressive array of major laws and thus begin the momentous era of the New Deal. Between March 9, 1933 and the formal adjournment of the Seventy-Fourth Congress on June 20, 1936, the nation was destined to undergo the most sweeping domestic reform movement in its entire history, experience a wide variety of severe economic and social problems, and witness the ominous rise of totalitarian aggression in Europe, Africa, and the Far East.

During this historic thirty-nine month period, a number of congressmen from the Great Plains were serving in the House of Representatives and United States Senate. Without exception these gentlemen were closely identified with high priority legislation. Indeed these congressmen from the Great Plains had a profound impact on the sequence of dramatic developments which corresponded with the first administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Among the prominent congressmen during these eventful years were four members of the House of Representatives from widely separated districts in the Great Plains. They were William A. Ayres of Kansas, Wilburn Cartwright of Oklahoma, Edgar Howard of Nebraska, and William Lemke of North Dakota.

Ayres, an articulate Democrat from a heavily Republican state, was to serve nine terms in the House. Between 1931 and 1934 he was a senior member of the powerful Committee on Appropriations and Chairman of the Naval Appropriations Subcommittee. Ayres' subcommittee chairmanship assumed increasing significance after the
failure of the 1930 London Disarmament Conference and the passage of the 1934 Naval Purity Act. Indeed the Kansan exercised the primary responsibility of determining how much money would be expended on the Navy and Marine Corps at the time that our government had made an unqualified commitment in behalf of naval expansion. In August 1934 Ayres relinquished his seat in Congress to accept President Roosevelt's appointment to the Federal Trade Commission.

Acknowledged as Congress's foremost authority on highway transportation, Cartwright would eventually he elected to eight consecutive terms in the House. He was Chairman of the Committee on Roads, 1933-1943, and the ranking Democrat on the Committee on Insular Affairs, 1935-1943. While chairing the former committee, Cartwright was to co-author two of the most ambitious road construction statutes ever enacted, the Federal Highway (Hayden-Cartwright) Acts of 1934 and 1936.

A former Lieutenant-Governor of Nebraska, Howard represented twenty-two rural counties in the northeastern portion of his state. A specialist in the problems of the American Indian, he was Chairman of the House Committee on Indian Affairs, 1933-1935. Howard's most widely acclaimed legislative contribution was the Indian Reorganization (Wheeler-Howard) Act of 1934, a comprehensive statute designed to completely overhaul the relationship between the United States government and the hitherto chronically neglected Indian tribes.

Lemke, a lawyer by profession, had served his political apprenticeship as Attorney-General of North Dakota. He was one of his state's two congressmen-at-large, thus representing one of the nation's most populous and spacious districts. An outspoken leader of the bipartisan congressional farm bloc, Lemke also strongly espoused a bank owned and operated by the federal government and the immediate cash payment of a bonus to World War I veterans. His most noteworthy successes were the Federal Farm Bankruptcy (Frazier-Lemke) Acts of 1934 and 1935, each of which suspended farm mortgage foreclosures. Conversely, Lemke's most widely publicized failure occurred in 1936, when the House defeated the controversial Agricultural Indebtedness (Frazier-Lemke) Bill. Although originally a loyal supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal, Lemke in 1936 was nominated by the Union Party to oppose the President's re-election.

Three other congressmen from the Great Plains during the First Roosevelt Administration were Representative Clifford R. Hope of Kansas and Senators Lynn J. Frazier of North Dakota and Peter
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Nebraska, Howard represented the eastern portion of his state. Native American Indian, he was Chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs, 1933-1935. Howard's contribution was the Indian Re-Act, 1934, a comprehensive statute which limited the United chronically neglected Indian

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Great Plains during the First Representative Clifford R. Hope of North Dakota and Peter Norbeck of South Dakota. Hope, Frazier, and Norbeck were to spend an aggregate total of sixty-three years on Capitol Hill.

A former Speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives, Hope in March 1933 was commencing his fourth of fifteen terms in Congress. Serving perhaps the nation's most thoroughly agricultural district, it was quite appropriate that he was the ranking Republican on the Committee on Agriculture. Hope played an active role in shaping every one of the numerous landmark farm bills passed by Congress between 1933 and 1936, and was especially conspicuous in the deliberations culminating in the Farm Credit Act and the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act. Although generally sympathetic to federal involvement in agriculture, he vigorously opposed such southern-oriented measures as the Cotton Control (Bankhead) Act and the Tobacco Control Act.

Previous to entering Congress, Frazier had served as Governor of North Dakota. Between 1927 and 1933 he had been Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. Frazier, as a member of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, was primarily interested in alleviating the distress of the farmers in the Great Plains and throughout the country. As previously mentioned, he co-authored the farm bankruptcy and farm refinancing bills. Like Lemke, he staunchly supported an official government bank and generous benefits for veterans. Finally, Frazier was a vociferous proponent of an expanded federal program of social security.

A former Lieutenant-Governor and Governor of South Dakota, Norbeck had been elected to his third term in the Senate in 1932. He had been Chairman of the Committee on Banking and Currency between 1927 and 1933. Strongly favoring banking reform and the strict regulation of stock exchanges, Norbeck was designated to serve on the House-Senate conference committees having jurisdiction over the Truth-in-Securities Act and the Banking Act of 1935. Moreover, he authored the legislation to complete the famous Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

The three most illustrious congressmen from the Great Plains between 1933 and 1936 were Senators Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota, Arthur Capper of Kansas, and George W. Norris of Nebraska. Nye, Capper, and Norris certainly rank among the most innovative public servants of the past half century.

Nye had never held political office prior to being sworn in as a member of the Senate in 1925. From 1927 to 1933 he was Chairman of the Committee on Public Lands and Surveys. Vitally concerned with maintaining a sound federal land policy, Nye was one of the congressmen most instrumental in the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act of
His foremost interests, however, were in the field of foreign affairs. An ardent isolationist, Nye strongly advocated legislation to prevent war profiteering and steadfastly opposed American participation in the Permanent Court of International Justice (World Court). He also introduced a series of resolutions to restrict passports, forbid foreign loans, and prohibit the export of arms in wartime. Although these resolutions were not adopted individually, in most respects they were incorporated into the Neutrality Act of 1935. Nye’s most celebrated activity occurred between 1934 and 1936 as Chairman of the Special Committee to Investigate the Munitions Industry.

Prior to his election to the Senate in 1918, Capper had been publisher of the Topeka Daily Capital and Governor of Kansas. During the First Roosevelt Administration he served on the Committees on Agriculture and Forestry and Finance. Although a Republican, Capper compiled a record of virtually unblemished support for New Deal legislation. Keenly interested in farm problems, he played a key role in the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Cattle Control Act, and the Sugar (Jones-Costigan) Act. As a member of the Finance Committee, Capper was to cooperate with his Democratic colleagues in producing two of the priority New Deal measures, the Social Security Act and the Revenue Act of 1935. The high esteem in which the people of Kansas held Capper was evident in November 1936 when the Senator, defying a Democratic trend in the Great Plains and throughout the United States, was re-elected to his fourth term.

Norris, whose House and Senate career paralleled the administrations of seven Presidents, was outranked in continuous seniority by only one of the five hundred and thirty-one members of Congress. He had been Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 1921-1926, and the Committee on the Judiciary, 1926-1933. In 1932 Norris had attracted nationwide attention by co-authoring both the Anti-Injunction (Norris-LaGuardia) Act and the Twentieth (Lame Duck) Amendment to the Constitution. A fervent and longstanding supporter of public power, he had been urging federal development of the Muscle Shoals facilities for an entire decade. Norris’s efforts were rewarded in May 1933, when his proposal, the Tennessee Valley Bill, was signed into law by President Roosevelt. Three years later, Norris, a passionate spokesman of the American farmer, co-authored the Rural Electrification (Norris-Rayburn) Act.

In addition to the obvious talents and abilities of the aforementioned congressmen, two major factors accounted for their collective
never, were in the field of foreign policy strongly advocated legislation to prohibit the export of arms in war. If not adopted individually, incorporated into the Neutrality Act of 1935, it was the amount of seniority and possession of desirable committee assignments.

Throughout the two decades after World War I the citizens of the Great Plains maintained a tradition of re-electing incumbents to the House and Senate. In 1936 those ten gentlemen, previously cited, had compiled one hundred and thirty-two years of uninterrupted congressional service. The accumulation of such considerable seniority in large measure explained why these congressmen were so influential. Thus, unlike those regions having a high proportion of junior members within the ranks of their delegations, the stature of the Great Plains congressmen was roughly commensurate with the aggregate seniority of its congressmen.

Most significantly, congressmen from the Great Plains were conspicuous by their presence on several key committees. Among these panels were the Senate Committees on Finance, Banking and Currency, and Agriculture and Forestry and the House Committees on Appropriations, Agriculture, and Roads. By 1933 and 1936 these six committees were responsible for initiating a sizeable portion of the principle bills and resolutions considered by the two houses. Under normal conditions each of these committees would have been quite important. Their importance, however, was accentuated by the pressing need for legislation to remedy the suffering caused by the Great Depression.

The ten aforementioned members of the House of Representatives and United States Senate were chosen by the citizens of the various states of the Great Plains to serve in Congress during one of the most turbulent and exhilarating periods in the country's history. Between March 9, 1933 and June 20, 1936 each of these gentlemen compiled records of genuine accomplishment. Although the Great Plains congressmen accounted for less than six percent of the nation's population, its congressmen exerted profound and disproportionate influence on Capitol Hill.

NOTES


2. Between March 9, 1933 and June 20, 1936 Congress was in session for twenty-three months and one day. During this period a total of fifteen hundred and sixty-six bills were enacted into law. Department of Commerce, Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 1061.

4. House of Representatives, *Conference Report on the bill (H.R. 7199)* making appropriations for the Yavapai Department and the naval service for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1935, and for other purposes, March 8, 1934; Congressional Record, LXXVIII, 1090-1122, 1185-1200, 1201-1219, 1205-1225, 1270-1275, 1276, 4012-4015; The States at Large of the United States of America, 1933-1934 (Washington: 1934), XLVII, 505-525.


7. Conference Report on the bill (S. 3643) to conserve and develop Indian lands and resources, to establish a credit system for Indians, to provide for higher education for Indians, to extend toward Indians the rights to form business and other organizations, and for other purposes, June 16, 1934; Congressional Record, LXXVIII, 7877-7977, 11724-11744, 12761-12165; States at Large, XLVIII, 944-986.


9. Lemke represented the 680,845 citizens and 70,665 square miles of North Dakota. In population his district was larger than all but eight of the four hundred and thirty-five districts, and in area was more spacious than the aggregate territory of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

10. H.R. 3834—A bill to establish the Bank of the United States, owned, operated, and controlled by the Government of the United States, defining the scope and manner of its operation, describing the powers and duties of persons charged with its management, creating a board of directors, and for other purposes. March 20, 1933; Congressional Record, LXXXVII, 847-9047, 9099-9109, LXXXIX, 178-1800-1802.


12. The original Frazier-Lemke Act was invalidated by the United States Supreme Court on May 27, 1935, but a modified version of the act was upheld by the Court on March 29, 1937.
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the Democratic presidential candidate on
its political complexion, Averes had been
Congress. In 1932 he had been re-elected
(73.9%). Sten Pedersen. A Statistical
(New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing
process. Congressional Directory (Wash-
3, 1270-1275. 2761, 4012-4015;
181) and the presidential
1932: Congressional Record.

1931; 1932: Congressional Record.

1930: Congressional Record.

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26. On January 6, 1936, an omnibus social insurance bill, co-authored by Frazee
and Representative Ernest Lundeen of Minnesota, was introduced in Congress. Al-
though the Frazee-Lundeen measure was never reported to the floor of either the House
or Senate, several of its provisions were incorporated into the social security system
in later years. S. 5475—A bill to provide for the establishment of a nationwide system
of social insurance, January 6, 1936; Congressional Record, LXXX, 120, 1538-
1543.

27. Although Franklin D. Roosevelt had won South Dakota in 1932 by 84,903 votes
(64.8%) and carried all but one of the state's sixty-nine counties, Norbeck, a Republican,
had been re-elected to the Senate in the same year by 26,144 votes (54.7%). An interest-
ing biography of Norbeck is Gilbert C. File, Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman
(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1945).

28. As Chairman of the Banking and Currency Committee during the Seventy-
Second Congress (1931-1933), Norbeck had played a pivotal role in the passage of
the Reconstruction Finance Corporation Act and the Federal Home Loan Bank Act and
presided over a lengthy inquiry on prevailing stock market practices. Statutes at Large,
LXXVII. 5:1-12. 726-741; Hearing on S. Res. 84, a resolution to thoroughly investigate
practices of stock exchanges with respect to the buying and selling and the borrowing
and lending of listed securities, the values of such securities and the effects of such
practices, April 11, 1932-March 2, 1933.

29. Conference Report of the bill (H. R. 5480) to provide full and fair disclosure
of the character of securities sold in interstate and foreign commerce and through
the mails, and to prevent frauds in the sale thereof, and for other purposes, May 22, 1933;
Congressional Record, LXXVII, 2000. 3223-3223; Statutes at Large, XLVIII, 74-75;
Michael E. Parish: Securities Exchange Regulation and the New Deal (New Haven: Yale

30. Conference Report on the bill (H. R. 7617) to provide for the sound, effective,
and uninterrupted operation of the banking system, and for other purposes, August 19,
1935; Congressional Record, LXXIX, 1195. 13603-13616; Statutes at Large, XLIX,
684-721; Frederick A. Bradford, "The Banking Act of 1935," American Economic

31. Report on the bill (S. 3204) to provide additional funds for the completion of
Mount Rushmore National Memorial, in the State of South Dakota, and for other
purposes, July 10, 1935; Congressional Record, LXXIX, 10888, 10908, 11760;
Statutes at Large, XLIX, 962.

32. Conference Report on the bill (H. R. 6462) to stop injury to the public grazing
lands by preventing overgrazing and soil deterioration, to provide for their orderly use,
improvements, and development, to stabilize the livestock industry dependent upon
the public range, and for other purposes, June 16, 1934; Congressional Record, LXXVIII,
1159, 12004; Statutes at Large, XLVIII, 1269-1275.

33. A definitive account of Nye during the first Roosevelt Administration may be
found in Wayne S. Cole, Senator Gerald P. Nye and American Foreign Relations
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), pp. 54-111.

34. Report on the bill (H. R. 5526) to prevent profiteering in time of war and to
equalize the burden of war and to provide for the defense and promote
peace, May 3, 1935; Congressional Record, LXXIX, 5445, 939, 9257.

35. Reports on the protocols relating to the World Court, January 10, 1935;
Congressional Record, LXXIX, 249, 902, 1147; Dennis F. Fleming, The United States and
the World Court (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1943), pp. 117-137.

36. Reports on the joint resolutions (S. J. Res. 99) to regulate the issuance of pass-
ports to American citizens in times of war, June 1, 1935; Congressional Record, LXXIX,
5286, 5287, 10463, 10997, 10998.
insurance bill, co-authored by Frazier, was introduced in Congress. A proposal to the floor of either the House of Representatives or the Senate, the bill called for a nationwide system of national bank and stock market practices. The Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1932, as amended by the Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1945, pp. 117-118; An interesting account of the role of the Federal Home Loan Bank Act and the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in the development of the Federal Home Loan Bank System is introduced in the works of Lawrence: American Economic History, 1861-1941 (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1946), pp. 100-101.

40. Report on the joint resolution (S. J. Res. 100) to prohibit the export of arms and ammunition and implements of war to belligerent countries; the prohibition of the transportation of arms, ammunition, and implements of war by ships of the United States for the use of belligerent states; for the registration and licensing of persons engaged in the business of manufacturing, exporting, or importing arms, ammunition, or implements of war; and restricting travel on belligerent ships during war. August 20, 1935; Congressional Record, LXXVIII, 4, 732-733; LXXX, 108-1085; Robert A. Divine, The Illusion of Neutrality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 81-117; Massey Jones, Isolationism in America, 1933-1941 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1946), pp. 169-175.


42. Report on the bill (H.R. 2478) to amend the Agricultural Adjustment Act so as to include cattle as a basic agricultural commodity, and for other purposes, March 26, 1934; Congressional Record, LXXVIII, 3663-3673; Statistics at Large, XLVIII, 528.

43. Report on the bill (H.R. 8966) to include sugar beets and sugar cane as basic agricultural commodities under the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and for other purposes, April 17, 1934; Statutes at Large, XLVIII, 670-676.

44. Report on the bill (H.R. 7260) to provide for the general welfare by establishing a system of Federal old-age benefits, and by enabling the several States to make more adequate provision for aged persons, dependent and crippled children, maternal and child welfare, public health, and the administration of their unemployment compensation laws; to establish a Social Security Board; to raise revenue, and for other purposes. May 20, 1935; Congressional Record, LXXXIX, 778-7787; Statutes at Large, XLIX, 620-628.

45. Report on the bill (H.R. 8974) to provide revenue, equalize taxation, and for other purposes. August 12, 1935; Congressional Record, LXIX, 129-1297; Statutes at Large, XLIX, 1014-1024.

46. Report on the bill (H.R. 8974) to provide revenue, equalize taxation, and for other purposes. August 12, 1935; Congressional Record, LXIX, 129-1297; Statutes at Large, XLIX, 1014-1024.

47. In 1936, Roosevelt carried forty-six of the forty-eight states, easily winning in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. Although Roosevelt defeated Alfred E. Landis, the incumbent Governor, by 66,793 votes in Kansas, Capper emerged victorious over his Democratic challenger by a 21,118 plurality. After the 1936
elections only sixteen of the ninety-six members of the Senate were Republicans.


49. Statutes at Large: XLVII, 70-73.

50. Ibid., 745.


54. Among the other Great Plains congressmen between 1933 and 1936 were Senators Edward R. Burke of Nebraska, William J. Bulow of South Dakota, and Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma and Representative Frank Carlson of Kansas. Burke co-authored the Selective Service (Burke-Wadsworth) Act of 1940. Bulow chaired the Committee on Civil Service from 1933 to 1942. Thomas as Chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs, 1935-1944, and the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 1944-1946 and 1949-1950. Carlson was Governor of Kansas, 1947-1950, and Chairman of the Senate Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, 1953-1954.

55. Collectively these gentlemen spent two hundred and twelve years in federal service. Most of these individuals continued in public life after 1936. Serving on the Federal Trade Commission until his death in 1952, Ayres was Chairman of that body in 1937, 1942, and 1946. Hope chaired the House Agriculture Committee, 1947-1948 and 1949-1954. Nye was the foremost of the isolationist movement during the months and years immediately prior to World War II. Capper presided over the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry in 1947 and 1948. Norris was one of the best known and most highly respected members of Congress at the time of his retirement in January 1943.

56. According to the Census of 1940, the states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota had an overall population of 6,738,192. This accounted for 5.7% of the nationwide population of 131,669,275.