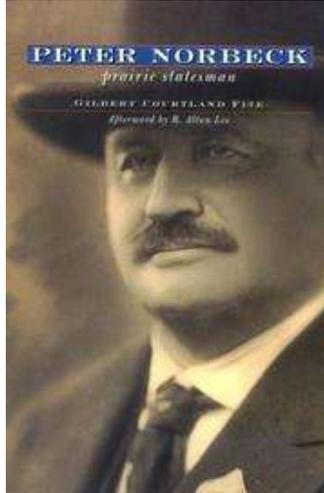


## About the Book



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

### Synopsis

Fite (born 1918), one of America's finest agricultural historians, grew up in Wessington Springs, received his master's degree in history at the University of South Dakota, and maintained ties with his native state until his death in 2010. His biography of Peter Norbeck, one of South Dakota's two or three most important governors, stands among the best biographies ever written about a South Dakota politician. Norbeck's career as state senator, lieutenant governor, governor, and U.S. Senator from 1909 to 1936 spanned the progressive period, World War I, and the New Deal.

### 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 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 prairie was water. Well-drilling outfits operating during the 1890's 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 the 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 economical 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 in 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 hardcore conservatism. Because most elections were practically determined in the 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 in 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 1930's.

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 De Witt'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.

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**Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).**

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