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Ruth Bryan Owen: Florida's First Congresswoman and Lifetime Activist

by SALLY VICKERS

Good daughter of a good father, mistress of the spoken word, statesman of both achievement and promise, for your womanly service in the world crisis brought on by man's ignorance, obstinacy and folly; for your high concept of civic duty and for your many services to your state and nation, Rollins College bestows on you the degree of LL. D.

Rollins College President
Hamilton Holt to Ruth Bryan Owen
on awarding her an honorary
Doctor of Laws in 1927.¹

When Ruth Bryan Owen was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws by Rollins College in 1927, she had yet to hold an elected office. A year before Owen won election as Florida's first congresswoman, her contemporaries were already commemorating her meritorious work on behalf of her state and her country. Public recognition of Owen's civic activism continued throughout a career that encompassed two terms in the United States House of Representatives, an appointment as Minister Plenipotentiary to Denmark, and service to the United Nations as an advisor and alternate delegate to the General Assembly.

Indeed, much of Ruth Bryan Owen's life was spent in the public spotlight. As the daughter of William Jennings Bryan, Nebraska congressman, three-time candidate for president, and Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson, she was no stranger to public adulation. Born in 1885, the eldest of three siblings, Ruth

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1. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, "In Miniature— Ruth Bryan Owen: 'Good Daughter of a Good Father,'" *McCall's Magazine* (May 1929), 90.

Bryan's childhood and formative years centered around her father's causes and campaigns. This political activist training ground later proved invaluable for the daughter of the "Great Commoner." While her father engrossed himself in the timely issues of the Gilded Age, Ruth's mother, Mary Elizabeth Baird, went to law school at night. In 1887, she graduated third in her class, the only woman among her seventeen classmates and one of the first women admitted to the state bar.² Ruth later recalled "how my father's career was strengthened by my mother. She was the critical audience who helped to bring to fullest flower his gift of eloquence."³

When Bryan embarked on the political career that made him "the founder of the modern Democratic party," his daughter Ruth Baird Bryan was only five years old.⁴ During Bryan's time in Congress from 1890-1894, the family joined him in Washington, D.C.⁵ Life in Washington had a profound effect on young Ruth. The freshman representative often took Ruth to work with him, holding her hand or carrying her on his shoulders. Sometimes she went with her mother to the gallery and absorbed with "awed delight" the "Great Commoner's" spirited debates in Congress. Occasionally Ruth joined her proud papa on the House floor, attentively observing all the activities on the day's agenda. She also spent many hours playing in a park within sight of the classical structure. Forty years later, Congresswoman Ruth Bryan Owen recalled how the Capitol dome became both "an obsession and a symbol" to her. According to family legend, after the family moved back to the Midwest, nine-year-old Ruth pledged herself to public service, vowing to "someday . . . return and live where, from her windows, she

2. Frances Parkinson Keyes, "Some Are Born Great," *Delineator* 119 (November 1931), 48.

3. Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde, "Let's Live With Our Careers," Bess Furman Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. According to Betty Bryan Adams, Ruth Bryan Owen's niece and granddaughter of Mary Baird Bryan, "It was Mary who counceled [sic] and advised and wrote William Jennings Bryan's speeches." Betty Bryan Adams to the author, July 21, 1993.

4. "Well before the days of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, Bryan brought it [the Democratic party] to champion the masses against the exactions of the classes, broadening the party's base to embrace the farmer, the city laborer, the immigrant, the small businessman, and to win the Negro." Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1971), 10.

5. Mary Baird Bryan, introduction to *The First Battle*, by William Jennings Bryan (Chicago, 1896), 63.

could always look at the snowy spherical shape that had made so significant an impression upon her childish mind."⁶

When Bryan was the presidential nominee for both the Democrats and the Populists in the national election of 1896, his family accompanied him on the campaign trail.⁷ They traveled over 18,000 miles by train throughout the nation as the candidate gave more than 600 speeches (many times up to twenty a day) while speaking to a total audience of five million.⁸ Mary and Ruth answered the campaign mail, which ranged from pleas for domestic advice to acknowledgments of naming children after the candidate, and even included demands for reimbursement on lost election bets. Sometimes the post contained gifts like a tremendous stuffed alligator, rabbit's feet, and four live eagles.⁹ In spite of the good-luck charms and his massive popularity, Bryan was defeated by his Republican opponent, William McKinley.¹⁰ Despite the disappointing loss, Ruth Bryan Owen never lost interest in her father's political career. She served as Bryan's campaign secretary in his unsuccessful 1900 campaign for president and again in his third attempt at the presidency in 1908. According to Owen, the 1908 campaign marked the actual start of her career in national affairs. When her father was nominated on the first ballot of the Democratic convention in Denver, twenty-two-year-old Ruth was cheering in the gallery with President Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Ruth was later escorted to the platform where she immediately waved her scarf and a Colorado flag.¹¹ As in the past two contests, a typically vigorous Bryan campaign ensued,

6. Keyes, "Some Are Born Great," 14; and Louise M. Young, "Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde," *Notable American Women: The Modern Period* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 591.

7. At the 1896 Democratic Convention in St. Louis, William Jennings Bryan delivered his famous "Cross of Gold" speech. At thirty-six, he was the youngest man ever nominated for president. Paul F. Boller Jr., *Presidential Campaigns* (New York, 1985), 168-70.

8. Bryan's addresses often aroused his audiences to a fevered pitch. Conversely not all of the estimated five million who heard the nominee's rhetoric were impressed. At various times he was assailed as "a socialist, anarchist, communist, revolutionary, lunatic, madman, rabble-rouser, thief, traitor, and murderer." *Ibid.*

9. Bryan, *The First Battle*, 537.

10. Boller, *Presidential Campaigns*, 171. The final tally was 7,111,607 (50.88 percent) to 6,509,052 (46.77 percent). It was the largest voter turnout in the nation's history.

11. *New York Times*, July 9, 1908.

only to produce the same disappointing results. Ruth took the defeat in stride, soon thereafter telling a companion after barely catching a trolley, "I seem to be the only member of the Bryan family that ever ran for anything and caught it."¹²

Assisting in her father's campaigns gave Owen an insider's view of political themes, strategies, and public opinion. She also realized the physically debilitating effects of the campaign trail and the rigors of a crusader's vocation.¹³ These insights cast a remarkable imprint on her future life choices.

In the interim between her father's political crusades, Ruth entered Monticello Female Academy (later Monticello College) in Godfrey, Illinois, in 1899.¹⁴ Two years later she enrolled at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Few women of her era enjoyed the same educational opportunity. During her freshman year at Nebraska, only thirty-five percent of all college undergraduates were women.¹⁵

At the university Ruth participated in athletics and was inducted into Chi Delta Phi Honor Society. During the 1901 fall term she joined Delta Gamma sorority where she served as pledge class president and corresponding secretary. Among her sorority sisters was Grace Abbott, the future chief of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor. Throughout her life, Ruth wrote articles for the Delta Gamma national magazine, *Anchora*, attended sorority conventions, and gave rousing keynote speeches to her sorority sisters. Her dedication to the Delta Gamma organization and the friendships forged as a member never wavered.¹⁶

12. Boller, *Presidential Campaigns*, 189-90; and Charles W. Thompson, *Presidents I've Known* (Indianapolis, 1929), 67. Republicans William H. Taft and James S. Sherman beat Bryan and John W. Kern in popular votes 7,677,788 to 6,407,982, and in electoral votes 321 to 162.

13. Samuel Johnson Woolf, "A Woman's Voice in Foreign Affairs," *New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 1930, 7.

14. In the early 1940s Ruth returned to her alma mater as a visiting professor of political science and guest lecturer. Box 70, Monticello College Records, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.

15. In his last will and testament, Ruth's grandfather, Silas Bryan, bequeathed "that all my sons and daughters shall receive the highest physical, intellectual and moral education to be had. . . ." See Koenig, *Bryan*, 52; and Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven, 1985), 133.

16. Ruth Baird Bryan, "Corresponding Secretary's Report for Kappa; University of Nebraska, Lincoln," *Anchora* 19 (November 1902), 19. Abbott served as head of the Children's Bureau from 1921 to 1934.

The early sorority experience introduced Ruth to the powerful sisterhood bonds that provided the foundation for an expanding "women's network" at the turn of the century. Uniting women across the country who shared common experiences and common goals, the women's network, also known as the "old-girl network," became a pivotal tool in women's political empowerment by providing professional contacts, leadership training, and political initiation for its participants.¹⁷ Owen's appointment as United States Minister Plenipotentiary to Denmark in 1933 can be traced to the powerful influence of the women's network.

Seventeen years old in 1903, the "Great Commoner's" daughter had matured into a tall, attractive, and articulate woman blessed with a quick smile and boundless energy. Through her encounters on the campaign trail and her collegiate studies, Ruth developed a keen interest in people and social questions.¹⁸ She soon became restless at the university as her yearning for public service grew. In the summer of 1903, Ruth left college and went to work in Chicago at Jane Addams' Hull House. Her parents approved of the "meritorious work."¹⁹ Addams founded the tenement project in 1889, and it soon developed as a base for large range reform programs. Settlement workers assisted recent immigrants, taught domestic skills, and provided nurseries, kindergartens, and medical services.²⁰ Ruth's formative time there "sharing the race life" provided her intimate insight into the increasing problems of a modern industrialized nation. She became intensely interested in the

17. Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women In The New Deal* (Cambridge, 1981), 7. Ware has documented how the women's network would ultimately reach its zenith during the New Deal era by "recruit[ing] women for prominent government positions, demand[ing] increased political patronage, and generally foster[ing] an awareness of women as a special interest group with a substantial role to play in the New Deal."

18. William Lyon Phelps, "Prefatory Remark," in Ruth Bryan Owen, *The Elements of Public Speaking* (New York, 1931), 9; and "Ruth Bryan Owen," *Current Biography 1944* (New York, 1944), 522.

19. *New York Times*, August 24, 1903.

20. Jane Addams often said the settlement house experience benefitted "those who did it" more than "those they helped." For her pioneering work in social reform and international peace, Addams shared the Noble Peace Prize with Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler in 1931. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years At Hull House* (New York, 1910), 117-77; Lois W. Banner, *Women In Modern America: A Brief History* (New York, 1984), 105-108; and Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 109-10.

problems of America's youth, a cause she would champion throughout her life.

After a troubled six-year marriage ended in 1909, Ruth found herself the young mother of two small children, Ruth and John, with no monetary support from her ex-husband or her family. Fortunately, she did not have to look very far past her own life experiences for the perfect career. Combining her heritage, political training, and her own ambition, Ruth Bryan began to accept speaking engagements for the Extension Department of the University of Nebraska and also substituted for her father on the national Chautauqua lecture circuit when he over-scheduled.²¹

Public speaking was a natural consequence of the Bryan family legacy. Yet to Ruth it also meant she had to leave her children to travel across the country. Often she lectured every night for several months, traveling to engagements in Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, and Ohio.²² She also wrote articles for a national newspaper syndicate. Occasionally these journalistic assignments took her to exotic international locations.²³

In 1910, Ruth Bryan remarried. Her second husband, Reginald Altham Owen, was an officer in the Royal Engineers Corps of the British Army.²⁴ According to prevailing American law, by marrying a foreigner, Ruth Bryan Owen forfeited her American citizenship. Her disputed election to the United States House of Representatives in 1928 would hinge on that very fact.

After two and a half years stationed in Jamaica, and a year in England where their son, Reginald Jr. (nicknamed Bryan), was born in 1913, the young couple's idyllic world changed dramatically in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I. Captain Owen was assigned to help train the British Army Signal Corps. In 1915, after Turkey allied with the Central Powers, he was sent with the first detachment to the Dardanelles in the Gallipoli peninsula, serving as

21. Ruth Bryan Leavitt to Carrie Dunlap, August 16, November 22, 1909, Carrie Dunlap Papers, Special Collections, Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida; and *New York Times*, July 11, 1909.

22. See Ruth Bryan Leavitt to Carrie Dunlap correspondence generally, Dunlap Papers. Throughout this collection Ruth detailed her lecturing agenda.

23. Samples of Ruth's syndicated articles contained in the Dunlap Papers include: Ruth Bryan Leavitt, "In Damascus with Ruth Bryan Leavitt," *Illustrated Sunday Magazine of the New Orleans Daily Picayune*, October 11, 1908. In a similar article with the title torn off, Ruth wrote "personal glimpses" of the African continent which included essays on Egypt and the Sudan.

24. *New York Times*, May 4, 1910.

assistant director of army signals for Egypt, Palestine, and Salonika, Greece.²⁵

Back in England, Ruth's transformation from officer's wife into wartime activist had begun. She joined the American Women's War Relief Fund Association in London. Along with Lou Hoover (wife of Herbert Hoover), Lady Astor, Lady Paget, the Duchess of Marlborough, and ten other women, Owen organized contributions for relief activities. For thirteen months, she worked jointly with Lou Hoover as secretary-treasurer while Herbert Hoover supervised the Belgian food relief effort.²⁶

As war raged in Europe, Ruth Bryan Owen grew restless in London. After eight months of separation, she yearned to be near her husband. Just before all civilian travel was halted, Ruth and two-year-old Bryan left for Alexandria, Egypt, the closest city to the Dardanelles' base of supply, "on the chance of getting a glance at our soldier."²⁷ Never one to be idle, the thirty year old took a course in nursing and joined the British Volunteer Aid Detachment in Cairo. Ruth served for three years as a ward nurse, operating-room nurse, and surgical nurse in Egyptian war hospitals. In an ironic and unfortunate twist, her own husband became one of her patients. Reginald Owen contracted Bright's Disease but insisted on remaining in combat: "My friends are being shot down in the trenches. How could I stop and take sick leave?" In recognition of Owen's outstanding military record, he was promoted to major and received five citations, including the prestigious Military Cross.²⁸

25. House Committee on Elections, "Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen," 71st Congress, second session, January 17, 1930, Committee Print, Washington, D.C., 1930, 56-57; and Keyes, "Some Are Born Great," 50.

26. The American Women's War Relief Fund Association financed five workrooms for unemployed London women and a three-thousand-bed hospital in Paignton, Devonshire. The workrooms employed several hundred women who produced the socks, uniforms, pajamas, and sheets for the American Women's War Hospital. Eventually, in 1917, the American government assumed the hospital's administration. American Women's War Relief Fund File, Lou H. Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa; *New York Times*, August 8, 1914, and June 11, 1915; and Woolf, "A Woman's Voice in Foreign Affairs," 7.

27. Ruth Bryan Owen to Lou Hoover, September 8, 1915, American Women's War Relief Fund File, Lou H. Hoover Papers; and Ruth Bryan Owen to Carrie Dunlap, November 18, 1915, Dunlap Papers.

28. House Committee on Elections, "Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen," 57; and Keyes, "Some Are Born Great," 50. Bright's Disease, also known as "trench nephritis," was an acute and chronic inflammation of the kidneys.

Ruth Bryan Owen's experiences in the Middle East prompted her lifelong involvement in the peace movement. She joined women such as Carrie Chapman Catt, Jane Addams, Crystal Eastman, Rheta Childe Door, Emily Green Balch, and Maud Wood Park in several peace organizations, including the National Conference on the Cause and Cure of War, the Women's Action Committee for Victory and Lasting Peace, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. These groups sought to promote peace by international agreement and disarmament.²⁹ To them, the First World War exemplified male aggression. Their pacifist rhetoric emphasized women's "peculiar moral passion against both the cruelty and the want of war," combined with an intimate sense of the value of life as moral redeemers—the pure mothers of civilization.³⁰ These female activists believed that by mobilizing women for peace and incorporating "feminine" values of cooperation and compromise, society could be transformed.³¹

Against the backdrop of the international tragedies of wartime, the Owen family suffered personal misfortune. After Major Owen's already weakened kidneys were further damaged by a case of scarlet fever in 1918, doctors gave him only ten more years to live. Heeding medical advice prescribing a warm climate for the ailing soldier, Ruth moved her family to Coral Gables, Florida, where her parents had retired. In 1920, after the birth of a daughter, Helen Rudd, thirty-five-year-old Ruth had to face the challenge of supporting her invalid husband and four children. As she "never had an income from [her] father" nor from Reginald's family, she turned once again to public speaking on the Chautauqua circuit.³² During her summer and winter lecture tours, Owen spoke to more than a million people. Her topics included both antiwar and humorous themes: "A Great Avalanche of Peace," "Opening Doors,"

29. Martin Gruberg, *Women in American Politics* (Oshkosh, Wisc., 1968), 95-96.

30. Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 144.

31. Sara M. Evans, *Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York, 1989), 170-71. Paralleling Owen's wartime activism and peace organization affiliations, her father served as United States Secretary of State from 1913-1915. As an ardent pacifist, William Jennings Bryan's primary diplomatic objective was restoring peace through mediation. He resigned his post to rally opposition against American intervention in the World War I "cataclysm." William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Chicago, 1896), 420-25.

32. House Committee on Elections, "Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen," 58.

"The Fine Arts as an Influence in Americanization," "Pragmatic Philosophy," and "Profanity: Its History, Present Use and Future Possibilities."³³ Her schedule for one week in 1920 exemplifies the frenzied pace of the circuit: October 20th: Louisville, Kentucky; 22nd: Edinburg, Indiana; 23rd: Canton, Ohio; 24th: Elyria, Ohio; 25th: Toledo, Ohio; 26th: Piqua, Ohio; and 27th: Streator, Illinois.³⁴

Besides her work on the Chautauqua circuit, Owen participated in numerous community activities in the Miami area. She served as president of the Miami Women's Club, the Parent-Teachers' Association, the Theater Guild, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Episcopal Church Guild. She was regional director of the YMCA and a member of the Federation of Business and Professional Women, the League of Women Voters, the National Consumers' League, the National Council for Child Welfare, the League of American Pen Women, and the American Association of University Women.³⁵ As busy as these organizations kept Ruth, they offered her and other women the opportunity to break the bonds that traditionally limited their world to the home. Participation in the voluntary associations and clubs enabled women to widen their spheres of experience. Generally comprised of middle-class, white, college-educated women, these organizations, as one scholar has argued, "demonstrated how once-radical ideas about female benevolence and civic action had become embedded in a female subculture."³⁶ Members invoked the traditional images of women to win society's acceptance. They asserted that as mothers of humanity, they naturally knew what reforms were needed. In the process, participants learned important organizational, political, and motivational skills. Consequently, their concerns progressed from home to church to club to local community affairs, and then on to state problems and finally to national issues.³⁷ Combined with

33. Ruth Bryan Owen to Carrie Dunlap, January 10, 1920, Dunlap Papers.

34. Ruth Bryan Owen to Carrie Dunlap, October 17, 1922, Dunlap Papers.

35. Ruth Bryan Owen to Carrie Dunlap, June 13, 1921, Dunlap Papers; and Hope Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members: Women in the U.S. Congress* (New York, 1973), 78.

36. Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York, 1980), 84-85.

37. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York, 1979), 35.

their new suffrage rights, women acquired the option to choose a productive existence instead of an exclusively reproductive one.³⁸

In 1925, Owen joined the faculty of the University of Miami as a member of the speech department. As evidence of her financial success on the lecture circuit, she donated her teaching salary to scholarships for deserving students. The honorary public speaking fraternity honored her with their Greek letters, Rho Beta Omicron, after her initials. In addition, she served as vice president of the university's Board of Regents from 1926-1928.³⁹

Ruth Bryan Owen established herself first as a leader among women in community activism. Through her experience, knowledge, and judgment, she became a leader among men as well. Her training and personality made politics the next logical step.

On April 8, 1926, Ruth Bryan Owen announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination to the United States House of Representatives, Fourth Congressional District.⁴⁰ Owen's quest for elected office was the culmination of her heritage, travels, and her extensive civic involvement. Without false modesty, the forty-year-old Owen believed that she had much to offer Florida, just as she had derived many benefits and opportunities from the state. She relished the challenge and the possibilities Congress offered.

Despite Owen's ambitions and national popularity as a Chautauqua lecturer, the situation in Florida was not favorable for female political candidates. In a state that failed to ratify the suffrage amendment and defeated two women candidates for the state house of representatives in 1922, victory was elusive.⁴¹ Nor was there any regional consolation: no woman from the thirteen states of the Old South had ever been successful in reaching Congress. "It is generally thought," the *New York Times* observed, "that Mrs. Owen will meet an over-whelming 'native son' sentiment. In addition the voters of Florida are notably opposed to accepting women in politics."⁴²

38. Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 140, 150, 160, 188; and Blair, *The Clubwoman As Feminist*, 85-90.

39. Anne Hard, "The Three Ruths In Congress," *Ladies Home Journal* 46 (March 1929), 221.

40. *Miami Herald*, April 9, 1926.

41. Allen Morris, "Florida's First Women Candidates," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 63 (April 1985), 410-13.

42. *New York Times*, April 9, 1926.

Regardless of the odds, Ruth remained convinced that her adopted state was ready for a congresswoman. The campaign was challenging. Florida's Fourth Congressional District was one of the nation's largest. It stretched over five hundred miles from Jacksonville to Key West and contained eighteen counties.⁴³ Ruth's opponent in the Democratic primary was William J. Sears of Kissimmee. He was a popular eleven-year incumbent who had lived in Florida most of his life.

Ruth Bryan Owen waged a strong campaign against Sears. The race developed into a novelty because of her gender and her father's legacy. Even before she officially announced her candidacy, the *Miami Herald* ran a series of articles on women and politics. In print, "representative citizens" generally expressed favorable opinions about Ruth, although several constituents brought up the issue of her political inexperience and her gender. Moreover, most people expressed their support for Owen as a candidate for the state legislature— not the national House of Representatives.⁴⁴

Throughout the campaign, Owen traveled the district giving speeches and meeting potential voters.⁴⁵ She supported federal aid for agriculture and waterway improvements. The issue of her eligibility for office based on her marriage to an Englishman was raised by both the Republican and Democratic hierarchy. To counter the accusations, Owen hired a lawyer to certify her eligibility by illustrating that she had been a Florida resident for seven years prior to the election.⁴⁶ In addition, she took out half-page newspaper advertisements declaring "She Will Be Seated" if elected because she had regained her citizenship through the naturalization process in 1925.⁴⁷ Owen's offensive strategy deflected any potential controversy and prevented the issue of her citizenship from playing a major role in 1926 as it would in the 1928 election.

43. The counties were Brevard, Broward, Clay, Dade, Duval, Flagler, Indian River, Martin, Monroe, Okeechobee, Orange, Osceola, Palm Beach, Putnam, Seminole, St. Johns, St. Lucie, and Volusia. *Official Congressional Directory, 1809-1934* (Washington, D.C., 1931), 277.

44. *Miami Herald* April 1-3, 1926.

45. *Ibid.*, April 9, 17, May 8, and June 1, 1926.

46. House Committee on Elections, "Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen," 15.

47. *Miami Herald*, June 6, 1926; and *New York Times*, January 24, 1925. The press insert also quoted section four of the 1922 Cable Act to support her qualification claims: "After her naturalization she shall have the same citizenship status as if her marriage had taken place after the passage of this act."

While Ruth Bryan Owen was better known in the Miami area, the electorate in other areas of the state remained wary of a woman candidate. The media often gave the incumbent more prominent coverage. Sears' prior experience and name-recognition, in addition to support from the state Democratic Party organization, proved formidable obstacles for the "newcomer" to surmount.

Even so, on June 8, 1926, scattered early returns gave Owen a five-hundred-vote majority. The suspense continued for three days as the lead flipped back and forth between the two candidates.⁴⁸ On June 11, William Sears was declared the winner with a 776-vote margin of victory.⁴⁹

As she was recovering from the first real defeat of her professional life, Owen's personal world was rocked by tragedy. On December 12, 1927, Major Reginald Owen died.⁵⁰ His widow was devastated. It took the combined forces of the youngest of the Owen children and the oldest of the Bryan family to pull Ruth from her debilitating melancholy over Reginald's death.

Helen Rudd Owen galvanized in her mother the courage to surmount personal grief and to renew her life. Similarly, when she wavered in her political aspirations, it was Ruth's mother, herself a recent widow, who advised her daughter to fight for her professional goals.⁵¹ Two-and-a-half months after Reginald's death, Ruth Bryan Owen began her second campaign for the United States House of Representatives.

In 1928 Owen fought against two familiar foes: the incumbent William J. Sears and the electorate's traditional disdain for female candidates. Her earlier defeat had demonstrated that "there was not the friendliest feeling toward any woman taking her place in political life."⁵² That, she asserted, could be changed. Owen decided to take her campaign to the people.⁵³

In addition to meeting with newspaper editors, the astute and tireless candidate sent them regular press releases on her activities. Owen also took out small ads in the newspapers mimicking Will Rogers' pithy and popular syndicated column. Entitled "Ruth

48. *New York Times*, June 9, 1926; and *Miami Herald*, June 9 and 10, 1926.

49. Election Returns, 1926, Department of State, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida (hereafter FSA).

50. *New York Times*, December 13, 1927.

51. Keyes, "Some Are Born Great," 52.

52. Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members*, 75.

53. *Current Biography 1944*, 523.



Ruth Bryan Owen, c. 1928. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

Bryan Owen Says,” they offered weekly “words of political wisdom” to readers. Two typical examples from the Miami *Herald* illustrate her tactics: “Ruth Bryan Owen Says: Some one said: ‘The politician is concerned about the next election— the statesman is concerned about the next generation.’ We need less politicians and more statesmen and stateswomen.” And “Ruth Bryan Owen Says: Florida is learning cooperation. Not this town against that town— this section against that section, but all of us for Florida.”⁵⁴ Like her father, Ruth understood the importance of public opinion. She knew that she had to arouse and mold it in her favor if she was to defeat an entrenched thirteen-year veteran.

Determined “to meet the voters personally,” Owen campaigned in every precinct in her district. The Fourth Congressional District in 1928 was still bigger than some states. It included 588,286 residents— more than half of the state’s total population. In order to cover such distances, candidate Owen purchased a green 1928 Ford coupe and christened it “The Spirit of Florida.” She recalled, “When I started out with the car, it attracted so much attention whenever I pulled into a town that I got a crowd automatically.”⁵⁵ Her entourage included a secretary and a driver. In true Chautauqua fashion, Owen logged 16,000 miles and delivered over six hundred speeches in three months. She often covered 250 miles a day, delivering as many as seven speeches. Owen ignored fatigue and its cumulative effect, and boasted proudly that she never once broke a speaking engagement or was late for an appointment? A dispassionate observer acquainted with her father’s lungs of iron would have suggested that it was a question of genes. Ruth Bryan Owen’s vigorous campaigning led one editor to comment:

This weaker sex stuff is exploded for me forever. These men candidates, none of whom have traveled as much or delivered as many speeches as you have, come dragging in here with their voices gone and completely exhausted, while you blow in as fresh as a daisy, full of pep and your voice going as strong as ever.⁵⁷

54. *Miami Herald*, May 23 and June 1, 1928.

55. *Ibid.*, June 11, 1928; and *Current Biography* 1944, 523.

56. *New York Times*, November 11, 1928.

57. Frances Drewry McMullen, “The Three Ruths in Congress,” *The Woman’s Journal* 13 (December 1928), 18.

Large and enthusiastic audiences greeted Owen wherever she visited. On one occasion, the crowd drove their cars up to the speaker's platform, honking their horns in approval when the candidate delivered her congressional proposals. Another time at a construction site where there was no platform available, Owen spoke suspended above the ground on a huge crane.⁵⁸ In addition to the campaign rallies, Owen's female supporters formed "Ruth Bryan Owen Clubs" along Florida's Atlantic seaboard. Besides championing her bid for Congress, club members set up voter registration booths at courthouses and lobbied civic organizations on her behalf. They even wrote a campaign song, "Florida Is Calling," in her honor.⁵⁹

A few days before the primary, the *Miami Herald* reported Owen's "whirlwind finish" when "from 2 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., she addressed seven meetings in five East Coast counties, with a total audience of 4,500."⁶⁰ On June 5, 1928, Ruth Bryan Owen's energetic, passionate, and ceaseless work on the campaign trail was rewarded when she won the Democratic primary. She carried every county in the Fourth District with the exception of Duval and Osceola, where Sears' margin of victory was less than 759 votes in both cases. The *Miami Herald* reported the largest voter turnout in history for the Democratic primary. The total vote count was 56,031 for Owen and 42,011 for Sears.⁶¹

An elated Owen took a few weeks off before the demands of the general election began. The respite was short-lived, however, as she once again lectured on the Chautauqua circuit throughout the summer. Returning to the campaign trail in the fall, Owen's platform revolved around four main topics: agriculture, economic renewal, citizenship, and political accountability. Her congressional agenda included support for a protective tariff, a call for federal aid to South Florida victims of two recent hurricanes, a pledge to take two high school students from each county to Washington, D.C., each year for a personal introduction to their government and the responsibilities of citizenship, and her promise to visit each

58. *Ibid.*, 19.

59. *Miami Herald*, April 18 and 19, 1928.

60. *Ibid.*, June 3, 1928. On election day, the *Herald* published their candidate recommendations on the front page. Owen's name was prominent in the listing, along with John Martin for U.S. Senator and Fons Hathaway for governor.

61. Election Returns, 1928, Department of State, FSA; *Miami Herald*, June 5-11, 1928; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, June 9, 1928; and *New York Times*, June 8, 1928.

of the Fourth District's eighteen counties every year to report on her congressional actions and other political developments.⁶²

Despite these specific themes, Owen exhibited her political finesse by stressing the fluid element of compromise in most democratic initiatives. In one speech, she admitted, "just what type of legislation I shall vote for, I cannot say in advance." Owen maintained that "legislation in Congress, I have observed, is never the preconceived ideas of one person. It is a synthesis of the ideas of a number of people, worked out together, and representing a common judgement."⁶³

The Republican state convention nominated William C. Lawson to run against Owen in the general election. A twenty-year resident of Florida from the Orlando area, Lawson suffered a tremendous defeat against then-incumbent Sears in the 1926 election. Similarly in 1928, state papers gave him little chance of victory against the increasing popularity of Owen. "We understand there is still someone running against her from the Republican side, but we do not know what his name is," quipped one editor. He concluded that "we have every reason to believe that in this respect at least, she will differ from her father and be elected."⁶⁴

With her base of support growing along with her confidence, Ruth Bryan Owen began to speak on more controversial subjects. In several speeches, she talked about the importance of women's political involvement. Ruth stressed her belief that the "home is no longer bounded by four walls but stretches out to include the whole community. The woman who takes a hand in politics is only widening the walls of her own home."⁶⁵ Her message continued to work within the traditional sphere of women's domestic role. She only enlarged the domesticity to include politics because "modern mothers have found that laws come into the home, that laws affect the lives of the their children. It is a woman's duty to know the laws that touch her children."⁶⁶

In these speeches Owen stressed the importance of women's unique perspective as the mothers of humanity. Consequently she saw "women's entry into politics as an enlargement of her home ac-

62. *Miami Herald*, May 23, 1928; and Marjory Stoneman Douglas, "Ruth Bryan Owen," *McCall's Magazine* 25 (May 1929), 7.

63. McMullen, "The Three Ruths in Congress," 221-22.

64. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, September 14, 1928.

65. *Miami Herald*, October 20, 1928.

66. *Ibid.*

tivity rather than a departure from it." According to Owen, women's political activity "merely means a wider spread of the wings of motherhood, rather than leaving the home behind."⁶⁷ This was bold rhetoric at a time when the conventional concept of women and politics was often more contradictory than complementary, especially so in a region of the county yet to elect a woman to a national office. But that fact would soon change on November 6, 1928, when Ruth Bryan Owen was elected Florida's first congresswoman in a landslide. She carried every county except Orange, which she lost by only 178 votes. The final tally was 67,130 to 36,288.⁶⁸ The Bryan family legacy had come full circle. The "Great Commoner's" daughter was prepared to embark on a political adventure of her own.

Upon Representative Owen's arrival at Capitol Hill, she was "rushed like the most popular coed on campus" as "her male colleagues were daft about her." According to one contemporary writer, Owen "captivated Washington completely" with her engaging personality, compelling oratorical skills, and strong sense of political purpose.⁶⁹

Just as Ruth Bryan Owen was beginning to lay the crucial foundation for her congressional career, the question of her own citizenship threatened to destroy her work and reputation. In a political manipulation of the law, Owen's former opponent, William C. Lawson, challenged the 1928 general election results. Republican Lawson and his team of lawyers claimed that her 1910 marriage to Reginald Owen, a British subject, had deprived Ruth of her American citizenship. Therefore, they claimed the 67,130 votes cast in her favor null and void because she had not been a United States citizen for seven years prior to the election. Lawson then declared himself "the only duly elected and qualified Member of the House of Representatives from the said congressional district."⁷⁰

Lawson based his argument on two points of federal law. The first was Article 1, section 2, of the United States Constitution: "No person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the age of twenty-five years, and been seven years a citizen of the

67. *Ibid.*, April 10, 1926.

68. Election Returns, 1928, Department of State, FSA.

69. Duff Gilfond, "Gentlewomen of the House," *American Mercury* 18 (October 1929), 152-53.

70. House Committee on Elections, "Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen," 147.

United States. . . .” Secondly, Lawson cited the Congressional Expiration Act of 1907, sections 3 and 4: “Any American woman who marries a foreigner shall take the nationality of her husband.” He also quoted several legal precedents regarding the ineligibility of certain candidates for office whose victories were later declared null and void.⁷¹

Warming to his quest, Lawson petitioned Florida’s governor John W. Martin to withhold the certificate of election pending the settlement of the hearing. Martin refused on the basis that “the people in the Fourth District elected Mrs. Owen.”⁷² Consequently, the national chairman of the Republican Party, Glenn E. Skipper, disavowed himself and the national and state Republican organizations from “having anything to do with this contest nor will we . . . because Mrs. Owen was elected by a vote of the people in this district.”⁷³

On January 17, 1930, Congresswoman Owen went before the House Committee on Elections to defend her right to the Fourth District’s seat. Owen appeared without an attorney because she believed “the elements we are considering are so simple that they do not require any legal representation.”⁷⁴ She began her defense by asserting that section 3 of the Cable Act of 1922 reinstated her citizenship: “A woman citizen of the United States shall not cease to be a citizen of the United States by reason of her marriage after the passage of this act.” Owen stressed that the intent of the Cable Act as defined by its author, Representative John L. Cable (D-Ohio), was to allow a woman who had lost her citizenship by marriage to reclaim it. She could resume her citizenship as if it had never been lost.⁷⁵

With dramatic flair, Representative Owen argued for the “equality of citizenship.” She emphasized that her citizenship was taken away not because she had married a foreigner, but because she was a woman. Never in the history of the United States had a

71. *Ibid.*, 1617.

72. *New York Times*, November 30, 1929.

73. *Miami Herald*, November 30, 1929.

74. House Committee on Elections, “Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen,” 47; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, January 17, 1930; and Ruby A. Black, “The Case of Ruth Bryan Owen,” *Equal Rights* 16 (April 5, 1930), 67.

75. House Committee on Elections, “Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen,” 54-55; and Black, “The Case of Ruth Bryan Owen,” 67.

man lost his American citizenship by marriage to a foreigner. Owen added that the only way a man would lose his citizenship was by swearing allegiance to another country, and, she noted emphatically, "I have never taken an oath of allegiance to any foreign government."⁷⁶ "Never by word or act," Owen declared, "have I been anything but a loyal American citizen during my entire life."⁷⁷ Concluding with a plea for equal justice for women under the law, Owen asserted, "You cannot deny my claim without saying to millions of American women that they are not entitled to the same treatment as men."⁷⁸

On March 1, 1930, the nine members of the House Committee on Elections unanimously agreed that Ruth Bryan Owen had been eligible as a candidate and was duly elected to serve Florida's Fourth District.⁷⁹ Soon after receiving the committee's report, the full House concurred without discussion or dissent.⁸⁰

Despite the difficulties caused by her disputed election, Owen was anything but idle in the interim. She focused on Florida's economic and agricultural problems. Within the first months of her term, Ruth wrote to friend Carrie Dunlap about her "multiplicity of duties":

I simply cannot convey in a letter all the interest and joy I am finding in my new "job." It is an extremely hard-working one but I love it all, and the best of it is that I am getting results. There have been four bills passed in the House this session, two of them mine, and one being an appropriation of Four and a quarter Million Dollars to eradicate the Mediterranean Fruit Fly which has appeared in my State.⁸¹

76. House Committee on Elections, "Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen," 54; and J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (Chicago, 1973), 235-36.

77. House Committee on Elections, "Arguments and Hearings in the Contested Election Case of William C. Lawson v. Ruth Bryan Owen," 54.

78. *Ibid.*, 60-61; *Woman's Journal* 16 (February 1930), 25; and *New York Times*, January 19, 1930.

79. House Committee on Elections, "William C. Lawson-Ruth Bryan Owen Election Case," 71st Congress, 2nd session, March 24, 1930, House Report 968, 7; *Miami Herald*, March 2, 1930; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, March 2, 1930; and *New York Times*, March 2, 1930.

80. *Congressional Record*, 71st Congress, 2nd session, June 6, 1930; *Tampa Tribune*, June 7, 1930.

81. Ruth Bryan Owen to Carrie Dunlap, April 30, 1929, Dunlap Papers.

The fruit fly threatened widespread disaster to Florida's fragile fruit industry, which had recently been devastated by two hurricanes and a major freeze. Owen's appropriations bill, which funded federal experts, quarantine measures, and educational programs on eradicating the fly, helped not only farmers in her district but also those in other areas of the state. In addition, growers were reimbursed 75 cents per field box of produce.⁸²

The other bill mentioned by Owen established a flood disaster program for farmers in the southeastern states. The measure authorized federal loans totaling six million dollars for flood stricken regions.⁸³ In Florida, the bill created drainage programs for Martin, St. Lucie, Okeechobee, Highlands, Lee, Collier, Dade, Palm Beach, Hendry, Glades, and Monroe Counties. The measure also initiated the Okeechobee Flood Control District to prevent future destruction similar to that caused by the 1926 and 1928 hurricanes.⁸⁴

Mindful of Florida's maritime economy, the congresswoman secured eight million dollars in federal appropriations for developing the state's rivers and harbors.⁸⁵ Included in her efforts was the approval of Port Everglades, the continuation of Okeechobee flood control, and the improvement of the Miami River. The chairman of the House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, Joseph J. Mansfield, praised Owen: "I can truthfully say that no more capable and successful advocate of river and harbor legislation has appeared before our committee in the past thirty years. . . ."⁸⁶

Owen's agricultural initiatives called for extensive federal aid in the midst of a crippling depression. It was remarkable that any of her bills passed considering the combined effects of the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, and the ensuing international economic stagnation. Yet when she was elected, Owen had pledged her loyalty to farmers: "I am going to Congress to represent the needs of an agricultural state. As my father used to say, only when agriculture is good can the city prosper."⁸⁷

82. *Congressional Record*, 71st Congress, 3rd session, December 13, 1930, 315-22; House Committee on Agriculture, "Hearings on the Mediterranean Fruit Fly," 71st Congress, 3rd session, January 28, 1931, 4; and Ruth Bryan Owen to President Herbert Hoover, March 5, 1930, President's General File 107, Hoover Library.

83. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, January 21, 1930.

84. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1929.

85. *Miami Herald*, June 3, 1932.

86. *Florida Times-Union*, June 3, 1932.

87. McMullen, "The Three Ruths in Congress," 221

Reflecting this commitment, she voted for the Smoot-Hawley Tariff in 1930. Historically considered one of the most restrictive and reactionary pieces of trade legislation, the six-cent import tax was heralded as a necessary action in the depression era.⁸⁸ Specifically, Owen feared that cheaper Cuban and Mexican products would threaten Florida's northern fruit and vegetable trade if left unprotected.⁸⁹ Owen went before the Senate Finance Committee in August 1929 to protest the inclusion of a seasonal clause in the tariff. She successfully argued that the clause denied protection for her constituents during the months of December, January, and February.⁹⁰ The congresswoman kept her promise to Florida's farmers even though protectionist tariffs reinforced isolationism and the contraction of the international market.⁹¹

Following the passage of Smoot-Hawley, a popular joke around Washington lambasted Owen's support of a tariff bill, a position that contradicted her father's unyielding support of free trade: "When Mrs. Owen's 'aye' resounded in the House chamber on the new tariff bill, one Democrat asked another if they'd heard that rumble. 'No, what was it?,' demanded the other. 'Why, that was William Jennings Bryan turning over in his grave.'"⁹²

Another issue that understandably concerned Owen was a bill to amend the Cable Act. Her highly publicized citizenship hearing revealed defects in the original wording of the act. Speaking before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, Representative Owen called for uniform application of the law regardless of gender. "We all should be considered as equal citizens," Ruth stressed, "not men citizens and women citizens."⁹³ Other groups whose members testified in support of the amendment were the National League of Women Voters, National Woman's Party, Na-

88. *New York Times*, June 29, 1930.

89. Ruth Bryan Owen to President Herbert Hoover, May 18, 1929, President's General File 107.

90. *New York Times*, August 17, 1929.

91. F. W. Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States* (New York, 1931), xv, 519-21. Ironically, as minister to Denmark in 1933, one of Owen's priorities would be to repair Danish-American trade relations damaged by protectionist policies like the Smoot-Hawley Tariff.

92. Gilfond, "Gentlewomen of the House," 152.

93. House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, "Hearings on the Amendment to the Women's Citizenship Act of 1922," 71st Congress, 2nd session, March 6, 1930, 16-18; *Congressional Record*, 71st Congress, 2nd session, April 18, 1930, 9315-9322; and *New York Times*, April 13, 1930.

tional Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Women's Christian Temperance Union, American Federation of Labor, and the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. These organizations hoped to insure a woman's right to independent citizenship based on equality, not contingency. President Hoover signed the Cable Act amendments into law on July 3, 1930.⁹⁴

In the midst of her work on the Cable Act amendments, Owen ran for re-election to a second term in the House. She easily defeated her primary opponent, Dewitt T. Dean, and ran unopposed in the general election. Several state newspapers hinted that her next campaign should be for the United States Senate.⁹⁵

Infused with great confidence from her congressional success, Owen introduced her most daring piece of legislation. She proposed the creation of a cabinet-level agency to be called the Department of Home and Child. The new department would "promote and foster education, home and family life, and child welfare."⁹⁶ Owen's idea had its origins in the Children's Bureau within the Department of Labor. She wanted powerful cabinet status to unify all government agencies dealing with children's issues.⁹⁷ Representative Owen lobbied, wrote articles, and delivered speeches on the issue for more than two years.⁹⁸ Her bill ran into opposition from members who objected to the unification of existing services under one omnipotent department. They cried "infringement of states' rights," and the measure floundered.⁹⁹ Evidently many politicians were not ready for a cabinet-level department dealing predominantly with women's issues. Whether the country was ready remains debatable. In addition, since the Great Depression occupied most lawmakers' agendas, a Department of Home and Child probably received low priority compared to legislation for economic survival.

94. *Equal Rights* 16 (March 15, 1930), 48; and Lemons, *The Woman Citizen*, 236-37.

95. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, May 21, 1930; and *Miami Herald*, November 5, 1930.

96. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, October 5, 1930, and January 28, 1931; and *New York Times*, September 22, 1930.

97. Ruth Bryan Owen, "Uncle Sam and the Children," *Good Housekeeping* 92 (January 1931), 25.

98. Ruth Bryan Owen, "A Department of Home and Child," *Women's Journal* 16 (February 1931), 8-9.

99. *New York Times*, May 21, 1931.

Opponents also defeated Owen's conservation legislation. In December 1930, she joined with other Florida conservationists, including her cousin May Mann Jennings, and feisty Marjory Stoneman Douglas, to advocate the preservation of the 2,000-square-mile Everglades as a national park. In her autobiography, Douglas related an example of Ruth's talents as a politician:

During the debate in a House Committee [Public Lands], the landowners who didn't want to sell to the government argued that the Everglades was a swamp filled with snakes and mosquitoes. To prove it, they brought a big snake in a bag and dumped it on the table. Ruth Bryan Owen saw that something had to be done. She'd never picked up a snake in her life, but she grabbed this one, wrapped it around her neck, and announced: "That's how afraid we are of snakes in the Everglades."¹⁰⁰

In addition to her reptile stunt, Ruth produced numerous experts who asserted unanimously that the Everglades had "educational, recreational, and inspirational value that entitled it to be preserved for the people of the United States."¹⁰¹ One esoteric naturalist wondered who could object to a project that "would make the crocodile-waters and weird bird area accessible to week-enders from crowded centres, and startle them out of the ruts which an exclusive association with human animals produces on the mind of man."¹⁰² The House Committee unanimously endorsed Owen's Everglades proposal.¹⁰³ But the bill was defeated on the House floor. The project's million-dollar price tag for road construction alone was considered too great an expenditure in the midst of the depression.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the legislation that Owen set in motion ultimately culminated in the creation of the Everglades National Park in 1947.¹⁰⁵

In August 1931, Congresswoman Owen announced her bid for a third term. Combined with depression-era economic issues, many

100. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *A Voice of the River* (Englewood, Fla., 1987), 176-77.

101. *Congressional Record*, 71st Congress, 3rd session, January 13, 1931, 48.

102. *New York Times*, December 16, 1930.

103. *Miami Herald*, January 18 and 19, 1931.

104. *Official Congressional Directory*, 277.

105. Douglas, *A Voice of the River*, 194; and Linda Vance, *May Mann Jennings: Florida's Gentle Activist* (Gainesville, 1985), 129-30.

voices were calling for either revision or repeal of Prohibition. Long recognized as a “dry” because of her father’s fervent anti-alcohol stance and her own belief that her constituents supported the Eighteenth Amendment, Ruth underestimated the growing opposition. Instead she stated that unemployment would be the issue in the campaign because “there are plenty more hungry than thirsty people in the country just now.”¹⁰⁶ Although her statement ended the persistent rumors that she would run for the United States Senate or the Florida governorship, it reflected a serious political miscalculation on her part.¹⁰⁷

In the spring of 1932, J. Mark Wilcox, a West Palm Beach lawyer, suddenly announced his decision to seek the Democratic nomination. Wilcox, a Georgia native, moved to Florida in 1925 and served as West Palm Beach city attorney from 1928-1933. Wilcox aggressively campaigned on a platform advocating the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, declaring it a “farce and a failure.”¹⁰⁸ Throughout the campaign, Wilcox continually assailed Owen as the daughter of the great “dry crusader.”¹⁰⁹ His attacks put her in the difficult position of having to defend her own as well as her father’s reputation. Wilcox challenged Ruth to several debates, but she refused knowing the discourse would revolve around the problematic prohibition issue. In addition, her opponent would never set times and dates for the debates to allow Owen to adjust her schedule accordingly.¹¹⁰

Repeating tactics from her past campaigns, Owen toured the district giving numerous speeches focusing on her congressional record.¹¹¹ Publicly, she did not directly criticize her opponent, although she did use newspaper ads featuring candidate comparison charts entitled, “What do they offer?” Contrasting her own numerous congressional initiatives with blank space for Wilcox’s, the mes-

106. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, August 30, 1931.

107. *Ibid.*, September 24, 1931; *Miami Herald*, September 24, 1931; and *New York Times*, September 24, 1931.

108. Ruth Bryan Owen to Corra Harris, May 26, 1932, Corra Harris Papers, Special Collections, Hargrett Library, University of Georgia; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, May 19, 1932; and *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress, 1774-1989* (Washington, D.C., 1971), 2049.

109. *Miami Herald*, May 28 and June 1, 1932.

110. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, May 19, 1932.

111. *Ibid.*, May 19, 1932; *Miami Herald*, May 31, 1932; and *Florida Times-Union*, June 7, 1932.

sage from Ruth Bryan Owen was clear: her opponent lacked a proven record and his campaign was short on substance.¹¹²

Despite large crowds at her appearances, praise from her congressional colleagues, editorial endorsements, and election-eve predictions of renomination, Owen lost, 48,049 to 60,246.¹¹³

Devastated by her defeat, tired and bitter from the negative campaign, Ruth offered to resign from Congress, explaining that she did not believe in "lame duck" office-holding.¹¹⁴ But the Speaker of the House, John Nance Garner, induced her to remain. He declared that "'lame-duck' members did not apply to the quality of statesmanship which she represented."¹¹⁵

Ironically, during her "lame-duck" session of the 72nd Congress, Ruth supported the cause of her defeat. Abiding by her constituents' wishes to the end, she voted for the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment.¹¹⁶ In an iconoclastic tribute to the dualities of political life, "the one so flattering, the other so pitiless," Ruth published a "Lady Lame Duck's Farewell":

To members in the coming session
 We leave what's left of the depression
 With Fifty thousand tomes appended
 Telling just how it can be ended.
 To Congressmen who'll draw our salary
 We leave all gunmen in the gallery,
 All Communists who march and fight
 And threaten us with dynamite.
 Those stalwart ones may have the onus
 Of laying hands upon the bonus.
 The currency— to them we hand it
 To shrink, contract it, or expand it.
 We'll let them exercise their talents
 On making that thar budget balance

112. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, October 1, 1931; *New York Times*, November 4, 1931; *Miami Herald*, May 31, June 1, 1932; and *Florida Times-Union*, June 5-7, 1932. Candidate Owen also astutely included the fact that she voted to reduce her own salary.

113. *Florida Times-Union*, June 3 and 6, 1932; Election Returns, 1932, Department of State, FSA, *Miami Herald*, June 9 and 10, 1932; and *New York Times*, June 10, 1932.

114. *Miami Herald*, June 10, 1932; and *New York Times*, June 10, 1932.

115. *New York Times*, July 10, 1932.

116. *Ibid.*, November 24, 1932.

And, pointing out, with no delaying
 A tax the public won't mind paying.
 To make this simple as can be
 We leave to them Technocracy.
 To them we're leaving the analysis
 Of beer producing no paralysis.
 To them we leave, with stifled sobs,
 All persons who are seeking jobs.
 Our pangs of exile 'twill assuage¹¹⁷
 To know we have no patronage.

Despite her poetic repudiation of the patronage system, the remainder of Ruth Bryan Owen's political career hinged on that intrinsic element of American politics. Never again would she hold elective office. Yet she remained an important player in the political field because patronage insured Ruth Bryan Owen's legacy of continued public service.

Only five months after her disappointing loss, Owen emerged as an important member of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration. Although Owen would have served ably in any number of New Deal agencies, President Roosevelt envisioned a more prominent position for her. The first indication of her assignment was an April 1, 1933, *Washington Post* article entitled, "Mrs. Owen Is Danish Envoy's Dinner Guest; Appointment Guessed." Owen dined with Danish minister Otto Wadstel and North Winship, counselor of the American legation in Copenhagen. The *Post* reported that "the dinner was regarded by political observers as clinching the conclusion that Mrs. Owen . . . soon would be wearing the title 'madame minister' in Denmark."¹¹⁸

The paper also mentioned a Denmark vacation Owen and her youngest children, Bryan and Helen Rudd, had taken two years earlier as a clue to her most likely diplomatic destination. On that trip, the Owen family traveled throughout Denmark in a car with a

117. Ruth Bryan Owen, "Lady Lame Duck's Farewell Verse," *Literary Digest* 115 (February 25, 1933), 32. The *New York Times* version of her poem included two additional stanzas: "To you dear ladies of the press; We leave unfeigned thankfulness. All you have done to give us pleasure; Are memories we will always treasure. While we roam that vast expanse; Where lame ducks seek their sustenance. When happy days are here again; Please let us know just where and when!" *New York Times*, February 1, 1933.

118. *Washington Post*, April 1, 1933.

trailer. Ruth called their adventure a "Denmark Caravan" because they traveled cross-country meeting the Danish face-to-face. Often they dined with families in small villages, learning the Danish language, traditions, legends, and recipes. On the Fourth of July, Ruth addressed a large crowd celebrating their Danish-American heritage at Rebild National Park. The trip was such a success that Ruth wrote an account of their excursion, *Danish Caravan*, which Dodd, Mead and Company published in 1936 as a children's book.¹¹⁹

On April 4, 1933, the *New York Times* reported: "Mrs. Owen to Be Envoy at Copenhagen; She Will Be First Woman Named Minister." According to the article, Owen preferred a domestic State Department position, but "by the insistence of President Roosevelt and the cordiality with which her suggested appointment was received in Denmark," she agreed to the foreign post "for which it is felt she is extremely well fitted both by personality and experience."¹²⁰ A few days later the King of Denmark, Christian X, officially endorsed Ruth Bryan Owen as minister to his country.¹²¹ The United States Senate unanimously confirmed President Roosevelt's nomination of Ruth Bryan Owen to be Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Denmark on April 12, 1933. Duncan U. Fletcher, Florida's longtime Democratic senator, made the motion to his colleagues. As an indication of her popularity, the vote was taken without the traditional reference to the Foreign Affairs Committee.¹²² Owen's public service reached new heights. Having already proven herself in state and national affairs, she confidentially met the challenges of the international arena.

As minister to Denmark, Owen became the first woman to represent the United States in a foreign country as the head of a diplomatic legation. Seeking to foster American-Danish good will, she toured the country, delivered speeches, entertained famous Americans, studied social welfare legislation, and promoted improved trade relations. According to prevailing opinion, Minister Owen

119. Ibid; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, May 29 and August 30, 1931; *New York Times*, July 27, 1931; and Ruth Bryan Owen, *Denmark Caravan* (New York, 1936), 10, 39, 58, 149-50, 156, 160-61.

120. *New York Times*, April 4, 1933.

121. Ibid., April 9, 1933; and "New Minister to Denmark," *Time* 21 (April 24, 1933), 13.

122. *New York Times*, April 13, 1933.



Eleanor Roosevelt and Ruth Bryan Owen, c. 1933. *Photograph courtesy of the Danish Royal Archives, Copenhagen.*

advanced "with conspicuous success, the real friendship and admiration of the Danes for the United States."¹²³

Owen served in the diplomatic post for three years. She would have gladly continued in the position but for the reoccurrence of a problematic issue that had shadowed her career: her citizenship status. While in Denmark, Owen fell in love with Captain Borge Rohde, a member of the King's Life Guards. The couple married on July 11, 1936, in Hyde Park, New York, at President and Mrs. Roosevelt's family church. Prominent members in the administration, Secretary of State Cordell Hull in particular, felt her marriage compromised her diplomatic standing as well as her upcoming work in the president's re-election campaign.¹²⁴ Bowing to the pressure, Owen decided to sacrifice her diplomatic career for the overriding cause of Roosevelt's re-election. She resigned her post at the end of August.¹²⁵ The diplomatic double-standard was not lost on the media:

[W]hile it is quite customary for men in the American diplomatic service to marry foreigners and while the wives of foreign envoys to this country are often Americans, a foreign husband for an American official abroad brings up questions for which there is no answer in the protocol It is also apparent that unless Washington follows the example of some of the other Governments in forbidding all diplomatic representatives to marry foreigners, in no sense can a woman appointee go as far as a man in the field of international relations.¹²⁶

After her resignation, Owen's public activism centered around speaking tours, teaching, writing, and advisory boards. With the outbreak of World War II, she worked to establish a viable international arbitration organization. Based on her expertise in the area and the publication of her influential book on the subject, President Harry Truman asked her to participate in the 1945 San Fran-

123. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1936.

124. Stephen Early to President Roosevelt, August 1, 1936, President's Personal File 2721, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

125. Ruth Bryan Owen to President Roosevelt, August 29, 1936, President's Official File 437, Roosevelt Library.

126. *New York Times*, September 1, 1936.

cisco Conference that formalized the United Nations.¹²⁷ In 1949, she served as an Alternative Representative to the Fourth Session of the U.N. General Assembly.¹²⁸

Until her death in 1954, Ruth Bryan Owen continued to deliver the message of peace and global cooperation in her speeches, writing, and travels. While in Denmark to accept the Danish Medal of Merit, sixty-eight-year-old Ruth died of a heart attack.¹²⁹ She left behind a remarkable legacy of activism and public service. Her breadth of vision and unwavering dedication to the causes of education, child welfare, citizenship, diplomacy, and peace endure as gifts to the people of Florida, the American nation, and the global community.¹³⁰

127. Ruth Bryan Owen, *Look Forward, Warrior* (New York, 1942); and *New York Times*, April 17, 1945.

128. *New York Times*, September 27, 1949.

129. *Ibid.*, July 27, 1954.

130. Recognizing the importance of remembering and celebrating her life, the State of Florida inducted Ruth Bryan Owen into the Florida Women's Hall of Fame on November 17, 1992.