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A Recovered Interview with Frank Norris

In April 1899, Frank Norris declared that he planned to write a novel set in California about “the San Joaquin wheat raisers and the Southern Pacific” and that he wanted “to get at it from every point of view, the social, agricultural, & political.”¹ Several years later, similarly, in the preface to the Golden Gate edition of his works Norris commented that the purpose of *The Octopus* was to show the “war between the wheat grower and the Railroad Trust.”² In his effort to depict events as realistically as possible, he traveled to California, spoke with farmers, watched the process of growing, reaping, and selling wheat, and corresponded with several people familiar with the dispute. He wrote Lilla Lewis Parks in October 1899, for example, that he was “very anxious to hear arguments on the other side.”² Notwithstanding his avowed purpose to represent “every point of view,” however, many contemporary readers of the novel concluded that Norris was a virulent opponent of the Southern Pacific railroad. In the September 1901 issue of the *Dial*, William M. Payne accused Norris of having “shown himself too evidently as a partisan of the agriculturist.”³ In order to challenge this widespread misperception, Norris sat for an interview with the Philadelphia *North American* on 14 January 1902, eight months before his death, that has hitherto been lost to scholarship.

The Author of “The Octopus” Discusses Railroad Trust⁴

Mr. Frank Norris, author of “The Octopus” and other novels, granted an interview to-day to a representative of *The North American*. He was seen in

his apartment at the Riverview, One Hundred and Forty-eighth street and the Boulevard.

"People who read 'The Octopus,'" he said, "seem to have the impression that I am a railroad expert, but such is not the case. I studied a certain phase of railroad life for the purpose of this one novel.

"When you ask me what the effect will be upon the farmer and general shipper of America by the formation of the anticipated Great Northern Securities railroad combine⁵ I cannot predict with any more accuracy than could any man who has studied this railroad question but slightly.⁶

"Primarily, though, I do not want to be put down as an enemy to the railroad or the railroad combine. Let us suppose that every road in this vast country was controlled by one man. Now the shippers as well as the people at large would like to know how such monopoly would result as to the welfare of the average disinterested citizen.

"I believe that if one man owned the railway system of the entire United States and the scheme proved not for the good of the people, that the owner would be the loser and not the people at large. In other words, if the people did not like the result of the monopoly they would rise up and wipe it out. Perhaps the government would take the railroad system in hand, or perhaps it would be divided up into fragments, and keen competition restored.

"Therefore any man or small body of men seeking to control the railroads of this country, or any other country for that matter, run a great risk. The people always have the power to rebel, no matter how strong a combination or monopoly may be.⁷

"Consequently a combination of men, which takes upon itself the risk of controlling our railroads, runs a greater risk than the man who builds a parallel road in competition with an existing one.⁸

"When a new road penetrates a new country or a new locality it is necessarily in itself a trust. That community through which the solitary road runs takes on new life. But in time, if another road does not penetrate the same locality, the original road, the trust, will get the better of the shippers in that community. If a second road enters the locality, however, and competes with the first road then there is a war, and the farmer benefits thereby. As soon as the farmer begins to get prosperous at the expense of the competing roads the latter combine and the farmer or shipper gets the worst of it as to profits.⁹

"We have already seen many small railroad trusts, and they have generally worked benefits to themselves. I remember very well when the Southern Pacific as absolute master and owner of the farmers in that rich valley, which lies between Stockton and Bakersfield, California. The farmers in that community had to pay the Southern Pacific for the long haul it made through

the regions from which there was not much shipping. Of course, those farmers hated the Southern Pacific because it was grinding them down for its own enrichment.

“Then came Claus Spreckels,¹⁰ who appealed to those farmers. This was in the early nineties. He said ‘I will build a road through this valley which will compete with the Southern Pacific.’ The farmers said: ‘He is only going to get our money to build the road, and then sell out to the Southern.’

“But to convince them that he was not going into any combine with the Southern, he arranged the stock company, which was formed so the other stockholders would outvote him, and he could not possibly sell out or combine.

“The plans were finally made satisfactorily to the farmers, and the great day came when the subscription books were to be opened. Farmers from one end of the valley to the other, clamoring for relief and redress, fairly mobbed the subscription books. In the town of Stockton the books were opened on the street corners in small booths, such as the Salvation Army opens up in New York just before Christmas time with its ‘boiling pots’ for the Christmas dinner in Madison Square Garden.

“Farmers flocked to those booths and paid in their \$5, \$10, or \$100, as they could afford. Every man had faith in the Spreckel’s road.¹¹

“The road was built, rates fell, and competition was strong. It was impossible for the Southern Pacific to acquire the new road, but one fine morning the farmers in that productive valley woke up and read that the Valley Road, as Spreckles called it, had sold out to the Santa Fe.¹² In a very short time the Santa Fe and the Southern combined.¹³ All was legal, all was regular. Not a farmer could say a word. But, as in ‘The Octopus,’ the railroad won out in the end.

“Now, nobody knows whether or not the sale to the Santa Fe and the subsequent combine was arranged from the inception of the Valley Road or no, but of course that is what the farmers of that valley believe unto this day. Yet there was no way of proving it.

“I believe that the trust, railroad, or otherwise, will survive if it is a good thing for the country. A national trust would possibly run a greater risk of being wiped out by the people than would a State trust, such as described in ‘The Octopus.’

“If we should ever have a national rail-road trust it could not be as strong as the people of the United States, and if it was not an advantage to them it would have to fall and take the consequences.

“I am not, understand, an enemy of the trust.¹⁴ I have a great respect for the railroad men. They are among our smartest business men. It is easier to criticise than it is to build one and run it.”

—*University of New Mexico*

Notes

1. *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*, ed. Jesse S. Crisler (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1986), pp 74–75.

2. *Ibid.* p. 89.

3. “Recent Fiction,” *Dial*, 1 September 1901, p. 136.

4. Philadelphia *North American*, 15 January 1902, p. 8.

5. Norris is referring to the combine of the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern Railroads. In 1893, the Great Northern took control of the Northern Pacific, forming the Northern Securities Company, but the combine was eventually declared to be a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act by the U.S. Supreme Court. The case went to trial in 1902.

6. Norris conducted research for *The Octopus* while staying at the Rancho Santa Anita near Hollister. As he wrote in mid-April 1899, he planned “get to California while the wheat is young,” and to “study the whole thing *on the ground*” (*Collected Letters*, pp. 74–75).

7. Norris likely alludes here to the so-called “Big Four” (Leland Stanford [1824–1893], Collis P. Huntington [1821–1900], Mark Hopkins [1813–1878], and Charles Crocker [1822–1888]), who owned the Southern Pacific Railroad. As part of his research for *The Octopus*, Norris interviewed Collis P. Huntington in December 1899.

8. Norris refers to Claus Spreckels’ takeover in 1895 of the San Francisco, Stockton & San Joaquin Valley Railroad, a project designed to compete with the Southern Pacific.

9. After competition was restored by the addition of a second railroad, rates dropped, and the farmers prospered, but Spreckels’ sale of the Valley Road to the Santa Fe in 1901 resulted in a new monopoly and a dramatic rate hike.

10. Spreckels (1828–1908) is best known for sugar monopolies in California and Hawaii, though he also was involved in railroads and shipping as well as other industries. According to Walton Bean, “the Spreckels family had carried on a bitter feud with the Southern Pacific Railroad for decades” (“Boss Ruef, the Union Labor Party, and the Graft Prosecution in San Francisco, 1901–1911,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 17 [November 1948], 449).

11. According to David H. Walker, over \$186,000 was raised (*Pioneers of Prosperity* [San Francisco: privately printed, 1895], pp. 121–36). Spreckels bought 5000 shares, which established him as the majority stockholder.

12. In November 1899, Norris commented on the combine of the Santa Fe and the San Francisco: “one octopus has absorbed the other and the last state is worse than the first. Though trusts are formed to obviate competition, I don’t see why there should not be competition among rival trusts. The same game would have to be played over and over again and the final result would be a trust of trusts. The California R.Rs are a case in point. The Santa Fe and S. P. were at one time separate Trusts, each one having absorbed a number of minor roads.—Now that they have pooled their interests they have only formed another bigger trust” (*Collected Letters*, p. 90).

13. The Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe did not fully merge until the late-twentieth century. Norris apparently refers to the Santa Fe’s lease of tracks to the Southern railroad in 1899.

14. Despite his assertion here, Norris privately allowed while he was writing *The Octopus* that he was “enlisted on the other side” of the combine. “The corporation (wh[ic]h is another name for trust) of the Southern Pacific R.R. is a very poignant issue with us in California and from what we know of it there we are not led to consider it as legitimate or tolerable, and I am afraid the S.P. is only a sample of its breed” (*Collected Letters*, p. 89).