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**"McCOOK'S MAN ON MAIN STREET:"
PUBLISHER HARRY D. STRUNK AND THE POLITICS OF
WATER RECLAMATION IN SOUTHWEST NEBRASKA,
1928-1938**

A Thesis

**Presented to the
Department of History
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha**

by

Charles E. Real

December, 1996

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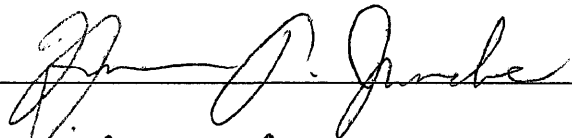


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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the Faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

Name	Department
 William C. Pratt	Comm.
	History

Chairperson Hugh A. Delstano
Date December 2, 1996

ABSTRACT

By the time Harry D. Strunk arrived in his new home of McCook, Nebraska in 1909, he had set his sights on becoming a newspaperman. While only seventeen years-old at the time of his first job with a McCook newspaper, he had already worked as a printer's devil and itinerant printer since the age of fourteen. With his arrival in McCook and first job in that city with the established **Tribune**, he soon found that his future in the newspaper business lay with starting his own paper.

In 1911, without benefit of a formal journalistic education, Strunk opened the **Red Willow County Gazette**. With his own newspaper, he immediately challenged the community's recognized editorial voice at the **Tribune**. In 1924, he established a daily newspaper. For the next forty-seven years until its publisher's death in 1961, the **McCook Daily Gazette** served as the newspaper and editorial voice for Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas.

In 1926, when he built a new office building for the **Gazette** on McCook's Main Street, Strunk had etched in the concrete above the building's entryway his concept of service to the community. With the motto, "Service is the Rent We Pay for the Space We Occupy in This World," Strunk set the tone and direction for both himself and his newspaper.

Strunk's dedication to community service was no more evident than in his lifetime work on behalf of flood control and irrigation along the Republican River. For a span of some three decades, "McCook's man on Main Street" hurled editorial challenges at state and national politicians to fund water control projects in Southwest Nebraska. Within his editorial demands for government programs to benefit his community, Strunk maintained a healthy dose of political pragmatism.

In 1928, Strunk began an active role in the foundation and work of the Twin Valley Association of Commercial Clubs. That organization stood in the forefront for

planning irrigation and flood control programs along the Republican and Frenchman rivers. As a member of the group's executive committee and chairman of its flood control committee, Strunk played an important role in making the goals of the organization known to elected officials.

Among the politicians who felt the wrath of Strunk's editorial attacks on sometimes inattentive politicians was a fellow townsman, the popular five-term senator from Nebraska, George W. Norris. In a volatile exchange of correspondence in advance of the 1930 senatorial election, the two men engaged in political polemics over their differing visions of water control in semi-arid Southwest Nebraska. With similar visions about water control but different methods for achievement, the two men sparred over how best to bring both flood control and irrigation to a land of sparse water resources. It was over the issue of water control that they had their greatest disagreement. Norris favored combining hydro-electric power with irrigation and flood control, while Strunk believed that water power had no place along the Republican River. Their differences would largely disappear when they found common bond after a devastating flood hit along the Republican River in 1935.

Strunk became well known throughout the state and much of the Midwest because of his dedication to water control and reclamation on the upper Republican River. His importance in bringing federally funded water programs to southwestern Nebraska was recognized by Congress. Congress passed legislation in 1952 designating the body of water held by Medicine Creek Dam near Cambridge, Nebraska, as Harry Strunk Lake. From an itinerant printer to newspaper publisher to a recognized water reclamationist, Harry Strunk fulfilled his motto of service to his community of McCook and Southwest Nebraska.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special acknowledgment is given to a number of people whose help on this study has been immeasurable.

First, I wish to specifically recognize the perseverance of my thesis chairperson, Professor Harl A. Dalstrom. While working on his dissertation on Kenneth S. Wherry, Professor Dalstrom became acquainted with Harry Strunk. Given my hometown of McCook and own memories of "McCook's man on Main Street," my thesis subject became obvious.

Thanks is extended to the other members of the thesis committee: Professors William C. Pratt and Warren T. Francke. Along with Professor Pratt, I wish to give special recognition to Professor Lorraine M. Gesick. Both professors provided opportunity for me to do research on my thesis while doing assigned work for their classes. That research led to information gathered on early McCook history and the 1935 Flood. Both subjects are discussed in this study.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Linda Hein, curator at the George W. Norris Home Site in McCook. Linda helped with research on both McCook and Senator Norris. Thanks to friend and business associate, Denise Cyr, for her helpful editing comments. Special note is made of the art work of another business associate, Linda McGloin.

Finally, thanks to my parents, Charles Sr. and Agnes, for their "leg-work" at the High Plains Museum in McCook, the George W. Norris Home, and with Gene Morris, Editor, **McCook Daily Gazette**.

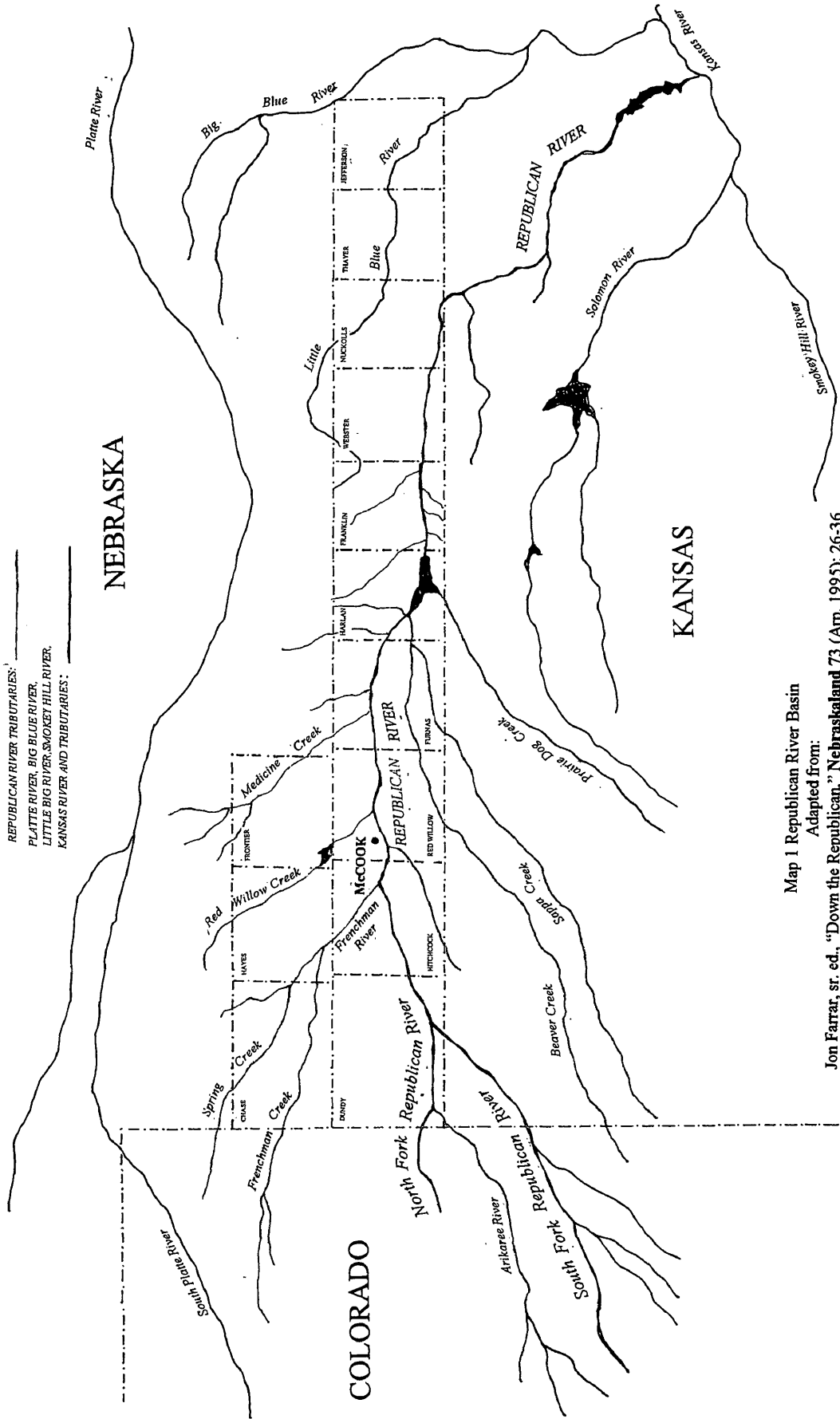
No acknowledgment would be complete without noting the support and many "quiet" afternoons and evenings provided by Josie, my wife, and Myla, my daughter.

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Legend:

REPUBLICAN RIVER TRIBUTARIES:
PLATTE RIVER, BIG BLUE RIVER,
LITTLE BIG RIVER, SMOKEY HILL RIVER,
KANSAS RIVER AND TRIBUTARIES:



Map 1 Republican River Basin

Adapted from:

Jon Farrar, sr. ed., "Down the Republican," *Nebraskaland* 73 (Apr. 1995): 26-36.



Harry D. Strunk
From the **Centennial Edition 1882-1982**

CHAPTER I

RIVER, RAILROAD, COMMUNITY . . . STRUNK'S McCOOK

For five decades, Harry D. Strunk controlled the editorial and publishing policy of the primary local news source for Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas.¹ As a young man of nineteen in 1911, he became the publisher of his first newspaper, the **Red Willow County Gazette**. More than a decade later, he would continue his newspaper career in his adopted home town of McCook, Nebraska, as editor and publisher of the **McCook Daily Gazette**. In some respects, Strunk's work as a life-long editor and publisher exemplified the small-town newspapermen of the Great Plains region during the early years of the twentieth century. Such editors and publishers have been important to the study of the small towns and villages built up along railroad lines that catered to both the emerging agricultural importance of the plowed-up grasslands and to the "unchangeable heart of American life."²

As with many of his newspaper contemporaries, Strunk managed more than just the daily tasks associated with running a newspaper. During his life-time of work in getting out the news and especially in the early years of lean advertising income accompanied by scant profits for hiring experienced employees or purchasing modern printing equipment, business associates, friends, and family would often find Strunk involved in the day-to-day work necessary to creating and printing a newspaper. Similar to most small-town publishers with editorial responsibility, Strunk deftly used the editorial podium of both papers to become the representative voice on many issues for the community at large. Such representation on the part of a rural or small-town newspaper publisher and editor, suggests Thomas J. Morain in **Prairie Grass Roots**, became the rallying point for both community boosterism and community unity.³

Not satisfied, however, with becoming the outspoken booster voice for the community of McCook and its surrounding trade area, Strunk spent much of his life as an ardent spokesman for regional and even national efforts toward water conservation and irrigation. In this latter *cause célèbre*, he would find himself at philosophical and political odds with McCook's political iconoclast, Senator George W. Norris.

Strunk's activist support for water conservation did not make him a one-dimensional editor. His editorial pen touched on national and international subjects. If a particular event in Europe or Asia or Washington D.C. spurred his thoughts, he could and did write a related editorial. It was, however, his more clearly defined interests and understanding of events and people close to Southwest Nebraska that symbolized his editorial voice. This study has chosen to focus on his interest in water and his efforts on behalf of water control in Southwest Nebraska during a period that parallels the years of the Great Depression.

Until Strunk's death in 1961, this tall, lanky, mainstreet-mainstay of McCook confounded his critics and supporters alike with his editorial wit and life-long support of land reclamation and water resource projects. In 1952, his vocal support of those projects resulted in his becoming only the second living person, the other being a former president, Herbert Hoover, to have a federally-funded Bureau of Reclamation lake project named for him.⁴

Before that honor, however, both Strunk and the geographical area of Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas covered by the editorial voice of the **Gazette** experienced the perennial floods that swept the Republican River valley in which McCook sat, the constant threat of drought in this semiarid area of the Great Plains, and, of course, the Great Depression and the New Deal. As with McCook, its people and the institutions that represented Red Willow County and the surrounding area of two states, Strunk and

the **Gazette** survived the challenges of both nature and short-sighted Wall Street brokers and indecisive politicians.

The first three chapters of this study treat both Strunk and his community and his role in his community. This treatment allow for a better understanding of Strunk's advocacy for water resource control and management in Southwest Nebraska. The last three chapters review his political activism, his vision for the future of water along the Republican River in Southwest Nebraska, and his confrontation with George W. Norris. "McCook's Man on Main Street" presents an examination of the role played by Strunk and his paper during the Depression years, as well as the role of a small-town newspaperman serving his community. Such service to the community had been the traditional role of the small-town newspaperman. A Missouri congressman wrote that

. . . the importance of the country weekly is closest to the hands, hearts and lives of the people at the grassroots than any other publication. The country publisher and editor knows the needs, desires, and aspirations of his readers as no one else can.⁵

To open the story of Harry Strunk and the effect he had on McCook and beyond, it might be fitting to begin with the seemingly endless abundance of inexpensive land that welcomed settlers during the years following Nebraska statehood in 1867. From fertile grass land and bottom land that lined both banks of the Republican River sprang the farms, ranches and communities that became the focal points of much of Strunk's dedication and editorial ardor. His focus on irrigation and flood control originated in the social and political environment of the Republican Valley constituency which he and his paper served.

While an effort to recognize Strunk and his work are centered on the period generally covered by the Great Depression, it is well to note that McCook provided both earlier and more recent claims to fame by its citizenry. In addition to Strunk's own

recognition by the federal government, a contemporary of Strunk, John Raymond McCarl, served as comptroller general of the United States through appointment by Warren G. Harding.⁶ In addition to its share of state legislators and numerous others appointed to serve political parties, McCook has sent three of its citizens to Lincoln as governors.⁷

Beyond federal appointments and elections to state offices, McCook justifiably lays claim to being the home-town of one of the state's most famous politicians, George W. Norris. A Republican with a strong sense of independence from the party line touted by state and national party leaders, Norris would run afoul of Harry Strunk, who was described as a staunch Republican. Beginning in the late 1920s, their antagonism over the very water projects that would consume Strunk's throughout his lifetime became the foundation for what contemporaries of the two men would refer to as McCook's famous Strunk-Norris controversy.⁸

For Strunk, Norris, and other important individuals who have come out of Southwest Nebraska one unifying force had been held in common—McCook. When Strunk arrived in McCook in 1909 at the age of 17, he found a community of about 3,800 men, women and children. By far the largest town in Red Willow County, McCook would continue to grow over the coming decades. Within that same period of time Strunk emerged from working for an established newspaper, the **McCook Tribune**, to being the editor and publisher of a twice-weekly paper, the **Red Willow County Gazette**. He proudly proclaimed from that newspaper's masthead that it had become the official county newspaper. From the **Red Willow County Gazette**, he went on to the managerial and editorial leadership of a daily newspaper, the **McCook Daily Gazette**. During this period of personal growth, the growth and success of his papers resulted from a steadily-rising population of both county and city. Between 1910 and 1930, Red Willow County's population had increased from 11,056 to 13,859. During that period, McCook's

population growth outstripped that of the county, increasing from 3,765 in 1910 to almost under 6,700 in 1930. To the obvious advantage of the subscription numbers for the **Gazette**, McCook had, according to the 1930 census, a literacy rate of 98.3 per cent.⁹

Located near the western edge of Red Willow County, McCook typified life in a railroad center in the age of an expanding railroad system. The community became the benefactor of the westward thrust of what came to be known as the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company between Lincoln and Denver. Prior to the arrival of the Burlington in the early 1880s, sparse land development or settlement had taken place in Red Willow County. As the railroad line moved westward farms and communities followed almost as soon as rail gangs drove the last spikes before moving to the next base camp.¹⁰

While the Burlington continued its rails toward Denver, the most recent section of completed line between Indianola in Red Willow County and Culbertson in Hitchcock County ran just north of an existing post office named Fairview. This nondescript spot near the Republican River consisted of a few rough-hewed wooden shacks near a sod house.¹¹ The few citizens of Fairview would have been hard pressed to lay any claim of import to their ramshackle collection when compared to the depots and other outbuildings that marked established communities both to the east and west and which received the blessing of daily train service.

Since the early 1870s, settlement in Red Willow County had been principally around the small village of Indianola lying just east of the county center and in the southeast part of the county around the smaller village of Danbury. With arrival of the Burlington in 1880, however, the future of the sleepy, unsuspecting village of Fairview soon became intertwined with the westward leading rails. As the result of the Burlington

and a move northward of only a few hundred yards, the village began anew with the railroad-sponsored name of McCook.

Railroad building across the Great Plains following the Civil War and before the conclusion of hostilities between the U.S. Government and Native American tribes usually found U.S. Army troops close at hand. Troops protected the Burlington rail-laying work westward through the Republican River valley. Most of the original tribes had left the valley by the time the greatest share of railroad building in Red Willow County had been undertaken. Prior to both the white settlers and the railroad, the Cheyenne, Pawnee, and Sioux, the principal tribes in the area, had extensively hunted buffalo up and down the banks of the Republican River. At the time of the Burlington arrival in Red Willow County, the tribes had largely moved further to the west or north or had been settled on government reservations. The last great inter-tribal battle between the Sioux and Pawnee in 1873 in neighboring Hitchcock County had reduced the presence of the more peaceful Pawnee.¹²

The town of McCook was named after an army officer who led government troops assigned to protect railroad construction. Alexander McDowell McCook came from a long line of military officers. McCook claimed some notoriety for himself by being associated with the famous "fighting McCooks" from Carrollton, Ohio.¹³ That appellation attached itself to McCook and several of his brothers and other relatives who had managed to become general officers during the war. For Alexander McCook, however, his war-time record would become suspect in later years. At the battles of Perryville in Kentucky, and Stones River in Tennessee, McCook found himself badly out-generaled and out-maneuvered by Confederate forces. In both battles, his actual or perceived failures to hold important flank positions for federal forces resulted in those battles being near disastrous Union defeats.¹⁴ It would be the more recent assignments of General McCook

associated with railroad building, however, that resulted in his name being applied to the new town springing up where only buffalo and Native tribes had freely roamed a few years before.

As the Burlington crossed through Red Willow County in 1882, railroad management determined the need for a new division point between its existing station at Red Cloud, Nebraska, and its then planned terminus at Akron, Colorado. The Burlington surveyed sites at existing water and fuel stations and depots at Arapahoe in Furnas County and Indianola in Red Willow County and the railroad's first stop in Hitchcock County, Culbertson. After the surveys had been completed, the company decided on building a completely new division point. In making this decision, the line decided on a spot approximately half way between Indianola and Culbertson. That half-way point was in the vicinity of Fairview. Here the railroad found a plentiful water supply from both the nearby Republican River and underground springs. This new site offered a reasonably flat area on which to construct a round-house and workshops along with the stores and homes that would be used by railroad workers and their soon-to-follow families. The Burlington's first superintendent of the new division point being built north of Fairview suggested the last name of his friend, Alexander McDowell McCook, for the new town.¹⁵

The location for the McCook division point maintained the Burlington's usual procedure to place stations approximately ten miles apart. This distance made it easier for "a man with a team . . . to go to town and back in a single day."¹⁶ The location for the new town had other features that made it attractive to land agents and settlers. In commemoration of McCook's fiftieth anniversary, pioneer-settler John F. Cordeal described the surrounding area:

On the north bank of the Republican river at a point near the center [sic] of Red Willow county, is one of the fairest spots in Southwestern Nebraska. Here the mild Republican, fringed with forests, trees and bedecked with shrubbery,

placidly winds its circuitous way through the oval valley, which, widens into miles of peaceful slopes and terraces rising into the divide beyond. Here a broad plateau juts out shelf-like from the hill-side, and rising thirty feet above the sleeping river, commands a view of landscape, which when bathed in the golden glory of an autumnal sunset, tempts the pen of the poet, or the pencil of an artist.¹⁷

Settlement of Red Willow County began when the first white farmers reached the mouths of Medicine Creek and Red Willow Creek in 1871.¹⁸ Within the next twenty years, the growing population of Red Willow County took part in the final chapter in what would be Frederick Jackson Turner's pronouncement that the frontier had been settled. In the meantime, settlers continued to arrive in the county bringing with them only the barest of necessities in clothing, house furnishings, livestock, farming implements and crop seed. Union army veterans from the Civil War and increasing numbers of immigrants from Germany and Russia came into the Republican River valley.¹⁹

With settlement extending west of the already-populated eastern third of Nebraska, a trail of farms and villages followed the westward-pointing Union Pacific Railroad line along central Nebraska or the river valleys that flowed into the Platte or Missouri Rivers. With the steady thrust of settlers scrambling to obtain their 160 acres promised by the federal government's Homestead Act and the availability of cheap railroad land, pressure began to mount for movement west of Lincoln, specifically up the Republican River valley.

The Republican River is a true river of the plains. It flows west to east between the larger Platte River to the north and the Smokey Hill River to the south in Kansas.²⁰ Rather than being fed by run-off from the Rockies like its northern and southern neighbors, the Republican rises out of underground springs in northeastern Colorado. The river is described as having a modest beginning as it flows out of the Colorado grasslands and "its waters are cold, deep and fast for its modest breadth."²¹ Curving north after entering northwestern Kansas and fed by run-off from prairie grasslands, the river begins a great meandering loop through southwestern Nebraska before crossing back into Kansas.

At the end of its nearly 400-mile journey, the waters of the Republican flow into the Kansas River to be eventually carried to the Missouri River then into the Mississippi River before being finally discharged into the Gulf of Mexico.

While several suggestions have been advanced for the origin of the name for the Republican River—a few political pundits claim the river earned its name from its similar nature to the Republican party, shallow and twisting—only one is put forth with any authority.²² The more acceptable exclamation favors the suggestion that a band of the Pawnee nation lent their name to the Republican River. J. Sterling Morton's early work on Nebraska history mentions one tribe of the Pawnee nation was named the "*Kit-ke-hak-i*."²³ Morton's work refers to this tribe as being called the Republican tribe. According to a more recent account, "[t]he Kitkahahki [sic] were described as dissidents who believed in a republican form of government. It was from this band of Pawnees that Europeans took the name for the river itself."²⁴

Many of the early settlers into the Republican River valley found soil well suited to both grain crops and the farming implements of the day. As these early settlers moved west along the valley and eventually into the less welcoming areas of western Nebraska on and beyond the 100th meridian that crosses the valley near Cambridge in Furnas County, they served as beacons to their relatives back east. Many wrote to their relatives extolling the "valley and the wonderful opportunities to be had."²⁵ Early boosters for the county trumpeted the "wonders of the valley and the favorable features of the new town to be established called Red Willow."²⁶

In later years, a few of the early settlers along both the Republican River valley and banks of its tributaries would remember the "interesting and exciting experience" that came with settling previously unplowed land.²⁷ The productivity of the fertile land soon became the lodestone to the increasing numbers of settlers willing to claim up on

homesteads, preemption rights, and timber claims. With some pride, early settlers could nod their heads in agreement when the most effusive land agents bragged up the "agricultural and producing capacity of the vast Republican Valley . . . [as] . . . the wonder of the world."²⁸

The pioneers who settled Red Willow County represented as much diversity as could then be expected on the western frontier. There was a Swedish settlement in the county by 1875 and with the railroads came Germans, Irish, and German-Russians.²⁹ From the long-settled areas of the eastern United States came some 432 men who had fought in the Union army. Their number did not include one notable early Red Willow County settler—Robert R. Stewart. Although a general officer who had suffered the loss of a leg on a bloody battlefield less than a decade before his arrival in the county, Stewart did not qualify for a veterans' list which appeared in **Trail's West**, a local history. That work, however, included a partial biography of his life and noted that members of the Grand Army of the Republic served as his pallbearers, a particular honor considering that Stewart had served as a brigadier general with the Confederate Army.³⁰ Census reports note both Blacks and Hispanics made up a small portion of the county and McCook populations. Each of these latter groups came into this principally grain-growing and cattle-raising area as a result of work associated with the railroad and a later meat-packing venture. As the census reports suggests, settlement of the Republican Valley progressed rapidly and with little of the hesitation and barriers that faced settlers further west and north of the Republican Valley.³¹

With settlement came the problems of all newcomers in a strange place far removed from their former homes. On the plains, the isolation of farms, towns and villages placed a premium upon building a sense and substance of community. In the isolation of individuals from friends and relatives left behind in Europe or in the older

areas of the United States, rural settlers and town builders strove to find some semblance of belonging. As Rex Myers suggests in his study of community in eastern Montana, early settlers needed a sense of unity in the face of the challenges they would have otherwise been forced to face alone and with even less chance of survival. From their neighbors, and most likely largely through trial and error, these isolated farmers and ranchers learned a social dependence on each other known by its German word *gemeinschaft*.³²

Myers' suggested that out of the isolation from the culture of the east, the settlers, sometimes led by the women hoping to bring stability and moral value to this often unfriendly land, "formed groups spontaneously, from the grass roots level up, and their actions demonstrated a putting aside or combining of private desires to achieve mutual benefit." As farm and ranch families from up and down the Republican Valley likely learned quickly during the ensuing years of settlement, "homesteading was a togetherness learned from and shared with neighbors."³³

Throughout the high plains frontier, cooperation in a community effort seemed to answer the quest for a life better than that left behind. Merle Curti's study of Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, noted that pioneers took particular pride in the "twin traits of generosity and hospitality."³⁴ These new adventurers in the sometime risk-filled land of semi-aridity and unrelenting weather that beat down both man and beast found that only by cooperation would they find "advantages superior to those in the old homes."³⁵ On the frontier and in the slowly-filling Republican River valley and Red Willow County, land and circumstance may have worked together to provide the opportunity for individuals to use their "talents to flourish . . . [and find] . . . opportunity and greater incentive than existed in older settled parts of the country."³⁶

Into this apparent land of opportunity, where an individual needed only to show his worth through cooperation with his neighbors and be left unhindered to develop his native

talent, strolled Harry Strunk as a seventeen year-old just becoming acquainted both with himself and with his chosen path as a newspaperman. At times isolated by his own actions from family and early boyhood friends, Strunk would find that his future rested with how well he worked with those already settled in McCook and its surrounding area.

Strunk's arrival in McCook in 1909 found a population of nearly 4,000. In 1909, McCook appeared on the edge of continued growth and prosperity. Young Strunk was about to become a part of an optimism that came from the lips of every town booster. Given the particular geographical setting in which he had chosen to settle, however, there would be the twin challenges of drought and Depression in the coming years .

Despite those challenges, Strunk worked effortlessly during the 1930s to serve his community and to bring government funding for water projects into the Republican River valley. Such effort did not go unchallenged. As Strunk learned from his newspaper office in his role as a community leader, obstacles often came in the form of partisan politics. Among the greatest trial to Strunk's visions of flood control and irrigation would be one involving Norris.

In order to meet the challenges to his plans for the scarce water resources of Southwest Nebraska, Strunk would exemplify the practice of *gemeinschaft*. Much like the settlers who had preceded him less than forty years before arrival in his new home, Strunk would become an apt object of study in what Merle Curti described as the trait of newcomers to develop "confidence in themselves."³⁷

Endnotes

¹ Harry Strunk referred to his extended community as "Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas." This study has frequently done the same.

² Don Martindale and R. Galen Hanson, **Small Town And The Nation** (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1968), 10.

³ Thomas J. Morain, **Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century** (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988), 23.

⁴ Allen D. Strunk, ed., "Harry D. Strunk Newspaperman Reclamationist," **Centennial Edition 1882-1982**, (McCook: **McCook Daily Gazette**, 1982). The **Centennial Edition** consisted of a compilation of previously published **Gazette** articles or articles prepared by the **Gazette** staff for the special edition commemorating McCook's 100th year. Harry Strunk's son, Allen, publisher of the **Gazette** at the time of the **Centennial Edition's** publication, served as both writer and editor. Articles from the **Centennial Edition** are referenced throughout this work. Page numbers did not appear in the **Centennial Edition**. In future references, both Strunk's name and the headline of the specific article will be given. Where another staff writer is identified, that writer's name will be included.

⁵ Kevin L. Warneke, "Norris Alfred: A Voice From The Prairie" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1994), 5.

⁶ John F. Cordeal, **Golden Anniversary Souvenir** (McCook: **McCook Daily Gazette**, 1932), 59.

⁷ Gene O. Morris, **Portraits of the Past: McCook's First One Hundred Years** (McCook: High Plains Historical Society, 1982), 195. In 1958, Ralph Brooks became the first governor from McCook. Brooks had been a former superintendent of McCook Public Schools. Following Brooks came another McCookite, Frank Morrison, who would serve three terms as Nebraska governor. Morrison, a McCook attorney before being elected governor, was first elected in 1960. Another thirty years would pass before McCook saw a third native son sent to Lincoln by the voters of the state. In 1990, E. Benjamin Nelson became the third governor from McCook.

⁸ Gene E. Hamaker, **Irrigation Pioneers: A History of the Tri-County Project To 1935** (Minden, Nebraska: Warp Publishing Company, 1964), 99.

⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, **Thirteenth Census of the United States in the Year 1910: Population**, vol. III (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1913), 64; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, **Fifteenth Census of the United States in the Year 1930: Population**, vol. III (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1932), 96.

¹⁰ Adolph Ernest Goedecken, "Railroad Development In The Republican Valley, 1862-1882" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1938), 132.

¹¹ Strunk, "Railroad Decision Gave City Birth;" Strunk, "Fairview Forerunner of City;" Morris, **Portraits of the Past**, 35, 111.

¹² Goedecken, "Railroad Development," 135-136; Robert T. Ray and Lois Rutledge, **Trails West To Red Willow County, Past and Present Family History and Biography** (N. p.: n. p., 1982), 115. **Trails West** was a privately written venture, copyrighted and apparently printed by the authors. The book is a collection of diaries and family histories of early pioneers and settlers in Red Willow County.

¹³ The author had an opportunity to visit the McCook home while working on this study. The home is located on the courthouse square in Carrollton. It is a two-story, red-brick colonial-style home. The house is maintained by the Carroll County Historical Society. In front of the house is a large descriptive plaque that includes the name of Alexander McDowell McCook.

¹⁴ Shelby Foote, **The Civil War: From Fort Sumter to Perryville** (New York: Vintage Books, 1986 Renewed), 733-736; Stanley F. Horn, **The Army of Tennessee** (Wilmington: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1987), 182-184; Peter Cozzens, **No Better Place To Die: The Battle of Stones River** (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 67-80.

¹⁵ Goedecken, "Railroad Development, 140-142; Strunk, "Railroad Decision Gave City Birth." Strunk., "McCook Named for General."

¹⁶ Dorothy Weyer Creigh, **Nebraska: A Bicentennial History** (New York: W. W. Northern & Company, Inc., 1977), 70.

¹⁷ John F. Cordeal, "History of Red Willow County," **Red Willow County Gazette**, Nov. 26. 1921.

¹⁸ W. H. Holze, "Pioneer School Days In Southwest Nebraska," **Nebraska History** 33 (Mar. 1952): 42.

¹⁹ Ibid., 41; F. M. Farmer, "Land Boom of Southwest Nebraska 1880-1890" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1936), 1; Goedecken, "Railroad Development," 6.

²⁰ Waldo R. Wedel, **Central Plains Prehistory** (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 97.

²¹ Jon Farrar, sr. ed., "Down the Republican," **Nebraskaland** 73 (Apr. 1955): 23.

²² Allen D. Strunk, letter to author, Mar. 23, 1995.

²³ J. Sterling Morton, **Illustrated History Of Nebraska**, ed. Albert Watkins (Lincoln: Jacob North & Company, 1905), 33.

²⁴ Farrar, "Down the Republican," 90.

²⁵ Robert D. Clark, "The Settlement of Blackwood Township, Hayes County, Nebraska 1878-1907," **Nebraska History** 66 (Spring 1985): 28

²⁶ Ray, **Trails West**, 166.

²⁷ Goedecken, "Railroad Development," 26.

²⁸ Ray, **Trails West**, 166.

²⁹ Creigh, **Nebraska**, 70.

³⁰ Ray, **Trails West**, table n.p.n., 225-226.

³¹ Goedecken, "Railroad Development, 130-135; Clark; "Settlement," 88.

³² Rex C. Myers, "Homestead On The Range: The Emergence of Community In Eastern Montana, 1900-1925," **Great Plains Quarterly** 10 (Fall 1990): 218-219.

³³ **Ibid.**

³⁴ Merle Curti, **The Making of An American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County** (Stanford: Stanford University, 1959), 115. Much of the sociological findings gathered from Curti's study of early settlement in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin would be applicable to the settlement of Red Willow County.

³⁵ **Ibid.**, 34.

³⁶ **Ibid.**, 83.

³⁷ **Ibid.**, 118.

CHAPTER II

FROM PRINTER'S DEVIL TO INNOVATIVE PUBLISHER

When Harry Strunk arrived in McCook, Nebraska, as a seventeen year-old in 1909, he had no immediate prospects other than continuing his fledging career as a journeyman printer. He went to work for the **McCook Tribune**. At that time, the paper was the primary news source of a community of almost 4,000 people.¹ As with most towns of any size during the opening years of the twentieth century, McCook boasted several weekly papers. Such a bustling business in rural mid-America should not be unexpected. In his account of small-town journalism during this time period, editor and publisher Loren Reid noted that any town with a sizable number of residents or towns that supported a railroad or other similar business enterprise "had newspapers; a town of a thousand had two or even three."²

These small-town centers of news for the local community were important to nurturing a sense of community. A biographer of William Allen White of Emporia, Kansas, emphasized the role of the newspaper in the small rural communities of the American heartland. In describing the dedication of both White and his newspaper, author Sally Griffith observed that small, individual-led newspapers "played an integral role in the development of communities in America, acting as promoter, interpreter, and watchdog."³ Harry Strunk would become no less a promoter, interpreter, and watchdog for his own community in southwestern Nebraska.

After leaving Pawnee City three years before his arrival in McCook, Strunk's printing itinerary had taken him to Fairbury, Nebraska, and northwestern Kansas. In the small town of Norton, Kansas, he found work with a weekly newspaper. Soon after arriving in Norton, Strunk heard of the growing opportunities for printers on the West Coast.⁴ A contemporary editor and publisher of Strunk, Edgar Howard of the **Papillion Times**, had led a similar wanderlust as a "tramp printer."⁵

After sizing up the possible opportunities further west and likely hoping to better himself, Strunk returned to Pawnee City from Kansas. Having worked in the Midwest for a few years, he informed his family of his plans to follow the still beckoning lure to "go West." His plans to take up both residence and his trade far beyond the prairie flat-lands of Nebraska and Kansas, however, soon took a detour.

In talking over his plans with his mother while at his childhood home preparing for his westward journey, Strunk found their discussion centering instead on potential prospects for his future in western Nebraska. As he would fondly recall some years later, his mother helped steer him toward McCook. He wrote: "Mother mentioned McCook had the reputation of being one of the fastest growing places in the state."⁶ With his arrival in McCook and continuation of his work in the newspaper field, Strunk and the city of McCook experienced growth and change over the next five decades.

As Strunk stepped off a westbound Burlington train at McCook in 1909, a quick glance from the depot fell on a community similar but at the same time different from his own home town some 250 miles to the east. As in Pawnee City, the unpaved streets of the county seat and largest urban area of southwestern Nebraska gave rise to sudden swirls of dust kicked up by passing horses, horse-drawn carriages, and a handful of the new gasoline-powered automobiles. Looking northward from the depot, Strunk's inquisitive eyes would have followed McCook's main business street up a gently rising hill. Unlike the majority of county seats in the older, settled areas of eastern Nebraska with their town squares built around the county courthouse, Red Willow County's courthouse sat at the top of the sloping rise. Between the depot and the courthouse stretched McCook's bustling business center along six blocks of stone, brick and clapboard buildings. Within a half-mile square east and west of the city's aptly Main Street sat many

small wood-frame structures interspersed with a few brick bungalows built for the railroad workers, businessmen, clergy, county officials and families that called McCook home.

After his initial visual inspection of his new hometown, Strunk merged into the pedestrian and vehicular traffic surrounding the depot. For the first time, he began his walk up McCook's Main Street. Over the remainder of his life, Strunk would take the same walk on many occasions. In the space of a relatively short period of time as measured by his growing value to both the city's newspaper business and the city's prospects, Harry D. Strunk would become an important fixture as "McCook's man on Main Street."

Before his last job in Norton, before his plans to go to the West Coast, and before McCook, Strunk's journey had begun in his home town of Pawnee City. Born on December 2, 1892, in the family's farm home west of Pawnee City, much of Strunk's boyhood held little hint of his later career as an editor and publisher. Even more so, his boyhood held even less indication that he would become a central figure in the water and conservation projects that became so vitally important to his adopted home and the Republican River valley.

Harry Strunk was the last of five children. His father, Albert D. Strunk, a Civil War veteran, was fifty years-old at his son's birth. His mother, Catherine Amanda Kenny, was thirty-nine years-old.⁷ While there is no indication that his family life would create wanderlust at a relatively young age, Strunk spent only fourteen years in the family home.

From his father, Strunk likely grew up to appreciate the struggles of those who sought to grow beyond the circumstances of their birth. Two of his paternal ancestors had come from Germany as indentured servants during the middle of the eighteenth century. First arriving in the state of New York, the Strunk forebears had by 1843 settled in

Hillsdale County, Michigan. Born July 9 of that year, Albert Strunk likely grew to young manhood in the immediate surroundings of the county.⁸

Little is known about his early life. By the age of eighteen, however, he had moved to Iowa. On September 1, 1861, he enlisted at Dubuque, Iowa as a private in Co. E, 9th Regiment, Iowa Infantry. With hundreds of thousands of other Americans, Albert marched off to war. He served under the immediate company command of a Captain Bevins.⁹

Despite the lack of family lore about the early life of Albert Strunk, it is likely that Harry Strunk obtained a good deal of respect for war veterans from his father's military service. Although he never himself served in the military, the military service of his father apparently became an important inspiration in Strunk's life. During his leadership at both the **Red Willow County Gazette** and later the **McCook Daily Gazette**, it appears that few Memorial Days passed without a Strunk editorial mentioning the sacrifices made by veterans. During the 1930s, several issues of the **Gazette** noted the diminishing numbers of Civil War veterans as passing years caught up with those who had been but young men and boys in 1861. In a 1932 editorial titled "The Blue and the Gray," Strunk eloquently stated his understanding of why the few remaining veterans of the Civil War had not agreed to a joint convention. He reminded his readers that the "boys in Blue and Gray" had not engaged "in a knightly duel; it was a cruel, bloody and frightfully painful bit of hell on earth. The men in it remember that fact. If we wish to sentimentalize it, they won't help us."¹⁰

Albert Strunk served throughout the Civil War and advanced from the enlisted ranks into the officer ranks. After nearly two years as a private and likely as the result of battle-field attrition, he received promotion to corporal in January 1863. He became a company sergeant in September 1863. With Union troops on the verge of victory in

March 1865, Strunk found himself transferred from Co. E to Co. H. with promotion to 1st Lieutenant. He would be mustered out of the army at that rank on July 18, 1865.¹¹

Albert Strunk survived some thirty-two engagements beginning with the Battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas in March 1862.¹² As a result of that battle in the northwestern hill country of Arkansas, his regiment suffered greatly in the loss of life and the number of wounded. According to his granddaughter, Shirley Strunk Powell, some 239 men out of Albert's regiment of 505 became casualties.¹³ The Order of Battle for Pea Ridge reports that the 9th Iowa sustained losses of 218 with 176 wounded and 38 killed.¹⁴

By the time his regiment became a part of General William Sherman's march through Georgia in 1864, Albert Strunk was one of only thirteen surviving members of the regiment that had mustered in 1861. With the end of the war, his last military duty found him marching with other veterans of the Army of the West and the Army of the Potomac to the cheering throngs that lined Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. Memories of this Grand Review March by the victorious Union armies would in later years be passed from Albert to his son.¹⁵

Some years after the end of the war, Harry Strunk's father joined the thousands of Civil War veterans seeking cheap land in the West. Albert Strunk obtained farmland in Pawnee County by 1884. A county plat map and description of land holdings dated July 17, 1884, based on the **Official Atlas of Nebraska**, records Strunk as the holder of 134 acres of land in Pawnee City township. According to the description that accompanied the plat, he used the land for raising Poland China Hogs and Graded Short Horn Cattle. His land sat adjacent to a county road about two miles west of the Pawnee City limits.¹⁶

After moving to Pawnee County, Albert Strunk met and married Catherine Amanda Kenny. Born March 13, 1853,¹⁷ Catherine Kenny had settled with the rest of her family in Nebraska after moving from Adair County, Iowa. While Albert Strunk became a

recognized member of the rural community as a farmer and county official, his wife apparently occupied the accepted traditional role of wife and mother in the course of raising four sons and a daughter.¹⁸ Shortly after Harry Strunk's birth, the family moved to a home in Pawnee City.

The Strunk's Pawnee City of 1892 had a population of about 2,214 based on returns for the 1890 Census. By the time Harry Strunk reached the age of fourteen, the city had grown to nearly 2,300. There had been a slowing, however, in its rate of growth. At some point in the early years of the twentieth century, Pawnee City experienced an eroding population. The 1910 population represented a sharp decline from the 2,693 individuals reported in the 1900 census.¹⁹

As Harry Strunk grew to adolescence, a formal education may not have held his interest. Although accounts differ as to reason, Strunk left the Pawnee City Public School system without attending high school. A family account has Strunk leaving school in order to earn money to buy a pair of shoes.²⁰ Leopold "Bus" Bahl, a long time employee and confidant of Strunk at the **McCook Daily Gazette**, recalled that it had been Strunk's father, Albert, who took his youngest son out of school. Apparently recalling his own conversations with Strunk, Bahl stated some years later that Strunk's "dad decided Harry ought to go out and work. So Harry started with a paper in Pawnee City."²¹

Another explanation for Strunk's early departure from schooling is suggested by retired McCook attorney and former Justice of the Peace Wendell Cheney. Cheney recalled in an interview that Strunk "was whopped by his teacher." This episode reportedly took place while Harry was in the eighth grade. According to Cheney, Strunk declared he would "never return to school again."²²

As to why Strunk received punishment from his teacher, his long-time friend, Art Herrmann, provided an explanation. Herrmann explained how Strunk had apparently

found a nickel one day on the way to school. As with most youngsters with a newly found coin, Strunk went to a Pawnee City general store and bought a full nickels worth of "corn candy." According to Herrmann, Strunk received immediate corporal punishment when discovered by a teacher eating his newly purchased candy in school.²³ In noting the nature of Harry Strunk in later years, it is easy to imagine that a teacher's firm discipline to Strunk's emerging unbridled personality would have caused him to leave school and chart a course independent of a more extensive formal education.

Although relatively short, Harry Strunk's time both in public school and in Pawnee City remained an important foundation for his later life. Three of Strunk's childhood acquaintances from that southeastern Nebraska community would go on to noteworthy vocations. One friend, Harold Lloyd, became a well-known comedian in early motion pictures. Another friend, Edwin Van Horn, journeyed to Omaha where he became president of the Federal Land Bank. Perhaps the one childhood friend who would play the greater role in Strunk's future, however, would be Kenneth S. Wherry.²⁴ Suffice it to say at this point that in the 1932 Nebraska gubernatorial primary, Strunk served as Wherry's campaign manager.²⁵ In 1942, Wherry won election to replace McCook's George Norris in the U. S. Senate. At the time of his defeat, Norris was a five-term senator from Nebraska. Boyhood friends Strunk and Wherry found themselves working together for the defeat of Strunk's fellow townsman.

Merl Peek, husband to a niece of Kenneth Wherry, recalled Wherry's early relationship with Strunk. As a youngster, Wherry visited the Strunk family home in Pawnee City. Through this boyhood friend we obtain an interesting picture of the home in which Strunk grew up. At the time of Wherry's visits to the Strunk home, the family lived in a "lovely old house about a block from the grade school. Situated on a corner, the

Strunk house had a high brick retaining wall down to the sidewalk. His sister ran a millinery shop out of the house."²⁶

With the formation of early friendships that would remain important to him over the succeeding years, Strunk entered the newspaper business at an early age. From his first acquaintance with the newspaper business in his home town, he never seemed to falter in his goals of being a publisher. Even when he took his first job as a printer's devil with all its accompanying menial tasks involving body-covering splashes of black ink, burns from molten lead, and the inevitable paper cuts, he never seemed to look at any other avocation. His son would write proudly that

with only an eighth grade education, Harry Strunk had entered the newspaper business at age 14, was a publisher at age 16, a shop foreman responsible for 10 hand-typesetting employees at age 17 and opened the **Red Willow County Gazette** in 1911 at the age of 19.²⁷

With his hometown as the beginning point for his newspaper career in 1905, Strunk first worked for two local newspapers, the **Pawnee Press** and **Pawnee Reporter**. His hometown experience lasted until 1907. In that year, at age sixteen, Strunk left for other opportunities. Over the next two years, he would work with several different newspapers in Kansas. By 1908, he was foreman for the typesetting operations of a Norton, Kansas newspaper. After his brief sojourn in Kansas and his thoughts about a newspaper job on the West Coast, his youthful travel would end in McCook.²⁸

Since his very earliest newspaper experience in Pawnee City, Harry Strunk seemed destined to become more than a printer's devil or a shop foreman. As his son wrote, Strunk learned not only the printing business but had "on the job training as an editor and publisher." Furthermore, noted Allen Strunk, his father "had a strong determination to learn and master the trade. Father was a close observer and extraordinarily ambitious." As a part of his leaning his job and likely as a substitute for his shortened formal

education, Strunk became both an expert speller and prolific reader.²⁹ Both attributes would serve him well in later years as an editor and publisher.

Arriving in McCook, Strunk landed his first job in that community as a printer for Francis (Frank) Kimmell of the **Tribune**. Strunk's ambition and perhaps a personality conflict with the pious and temperamental Kimmell may have numbered his days in this position. Leaving the **Tribune** in 1911, Strunk and a partner, Burris Stewart, first opened a job printing shop. On July 6 of that year, after borrowing \$500 in start-up capital, both men opened the **Red Willow County Gazette**.³⁰

Within only a few days of the joint venture into their own newspaper on McCook's Main Street, Strunk's partner committed suicide. Although the exact cause of Stewart's action is not clear, it is believed he took his life because of the debt the two men had undertaken along with undisclosed family problems.³¹

With the death of his partner, Strunk found himself entirely responsible for a new paper. At the same time, in order to compete against his former employer, Kimmell, and the other weekly paper in McCook, the **McCook Republican**, he decided to make a major statement about himself and his new paper. Rather than being a weekly paper, Strunk's **Gazette** began printing a twice-weekly edition. With this new publisher upstart within spitting distance from his former employer, he seemed headed for a show down with the long-established Kimmell. Such confrontation would come early and often over the next decade and a half until Kimmell's death in 1928. Later, the two papers became consolidated when Kimmell's widow sold the **Tribune** to the **Gazette** in 1936.³²

Having struck out on his own with the **Red Willow County Gazette**, Strunk made another decision within the following year that played an equally important role in his future. When he moved to McCook in 1909, he boarded in a home owned by two widowed women, a mother and daughter, on the city's West 1st Street. The daughter,

Stella Stillman Allen, widow of a Burlington station agent, James Payne Allen, had a daughter of her own. In June 1912, at the age of 20, Harry Strunk married Arlene Lelia Allen who was three months older than her husband.³³

The marriage of Harry and Arlene would last until Strunk's death. From that marriage would come an important partnership in the running of the **Gazette** as well as a family with two children, Shirley Margaret, born June 11, 1926, and Allen D., born December 31, 1929. As her son wrote in the **Centennial Edition**, Arlene Strunk played an important part in the operations of both the **Red Willow County Gazette** and its successor, the **McCook Daily Gazette**. Obviously not shy about making her own contributions to the paper, she served her husband's newspaper for seventy years "as typesetter, reporter, society editor and bookkeeper."³⁴ Upon the death of her husband, she assumed the position of president of the **Gazette**.³⁵

While there would likely be the usual family squabbles over the next half century, his home life seems to have been one of affection. His daughter, Shirley, recalled that Strunk "cared deeply for my mother, brother and myself. He gave freely of himself with time, energy and interest in us."³⁶ Strunk's son, Allen, remembered that his father "tried hard" to succeed both as a husband and father. During his college days, Allen Strunk wrote a profile of his father in which he noted that "in my opinion, the world's greatest man is not President Truman, General Eisenhower, or Clark Gable, but my 'ole' man."³⁷

For the next half century, Strunk's newspaper operations and his later planning the development of water resource projects important to the Republican River valley, became replete with the innovation that became the hallmark for his career. First with a twice-weekly newspaper and then moving to a daily paper, he seemed driven to become the leading newspaper publisher in the McCook region. From his first editorial cross-swords

with his former employer, Frank Kimmell, Strunk appears to have relished engaging in editorial and publishing one-upmanship.

Strunk's son relates that when Strunk left the **Tribune** to form his own paper Kimmell became embittered toward his former employee. At one time the feud became so intense that the "City Fathers" called on the two men to curb their editorial exchanges. Those exchanges continued, however, until Strunk founded his daily paper. By then Kimmell had become aged and "mellowing."³⁸ In the years before, however, Kimmell's editorial pages referred to the upstart competitor as the "Boy Editor" or "Rastus Ramrod." In a 1915 incident when Strunk may have bid for a county printing job below the rate set by the state, Kimmell started referring to Strunk as "who hasn't-put-it-back."³⁹ One editorial said of the **Gazette** publisher:

When Rastus Ramrod (who hasn't put it back) takes his gory snickersnee in hand and inglorious [sic] writes people of the local map—socially and financially—he is sumpin' fierce—as well as casually monstrously amusing, and calls to mind stunts of the elongated pole-climbing simian who sat down in a can of luminous paint before one of his ascents unmindful or witless of his mounting merriment.⁴⁰

Two local "country newspapers" finding the time to engage in editorial exchanges may not have been typical. A survey done in the 1930s by University of Minnesota journalism professor Phil Bing found small-town newspaper publishers less likely to run editorials than big-town newspaper with daily issues. Bing suggested that the lack of editorial comment by smaller papers resulted from two factors. One reason was the lack of education on the part of the publishers. The slow process involved in hand-setting copy further affected the time a small-town publisher had available to write regular editorial features. Country editors spent a majority of their time engaged in gathering and writing news. To make financial ends meet, small-town publishers spent considerable time soliciting job work and advertising. Editorials apparently did not fit into a tightly-regulated schedule that required fourteen to fifteen-hour work days seven days a week.⁴¹

While his early competitors seemed satisfied in producing weekly editions filled with home-spun news about local events and personal items, Strunk wanted a paper that attracted a larger readership. With the increased production needs to put out a twice-weekly paper, Strunk took steps to reduce the time-consuming process of manually typesetting each edition. The **Red Willow County Gazette** became McCook's first newspaper to go to the more efficient linotype. Arlene Strunk was the first person to be trained on the linotype. As she proudly recalled years later: "I was a pretty fast operator on the linotype."⁴²

In 1924, Strunk further challenged the other rural newspapers of southwestern Nebraska and northwestern Kansas by going to a daily edition. With the more local-sounding name of the **McCook Daily Gazette** replacing the county title, it might strike the casual observer that Strunk had decided to make news of and about McCook as the focal point of his publishing efforts. Instead, it appears from the outset that the new **Gazette** stretched its news coverage to include the entire trade area of southwestern Nebraska and northwestern Kansas.

An interesting side-light to the establishment of Strunk's newest newspaper venture might be found in the reaction to this new challenge by his former employer, Frank Kimmell. By July 1924, when Strunk established the **McCook Daily Gazette**, Kimmell had been publisher of the **Tribune** for forty-one years. The paper itself was about to enter its forty-third year of bringing local news to Red Willow County readers. In fact, when he opened the office of the **McCook Daily Gazette**, the **Tribune** claimed to be the official newspaper of the county. That claim had previously been made on the **Gazette** masthead.⁴³

During Kimmell's forty-one years of leadership, however, the **Tribune** had not gotten beyond the usual appearance of a small, six-column rural newspaper. It had gone

from a weekly to semi-weekly publication. With a yearly subscription of \$1.50 and a published claimed subscription of 2,000, the paper published no national news, statewide news, or wire-service photos on its front page. For the most part, the **Tribune** reflected its publisher's primary goal of printing news about local happenings, club events, and personal columns from local correspondents.⁴⁴

Kimmell's efforts represented what might have passed for the stereotypical rural newspaper when compared to the competing issues of the **Gazette**. Strunk's paper had a more metropolitan appearance. It featured eight columns of United Press wire-service news on the front page. The **Gazette's** usage of front-page photos contrasted sharply with the photoless front page of the **Tribune**. The latter paper did use small, boiler-plate photos on inside pages. When international and national news of importance came across the news wire, the **Gazette** employed full page banner head-lines with photos. Those same news stories generated little, if any, similar place in the pages of the **Tribune**. Kimmell's front page appeared even more provincial with its continued use of front page advertising. Such advertising seemed at times to overwhelm the importance of the front-page local news.⁴⁵

A survey of the Kimmell paper for reaction to his former employee's rising success finds no mention of Strunk's new paper. In fact, for the surveyed papers it is more interesting to note what Kimmell said about his own newspaper philosophy than what he did not say about Strunk. The only time Strunk received any mention in the **Tribune** for a three-month period prior to and for a month following his opening of the **McCook Daily Gazette** came in a July 3, 1924, article on the **Tribune's** front page. In that issue, Kimmell displayed a two-column wide article announcing sponsorship by the Elk's Club of a three-day horse race session. Within the article, Strunk was noted as one of the members of the race committee. Given Kimmell's sometimes strait-laced reputation and

this singular mention of Strunk, he might have given some measure of his thoughts about his former employee.

One other article which Kimmell printed shortly after Strunk's new paper began might be more revealing about the former employer's reaction to his competition. On July 16, 1924, he wrote an editorial titled "The Ideal Newspaper." In whimsical musings, he decried the changing face of the newspaper business. Saying there was no longer "such [an] animal" as an ideal newspaper, Kimmell lashed out at the daily features of "salacious scandal, risqué news," and emphasis on the "immoral in our imperfect life."⁴⁶ For readers of the two primary McCook papers, it likely did not take much thought to link his complaints about the state of the newspaper business with the more urbane issues of the Strunk publication. Where Kimmell concentrated on local news, Strunk's front page was replete with world and national news. Where his paper used no wire service photos, the **Gazette** lavishly used photos though out its sometimes eight or ten page editions. Where Kimmell relied on his editor's footwork for news of the community, his competitor relied on newswire service for the latest from New York, Chicago and around the world.

Going on to express his growing impatience with news that did not represent his perception of wholesomeness, the **Tribune** publisher noted that "the country newspaper is singularly free from this morbid and unworthy attitude." Lambasting large city papers, Kimmell continued in the same vein by claiming that journalists had abandoned the "legacies [established] . . . from the distinguished gentlemen of old-school journalism."⁴⁷ In that one article, Kimmell seemed to obliquely challenge both Strunk's character and lack of journalistic training.

Kimmell then described for his readers what he believed to be the primary purpose of the country editor. He wrote:

Better a thousand times a country editor with ideas, lifting his community by sheer force of character to a better life, a higher moral plane, a richer

experience, than to exploit divorces, revel in crime details, color news with propaganda, and in general assault those ideals of journalism that make a better individual and a more harmonious community.⁴⁸

Strunk's efforts, however, seemed to have an impact upon Kimmell. With the July 16, 1924, issue, and without fanfare or notice to his readers, Kimmell's paper went to a three-times weekly edition. With papers printed on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of each week, he attempted to ease some of the blow to his obvious pride as he saw his former itinerant printer challenge his ideals of the small-town publisher. In making his move to a three-times a week paper, Kimmell bragged he did so because of an interested readership and did not need to rely on "... high-powered solicitations or gift baiting or special attractions to put it over."⁴⁹ That comment reflects on some of Strunk's early subscription campaigns. In one subscription campaign that caught Kimmell's attention, the **Gazette** gave away three new cars.⁵⁰ In spite of his attempts to keep up an image in front of the community that he was competing with Strunk's efforts, it is unlikely that Strunk felt any pressure from Kimmell's change.

To emphasize both the regional nature of the **Gazette** as well as providing daily news in a timely fashion, Strunk introduced one of the more innovative moves of the day—same day air delivery. And it was true air delivery. Purchasing a Curtis Robin airplane in 1929, he hired a pilot to deliver newspaper bundles to waiting newsboys throughout the McCook trading area. Flying low over the small villages and towns of Nebraska and Kansas, the pilot or some lucky McCookite who had gone along for the ride would act much like a bombardier and drop the newspapers through a specially cut chute in the bottom of the plane's fuselage. Although suspended during the Depression, the innovation of Strunk's delivery service by an airplane nicknamed the "Newsboy" earned a permanent resting spot for the plane. The "Newsboy" is on display in the Spokane, Washington Space Museum.⁵¹

While innovation and change would characterize of his newspapers, it would be Strunk's own developing philosophy in the use of the editorial pulpit of his papers that guided his community service goal over the succeeding half-century. In his mind the primary purpose of the **Gazette** would be manifested in the slogan etched deeply into the concrete-stone front of the new office built in 1926. For anyone who did not subscribe to the **Gazette** but who drove or walked in front of the **Gazette's** Main Street location, Strunk had ordered carved for all to see a simple line: "Service Is The Rent We Pay For The Space We Occupy In This World."

Endnotes

¹ U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, **Thirteenth Census of the United States in the Year 1910: Population**, vol. III (Washington DC.: Bureau of the Census, 1913), 35.

² Loren Reid, **Hurry Home Wednesday** (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 2.

³ Sally Foreman Griffith, **Home Town News: William Allen White And The Emporia Gazette** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5.

⁴ Allen D. Strunk, ed., "Harry D. Strunk Newspaperman Reclamationist," **Centennial Edition 1882-1982**, (McCook: **McCook Daily Gazette**, 1982), n.p.n.

⁵ William E. Christiansen, "Splendid Old Roman: The Political Career of Edgar Howard" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1966), 3, 12-13. Howard's own newspaper career had other similarities to Strunk. Howard started delivering papers at the age of 10. By the time he reached eighteen, Howard had worked in much of the Midwest before serving a stint in southwestern Nebraska for a Benkleman paper. After enduring drought and locust infestations in the Republican Valley of the late 1880s, Howard returned eastern Nebraska.

⁶ Harry D. Strunk, editor and publisher, "McCook Golden Anniversary Souvenir Edition," **McCook Daily Gazette**, June 15, 1932.

⁷ Shirley Strunk Powell, completed interview questionnaire to author, April 1996. Powell is the daughter of Harry Strunk.

⁸ Yvonne Dalluge, Pawnee City Historical Society, letter to author, July 16, 1996.

⁹ Company Muster Records, Co. E, 9 Reg't, Iowa Infantry, Albert D. Strunk, Book Mark S409.U.S. 85, National Archives Veteran Records sent to author Sept. 3, 1996.

¹⁰ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Oct. 5, 1932, editorial.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Powell, interview questionnaire.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Earl J. Hess and William L. Shea, **Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 331-334.

¹⁵ Powell, interview questionnaire; Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."

¹⁶ **Official State Atlas of Nebraska, 1884**. Related pages and plats provided by Yvonne Dalluge of the Pawnee City Historical Society.

¹⁷ Dalluge, letter to author.

¹⁸ Powell, interview questionnaire. Harry Strunk's daughter thought her grandfather had been a Treasurer and Sheriff for Pawnee County. A search by Yvonne Dalluge could not find Albert Strunk's name listed for either position.

¹⁹ **Census 1910**, 34. A comparison of census reports for Pawnee County between 1890 and 1910 is provided.

²⁰ Allen D. Strunk, completed interview questionnaire to author, April 1996.

²¹ Leopold "Bus" Bahl, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988. Charles Peek did a series of taped interviews with a number of acquaintances of Harry Strunk. These interviews were started during the summer of 1988, with a few being completed in 1989. Peek conducted his interviews through a grant issued by the Nebraska Humanities Council. The transcripts of those interviews have been made available to the author.

²² Wendell Cheney, interview with the author, summer 1994. Art Herrmann, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.

²³ Herrmann, interview.

²⁴ Annette Trimble, interview with the author, summer 1994.

²⁵ Harl Adams Dalstrom, "Kenneth S. Wherry" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1965), 70.

²⁶ Merl Peek, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988. According to Charles Peek, there is no family relationship between himself and Merl Peek.

²⁷ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."

²⁸ Strunk, interview questionnaire; Powell, interview questionnaires.

²⁹ Strunk, interview questionnaire; Bahl, Peek interview.

³⁰ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk;" Robert T. Ray and Lois Rutledge, **Trails West to Red Willow County Nebraska: Past and Present Family History and Biography** (n.p.: n.p., 1982), 136, 228; Powell, questionnaire.

³¹ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."

³² Ray, **Trails West**, 228; Strunk, interview questionnaire; Strunk., "Harry D. Strunk."

³³ Shirley Strunk Powell, telephone interview with author, June 24, 1996.

³⁴ Strunk, interview questionnaire; Powell, interview questionnaire; Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."

³⁵ **Polk's McCook City Directory 1961**, (Kansas City: R. L. Polk & Co., 1961), 125.

³⁶ Powell, interview questionnaire.

- ³⁷ Strunk, interview questionnaire; Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."
- ³⁸ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Kevin L. Warneke, "Norris Alfred: A Voice From The Prairie" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1994), 5.
- ⁴² Strunk, "Founder's Wife Still Active in **Gazette**."
- ⁴³ **McCook Tribune**, various issues, May 8- Aug. 4, 1924.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., July 16, 1924.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ **McCook Tribune**, July 23, 1924. While subscriptions and circulation are certainly important in measuring the success of any newspaper, neither the **Tribune** or the **Gazette** seemed overly willing to publish their subscription numbers. During the course of this study, only two subscription totals were given. The **Red Willow County Gazette** published a figure of approximately 1,500 in 1922. When Strunk founded the **McCook Daily Gazette** in 1924, Kimmell claimed 2,000.
- ⁵⁰ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."
- ⁵¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER III

SERVICE TO HIS COMMUNITY

According to his son, Harry's Strunk's boldly stated motto, "Service Is The Rent We Pay For The Space We Occupy In This World," may not have been an original thought.¹ Although the originality of the stated aim of the paper might be in question, there is little doubt that Strunk skillfully applied the meaning of the motto to his work in his adopted community.

In examining Strunk's service to his community, it is important to explore his character and personality. To understand the depth of his service through his work as editor and publisher, it is important to examine his contributions to McCook and to the wider readership in Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas. As had his contemporary fellow publisher in Kansas, William Allen White, Strunk played a major part in his community and became a community spokesman. Similarly, he not only performed as had been written of White, "all the kinds of offices of a country editor," but dedicated himself much like the Kansas publisher to a life of service to his community.²

When meeting Strunk for the first time, an observer would immediately note the single feature of his physical appearance that left a lasting impression. Described variously as "skinny as a rail,"³ "thin as a rail,"⁴ he was indeed "very thin."⁵ With each description of his slim appearance, a listener who had never met him might be justified in applying a Lincolnesque portrait to the McCook publisher. In fact, one of those who described the rawboned stature of Strunk noted a "typical frontiersman" look that resembled Abraham Lincoln. Over six feet tall and probably weighing less than 150 pounds most of his life, His angular body carried only enough flesh to stretch tightly over his frame.⁶ An ever-present pair of glasses, usually slim, wire-framed ones perched on his nose, seemed to magnify his physical thinness.

While his pencil-thin build during his early career might be attributed to the long work hours necessary to the success of his newspapers, Strunk's friends noted his eating habits appeared Spartan and bird-like. His emaciated image may have lent a further vision of someone with the weight of others on his shoulders. Senator Carl T. Curtis recalled that Strunk "would never eat or take time to eat. He might cut his food and take a bite or two. Then he would get involved in something else."⁷ The spectral form of Strunk seemed magnified by his dress. From wearing his ties askew around his neck to having his clothes draped "haphazardly" over his body, he made an lasting impression.⁸

Beyond his distinctive physical feature, Strunk possessed several other visages that friends and acquaintances recalled in later years. Oftentimes when meeting with him in his second-floor office that overlooked Main Street, or at a civic meeting in the nearby Keystone Hotel, or at a gabfest at the Elk's Club, his head and shoulders would appear surrounded by a floating swirl of cigarette smoke. Because of the smoke, he might have appeared as an ethereal figure to some of the town youngsters that worked for the **Gazette** as newspaper carriers. When observed in the sometimes faint light of the hallway that led to the second-floor stairs, his upper body appeared tree-like and surrounded by early morning clouds.⁹ Not only did he smoke, but as McCook attorney William Lyon recalled, "I never saw Harry when he didn't have a cigarette in his mouth or his hand."¹⁰

In spite of the sometimes gruff exterior and tone that Strunk projected, he had the reputation for being very soft-spoken. One associate remembered that "Strunk didn't project his voice very good."¹¹ Soft-spoken or not, he did know how and when to use his voice. When one business acquaintance ran an advertisement in a rival McCook newspaper, he received an angry phone call from Strunk. By having used a paper other than the **Gazette**, the soon to be shell-shocked businessman found himself being "cussed out" by the agitated newspaper owner.¹²

Even though seemingly soft-spoken to some and extremely direct to others when the situation required, Strunk dealt effectively with a variety of individuals. From his many forays into government and business offices between McCook and points east and west, he learned to "get along with those . . . in McCook as well as the multi-millionaires in Denver, or the governor."¹³

While Strunk did not have the background in the manners of polite society and the expectations of acceptable behavior in the presence of either the governmental or social elite, he learned to hold his own. Self-taught in the newspaper business, he continued his education by acquiring the tact that enabled him to outmaneuver many of the political and social Machivellians with whom he would later have so much contact on behalf of Southwest Nebraska.

His accomplishments as a newspaperman and later as a recognized reclamationist of the waters that annually escaped down the length of the Republican River, give us a better understanding as to why some described him as being "very dynamic."¹⁴ Strunk's dynamic approach to solving the problems which he deemed important to the people of the Republican Valley did not always bring success. In those instances, when thwarted in his actions the publisher found solace in solitary train rides to Denver or Chicago or points in between, depending on when he could lift himself out of a momentary melancholy. Often times a late-night Chicago-bound Burlington Zephyr would pick up a sole passenger at the McCook Depot. If Strunk's ire with politicians or government civil or army engineers cooled by the time the train arrived in Lincoln, he would hop off and catch the next westbound to McCook.¹⁵

In spite of his high-strung disposition and of his need for physical escape in controlling his anger, Strunk appears to have been remembered as a normally gentle and caring individual. Even when the work day schedule at the **Gazette** ran into momentary

disruption because of an employee who had forgotten an assignment or some mix-up on a task necessary to production of a daily paper, he did not strike back by firing an employee for a temporary lapse.¹⁶

Some friends and business associates might agree that Strunk's disheveled exterior and sometimes verbal wrath appeared to exude an "old sour thing"¹⁷ disposition when confronted with the snail-like pace that sometimes marked the handling of matters dear to his heart. At the same time, he was drawn to children like a moth to the flame. One cold, winter day during the Depression, he found near the **Gazette** office a street waif lacking even the most elementary protection against a Great Plains north wind. Strunk took the youngster in hand. Together they walked across the street to the Post Office building and then across D street to the local Montgomery Ward store. There he purchased a warm jacket for his temporary ward. Later he would be visibly shaken when told the lad had drowned in a swimming mishap in one of the water-filled sand pits that lined the Republican River south of McCook.¹⁸

In attempting to paint a more thorough portrait of Strunk, it might be useful to note that his sensitive nature to those around him, especially with children, might have originated with his own childhood. He left home at an age when most adolescents would have been ill-equipped to set out on their own. Although there is no evidence that he lived an unhappy life while living in Pawnee City, he prematurely left the security of home to become an itinerant printer.

Strunk wrote eloquently of the dreams and expectations of childhood. Perhaps with just a touch of memory about his own dreams and expectations and his decision to leave home, He wrote about a pair of runaway boys. Describing the optimism of youth and perhaps his own lost youth, he wrote:

[W]e have to feel a bit envious too; for the world which one looks at when one is just 16 may be utterly unreal, but it is beautiful. Never again will it seem as

enchanting as it does just then, when any road can lead to a California that never existed, and a hopeful heart can carry one clear to the end.¹⁹

Perhaps Strunk's memory of what he had missed in a shortened childhood becomes more evident in a 1932 editorial, "Father Stands the Gaff." In that editorial, he wrote emotionally about fatherhood. In his monologue, he noted that fathers seemed to have become a family football. Whenever family squabbles erupted, it appeared father either became caught in the middle or became the center and sometimes imagined cause of the disagreement. For fathers, he suggested, it did no good to get upset. Instead a father had to stand the "gaff."²⁰

Turning to a more somber point in the same editorial, he lamented the role of fathers who became the focal point of a child's broken heart. Wrote Strunk:

A father has to pay the price of his children's disillusionment. There's no help for it. His only escape would be to live up to all the things the youngsters feel about him in the beginning; and anyone who has ever been idolized by a six-year old must know that, unfortunately, is impossible.²¹

In pursuing a closer understanding of his personality, two diametrically opposed elements of his life bear examination. These elements might have more adversely affected any other individual's reputation in a close-knit community the size of McCook. Setting in stark juxtaposition were Strunk's apparent deep moral convictions and his well-documented drinking habits.

Strunk was not a church member. He appeared, however, to maintain an acute understanding of a spiritual presence in his life. Allen Strunk wrote that his father believed strongly that "it isn't how long any man lives, but how he lives." The son of the *Gazette's* founder went on to note that "beyond a belief in a Supreme Being his [Harry Strunk] religious philosophy rested in his belief that working for mankind helped wash out a man's sins."²²

For himself, Strunk may have attempted to put his imprimatur on the question of a spiritual life and its meaning. In 1931, he commented about the attempts of science to study the deeper meaning of life and its origins. While he likely appreciated the attempts of science to explain the mystery of life, he chided the scientific community. In an editorial titled, "The Origins of Life," he postulated that when all was said and done by the scientists, the mystery of life would be as "heavy, as impenetrable and as magical as ever."²³

Strunk's newspapers regularly carried religious articles. Christmas issues displayed both the commercial and religious trappings of the season. Easter issues carried messages of spiritual and personal renewal. Authorship of specific articles of religious connotation that were not boilerplate inserts is not known, but these articles could have been written by Arlene Strunk.²⁴ Regardless of the authorship, however, he appears not to have opposed any use of his paper to proselytize religion, specifically the Christian faith and its morality.

Although her acquaintance with Strunk did not begin until she became his secretary in the early 1950s, Annette Trimble remembered that he occasionally accompanied his family to McCook's Congregational Church where his wife was a member. According to Trimble, her boss held a strong conviction about religion that "he called Providence." As Trimble recalled her conversations with Strunk, he believed his spiritual concerns did not rest in the popular definition of "God, or the Lord or anything, but in Providence." When he faced especially trying times or looked for answers for things he could not explain, he sometimes found an answer in the "magical" by saying: "I could just see that shadow telling me what to do."²⁵

As we examine this more spiritual part of Strunk's nature, we find that regardless of the depth of his religious convictions, or the lack of church membership, his idea of a

"Providence" or a "shadow" guiding his actions most likely influenced much of his service on behalf of his community. As McCook attorney Fred Hanson related, the performance by Strunk on behalf of the community was accomplished with "basic Christian morality."²⁶

If Christian morality or the "shadow" of a mystical Providence seems to have been a guiding force to Strunk, his not infrequent abuse of alcohol might provide a further insight into the direction of his editorial pen and community service. To examine him without mentioning his drinking habit would be misleading. In examining this part of Strunk's make up, his acquaintances in the city of McCook become not only the observers but the ultimate judges of his most evident character flaw.

With the installation of its charter members in 1922, who included Strunk, the McCook Elk's Club quickly became one of the primary social gathering places for the elite of the town's male population.²⁷ The Club was a convenient gathering place for lunch and dinner or for a quiet place to discuss the city's future. After the end of prohibition its bar provided a ready "watering-hole" for the city's business and civic leaders. Few afternoons went by without Strunk sitting at his favorite table with his favorite drink—"scotch whisky."²⁸

The Elk's Club provided Strunk a mid-day respite from newspaper management and the water reclamation projects that accumulated over the years. After moving to a highly visible location at the corner of Main Street and G Street, Club members likely found their comings and goings at the club well reported in the city's daily gossip. The two-block walk north from his office to the Elk's led Strunk past the County Court House and within a few yards of the near-by residence of Senator Norris. Likely both the courthouse and Strunk's observation of the people coming and going from the Norris home helped shape the next day's editorial page. Even had there not been the nearby presence of either the courthouse or the Norris home, it is likely that the Elk's would have

provided important insight for Strunk into the community of McCook. For the infrequent days when Strunk may not have returned to the office or after a late-night session at the Elk's, the central location of the club provided a head start to his own home five blocks north at 1112 Main Street.²⁹

To those who over the years came to know Strunk well and who had a close observation of his frequent forays into the Elk's, none spoke or wrote of any adverse impact of his drinking on his editorial work. Again, in turning to someone who spent a considerable amount of time with him, Annette Trimble, we find that her boss "would go the Elk's Club and that usually stirred him to come back and dictate a masterful editorial." Trimble went on to state that after being at the Elk's, "Strunk saw all the angles [of an issue]." She noted that both the length and scope of his editorial would "depend on how long he was at the Elk's."³⁰

Although perhaps not completely charitable, but to the point, Fred Hanson remembered that as an "idea man, and a man of action, Strunk was one of the few, maybe the only person I've known that got his success out of a liquor bottle."³¹ He usually maintained a level head even after having his allotment of scotch. Harold Shoemaker remembered that "Harry had a weakness for liquor that was pretty well known by everyone in the territory. But he was a man that even with liquor he kept his balance and his mind. Nobody took advantage of Harry while he was drinking."³²

While the memories of Strunk's drinking are filled with anecdotal stories, some perhaps more apocryphal than others, several documented post-drinking adventures are worth repeating. Even the Burlington Railroad did its part in keeping him supplied with his favorite beverages on rides to Chicago or Denver. Following one infamous drinking bout at the Elk's that ended in his being denied bar privileges for a period, he arrived at the club one evening after returning from Chicago. Members soon learned that any

restrictions on Strunk by the Elk's bar management had not taken into consideration his ability to obtain bottles of whiskey while aboard the westbound Burlington Zephyr. Strolling into the Elk's bar after his Chicago sojourn, Strunk proudly produced several liquor bottles from his coat pockets.³³

To some citizens of McCook, the most obvious signs of Strunk's drinking involved his driving after visiting the Elk's. On several occasions his car would end up in one place, sometimes in the middle of Main Street or parked haphazardly near the depot, while he found another ride home. At times his drinking and driving would result in Strunk being stopped by the local police. Attorney Thomas Colfer remembered a Sunday morning with his family on the way to Mass at St. Patrick's Church. As the Colfer family car passed the corner on which sat the Elk's Club they noticed Strunk's Oldsmobile sedan abandoned on the curb and terrace of the Frank Real home that sat directly behind the Elk's. In addition to the torn-up grass of the Real home, one of the city's new iron-ornamental light posts with a frosted-glass globe had fallen victim to his previous evening at the Elk's.³⁴

While on occasion Strunk's drinking may have been as prominent as his tobacco habit, at least one acquaintance provided an explanation and further examination of the newspaperman's inner struggles. Merl Peek traced his "drinking problems" to the hardships of the Depression. According to Peek, "Harry's drinking problems started during the Depression. I remember him telling me that when the dust storms came . . . he'd get so depressed."³⁵

From all indications, Strunk recognized this weakness in both his character and his behavior. He never denied having a drinking problem during the period covered by this study. He likely understood the debilitating impact of alcohol. According to Carl Curtis, Strunk had a saying around the **Gazette** building. In discussing the drinking by employees during work hours, Strunk admonished: "You're here to work. I'll not tolerate drinking.

I'll do the drinking."³⁶ Despite this quirk in his character, he ran a successful newspaper and maintained his promise of service to the community.

Before founding the **McCook Daily Gazette**, Strunk had attempted on several occasions to state the larger purpose represented by the editorial voice of his respective papers. In 1922, over a decade after his venture into newspaper ownership, he wrote an editorial answer to a question posed by the **Omaha Bee**. As noted in his response, the **Bee** had asked its statewide readership to discuss the most important issues facing post-World War I Nebraska.³⁷ Apparently writing for the community as he was wont to do, but responding as editor of the **Red Willow County Gazette**, Strunk wrote:

McCook is most vitally interested in the readjustment of both the business and social world; the return to normalcy with a real adjustment of the valuation of all commodities to a more reasonable and equitable basis of exchange; together with a true realization of public opinion that the morale of America is threatened with the jazzing [sic] spirit which has swept over the country.³⁸

Expanding further on what would be good for Nebraska and by inference what would be best for his own part of the state, he explained the need for expanded support to rural communities. Only with some form of price supports, he claimed, would the rural areas of the state be able to stave off the continuing decline of farm prices due to the loss of European markets following the end of the First World War. He complained that since the end of the war, "the farmer finds the valuation of his wheat, corn, and other products insufficient to pay the expense of production."³⁹

With his commitment to speak on behalf of the farming community that represented much of the readership of the **Red Willow Gazette**, there is little doubt that Strunk intended to serve the larger community beyond McCook. For the enterprising young editor, such support for the farming community would appear to be only natural when considering the rich farm land and pasture ranges of much of Southwest Nebraska

and Northwest Kansas. There is little doubt that Strunk gave considerable thought to expanding his readership base to farm families.

The 1920 federal agricultural census for the previous year's data reported 1,091 farms in Red Willow County. An estimated total value of county farm property of \$25,003,500 was given in the same census.⁴⁰ Wheat, corn, and rye made up the bulk of the cash crops that had earned local farmers handsome profits during the war. A great portion of those profits had been spent with McCook merchants. What was good for McCook businessmen was good for Strunk and his newspaper.

Some of the most prominent advertising displays in the **Red Willow County Gazette** included cattle and hog raisers. In almost every issue of the paper, interested readers would find a Livestock Breeder's Directory. The Directory listed at least two-dozen cattle and hog breeders.⁴¹

To emphasize its commitment to agriculture, the **Red Willow County Gazette** published its own Farm Department column with an Agricultural Editor. Probably like similar newspapers with large rural readerships, the **Gazette's** farm column carried worthwhile tips on detecting livestock diseases, the latest advancement in new strains of corn and wheat, and other news items that Strunk probably believed would be important to his rural readers. At a time when the local grain market paid farmers \$1.10 per bushel for wheat, \$.95 cents for a bushel of rye, and eggs earned a paltry \$.14 cents per dozen and while hog farmers received only \$6.75 per hundredweight, the **Red Willow County Gazette** called for a return to pre-1920 prices.⁴²

In January 1922, the paper carried a full-page reprint of an Atlantic Monthly article by Bernard Baruch. While Baruch's fame on both the American and international scene had yet to be fully realized, his 1922 article, "Some Aspects of the Farm Problem," appeared to place him directly on the side of Strunk's thinking. That same thinking

emanated from the readership in the rich farmland along the Republican River valley. Noting the importance of the declining role of agriculture to the fall of Rome, Baruch cautioned readers that a similar fate could await the United States unless "our farmers are well and fairly paid for their services."⁴³

Strunk's feelings toward the rural community of farms and small towns may have resulted from his own belief in a still evolving Great Plains culture centered on the "yeoman farmer." In a 1931 editorial, he commented whimsically on the virtue of rural living over city life. He noted that farm youth had fewer distractions. He suggested that because of the fewer demands for his time and attention, the farm lad could "get his young life oriented before he plunged into the working world."⁴⁴

In another editorial, he suggested that a youngster's exposure to a rural environment enhanced the youth's chances with later entry into the rural or city job market. Explained Strunk: "The small town and the open country offer a way of life that is more wholesome." Rhetorically, he asked his readers: "Will we have to take our big cities apart and get over the notion that we have to huddle together in vast groups in order to make a go of things?"⁴⁵ It is not known how much he followed William Allen White's career and writing. White's own feelings about rural America may have caught Strunk's attention. As the Emporia newspaperman's biographer noted, he became an eloquent "spokesman for a particular way of life, that of the mid-western small town."⁴⁶

To emphasize the **Gazette's** understanding of the farming community and no doubt to enhance farm readership, Strunk several times editorialized on the need for equitable farm legislation. His support for his farm readership remained consistent during the period of this study. As Strunk continually suggested, farm legislation should provide guaranteed prices for farm goods. At one point he wrote of the need for "a three-year guaranteed price on wheat and corn." Writing of the harrying times faced by the post-war farmer on

the Great Plains because of the continuing soft market for farm commodities, he demanded that farm legislation provide "enough profit so that a farmer could afford the cost of production."⁴⁷

Like countless others who saw the rural community as the backbone of the nation, Strunk embraced what historian Richard Hofstadter termed "the agrarian myth." That myth, however, was largely centered in the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Strunk may not have recognized the changing character of the farm community as the movement from rural to urban areas began to increase in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Later, in 1933, Strunk's assumptions about the rural community may have undergone some rethinking, as the result of the Farmer's Holiday movement. He would call the sight of farmers in Iowa threatening local judges and being arrested by National Guard troops as "disgraceful." Strunk then praised his own community's reaction to an earlier Farmer's Holiday recruitment meeting held in McCook by Harry Lux of Lincoln. Commenting that "Lux failed to get support" from local farmers, he noted that the activities in Iowa could not happen locally because of the "level-headed people in Southwest Nebraska."⁴⁹

Strunk stood solidly in support of the farming community in the **Gazette's** trade territory. He showed no less support for non-farm workers. As might be expected because of the major role of the railroad in the livelihood of his town, he strongly supported laborers, especially Burlington train crews and their families. During a 1922 national strike by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and sixteen other railroad employee organizations, McCook's Burlington workplace witnessed its share of labor strife. The McCook yard reported 225 railroad employees out on strike.⁵⁰ Those strikers had taken an important step in a conflict that "pitted a leading industrial sector against a solidly organized labor force."⁵¹ Throughout the strike, it was apparent from both articles and editorials that the **Red Willow Gazette** stood in solidarity with the unionized railroad

employees. The **Gazette** gave considerable attention to the low wages of the rail workers. During the entire period of the strike, railroad workers published their own column on the front page of the primary local news source for Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas.⁵²

In the early days of the strike, probably to justify the position taken by his paper and to rally community support to railroad union members, Strunk penned an editorial that explained the roots of the union's complaints. In the editorial titled "Are Wages Too High," he observed that rent for a six-room house in McCook was \$50 per month. In addition, the renter paid another \$3 for electricity, \$1.50 for water, \$2 for a telephone, and \$3 for cooking gas. Listing other expenses facing union members, he noted that a ten-ton load of coal for winter heating cost \$10 per month. The supportive publisher even figured into his calculation a \$4,000 life insurance policy at \$13 each month. Ever the salesman, he allowed for monthly newspaper and magazine subscriptions at \$1.00. Further monthly costs included \$.75 for personal property taxes and \$.75 for insurance on personal property.⁵³

Finally, in summarizing his findings and explaining to his readers that his figures represented the budget for a family of four, consisting of a husband, wife, and two children, Strunk found that it took \$177.75 to maintain a reasonable lifestyle. "Unbelievable," he declared as he reviewed the cost of living and noted that the average railroad worker, depending on his job-skills, earned wages of between only \$82.16 and \$160.16 each month. In addition, he observed railroad workers in 1922 found their paychecks reduced by a twenty percent pay-cut.⁵⁴ That pay-cut had in part precipitated the strike for which Strunk rallied on behalf of the strikers. Of course, readers likely recognized that a number of those same strikers, as with local farmers, did their shopping in McCook and read the **Red Willow County Gazette**.

Strunk's support and boosterism for McCook never wavered and few readers of either of his papers could doubt the leadership role played by the papers and its publisher. An early indication of this community promotion came in a front page article claiming McCook to be the "convention city of Southwest Nebraska" and the "metropolis of Southwest Nebraska."⁵⁵

Strunk published statistics to measure the drawing power of McCook from its trade territory. In one front-page article in 1922, he wrote of counting cars in a sixteen-square block area of the city's business district. Of the 414 cars counted, only 290 had license plates from Red Willow County. Twenty-seven vehicles had plates from adjacent Frontier County and another 22 came from neighboring Hitchcock County. Sixteen cars had out-of-state licenses, primarily from Kansas and Colorado.⁵⁶ Considering the sorry state of roads, these numbers were impressive. The numbers and the potential for other out-of-towners trading in the town spurred Strunk's interest in backing several civic groups that supported construction of better roads to serve the McCook trade area.

McCook's early building and population boom following the Burlington's 1882 announcement for a new division point was impressive. The years 1921 to 1923, however, were banner years in the continuing growth of the city. By 1920, Burlington's roundhouse, switch tracks, and workers along with the county seat with its county employees resulted in McCook becoming the center of the two largest employers in Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas. At the time of the 1922 strike the Burlington employed 250-300 workers in McCook.⁵⁷ The leadership of the Commercial Club, the forerunner of the city's Chamber of Commerce; and a local political organization, the Citizens party, were important to the city's continued growth between 1921 and 1923.⁵⁸ Throughout this period, Strunk threw his support behind the city and its political and business leadership.

By 1920, Red Willow County's population had reached 11,400. At the same time, McCook's population neared 5,000 people. Within the next decade, the population of McCook climbed to almost 7,000. Triggered by the impressive growth of his community, Strunk visualized even more expansion. On the eve of the 1929 stock market crash, Strunk had written that "Southwest Nebraska has developed considerably during the past 10 years and during that development, McCook has naturally come to be recognized as a metropolis of considerable importance to this entire region."⁵⁹

Strunk's service to the diverse communities of agriculture and business and his promotion of McCook itself continued beyond the 1920s. Even in the midst of the Depression, he continued to extol the wealth and potential for growth in southwestern Nebraska. In a 1931 editorial, he restated the **McCook Daily Gazette's** active support toward building a strong economic base throughout the Republican River valley. While confirming the paper's continued goal to work toward whatever development brought benefits to the city and region, he reminded his readers that his work and the paper's on the behalf of the community reflected "public sentiment."⁶⁰

As the more debilitating effects of the Depression began to taper off toward the end of the 1930s, Strunk continued to explain his community activism vis-à-vis a New York paper's comments about loyalty of an employer to a community. He argued: "It is best for management . . . to remain an integral part of the community on which its business has been built."⁶¹

To Strunk, the ever-optimistic visionary about the potential of the Republican River valley region, there existed little in the way of continuing economic development that could not be accomplished. From such interest in the development of the river valley came much of the impetus to Strunk's life-long interest in water conservation. His role as a water reclamationist will be addressed later. At this point, it is sufficient to note that in

1930, in one of his earliest successes on the part of water management along the Republican River, Strunk worked to bring the governors or their representatives from fourteen states to attend a flood-control conference in McCook.

Centered on the question of how upstream waters from the Missouri drainage basin could be controlled, that conference might have foreshadowed the later Pick-Sloan Plan. Pick-Sloan has been described by historian Michael Lawson as "the joint water development program developed by the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation in 1944 for the Missouri River Basin."⁶² Much of the discussion at the McCook conference about controlling the upper waters of the streams and rivers that fed into the Missouri River likely became a part of the congressional discussion about flood control following the Republican River flood of 1935. At that time, "Congress authorized construction of several local levee projects as part of the first nationwide Flood Control Act in 1936."⁶³

A little more than a month after the McCook meeting, Strunk referred to it in an editorial titled "There Is Nothing Impossible." He asserted that such a gathering enabled "Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas [to] build upon these plains in [sic] worthwhile accomplishments that will stand for future generations to muse over and wonder about."⁶⁴

While Strunk's interest in water reclamation claimed a great deal of his attention during the Depression years, he never lost sight of his responsibility to the town and region by evoking his optimistic nature as the Depression took its toll of farms and businesses. To counter the increased pessimism of local businessmen, Strunk wrote a 1932 front page article that likely opened many eyes in McCook's business district. In that piece, the town's leading optimist noted that the city of McCook, in spite of both the national and local economy, had working men and women who had earned some

\$1,741,710 in wages during 1931. Strunk reminded the paper's business readers that those wages went to buy goods and services in local stores. Likely with tongue in cheek, he chided worried businessmen when he explained "that amount of money makes it mighty unpleasant for the wolf who might decide to call at the door."⁶⁵ In his attempt to spread optimism, he added that ". . . those merchants who talk "hard times" no doubt are unable to visualize the vast numbers of people in their territory who are earning pay checks each week and each month. People may be reducing but they are still spending."⁶⁶

Strunk continued to look forward to the future and remained a booster of the city's prospects. In a 1932 editorial welcoming a campaigning Franklin D. Roosevelt to the city, he wrote that as a "city of almost 8,000 [sic] progressive and home-loving people, McCook looked forward to the future."⁶⁷ Roosevelt's campaign visit to McCook was seen as good publicity for the city. Arriving by train from Denver, he was accompanied by Senator Norris who had met the train in Benkelman, Nebraska. The **Gazette** article on the visit stressed the numbers of people who had come to the city to see the presidential candidate and Senator Norris. Figures ranged from a 30,000 estimate by the McCook paper to between 30,000 and 40,000 people by the **World-Herald**. The McCook publisher stressed that the Roosevelt visit was a "splendid opportunity for McCook" to be recognized by others. He did not give any indication that the visit should be seen as political favoritism or endorsement by the city of a particular candidate. In fact, the McCook Chamber of Commerce, who had first invited Roosevelt to the city, issued a similar invitation to President Hoover. Hoover, however, did not come.⁶⁸

By 1938, when the most serious part of the dust storms, drought, and Depression had either passed or been brought under some measure of management, Strunk chaired a three-man commission charged with promoting voter approval of a bond issue to fund the building of a city auditorium. Not since the building boom years of 1921-1923 had there

been a bigger issue placed before McCook voters. At a time when most voters were still recovering from hard times, they were now being asked to support a bond issue for a structure the city had done without for almost forty-five years. His stature and that of his paper were tied to the voters' decision.

Appointed as chairman of the bond issue committee, Strunk joined with former mayor Frank Real, one of the city's leading businessmen, and long-time McCook entrepreneur and civil philanthropist, Albert Barnett. Barnett, known to most McCookites as "The Builder" because of his business interests and ownership in lumber and cement companies, promised to make available at cost any materials from his far-ranging business interests used in building the auditorium. Almost half of the required \$107,000 had been promised through a grant by the Public Works Administration (PWA).⁶⁹

Using his editorial column, Strunk worked to convince McCook voters that the planned auditorium represented the strength, past, present and future, of the city. He avowed that the new city edifice would meet McCook's obligation as "a first class KEY city of a vast territory."⁷⁰ Such mobilization of community support appears to mirror similar exhortations made by publisher William Allen White in Emporia.⁷¹

Responding to this appeal, McCook voters passed the bond issue by a vote of 1,127 to 579. Strunk quickly pointed out that "3 times as many voted in the bond issue as had voted in April's municipal election."⁷² His faith in McCook had been vindicated.

During the bond issue campaign Strunk had appealed to civic pride in support of the auditorium project. His position on the question, however, might have affected voters without such a direct appeal. Many of the citizens of McCook appeared to respect and carefully consider the newspaper publisher's judgment on local issues. He was remembered as "a great influence" on the community.⁷³ One associate noted that Strunk "had a lot of influence on the political aspects of the area. People listened to Harry, and

read his editorials."⁷⁴ Merl Peek went even further in describing McCook's newspaper publisher's relationship and service to the community. He claimed that "Strunk was the community."⁷⁵

As we attempt to clarify the position of Strunk in McCook and the larger territory served by his newspapers, it appears that his commitment to serve his readers transcended any personal gain or promotion. Perhaps Don Thompson best described Strunk's community service both as a booster of economic growth and his later impact on water resource development. According to this cattleman, friend and associate on water projects who was later elected representative to the Nebraska Legislature, "Harry was determined to make Southwest Nebraska a better place. He boosted Southwest Nebraska."⁷⁶ Annette Trimble shared this view. As she stated, Strunk "never asked for anything for himself. He would go on those rampages and demand the senators do this and that and the other thing. But it wasn't for himself. That is the reason he got things done."⁷⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ Allen D. Strunk, ed., "Harry Strunk Newspaperman Reclamationist," **Centennial Edition 1882-1982** (McCook: **McCook Daily Gazette**, 1982).
- ² Sally Foreman Griffith, **Home Town News: William Allen White And The Emporia Gazette** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-4, 36.
- ³ Carl T. Curtis, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.
- ⁴ George Peek, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988. The Reverend George Peek, father of Charles Peek, served as rector of McCook's Episcopal Church.
- ⁵ Bob Kutz, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.
- ⁶ Peek interview.
- ⁷ Curtis interview.
- ⁸ John T. Harris, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988. Harris would be a qualified observer of Harry Strunk's method of dress. Harris managed DeGroffs Department Store in McCook. That store had an extensive men's clothing department.
- ⁹ As an eleven year-old, the author delivered papers for the **Gazette**. The author recalls meeting Strunk on many occasions in the entry hallway of the **Gazette** building. Strunk, with an always present cigarette either in his hand or between his lips, would be headed for his upstairs office while the author joined other carriers on the front sidewalk to fold their daily load of papers for delivery. The author's father had been a carrier for the **Gazette** during several of the years covered by this study.
- ¹⁰ William W. Lyons, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.
- ¹¹ Don Thompson, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.
- ¹² Lyon interview.
- ¹³ Ray Search, interview with the author, summer 1994.
- ¹⁴ Curtis interview.
- ¹⁵ Annette Trimble, interview with the author, summer 1994.
- ¹⁶ Lyon interview.
- ¹⁷ Trimble interview.
- ¹⁸ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."
- ¹⁹ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Jan. 20, 1932, editorial.

²⁰ Ibid., Jan. 28, 1932, editorial.

²¹ Ibid. Harry Strunk's own daughter was six-years old at the time of this editorial.

²² Strunk, "McCook Elks Lodge 1434." The **Centennial** issue included a two-page advertisement for the Elk's Club and a pre-1961 picture of the surviving charter members of the Elk's. The picture included Harry Strunk.

²³ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 20, 1931, editorial.

²⁴ Fred T. Hanson, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.

²⁵ Trimble interview.

²⁶ Hanson interview.

²⁷ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ **Polk's McCook City Directory 1931**, (Kansas City: R. L. Polk & Co., 1931), 123.

³⁰ Trimble interview.

³¹ Hanson interview.

³² Harold Shoemaker, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.

³³ Thomas Colfer, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Merl Peek, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.

³⁶ Curtis interview.

³⁷ **Red Willow County Gazette**, April 10, 1922, editorial.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, **Fourteenth Census of the United States in the Year 1920: Agriculture**, vol. part 1, (Washington: Bureau of the Census), 134.

⁴¹ **Red Willow County Gazette**, various issues April 1922. As could be expected from the issues surveyed for this paper, rural advertisement made up a large proportion of advertising dollars spent with both **Gazettes**.

⁴² Ibid., May 12, 1921.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Jan., 20, 1922.

⁴⁴ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 11, 1931, editorial.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Dec. 11, 1931, editorial.

⁴⁶ **Griffith, Home Town News**, 142.

⁴⁷ **Red Willow County Gazette**, Mar. 8, 1923, editorial.

⁴⁸ Richard Hofstadter, **The Age of Reform** (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 31-32.

⁴⁹ **McCook Daily Gazette**, May 5, 1933, editorial. A front page article included a two-column photograph of Iowa National Guardsman with rifles surrounding what was described as "two farmers." Prior to the May 5 editorial, the **Gazette** had published without comment other UP articles on the Farmer's Holiday movement in Iowa and Wisconsin. The sight of farmers surrounded by armed troops apparently caused a reaction in Strunk.

⁵⁰ Thomas Magnuson, "Two Railroad Towns React to a Strike: Havelock and Plattsmouth in 1922," **Nebraska History** 75 (Fall 1994): 256.

⁵¹ Colin J. Davis, "Bitter Conflict: The 1922 Railroad Shopmen's Strike," **Labor History** 33 (Fall 1922): 435.

⁵² Strunk, "CB&Q Railroad Strike Never Officially Resolved."

⁵³ **Red Willow County Gazette**, Aug. 31, 1922, editorial. It is interesting to note that Strunk did not include the luxury of an automobile in his figures.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Mar. 29, 1923.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, May 8, 1922.

⁵⁷ Strunk, "CB&Q Railroad Strike Never Officially Resolved;" Magnuson, "Two Railroad Towns," 256.

⁵⁸ **Red Willow County Gazette**, various issues, 1921-1923. In spite of the decreasing prices paid to farmers and possible affect on the McCook economy, the post-war period in McCook saw an impressive building boom. Between 1921 and 1923, the city and its local politicians, led by the Citizens Party, demonstrated an ability to continue building community projects and bring in new employment in the form of a Wilson packing plant. These expansion projects and new packing plant required a labor force. In addition, the building expansion primed the economic pump for businesses that supplied the goods and materials for contractors as well as providing food and goods to contractors, carpenters, laborers, and their families. Within this period, McCook witnessed the planning or completion of the six-story Keystone Hotel, a Carnegie Library, a YMCA, a federally funded two-story Post Office building, the Elks Club, a golf course, a new three-story hospital operated by Catholic nuns, and the largest paved street program in the city to date. At the close of the 1922 railroad strike, the Burlington announced it would build a two-

story brick depot for the city of McCook. In a 1922 issue of the **Gazette**, the paper heralded the building of 100 new homes in the city. In the 1922 city elections, little opposition appeared to contest the Citizens party slate of candidates for the City Council, or the seemingly growing prosperity for the community which the party apparently promoted. The electorate of McCook overwhelmingly voted for the Citizens party candidates. Only the mayor's race exhibited any real contest, but the Citizens party's candidate, Frank Real, won by a three-to-one margin.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 22, 1929.

⁶⁰ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 18, 1931, editorial.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, July 7, 1938, editorial.

⁶² Michael L. Lawson, **The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980: Dammed Indians** (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994 ed.), xxix.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁴ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Jan. 6, 1932, editorial.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 25, 1930.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1932, editorial.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Sept. 12, 15, 28, 29, 1932, front page articles and editorials; Richard Lowitt, **George W. Norris: The Persistence of a Progressive, 1913-1933** (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 557-559. Lowitt notes that Roosevelt used the McCook visit to give a "remarkable tribute" to Senator Norris. The presidential candidate embodied Norris with the characteristics of integrity, unselfishness, courage, and consistency. In his related editorial, Strunk made only a passing reference to the New York governor's comments about Norris.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, May 7, 1938; Strunk, "Barnett Was Known As The Builder," Ray, **Trails West**, 16-17.

⁷⁰ **McCook Daily Gazette**, May 27, 1938, editorial.

⁷¹ Griffith, **Home Town News**, 114.

⁷² **McCook Daily Gazette**, June 16, 1938, editorial.

⁷³ Strunk, "Harry Strunk: Newspaperman Reclamationist."

⁷⁴ Thompson interview.

⁷⁵ Merl Peek interview.

⁷⁶ Thompson interview.

⁷⁷ Trimble interview.

CHAPTER IV

STRUNK AND DEPRESSION POLITICS

The relationship between Harry Strunk and Senator George W. Norris requires examination in considering Strunk and Depression politics. Gene E. Hamaker's history of central Nebraska's Tri-County Irrigation Project devoted a section to what he described as the "Norris-Strunk controversy."¹ Before exploring the nature of the Norris-Strunk relationship and the surrounding controversy, however, it would be beneficial to first examine the political activism of Strunk. The Depression years between 1929 and 1938 are used as a focal point to trace the maturing of his political involvement.

To form an understanding of Strunk's political views several primary themes will be explored in this and the following chapters. These themes are important in ultimately arriving at an understanding of both Strunk's political activism on behalf of his community and his sometimes confrontational relationship with Norris. Understanding his political participation is important in laying a preliminary foundation for discussing the Norris-Strunk relationship—at least from the Strunk perspective. Brief objectives of ensuing chapters are provided at this point. This chapter provides a review of his political allegiances and alliances, while the following chapter examines his developing political acumen. Such thinking usually ran counter to his efforts on behalf of irrigation and water reclamation projects in Southwest Nebraska. The final chapter explores the Norris-Strunk relationship.

The importance of community journalism and the role of the small-town publisher, made it self-evident that the political leanings of a publisher did not stray far afield from

the political bearings of the community. This was apparent in the journalistic success of Strunk as well as for William Allen White.² For a newspaper publisher to ignore the community's position as to its collective sense of direction and purpose invited disaster for the paper's advertising sales and subscription rolls.

While an initial examination of Harry Strunk's political leaning might place him staunchly on the side of the Republican party, a closer review suggests otherwise. McCook attorney William Lyon recalled that Strunk did not measure a person by a political party. As New Deal Democrats flexed their national political power, some McCook Republicans and Harold Sutton, a businessman and local party leader, retained decades-old attitudes about Democrats. In the midst of the New Deal, Sutton wanted to exclude Democrats from "any position of responsibility on appointed executive boards" in McCook and Red Willow County. Sutton even wanted to exclude Democrats from boards dealing with Strunk's water conservation projects.³ According to Lyon, however, Strunk had a strong belief in political ecumenism. "Harry," claimed Lyon, "didn't care what your [political] stripe or color was"⁴ Strunk had only one "litmus test"—would a person perform in the best interest of the people of the Republican Valley?

Strunk's editorial positions best describe his own political stripe. During the 1922 railroad strike touched on in the preceding chapter, Strunk did not support the position taken by McCook's largest employer—the Burlington. His paper supported the local strikers. During the strike, he appeared to have placed himself squarely in the political camp of former President Theodore Roosevelt. In commenting about the length and animosity of the work stoppage, Strunk demanded "a little more Theodore Roosevelt spunk and nerve, mixed in with the conservative attitude that rules the land."⁵

Several months prior to his call for emulation of Teddy Roosevelt, Strunk had praised the Iowa primary victory of Smith W. Brookhart for the U.S. Senate seat.

Comparing Brookhart to McCook's noted progressive politician, George W. Norris, Strunk wrote that the election of Brookhart “. . . to the high office of United States Senator, should be a warning to those statesmen who disregard the wishes of the people in preference for the big interests of the country. Brookhart is one of those progressives like Senator Norris.”⁶ The McCook publisher's feelings about Brookhart subsequently changed, however. Ten years later, in May 1932, he accused the Iowa senator of having collected both his senate salary and travel mileage while on the Chautauqua circuit. Strunk noted further that Brookhart's family “was on the government payroll for \$25,000 annually.”⁷

Although not completely satisfied with the sometimes more progressive swings in political legislation that represented the later efforts of Norris and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Strunk appeared to be a political pragmatist. After almost five years of Roosevelt-sponsored Depression legislation, he mused in a 1938 editorial about the pull of progressive ideas. As he reflected over the change in the political landscape since 1932, he questioned the attraction of “these liberal-progressive swings that take hold every second decade or so.”⁸ He answered his own question while at the same time expressing his own political nature. In times of need, he wrote, “liberals or progressives tries [try] to make the best of both worlds: the future and the past. It is a hard job, an impossible job. And yet it seems to be the way American progresses.”⁹

For his own part, Strunk worked politics to his objectives regardless of the party or philosophy of the moment. At times, it might have appeared to him that the political process existed as a necessary evil needing to be controlled by a greater purpose. The greater purpose would be one set by the tone and direction of the community. For Strunk that met controlling politics for the advantage of Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas. In meeting the challenge for water reclamation along the Republican River, he

used his emerging political talent to mold political decisions to his own community-directed ends. One Strunk associate recalled the McCook publisher's political astuteness: "Harry had the important character of leadership and know-how about organization. He was familiar with the political process."¹⁰

Strunk became so adept at working the political system to the advantage of his Republican Valley region that often politicians would call for a cease-fire. When a *Gazette* employee visited Washington, D.C., he learned first hand of the spread of his employer's reputation. Several senators, who too well had become acquainted with the McCook publisher through their work on water legislation, learned of the visitor's relationship with their primary antagonist. Cornering the McCook native in the halls of Congress they immediately asked for intercession "to get Harry off their back."¹¹ He did not restrict his demands to only those elected representatives from Nebraska.

Former McCook attorney and Nebraska governor and leader in the state's Democratic party, Frank Morrison, best described Strunk's political pragmatism. As Morrison said:

Harry Strunk grew up in the strong Republican conditions of Pawnee county. He became an active Republican. But, though a Republican, he believed that people could not cope with the forces of nature without major help from all levels of government and particularly the federal government.¹²

Above all, he had a keen sense of knowing when to oppose a politician or when to obtain a politician's cooperation. Merl Peek recalled that Strunk knew the people who would work with him or against him.¹³ Accordingly, he continually met challenges in obtaining what he believed necessary to the growth and protection of the Republican River valley. The Depression years sharply honed much of what is known about his political thinking. Despite one associate's claim that the Depression caused Strunk mental anguish, he remained throughout the Depression an optimist about the future. His basic political

approach seems to have been a pragmatic assessment of which political party could do the most good for his community.

In further assessing Strunk's political core, we again turn to his editorial ruminations. In a 1932 editorial, he waxed eloquently about his admiration for former New York governor and 1928 Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith. He described Smith's positive character and praised his upbeat spirit. He suggested, however, that the time had come for someone other than Smith to carry the torch of progressive leadership and called on Smith to "lift that brown derby and doff it before the passing entourage of Franklin D. Roosevelt. That's the way many of us feel."¹⁴

Why would a Republican newspaper publisher suggest that an already defeated Democratic presidential candidate give way to a rival in the 1932 election? Perhaps the answer to that question lies in Strunk's support of Roosevelt's call for aggressive measures to combat the Depression. Such measures gave him hope that the lessening of the economic down-turn in Southwest Nebraska lay with a new White House occupant. Indeed a Strunk editorial argued that only new and fresh ideas could benefit a nation in the throes of economic disaster. And since the efforts of Herbert Hoover had been ineffective, the only opportunity to meet the challenges of the Depression rested with Roosevelt. Writing under an editorial titled "Our New View-Point," he explained how past beliefs had come full-circle:

In times of prosperity, we all went conservative. The politician's first thought was to prove to business that he [the businessman] was "safe." Liberalism had no appeal. We are getting back now to a sounder position. This will be a good thing for us, no matter which side proves the stronger.¹⁵

With the onset of the more debilitating affects of the Depression, Strunk used the editorial page to level scathing attacks on government's slow response to solving the Depression. As the Hoover administration found itself pilloried on three sides by the

effects of economic down-turn, angry Republican politicians and businessmen, and the “prairie fire” effect of the Roosevelt campaign, especially in the West,¹⁶ the White House sought to reassess the priorities of the national budget. In noting the inability of the Hoover administration to cope with the Depression, Strunk called for a “system of government adequate to the times, a business system in place of a political one.”¹⁷ Parallel with his developing perspectives, Senator Norris had the previous fall expressed interest in the political fortunes of Roosevelt.¹⁸

A May 6, 1932, *Gazette* piece claimed that Norris was set to “bolt” the Republican party and declare his support for Roosevelt. Norris would follow that report with a more public announcement in July. In his July comment, Norris stated he could not be “associated with Hoover.” On the front page with the Norris announcement, the McCook paper published a quarter-page picture of Roosevelt. The picture was flanked by small insert drawings of Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson. A caption underneath the picture read: “Democracy’s Choice For President.”¹⁹ After Norris declared he would support the Roosevelt candidacy, the McCook paper’s only editorial mention of Norris came when the senator claimed prohibition had been a “sad failure.”²⁰

As his politically pragmatic background might suggest, Strunk hoped that any national government would operate more like a business. Accordingly, he wrote that the three primary institutions of the nation—government, business, and homes—should “operate on the same foundation. [B]alancing a budget at all times. [R]etaining those things most essential . . . and elimination of the less important.”²¹

In further explaining his thoughts on the economic needs of the country, Strunk readily understood the more evident rent in the economic fabric of the country. In his sense of urgency to find solutions to the economic and social problems magnified by the Depression, he at one time questioned the very foundation of the nation's form of

government. As he lashed out in editorial frustration, questioning why so little seemed accomplished by the Hoover presidency to right the problem, he demanded "real leadership." Spelling out his position, he claimed that ". . . we may have a representative government and it may be a shade too representative. At a time when all of us are as confused as we are now, we don't want someone to take our orders. We want someone to lead us."²²

In his demand for political leadership, Strunk put congressional candidates from Nebraska's Fourth District on notice that they were to think for themselves. He wanted candidates who would not be buffeted by the "ever-changing wind of public opinion."²³ Strunk called for more creativity in public policy and less pandering to public opinion.

With increasing knowledge about the part played by the Stock Market Crash in bringing about the Depression, Strunk joined others who supported congressional investigations of the machinations of Wall Street brokers and investors. Noting that the 1920s had been a decade of instant prosperity, penny stocks, and paper millionaires, Strunk warned readers not to get caught up in a repeated over-reliance on Wall Street. As the enduring optimist looking into a future where the Depression was solved and forgotten, he argued for a "saner kind" of prosperity "that won't depend as much on Wall Street, but that will be a little more enduring." Continued Strunk: "It is becoming more obvious every day that a lot of our troubles now stem directly from the orgy of stock speculation of recent years."²⁴

Even before the New Deal, McCook's city council found it necessary to begin its own relief program. This initiative took place in December 1931, without seeking help from either Lincoln or Washington. One local program allowed unemployed heads of families to earn money by splitting and then selling to city residents lumber from a "municipal wood pile." At a time when the bottom had dropped out of the wheat market

with a bushel selling for thirty-four cents, McCook felt the pinch of the emerging economic disaster.²⁵ Strunk strongly supported the city position. This initiative seems to have originated within city government as a response to the community's need.

While McCook's city council increased efforts to aid the unemployed, Strunk began to offer some of his own ideas. The thrust of these proposals centered on the need to assess how a community should spend its decreasing tax revenue. By the end of 1931, he noted that McCook harbored a "hundred or more" unemployed railroad workers. He claimed that the blame for such numbers stemmed from the inability of both state and city governments to change how business had been done in the past. After observing that newly-pressed automobile license plates had been trucked to the county court house, Strunk asked what must have seemed to both the Burlington line and the unemployed railroad workers a logical question. Directed toward both county and state officials, he asked why the railroad had not been given the assignment of shipping the auto tags? If nothing else, claimed Strunk, the state should have let out competitive bids. The idea of not using the railroad at a time of increasing railroad unemployment seemed "characteristic of a lot of funny business that is going on down in Lincoln."²⁶

Strunk found another reason to criticize the county commissioners. As he reviewed the county budget, the McCook publisher, who also had a job printing business, discovered that county printing jobs were being sent to Omaha printers. "Plus," exclaimed a perplexed Strunk, "the county paid for the transportation." Strunk noted that employees in his newspaper plant paid \$3,550 in county tax money. In voicing his disgust over tax dollars being spent outside Red Willow County, the frustrated Strunk cautioned that such lapses led to the formation of "taxpayers [sic] leagues."²⁷ It should not be overlooked that the editorial attack against the county doing business with Omaha printers represented a personal interest on his part.

Strunk continued to rail against local tax money spent on goods and services beyond McCook's boundaries. Such spending, he argued, took "food out of the mouths of hungry men, women and children." Again pointing an accusing finger at elected county officials, he wrote that those who authorized such spending for businesses in "Omaha or any other large cities which could have just as well be spent in McCook took succulence [sic] from his neighbors."²⁸

With his frustration over the inability of local and national representatives to cope with the Depression, Strunk lashed out at the ineffectiveness of government. On the heels of his editorial demand for more county spending on local goods and services, he suggested that Americans might be in the mood for "another Boston Tea Party." He used his renewed call for more action by the federal government as an opportunity to heap criticism on "representatives in congress who earned outside incomes." How could those representatives, he asked, either understand or solve the nation's economic problems if they had financial commitments outside their legislative duties?²⁹ Strunk wanted government to make more money available to local communities. He questioned how some congressmen could understand the financial hardships faced by the unemployed.

Despite the impact of the Depression, Strunk did not retreat from his goal of fostering community spirit and involvement. When the county and city governments questioned expenditures on such traditional events as the county fair, a state league baseball team, celebration festivities for McCook's fiftieth anniversary, or needs of the school system, he encouraged the commissioners to fund the threatened programs.³⁰ He no doubt believed that eliminating those programs would adversely affect the morale of the taxpayers. Continuing such community sponsored programs would be less harmful than seeming to give into the fears fostered by the deepening economic depression. To Strunk the Depression had become not only a community obstacle to be overcome, but an

obstacle for each individual in the community to overcome. Giving up those grass-roots activities that marked citizen participation and enjoyment would be an even greater threat to his community.

In virtually every political campaign during the Depression, Strunk harangued his readers to become involved. Given the role of the **Gazette** in bringing political issues to the attention of Southwest Nebraska readers, it is understandable that he strongly endorsed the role of newspapers in the political process. Without an "alert, honest, intelligent press," he claimed, "a democracy could not function." He went on to claim that a newspaper existed in order to let the readers know not only what is happening but how the events of the day affected them.³¹ As he used his paper to inform readers during the confusing years of the Depression, his involvement in the political system increased and became more refined. Although not portraying any partisan favoritism for one political party over another in his editorial pages, Strunk used the editorial column to stimulate the political consciousness of his readership. When candidates appeared to be talking out of both sides of their mouths in currying voters, he attempted to become an effective counter-force.

Although described by his long-time employee "Bus" Bahl as a "staunch Republican,"³² Strunk did not let such partisan credentials keep him from lambasting questionable legislation. When Republican gubernatorial candidate Dwight Griswold suggested in 1931 that the federal government return a portion of federal tax money to Nebraska, he immediately attacked Griswold. To Strunk, the Griswold proposal "sounded good, but [was] neither practical or possible." He then asked of both readers and the candidate: "How does the federal government replace revenue being returned to the state?" His answer rested with a simple warning. The federal government, wrote Strunk, would need to "find additional ways to tax in order to replace moneys going back to the

state.”³³ His disagreement with Griswold appears well founded in logic. It should be noted, however, that he strongly supported one of Griswold's 1932 primary opponents.

Republican Griswold needed not to have felt singled out by the Southwest Nebraska publisher. Griswold's Democratic opponent in the 1932 gubernatorial election, incumbent Governor Charles Bryan, came in for his own political sting from Strunk's editorial arrows. When Bryan publicly decried the effects that the Depression and its accompanying drought had on Nebraska, he wrote in essence that the governor should stop whining. As Bryan pushed for more aid from the federal government to alleviate the economic losses of Nebraskans, Strunk asserted that such political begging for outside help only increased the despair of Nebraskans.³⁴

After the economic down-turn of the past three years, the outcome of the 1932 election loomed on the horizon as important for not only the nation but Nebraskans as well. The 1932 campaign found a battle being waged in the Republican party organization for ideological control of both the party and the governor's race. The chief dispute erupted over the increasing liberal tendencies of the party's leading personality, George W. Norris.³⁵ One individual who appeared to step into the void created by this rift would be Harry Strunk's Pawnee City boyhood friend, Kenneth S. Wherry. With his decision to enter the 1932 gubernatorial primary, Wherry quickly learned to walk a tight-rope between the two extremes of the party. In doing so, he could not afford to alienate either the party's right-wing or antagonize Norris' increasing distrust of partisan politics.³⁶

With his friend's decision to enter into the Republican primary race for governor, Strunk quickly threw his support behind his childhood friend. Strunk was selected to be the campaign manager.³⁷ Given Wherry's known popularity within at least a segment of southeastern Nebraska, the selection of Strunk helped to link Republicans from opposite ends of the state. Although a life-long friend of Wherry, such friendship did not create the

sole bond that brought Strunk into the Wherry camp. The candidate's own ideas on irrigation programs for central and western Nebraska played an important part in Strunk's support for his friend. Wherry biographer, Harl A. Dalstrom, describes Strunk's "journalistic ecstasy" at the thought of Wherry being elected governor.³⁸ Such ecstasy no doubt resulted in part from their similar irrigation and water reclamation interests.

A third Republican primary candidate joined Griswold and Wherry in vying to be on the November ballot. Strunk had his work cut out to carry Wherry successfully through the primary election. As to be discussed in a following chapter, Strunk brought some political baggage into the Wherry campaign. That baggage resulted from the controversy that had sprung up between himself and Senator Norris over the question of water resources. For the sake of the Wherry campaign, Strunk had to rein in his attacks on Norris so as not to make it more difficult for Wherry to obtain a hoped for endorsement from the Nebraska Senator. Accordingly, Strunk's selection as campaign manager might have seemed risky. On the other hand with Strunk's known reputation in the block of counties along the path of the Republican River, the choice appears to have been reasonable. As the 1932 primary campaign began to take form, Strunk no doubt believed a Wherry victory would quickly place his old friend in position for higher office. And who knows what could come from a close friend who might end up "directing the affairs of the nation at Washington?"³⁹

Strunk's hope for the election of Wherry to the governor's seat soon encountered a rude awakening. With the closing of the polls on primary election day, it became apparent that his work on behalf of Wherry had not translated into a state-wide majority of the votes cast. By a margin of 3,000 votes out of nearly 75,700 votes cast for the two leading contenders, the target of Strunk's earlier editorial, Dwight Griswold, became the Republican candidate. George Williams, the third candidate, received just under 16,000

votes.⁴⁰ The outcome of the election might have gone in Wherry's favor had it not been for the votes cast for Williams. In Southwest Nebraska, only Hayes County, which went to Williams, failed to follow the McCook publisher.⁴¹ Whether by the stature of Wherry or by the influence of Strunk, Southwest Nebraska seemed solidly behind Strunk's political alliance.

After seeing his candidate and friend go down to defeat in the Republican primary election, Strunk sought solace in having fought the good fight. Commenting in an editorial soon after the primary results, Strunk stoically observed that "the cup of defeat . . . is not such a bitter one after all."⁴²

Following the primary defeat of Wherry, Strunk continued to work on behalf of those candidates who mirrored his own favorite programs for Southwest Nebraska. While he would not support other candidates during the 1930s as he had supported Wherry, he did continue to back candidates whose views on irrigation and water matched his own. In the 1934 senatorial primary, Strunk supported Wherry, who lost all of Southwest Nebraska except for Red Willow and Chase counties.⁴³ Wherry's opponent and eventual primary winner, Robert G. Simmons, received general support from across the state. One area where Simmons fell short was in the central Nebraska counties of Gosper, Kearney, and Phelps. Those counties were heavily involved in the Tri-County project, which backed the construction of irrigation and public power plants in central Nebraska along the Platte River.⁴⁴ In view of the government's ignoring of Southwest Nebraska's water needs, Strunk would not support the Tri-County project. Simmons' own differences with Tri-County had not earned him many voters in that region of the state. More about Strunk and Tri-County will be addressed in the next chapter. His editorials leading up to the 1934 senatorial election made no mention of the Democratic candidate, Edward Burke of Omaha.

Many of his Depression era editorials appear to have called for a balanced approach by New Deal programs and a similar acceptance of these programs by his community. More than any other idea expressed by Strunk during this period of hardship, however, he encouraged his community not to give up. He continued to be optimistic. Following the 1932 Roosevelt victory, the McCook publisher wrote that “public sentiment is strongly behind the newly elected administration.” He claimed that the public’s support “should do much to restore and build the much needed confidence of business and industry in this country.”⁴⁵

It should be noted that in the first one-hundred days that followed Roosevelt’s inauguration in March 1933, Strunk generally supported the New Deal programs being introduced. Overall, he agreed with the need for “re-organization of government and business.” Even though he claimed the “strain of depression has been felt less [in McCook] than perhaps any place in the United States,” Strunk believed that Americans owed their “complete and unqualified support” to the new president. He argued forcibly that the Roosevelt should not have to contend with “partisanship, protracted debate or petty criticism.” When Roosevelt introduced the Civilian Conservation Corps, he gave it his immediate support. He noted that the enabling legislation provided for flood control and prevention of soil erosion. At the same time, the McCook water resource advocate wanted the water project goals of the 1930 McCook conference on flood control added to the Corps’ responsibility.⁴⁶

When he learned of some of the early criticism that Roosevelt was overreaching his presidential prerogatives, Strunk argued that the president was not a dictator. Given the situation in the country, he believed it was necessary to “give extraordinary power” to the president. In May 1933, Strunk contrasted Franklin Roosevelt with Theodore Roosevelt. He wrote that when the first Roosevelt had been president, business had been “allowed to

go its own way.” In the background, however, stood “Uncle Sam with a big stick.” That may have been enough then, wrote Strunk, but there was “more than that needed now.” He then went on to describe what he believed to be Roosevelt’s stance on business. Now, he claimed, “government must not be content to keep industry from doing certain things; it must be ready to persuade or force industry to do things. Its control must be positive rather than negative.”⁴⁷ Given his position in the 1922 railroad strike, it is not surprising that he was especially interested in Roosevelt’s appointment for Secretary of Labor. Strunk claimed that as Secretary, Frances Perkins was “the staunchest and most effective friend labor has ever had in a president’s cabinet.”⁴⁸

When some of the early criticism of the New Deal claimed the country was headed into a new revolution, Strunk wrote that a revolution had “already taken place” and it had not been recognized by most people. At the same time, he swung his support to the pending legislation setting up the National Recovery Act. He went on to say that both the Civilian Conservation Program and National Recovery Act might appear revolutionary but that these programs were necessary to foster confidence in the country once more.⁴⁹ Strunk’s position on the first “Hundred Days” of the New Deal was positive and optimistic.

While Strunk continued to support New Deal programs during Roosevelt’s first term, the approach of the 1936 election found the McCook publisher engaged in an editorial analysis of the issues at stake. As he had done so many times before and continued to promise his readers, the *Gazette* publisher spoke out on those issues he believed were important to Southwest Nebraska. By 1936, he had begun to criticize parts of the New Deal. In August 1936, his long-time support of the farm community resulted in his questioning the effectiveness of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Although he had not previously questioned the objectives of the AAA to control prices, Strunk

criticized the manner in which the AAA administered programs to reduce crop production. Noting that crop production had already been decreased by the natural results of the drought, Strunk sought answer to his claim that AAA administrators had favored the importing of foreign grain. Strunk wrote forcefully that had the bureaucrats in Washington realized crop production would remain low during the drought years, they would not have further reduced crop production. Although the charge against the AAA and Washington bureaucrats seemed well intended on behalf of Southwest Nebraska's farmers, his attack appeared provincial when compared to the national scope of the problems of agriculture and the solutions offered by the New Deal. It is entirely possible that he failed to understand the primary purpose of AAA to reduce production in order to raise farm prices. Strunk's approach to putting more crop land into production ran counter to AAA.

Strunk charged that the "New Deal is in no position to say that its agricultural adjustment programs had nothing to do with the reductions in food supplies."⁵⁰ The McCook editor suggested that the AAA approve an increase in crop production by the simple expediency of allowing farmers to increase their acreage under cultivation.⁵¹ In view of Norris' strong support for the Roosevelt New Deal, Strunk's viewpoint on the AAA may have led some readers to question whether the two men could ever overcome their differences. Norris' support of Al Smith in 1928; his reluctance to back Strunk's ideas for water projects along the Republican River after the 1930 McCook Flood Conference; his lack of support for Wherry in 1932, and now their differing attitudes towards the New Deal suggested their political differences.

In the 1936 presidential campaign contest between Roosevelt and Kansan Alf Landon, Strunk editorialized that a vote for either man would be "wholly proper." As in 1932, his pre-election editorials remained silent as to which presidential candidate he

preferred. Nevertheless, he used his editorial pen to bring the issues of the campaign to his readers. Strunk noted that as an editor he might hold his own "individual opinions" and would "vote his convictions." He went on to encourage his readers to follow similar action, noting that "every good citizen ought to do the same." The caution that Strunk urged upon his readers, however, centered on his request that voters "owed it to themselves and their government to read both sides of every question important to their own future welfare and best interests."⁵²

In much of Nebraska, the most pressing political question in 1936 appeared to be whether Senator Norris would run for another term. With the senator's almost unqualified support for the New Deal and the attention given by the Roosevelt administration to the maverick Republican, some political pundits believed Norris might even decide not to enter the race so he could support Roosevelt unhindered by political party.⁵³

In the fall of 1936, some 40,500 Nebraskans signed petitions urging Norris to run for the Senate. Those who signed the petitions knew that Norris had the support of the Roosevelt administration along with the support of a significant number of Nebraska Democratic party members. The support of the latter group came in spite of the party's nomination of Scottsbluff's Terry Carpenter to run for Senator. With the Democrats split in their support between Norris and Carpenter and given the Norris mystique, the 1936 senatorial race seemed predictable. Entering the three-man race as an Independent, perhaps to emulate his decades-old call for non-partisanship in matters of politics, Norris easily outdistanced both his Democratic and Republican opponents even though he received less than 50 percent of the total vote cast.⁵⁴ Norris later claimed to have entered the race against his better judgment.⁵⁵

With the 1936 election less than a month away, Strunk took aim at the spectacle of the Democratic candidate, Terry Carpenter, being all but forgotten in his race for the

Senate. By that time, a significant number of Nebraska Democrats had jumped on the bandwagon of Norris' Independent candidacy. The Carpenter campaign ground toward defeat with its candidate left largely ignored by the state's Democratic party and the Roosevelt administration. To Strunk, the Norris-Carpenter face-off appeared "amusing."⁵⁶

Strunk remembered the lack of support in 1934 for the Republican senatorial candidate Robert Simmons by several counties associated with the Tri-County project. In 1936, he found Simmons a laudable candidate. With Norris and Carpenter vying to split both the Democratic and Independent vote and both men currying favor with the Roosevelt administration, he claimed only Simmons had run an "issue oriented race."⁵⁷ Although not a supporter of Simmons in the past, he clearly believed Southwest Nebraska's interest lay with the known water program credentials of Simmons. He did not endorse Simmon's in the pages of the **Gazette**. An October editorial, however, noted that while at a McCook campaign rally Simmons stated that he "pledged himself to work consistently for control of the Republican River flood waters."⁵⁸ For the rest of the campaign, Strunk withheld further comment on the Senate candidates.

Strunk had not explicitly endorsed any of the senatorial candidates. True to form, however, McCook's man with his pulse on Main Street politics kept the **Gazette** readership informed about both the issues and the candidates' stances on the issues. The race for governor found him strongly speaking out for one candidate. Less than a week before voters went to the polls, he authored a short editorial directed to the two gubernatorial candidates, Democrat Roy L. Cochran and Republican Dwight Griswold. This editorial is even more interesting since no similar endorsements or favorable attention to one candidate appeared at any time between August and the eve of the 1936 election.

Strunk's feelings concerning Griswold retained some of the animosity centered around the 1932 gubernatorial primary. Instead of dredging up the past campaign,

however, he simply asked his readers to recall which of the two candidates for the governor's office in 1936 had so "quickly arrived in McCook" following the devastating flood of the previous year. He then made sure his readers understood the answer by reminding them that Cochran had arrived almost as soon as the Red Cross. "Griswold," he wrote, "had remained in Washington, D.C."⁵⁹ With that kind of endorsement, Strunk sought to solidify Cochran's vote in Southwest Nebraska. With the votes counted, Cochran outpolled Griswold 10,676 to 8,935 in the *Gazette* listing of nine southwestern counties. Norris won by a landslide in the same counties, easily outdistancing both Carpenter and Simmons in that area by more than 11,285 votes.⁶⁰

A closer examination of the 1936 election results reveals interesting changes in Strunk's pre-election positions on the New Deal and Senator Norris. By the time of the election, the popularity of Roosevelt had not suffered appreciably in Nebraska. Its results made it clear that voters had responded well to the Administration's attempts to solve the economic Depression. Its actions mirrored some of Strunk's earlier demands to find leadership in the country willing to do "something." With Roosevelt solidly ensconced in the White House for another four years and Norris elected to another six-year term, he began to rethink his immediate political position.

In a post-election editorial titled "America Marches On," Strunk referred to Roosevelt as the "greatest leader of all time."⁶¹ Another comment in the same editorial may have revealed an important change in his eight year-old-old battle with George Norris. Having just heaped high praise on Roosevelt, he bent over backwards to lavish similar praise on Norris, "our fellow townsman." With an almost effusive state, Strunk described him as "another of America's outstanding political leaders."⁶² In considering such praise for both national figures, it must be kept in mind that any hopes that Strunk had for his pet irrigation and water reclamation projects for at least the next four years lay with

the largesse of Roosevelt and Norris. His recognition of the politics involved in seeking the support of Norris appears to have been an editorial mea culpa. Acknowledging that he had observed Norris' campaign from the sidelines, Strunk admitted to readers and Norris alike that:

As the spirit and the record of this great leader passes in review, all hats are off along the line of march, not alone those who were in the bandwagon of the campaign, but those along the sidelines as well, who regardless of personal feelings or party affiliations, recognizes him [Norris] today as one of the outstanding political figures of the world.⁶³

His pragmatic acknowledgment of Norris' popularity may have resulted in the desired effect. Less than a week after this glowing tribute for Norris appeared in the **Gazette**, the paper's front page reported extensively on a Norris visit to the McCook area. This trip included a tour of the same ground devastated by the 1935 Republican River flood. That natural disaster is detailed in a later chapter. The flood would be a further impetus to Strunk's effort on behalf of water projects in the Republican Valley. Although the front page article on the Norris tour carried a by-line of a **Gazette** news editor, the wording appears to be vintage Strunk. Regardless of authorship, however, Strunk had to be elated over the new found-interest by Norris in the Republican Valley. Looking out over the flooded fields of the previous year, the senator declared that "flood control is the paramount consideration."⁶⁴ This view had been a part of Harry Strunk's editorial lexicon since the days of the 1930 McCook flood conference.

Soon after the first flush of the 1936 election had begun to recede, the opening guns had been fired for the 1938 Nebraska congressional election. Strunk found a new Fourth District congressional candidate to support in the person of Carl T. Curtis. From Minden in the south-central part of the state, Curtis had both regional and political ties to Southwest Nebraska and shared Strunk's interest in irrigation and reclamation programs. As he had demonstrated through the years of the New Deal and even before, McCook's

wily newspaperman gravitated towards political candidates who reflected not only the needs of Nebraska but the needs of the Republican Valley region. In a November 1938 election-eve editorial, he suggested that by electing Curtis, "the Republican Valley may find a champion, one who can secure assistance in irrigation development without its entanglement in unwanted power deals."⁶⁵

On the surface, the editorial reference to "power deals" might have been interpreted as relating to back-room political arrangements. Strunk's reference to power deals, however, clearly suggests that the long simmering feud between himself and Senator Norris may have reached a point of mutual understanding. Much of the Norris-Strunk interpersonal dispute centered on the question of which entities would control electrical power production tied to water construction projects.

In the 1938 congressional campaign, Curtis easily defeated the incumbent Fourth District Democratic representative, Charles G. Binderup. Binderup had experienced first hand Strunk's editorial displeasure. As explained in the next chapter, Strunk found Binderup woefully uninformed after the 1935 Flood about the Army Corps of Engineers water project plans for Southwest Nebraska.

In Red Willow County, voters again followed the lead of Strunk and cast 2,543 votes for Curtis to 1,228 for the incumbent. Governor Cochran again carried the county. As early as February 1938, the **Gazette** publisher had let his fondness for the Democratic governor seep into the editorial pages. He again reminded his readers of Cochran's quick and thoughtful response at the time of the 1935 flood and backed the governor's re-election. "There is no doubt in the minds of his [Cochran's] friends in western Nebraska," wrote Strunk, "but that he will be drafted for a third term by voluntary public sentiment. And this newspaper hopes he is."⁶⁶

Beyond his editorial nods to Curtis and Cochran, Strunk's 1938 campaign participation seemed largely muted. He did not, however, forget his old friend, Kenneth Wherry. Although he had withdrawn for a time from seeking state-wide elective office, he remained active in state Republican party functions. Having returned to the more sedate surroundings of his hometown after two failed campaigns, Wherry found himself heavily engaged in Pawnee County activities as president of the County Fair Board.⁶⁷ As Strunk viewed his friend's activities to make the annual Pawnee County event "bigger and better than those of the past,"⁶⁸ he made the suggestion that Wherry head the Nebraska State Fair. Noting his accomplishments on the county Fair Board, Strunk boasted that his friend "would give the people of Nebraska a fair that IS [Strunk's emphasis] a fair."⁶⁹ With his sights somewhat higher, however, Wherry chose in 1939 to head the state Republican party. Three years later, he defeated George W. Norris in the senatorial race.

As the Depression deepened and Strunk became more politically active in water control issues along the Republican River, he underwent change in some of his basic political thinking. By 1936, he moved away from his statement in 1932 that elected representatives should not be unduly guided by public opinion. He now called on government leaders to understand the strengths and fears of the public before determining legislation. In September 1936, under the heading "Government Is What People Make It," He wrote:

The problems of democracy are many, but none is greater than this: that democracy calls on individual citizens to give to their government a strength, a wisdom, and a tolerance greater than they ordinarily know they possess themselves. Democratic government is a mirror in which the common man sees his own virtues and his own failings. To improve it, we must start at the bottom—with ourselves.⁷⁰

For Strunk, the final arbiter of the direction and scope of government rested with the voters. As he had done throughout the Depression, he called on the ordinary citizen to

choose wisely at the polls. As reflected in the editorial pages of the **Gazette**, he did not demand blind obedience to a particular political party or candidate. After an editorial discussion of the issues of the day, Strunk believed strongly that the outcome of the political process rested in the hands of an informed electorate.

During the early years of the Depression, a basic theme of several Strunk editorials dwelt on the sacred foundation of American democracy. As his editorials are reviewed today, it is evident that Strunk believed the Depression directly threatened the nation's future. The Depression brought some questioning of American ideals and purpose, but such questions often found him reminding readers that the good of the nation lay with the public's ability to face the future with optimism. To be part of a great nation, he reminded his readers, they must continue to be loyal, participating and protective members of the national society. If a citizen expected the nation to progress and prosper, then the individual citizen had to assume responsibility to be faithful to the national good.⁷¹ Such civic duty, he felt, extended to the local level.

The more outward expressions of Strunk's Republicanism became relegated to the background as he followed the political discretion required of a newspaper publisher. It is important to gauge how his occasional political neutrality affected his deliberations over the political and social changes wrought by the Depression. How then did he react to the circumstances that caused unemployment and hunger in McCook and its surrounding trade area?

Catherine McNicol Stock has written an excellent account of how the Depression affected people and communities in the Great Plains states of the Dakotas. In her commentary upon individual stories told by newcomers and the "old-middle class," she highlights the shifting centers of community influence. Stock discusses the Depression from the perspective of rural America—the farms and small town main streets. As she

suggests, the decade of the 1930s represented a true test of individual will and personality. She found the "yeoman farmer" and the community built around the farmer locked in a life or death struggle fought out in the market place of ideas and ideology based upon the concept of self-made independence.⁷²

Stock contrasted the impact of the New Deal centralization of government programs with the strong individual and family independence that had sprung up on the Great Plains. That contrast exposed the soft-underbelly of over-reliance on small-scale family farming in a semi-arid country and the cultural traditions that had extracted a living out of a harsh land. As she wrote, the "plains was home to one of the last bastions of old-middle-class hegemony, a region where . . . traditional ways . . . maintained authority through a combination of sheer numbers and shared habits."⁷³

With the economic ravages of the Depression, such independence often times found little understanding by the local administrators of the New Deal. As Stock examined the cultural changes brought about by the Depression, she noted that the old ways practiced since the first pioneers and settlers had turned the virgin soil faced unparalleled challenges in the face of the Depression. In some respects, the New Deal response to the Depression on the Great Plains "made it difficult to maintain the status of independent property owners," wrote Stock.⁷⁴

The Depression years brought unmatched challenges to the idea of community. Where for decades there had been a developing culture of neighbors working closely together in facing the tests of the shared experiences in farming under dry-land conditions, the Depression sometimes broke asunder those chains of neighborliness. Stock's appraisal of the affects of the Depression centered on diminished community resources. She suggests that as the drought, dust storms, and Depression wore on, available resources became too meager to allow one neighbor to reach out a helping hand to another.⁷⁵ Even

South Dakota's Oscar Fosheim of the Farmer's Holiday Association (FHA) lamented that ". . . depleted resources sometimes led to depleted neighborliness."⁷⁶

Stock and Fosheim may not represent a majority of opinion concerning the affect of the Depression on plains rural culture and community life. Their sentiment about community, however, would seem important to determine if a similar Depression-generated malaise settled into Strunk's own community. His strong support for community, farmers, and laborers indicated his intention to forestall any similar unease in Southwest Nebraska. Because of his long-term interest in the economic well-being of the Republican Valley region, he believed in quick measures to bring his community together in times of need. Despite the Depression, the McCook publisher seems to have remained optimistic about eventual recovery in Southwest Nebraska. He apparently accepted the fact that the road to economic recovery ran through the Roosevelt White House. It is not made clear whether his concern about reliance on the New Deal mirrored Stock's description of the Roosevelt policies as coming from "outsiders who did not fully understand [the] land, communities, or culture but had the power to dictate the future."⁷⁷

Stock's description of the sociological impact of the Depression and New Deal programs receives some enforcement. A study of the West River country of South Dakota found that "government proposed solutions to the problems of the thirties challenged [peoples'] most dearly held ideas and their very history."⁷⁸ The reaction by rural and town dwellers alike sometimes depended on their shared experiences of pre-Depression years. While few may have understood the early implications of the Depression and later found themselves unable to cope with its worst ravages, others discovered early on how to survive their new situation. Often times the survivors demonstrated the old pioneer skill of "making do."⁷⁹

For Strunk, whose dedication to his community was well known, it is difficult to find in the pages of the **Gazette** any suggestion of a “nation . . . on the brink of wrenching, violent economic change . . . [or] . . . nature’s Armageddon worsened by the economic despair that gripped the nation.”⁸⁰ During the Depression, he appears to have made a concerted effort not to let settle into his community a similar despair that affected other parts of the Great Plains.

By the end of the 1930s, with Cochran in the state house, Curtis in Congress, and Wherry in the wings preparing to run for Norris' seat in the Senate, Strunk held a golden opportunity to influence political action to achieve his visions for Southwest Nebraska. Before the tentative truce with George Norris following the 1935 Flood and before witnessing the election of three candidates who appeared to support much of his vision for water control, Strunk had fought persistently for his dreams for Southwest Nebraska. In the end, his political activism and pragmatism would largely prevail to bring government money and planning expertise into the Republican Valley. These resources would be used to build his dream of vast irrigated crop lands and flood control projects. Such projects kept his community focused on the future and not on the Depression. Whatever despair may have been evident in other parts of the Great Plains during the Depression, Strunk had made every effort to minimize similar feelings in his community of Southwest Nebraska.

Endnotes

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- ² Sally Foreman Griffith, **Home Town News: William Allen White And The Emporia Gazette** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 172.
- ³ William Lyon, interview with Charles Peek, Summer 1988.
- ⁴ Lyon interview.
- ⁵ **Red Willow County Gazette**, Aug. 3, 1922, editorial.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, June 6, 1922, editorial.
- ⁷ **McCook Daily Gazette**, May 17, 1932.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, May 7, 1938, editorial.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Bob Kutz, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988. As a Bureau of Reclamation engineer living in McCook, Kutz had first hand knowledge of Strunk's ability to affect political decisions that favored water projects in the Republican Valley.
- ¹¹ "Bus" Bahl, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.
- ¹² Frank Morrison, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.
- ¹³ Merl Peek, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.
- ¹⁴ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Jan. 23, 1932, editorial.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1932, editorial.
- ¹⁶ Richard Lowitt, **The New Deal and the West** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 2.
- ¹⁷ **McCook Daily Gazette**, May 5, 1932, editorial.
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- ¹⁹ **McCook Daily Gazette**, May 6, 1932; July 2, 1932.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1932, editorial.
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²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., May 30, 1932.

²⁵ Ibid., Dec. 10, 1931.

²⁶ Ibid., Dec. 16, 1931, editorial.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., May 13, 1932, editorial.

²⁹ Ibid., May 17, 1932, editorial.

³⁰ Ibid., May 5, 1932, editorial.

³¹ Ibid., Oct. 7, 1932, editorial.

³² Bahl interview.

³³ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 22, 1931, editorial.

³⁴ Ibid., Feb. 2, 1932, editorial.

³⁵ Harl A. Dalstrom, "Kenneth S. Wherry" (Ph. D. dissertation., University of Nebraska, 1965), 52.

³⁶ Ibid., 53-66.

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1932 Primary Election Map.

⁴² Ibid., 91; **McCook Daily Gazette**, April 13, 1932, editorial.

⁴³ Dalstrom, "Kenneth S. Wherry," 132-133; 1934 Primary Election Map.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁵ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Nov. 9, 1932.

⁴⁶ Ibid., Mar. 4, 13, 14, 22, 25; 1933, editorials.

⁴⁷ Ibid., May 25, 1933, editorial.

- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1933, editorial.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, May 30, 1933, editorial.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Aug. 11, 1936, editorial.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1936.
- ⁵³ Splittgerber, "The Independent Candidacy," 30.
- ⁵⁴ Lowitt, **Triumph of a Progressive**, 151-159.
- ⁵⁵ Robert Lowitt, **George W. Norris: Triumph of a Progressive, 1933-1944** (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 152.
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- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Oct. 9, 1936, editorial.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 31, 1936, editorial.
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- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 5, 1936, editorial.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
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- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Feb. 3, 1938, editorial.
- ⁶⁷ Dalstrom, "Kenneth S. Wherry," 139.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Sept. 9, 1938, editorial.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Sept. 18, 1936.
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⁷² Catherine McNicol Stock, **Main Street In Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains** (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 86.

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⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

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⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷⁸ Paula M. Nelson, **The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust** (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), x.

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CHAPTER V

WATER . . . STRUNK'S VISION OF THE FUTURE

Harry Strunk's *raison d'être* can be summed up in a word—water. In an area of the country where water is a precious commodity, Strunk spent the greater part of a lifetime attempting to conserve the resource that meant life to crops and livestock and to the people who lived in the Republican Valley. On one hand, he sought to find means to provide for irrigation from limited water resources for periods of drought that could last for years. On the other hand, he found himself attempting to convince government administrators and elected representatives that the sometime flooding and other times bone-dry streams and rivers of the region needed dams. Out of this diversity of need came Strunk's dedication and vision to bring irrigation and flood control projects to the Republican River valley.

As previously discussed, the area of southwestern Nebraska and northwestern Kansas has a transitional climate that marks much of the Great Plains region. Here can be found the extremes in temperature and seasonal precipitation that conspire to challenge farmers and town-dwellers alike. Because of its location west of the fall-line of plentiful moisture broken by the one-hundredth meridian, years of drought are neither uncommon nor unexpected. While the average rainfall for the region is twenty inches, rainfall varies from semi-arid scarcity to sub-humid plenty.¹ Walter Prescott Webb described land west of the one-hundredth meridian as short-grass country. The short-grass resulted from nature's adaptation to a shortage of rainfall.²

The Republican River valley quickly became populated in the years following completion of the Lincoln-to-Denver railroad line. Early settlers in the valley experienced good rainfall and resultant good crop yields until mid-way into the 1890s. Introduction of settlers to the fickleness of weather and rainfall in Southwest Nebraska led some to give

up on homesteading.³ During a fifty-year period of record keeping that followed the 1890s, southwestern Nebraska experienced unusually low average rainfalls four out of each ten years. Periods of drought and subsequent decline in crop production occurred with some regularity in the years 1910 to 1914, 1916 to 1922, and during the 1930s. In eight years between 1890 and 1940, rainfall measured less than fifteen inches annually, and less than ten inches fell in 1910. At the other extreme, however, 1923 brought an end to one period of drought as almost thirty inches of rainfall were measured for the year.⁴

Since the 1880s, farmers in the Great Plains had found dry farming "as the coming salvation" to resolve both the lack of plentiful moisture and adequate resources for irrigation.⁵ A Great Plains historian explained that "dry farming . . . [is] generally defined as agriculture without irrigation in regions of scanty precipitation."⁶ In the forty to fifty years that followed agricultural settlement in the Republican River basin, the quest for abundant water supply had been never-ending. While most of the land suitable for cultivation had been put to the plow, dry-land farming severely limited crop production.⁷

Even with limited dry farming success in the Republican River valley, the search continued for means to bring water from the streams and tributaries that make up the drainage basin of the river. As the demand for irrigation increased with each drought period, Southwest Nebraska encountered several bumpy starts on early irrigation projects. Most of these early starts represented small-scale and localized projects doomed to failure from the outset. Without "adequate water supply from stream diversion, proper funding for construction, and adequate storage structures," irrigation projects seemed unmanageable and impractical.⁸ As early as 1890, a canal along the Driftwood Creek south of McCook provided promise of irrigation. Under this impetus "irrigation fever was running high . . . with farmers . . . joining together for ditch projects in the Culbertson and Palisade area."⁹

The experience of the 1916 to 1922 drought resulted in a second assault on an already fragile agricultural economy of a Southwest Nebraska feeling the pinch of decreasing crop demands after World War I. Drought, however, reinforced new efforts to begin viable irrigation projects. By 1925, the combination of small-scale canal or ditch irrigation projects and dry farming had been joined by "pump irrigation from wells."¹⁰ A water-driven pump irrigation system had been tried in the McCook area as early as the 1880s.¹¹ The first irrigation well near the city had been drilled by an enterprising farmer in 1920.¹² Although the number of irrigated areas in Red Willow County reached a seemingly paltry 3,118 acres out of a total of 229, 735 cultivated acres in 1925, county leaders boasted that "irrigation and scientific farming are the keynotes of the prosperity of southwestern Nebraska." With hope that the number of acres coming under irrigation would continue to increase, farmers and residents alike may have felt justified in crowing that "irrigation assures . . . a future prosperity never dreamed of by early comers."¹³

Irrigation of the Republican Valley, however, could not rely solely on the initiative of local farmers. Because irrigation and other water projects depended on capital investment, Strunk believed irrigation projects required the federal government's participation as an active partner in both their planning and finding the necessary funds to finance related programs. When it came to the agricultural economy of Southwest Nebraska, he stood foursquare in favor of government intervention. Such projects, he felt, should be the result of local initiative and should receive the approval of the community. Most of all, however, when it came to government and the necessity of water programs, Strunk "criticized a lack of government involvement and concern with the water problems of the area."¹⁴

Strunk's interest in the possibility of irrigation in the Republican Valley began the same year he arrived in McCook. In 1911, an engineer from Denver had conducted a

survey of the Frenchman River. Strunk said of this early effort that the engineer had proposed an "idea that water could be obtained from that river to irrigate upland dry farms That's where I probably got my resolve to keep hammering away to get irrigation and flood control."¹⁵

In 1929, the federal government's efforts to control flooding and provide irrigation along the Colorado River by building Boulder Dam found Strunk intensifying his embryonic efforts for a smaller project in the Republican River valley. His early effort in seeking local support for irrigation and government interest in these projects centered on the Twin Valley Association of Commercial Clubs (Twin Valley).¹⁶ Established in 1928, Twin Valley was a region-wide group created to study irrigation needs at the local level. It advocated large-scale water storage areas to supplement limited water supplies during dry years.¹⁷ Communities along the Republican and Frenchman rivers selected representatives from farms and towns to represent their communities in the Twin Valley organization. Funding for the organization was provided through a minimal assessment paid by each Commercial Club. Strunk became an active supporter and participant in the water planning group. At the time of the budding controversy between Strunk and Norris, the former was chairman of Twin Valley's flood control committee.¹⁸

As Twin Valley extended its involvement in early planning for water programs in the region, Strunk criticized the federal government for not being more active in providing planning and financial assistance. Aware that the same problems existed in the twin valleys that had given rise to the federal government's sponsorship of the Colorado River project, Strunk called for a similar project in Southwest Nebraska. A front page *Gazette* article noted that an average of 200,000 acres (the article did not make a distinction of acres or acre-feet or over what period of time the measurement had been made) of water flowed along the Republican and Frenchman rivers. To Strunk, the very thought of that

much uncontrolled water being increased during the rainy season provided sufficient incentive for the federal government to become an active partner in irrigation, soil erosion, and flood control measures.¹⁹

Over the next several months following the *Gazette's* August 1929 article, Strunk continued to coax the federal government to provide the same financial help to Southwest Nebraska's twin valleys as it provided in the Colorado River region. A September 1929 editorial examined the waste of water run-off that followed each rain. Strunk questioned why the federal government continued to spend money on dikes along the Mississippi River when a sizable portion of the water requiring those dikes originated in the Republican River basin. To him, the answer to dikes downstream rested with dams and reservoirs upstream at the head-waters. He noted: "Irrigation has long been a timely subject in this territory. From the time of the first settlers, we have sat idly by and watched the waters of the Republican, Frenchman and their tributaries run away to the Mississippi to be wasted."²⁰

A month later, still taking the federal government to task for ignoring Southwest Nebraska when it came to distributing federal funds for river and harbor projects, Strunk again brought up the need to control waters at their upstream sources. That editorial came one day after the Stock Market Crash. The Crash and accompanying Depression played a large role in defeating Strunk's immediate demand for involvement of federal money for Southwest Nebraska. In his October editorial, Strunk offered his vision of how reservoirs built on rivers flowing into the Missouri not only lessened flooding that struck the lower Mississippi every year, but the same reservoirs "could be used for irrigation."²¹ Although it was more than a year before the next congressional election, he issued a warning to political candidates which he would give to politicians over the next several decades. If candidates wanted votes from Southwest Nebraska, he had a simple question

for an office seeker: "What are you going to do Mr. Candidate to stop this waste of federal money in the lower Mississippi Valley and bring about a system of flood control which will in turn make millions of semi-arid land [sic] productive?"²²

As the 1920s ended, the issue of irrigation and upstream water control moved to the front-burner of Strunk's promise of service to his community. At the same time, a dispute over the direction and scope of government support and funding of related projects arose between Strunk and George Norris. Although this dispute is explored later, it became apparent during late 1929 and early 1930 that both men were diametrically opposed as to the where, when, and how to spend federal money on the smaller water projects supported by Strunk. As might be expected, each man's argument centered on their perceived constituency. The publisher focused his efforts for the good of his community in Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas. By the 1930s, the Senator from McCook had devoted a large share of his energy toward regional and national interests.

The open dispute between the two community members over the question of water was reflected in Strunk's editorials. At one point, however, rather than restricting his attack on Norris to the current water issue, Strunk took the senator to task for his support of Democratic candidate Al Smith in the 1928 presidential campaign.²³ Although he later wrote glowingly of Smith, the question of the depth and breadth of Norris' support for water projects in the Republican Valley provided him an excuse to use the 1928 election for a back-handed attack on Norris. Whatever his intent, Strunk's questioning of Norris' Republican credentials may have established an opening for Strunk to make any future political challenge to the McCook politician.

For several years, most daily issues of the **Gazette** had printed the current year's "Service Pledge" on the editorial page. Even before his increased attacks against the

federal government's reluctance to play a part in funding basic irrigation and water control planning needs, Strunk's 1929 service pledge became his bond to his community. Two of these pledges stand out in the context of future events. Not only would he work on behalf of "road improvement projects, increased crop production through conservation, improved railroad and bus service for the region, and improvement in the city's water supply," but he would work to bring "more acres of Southwest Nebraska under irrigation" and find ways for "the general reduction of light and power rates to consumers in McCook and associated towns."²⁴ The last two pledges were the crux of the issues that came to divide McCook's two best known residents.

For much of 1929, Strunk hammered away at the federal government and the Hoover administration. While the worsening national economy played a part in Strunk's editorial attacks upon Washington, his primary attention centered on the government's shortsightedness in not sharing federal public works money ear-marked for eastern coastal states. Examining the Hoover administration's seemingly free-spending attitude toward harbor and seaboard navigable-river channels, Strunk lamented over what even a portion of that money could achieve in the Midwest. With tongue-in-cheek, he asked why Washington seemed unable or unwilling to fund water projects beyond the East coast. He challenged the government to find worthy programs "further west than the Hudson River."²⁵

For Strunk and Twin Valley, the early days of 1930 witnessed an important first step in placing the Republican River valley at the forefront for any future planning for water projects in the state. On January 27, 1930, Twin Valley and McCook hosted the first and only meeting of the McCook Flood Control Conference. Strunk played a major part in organizing the meeting. He used both his position on Twin Valley's flood committee as well as his numerous acquaintances throughout the Missouri River Basin to

contact like-minded individuals for flood control on the tributaries of the Mississippi. Strunk's son described the efforts of his father in organizing the McCook meeting as well as the meeting's subsequent report as having "laid the ground work for the Pick-Sloan Plan for the overall development of the Missouri River Drainage Basin."²⁶

The list of participants was impressive. In addition to representatives from the state of Nebraska, including Governor A. J. Weaver who acted as chairman, representatives from fourteen other states attended. The Army Corps of Engineers sent three officers, including a colonel, while railroads and private power companies sent observers.²⁷ Although Arkansas and Louisiana, states that benefited the most from the existing federal flood control construction of dikes and levees were not represented, the Conference marked a significant beginning. As Tri-County Project historian Gene Hamaker wrote, the McCook meeting "was an impressive gathering, auguring of possibilities for reservoir control beyond any previous conceptions."²⁸

The McCook gathering came on the heels of a late December 1929 meeting in Minden. Minden's conference was the first time Strunk and Norris had met each other since the opening exchange of charges and counter-charges over hydro-electric power. As the early stages of the Strunk-Norris feud festered, the McCook Conference initiated, or at least highlighted, the more explicit issues involved in water control talks over the succeeding decades. At the same time, the McCook meeting underlined a growing disagreement about the scope of local water projects and among personalities involved in the water issue, which had become a political issue.

Before the opening of the McCook Flood Control Conference, Strunk's advocacy for local irrigation and flood control measures along the Republican River gained at least some editorial support from outside Southwest Nebraska. Suggesting agreement with his position on water matters affecting southwestern Nebraska, the **Omaha World-Herald**

called for greater federal expenditures on water projects at the headwaters rather than at the lower terminus of the Mississippi River. Reprinted by Strunk on the McCook paper's editorial page, the Omaha editorial offered suggestions to the Hoover administration on the most efficient spending of government funds on water projects. Taking a page out of the McCook publisher's similar editorials, the **World-Herald** agreed with Strunk that "some of the water that causes people in Arkansas and Louisiana and Mississippi to flee from their homes and hunt for the high ground in April and May could be used to excellent advantage around McCook in July and August."²⁹

Anticipating some of the disagreement between local competing irrigation projects that eventually came to the forefront following the January Conference in McCook, the **World-Herald** cautioned that only the federal government could provide both the massive funding and expertise in planning and constructing flood control measures.³⁰ The Omaha paper's reference to Arkansas and Louisiana had special meaning given the action of those states not to attend the flood control meeting.

At the end of the McCook Flood Control Conference and with the release of its report, Harry Strunk authored an editorial addressed to President Hoover. Not expecting the editorial to be read by the President, he used the essay to explain the practical need for water control along the Republican River. Sounding a theme similar to his past position and the recent **World-Herald** editorial, he called for Hoover to pay closer attention to "a more safe and sane program of flood control." Reviewing the goals set at the recently completed Conference, Strunk explained that flood control efforts at upstream sites combined with irrigation use of the controlled water appeared more economical than downstream projects in the long run.³¹

Announcing his own vision of irrigation and flood control construction on the upper reaches of the Republican River, the McCook publisher again placed political

candidates on notice that their own position on water issues had come under closer scrutiny. Strunk's editorial to Nebraska's congressional delegation warned ". . . that the people favor flood control by a system of impounding the waters of tributaries to the Mississippi in reservoirs at their sources in preference to a continuation of the plan of terraces and dikes on the lower Mississippi."³²

The end of the 1930 Flood Control Conference found Strunk upbeat and optimistic about the future of water along the Republican River. Unfortunately, his optimism would soon be affected by a national Depression accompanied by drought and local dust-storms. As Strunk basked in the after-glow of the McCook meeting, however, he continued to visualize a future when "irrigation unquestionably will . . . transform Nebraska."³³

The McCook meeting did not go unnoticed in Washington, D.C. Through the efforts of then Fourth District Congressman Fred G. Johnson, the Conference report found its way into the **Congressional Record**.³⁴ Aimed both at the faltering efforts of the Hoover administration and as further notice to elected officials of the water needs in the valley, the report stated the water usage goals set at McCook. Those goals coincidentally mirrored much of Strunk's own vision for water reclamation projects at the headwaters that eventually reached the Mississippi delta. The goals of the Conference became an integral part of Strunk's dedication for the next three decades.

At the time of Johnson's reading into the **Congressional Record** the Report from the McCook meeting, Strunk authored his own front-page article. Praising the cooperation that had been demonstrated by the representatives for the fourteen states and other agencies meeting in McCook, Strunk asked his readers to pay close attention to the outcome of the meeting as represented by the Conference report. In describing the primary objectives set by the Conference, Strunk proudly wrote that the goals represented

the wishes of Southwest Nebraska which, by inference, were his wishes. The stated goals included:

- Adopt a national policy for conservation of water resources.
- Provide for storage of water that would allow for the most beneficial use when needed.
- Construct water storage works as near the sources of rivers and streams as possible.
- Recognize the need of water conservation and stream control to lessen soil erosion.³⁵

For five years following the 1930 meeting, much of the effort and expectation that had come from the McCook gathering remained far removed from the interest of either the President or Congress. As the tide of the Depression deepened, little interest could be generated for water projects in the Great Plains. Although much larger federal water projects like the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River and the Norris-backed Tennessee Valley program sponsored by the federal government went forward, the Republican River continued to flow unhindered. For his part, Strunk persevered on behalf of bringing federal money to the valley. He wanted Southwest Nebraska to have "at least our share for the development of natural resources which in all events would mean development of the Frenchman, Arikaree, the Medicine, and possibly the [Red] Willow."³⁶ Ignoring the little rivers in Southwest Nebraska soon brought the consequences most feared but largely unthinkable.

Strunk's editorial pen turned more and more to political matters related to water. As he became more politically astute in searching out support for his visions of Southwest Nebraska, his endorsement of candidates focused on those who backed his vision of water issues. Indeed, his editorials suggest that neither water or politics remained far from his

thinking. They reflected his growing belief that if factual argument and logic did not accomplish his goals for the Republican River, then political leverage in the state house and in Congress would be essential. It would, however, take a devastating flood rolling along the length of the Republican River to generate the necessary interest in Washington to understand the water needs of the valley. In 1935, the lack of long-term government water resource planning and wind erosion of the withered crop-lands along the Republican River led to fatal consequences.

In April 1935, the **Omaha World-Herald** echoed much of Strunk's criticism of an uninterested federal government following the 1930 Flood Control Conference. Additionally, the Omaha paper expressed concern about the neglect of large amounts of field soil being shifted by the hot winds. In an editorial, it reminded Nebraskans that they "have the perennial worriment over the sufficiency of rainfall, aggravated by the sinking of the water level due to reckless drainage and lack of proper care in cultivation and conservation of the soil and its moisture."³⁷ The lack of government action and individual responsibility combined to set the stage for mother nature to take a hand in shaping future water control discussions.

In general, floods are the natural by-products of streams and rivers suddenly overburdened with an abnormal volume of new waters. Those new waters overwhelm the normal carrying capacity of the surrounding drainage area. A more scientific explanation notes that floods ". . . result from short duration, high intensity thunderstorms often referred to as flash floods because of the speed with which the discharge rises and falls."³⁸ Melting snow and ice along rivers and streams can lead to flooding. When a large amount of new water taxes the capacity of the normal course of a stream or river to carry water along its usual path, the result is like the destructive force of the most powerful weapons in a nation's military arsenal. Rivers rushing out of control and overflowing their banks

can sweep away all natural and man-made barriers because of the sudden need for a new path to carry away the rapid increase in the volume of water. Without warning a flood can come crashing down on farm homes and villages and cities, and sweep away lives and a lifetime of work. Such a flood occurred along the Republican River in 1935.

On the front page of the New Year's Day 1935 issue of the **Gazette**, Strunk, while recalling the hot, dry weather of the previous year, praised a rising optimism among local business leaders. He wrote "that while the crops had been baking in a furnace of heat, it would have been hard to convince some McCook merchants they would still be in business on Jan. 1, 1935."³⁹ Two days later, a Strunk editorial would give further encouragement:

There is a marked optimistic feeling that regardless of everything, conditions are going to be better . . . and . . . go a long ways in bringing us out of the turmoil which has been testing men and women mentally and physically the past four years.⁴⁰

The **World-Herald** voiced similar optimism, stressing retail gains in 1934.

Merchandise sales in Omaha had jumped from \$73.1 million in 1933 to \$90.7 million in the just-ended year. The paper acknowledged, however, that other market signs did not bode well. It specifically noted continuing hardship in some areas of the Midwest because of low grain receipts, a down-turn in butter manufacturing, and decreasing shipments of livestock to market. Laying blame for these lingering hardships on the previous year's drought, the **World-Herald** commented that a little moisture in the grain-belt of Nebraska would take care of those problems. In the same issue a clothing sale advertisement gave further rise to optimism that the hardships of the Depression had run their course.

Hayden's Department Store claimed that increased sales in 1934 had allowed the store to make great strides in satisfying its growing number of customers. Because of its success, Hayden's "had modernized so shopping could be a pleasure." Goldstein-Chapman, for

many years one of Omaha's premier marketers of women's fashions, seemed to flaunt the Depression by advertising a sale on fur coats. The discriminating female shopper could purchase a "natural gray krumaner fur coat for \$399."⁴¹

While optimism for the new year generated the lead stories for both papers, the top story of the previous year continued to be the drought. The Omaha paper's list of top news stories for 1934 found the drought at the center of attention in western Nebraska. In the January 1, 1935, issue, the **Gazette** noted rainfall in 1934 had fallen 6.61 inches under the amount for 1933. It called 1934's lack of moisture as the "worst drought of a generation,"⁴² while the **World-Herald** reported that 1934 had experienced the "most days of one-hundred degrees or above days—26—compared with the previous record of 19 in 1913."⁴³ It appeared clear that the end of problems caused by the drought depended on increased rainfall in 1935.

While looking hopefully forward to some sign of break in the extended period of drought that had marked the first half of the 1930s, both papers neglected to give appropriate recognition to the more dramatic affects of the drought. After several years of land erosion caused by the "black-rollers" that made up the dust storms of the 1930s, the soil and water systems in the semi-arid reaches of Nebraska perched on the edge of ecological disaster. With farmers, townspeople and newspaper editors looking skyward each day for replenishing moisture, the top layers of soil and dry creek and stream beds no longer had the capacity to rapidly absorb and move large amounts of runoff that accompanied spring rains. The mostly hidden results from this unusual combination of drought and non-management of water and land resources provided little indication to observers of the impending disaster that came on the heels of the spring rain.

Geologists and meteorologists on the Great Plains have described precipitation patterns for the spring and summer months as being unpredictable. These observers

describe the Great Plains as having "rainfall . . . [that] varied from year to year." Such variance did not detract from the semi-arid Great Plains as being a place where "rather low levels of precipitation occurs." Added to the fickleness of rainfall came the acknowledgment that when plentiful rain did fall, it fell "as torrential rains which cause considerable erosion and loss of moisture through surface runoff."⁴⁴

The dust storms and the unpredictability of rain patterns combined to produce a 100-year flood. Geologists claim that such floods result from three factors: heavy rains that waste away topsoil thereby lessening the chance for rainfall to sink into the soil; erosion and wearing down of the banks of streams and rivers thus allowing for those bodies to quickly overflow, or insufficient capability of a drainage area to carry away melting mountain snows or heavy rain.⁴⁵ In 1935, these three conditions became the prime factors in the flood that struck the full length of the Republican River valley.

Although water projects along the Republican River continued to be ignored or shunted aside during the Depression, Strunk persisted in making editorial comments about the importance of fulfilling the promises of the 1930 Conference. As the spring rainy season approached, he observed that banks along the streams and creeks that fed the Republican had become worn down due to wind erosion. Such conditions, wrote the McCook publisher, reduced the streams' ability to retain waters not already lost to evaporation. He added that erosion of the banks along the waterways had been addressed at the McCook Conference.⁴⁶

For the remainder of the winter months and into early spring, the **Gazette's** weather feature on its front page detailed either the lack of moisture in the McCook area or the abundance of moisture and subsequent flooding along the Mississippi and lower Missouri rivers. In April, a break in the long period of dry weather appeared to signal coming rains in time to save the few crop seeds and roots not blown away by Nebraska

winds. On April 6, 1935, the McCook paper's front page featured an article that claimed recent area rains had "partially healed the wounds caused by the dust storms . . . and gave new life to wheat fields."⁴⁷ Several days later the paper trumpeted a "million dollar" rain and ran a headline boldly claiming: "Drought is Definitely Broken Up."⁴⁸

People who have spent a lifetime in Nebraska, however, know that little in life is definite, especially weather. Just as the McCook paper declared victory over the drought, the **World-Herald** carried a feature story on train delays in Kansas due to continuing dust storms. The same dust storms carried top-soil as far north as the North Platte area. In addition, the Omaha paper reported that precipitation remained below the average rainfall for that time of the year.⁴⁹

April 1935 ended on a wet note for much of western Nebraska. Streams ran nearly bank-full for the first time in years. The increased moisture saturated the shallow top soil still remaining in the fields along the Republican River and its tributaries. Water run-off into the streams and creeks seemed to spread quicker than the rate at which those same streams could absorb and direct the increasing volume of water. Soon some areas of Southwest Nebraska experienced localized flooding. For a few old-timers, questions might have been raised around the card-halls of Trenton, Culbertson, McCook, Cambridge, and Republican City as to how much new water could be carried from the drainage basin before the Republican River overflowed its now shallow banks. Through the first half of May rain fell almost daily. Perhaps some of the more knowledgeable pundits on Nebraska weather might have vaguely recalled the legend of 100-year floods related by Native Americans to the first settlers of the valley.⁵⁰ Although aware of the legend, the pundits and old-timers had no idea when the last 100-year flood had hit the valley.

From mid-April, 1935, rains continued to fall throughout western and southwestern Nebraska. Accompanying the rain came growing optimism on the part of farmers and businessmen that the drought had been broken and the coming harvests might possibly be a harbinger of recovery. The rainy period that continued through May had been such that "by May 20, 1935, the ground in Southwest Nebraska was almost saturated. If more rain were to fall, it likely would run off into the rivers and creeks."⁵¹

On Wednesday, May 22, the **Gazette** reported that McCook had received .14 of an inch the previous night but no rain had been forecast for the immediate future. A forecast for partly cloudy skies with no precipitation greeted rain-weary readers on May 23. Cloudy weather continued through May 24, but forecasters cautioned about possible showers in western Nebraska. After an additional day without rain on May 25, that evening areas around McCook experienced new precipitation with backyard rain gauges registering another .14 of an inch during Saturday night and into early Sunday. Sunday's edition of the **Gazette's** continued to voice optimism on the benefit of the welcomed rains for the emerging crops. The paper noted that the forecast included continuation of cloudy weather with possible showers.⁵² Looking ahead to Thursday, McCook residents could anticipate the Memorial Day holiday.

By Monday, May 27, warm, moisture laden Gulf of Mexico air smashing against colder Canadian air above northern Colorado and western Nebraska brought a general increase in rainfall. Strunk's paper called attention in the afternoon edition to the first thunder showers of spring. A "brief" deluge had been reported in Omaha along with showers in outstate Nebraska. On the following day, with rainfall continuing, a new challenge began to evolve for the drought and Depression sufferers of southwestern Nebraska. Rain waters running into the streams and creeks feeding into the narrow channel of the Republican River led to localized flooding. For the time being, however,

flooding appeared concentrated near Culbertson, the Hitchcock County seat about eleven miles upstream from McCook. Near Culbertson, the Republican valley begins to narrow and becomes the collection point for several of the smaller tributaries flowing into the Republican River.⁵³

The **Gazette's** May 28 edition reported that some of the worst floods in years had hit the region. According to the lead story for the day, highway travel near Culbertson had come to a stand-still. Even rail traffic on the Burlington between McCook and Denver had been interrupted when rising waters washed a Burlington bridge downstream. Stranded train passengers had to find bus accommodations in order to continue their travel. With some anxiety, Strunk's paper reported waters around McCook's Nebraska Light & Power Company plant just yards north of the river appeared to be rising, but the **Gazette** reported that any danger to the plant would subside by the time the still-rising crest upstream reached McCook at midnight.⁵⁴ In following the drama out west, the **World-Herald** reported that the flood danger had apparently abated "and as the waters subsided, the people in the valley relaxed."⁵⁵

The people of McCook and the surrounding area relaxed following several days of harrowing reports of rapidly building flood waters. As they relaxed, the intensity of the weather patterns continued to grow. Cloudbursts hit the Ogallala area along the Platte River and on the northern rim of the Republican drainage basin. Excess water began to flow rapidly into the small tributaries of Frenchman Creek and the Frenchman River. Further west over the flat-lands of northeastern Colorado, thunderstorms increased in their intensity and downpour to match those over Nebraska. Soon the Arikaree and South Fork of the Republican surged over their banks and added to the volume of water headed down the Republican Valley toward an even narrower portion of the funnel-like basin near McCook and its unsuspecting residents.

On Wednesday, May 29, the **World-Herald** reported new rains, including a five-inch gully washer near Culbertson. The Omaha paper warned this latest downpour threatened to renew the danger of flooding. For the first time, large numbers of people faced real danger as the rising water "sent rivers near McCook and Culbertson out of their banks [and] hundreds of men were at work building dikes . . . [while] . . . many residents of the Republican River valley fled their homes."⁵⁶ Impending disaster became reality. While those not yet affected by the continued rise in waters and threat of more rain planned for the May 30 Memorial Day picnics and family gatherings, even greater amounts of rainfall further saturated the topsoil. This excess water swiftly overran the banks of the Blackwood and Driftwood creeks and the North Branch of the Republican River. In the aftermath of the Flood "no one knows for sure just how much rain fell . . . but one estimate is that 24 inches fell with a 24-hour period."⁵⁷

So swiftly did raging flood-waters of Memorial Day eve 1935 cut off communications from the valley to surrounding areas, the **World-Herald** received little information until June 1 about the disaster that struck southwestern Nebraska. The paper reported that two small towns near the river had ceased to exist, literally washed off the map. In some cases, reported the **World-Herald**, valley residents learned the fate of others only when they witnessed " . . . houses going down stream in such numbers that observers felt all could not be completely empty."⁵⁸ In a few even more unfortunate cases, the only warning came as rampaging waters burst through doors and windows gave way to an in-rushing, muddy tide.

Men who several days before had been building dikes around McCook's electricity generating plant had since returned to their normal duties. With little warning, the plant workers found themselves scrambling to the building's rooftop to escape the lapping waters behind them. In a dramatic rescue effort described by the McCook and Omaha

newspapers and papers throughout America, the men found safety only minutes before the building seemed on the verge of collapse. Stark black and white photos show a last-minute rescue using methods similar to those used on the high seas when taking men off a sinking ship by life lines. Yet another spectacular picture appeared in the **World-Herald**. A wide, aerial shot looking westward up the Republican River, the photograph vividly illustrated the area covered by the flood waters. The accompanying caption explained dispassionately to the reader that as a result of rainfall, the "usually quiet little stream went wild."⁵⁹

Although not established by an official count, it is believed that some 112 to 113 people died as the result of the flood waters that swept the length of the Republican Valley.⁶⁰ Other estimates of lives lost ranged between 94 and 135.⁶¹ Houses, farms, and businesses ceased to exist. Likewise, "more than 20,000 cattle and hogs . . . along with thousands of chickens" were swept away by the waters. State government and officials of the Burlington totaled "approximately 515 highway and railroad bridges . . . destroyed or left unusable, along with miles" of a primary rail-link between Chicago and Denver.⁶² In the aftermath of the flood, the damage totaled "more than \$13 million" in 1935 dollars, an estimate which was "a conservative figure."⁶³

For Strunk, who had preached the need for water control projects in the Republican valley for nearly a decade, the 1935 Flood seemed to be personal vindication of his views. The flood gave him a golden opportunity to strike out at government officials who for so long had ignored planning and construction of water projects in the valley. There is no doubt that the destruction brought by the flood waters greatly angered Strunk over the government inaction. That anger, however, did not appear to have resulted in his feeling personally vindicated or exalted over the wisdom of his vision.

Instead, the 1935 Flood spurred Strunk to immerse himself even more into the work of bringing water programs to the valley which would avert repetition of the 1935 disaster.

In a June 10, 1935, front page article, Strunk conceded that "McCook and the Republican Valley have suffered one of the greatest shocks of its history in the form of death and property loss. The challenge had now become one for each valley resident to fight to rebuild."⁶⁴ Carl T. Curtis, who later worked closely with Strunk on water concerns for the valley, remembered the aftermath of the flood and echoed Strunk's own optimism for rebuilding. He recalled the "tenacious Nebraskans [who] went about the labor of cleaning up the debris, rebuilding highways and railroads, and trying to restore farmland to cultivation."⁶⁵

Much of the rebuilding following the flood found Strunk in a leading role. One of his primary goals as a leader continued to be reminding elected representatives of the need for water projects in the valley. Valley residents like Ray Search recalled that "after the flood, everybody needed help all the way up and down the Republican Valley. Harry viewed the results and said now was the time to get something done so this could never happen again."⁶⁶ Other residents who had survived the flood remembered that "the water hadn't begun to recede when Harry Strunk . . . started his campaign to do something for the valley. He organized the Republican Valley Conservation Association [in 1940] and served as its first president. Flood control became a personal crusade."⁶⁷

Over a half century after the flood, former governor Frank Morrison said that the disaster

was the triggering mechanism of Strunk's explosion. His paper became his pulpit. He organized the Republican Valley Conservation Association with a board of directors selected valley-wide, with officers and a program of action. He got the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, the soil and water conservation services, and all other local, state, and federal agencies involved. He included all elected public officials . . . from the president on down . . . [to be] servants in a program involving farm terraces, farm dams, multi-million dollar

programs of main stream, and tributary creek, and river dams to prevent flooding, check erosion and provide water for irrigation. Shelter belts were to be built to further check wind and soil erosion. And serious flooding was therefore to become history. All of this was to be spearheaded by the Pick-Sloan Plan for the development of the entire Missouri Basin.⁶⁸

Morrison claimed further that after the 1935 Flood, it had been "Strunk who led the campaign which produced the chain of lakes in Southwest Nebraska." From his leadership of the Republican Valley Conservation Association (RVCA), he "helped to spur legislators and Bureau of Reclamation officials to construct Bonny Dam in Colorado, and Enders, Swanson, Harry Strunk, and Hugh Butler lakes in Nebraska."⁶⁹

Just over three months after the 1935 Flood, Minden, Nebraska, home of future Congressman and Senator Carl T. Curtis, hosted a major water conference. Attending both as a newspaper publisher and representative from the Twin Valley group, Strunk found a conference agenda still out-of-touch with his water program for Southwest Nebraska. Offering an amendment to a meeting report that emphasized irrigation and power development, Strunk sought two objectives. First, with visions of the flood results fresh in his mind, he wanted the conference report to "permit each district in the state to name . . . the purpose for which waters of their respective districts should be used."⁷⁰ A second objective was to codify the water objectives of Southwest Nebraska. Strunk's emphasis on water control further demonstrated the continuing disagreement between himself and Norris and between Southwest Nebraska and the Tri-County Irrigation Project. The participants at the Minden conference, while not philosophically opposed to Strunk's objectives given the disaster that had just occurred, nevertheless voted against his amendment.⁷¹

As could be expected, Strunk took the adverse Minden decision as a slap at Southwest Nebraska. In commenting about the actions of the participants, he warned his readers that in spite of their suffering from the flood, the Minden meeting had ignored the

needs of their communities and farms. Because of his perception of this bias against his community, he declared to his Minden opponents that he "would oppose any person or group attempting to appropriate the waters of the Southwest territory with the primary object of creating more [electrical] power." Strunk continued his attack by writing that the objective of any water-related proposals must "lie in the protection of life and property and the guarding against a future flood [such] as wrecked the Republican Valley."⁷²

The period 1929-1930 found Strunk in the lead for irrigation projects in Southwest Nebraska. After the 1935 Flood, he was solidly behind flood control. While the two issues had never been separated, his personal and publishing energies had moved from the primary goal of water for crops to sustain the prosperity of Southwest Nebraska to water control. Neither use was exclusive of the other, but out of the devastation of the flood, Strunk found a ready-made issue to force government involvement. Ever the pragmatist, he realized that if logic and reasoning had not worked to bring federal funds to the Republican Valley, then the sight of the wasteland that remained after the flood provided convincing evidence to politicians of the immediate need for the ignored water projects.

As Strunk turned more of his energy toward obtaining federal involvement in the valley, he continued to find evidence that some federal officials still doubted the importance of establishing water projects in the valley. Over a year after the flood, the federal government sent an "observation team" from the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) into the valley. Rather than observe the cause and results of the flood, the federal group traveled the valley to study the affects of the drought. For Strunk, such continuing misunderstanding of the shifting water issues of Southwest Nebraska necessitated a blistering attack on government's inability to recognize the problem exposed by the flood. Writing in vintage Strunk style on the *Gazette's* front page—likely to be seen by any outside visitor—the perplexed publisher made clear that the "major problem facing

agriculture in this section of the country involves flood control." Coincidentally, his paper printed a statement released from the chambers of commerce for McCook, Oxford and Cambridge. Those organizations produced a unified statement clearly favoring flood controls that included "large reservoirs, foresting work in canyons and soil conservation."⁷³

Strunk's post-flood angst resulted in a confrontation with the Corps. At the time of the flood, the Corps held primary responsibility for water-related planning in Southwest Nebraska. The disagreement between Strunk expectations and the Corps perceived performance led to a dramatic change its role in Southwest Nebraska. That confrontation would begin in the aftermath of the 1935 Flood. The scope of this study did not follow the greater share of the face-off that took place after 1938. Until the 1935 Flood, the Bureau of Reclamation remained largely out of any water project planning for Southwest Nebraska. After Strunk took the Corps to task for what he perceived as foot-dragging and an inability to work with representatives from the valley, the federal government eventually assigned to the Bureau the planning and construction of the area's water projects. Some years later the Bureau established a division office in McCook.

Strunk's role in bringing the Bureau to McCook and the Republican Valley seems larger than life. His long-time secretary and employee of the RVCA, Annette Trimble, claimed that "in the original picture and plan, the Red Willow area belonged to the Army Corps of Engineers. At the same time there was the Wilson Dam project down in Kansas. That belonged to the Bureau. So Strunk talked to this Colonel Potter [Army Corps of Engineers] and suggested a swap between the two."⁷⁴ The result would be the eventual moving of a Bureau office to McCook. While it would be another decade before McCook became home to an office in 1949, his work in the 1930s laid the foundation for this move to McCook. Bureau Project Manager for the McCook area, Bob Kutz, recalled the

importance of Strunk to the agency's decision to move to McCook and take over from the Corps the water project planning for Southwest Nebraska. Kutz claimed he "would not have been in McCook" if it had not been for the Strunk.⁷⁵

In addition to the Corps, Fourth District Congressman C. C. Binderup became an editorial target over the progress of the planning and construction of water projects. Binderup would not receive Strunk's support in the 1936 election. In his July 1936 editorial, Strunk advised his readers that the Congressman and the Corps disagreed over the extent of the Corps' work in the valley. He claimed that Binderup believed that the Corps had in the year since the flood completed forty percent of the necessary planning in advance of beginning construction of water projects in the valley. As it turned out, Binderup's optimistic outlook on the work in progress did not seem to match information provided by the Corps. To Strunk's understanding, either Binderup had been misled or had not demonstrated sufficient interest in getting to the bottom of the nature and extent of Corps planning. Although the congressman issued a favorable report on Corps work, its engineers revealed that any "work done at this time is merely a preliminary survey to ascertain whether or not further survey is JUSTIFIED [Strunk's emphasis]."⁷⁶

While the Corps seemed mired in work that had little connection with the need for immediate flood control, Strunk learned that federal funds earmarked for nation-wide water projects ended up in places other than along the Republican River.⁷⁷ Despite the attention given by the federal government to flood control, the objectives of the Corps along the Republican River appeared to remain unclear. Several years after the flood, Strunk and members of the RVCA visited the Corps' Washington office. They came away from that meeting believing "it was apparent that the august Corps of Engineers did not even know about the existence of the Republican River, to say nothing of being prepared to tame the stream."⁷⁸

Years after the McCook Conference, Strunk believed that many of the suggested resolutions from the conference had largely been ignored. In a 1936 editorial, he noted that at the time of the McCook meeting some experts in flood control had argued against irrigation because of possible crop over-production. Those same experts, he claimed, had expressed "more interest in the navigational use of rivers," a use for which he had little interest.⁷⁹ The editorial logically questioned why disputes over the scope of water projects had been allowed to lead to the previous year's destruction.

In the same editorial regarding lost opportunities following the 1930 meeting, Strunk claimed that from the McCook meeting "President Roosevelt took almost verbatim his 1932 policy of conserving natural resources."⁸⁰ To him it seemed only reasonable that other elements of the Conference report in addition to conservation should have been just as readily adopted. With some remaining rancor directed to the Tri-County Project, he hinted that the results of the 1935 Flood might have been less severe if the central Nebraska irrigation project had spent less time lobbying for water diversion for irrigation and power rather than giving equal attention to flood control as suggested at McCook. After all had been said and done following the 1930 Flood Control Conference, the only tangible result, claimed Strunk, had been the allocation of eighty million dollars to Nebraska for water projects. Even with the lofty goals of the Conference and an infusion of government money, he asserted there had been no significant progress toward flood control.⁸¹

While finding fault with others for their lack of effort, Strunk continued to be an increasingly vocal spokesman on behalf of Southwest Nebraska's water needs. In advance of the 1936 election and recalling the continuing rift between himself and Norris and himself and the Tri-County Project advocates, he continued to deride those individuals and groups seeking water conservation as a part of obtaining "cheap power." Making cheap

power available would no doubt be a "notable accomplishment" agreed Strunk. Such emphasis on power, he warned, should not replace the need to control flood waters and provide for irrigation.⁸²

Earlier, Strunk had lashed out at the Agriculture Adjustment Administration (AAA) when faced with he believed to be contrary objectives between the needs of farmers on one hand and those of the AAA in reducing crop production. Given the size of construction projects sponsored by the New Deal's Public Works Administration (PWA), Strunk again turned to questioning a New Deal program. This time he questioned the effectiveness of the PWA's seeming concentration on only large construction projects. He asked whether the PWA might serve its purpose better if it switched to smaller projects. Those small projects in his view included the water programs he envisioned for the Republican valley. Such projects he argued, "will not only make this country a garden spot but will help those farmers and pioneers who have labored and suffered in paying their taxes and shouldering their share of the future responsibilities of maintaining and building a greater Nebraska."⁸³

Strunk continued to push for flood control as the primary objective of any water projects in Southwest Nebraska. At one time, he even asked his readers to take part in a poll on water issues important to Southwest Nebraska. Stating both the objectives of the McCook Flood Control Conference of 1930 and his own statements on flood control that had emerged from the 1935 Minden meeting, Strunk asked readers to vote on those issues they favored. He noted that while every politician talked water control, there remained "no definitive program headed by active and earnest effort."⁸⁴

Again citing the dismissal of his proposed amendment at Minden and federal government inaction, McCook's advocate of flood control wanted the voice of his readers and voters in the coming election to be clearly heard in Lincoln and Washington. Without

naming incumbent representatives or candidates, but likely referring to Norris and Binderup, Strunk insisted that Congress had chosen electrical power development over flood control and irrigation. In making this choice, claimed Strunk, elected representatives had directly "challenged the rights of the people of Southwest Nebraska." At the same time, he challenged any other group interested in water issues to let the people decide which issues were most important.⁸⁵ The latter appeared to be a further editorial jab aimed at the Tri-County leadership.

In conducting his straw-poll, Strunk's paper provided a ballot that could be checked and then either mailed or brought into the newspaper office. On the ballot, Strunk requested his readers to check which water issues they deemed most important. The ballot gave subscribers the choice between flood control, irrigation, power, or navigation.⁸⁶ After some three weeks of whetting his readers' appetite for the outcome of the voting, he published the unscientific and unverified results on September 30, 1936. In the intervening weeks he continued to publish editorials in support of his position on flood control.

During the voting period, Strunk learned that a representative from Tri-County questioned his motive for the poll. The same representative had threatened to "skin alive" the McCook publisher if he ever showed up at a Tri-County meeting. Strunk issued an immediate response to the challenge by the Tri-County representative, by asking his readers to decide for themselves whether they supported his views on flood control. He then challenged Tri-County to ask the same question of the people in the Tri-County area.⁸⁷

In obvious support of Strunk and perhaps anticipating the outcome of the **Gazette** poll, the McCook Chamber of Commerce came out solidly for flood control as the most important water issue to be addressed. Before the votes had been tallied, the Chamber

established a committee to work toward securing flood control and irrigation projects for the Republican Valley. The Chamber named Strunk, Frank Real, H. C. Clapp, and Ed Caya to serve on the committee.⁸⁸ It appears this committee served as an extension of Strunk's existing position with Twin Valleys Association until the later establishment of the RVCA.⁸⁹ As he had demonstrated since even before the 1935 Flood, he continued to play important roles in the valley's water project planning. With his leadership well established, Strunk later became the "driving force of the RVCA organization" as its first president.⁹⁰

As expected, the results of Strunk's request for his readers to decide the importance of water issues clearly represented his position. The **Gazette** received some 2,000 votes. A front page article, "Flood Control Favored in Gazette Straw Vote," showed that 97 percent of those voting supported flood control. Since readers could vote on the issues presented in descending order or chose not to vote on some issues, irrigation came in a close second with 93 percent. Power projects and navigation lagged far behind. While 7 percent of the votes favored power projects, the question of navigation received less than 2 percent of the votes cast.⁹¹

Although flood control and irrigation became Strunk's principal cause, he never remained far from the subject of conservation. Just before the 1936 election, he explained the importance of conservation to any eventual water projects. In comparing water conservation to forest conservation, he reminded readers that conservation of trees "did not stop the cutting down of trees; it is merely to cut them down sanely and intelligently, so that there will be some left for our grandchildren." Continuing, he wrote that conservation did "not mean going without things; it simply means using them . . . with an idea to the future." Only through conservation, whether with trees or water, he explained, could there be "an enduring prosperity."⁹²

By the time of his 1938 editorial, Harry Strunk had undergone a 180-degree change on issues centered on the Depression and water. Ten years earlier, he had found irrigation as the answer to the economic prosperity of the region, but flood control became his primary focus after 1935. Less than a decade before the 1938 editorial, he had found economic Depression as the primary force that might destroy his community; now he believed that water issues and conservation held the key to future prosperity.

At times readers of the **Gazette** seemed overwhelmed by articles and editorials about water. McCook attorney William Lyon recalled Strunk running "an editorial every day on this water thing. Not once, but day after day after day. A regular routine. I asked him why?" In response to Lyon, Strunk replied:

If you don't hammer at it every single day, you're not going to get it done. I want this valley irrigated. I want these dams in. I want to make this a beautiful valley. I want lakes around here. And by God we're going to get them. We're going to get them in if I have to put them in myself.⁹³

To some McCook residents like Lyons, Strunk may have written excessively about water. Lyon's recollection came almost three decades after Strunk's death and nearly six decades after the time period covered by this study. As previously stated in this study, Strunk's editorial voice was not one dimensional. The cause of water was without doubt the theme of a great many of his editorials. He did, however, cover other subjects and events of the day. No doubt Lyon's spoke in hyperbole, remembering the primary message that the McCook publisher wanted to be most noticed by his readers.

Although Carl Curtis did not become well acquainted with Strunk until 1938, he remembered that following the 1935 Flood, Strunk's main concern "was to rebuild the valley. Strunk was a great builder. There would be no dams in the Republican Valley holding back the floods and providing waters if it hadn't been for Harry Strunk and his dedication." His work had consequence beyond the Republican Valley. Curtis recalled

that when he "introduced the legislation that brought forth the Pick-Sloan Plan, it was because of my familiarity with the Republican Valley. I had worked through the years with Harry Strunk."⁹⁴ Curtis was quite aware of Strunk's early work in organizing the 1930 McCook Flood Control Conference. That Conference has been described as having provided the "framework for what was later called the Pick-Sloan Plan."⁹⁵

In 1939, the Bureau of Reclamation began its efforts to "tame the stream." In that year, the Bureau sent to McCook "planners and investigators . . . to outline feasible plans for area development of water resources." Those findings became "incorporated into a comprehensive plan for developing the huge Missouri River Basin, and the plan was turned over to Congress in 1943. A year later Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1944."⁹⁶ An earlier flood control statute had been passed by Congress in 1937. The 1937 legislation resulted directly from the 1935 Flood on the Republican River.⁹⁷

As the 1930s drew to a close, Strunk fit comfortably into the role as primary instigator, motivator, and supporter for government-sponsored water projects in Southwest Nebraska. While not specific as to location in his demand for water projects in his part of the state, he made it clear that he believed water reservoirs should be constructed on the upper Republican "as far west as the Nebraska-Colorado line." In 1940, when the Corps of Engineers decided to build the first flood control project on the Republican River near Republican City, some 80 miles downstream from where the 1935 Flood had done such great damage, Strunk was beside himself with disbelief. Adding to his displeasure was the revelation that Senator Norris had given his imprimatur to the Corps' plan. In reaction, Strunk claimed that Norris had reversed himself from earlier promises made following the 1935 Flood. He accused Norris of "insulting valley friends." Strunk then went on to claim that the people in the upper Republican Valley questioned the "building of any one dam in any one place."⁹⁸

Coming to the aid of both Strunk and Southwest Nebraska was the **Norfolk Daily News**. In reviewing the latest charge in the Norris-Strunk episode, which many believed had been resolved following the 1935 Flood, the Norfolk paper claimed that Norris' agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers caused suspicion that the senator "is not much concerned with irrigation." The **Daily News** went on to say that "the federal government is not primarily interested in using Nebraska waters for irrigation purposes, which is the most valuable use to which they could be put to use." Finally, it supported Strunk's anger over money being spent far beyond McCook. Once the federal government spent money on the Republican City project, wrote the paper, it would "never let go of any more money for the section [upper Republican] that really needs the protection and the water."⁹⁹

Despite continued resistance to water control projects on the upper Republican River, Strunk persisted in his efforts. His success in bringing projects to southwestern Nebraska rested with his intense personality and tireless efforts. Another part of Strunk's success came from his political activism and "knowing which politicians to support and which to oppose." As his associates from the various water-related associations and civic groups recalled, he made water and water-related projects "an objective which he pursued with a religious fervor. He spent countless hours of his time and generous columns of his newspaper in encouraging, pressuring, cajoling or converting anyone within reach."¹⁰⁰ Not all persons shared Strunk's views on water projects. Most notably, his visions of water programs for the valley differed from those of Senator George W. Norris.

Endnotes

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- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
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⁶⁶ Ray Search, interview with author, June 1995.

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- ⁸⁴ Ibid., Aug. 28, 1936, editorial.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., Sept. 5, 1936, editorial.
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⁹⁷ Michael L. Lawson, **The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980: Dammed Indians** (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994 ed.), 11-20; Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk." It would be more accurate to claim that the 1935 Flood on the Republican River was one of the factors that eventually led to the Flood Control Act of 1944. In June 1936, both Norris and Senator Edward R. Burke of Omaha introduced bills related to the Republican River. Norris' bill (S. 4025) requested authorization for "a preliminary examination of the Republican River with a view to control its floods." On June 1, 1936, one year after the Republican River flood, Norris had read into the **Congressional Record** a report from the Nebraska office of the Works Progress Administration. The report detailed the losses in soil, farms, businesses, lives, and livestock as a result of the flood. Burke's bill (S. 4025) requested funding "for flood control survey" of the Republican. It is noted, however, that in both the 1936 and 1937 sessions of the Seventy-Fourth and Seventy-Fifth Congresses, more than one hundred other similar bills on other rivers throughout the United States were introduced. A review of the **Congressional Record** for the Seventy-Fourth Congress indicates that all bills calling for flood control were combined into a Joint Resolution (S. J. Res. 57) by the Senate Committee on Commerce. The Joint Resolution called for a "comprehensive national plan for prevention and control of floods of all major rivers" (U.S., Congress, Senate, Congressional Record, 74th Cong. 2d sess., 1936, pp. 53, 2017, 2900, 5405, 8485-8486.) President Roosevelt vetoed the proposed legislation. The 1936 legislation became a part of the Flood Control Act of 1944.

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CHAPTER VI

STRUNK AND NORRIS . . . THE POLITICAL POLEMICS OF WATER

Even after almost seven decades, it is appropriate to place into perspective the issue that divided publisher Harry D. Strunk and Senator George W. Norris. In November 1929, the two long-time acquaintances began an exchange of testy correspondence that lasted less than two months. Within that relatively short time period of blunt exchange, the lives of both men became joined.¹ Their unusually rancorous correspondence began a fiery rhetoric of charge and counter-charge.

As in much of the history of the semi-arid southwestern corner of Nebraska and throughout the Great Plains, the dividing point between Strunk and Norris centered on the same issue that has given them similarity in historical perspective—water. The legacy of both men has been closely identified with their different visions of the use for either plentiful or scarce water resources. Their political polemics over water became ingrained in the history of McCook and Southwest Nebraska.

On one hand, Norris achieved historical significance due to his political maverick image and willingness to challenge political convention and partisanship. On the other hand, the five-term senator is remembered for bringing navigation, flood control, and development of electrical power to the Tennessee River valley.² Despite the perception of his critics in Southwest Nebraska, Norris worked on behalf of water projects throughout the state. Beginning in 1925, Norris supported the Tri-County Project in central Nebraska. His influence with Franklin Roosevelt and ultimately with Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes helped speed up federal action for the primary competitor to Southwest Nebraska's similar need for federal funding. Norris supported similar projects along the Loup River.³

Norris' effort along the Tennessee River overshadowed Strunk's own vision of flood control projects along the Republican River. Strunk's efforts, however, became no less important to the people of Southwest Nebraska. Supporters of both men lay justifiable claim to the significance of the achievements of each the development of water resources. For his own reasons, Strunk did not seem to recognize the efforts of Norris in support of Nebraska water projects.

Despite the discord between himself and Norris, Strunk continued to have considerable respect and admiration for the senator. For some twenty years prior to their disagreement over water, he had strongly back his townsman. Their simmering dispute following the 1928 presidential election and Norris' reluctance to back water projects in the Republican River valley, however, resulted in Strunk's withholding the **Gazette's** endorsement of Norris in the senatorial elections of 1930, 1936, and 1942. Even though Strunk withheld active support for Norris at the polls, the McCook publisher maintained his admiration of Norris as a figure of national consequence.

Almost the direct physical opposite of Strunk, Norris was described as "small in stature." Closing resembling Strunk in clothing style, observers remembered Norris as having "dressed plainly, usually wearing a baggy black suit and a string bow tie."⁴ Some of his dress habits might have been politically motivated. Strunk's long-time secretary recalled that in one his less charitable comments about Norris, the McCook publisher claimed the senator "would come down Main Street and be walking very chipper. When he got close to where he was going to give a speech or something, he'd rough up his hair. This was so he could better plead for what he wanted."⁵ Of a quieter nature than Strunk, both in his hometown and in the nation's capital, Norris avoided the social life. Even in Washington, he spent his free evenings at home reading.⁶

Moving to McCook in late December 1899, Norris preceded Strunk's arrival by ten years. The Norris family increased by four the city's population of 2,445.⁷ Both men carried the baggage of being outsiders, but this distinction applied to many residents of a city less than two decades old at the time of Norris' arrival. McCook had been founded less than thirty years before the time Strunk stepped off a Denver-bound Burlington train in 1909.

Before Strunk's arrival in McCook, Norris already was an important member of the community. Coming to McCook as a state district judge, he won election to Congress in 1902 as Representative from Nebraska's Fifth Congressional District.⁸ Beginning in 1912, Nebraskans elected Norris to the Senate five times.

To win acceptance into the social and business life of his new community, Strunk first established his own newspaper. He then set out to challenge the existing editorial voice of the community, **Tribune** publisher Frank Kimmell. In his confrontation with Kimmell, Strunk made it clear early on that he was not above challenging a local icon.

Norris' independent political thinking and opposing vision on water sometimes seemed a handy lightning-rod to Strunk's editorial sparks. The difference between the more patrician Norris and the self-educated Strunk, however, never reached the intensity of the verbal barrage that had marked the exchange between Strunk and Kimmell.

John R. McCarl, a former Comptroller General of the United States and early McCook resident, recalled that Strunk and Norris "clashed . . . over the expenditures of the senator's pet project, the TVA."⁹ The clash, however, never resulted in personal animosity. Merl Peek remembered that even after Strunk had opposed Norris in 1930 and 1936 and backed Kenneth Wherry in 1942, both men retained their good personal feelings for each other. Strunk and Norris, claimed Peek, recognized their differences as "all politics."¹⁰

Long-time Strunk employee Leopold "Bus" Bahl related that whenever Norris returned to McCook, Harry would "get on the senator" about repairs needed on the Norris home. "Bus" would be sent up the street with tools and a ladder to fix doors and window screens. For a door, Bahl received twenty cents. He earned ten cents for fixing the senator's window screens.¹¹

Bahl explained that "many people think that Strunk and George Norris were bitter enemies. But that's not true. On his trips back home, Norris would almost always stop by the newspaper office to visit Harry."¹² According to Bahl, the two of them would stand in the hall way of the **Gazette** building "and they'd talk and they'd talk, or they'd go upstairs, sit in Harry's office and talk. But they were good friends. They had their arguments, naturally, because Harry wanted that water project here to go smooth."¹³

Those three words, "that water project," define not only the measure of Strunk, but the measure of the disagreement between himself and Norris. From the time he had founded the **Red Willow County Gazette** and later the **McCook Daily Gazette**, his interest in water projects in the Republican Valley had been largely within the scope of irrigation. With the organization of the Twin Valley Association of Commercial Clubs (Twin Valley) in 1928, the McCook publisher's focus became more directed toward flood control as an aid to irrigation. Then, with the 1935 Flood, flood control became all-consuming with him.

Norris had his own early interest in water control. While living in McCook, he had maintained a business interest in a grist mill on Beaver Creek in Furnas County. In 1902, flood waters in the Republican River basin caused the usually passive Beaver to overflow. Norris' grist mill became a casualty of the flood.¹⁴ In the years following his first-hand experience with uncontrolled waters, he became strongly identified with water resources.

Unlike Strunk's life-long dream of flood control and irrigation, Norris' vision of controlled water became "inseparably bound up with the history of hydro-electric power."¹⁵

It is with Norris' identification with hydro-electric power that can be found the catalyst to the Strunk-Norris discord. Norris feared that electric power generated by water might be controlled by unethical electrical power companies. That fear resulted in his life-long struggle to prevent private power companies from benefiting from federal government water projects. In 1912, Norris' strongly-held position against electric power trusts led him to warn government and electrical power consumers that they must "guard with jealous care against the concentration of the water power of the country in the hands of any combination of men."¹⁶

Norris' aversion to the perceived abuses of electrical power monopolies played a decisive role in his efforts to change Nebraska's legislative body from a two-house system to the current unicameral form. The Senator's biographer, Richard Lowitt, described how Norris had observed attempted manipulation of the state legislature by the Nebraska power lobby. That manipulation resulted from the opposition of the power lobby to a bill allowing municipal utilities to expand beyond their city boundaries. Norris believed that the power trusts wanted to exert excessive control over both the expansion and construction costs of electrical power.¹⁷

Although Norris tirelessly resisted control of hydro-electric power by a powerful combination of electrical power lobbyists, he continued his support for federally-funded water projects. His enthusiasm for popular national and regional water programs sometimes led to disagreement from his constituents, as did his efforts in behalf of farmers and town-dwellers far from Nebraska. Often times "constituents and critics charged Norris with ignoring Nebraska while he fought for programs that would aid the South and

California."¹⁸ Events indicated, however, that more than a few of the senator's critics suffered from selective memory.

Biographer Richard Lowitt noted that in 1914, Norris secured congressional appropriations totaling \$10,000 for a study of water resources in Nebraska. In 1922, he obtained an additional \$5,000 for the same purpose. By 1925, Norris had become actively engaged in supporting construction of irrigation projects in Nebraska. In that year, he sponsored legislation to fund Nebraska irrigation work, but it was unsuccessful. He blamed opposition by large private electrical power companies for this failure.¹⁹

Among Nebraska irrigation projects, Norris appeared to favor the Tri-County Project (Tri-County) along the Platte River. In spite of its restrictive geographical name, that project incorporated irrigation planning for Lincoln, Dawson, Gosper, Phelps, Kearney and Adams counties. In addition, Tri-County included plans for building electrical power-generating plants. In 1925, he introduced a bill in the U.S. Senate to fund construction of water projects in the Tri-County region.²⁰

The senator's perceived favoritism for water projects along the Platte River did not set well with Strunk. Norris' favorable position toward Tri-County, however, appears justified. When he made a tour of the Tri-County area in the fall of 1931, Strunk asked him to take a similar tour of the Republican basin. Nebraska Congressmen Ashton Shallenberger and J. N. Norton accompanied Norris and the three men turned down Strunk's request. The three legislators noted they planned to tour only surveyed reservoir sites. So far, they explained, even the most basic survey and engineering work had not been undertaken along the Frenchman and Republican Rivers. Strunk subsequently agreed with their assessment.²¹

According to Lowitt, Norris supported Tri-County work in part because of plans to provide cheap hydro-power.²² In his autobiography, Norris stressed the need for

available electrical power, recalling his family's "primitive Ohio farm life and the possibilities of electricity for lightening the drudgery of farms and urban homes, while revolutionizing the factories"23

A further illustration of Norris' unrestrained fear of price-gouging by the power trust came in a letter to a Tennessee resident. In his letter explaining the benefits of the proposed plans for the Tennessee River, he claimed that the power trust leaders

do not want an example of Muscle Shoals which would become a yardstick for the entire United States in the price of power. They know it will demonstrate that the people are being charged and have for years been charged exorbitant rates for power and light.²⁴

Norris favored water programs that brought cheap electricity to rural areas. In 1927, however, when the Nebraska legislature considered a bill backing construction of hydro-power plants, Norris gave little more than luke-warm approval. He believed the proposed bill did not provide adequate safeguards against attempts by private power companies to gain control of state-sponsored water projects. As a result, he requested that the bill be changed in a way that virtually guaranteed state dominance in planning, building and controlling hydro-electric plants. The Nebraska legislature took no action on either the bill or Norris' request.²⁵

Norris recognized that his work on behalf of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and other water projects outside of Nebraska had not earned him full praise with the home folk. Lack of overwhelming popularity, however, was insufficient to defeat him at the polls during the 1930s. His support for large projects like the TVA and smaller works like Tri-County showed his basic political philosophy of doing the most good for the most people. Understanding the opposition he faced from hometown friends and opposition in sparsely populated Southwest Nebraska, Norris defended his positions in his autobiography. In describing his support of the TVA, he wrote:

From the first gun to the last, there was no armistice, no breathing space, and no truce. From the beginning to the end, there was the irreconcilable conflict between those who believed the natural wealth of the United States best can be developed by private capital and enterprise, and those who believe that in certain activities related to the natural resources only the great strength of the federal government itself can perform the most necessary task in the spirit of unselfishness, for the greatest good to the greatest number.²⁶

In addressing his concern for water projects along the Republican River valley, Norris wrote: "On several occasions, I rescued it [sic] from the dump heap. I had been accused of a deeper concern for the Tennessee Valley than for my own homeland."²⁷

Norris spent seven years of his Senate service between 1926 and 1933 working for passage of a plan to improve navigation and flood control along the Tennessee River.²⁸ In those same years, he enjoyed few days when he was not reminded of the clamor for a similar program along the Republican River. Most of that clamor originated with Strunk's editorial demands regarding water and his complaints about Norris' sometimes intransigence toward any water project that might favor private hydro-electric power companies.

Strunk's son offered a succinct description of the feud that existed between his father and Senator Norris. Allen Strunk claimed his father and Norris "split sharply after Strunk was denied Norris' help in construction of dams to protect the upper Republican River valley and its tributaries." His father, continued the younger Strunk, "contended flood control and irrigation should be the major objectives" of any water projects in the Republican Valley." On the other hand, noted the publisher's son, "Senator Norris put great emphasis on the additional interests in navigation and primarily hydro-electric power."²⁹ Strunk's daughter wrote that her father "felt Senator Norris cared more about the Tennessee Valley than the Republican Valley."³⁰

In his own defense, Norris claimed that he ". . . believed that the first and most important objective [of water projects] was the control of the flood waters" ³¹ In

addition to flood control, he addressed irrigation needs in the Great Plains. "In the Great Plains," wrote Norris, "stretching all the way to the foothills of the Rockies, irrigation is probably the most important consideration."³²

While Norris' statements might appear contradictory, the dual issues of flood control and irrigation are not exclusive from one another. The statements taken from the senator's autobiography, however, suggests some bifurcation of Norris' efforts when compared to Strunk's later more focused efforts on flood control. Norris' statements appear to de-emphasize his previous concentration on government-controlled development of hydro-power. Perhaps by the time Norris penned his work, he recognized that development of hydro-power was not viable along the normally shallow and meandering rivers of western Nebraska. Strunk, however, had reached that same conclusion at the time of the 1930 McCook Flood Conference.

By 1929, Strunk had firmly established his editorial leadership in Southwest Nebraska. Additionally, he held an important role in the Twin Valley Association. Norris' seeming lack of support for the efforts of Twin Valley did not set well with the McCook publisher. At the same time, he recognized the senator's continued popularity probably would translate into success in the coming election.

With few illusions about unseating the popular elected official, Strunk might have decided to give Norris an editorial run for his money. In the Armistice Day 1929 issue of the McCook paper, Strunk wrote that the voters would "cheer lustily" if Norris succeeded in being re-elected. At the same time, those voters were reminded that McCook's "stalwart son committed the almost unpardonable sin in his support of Alfred E. Smith."³³

Norris' lack of support for water projects along the Republican was only a partial cause of the angry exchange between himself and Strunk. The senator added further fuel to the smoldering coals of disagreement between the two men when he wrote to Strunk in

December 1929, making an unsupported charge that Strunk had fallen under the influence of the power trusts. The senator's ill-timed charge in advance of the 1930 election marked the political break between the two men.³⁴ During the final month of 1929 and into the first month of 1930, the two sparred both in private exchanges of correspondence and in the pages of newspapers from McCook to Lincoln.

In addition to Norris' position favoring Al Smith, the senator's indifference to the increased efforts of the Twin Valley Association along the Republican and Frenchman rivers created further disagreement with Strunk. After its organization in 1928, Twin Valley focused attention on the water needs of the Republican and Frenchman valleys. The members of Twin Valley recognized early, however, that the interests of the various water planning organizations in the state had different goals. Those differences reduced the effectiveness of the different groups to petition either the state legislature or Congress for the necessary funds to construct dams, reservoirs, and irrigation channels.

Gene Hamaker has described the competing water resource groups. Water advocates in the middle Platte River region (Tri-County area) emphasized tributary control, which control clashed with the irrigators on the upper Platte (Sutherland diversion area) who feared any program that might affect their water supplies. In southwest Nebraska, Twin Valley concentrated upon flood control. Even Omaha got into the picture by proposing projects that promoted navigation on the Missouri River. As Hamaker notes, these conflicting interests "seemed incapable of cooperating for any length of time. Envy, suspicion and memories of past quarrels drove them apart."³⁵

An early supporter of Strunk's view of flood control and irrigation priorities in the Republican Valley was Victor Westermark, a Benkelman, Nebraska attorney. Later, Westermark served as a district court judge. He also served with Strunk on the executive committee for Twin Valley. To Westermark, the increasing split between the two men

emerged only after Twin Valley's formation in 1928. Westermarck believed that "Norris failed to show that he would take any initial leadership in getting cooperation of the senators and representatives and in formulating plans that would bring about the necessary congressional action desired by this territory [Republican River valley]."³⁶ Into the leadership void left by both Norris and the competing water planning groups stepped McCook's publisher and editor.

In November 1929, in his role as both publisher and member of Twin Valley, Strunk sent to Norris what appeared to be an innocent telegram. The telegram had been sent in advance of a December meeting to be held in Lexington, Nebraska, by the State Irrigation Association. On the heels of Strunk's editorial indictments against federal funds wasted on flood control on the lower Mississippi, he queried Norris' position on flood control.

The full text of the telegram was printed in the **Gazette** on November 23, 1929. In the telegram, Strunk informed Norris that the McCook paper and the people of Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas "would appreciate a frank statement as to your contentions in the matter and what support may be expected of you to stop waste of public funds to control Mississippi River floods by impounding waters of its tributaries?"³⁷

In a separate editorial, and perhaps borrowing from the pages of the campaign book of William Jennings Bryan, Strunk asked whether Norris intended "that the good of flood control be sacrificed on the altar of electrical energy?"³⁸ He accused Norris of giving too much attention to the question of electrical power without addressing flood control. For Strunk, Norris had only one question to answer. Did the senator believe power trusts were worse than the spending of tax revenue on the lower Mississippi while ignoring the primary sources of the flooding on that river?³⁹

Even before giving Norris an opportunity to reply to his telegram, or at least before making the senator's reply public, Strunk attempted to prevent Norris from tying Strunk or Twin Valley to the power trusts. His action to deflect any Norris criticism about a tie between the power trusts and Strunk appeared to confirm that power companies had not exhibited any interest in building along the Republican River. Strunk's position that electric power generation on the Republican held little consequence was buttressed by fellow Twin Valley organizer and principal spokesperson, Samuel G. Porter. Conveniently, Porter had written an article for the **Gazette** titled "Stored Water is Not Worthwhile for Power Use." In his article, he claimed power was not an issue along the Republican, explaining that "holding the water back until some unknown date dependent upon the weather . . . does not coincide with power demands."⁴⁰

Strunk's question to Norris about supporting the impounding of waters seemed designed only to elicit support from the senator for Twin Valley's well-known position on flood control. Instead, the question immediately raised Norris' ire. Another factor likely influenced Norris' reaction to the tone of Strunk's question. In later years Strunk expressed admiration for Al Smith and claimed he supported Norris even after the senator's support of the defeated Democratic candidate for president. Norris no doubt believed, however, that in 1929 Strunk toed the Republican line in opposition to Norris for his Smith endorsement. Strunk's questioning Norris' flood-control credentials came just when the independent-minded Norris was in the midst of considering his options for the 1930 election. With Strunk's question and Norris' own knowledge that the Republican leadership did not support his re-election, the senator had reason to believe that Strunk was actively working with the party to derail his decision to run for re-election.

In his reply reprinted in the **Gazette**, Norris agreed with Strunk and Twin Valley on their proposals for flood programs upstream from the Mississippi. He went on to

argue that his similar position on irrigation and flood control was well known.⁴¹ Having previously stated his position on flood control and irrigation, and irritated by being asked to state it once again, Norris was not in the mood to answer without some recrimination. In his response to Strunk's question, the senator brought into the exchange the question of hydro-electric power. Furthermore, he launched an attack on one of his favorite political scapegoats—partisan politics. In what might be considered a non-sequitur in his argument, the former attorney and judge linked partisan politics to the "power trust" and then to Harry Strunk. Norris asked Strunk:

Has it occurred to you, editor, that when you have been shouting to vote the ticket straight yellow-dog and all, you have been pleading with your people to vote for a real representative of the power trust, as against someone standing for the people?⁴²

With that one question, Norris placed Strunk on the side of the hydro-electric power monopoly. The question countered Strunk's oft-stated claim of working for the community good. As might be expected, his reply was immediate. He challenged Norris to come forth with any proof that he had been working on the side of the "power trust."⁴³

As a point of fact, an earlier letter to the senator from Strunk had raised the issue of hydro-electric power and Norris' related position. That letter will be addressed later. He surely realized Norris' stated goal that cheap hydro-power accompany water projects. In his mind, however, such projects were neither necessary nor practical on the Republican River. In the same November issue that carried a copy of his telegram to Norris, Strunk charged his fellow townsman with throwing a red herring into the serious question of flood control and irrigation. He reminded the senator that the water issue for "farmers along the Republican and Frenchman Rivers dealt with irrigation and flood control, not electrical power."⁴⁴

Strunk seems justified in taking exception to Norris' attempts to blame the power trust for the telegram. His work with Twin Valley revealed no sentiment or inclination toward embarrassing Norris for the sake of the power companies. An attempt to embarrass the senator as behalf of partisan politics may have been the motivation of the McCook publisher. Whether Strunk had joined with the Republican leadership as alleged by Norris is not clear. It is more likely he acted out of a sense of partisanship for Southwest Nebraska. Most likely he wanted to force a commitment from Norris while the senator was in the midst of a political decision. He wanted a decision that would give Southwest Nebraska similar attention then being given by Norris to Tri-County. Hamaker suggests that Strunk "was preparing a political ambush for the senator," but does not name any other members of the ambush party.⁴⁵

Shortly after Christmas 1929, the **Gazette** carried an announcement that Norris planned to return to McCook for the New Year Holidays. His planned trip included filing papers for the 1930 senatorial election.⁴⁶ In an accompanying editorial, Strunk speculated on the reason for Norris' return to McCook. The editorial suggests that he had not received a response to his challenge to provide proof of the McCook editor's collusion with the power lobby. Perhaps, speculated Strunk, Norris had decided to return to McCook "to apologize for the cynical letter . . . written in reply" to his original telegram. Or perhaps he planned to return to McCook to administer "a sound thrashing" to Strunk. And with full knowledge of the ultimate answer, the feisty editor asked his readers if it was possible that Norris intended "to prove his statement . . . made without reservations . . . that this newspaper has sold out to the power trusts."⁴⁷

Strunk's original demand that Norris prove the accusation that he and the power trust worked in concert was joined by a new challenge. Referring to the **Gazette's** Service Pledge for 1929, he asked Norris to prove that any part of the pledge favored the power

trust. Strunk went on to remind both his community and Norris that he and his editorials had successfully crusaded for reduced rates by the private Nebraska Light and Power Company. That crusade, claimed Strunk, was far from being on behalf of electrical power companies.⁴⁸

In bringing his editorial shot at Norris to a tenuous close, Strunk reminded his readers and Norris that the last time he checked, it was he who held the papers of ownership for the *Gazette*. In addition, he remained the paper's manager, editor, and publisher. With tongue in cheek, Strunk claimed he had not found any indication that either the power companies or someone other than himself held responsibility for the paper. Given the unfounded accusation by Norris that Strunk had acted on the behest of the power companies, he suggested that the senator might find it necessary "to do [a] little repair work on his political fences" during his McCook stay.⁴⁹

While charge and counter-charge worked their way through the McCook paper as well as other state newspapers, Norris returned to Nebraska. The senator's first stop was in Omaha. There, Norris fielded questions about the differences swirling around himself and Strunk. Adding fuel to the fire, he charged that "old guard members of the 'Republican party simply have induced Mr. Strunk to build up a straw man and then expect to keep [me] busy attacking him. It will look better from their angle to have a paper in my home town fighting me."⁵⁰ Continuing to answer questions about himself and Strunk, he added that they had been long-time friends. Now, however, Norris claimed his friend had turned against him.⁵¹

While not specifically naming Strunk as the writer, Norris mentioned receipt of a recent letter. That letter had the earmarks of being either from Strunk or someone very like-minded. It lends support to Norris' belief, if the letter had been penned by Strunk,

that the McCook editor was working in league with the leadership of the Republican party. Norris told the Omaha gathering:

I received a letter recently from a man who has supported me in every campaign. He informed me that this would have to be the parting of the ways. He could no longer vote for a man who voted for the candidate of the opposition ticket. I am not that kind of partisan. Republicanism is not a fetish. My record will speak for itself.⁵²

Between Omaha and McCook, Norris made several stops as part of his early start on the 1930 election. After leaving Lincoln, he scheduled a brief stop in Minden, Nebraska. While in Minden, Norris addressed a conveniently-timed meeting on flood control. The state-wide meeting had apparently been scheduled before the exchange between Strunk and Norris on the same subject. Strunk was among the interested listeners. In fact, when Norris mounted the speaker's stage in the Minden auditorium, he found Twin Valley well represented in the persons of Strunk and Westermarck. Both men occupied seats on the stage with other state irrigation and flood control leaders.⁵³

For the 800 participants at the Minden meeting, the potentially volatile mix of Norris and Strunk in the same room might have seemed destined for verbal fireworks. Several days earlier, however, Strunk took the sharper edges from his growing dispute with Norris. In an editorial written before the Minden conference, he claimed that Norris' remarks made in Omaha had cleared the McCook publisher of being a "tool of the power trusts."⁵⁴ The vindication seemed no more than a Pyrrhic victory. While Norris had apparently backed away from linking Strunk directly to the power trust, the senator did lump the McCook publisher with the Republican cabal working against his re-election. Norris had previously made it clear that the Republican leadership backed a "representative of the power trust."

In his December 31 editorial, Strunk reiterated his support for Norris. He reminded him that his paper had supported the McCook politician in the past. This

support, wrote Strunk, had been based on his feeling that Norris had been "conscientious and true."⁵⁵ His reminder of past support for Norris, however, suggests he had reconsidered that support. The Norris claim of political intrigue involving Strunk may have breached the senator's previous credibility and conscientiousness with Strunk. He concluded his editorial by reminding voters that their vote should go to the "candidate who represented their territory."⁵⁶

To reinforce his point regarding past support for Norris, Strunk recalled that he "was the only one in the city to extend a friendly hand" when Norris had voted against entry into World War I. Although likely contrary to Norris' personal view, Strunk claimed he continued to support him even after the 1928 Al Smith endorsement.⁵⁷

In addition to the editorial prepared to greet Norris' return home, the McCook paper carried a front-page article designed to show that Strunk's views on flood control did not stand alone. While speaking in Omaha, Norris asked why Strunk had not addressed to other members of the Nebraska congressional delegation similar questions about their support of flood controls. In the December 31 issue of the *Gazette*, Strunk replied that the other congressional members had been asked the same question. He noted that there had been no differences of opinion between the other members of Congress and the position of Twin Valley.⁵⁸ Strunk, however, gave no evidence of that support in this article.⁵⁹

A smaller front-page article in the same December issue carried other disconcerting news preceding Norris' arrival home. According to the news story, Norris had been invited to speak at a regular meeting of the McCook American Legion Post. After the invitation had been issued and accepted, the officers of the Post rescinded their invitation. While not stated in the article, it appears the retraction of the invitation indicated rising impatience with Norris' reluctance to give unqualified support to water

projects in the Republican Valley. Norris' Washington office put as much face-saving into the retraction as possible. According to the senator's office, Norris was "unlikely" to be in McCook at the time of the Legionnaire's meeting.⁶⁰

With the senator's appearance at Minden on January 3, 1930, the two antagonists had their first opportunity to meet head-on. As the two men met in the lobby of a Minden hotel, Strunk spoke first. Hearing Strunk greet Norris with a polite "Hello, Senator," other conference attendees waited for Norris' response. With a bemused look, Norris asked Strunk: "Have you got a gun with you?" Playing the straight-man, Strunk responded: "You know better than that. But, when I saw you reach for your hip, I thought you were going to offer me a drink." Continuing in the spirit of the exchange, Norris insisted: "Well, I thought you'd have a bowie knife or a gun." Laughing at their light-hearted exchange, the two men continued on their separate ways.⁶¹

By the time the McCook paper appeared the afternoon following the Minden meeting, however, there had been no narrowing of the gap between Norris and Strunk, or with Twin Valley. Strunk claimed that the Minden meeting had been no more than a "political fest" in support of Norris. According to the McCook advocate of flood control, the Minden meeting failed to address the real issues involving construction of needed water control projects.

Turning to Norris' attendance at the meeting while preparing to announce his plans for re-election, Strunk claimed that it had been Norris who used the power trust as a straw man. In the past, he said, Norris had withdrawn or displayed luke-warm support for programs that did not totally exclude involvement by electrical power companies. He believed that by blaming the power trusts for holding up water resource programs, the senator really reflected his own coolness toward Nebraska reservoir and irrigation needs.⁶²

In a front-page article accompanying the January 4 editorial, the McCook paper claimed Norris offered no new suggestions for water projects in the valley. More importantly, the paper reported that Norris had offered no support to Twin Valley attempts to obtain congressional funding support. Victor Westermarck claimed Norris "left a negative impression" on the Twin Valley delegation as the result of the senator's remarks at the Minden meeting.⁶³

A related January 4 article revealed that no plans had been made for a Norris and Strunk meeting. In fact, the article noted a claim by Norris that he did not foresee irrigation as being an issue in the coming senatorial election.⁶⁴ That remark might have been a message to both Strunk and Twin Valley that the senator was not about to let his antagonists dictate his legislative agenda for water projects in Nebraska.

The new year offered little change in the continuing bad news facing Norris on his visit home. As previously noted, Strunk wrote an earlier letter concerning Norris and the issue of hydro-power and flood control. The *Gazette's* New Year edition reprinted the letter to Norris, which detailed an invitation from Strunk and Twin Valley to speak at an Oberlin, Kansas, meeting. Strunk invited the senator to use the Oberlin meeting to state his support for water projects in Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas.

In reprinting the November invitation, Strunk reasoned that the combination of the November invitation and Strunk's later public questioning in the November telegram would goad Norris into some definitive statement while in McCook. On the other hand, with those two initiatives, Strunk gained an opportunity to demonstrate Norris' disregard for the water views of the senator's constituency. The senator's view on water issues loomed important as voters in the Republican Valley looked to the 1930 election.

While in McCook, the senator filed the papers placing him on the primary ballot for the upcoming election. In the meantime, with no scheduled meeting with Strunk, and

apparently no further indication of any support from Norris for the flood control proposals by Twin Valley, the simmering dispute between the two men appeared reduced to no more than occasional pot-shots over the next five years. As Hamaker suggests, the dispute between Strunk and Norris might have been no more than their perceptions of their individual duty to their respective constituencies. "Strunk's ideas were insular in character," wrote Hamaker, "the Senator's sweeping, with the nation their limit."⁶⁵

When Norris filed for re-election as a Republican, more than a few eyebrows were raised in both McCook and other parts of Nebraska. Given Norris' unqualified support for Al Smith in 1928, several party members took exception to Norris' continued claim of being a Republican. Strunk, however, in January, 1930, spoke out against the more radical of the Republican faithful. Many of the faithful in the right wing of the party were among those who would be challenged by Kenneth Wherry in the 1932 Republican primary election for governor. In an editorial response to criticism of Norris, Strunk displayed much of the political pragmatism noted previously. The sagacious editor wrote:

What does it matter whether any man's name appears on the Republican ticket, or any other ticket, technically? Morally, there is a responsibility, and that obligation and the manner in which it is taken by the candidate and considered, should have weight with the voter in determining whether he is the man entitled to support and election.⁶⁶

Much of the controversy that split Strunk and Norris in the closing days of 1929 and the opening days of 1930, receded into the collective corners of memory as the Depression, drought, and New Deal occupied both men and their constituents in Southwest Nebraska. Beneath the surface, both men held on to their respective position toward water. Strunk continued to urge Norris to propose legislation for federal projects for the Republican River valley. When Norris withheld his support for the Twin Valley position, the *Gazette* withheld for the next three elections any endorsement for its

hometown senator. During the 1930 election, however, few of Nebraska's large daily newspapers threw their support behind Norris.⁶⁷

During the 1930 primary, the "Grocer" Norris controversy became an issue. In an attempt to take as many votes as possible from Norris, another George W. Norris, a Broken Bow resident, had been persuaded to run in the primary. Generally, it was believed the "Grocer" Norris candidacy had originated within the Republican party hierarchy.⁶⁸ When asked to rule on the questioned filing, the Nebraska Secretary of State found "Grocer" Norris' filing in order. With the matter not laid to rest by the Secretary's ruling, the matter then went to the State Attorney General. The Attorney General, a supporter of Senator George W. Norris, found the "Grocer" Norris filing invalid. Finally, the issue went to the Nebraska Chief Justice who also found the "Grocer" Norris filing invalid.⁶⁹

While Nebraska newspapers, including those opposed to Norris, generally deplored the ethics of the "Grocer" Norris ploy, Strunk remained unmoved by the misuse of the primary process. In one of his more uncharacteristic moves, the McCook editor suggested that Senator Norris may have been responsible for the whole "Grocer" Norris fiasco.⁷⁰ Strunk did not offer his reasoning for this suggestion.

With the 1930 primary drawing near, Strunk explained why he could not support Norris. Under an editorial titled, "Why This Paper is Not Supporting Norris," Strunk reiterated that his opposition to Norris centered on the senator's refusal to support the position of Twin Valley. Strunk announced that "the senator's position required the two men to go their separate ways."⁷¹

In spite of Strunk's interpretation of Norris' position on water control, Hamaker suggests that at several campaign stops, Norris "reaffirmed his position on tributary control."⁷² A former colleague of Strunk supported the senator's position. On the same

day as the 1930 primary, even though in disagreement with Strunk's own pronouncements, the **Gazette** printed a front page article that demonstrated a potentially damaging split in Twin Valley membership over Norris.

A former Twin Valley executive committee member claimed Norris had supported the Twin Valley storage reservoir position. The same individual further hinted that the "power trust" might have indeed been behind the Strunk-Norris disagreement. In support of both Twin Valley and Strunk's attacks on Norris, the article noted that Victor Westermark claimed Norris had not supported Twin Valley at the earlier Minden meeting.⁷³ Westermark, a member of the Twin Valley executive committee, had been with Strunk at the Minden meeting. With some eight months having passed since the Minden meeting, it appears that Westermark may have been unaware or uninformed as to what the senator may have done or said since then. In spite of the attempts to place Norris on the defensive, the popular senator won the primary vote by a wide margin in Red Willow County, out-polling his Republican rival by 1,489 to 289.⁷⁴

In the days before the November general election, Strunk fully utilized his paper to oppose Norris. In an October 30 editorial, he stressed a dual theme that included giving support to a candidate's independence to make decisions along with reminding candidates that they could not disregard the people they represented.⁷⁵ A few days later, Strunk gave editorial support to Democratic senatorial candidate Gilbert Hitchcock. His support for the Omaha publisher came from Hitchcock's "friendly attitude toward irrigation."⁷⁶

In the same issue as the Hitchcock endorsement, Strunk took two other potshots at the senator. In stories seemingly unrelated to the senator's campaign, Strunk noted that Norris had canceled his **Gazette** subscription. According to the paper's account of the cancellation, Norris claimed the paper was "under control of monopolistic interests." In addition to the black-border and bold type-set of the cancellation announcement, pictures

of two houses dominated the front page. One house was described as the senator's lakeside home in Waupaca, Wisconsin. The other picture showed the senator's McCook home. Of the McCook home, the paper asserted that Norris had not spent a night in it for years.⁷⁷

In the November General Election, Norris easily defeated his Democratic rival, Gilbert M. Hitchcock, by a state-wide margin of 247,118 to 172,795.⁷⁸ In his editorial ruminations on the Norris victory, Strunk retained his usual sense of magnanimity. In accepting not only the state-wide support for the McCook politician, but noting the senator's strong showing in Red Willow County, Strunk wrote: "It should be remembered, always in an election that only one candidate can be successful to an office, and that a good loser is as much to be respected as the victor."⁷⁹ A previous chapter on Strunk's political activism demonstrates the McCook publisher's pragmatic acceptance of the Norris victory.

Norris was not up for re-election in 1934. His name, however, was brought into the election process by a Strunk editorial. On the ballot for the 1934 election was a proposal to amend to the Nebraska Constitution. Long supported by Norris, the proposed amendment would change the state legislature from a partisan two-house body to a non-partisan unicameral. In two separate editorials in October 1934, Strunk argued that Norris' supported plan was not necessary. In addition, he claimed that the state was not prepared for such a major change in its government. Yet the amendment won by a comfortable margin.⁸⁰

The importance of the next senatorial election in 1936 weighed heavily on Norris as well as the New Deal leadership. The McCook senator's importance to the New Deal was made evident when President Roosevelt "came into Nebraska to urge the re-election of Norris."⁸¹ With the New Deal and Norris joined hand-in-hand, both Strunk and his

Pawnee City friend, Wherry, decided against supporting Norris. No doubt Strunk subscribed to Wherry's position that Norris supported Roosevelt's continued New Deal attempts to usurp state authority.⁸²

Wherry remembered that Norris failed to support his 1932 primary campaign for governor.⁸³ In 1934, when he ran in the Republican primary for senator, he received only a back-handed endorsement from Norris, who said he would not support Wherry's principal opponent, Robert Simmons.⁸⁴ His own lack of support for Norris in 1936 appears to have been a *quid pro quo* for the senator's indifference during past Wherry campaigns. Norris' lack of support for Wherry might be evident in the Pawnee City politician's ties with Strunk. It is doubtful Norris would have supported a friend of Strunk while the McCook editor was still engaged in editorial potshots. At the same time, given Norris' known disdain for political partisanship, it is doubtful he would have given support to Wherry in any case. With Norris entering the race as an independent candidate running against the chosen Republican candidate as well as the nominated Democratic candidate, it was unlikely that Republican Wherry would have chosen to support Norris in opposition to the position of the Republican leadership.

In explaining his decision not to support Norris in 1936, Strunk reminded *Gazette* readers of the senator's failure since 1928 to support either the objectives of Twin Valley or those of the 1930 McCook Flood Control Conference. When Norris "declined to join the people of Nebraska," wrote Strunk, the senator had done so

because he feared it was a power movement, instead of water conservation. At that time he charged this newspaper with being owned and controlled by the power trusts. Today . . . this newspaper is fighting for water conservation and the senior senator from Nebraska is aligned with power.⁸⁵

The last comment by Strunk warrants a brief explanation. In December 1936, just weeks after the general election, McCook voters again went to the polls. This time they

were asked to cast their votes for a proposal to replace McCook's private power generating plant with one built with Public Works Administration funds. The McCook plant was operated by the Nebraska Light & Power Company. The plan would have brought in power from a regional public power grid aligned with Sutherland and Tri-County. As a part of his support for the programs along the Platte River, Norris favored the extension of the power grid to McCook. Coincidentally, a group of McCook businessmen had attempted to purchase the McCook plant from the Nebraska Light & Power Company. Interestingly, a purchase agreement had been drawn up and sent to Norris for his signature. No reason was given for the involvement of Norris. Apparently no further action was taken in advance of the electric-power issue being placed before the voters.⁸⁶

Strunk and Twin Valley took exception to this intrusion of public power into an area served by a private power plant. Additionally, Strunk and his local supporters realized they would most likely lose the local power plant. Left unsaid, however, was the knowledge that power would come from an entity strongly supported by Norris. When the voters of McCook went to the polls for the special election on joining the power grid originating from the waters of the Platte River, they voted to retain the city's existing electrical power supply arrangement.⁸⁷ Although they had strongly backed Norris the month before, McCook voters demonstrated that public power was not an issue in their community.

The planning and building of water projects in Southwest Nebraska received little attention during the first half of the 1930s, the closing half of the decade, however, found increasing favor of those projects with politicians more attuned to the position of Strunk and Twin Valley. As noted in the previous chapter, the 1935 Flood became a catalyst for much of the legislation that eventually brought irrigation and flood control to the

Republican Valley. At the same time, Norris and Strunk found more common ground after the flood than they had experienced in the years since the founding of Twin Valley in 1928.

In 1937, Strunk reported that Norris stood behind the Republican Valley and Twin Valley. And by extension, Norris stood by Strunk. Whether Norris' views had changed or simply became merged with Strunk's, or whether Strunk's view had recognized the outside forces of politics and funding that buffeted Norris, the similar vision of both men for water projects along the Republican became much clearer after a visit by Norris to McCook. While in the city he reportedly left a message for Strunk at the *Gazette* office. Contained in the message, wrote Strunk, was a Norris promise to "use his influence to see to it that a flood control program be put underway throughout the territory." In replying to the senator's message, Strunk expressed hope for "a few millions of appropriations" for Twin Valley through the senator's efforts.⁸⁸

During the early months of 1938, Strunk continued to press for federal funding. In a February editorial, he urged the Nebraska Congressional delegation to work together to support water project funding legislation then pending in the House. In June 1938, government programs for the valley had come full-circle to one proposed in 1936. Strunk must have written with some consternation when he explained that a proposal for a "little TVA" was actually designed to hand over McCook's existing power operations to the Sutherland district.⁸⁹ This was similar to the scheme which McCook voters had defeated in 1936.

For his own part, Norris found over the years that he had little control over some of the legislation needed to obtain funding for his state and for Southwest Nebraska. In a letter to W. W. Hoagland of North Platte, one of the leaders in the Sutherland diversion

effort above Tri-County, Norris bemoaned the role of "scientific engineers." More could have been done earlier claimed Norris, but he had been

handicapped in the years that have passed because for the last hundred years the alleged scientific engineers have held that the way to cope with flood waters of the Mississippi River was to build levees and dikes along the lower portion of that great stream.⁹⁰

In the same letter, Norris provided a further explanation of his work on the Tennessee River. Even though that effort seemed far from the needs of Nebraska, the senator claimed he had worked "incessantly to establish a precedent for the government to expand public money in the building of dams and tributaries."⁹¹ Norris' claim was reasonable and practical. Given the state of the nation in the midst of a depression, however, government largesse on the Tennessee River translating to similar funding on the Platte and Republican was speculative at the best. In addition, there existed a disparity in political power between the two regions. That disparity worked against the less populous Nebraska with only four congressional districts.

When Norris passed away in 1944, less than two years after his defeat by Strunk's close friend, Kenneth Wherry, Strunk could not contain his admiration for his friend and sometimes foe. In an editorial eulogy, Strunk traced the Senator's life in McCook. While praising Norris' national accomplishments, Strunk kept the memory of Norris close to the people of Southwest Nebraska. In words similar to his post-1936 election acclamation for Norris, Strunk commented:

Former Senator George W. Norris was one of America's great men. He was one of this nation's greatest statesmen. He visualized the answer to the problems of not only this territory but of other parts of the United States affected by drought and at the same time devastated by flood. Father of the TVA, he drew a pattern of control and utilization of such waters in the form of power and irrigation to lighten the burden of humanity and make the soil produce.⁹²

By the time of his death, Norris held no animosity to the opposition he had faced from Strunk over the previous fifteen years. It might seem strange that neither Lowitt nor Norris' autobiography mention either Strunk by name or provide a discussion of the disagreement between the hometown senator and hometown publisher. At the time of Norris' death, however, the McCook paper and its publisher made clear that whatever the differences between "McCook's man on Main Street" and the "Gentle Knight," those conflicts had been relegated to the past.

In extensive coverage of the senator's funeral and burial in his hometown, the **Gazette's** coverage alluded to an interview with Norris a few days before his death. Most likely that interview had been with Strunk. The news article notes only that Norris gave the interview to the **Gazette**. There are no references to the interview in any of the paper's issues before or after Norris' death. It would be reasonable that such a discussion with Norris would have been later reported in its entirety. In the **Gazette** article, however, he was quoted as having claimed: "I hold no grudge against any person for any reason. You know, that's a mighty comfortable feeling."⁹³

In later years, when asked by a reporter about the controversy with Norris, Strunk replied: "The only difference Senator Norris and I ever had was that the senator was about 99 percent for development of power. I was about 99 percent for the development of irrigation, flood control and recreation areas."⁹⁴ While his statement perhaps oversimplified Norris' position and ignores the senator's support of many of the same uses of water proposed by Strunk, his answer indicates the difference between the two men had been largely one-dimensional.

Still later, when he learned Norris' name had been left off a list of the greatest senators of all times as determined by a Senate committee, Strunk challenged the committee's action. In support of the late senator, Strunk wrote that "when the people

chose the greatest senator, in Nebraska, we will label Senator George Norris as one of the greatest statesman this country ever produced."⁹⁵

Endnotes

¹ In a telephone interview with the author on November 15, 1996, Norris biographer Richard Lowitt described the Strunk-Norris relationship as probably being "perfunctory." Strunk is not mentioned in either Lowitt's work or in Norris' autobiography. During the course of their controversy, Norris referred to Strunk as a "long time friend." In the bibliographical essay to **George W. Norris: The Persistence of a Progressive** (p. 577), Lowitt wrote that in the senator's autobiography **Fighting Liberal**, Norris "seemingly determined to ignore individuals and groups who had opposed programs he favored."

² Richard Lowitt, **George W. Norris: The Triumph of a Progressive, 1933-1944** (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 16-25.

³ Charles A. Flowerday, ed., **Flat Water: A History of Nebraska and Its Water**, Resource Report, no. 12. Conservation and Survey Division, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1993), 204-207.

⁴ Robert B. Crosby, "Dedication of the George W. Norris West Legislative Chamber," **Nebraska History** (Spring 1985), 4.

⁵ Annette Trimble, interview with the author, summer 1994.

⁶ Crosby, "Dedication."

⁷ Richard Lowitt, **George W. Norris: The Making of a Progressive, 1861-1912** (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963), 38-45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹ Robert T. Ray and Lois Rutledge, **Trails West to Red Willow County Nebraska: Past and Present Family History and Biography**, (N.p.: n.p., 1982), 153.

¹⁰ Merl Peek, interview with Charles Peek, Summer 1988.

¹¹ Linda Hein, letter to author, November 4, 1994. Hein is curator at the George W. Norris State Historical Site in McCook. She interviewed "Bus" Bahl several times concerning the Strunk-Norris relationship.

¹² Gene O. Morris, "Boy Editor," **McCook Daily Gazette**, June 24, 1994.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Lowitt, **The Making of a Progressive**, 79.

¹⁵ Richard L. Neuberger and Stephen B. Kahn, **Integrity: The Life Of George W. Norris** (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1937), 204.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Richard Lowitt, **George W. Norris: The Persistence of a Progressive, 1913-1933** (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 450-451; George W. Norris, **Fighting Liberal: The Autobiography of George W. Norris** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), 352-353.

¹⁸ Lowitt, **The Persistence of a Progressive**, 267.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁰ Flowerday, **Flat Water**, 204.

²¹ Gene E. Hamaker, **Irrigation Pioneers: A History of the Tri-County Project To 1935** (Minden: Warp Publishing Company, 1964), 118.

²² Lowitt, **The Persistence of a Progressive**, 349.

²³ Norris, **Fighting Liberal**, 248.

²⁴ George W. Norris letter to B. H. Livesay, March 34, 1936, George W. Norris Papers, MS3298, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

²⁵ Norris, **Fighting Liberal**, 248.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 375. The complaint by Norris' constituency over his attention to water issues in other areas of the country was not isolated. See William C. Pratt, "Employer Offensive in Nebraska Politics, 1946-1949," in **Politics in the Postwar American West**, ed. Richard Lowitt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 136, 335. Pratt notes that Nebraska labor unions were generally for Norris. The Teamsters, however, criticized the senator for not giving as much attention to state labor needs as he had to national labor issues. Labor in Nebraska asked for "a little T.V.A. for the workers of Nebraska."

²⁸ Neuberger and Kahn, **Integrity**, 249-250, 267.

²⁹ Allen D. Strunk, ed., "Harry D. Strunk Newspaperman Reclamationist," **Centennial Edition 1882-1982**, (McCook: McCook Daily Gazette, 1982, n.p.n.

³⁰ Shirley Strunk Powell, completed interview questionnaire to author, April 1996.

³¹ Norris, **Fighting Liberal**, 261.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Nov. 11, 1929, editorial.

³⁴ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk." The **Centennial Edition** included a portion of the December 14, 1929, letter from Norris to Strunk. A more complete copy of the letter is found on page 100 of Gene Hamaker's **History of the Tri-County Project**. At this point, it is noted that much of the original correspondence that took place between Strunk and Norris has not been located. Allen Strunk gave to the Museum of the High Plains in McCook, the original copies of his father's letters detailing the Strunk-Norris controversy. The correspondence given to the museum included the originals of Norris' letters. After both a catalog

and physical search of the museum, the letters have not been located. The museum director did relate that some museum items had been destroyed by water damage. Apparently the Strunk and Norris letters had neither been cataloged nor safeguarded. Linda Hein of the George W. Norris Historical Home Site in McCook undertook extensive research for the author to locate Norris' copies of related correspondence in the Norris archives in Washington and the Norris papers at the Nebraska Historical Society. The author made a further physical search for the letters in the Museum of the High Plains and the Nebraska State Historical Society archives. No originals or copies of the correspondence have been located in either repository. The copy of the letter referenced by Hamaker came from the manuscripts of one of the leaders of the Tri-County Project.

³⁵ Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 99.

³⁶ Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk."

³⁷ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Nov. 23, 1929.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, editorial.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 10, 1929; Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 100.

⁴¹ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 12, 1929.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1929, editorial.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 23, 1929, editorial.

⁴⁵ Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 99.

⁴⁶ **The Lincoln Star**, Dec. 26, 1929.

⁴⁷ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 28, 1929, editorial.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ **The Lincoln Star**, Dec. 30, 1929.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 100.

⁵⁴ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 31, 1929, editorial.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., front page article.

⁵⁹ Hamaker provides some indication of general support by several members of the Nebraska delegation. In **Tri-County Project**, he covers specific actions by Congressmen W. G. Sears and Robert G. Simmons. Sears introduced a bill in January 1930 that included objectives discussed at the McCook Flood Control Conference. Sears lost in his 1930 re-election bid. Simmons supported reservoir construction for irrigation.

⁶⁰ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Dec. 31, 1929, front page article.

⁶¹ Ibid., Jan. 4, 1930. The article appearing in the McCook paper was datelined Minden and appears to have been written by a third party. The article opined that "the controversy between the two may end a friendship that has endured for 20 years." No other reference to this exchange has been found. **The Lincoln Star** carried a summary of the conference and Norris' remarks. The Lincoln paper made no mention of the Strunk-Norris exchange even though that paper carried substantial coverage of the Strunk-Norris feud after the senator's arrival in Nebraska. J. E. Lawrence, editor of the Lincoln paper, would later work closely with Norris on the senator's autobiography. The Nebraska Historical Society Archives has a folder of correspondence between Norris and Lawrence in the Norris papers.

⁶² Ibid., Jan. 4, 1930, editorial.

⁶³ Ibid., front page article.

⁶⁴ Ibid., front page article. Hamaker refers to a possible McCook meeting between Strunk and Norris. The source of Hamaker's information came from the January 6, 1930, issue of the **Hastings Tribune**. The **Tribune** reported that Strunk indicated he and Norris would work together for irrigation. Again, reported the **Hastings'** paper, Strunk maintained his doubts about the importance of power. A survey of the **Gazette** for the period in which a meeting between Strunk and Norris could have taken place finds no reference to such a meeting. This survey extended for a period of two weeks beyond Norris' departure for Washington.

⁶⁵ Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 100.

⁶⁶ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Jan. 22, 1930, editorial.

⁶⁷ Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 106.

⁶⁸ Lowitt, **The Persistence of a Progressive**, 472.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ **McCook Daily Gazette**, July 11, 1930, editorial.

⁷¹ Ibid., Aug. 8, 1930, editorial.

- ⁷² Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 106.
- ⁷³ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Aug. 12, 1930; Hamaker, **Tri-County Project**, 106.
- ⁷⁴ Lowitt, **The Persistence of a Progressive**, 477.
- ⁷⁵ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Oct. 14, 1944, editorial.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Oct. 29, 1944, editorial.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, front page article. Norris and his wife spent many of their McCook visits in the city's Keystone Hotel. According to Richard Lowitt, Norris spent his summers in Wisconsin because of his difficulty in coping with the heat of Southwest Nebraska. (Lowitt, telephone interview with author.) The **Gazette's** assertion about the senator not living in his house may have stimulated home remodeling income for McCook contractors. The Norris Papers in the State Archives include a folder on correspondence, plans, and billings for remodeling of the Norris home in 1931. The remodeled home is today a state historical site.
- ⁷⁸ Lowitt, **The Persistence of a Progressive**, 481.
- ⁷⁹ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Nov. 5, 1930, editorial.
- ⁸⁰ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Oct. 11, 30, 1934.
- ⁸¹ Crosby, "Dedication," 5.
- ⁸² Harl A. Dalstrom, "Kenneth S. Wherry" (Ph. D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1965), 211.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 109, 112.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 131-132.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Sept. 9, 1936, editorial.
- ⁸⁶ Strunk, "McCook Power District, Those Early Years."
- ⁸⁷ Neuberger and Kahn, **Integrity**, 377;
- ⁸⁸ **McCook Daily Gazette**, Jan. 5, 1937, editorial.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, June 6, 1938, editorial.
- ⁹⁰ George W. Norris letter to W. W. Hoagland, April 29, 1933, George W. Norris Papers, MS3298, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁹² **McCook Daily Gazette**, Sept. 4, 1944, editorial.

⁹³ **Ibid.**, front page article.

⁹⁴ **Strunk**, "Harry Strunk."

⁹⁵ **Ibid.**

CONCLUSION

On a credenza behind his desk in his **Gazette** office, Harry Strunk kept a plaque that caught the interest of many visitors. That plaque read: "On the Plains of Hesitation Bleach the Bones of Unnumbered Thousands Who at the Dawn of Victory Sat Down to Wait and Waiting Died."¹ Strunk spent a life-time working toward victory in his quest for water control projects along the Republican River valley. When lesser men might have given up in the face of both opposition and indifference to his visions of a valley blooming with irrigated crops and free from the threat of floods, he persevered in his dreams of flood control and irrigation.

In analyzing Strunk's role as a conscientious newspaper publisher, we might isolate two elements that define his editorial and journalistic efforts. First, he was an activist journalist. He used his paper to support issues important to his community. His editorial stance did not shy away from either public fights or being a public voice. Strunk worked effortlessly to bring to the attention of both readers and politicians the need of the Republican Valley for water control projects. Such activism could be expected from an editor. The second element of his efforts, however, made it evident that he used his role as a publisher to participate in the political process. His leadership roles in the Twin Valley Association of Commercial Clubs and later the Republican Valley Conservation Association were strong indications of his interest beyond the editorial page. Through these, he displayed his belief that his community could stand up to the challenges of economic depression and adverse weather conditions and the scarcity of water. He recognized, however, that some challenges could only be met by government assistance.

From a humble origin of being a printer's devil and tramp printer to being a newspaper owner, publisher and editor, Strunk confounded supporters and critics alike in his accomplishments as a water reclamationist. He was able to utilize his considerable

power as a publisher and editor to work toward his goals in water reclamation. In a region of the country recognized as part of the "Great American Desert," he maintained a dream of storing scarce water in times of plenty for use in irrigation in times of drought.

To realize his dream, Strunk took on the political icons of his day. As a co-founder and member of the executive committee of the Twin Valley Association of Commercial Clubs, Strunk kept the editorial fires lit beneath the sometimes unmoving feet of indifferent politicians. At the same time, Strunk worked tirelessly to make sure that Southwest Nebraska was not left out of any equation that brought federal funding for water projects into the state. At times, Strunk seemed at odds with other similar water interests in the western half of Nebraska. That appearance, however, said more for differences in philosophy and goals of the competing interests than in the single-mindedness of Strunk.

Although he appeared at times to be confrontational and irascible, both his manner and objectives stood firmly rooted in the service motto he had established for himself and his newspaper. Etched above the entrance to the new building he had built in 1926, Strunk let his community know that "Service is the Rent We Pay for the Space We Occupy in This World." That motto became the focus and direction of his editorial and personal commitment to community. Not only active as a newspaper publisher, Strunk held membership and offices in many local and regional organizations. He was active in the Elk's Club, Twin Valley Association of Commercial Clubs, the McCook Chamber of Commerce, and the Republican Valley Conservation Association. In each of those organizations, he continued his effort to work on behalf of the community good.

When he challenged politicians to do more for the needs of Southwest Nebraska, he did not leave unscathed one of the most prominent and popular politicians of the day.

In his struggle to focus federal attention and subsequent federal funding on Southwest Nebraska, Strunk challenged his fellow townsman, Senator George W. Norris.

Norris had an established constituency that reached far beyond the boundaries of his hometown or his state. On a national scale, Norris worked as vigorously on behalf of the Tennessee River valley as did Strunk on the Republican River valley. The McCook politician distrusted any water project that might involve private hydro-electric power operations. Strunk, however, believed that the need for flood control and irrigation outweighed any concerns about private power companies. Both men believed that federal moneys should be expended for water control on the upper reaches of the streams and tributaries that created floods on the lower Mississippi.

The disagreement between Strunk and Norris over private versus public hydro-electric power control led to a volatile exchange of correspondence in the months leading up to the 1930 election. In the senatorial elections prior to 1930, Strunk and his papers had stood solidly in support of Norris. After Norris' decision in 1928 to support the Democratic candidate for president, Alfred E. Smith, and Norris' further decision not to give unquestioning support to the objectives of both Twin Valley and Strunk, the newspaper publisher withheld his paper's endorsement of Norris. Withholding of the paper's endorsement, however, did not translate into a withholding of Strunk's personal admiration for the senator.

In spite of the spirited exchange of charge and counter-charge that dominated the politics of Southwest Nebraska for three senatorial elections, the two men found a common bond for their respective positions on flood control. In May 1935, a devastating Memorial Day flood struck all along the Republican River. Shortly after the flood, Norris announced his support for reservoirs that echoed much of the planning that had been represented by both Strunk and Twin Valley since 1928.

For half a century, Strunk published and edited newspapers in Southwest Nebraska. During that period, his extended community, as evidenced by the area covered by his papers, witnessed a world war, depression, drought, and unsurpassed change in the political landscape. Strunk led his paper and community in the quest for economic development of both town-based businesses and farming. The McCook publisher never lost sight of the importance played by water in economic development. Without storage water for irrigation and holding reservoirs to control flooding, the future of Southwest Nebraska would have been placed at risk. It is important to recognize that Strunk is remembered as much for his efforts on behalf of water control and reclamation as for his role as a publisher.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) reminded us that historical research evolves into three distinct areas. Depending on the subject and available sources, history can be either monumental, antiquarian, or critical.² Monumental history requires models and teachers. It is history in which we find our sources for inspiration and guidance. It is history in which we find our own weaknesses and shortcomings in leadership. Strunk's career as a publisher and crusader for the cause of water resources serves as a commendable model for monumental history. His dedication to a cause and his leadership in that cause were significant.

Not only did his dedication and leadership have meaning at the time of his greatest effort but the results of his effort are present today. Through his leadership, Strunk gave identification to Southwest Nebraska through its chain of lakes and water reclamation programs. He provided the necessary direction that led to the upper Republican drainage area becoming a center of flood control for the Mississippi River. Such direction would appear to have put the McCook publisher firmly on the side of other water reclamationists in the Missouri River basin. Whether he identified himself as a supporter of other upper

Missouri basin water projects to the exclusion or limitation of similar projects in the lower basin or along the Mississippi is not clear. His support for water projects outside his own region of Nebraska is muted at best. What we can surmise, however, is Strunk's total emphasis on water projects that first and foremost benefited Southwest Nebraska.

Perhaps former governor and resident of McCook Frank Morrison stated it best when addressing the accomplishments of Harry Strunk. In noting his role in actively working on behalf of his community and directly challenging government to do its part for the citizens along the Republican River valley, Morrison said:

The entire nation owes Harry Strunk a great measure of gratitude. Strunk should be an example of what government can do, properly used by the people under dedicated and unselfish leadership, to improve our environment. Strunk never feared the intrusion of the federal government . . . as long as the people who are in control of government are using their government as a tool.³

Endnotes

¹ Allen D. Strunk, "Harry D. Strunk Newspaperman and Reclamationist," **Centennial Edition 1882-1982**, (McCook: **McCook Daily Gazette**, 1982); Carl T. Curtis, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.

² Kathleen Nutt, "Irish Identity and the Writing of History," **Eire-Ireland** 29 (Summer 1994): 160-161.

³ Frank Morrison, interview with Charles Peek, summer 1988.

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