

Jeannette Rankin

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Family History

“To be a child in Montana in the 1880s was to know mountains and rivers and plains and a great sky overhead enclosing and projecting your world; to live among settlers, minters, ranchers and cowboys; to see Indians riding by to new hunting grounds or decked out for ritual dances; to come upon deer, elk, porcupine or an occasional bear without surprise; to watch the empty countryside filling up and towns spreading out around you. Jeannette Rankin was a child in Montana in those days” (Josephson, 1974, p. 5).

Jeanette Rankin was born on June 11, 1880, nine years before the Montana Territory gained statehood in the United States. Throughout her life Rankin witnessed the development of that wild land into one of the great copper-producing and cattle-raising areas of the country (Josephson, 1974).

Jeanette’s father, John Rankin, was one of nine children of Scottish immigrants who had settled on a farm in Ontario, Canada, in the early nineteenth century (Josephson, 1974). The Rankin farm did not provide a large income for the expanding family, and John did not attend many years of school. In its stead, he learned to be a carpenter by the age of twenty (Josephson, 1974). In 1869, John and his brother Duncan were lured to the Montana Territory by the stories of a gold strike. However, he did not find a fortune in gold. His carpentry skills served him well in Montana, as he served its people in the growth and development of the town of Missoula (Josephson, 1974). John earned enough money in Missoula to buy a small ranch six miles outside of town.

Missoula’s population swelled with the incoming settlers. Olive Pickering, a girl from New Hampshire, arrived in 1878 with her uncle C.W. Berry, one of Missoula’s founding fathers (Josephson, 1974). Miss Pickering was only the second schoolteacher in the Territory. She held

her classes in a one-room building surrounded by a fence. It was not unusual to observe a group of Indians perched on this fence, listening to the school lessons (Josephson, 1974). John Rankin married Olive Pickering within a year of her move to Missoula in 1897. The following year she gave birth to Jeanette, the first of seven children, of whom six survived (Josephson, 1974).

Jeanette was born on the ranch outside of town, but her father was not convinced that the family could survive the winters at the ranch. When Jeanette was five years old the Rankin family moved into a house in town. Until she was in her twenties Jeanette spent her winters in the town house and her summers at the ranch. Despite the elegance of the town house and the eminence of their parents in town affairs, the Rankin children were deeply attached to the ranch, where life was larger, more free, and much more exciting (Josephson, 1974).

The Rankin family was close-knit, affectionate and highly individualistic. The parents expected obedience but were not overly oppressive. John Rankin had great respect for Jeanette's intelligence and from her early years gave her confidence in her own judgement. Jeanette prepared to enter the University of Montana in 1898. "But before she went to college she had already exhibited some of those traits that were to serve her so well throughout her life: a passion to observe and learn things for herself, an enjoyment of nature and of people, a strong sympathy for the underdog, and above all a willingness to undertake any task that promised to be interesting. It never occurred to her that some of the tasks she set herself were considered 'man's work,' any more than she downgraded the 'woman's work' she was obliged to do. It was all part of the world's work, and in her girlhood she indicated her readiness to seize any opportunity for action that presented itself, even to make the opportunity, if need be" (Josephson, 1974, p. 17). Jeanette had sharpened her wits in friendly sibling rivalry, as her brothers and sisters were capable, intelligent persons. Her parents had also given her the most valuable gift: humane

values, a sturdy physique, and a sense of humor to bear with the disappointments of a life of action (Josephson, 1974).

Finding Her True Calling

The four years she spent at Montana State University in Missoula were a disappointment to her; living at home, she could not enjoy a change of scene or contact with young people of other backgrounds and interests. In the classroom few courses seemed to excite or challenge her (Josephson, 1974). When she graduated in 1902 with a B.Sc. Jeanette realized that she was qualified for nothing except teaching, and only at the elementary level (Josephson, 1974). She taught briefly in Missoula and Whitehall, but did not win a permanent position. Always restless and looking for something to do, Jeanette worked as an apprentice dressmaker and took a correspondence course in furniture design. These too did not lead Jeanette to gainful employment.

After she graduated several men asked Jeanette to marry them, but she refused them all. Jeanette enjoyed the company of men, but she saw no reason for giving up her independence merely for the married state, and as the oldest child in a large family, she felt her obligations and responsibilities regarding her youngest siblings satisfied her maternal urges (Josephson, 1974). The two men that mattered most in her life were her father and brother Wellington. In 1904 her father died suddenly of Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Although his death was a blow to Jeanette, it also gave her license to make her own decisions and find her own way in life, as her mother had such respect for her intelligence and capability that she always deferred to her eldest daughter (Josephson, 1974).

In 1904, after the death of her father, Jeanette made her first trip out of Montana to visit Wellington at Harvard. The experience was stimulating, and also shattering at the same time, as Jeanette became aware of crowded big city slum living conditions. She saw for the first time the

masses of people living together in conditions of unimaginable poverty and squalor, the children undernourished and uncared for, and the adults who were either overworked, unemployed and spiritless (Josephson, 1974). Nothing in Montana had prepared Jeanette for sights like these. In the West the only cases of mass poverty were the Indians.

“Fifteen years earlier Jane Addams had had a similar awakening when she saw the wretchedness of the London East End and realized that in her native Chicago, the same conditions must exist. Learning now what the founder of Hull House was trying to do to mitigate those conditions, Jeanette began reading avidly the current literature of protest: the muckraking magazines, the works of Jacob Riis, Jack London, Henry George, and particularly anything she could lay hands on by or about Miss Addams” (Josephson, 1974, p. 22-23).

At the age of 28, Jeanette felt that she had found her vocation at last as a social worker, a career that would enable her to be of use to people (Josephson, 1974). In order to qualify herself for this occupation, Jeanette went to New York in 1909 to enroll in the New York School of Philanthropy, the forerunner of the Columbia University School of Social Work (Josephson, 1974).

Although Jeanette returned to her hometown after her social work training, Missoula did not offer much opportunity for a social worker. “It was too new, there was little hereditary poverty, and there was still some flow among the economic strata” (Josephson, 1974, p. 25). In the fall of 1910, she accepted a job in a children’s home in Spokane, Washington. She found the conditions at the home appalling and quit after a few weeks. Refusing to return home, Jeanette enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle. Here she studied economics, sociology, and public speaking, all subjects she was drawn to (Josephson, 1974).

In the state of Washington in 1910, the people were to vote in November on an amendment granting woman suffrage. This was an issue Jeanette completely sympathized and supported and she was prepared to contribute her services (Josephson, 1975). On her own initiative, she obtained a batch of suffrage posters and volunteered to place them in all the shop windows. Her actions won the interest of the suffrage leaders, who invited Jeanette to out into the field to canvass voters (Josephson, 1974).

Jeanette was under the direction of very able organizers in the Washington suffrage campaign – Emma Smith Devoe, May Arkwright and Abigail Smith Duniway (Josephson, 1974). Under their tutelage, Jeanette learned how to swing an election. She learned how a political campaign was organized, what planning, what staff, and what approach to what people were needed (Josephson, 1974). She had made her contribution to a cause she could cherish, and she had a taste of success with the Washington effort. Jeanette felt that if she could be useful in Washington then she could do even greater good in her home state.

The Fight for Suffrage

In December 1910, Jeanette learned that a suffrage amendment was to be introduced in the legislature at Helena in the next session, which would open in January (Josephson, 1974). She decided she would like to address the legislature on this issue. Jeanette created the Equal Franchise Society when she realized that no suffrage groups existed in the Montana capitol. She wrote to the legislature in the name of this group, asking to speak in support of suffrage. She was invited to speak before the House on February 1, 1911 (Josephson, 1974).

Members of the Senate adjourned their session to listen to Jeanette's speech. The House chamber was filled to capacity when she made her appearance; women were seated on the platform for the first time in Montana's history. The members of the House had each put up fifty

cents to provide flowers and had voted to ban cigars and spittoons for her speech (Josephson, 1974). Jeanette was the first woman to speak before the Montana Legislature.

Jeanette spoke earnestly about why women should have the vote and pointed out that suffrage had already been adopted in some of the most enlightened countries in the world. Her conclusion proved that she understood the constitutional problem as well: “We are not asking you gentlemen to decide this great question. We are merely asking you to leave it to the voters” (Josephson, 1974, p. 29).

The end of her speech was greeted with a round of applause, and Representative Binnard, a determined opponent of suffrage, presented her with a bouquet of violets. “This condescending gesture was not lost on Jeannette, who wanted votes, not violets” (Josephson, 1974, p. 29). When the amendment came to a vote later that session, it was clear that her speech had a good effect. The measure won a majority in the House, short of the two-thirds needed to submit the idea to the electorate, but enough to give promise of success in later sessions (Josephson, 1974).

Her speech had not only won her statewide publicity, but also made woman suffrage a live issue in Montana. Within this short time, Jeanette discovered what she was fitted for - the art of politics (Josephson, 1974).

In May 1911, Jeanette returned to New York to take a job offer with the New York Woman Suffrage Party (Josephson, 1974). Her hard work earned her a solid reputation within the suffrage movement. In the fall of 1911 she was appointed a member of the Central Committee of the California Progressive Party, which was urging the adoption of a suffrage amendment in California that year (Josephson, 1974). After California, Jeanette returned to New York State to lobby for a suffrage amendment in Albany. Jeanette succeeded in having a resolution favoring votes for women introduced in the New York Senate, but it did not pass.

One of the senators she approached was Franklin D. Roosevelt. When Jeanette told him that many western states were adopting suffrage, Roosevelt replied, “that might be very well in the West, a good idea, in fact, but things that worked in the West probably wouldn’t work in the East” (Josephson, 1974, p. 35).

Jeanette had become well known in the suffrage movement, and its leaders sent her to Ohio and Wisconsin. Although she did not always have success in these new areas, Jeanette was able to familiarize herself with the laws and constitutions of various states, which differed widely (Josephson, 1974). Of special importance to the suffrage movement was the understanding of how a state constitution could be amended. Jeanette made herself so useful to the movement that in 1912 she was appointed field secretary of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (Josephson, 1974).

No matter where her position in the National American Woman Suffrage Association took her, Jeanette never lost touch with the situation in Montana. After her speech to the legislature in 1911, she had set up a two-fold program: to build an organization and to inform the voters on the issue (Josephson, 1974). By 1913, her organization had become a significant factor in the local political scene. In November 1912, the Democratic candidate for governor, Samuel V. Stewart, pledged himself to support an equal-franchise amendment to the state constitution. Many candidates running for the legislature followed Stewart’s lead (Josephson, 1974). In his inaugural address Governor Stewart called on the legislature to act on his recommendation. Although it looked promising for suffrage, Jeanette was not willing to take any chances. She urged her followers to bombard their legislators with letters, and she personally interviewed every legislator on the topic. The resolution to submit the amendment to the voters of the state was passed and signed by the governor on January 25, 1913 (Josephson, 1974).

According to the Montana constitution, a proposed amendment could only be submitted to the electorate in the year after it passed the legislature. This gave Jeanette and the Montana Equal Franchise Society a year to create voter support for the amendment (Josephson, 1974). On Election Day, November 3, 1914, Jeanette made sure that there were poll-watchers on hand in all of the city precincts to prevent the stuffing of ballot boxes. It was not until the middle of November when the ballots were counted. The amendment was passed, and Jeanette celebrated the victory in Nashville, TN in public, at the National American Woman's Suffrage Association's annual convention (Josephson, 1974).

Jeanette's Next Steps

After her victory in Montana, Jeanette spent the next two years working for the National American Woman Suffrage Association and traveling abroad. With her return to the United States Jeanette announced her intentions. She believed that if women could vote in Montana, they could also be represented by a woman in Congress. With the encouragement of her brother Wellington, who became her campaign manager, Jeanette announced her candidacy in July 1916 by filing a petition to run for a seat in the House of Representatives in the Republican Party primaries (Josephson, 1974).

Jeanette ran against seven men in the primary, and won easily, coming out with 22, 549 votes against 15, 439 for the nearest contender (Josephson, 1974). Among her supporters were Democratic women, who gladly crossed party lines in order to help send a woman representative to Washington.

Jeanette used the tactics that had been effective in the suffrage movement in her campaign. She addressed voters in every city, town, and hamlet in Montana about her platform. Her platform in 1916 differed from the Republican Party. She "called for an amendment to the

Federal Constitution to give women the vote, stronger legislation for the protection of children, and a radical revision of congressional rules to allow for the speedier passage of important legislation” (Josephson, 1974, p. 53). She also included support for Prohibition in the hopes of attaining the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. An issue closer to her heart was the war issue, and while her platform called for "preparedness for peace," she frequently stated her firm commitment to keep the United States out of the war in Europe (Josephson, 1974).

During her campaign, Jeanette went out to meet the public. In order to meet constituents, she spoke on street corners, in lumbering camps, in homes to speak to women in their kitchens, and met with men at the gates of the mines and smelters when they changed shifts (Josephson, 1974). Jeanette traveled throughout the state constantly, using car and train.

The most significant opposition she had to face came from the powerful Anaconda Copper Company. The Company was accustomed to having elected officials who knew who was in charge in Montana, but Jeanette did not fit into this category (Josephson, 1974). The liquor interests and the Company controlled most of the newspapers in Montana, so her campaign had minimum coverage in the press.

On November 6, 1916, Jeanette voted for the first time, since she had been in New Zealand the previous year. “Late that night, unable to bear the suspense, she phoned the local newspaper in Missoula to learn the results thus far, trying to conceal her identity, as she told her friend, by inquiring first about the other candidates. ‘How did Wilson come out?’ she asked. And after a few other queries: ‘How did Jeanette Rankin run?’ ‘Oh, she lost,’ was the reply. It was with this disheartening news that she went to bed” (Josephson, 1974, p. 55).

The Montana newspapers published the results of the election on the November 8, 1916 issues. Jeanette had beaten her opponent by 7,567 votes (Josephson, 1974)! She was the only

Republican running for an important office to be elected in Montana that year; the Democrats won the other seat in Congress, the United States senatorship, the governorship, and other ranking posts, as well as giving Wilson a plurality of more than 34,000 votes (Josephson, 1974). Jeanette immediately attributed her victory to the women of Montana, who were determined, as she said at that time, “to have a woman represent their interest in Congress” (Josephson, 1974, p. 56).

Although Jeanette became a national headline overnight, as the first woman elected to Congress, she was unusually well equipped for her seat. She was far more qualified than most of the other freshman congressmen being sent to Washington at that time. She was better educated than many of them, and thanks to her years in the suffrage movement, she had more than book knowledge of legislative practices (Josephson, 1974). In the course of her extensive lobbying activities in state and national legislatures, she had been obliged to learn parliamentary rules and the means by which bills are introduced and brought to debate. She knew the role of committees, and she understood the kinds of pressure that could be exerted by vested interests, and the loyalties exacted of party regulars (Josephson, 1974).

Jeanette Rankin was 36 years old when she won her election, and she was ready to begin work in Congress. “No longer shy or reserved after years in public life, she had manners so unaffected and winning that they concealed an iron core of resolution from all but her intimates. Her friendly gray-green eyes, her controlled voice, her style of dress were far from the popular conception of the militant suffragist, who was more often pictured as noisy, defiant, masculine; but those who thought she could be influenced to act against her better judgement were yet to learn the mettle of this staunch feminist and humanitarian (Josephson, 1974, p. 58).

First Woman in Congress

As Jeanette took her seat in Congress in 1916, national woman's suffrage was her highest priority (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988). Her suffrage amendment passed the House but was later defeated in the Senate (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988). Jeanette's priorities were overshadowed by the war in Europe, which had been raging since 1914. In a statement printed in the New York Times after her election, Jeanette said she did not think, "war could continue for any considerable length of time without the support of women" (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988, p. 17). When President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany and Austria in 1917, Jeanette, a dedicated pacifist, cast her vote and stated, "I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war. I vote no" (Josephson, 1974, p. 76).

Although Jeanette was one of 49 members of Congress who voted against the declaration of war, she was the only one accused by the media of disloyalty to her country and cowardice (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988).

In July 1918 she introduced the first federal social legislation in the history of the United States – a maternity and infancy protection measure designed to lower the unusually high maternity and infant mortality rate in the country (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988). Her legislation proposed that federal aid be "given to the states to provide medical aid, hospital care, consultation centers, visiting nurses, and instruction in pre- and post-natal care" (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988, p. 17).

When her congressional term was up in 1918, rather than be boxed in geographically in a newly created district that was largely Democratic, Jeanette filed as a candidate for the United States Senate (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988). She lost the Republican nomination in the primary by only 1,700 votes. She then ran as a candidate of the National Party, a newly formed coalition of

Socialists, Prohibitionists, Progressives, and farmers, but doubts about her patriotism, as a result of her vote against the declaration of war, plagued her campaign (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988).

Jeanette's Career after Congress

For twenty years after her defeat, Jeanette worked as a field secretary and lobbyist for the national Consumers' League in Washington, D.C. She lobbied for federal wage and hour laws, for a constitutional amendment prohibition child labor, and for the Sheppard-Towner bill, which was a recreation of the maternity and infancy measure she had introduced under her own name in 1918 (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988). When the Sheppard-Towner bill was passed in 1921, Jeanette was given major credit for the victory.

Jeanette was an ardent pacifist when she ran for Congress again in 1940. Her Democratic opponent was the incumbent, James O'Connor, who had gained a reputation as a New Dealer with a liberal record and who did not differ with her greatly on the war issue (Josephson, 1974). Jeanette won the election by a margin of 9,264 votes (Josephson, 1974). Ironically, when Jeanette assumed office war was again raging in Europe. Jeanette began the session by introducing various legislation geared at keeping the United States out of war. However, on December 8, 1941, Congress voted to declare war on Japan, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Jeanette was the only member of Congress to vote against this measure, stating, "as a woman I can't go to war, and I refuse to sent anyone else" (Josephson, 1974, p. 162). Jeanette Rankin is the only member of Congress to vote against the United State's entry into both World War I and World War II. Her negative vote was met with active hostility, a chorus of hisses and boos arose from the floor and the galleries, when she cast her vote (Josephson, 1974). Her negative vote on war ended her congressional career for a second time.

Jeanette spent many years traveling abroad after her second term in Congress. In 1968, she gave her name to the Jeanette Rankin Brigade; a delegation of several thousand women that she led in a parade to the Capital steps in a protest of the Vietnam War (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988). She was 88 years old, and the rest of the country was finally catching up to her anti-war views. During the years of the Vietnam War, Jeanette spoke at various marches in other cities against the conflict (Carabillo and Meuli, 1988).

At a celebration for her ninetieth birthday on June 11, 1970, various speakers and guests paid tribute to Jeanette and her career. Lee Metcalf, the junior senator from Montana, went into specifics and gave a picture of Jeanette's career in depth, stressing the contemporaneity of the issues for which she had given battle. He listed the causes with which she had identified herself: "She spoke for child welfare, of industrial and labor problems, of economic maladjustments...the interdependence of all national in distribution of the world's goods, the pressure of growing populations, social injustice, racial prejudice. She believed in freedom for our First American – the American Indian – and of his needs for education and recognition. She was interested in the development of public lands, including our public parks...these all sound like a reading of the calendar of issues before Congress today" (Josephson, 1974, p. 193).

Conclusion

Jeanette Rankin was a hardworking woman in a man's world. She overcame barriers to work towards the issues she believed in. Even at the age of 92, when her body was becoming weak though her mind was still alert, she joked about running for Congress again, "just to have someone to vote for" (Josephson, 1974, p. 209).

Jeanette Rankin died in her home at the Carmel Valley Manor in California in her sleep, the night of Friday, May 18, 1973, a few weeks short of her ninety-third birthday (Josephson, 1974).

References

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