

## Politics

The immigrants brought to America a sturdy tradition of political interest and a familiarity with the fundamentals of local self-government. Politics, next to religion, was their chief source of intellectual stimulation. Reaching the Middle West earlier than the Swedes and Danes, and greatly outnumbering them in the formative period of the midwestern states, the Norwegians gained a political foothold, an advantage which the other groups never overcame. Among the legislators elected to the General Assembly in the past century, Norwegians have outnumbered Swedes more than two to one and Danes more than three to one. To Congress Iowans have sent three men of Norwegian stock, one Swede, and one Dane.

### *Local Government*

The Norwegians came to unoccupied regions, settled in compact groups, and almost immediately had a hand in organizing township government. When, for example, the first election in Logan township, Winnebago County, was held in the 1870's, seven Norwegians were elected to posts.

Election to county offices came more slowly. Americans at first held the key posts, but when they rose to judgeships or went to the legislature,



immigrants began to move into the courthouse. One of the first to hold office was Erick Anderson, leader of a party of Norwegians to Winneshiek County in 1850. He was elected sheriff in 1858 and until 1873 was succeeded by other Norwegians. G. T. Lommen was elected treasurer of the county in 1869. In Worth County, Norwegians were elected to the board of supervisors as early as 1861, in the mid 'seventies to the offices of recorder and treasurer. In Winnebago County the same thing was happening.

Americans continued to hold the offices of engineer, coroner, attorney, and superintendent of schools until around 1900. Then with the rising educational level of the immigrants' children these offices, too, came to the Norwegians. Clara B. Olson was superintendent of the Winnebago County schools from 1929 to 1949. Norwegian-born Ole T. Naglestad was Woodbury's county attorney from 1914 to 1930.

#### *State Government*

The first representative from the Norwegian settlements to make his appearance in the Iowa legislature was the Lutheran pastor, C. L. Clausen, who founded St. Ansgar. In 1856 he was nominated for the Iowa house of representatives from the 46th district, comprising Winneshiek, Howard, Winnebago, Worth, and Mitchell counties. In accepting the nomination, he wrote in the Norwegian American newspaper *Emigranten*:



My chief consideration is the hope of uniting all our countrymen here in Northern Iowa in the Republican party; for the realization of whose principles I, with God's help, entertain the only hope for checking the further spread of slavery and for preserving our free republican institutions from destruction. Thus far my hope has not been in vain and as far as my election is concerned that seems quite certain, even though I have encountered no little opposition due to local differences of opinion. I also consider it almost certain that the whole Republican ticket will win in this district.

Clausen won over his opponent, George H. Shannon, by a wide margin and attended the session that assembled in Iowa City for the last time. He did not stand for re-election in 1858. In 1867 Governor Stone designated him to represent the state at the Universal Exposition in Paris. In the 1870's he again served the state when the governor appointed him to the board of immigration.

The second Norwegian to make his way to the Iowa assembly was Ole Nelson from Winneshiek County. He was born in Norway and had lived for seven years in Iowa when he came to the ninth General Assembly in January, 1862. From legislative documents we learn that he was 22 years old, weighed 140 pounds, had no boarding place in Des Moines, was a Lutheran, and that his "condition in life" was "single," but we are not informed of his party affiliation! He was re-elected in 1863. In the 1870's three Norwegians served in the legislature, all from Winneshiek



County; during the 1880's, five, and in the 1890's, six, always representing the heavily Norwegian counties from the northern part of the state. The number continued to increase after 1900. As later generations take over, the task of spotting Norwegian backgrounds becomes more difficult. Nevertheless, it is clear that the peak of "Norwegian" representation came between the mid-twenties and mid-thirties when each General Assembly had about a dozen men of this background.

Altogether over the past century some eighty to ninety members of the legislature have come from this sector of Iowa's population. Twenty were Norwegian-born. Farm and small town business interests form the occupational backgrounds of the majority of the legislators, though one finds a scattering of lawyers, teachers, and ministers. Party affiliation is heavily Republican. Only about 8 per cent have been Democrats. About a fifth of the entire group has served in the senate.

Election to the governorship has never come to anyone of Norwegian descent, but the chair has been occupied by an Iowan whose father came from Norway in 1871 and whose maternal grandmother came in the 1850's. Leo Elthon, who was born in Fertile, was elected to the state senate in 1933 and after two decades in this post was elected lieutenant governor in 1952. He was serving in this office at the time of Governor William Beardsley's death in November, 1954, and sub-



sequently acted as governor until January, 1955.

Rollo Bergeson, deputy secretary of state, 1938 to 1941, and secretary of state, 1946 to 1948, belongs to the third generation of a politically-inclined family. His grandparents came to Iowa from Stavanger, Norway. His father, Berges Bergeson, was elected to the state legislature from Palo Alto County in 1906, serving one term. A brother, Emlin Bergeson, was appointed to the state tax commission for a six-year term beginning July, 1956.

Gilbert S. Gilbertson, after a term in the senate, was elected state treasurer in 1900 and served until 1907. His parents came from Norway.

#### *National Government*

For over half a century, 1898 to 1958, Iowa's northeastern counties, the fourth congressional district — since 1941 the second district — have sent to congress men of Norwegian background. Only three have served over this long period, two Republicans and one Democrat.

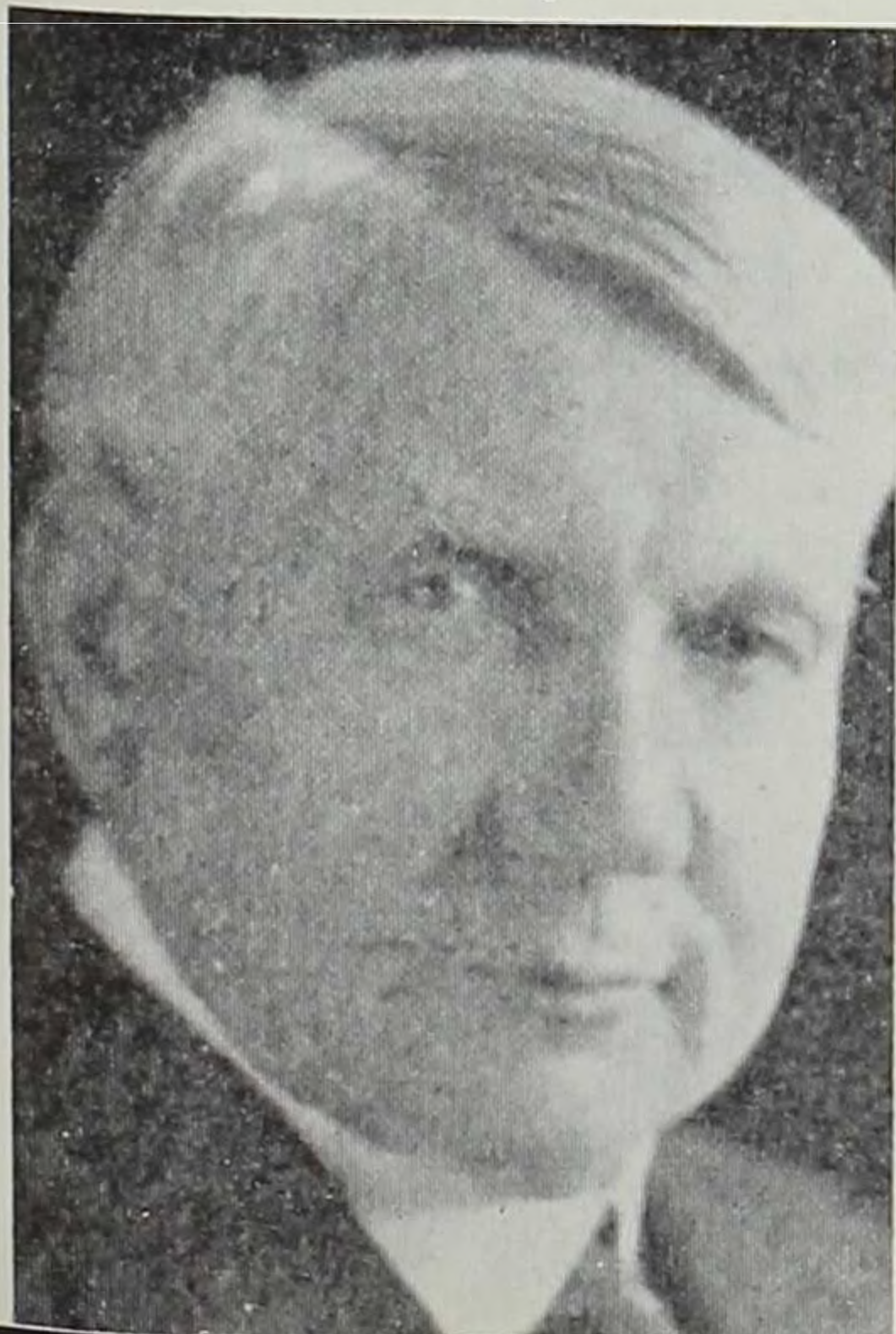
The first to be elected from this area was Gilbert N. Haugen of Northwood. Born in Wisconsin, he came to Iowa with his immigrant parents. He acquired large landholdings in Worth County, established banks, a livestock and implement business. His political career began in 1887 as a county treasurer; for two years he served in the state legislature. Winning the congressional seat for the fourth district in 1898, he moved onto



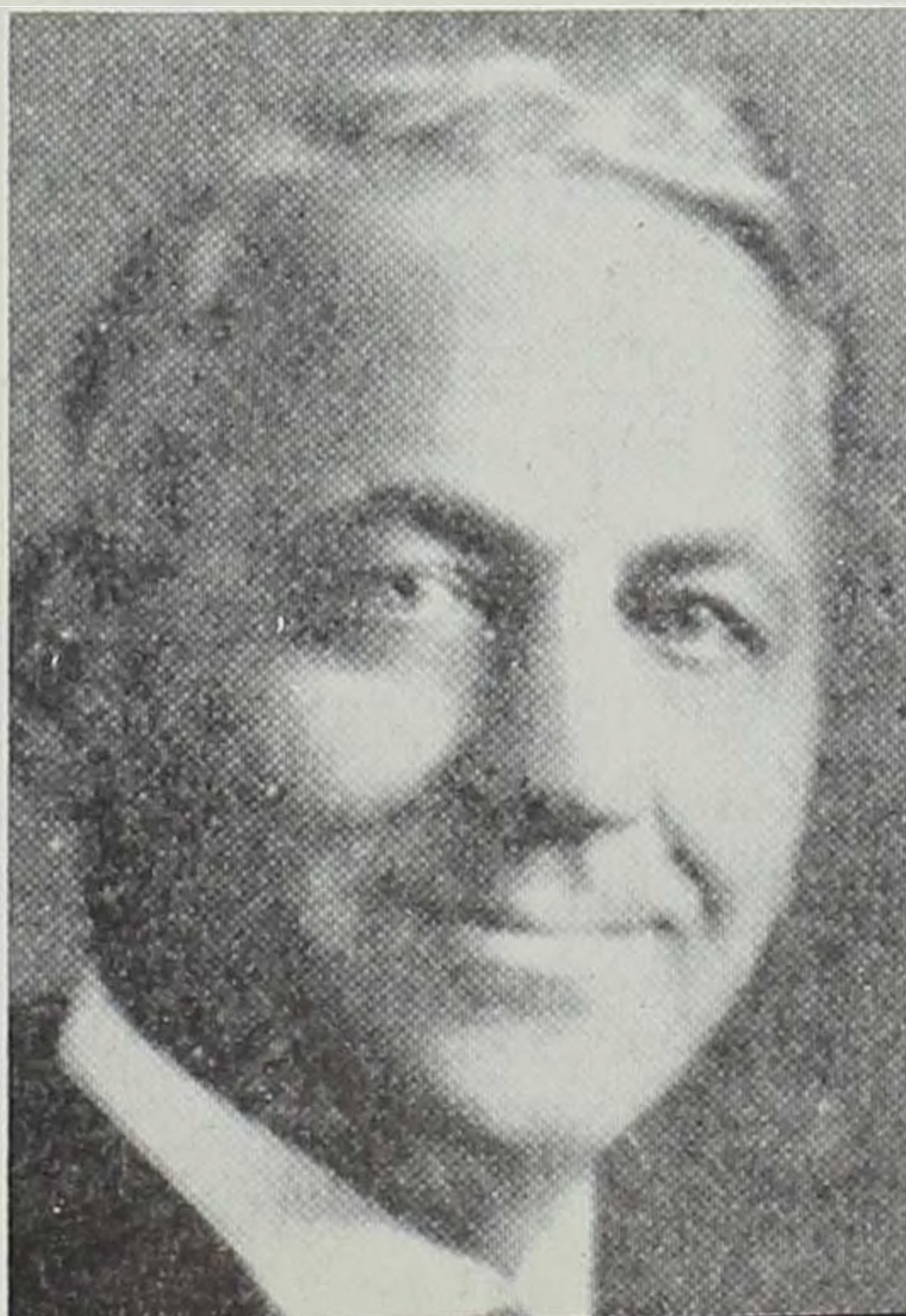
the national scene and for the next thirty-four years served continuously in the house of representatives, the longest term of any Iowan in congress. His major contribution came through his membership on the committee on agriculture, whose chairman he was from 1919 to 1931. He introduced scores of bills concerned with protection and relief of the farmer. The one that has gone down in the annals of American history is the McNary-Haugen bill. In the Democratic landslide of 1932 Haugen was defeated, losing all the counties of his district. He died in 1933.

The new Democratic representative from the fourth district was Frederick E. Biermann, editor and publisher of the *Decorah Journal* and for many years one of Iowa's prominent Democrats. His Norwegian-born father and uncle had been active in Minnesota politics. For six years he served in congress. In the election of 1938 his Republican opponent, Henry O. Talle, an eco-

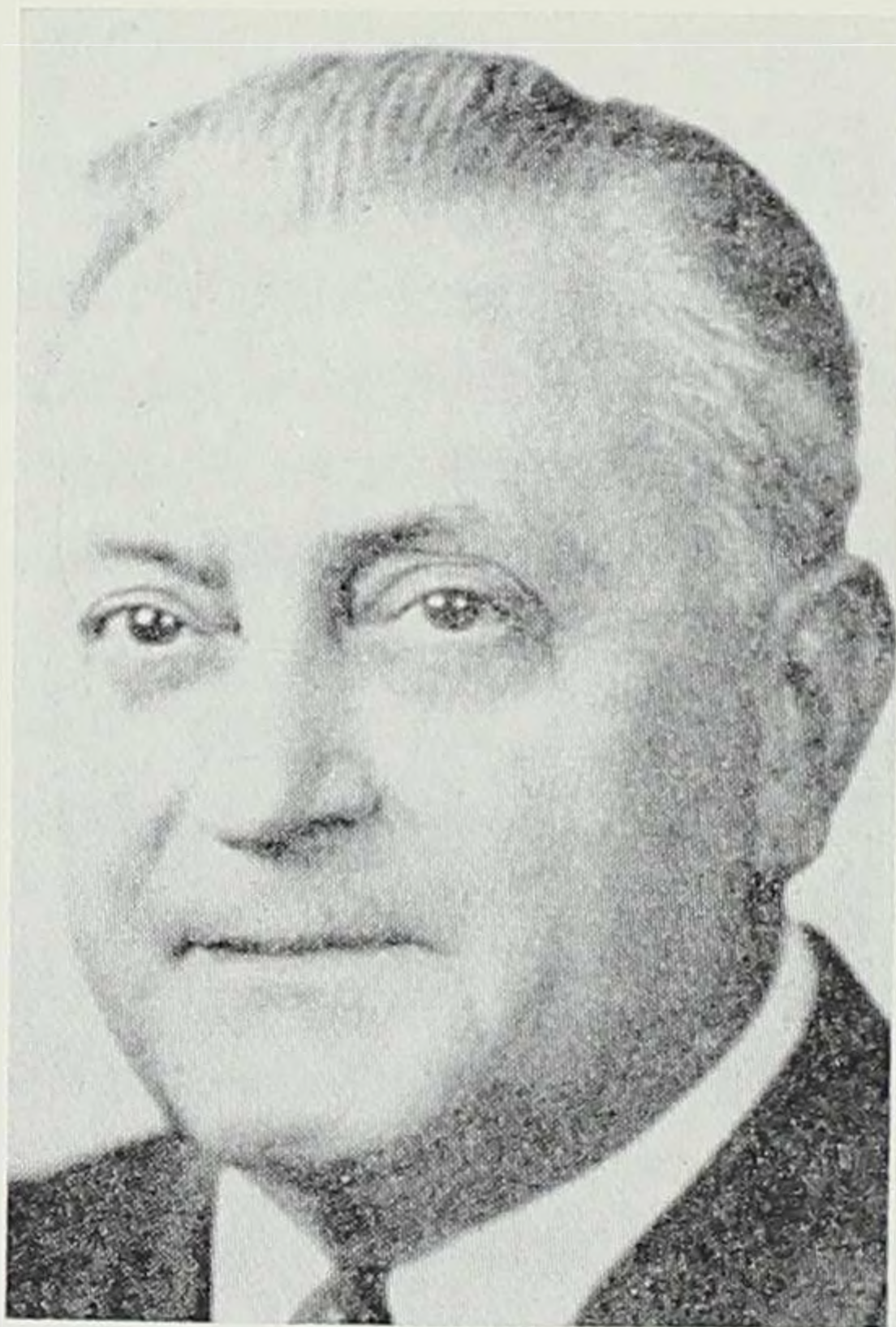
G. N. Haugen



F. E. Biermann







H. O. Talle

nomics professor at Luther College, won by four thousand votes out of a total of 93,000. During his twenty-year congressional career Talle had top rank on three committees, banking and currency, joint economic, and joint committee on defense production. His defeat in 1958 marked the end of the "Norwegian" line.

### *Party Preferences*

The Norwegians have been loyal Republicans. Lincoln, slavery, and the Homestead Act were compelling reasons for identification with this party when they first came in large numbers to Iowa between 1860 and '70. There were dissenters, of course, but the comment of the editor of Estherville's *Northern Vindicator*, in 1872, covered most of Iowa's Norwegian voters: "The Norwegians of this county being an intelligent, reading people, are reported to us as — with few exceptions — solid for Grant. They are nearly all Republicans. . . ."

The fourth district congressional election of 1888 furnishes some evidence of the sentiment of the Norwegian voter. The Democratic candidate was a Norwegian, Professor Lars S. Reque of Luther College; the Republican was Joseph H.



Sweney of Osage. In a campaign directed at Norwegian voters the Republican press, the Decorah *Republican* in particular, attacked the Democratic candidate by interviewing outstanding Republican Norwegians in the district, printing their replies, column after column, to the effect that though Mr. Reque was a fine upstanding man whom they liked personally, they would not forsake their political principles to vote for him.

The Republican candidate won in seven out of ten counties in the district. Reque may have picked up some Norwegian Republican votes, for his score was higher in the district than were those for other Democrats, including the presidential candidate, Grover Cleveland. By and large, the election showed that among the Norwegians party loyalty was stronger than the national tie.

In the state elections of 1889 and 1891 when Iowans elected a Democratic governor, Horace Boies, we find that in twenty counties where Norwegian voters were significant only six in 1889 and eight in 1891 went Democratic. Winneshiek, showing a slight preference for the Republican candidate in 1889, edged across the line in 1891. A breakdown to the township level there shows that the Democratic victory came from townships which were predominantly Bohemian, German, and Irish, from which we can infer that the Norwegians voted, once again, Republican. The strong Norwegian counties, Story, Winnebago,



Worth, Mitchell, Humboldt, Wright, and Emmet were lopsidedly Republican.

The Populist movement in the 'nineties did not attract the Norwegian voters. The minor support the movement had in Iowa came from southern and western counties, which had not been settled by Norwegians. In the presidential election of 1912, when the Republican vote was split between regulars and progressives, Woodrow Wilson carried Iowa, but the above twenty counties showed a decided preference for the Progressive candidate, Theodore Roosevelt.

The "Norwegians" (by this time the term has a figurative meaning — they are Americans) trudged loyally along with the Republican party until the depression. In 1932 all twenty counties, except Story, swung into the Democratic stream and stayed there in 1936, joined then by Story. In 1940 and 1944 nine counties had returned to Republican pastures, but in 1948 Truman drew three of them back to the Democrats when he won the state. In 1952 and again in 1956 Eisenhower captured all of the twenty counties handsomely.

LEOLA NELSON BERGMANN