



*Benjamin Nelson*

## KNUTE NELSON<sup>1</sup>

To the extreme north in Europe lies a mountainous little country with a population a little greater than that of Minnesota, with scenic beauty second to none. Since it is washed by the Gulf Stream, its climatic conditions are much like those of our state. Hardy people live there. As fishing, shipping, and agriculture are its principal industries, hardihood has characterized its people at all times. The Vikings of old were both pirates and crusaders. Its poets rank with Homer, its Edda ranks with the Odyssey. Its pagan beliefs were much the same as those of Greece. It is Norway.

Fjords and mountains naturally divide the people into groups which have remained apart and more or less hostile until modern transportation facilities have brought them together. Dialects very dissimilar were developed until almost different languages seem to be found in the various *bygder*. No hardier people are found anywhere in Norway than in Voss, where we frequently find a short, black-haired but blue-eyed type of Norwegian, doubtless representing in part at least the Celtic strain which is found principally in southwestern Norway. In this *bygð*, at Evanger, high up on the mountain side in a little hut on a farm called Kvilekvaal, the late Senator Knute Nelson was born on February 2, 1843. It is needless to say that he was born in poverty. His father died when he was three years old. His father and mother sprang from people who doubtless belonged to the very substantial class from the standpoint of character and industry known as the *bonde* or farmer.

July 4, 1825, records the earliest group immigration from Norway to the United States. The sloop "Restoration," the "Norwegian Mayflower" as it is sometimes called, on that day

<sup>1</sup>An address read at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, January 14, 1924.

sailed for America. In the years following immigrants came from time to time and soon were drawn to the West. In 1834 an important settlement was founded in Illinois, and later on we find a very substantial immigration to southern Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa, and other parts of the United States.

Senator Nelson's mother must have been an extremely courageous woman. She not only conceived the idea of improving the opportunities for her child at home but deemed it advisable to emigrate to America. She had a brother in this country. Doubtless he influenced her in coming. When her son was six years old she arrived in New York penniless. She had to borrow enough money from friends on board ship to gain admission from Castle Garden. They went to Chicago where illness and poverty forced young Knute to become a newsboy on the streets of the city. Fifteen months later they left for Deerfield, Wisconsin, where there was a substantial settlement of people who had come from Voss. Here in what was then almost a wilderness the mother soon acquired a piece of land. Hard work on the frontier was the lot of her son. He was, however, able to attend district school.

Once while I was taking dictation as Senator Nelson's stenographer, he wrote a letter referring to Mary Dillon. When he had finished the letter I said to him, "You must like Mary Dillon pretty well." He replied "Yes, she was a great woman. She was teacher in the district school in Dane County, Wisconsin, when I was a little boy. She encouraged me particularly in reading good books, especially history, and it is to her I owe my tremendous appetite for reading."

That he lived in poor circumstances can probably be best evidenced by the manner in which he procured his fifth reader. He told the story himself. "I hauled a cord of four foot hard maple wood and traded it even up, for that reader." Spurred on by Mary Dillon's inspiration he succeeded under the most trying circumstances in getting into Albion Academy near his

home in 1858. He studied there until the outbreak of the Civil War in the spring of 1861. He resumed his studies after the war and was graduated in 1865.

Colonel Hans C. Heg organized the famous Fifteenth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, a regiment which acquitted itself extremely creditably in the Civil War, its colonel giving his life at the battle of Chickamauga. Many have the idea that Knute Nelson was a member of this regiment. He was not, and for the very good reason that he enlisted before it was organized. In May, 1861, in fact, he enlisted as a private in Company B, Fourth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry. This regiment in 1863 became the Fourth Wisconsin Cavalry. His regiment was first sent to Washington and Knute Nelson did duty within view of the Capitol and the White House where we now have what is called The Mall. This place then was a swamp with a creek running through it, a very unhealthful spot. In 1861 and in 1923 we find him serving his country in the capital of the nation.

The regiment was soon sent south to join General Butler's gulf expedition. Nelson took part in the capture of Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip and also in the taking of New Orleans on April 30, 1862. His company was part of the expedition which proceeded by the river against Vicksburg. In this expedition he participated in the battle of Baton Rouge in August, 1862, as well as in the various other engagements which were fought. On June 14, 1863, during the charge which was made at the siege of Port Hudson, Nelson fell on the battle field with a wound in the thigh, from which he suffered all his life. From morning until dusk he lay on the field exposed to fire from both sides. He tells of it himself. "I was picked up within four rods of the Confederate breastworks by three young rebels who had come outside to seek for food, haversacks, canteens, and other necessities. . . . Two of the rebels then came up to me and lifted me up — one supporting me under one arm, the other under the other arm, and

between the two I hobbled on one foot inside the breastworks, from where, with other wounded, I was carried in a cart to a hospital in a ravine near the Mississippi River." About a month later Port Hudson surrendered. After spending about two months in the hospital and prison, he was exchanged for a Confederate soldier and went back to his regiment, with which he served faithfully in the hard service of guerrilla warfare.

When his enlistment expired in 1864 he found himself in extremely poor health; and therefore he returned to his home and resumed his studies at Albion Academy, from which he was graduated the following year. During his service in the war he faithfully saved his allowances, which were extremely small inasmuch as the only advancement he gained during his entire service was to the rank of corporal. His money he husbanded in the most careful manner, sending most of it home to support his mother. The two together, however, were able to save enough to have him resume his studies.

A fellow soldier tells the following illustrative anecdote about Nelson, the soldier: "One evening at 'water call,' as I was going to the river to water my horse, I saw a soldier of Co. E snatch a paper from a newsboy and gallop towards camp. Knute Nelson happened to be passing close by and hastily *paying the boy for the paper*, he started off on a gallop, overtook the Co. E man and demanded the paper as his property. Nelson was hardly more than a boy at the time and I expected he would get into trouble as the other was a very rough fellow, but Nelson's fearless manner so cowed him that he gave up the paper and submitted to a lecture that ought to have made him a wiser and better man." Nelson found time even in the strenuous days of war to read books. In a letter written at Baton Rouge on Christmas Day, 1863, Nelson — then a corporal — wrote, "During the forenoon I was occupied in reading Macaulay's great essay on Warren Hastings — a wonderful intellectual treat, that seemed almost like a

romance, glittering in thought and language, and to me a revelation, for I had never read anything by Macaulay before."

After finishing his course at Albion he entered the law office of the distinguished lawyer and politician, Colonel William F. Vilas, at Madison, Wisconsin. He studied industriously for two years and then was admitted to the bar in Dane County, Wisconsin. At once he became interested in politics. In the fall of 1867 he was elected assemblyman in the Wisconsin legislature for the second district. He was reelected in 1868. He moved to Cambridge in Dane County and practiced law there a short time.

At this time there was much excitement over the migration westward. The Civil War was over. So was the Sioux War, and the removal of the Indian menace made living safe in western Minnesota. Railroads were pushing westward and enlarged population was sweeping to the frontier. In July, 1871, Nelson moved to Alexandria in Douglas County, Minnesota, where he took a homestead on which he lived until the day he died and where his daughter and only survivor, Miss Ida G. Nelson, now lives. He was at once recognized as a good, honest, sound lawyer and his practice became as substantial as could be hoped for in such a community. He at once became interested in politics and in October of the first year he was elected county attorney on the Republican ticket. In 1874 he was advanced to the position of state senator. In 1876 he said "I do not wish to be a candidate for the Senate, but if the people elect me, I will serve." He was nominated and elected without any opposition. When his second term expired he withdrew temporarily from public life, although he did serve as a presidential elector in 1880.

But in 1882 he entered the greatest political contest of his career and perhaps the most spectacular political contest in the history of Minnesota. The Fifth Congressional District at that time embraced twenty-nine counties in the northern half of the state. The people there were mostly farmers and lum-

berjacks. There were many candidates aspiring for the congressional honor, but the contest was finally narrowed down to Charles F. Kindred of Brainerd and Knute Nelson. Kindred was a very rich man. He had been in the land department of the Northern Pacific Railway Company. He thought that his money would win, and it has generally been conservatively estimated that to further his cause he spent one hundred thousand dollars, which in those days must have been an enormous sum. The Republican convention for the district was held at Detroit on July 12, but in every county there were sharp struggles over the selection of delegates to attend this convention. The farming communities generally supported Nelson, but the counties lying between Duluth and Brainerd were favorable to Kindred. The Otter Tail County convention is illustrative of how these conventions were conducted. The delegates there out-voted Kindred in favor of Nelson 85 to 15. Nevertheless, the Kindred people arranged a separate meeting and elected delegates to Detroit. Nelson and Kindred were both present at Fergus Falls when the Otter Tail convention was in session. Nelson there made a speech characteristic of him in his early career. Among other things he said, "The great principle is not what man is to go to congress, but whether the office is to be put up at auction and knocked off to the highest bidder. . . . The question is whether none but a millionaire can go to congress, or whether you will allow yourselves to be knocked down with a bag of gold." And he closed his speech by saying, "If I am nominated and elected, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, I will endeavor to 'do the right as God gives me to see the right.'"

To the district convention at Detroit, Kindred brought two brass bands and a squad of police. He had also personally rented the convention hall, and all the rooms in the leading hotel were reserved except one which an old soldier had set aside for Nelson. The Nelson supporters, anticipating trouble, erected a tent directly across the road from the convention hall.

The convention split. One faction nominated Nelson, the other Kindred. A spirited and exciting campaign followed. Nelson was triumphant and the doors were opened to a long life of service for Knute Nelson, member of Congress. During the three sessions that he served in Congress he had little opportunity for service, for the organization of the House was Democratic while he was Republican. The one thing which attracted attention to him during his service was that he voted for the Mills bill, the Democratic tariff bill. Referring to the tariff, on March 29, 1888, he argued for "cheaper food, cheaper fuel, cheaper clothing, and cheaper shelter — cheaper because released from the heavy and unnecessary bondage of high-tariff taxes." He said, "I will put free sugar, free coal, free salt, and free lumber against free whiskey and free tobacco, under all circumstances, and so will the great mass of the American people." This address illustrates the directness and force which always characterized Nelson as a debater.

When Nelson ran for reelection in 1884 and he went to Brainerd, among those who welcomed and supported him was Kindred. As far back as 1884 Nelson advocated grain inspection. He said, "Cannot some system of elevator and transportation rates be inaugurated that will move hand in hand with and be just and fair to our agricultural and producing classes?" He won his second and third elections by very large majorities. At the end of his third term, he voluntarily retired and went back to his farm at Alexandria. There was much speculation as to his reason for retiring. Although he had been much criticized by Republicans for supporting the Mills bill, it was apparent that the people of Minnesota recognized that agriculture is interested in a low protective tariff only. In 1882 he was appointed on the board of regents of the University of Minnesota and he served there until 1893.

Nelson was decidedly a party man who believed in party government, although in later years he probably was not so intense a Republican as he was earlier in life. In 1890 his

name was placed before the Farmers' Alliance convention as a possibility for governor on the ticket of that party. He himself was a farmer who had a good background, he came from the country, the farmers believed he understood their problems. The movement for his nomination was quieted when he sent the following telegram, "I am a Republican and not a mendicant for office." The Republican party had carried on during the Civil War and he was faithful to the party which successfully destroyed slavery and sustained the Union. In 1892, however, the Republican convention unanimously nominated Knute Nelson for governor. He won at the election with a vote of 109,220 to 94,600 for Daniel W. Lawler, the Democratic nominee, and 39,862 for Ignatius Donnelly, the Farmers' Alliance candidate. In his message to the legislature he stated that he was satisfied with the weighing, grading, and inspection of grain as operated under the law, but not with the regulation of elevators and warehouses. He directed attention to the condition of state institutions, especially to the state university. As indicating his interest in agriculture and the university, of which he had been a regent, he stated, "Perhaps nothing pertaining to the progress and growth of the University has been more marked and original than the establishment of a school of practical agriculture, giving special instruction in all that pertains to the theory and practice of agriculture, in all its branches." He advocated a gross earnings tax on certain classes of corporations. He urged that the burdens of government should be made not heavier, but lighter, upon the farmers, and he especially advocated the most rigid economy.

In 1894 he was reelected by a plurality of more than sixty thousand. In this campaign Governor Nelson delivered the most telling address in all his political campaigns. At Argyle, Minnesota, on July 28, 1894, when the free silver question was an issue between the Republican and Democratic parties, he

stated that he favored "honest, genuine bimetallism." The conservatism of Nelson is shown in the following statement, "The moment a silver dollar is not convertible into a gold dollar, silver, now as in the early days of our nation, will entirely usurp the place of gold and drive the latter out of circulation and into hiding." "A free coinage," he said, "which would at one fell blow strike down bimetallism and reduce us to a state of silver monometallism, is not desired by anybody except the most extreme inflationists and the owners of silver mines and silver bullion." This conservatism is also shown in the following statement which he made in the same address. "Farmers of the Red River valley, if you look at the situation in its true light, is it not plain to you that relief cannot come from the referendum, from saloons kept by the state, from government ownership of railroads, from female suffrage or from the unconditional free coinage of silver at the ratio of 16 to 1."

In his message to the legislature in 1895, he chiefly reviewed the achievements of his first administration. He said, referring to the Country Warehouse Law passed in 1893, "The honest warehouseman finds nothing oppressive in the law, the honest farmer finds in it a reasonable safeguard and protection, and the demagogue is deprived of his favorite text of complaint." He referred to the effective manner in which his administration had furnished relief to the sufferers in the dreadful fire at Hinckley. He proposed a plan for draining the Red River Valley. He spoke of the capitol commission which he had appointed in connection with the plan for building a new capitol. Again showing his interest in education, he said, "Our university stands at the head of our educational system and occupies a leading and commanding position as an institution of high order, both at home and abroad. The most fastidious have no longer occasion to send their children to the east or abroad. All that is worth knowing and learning can be obtained at home and in our own midst. Our university has made

Minnesota known throughout the civilized world. It deserves kind and liberal consideration at your hands. You should deal with it in a broad and liberal spirit. The people expect nothing less." In one paragraph of the message he said, "Excessive and needless legislation — legislation to meet a lot of petty ills that are more easily cured within the realm of moral suasion, is one of the tendencies of our times, in respect to which we ought to practice a little self-restraint."

When Governor Nelson was a candidate for reëlection, United States Senator William D. Washburn and his adherents feared very much that in the coming session of the legislature Nelson would be a candidate to succeed Washburn. The Washburn forces were using every conceivable device to get Governor Nelson to promise that he would not be a candidate for the Senate. Finally, it was reported that Nelson stated in his speech at Albert Lea, "It has been reported that I am a candidate for United States senator, but this is not so. I am not a candidate and do not expect to be. I am a candidate for governor and want to be elected governor, and if elected, expect to serve out my term as governor. But elect your Republican legislative ticket, so as to send my friend Washburn back to the United States Senate, or if you do not like him, send some other good Republican." That Governor Nelson made these remarks was always denied by his supporters who were present at that meeting. Laurits S. Swenson was at that time the president of a preparatory college at Albert Lea. He has served as United States minister to Denmark twice, Switzerland once, and is now United States minister to Norway. He stated to me that Nelson spoke about as follows: "I am a candidate for governor, and I am not a candidate for the Senate. The legislature must determine who the Senator shall be." I have never been able to see why anyone should endeavor to tarnish Senator Nelson's memory by reason of this incident. To commence with, anyone in public life knows that it is a cheap political trick to try to commit a man on political questions that would thwart his natural and possibly deserved

advancement. Furthermore a man could not very well be so foolish as to be a candidate for two different offices under such circumstances. When the legislature met it was clear that the people of the state favored Nelson's election. He was elected, and he resigned as governor. The best proof of his sincerity was that the legislature by overwhelming vote elected him to the Senate and that he remained there by reelection by succeeding legislatures as well as by election by the people. He remained there under the presidencies of Cleveland, McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, and Harding, serving more than twenty-eight years.

It is utterly impossible for me to go at length into his service in the United States Senate. In fact, the full extent of his service will never be known. Senator Nelson would gladly take the chairmanship of a subcommittee, do the work in preparing a bill and in holding hearings, and then give someone else the opportunity of having his name attached to the law. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that service to Nelson meant more than fame, but he was also shrewd enough to know that men who have their names attached to important acts in Congress are frequently retired from public life by reason of such distinction. He was chairman of the judiciary committee of the Senate when the Volstead Law was passed. No man devoted himself more industriously to the passage of that law than Nelson, yet he told me once that he would not have his name attached to the statute. It is true that the bankruptcy law bears his name and is frequently called the "Nelson cure." He was a member of the public lands committee during the time when the public domain interested the people of Minnesota greatly. He was a member of the committee on agriculture. When he died he had for some years been chairman of the judiciary committee and he had been a member thereof for many years. He was at one time chairman of the committee on commerce.

The Spanish-American War interested Senator Nelson greatly. He said in an address, "To ignore Gomez and the

Cuban Republic seems to me to be cold, icy heartlessness, unworthy a great nation and a great people." In 1898 he spoke in Minnesota and said, "It was upon the broad grounds of humanity and for the relief of the oppressed, and not upon mercenary or commercial grounds, that we intervened; and our intervention must be as broad and as generous as the grounds upon which we intervened. . . . We owe the people we saved a good government in some form. . . . Neither the cry of 'jingoism' nor the cry of 'imperialism' will chill the ardor or dull the conscience of the American people." His faith in our government as regards imperialism he put forth in an address on January 20, 1899 — a splendid legal argument "On the Right to Acquire and Govern Additional Territory." In that address, he said, "We come as ministering angels, not as despots." That he was not blind to the commercial advantages of the new holdings, however, he made clear in an address delivered at Alexandria on September 1, 1900. "With peace and good government, Manila and the Philippine islands will become the great commercial center of the far East, and afford us a great field for American enterprise and trade, such as we never had before, and such as no other nation can boast of. From this vantage ground we can dominate the commerce, and by our near presence be instrumental in maintaining the peace of the East, at less outlay and less exertion than any other nation." In 1902, on February 20, Nelson said, "I do not think we want to assume a guardianship as protectors in the distant Orient, 8,000 miles from our shores, in the midst of the densest beehive of humanity on the face of the habitable globe. But if we are to keep an army and navy there, if we are to have fortifications there, if we are to maintain a naval station there, if we are to protect anybody in that country, let it be under our flag, under our dominion, where we can exercise, not the care of a policeman, but the care of a good father." Fourteen years later, on January 14, 1916, his faith is unchanged. He said in the Senate: "Mr. President, let us never scuttle the ship. The

American flag was hoisted over the bay of Manila, on Corregidor Island, at its entrance. Let no American be foolish enough or base enough for political reasons or any other to tear down that flag."

His attitude on the tariff remained the same in the Senate as it had been in the House. He expressed it thus, "The tariff protection where needed ought never to exceed the difference in the cost of production at home and abroad." He voted against the Payne-Aldrich bill and fought vigorously against it. First he sought reductions in the wool, cotton, lumber, and other schedules; but when he did not succeed in getting them revised, he voted against the measure. He did not, however, vote for the Underwood-Simmons measure of 1913 which was Democratic. He said, in regard to it, "There are a great many matters in it of which I highly approve. I had hoped I could see my way clear to support it. But taking the bill in its entirety there is . . . gross discrimination against the farmers of the West and the Northwest and all along our northern boundary." When the Fordney-McCumber bill was before the Senate in 1922 he again made his vigorous fight against certain schedules, but particularly against the wool schedule. In his plea for moderate rates he stated in the Senate, "This is all 'love's labor lost.' We are in the hands of the wool Philistines. They have us by the throat, and perhaps it would be wiser for us to take the medicine in silence and turn our heads toward Providence and hope to get relief from that source." He was at this time 81 years old. This language shows the vigor of his mind and body. That he was ready at any time to oppose his own party leaders where he did not consider their judgment correct shows the independence of his thought. He voted for the measure finally because he regarded it a little more highly than he did the Underwood-Simmons Law.

Senator Nelson was liberal in his attitude on immigration. While he was a member of the committee on immigration he favored reductions in the number of annual immigrants, but within very reasonable bounds. As he was an immigrant him-

self, he looked upon our country's history as the history of immigration. In taking to task those who condemned certain races, he once said, "The blood that flowed in the veins of Virgil and Dante, Raphael and Michael Angelo, Columbus and Napoleon, Cavour, Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel and Crispi surely will not contaminate our English of many strains." Speaking of the Minnesota immigrants, he said, "They came there, most of them, poor and empty-handed, with no capital but stout hearts and willing hands, but possessed of an intense desire and purpose to become good American citizens. She received them with open arms, as though they were to the manor born, and on a parity with her own people. And today, after the lapse of half a century, she can truly say that they have not betrayed the trust she reposed in them."

Senator Nelson had as great a fund of knowledge in regard to our public lands as any man in this country. While he was a member of the committee on lands he took a trip to Alaska with a congressional committee, and he trudged over that territory in the interest of the people of Alaska as did no other member of the delegation. From that time on he was looked upon by many in Alaska as their senator. His position of authority on Alaskan matters was in fact recognized by two presidents. From President Taft he obtained the appointment of a United States marshal. President Harding recognized his recommendation for a United States marshal and one district judge. In 1909 he wrote an article entitled "Summary of Our Most Important Land Laws."<sup>2</sup> It is an extremely compact discourse and explanation of our federal land laws. His attitude on the public domain we get near the conclusion of the article where he points out that "in view of the rapid increase of our population and in view of the rapidly diminishing area of our public domain, no agricultural land should be disposed of except under the homestead law without the 'commutation' privilege; that none of our remaining

<sup>2</sup> The article is published in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 33: 611-619 (May, 1909).

forest lands should be disposed of, but only the large and mature timber, and that our arid lands should be disposed of for agricultural purposes to actual settlers under the reclamation law."

Senator Nelson believed in regulation by the government but not in the ownership of railroads by the government. He was active in establishing the Interstate Commerce Commission and he advocated that the commission should have the power to fix rates. He was particularly anxious that the Sherman Antitrust Law should apply to railroads. In 1908 great effort was made by Senators Foraker, Dick, and Root to amend the Sherman Antitrust Law, which declared all restraint of trade unlawful. Nelson prepared a very learned brief in which he opposed such an amendment. When later on the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the famous Standard Oil Company case of 1911, Justice Harlan, in his dissenting opinion, quoted extensively from this brief to the judiciary committee. Senator Nelson was violently opposed to the Adamson Law. He said in a speech that the Adamson Law would permit labor organizations to sandbag the government, that "you are sowing the wind and you will reap the whirlwind." He was the only man in Congress from Minnesota who voted against this law when a great many people were clamoring for its passage.

In 1911, President Taft recommended reciprocity with Canada. In opposing the measure, Senator Nelson said, "The whole burden is cast upon the farmers for the benefit of the manufacturers and the railroads, who are the chief beneficiaries of the scheme."

With regard to the World War, Senator Nelson felt that President Wilson should have warned Germany not to enter Belgium just as Colonel Roosevelt so vigorously advocated. He believed thoroughly in the cause of the Allies and that Germany was responsible for the war. He was outspoken in his attitude long before the United States entered the war and before the sinking of the "Lusitania." He was the only

member of Congress from Minnesota who voted against the well-known McLemore Resolution, a resolution which would warn Americans not to travel upon any armed merchant ship for fear of losing their lives and of provoking war. When the declaration of war came his age and position alone kept him from getting into the strife. On August 24, 1918, he said, "As soon as the great war broke out in Europe it was evident to me that it would ultimately be our war as much as the war of those countries in Europe. It was evident to me that if Germany should succeed in vanquishing France and England and obtain complete control of the Continent in Europe there would be no place in the sun for America; that we would be the next victims of German aggression. So from the very beginning my heart has been in favor of this war."

Senator Nelson hated war. He had himself known what war was. He stated his position strongly and courageously in regard to the League of Nations, and on this issue he was very much out of harmony with his own party. He said, "Remove the terrors of war — the poor and lowly suffer most therefrom — and mankind will breathe easier and will soon be born to a new life and to a new spirit. Would it not be sad to think that our country should stand aloof from such purpose and such mission?" "I can not sympathize with that sentiment which would have our country crawl into a closed shell with no other label than the Monroe Doctrine." He voted for the reservations to the League of Nations, but I firmly believe that if these had not been adopted by the Senate he would have voted for the League of Nations as provided for in the Treaty of Versailles, had this come to a vote. He concluded his remarks in an address in October, 1919, as follows: "I have not made these remarks under the idea that I am a statesman. . . . It has rather been the spirit of old Corporal Nelson of the Fourth Wisconsin." Later on, in November, he said, "The campaign that has been waged against the league of nations reminds me very much of the campaign that was waged against the adoption of the Constitution of the United States."

“ Let us keep our heads on and let us pass just such legislation as we would if we had today a Republican President.” He also opposed the Knox Resolution in a strong speech which he delivered in April, 1921. He was consistent from beginning to end, and nothing in his life shows greater sincerity than his attitude on the League of Nations. Shortly before he died he said in the Senate that it was “ the greatest of mistakes, economically and in every other way, for America not to enter the League of Nations, with one or two amendments of the covenant.” Then he proceeded to warn against the intrusion of peanut politics in international relations.

While governor, Nelson had favored high license which resulted in the restriction of the number of saloons. In the Senate he took his characteristic vigorous attitude in speaking on the Volstead Law. “ We have exterminated the beer saloons and the whiskey saloons, and, so help me God, they will stay exterminated; and no friend of the bootleggers, no cunning move to undermine the prohibition law will prevail. The American people, the American women, at all events, understand what is involved in this question.”

Legislation affecting agriculture always challenged Senator Nelson's attention. His attitude in regard to the farming class is probably best expressed in an address which he delivered in the Senate in 1917, when the question of fixing the price of wheat was before that body. He said, “ The laboring men may get cheaper flour; they may get other products more cheaply; but the main sufferers will be the farmers of our land; and the farmers, above all others, are entitled to our protection, for they are the mainstay of the country. They are the ones who furnish us with the staff of life, with bread and meat and cotton. If we allow them to suffer and to be left in distress, we destroy that class on whom we must mainly rely.”

In a discussion in the Senate judiciary committee when Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, appeared before the committee asking that labor organizations be exempt from the provisions of the Sherman

Antitrust Act, Mr. Gompers used some very strong language. Senator Nelson was not pleased with the remarks and was very firm in his conviction that it was just as necessary to prohibit labor as capital from combining to fix prices. With characteristic frankness he stated his position to Mr. Gompers and added that he doubted whether any man could live as long as he had and remain more staunch in his sympathy for the laboring man and the lowly. Mr. Gompers generously withdrew his remarks and said, "That is true," and the conversation was stricken from the record.

Senator Nelson's strongest characteristic was his simplicity. In order to understand his life you have but to proceed to his farm and his home in Alexandria and view it as it there stands, a home in the future to be utilized as an old folks' home, a simple farm home. Even more clearly you would find this quality if you should enter his residence at 649 East Capitol Street, Washington, D. C., where he lived for many years. It was not on the northwest side of the city where the other senators lived. No, not a colleague lived in his neighborhood. His home was a modest three-story building, old and simple in appearance. I doubt that the furniture in this residence could be sold for four hundred dollars. When I listed his jewelry in his inventory I listed one watch. It was presented to him just after he was inaugurated governor in 1893. He had a little old silver watch which his friends considered too shabby for a governor and they therefore presented him with a gold one on which was engraved, "From Your Norwegian and Swedish Friends." He was frugal as he was simple. He left a very modest fortune, a fortune at all because he was saving, small because he gave away liberally, but small principally because he cared nothing for wealth.

Senator Nelson had a delightful personality. Men were attracted to him and he kept his friends because he was faithful to them. He wished to serve everyone and he knew that it was a part of a Christian to serve another even where that person was wrong. He was a devoted son. Each year in going to and

from Washington he would stop at Deerfield and visit for a couple of days with his mother, who lived to the ripe old age of ninety-six. His home life was pure and blameless. Many years ago sadness came to his family when three children passed away in a diphtheria epidemic. His son, who was at one time a member of the legislature of Minnesota, died from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-seven. He is survived by one daughter.

From the mountain side in Norway he came to Castle Garden, where he pledged his troth to his weeping mother in her loneliness and trouble, saying "Do not weep, mother; when I grow up, I shall be next to the king"; then he was a newsboy; then a frontiersman (how much like the rail-splitter, the great Emancipator); then a soldier, brave, wounded, sick, and in prison; then a legislator in the state and nation; chief executive of his state; and United States Senator; once he declined a position in the president's cabinet — he was near enough to the king. Truly he could have said, when God removed him, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." Knute Nelson is the greatest inspiration of our day to the lowly American immigrant; may his memory be as lasting as the noble purposes for which he lived.

JACOB A. O. PREUS

STATE CAPITOL  
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



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