JEANNETTE RANKIN’S STORY

by Dorothy Sams Newland
Dear Friends,

On June 2020, we celebrate the 140th birthday of trailblazer, feminist, and activist Jeannette Rankin. We are sharing this brief biography with you to shine a light on the wonderful work she did to advance the causes of suffrage, women's rights, protection for children, and pacifism. She was a tireless advocate of social and racial justice and modeled her beliefs throughout her life.

While Jeannette Rankin was from Montana, it is a little-known fact that she lived near Athens, Georgia for over 50 years. The proceeds from her Georgia home created the seed money for Jeannette Rankin Women's Scholarship Fund (JRF). In her will, Jeannette expressed her desire to use proceeds from her estate to help “mature unemployed women workers.” Her administrative assistant, Reita Rivers, along with Athens feminists Susan Bailey, Gail Carter Dendy, Margaret Holt, and Heather Kleiner took Jeannette’s wish and translated it into the Jeannette Rankin Women’s Scholarship Fund. Our mission is to empower women through education. We provide scholarships and support for low-income women over the age of 35 across the USA.

As we celebrate 45 years of delivering that mission, we share Jeannette Rankin’s inspiring story with you. It was authored in 2011 by Dorothy Sams Newland, a long-time leader and supporter of JRF.

We hope you will say a word of thanks to Jeannette for her fearless leadership, her unerring conviction, and her advocacy for peace and justice.

Yours for Women and Education,

Karen Sterk

Jeannette Rankin is my heroine. She was someone I grew up hearing about, although my impressions were rather vague. She was a contemporary of my grandmother and my favorite great aunt. My husband Jim became a board member of the Jeannette Rankin Foundation in the early to mid 1980s and eventually he became the first male president of that board. My exposure to Jeannette Rankin grew by leaps and bounds as did my admiration of her. I am very much in awe of her courage and her persistence in fighting throughout her long life for the things that were so important to her and, indeed to all of us. In preparing this program I read several books that provided me with the basic facts of Jeannette’s life, a kind of black and white version. The technicolor part, the real feel for Jeannette, especially in her later years, mostly came from an interview with Reita Rivers whose close association with Jeannette began in 1969.

Jeannette Rankin was first and foremost a woman of courage and a woman of conviction. I imagine most of you have more than a passing knowledge of her. Even people who know little about her, I expect do know that Jeannette was twice elected to the United States House of Representatives from Montana and twice voted against our country’s declaration of war. The second time in 1941, hers was the sole dissenting vote and she was crucified unmercifully for it. Those of you who can remember that far back may even have been among those crucifying her. During our time together today, I hope to get beyond those two votes that were a small, though important, part of Jeannette’s life. Her heroism and the value of her life go so much deeper than that. “Her leadership and dedication to the improvement and well-being of women and children through legislation and her lifelong dedication to peace earned her a special place of honor.” Indeed, her work to improve the lives of women and children has continued after her death in the form of scholarships granted to mature women by the Jeannette Rankin Foundation.

Jeannette Rankin was born June 11, 1880, in Missoula, Montana, to John and Olive Rankin. She was the oldest of seven children. Her father John was born in Ontario, Canada, to Scottish immigrants Hugh and Jeannette Rankin. John and his brother
headed for the Montana Territory in 1869 eventually ending up in Missoula “where at age 29 he established himself as a builder, architect, logger, carpenter, and craftsman. He invested in ranching and also built the first sawmill. Rankin became a rich man by Western standards, served in civic affairs and was elected county commissioner in 1878, while the woman who was to become his wife was making her way west from New Hampshire.” At the age of 20 Olive Pickering began teaching in a one room schoolhouse in Missoula, and married John Rankin in August 1879.

The Rankins had a house in town that had hot and cold running water and electricity, unusual for that time and place, and a ranch six miles north of town. Jeannette, as a child and throughout her adult life, especially loved summers on the ranch. As the oldest of the seven children (all girls except for the fourth, a son named Wellington who was the pet of the family), she bore some responsibility in caring for the younger ones and was considered the leader in the family. She had a strong sense of family all her life and was assisted by her siblings when she ran for Congress and while she was in office. Not only did Jeannette learn the womanly things like sewing and cooking, she learned to chop wood, build fires, clear brush and look after the animals. There is a story that as a ten year old she grabbed a needle and thread and stitched up a gash in the shoulder of one of the family’s horses.

One of the books I read described the young Jeannette as a Daddy’s Girl. Another said that “he offered her privileges and expectations usually reserved for a father-son relationship.” It’s apparent that John Rankin’s influence on his daughter was strong. From him she learned to talk to men as equals. She was undoubtedly affected by his cynical attitude toward the military. Jeannette’s exposure to politics and the world of ideas came from her father.

Although Jeannette was intellectually aggressive, she found school boring and her performance was mediocre. Not knowing what direction her life should take at the end of high school, in 1898 Jeannette enrolled in the first freshman class at the University of Montana and was graduated four years later with a bachelor of science degree in biology. Still not knowing where to focus she spent one year teaching school in a tiny Montana town and then working for a Missoula dressmaker and helping her mother keep house.

In 1904, after her father’s death from Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever at age 63, Jeannette headed east for an extended visit with Wellington who was in law school at Harvard University. Having lived a protected life in Montana she knew little of the crime, poverty, and corruption of the big cities in the east and was appalled by the misery and squalor in the tenement slums in Boston. Here was born her interest in the reform movement. She did much reading at the Harvard library and back home in Missoula but didn’t get personally involved until she went to San Francisco in 1908.

Working in a settlement house on Telegraph Hill for four months had a profound impact on Jeannette. She was deeply touched by the plight of the destitute women and children and came to see that “the women suffered from the oppression of bigoted and antiquated laws and a total lack of legal protection.” In the autumn of 1908 she enrolled in the New York School of Philanthropy whose faculty included such notables as Louis D. Brandeis and Booker T. Washington. “Jeannette studied labor disputes, criminal sociology, social reform, racial progress and the theory and practice of charity organization.” She got practical experience working in the night courts and studying the needs of deaf children in the Jewish-Italian district of the Lower East Side.

Jeannette graduated as a qualified social worker and in 1909 took a job with the Children’s Home Society of Spokane, Washington, and later at an orphanage in Seattle. The lives of the children in the homes were heartbreaking for Jeannette, and she began to see that reform would not come from within the institutions but by influencing the laws which governed them.

While in Washington State Jeannette’s involvement in the suffrage movement began in earnest. Responding to an advertisement for volunteers to hang posters promoting equal suffrage, she proceeded to tack the posters on every facade and empty wall or fence she could find. Her audacity in marching into a barbershop and hanging a poster in the window resulted in Jeannette being invited to join the statewide campaign. She did so and worked hard in the fall of 1910, happily celebrating when suffrage passed
Jeannette Rankin’s Story

Helena, became president of the Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage. Victory came through hard work and going door to door. Brother Wellington, now a lawyer with an office in Helena, offered a special regard for the welfare of children that men did not.

Back in Montana, Jeannette learned that a suffrage bill had been introduced into the legislature. On February 1, 1911, Jeannette made history by being the first woman to address the all male Montana Legislature in Helena. Excitement was high and the galleries were crowded. Bouquets of purple violets embellished the room, smoking was banned, spittoons had been removed, and swearing was forbidden. “The speech reflected Jeannette’s deep suspicion of the priorities of government without female representation.” She repeated the same argument that men had made during the Revolutionary War that taxation without representation was tyranny. She said that suffrage was not an issue to be decided by lawmakers and asked that they vote to submit the suffrage issue to the voters of Montana (all men, obviously) at the next election.

The bill was narrowly defeated and the vote on suffrage did not go to the people of Montana at that time, but Jeannette emerged as a leader in the suffrage movement and went on to accept the call of Harriet Laidlaw of the New York Woman’s Suffrage Party to join the campaign in her state. Her work there was done mostly by speaking to street corner crowds and by fearlessly approaching people to sign petitions. She also went to California where her tireless work in rural areas, traveling and sleeping in a different bed every night paid off and the suffrage amendment passed.

Back in New York in 1912, Jeannette took the position of field secretary for the National American Woman Suffrage Association and “directed an overwhelming victory in North Dakota.” In March 1913, the day before Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration, she joined in a rally instigated by Alice Paul. Minutes after the parade, made up of 5,000 marchers according to one report, began, trouble erupted. “Men pressed in from both sides of the street, shouting insults. They spit on the women, tripped them, pelted them with burning cigars, slapped them, and hit them.” The police offered no protection to the women.

Meanwhile, back in Montana, an amendment was passed with only two dissenting votes in the Senate and House to put suffrage to a vote statewide. Jeannette traveled to Butte to lead the campaign. She took the state by storm and worked tirelessly for ten months, traveling 9,000 miles and making 25 speeches in 25 days at one point. Her car bogged down in mud at times and she sometimes “relied on benevolent ranchers to provide her supper.” She was 34 years old at the time and often described as “a prophet, and many other things – some not so kind I’m sure. She was immensely popular with the working class but attacked by the political bosses including one who threw a glass of water in her face. She used all kinds of tactics, including wooing children to tell their dads to let their mothers vote. Jeannette’s family pitched in, too, with her sisters working at the main office and going door to door. Brother Wellington, now a lawyer with an office in Helena, became president of the Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage. Victory came on November 3, 1914, when Montana became the tenth state to grant suffrage but the first to approve it on the first state-wide referendum.

One of Jeannette’s main arguments was that women should have the right to vote to determine whether men go to war, and by the time of the vote in Montana, World War I had begun. For the next several months she continued to work on suffrage and peace issues but then took a year off and traveled to New Zealand where she earned money by sewing.

Jeannette returned to the United States in the spring of 1916 well rested and contemplating running for a seat in the United States House of Representatives. What better way to accomplish social reform and advance the cause of suffrage nationwide. Many whom she consulted thought she should begin with a lesser office, but her brother Wellington encouraged her and offered to manage her campaign. On July 11, 1916, she announced that she was a candidate for Congress. She ran as a Republican despite “her strong Progressive leanings and her incessant references to democratic government.” Many years later she said: “I was never a Republican. I ran on the Republican ticket.”

Jeannette ran against seven men in the primary and beat them all, winning 7000 more votes than her closest rival. As with the suffrage movement she ran a grass roots campaign and mingled with the voters. Her opponents, according to Jeannette, “had too much dignity” and were afraid to meet the voters. In the general election, she was largely ignored by the Montana newspapers which were mostly owned by the powerful Anaconda Copper Mining Company. She managed to make her views known, however, and called for amending the constitution to give women the vote nationwide. She also promised to do all she could to keep her country out of war and to work for the interests of children. She chastised the previous Congress for earmarking $300,000 for a study of hog feed while setting aside only $30,000 to study...
children's needs. She said, “If the hogs of the nation are ten times more important than the children it is high time that women should make their influence felt.”

Jeannette emerged victorious in the general election on November 6, the first woman to be elected to a Congress in the United States. She instantly received a huge amount of publicity, proposals of marriage, and offers from businesses to feature her in their advertising. “The Lady from Montana” as she was called, prepared with some apprehension to begin her new job in Washington.

While she was on a speaking tour Jeannette learned that President Woodrow Wilson had called a special session of Congress. That day would also be when she was sworn in and a breakfast in her honor was held that morning at the Shoreham Hotel. Well-known faces surrounded her. Two of the famous suffragettes were Alice Paul, a pacifist, and Carrie Chapman Catt, who wanted votes for women even more than she wanted peace. Both women, knowing that President Wilson would be asking for a declaration of war, were putting pressure on Jeannette. Ms. Catt later turned on Jeannette because of her anti-war vote, but Alice Paul remained her friend for life.

At twelve noon Jeannette entered the House of Representatives carrying a bouquet of flowers on the arm of John Evans, the other congressman from Montana. Everyone burst into applause. Jeannette was neither the mannish, overbearing woman some expected her to be nor the flighty, irrational giggly type others may have expected. She was attractive, feminine, friendly, straightforward, well informed, and most of all a woman of conviction who was opposed to war.

As expected President Wilson issued his war resolution to a joint session that evening, and two days later the Senate passed it by a vote of 82 to 6. Jeannette was lobbied from all sides and encouraged to vote “yes” by many friends and family, including her brother Wellington who knew her political career would be over if she voted “no,” and many of her suffragette friends who knew their cause would be hurt if the first woman in Congress voted against war. Seeing her torment, Wellington ultimately told her to vote her conscience. The roll call vote began at 3:00 a.m. on Good Friday, April 6, 1917. She did not vote until the second roll call and when her name was reached, Jeannette went against protocol that no comments were made when voting. She rose and said “I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war. I vote no.”

Although she was in agony for casting that nay vote and became the object of much fury and contempt (far more than the 49 men who also voted no), she never regretted doing what she felt to be the right thing. She was wed to the cause of peace for life and forevermore believed that “war is a stupid and futile way of attempting to settle international difficulties.” She said that “you can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake” and that “war never advances the cause of civilization; it always retards it.”

During the rest of her term while war raged and dominated the business of Congress, Jeannette strove to pass bills that promoted the welfare of women and children and watched helplessly as rights for all people were eroded through censorship and imprisonment of war protesters. She fought for the rights of men, too, the little people, miners and farmers. As the next election approached Jeannette was well aware that she would be defeated if she ran for reelection to the House. Ultimately she ran for the Senate on the National Party ticket instead and came in a distant third to incumbent Democrat Thomas Walsh. It was time for Jeannette to find another approach to promoting her causes, especially the cause of peace.

Jeannette’s term in Congress ended March 4, 1919, almost four months after the end of World War I and almost a year and a half before the states ratified the national suffrage amendment. Within a month of her departure from Congress, Jeannette, along with twenty-five other U.S. women, boarded a ship for Europe to meet with women from other countries that had fought each other in the war. Their goal was “to work out plans for the conditions needed to prevent future wars” and “they called themselves the Zurich Congress.”

In Zurich a permanent peace organization was formed. It was called the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and Jeannette was one of its officers. In 1925 she became a field secretary for WLPF. During the twenty or so years between her two terms in Congress, Jeannette helped form and worked for several organizations that promoted the cause of peace. It was also during this period that she began spending time at the farm she purchased near Athens, Georgia.

Why Georgia? The books I read indicated that Jeannette wanted a home accessible to the nation’s capitol (that is, not as far away as Montana) where much of her lobbying efforts were centered. Also, she believed that there was a stronger current of anti-war feeling in the South and, therefore, a more fertile field for a peace movement. She liked the idea of living in the country while having the University of Georgia nearby. So, according to her biographer, when she was forty-four years old at the end of 1924, Jeannette bought a 64-acre farm near Bogart. In two days she and two sharecroppers built a one-room wood house that had no electricity and no running water. She had an outdoor toilet and did her cooking in a shed behind the house. A car radiator that she somehow rigged along one wall supplied heat. She lived off a small monthly check from her father’s estate, gifts from Wellington and the small salary she received irregularly while trying to reclaim the existing treasures that had almost been lost to neglect.
It was in 1925 that Jeannette became field secretary for the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. In 1928 she and some acquaintances met in the apartment of artist Lucy Stanton to form the Georgia Peace Society. Jeannette was officially the secretary but, in actuality, she convened the meetings and was the moving force behind it. The following year she served a six month stint as a lobbyist for the Women’s Peace Union, and in 1930 began a ten year association with the National Council for the Prevention of War.

In 1931 Jeannette went head to head with Congressman Carl Vinson of Georgia about a $616 million naval building bill. That year the bill died in committee but it resurfaced two years later and passed. Carl Vinson was re-elected and continued to be a leading hawk in Congress.

According to the biography Flight of the Dove, “By 1934 Jeannette had built a reputation in Georgia as a woman forever doing things women weren’t supposed to do, things not in vogue with the times.” In fact, all of her life, Jeannette was a woman ahead of the times, in large ways and small. In addition to the obvious causes of suffrage and peace, as early as 1916 she talked of fine-tuning the election process of eliminating the electoral college. A small way in which she was ahead of the times. In later years she held Friday night gatherings at her home where she entertained all kinds of people from the local sheriff to University of Georgia professors. She served them cartons of yogurt long before yogurt became such a trendy food. Incidentally, at one of these gatherings, the un-liberated date of a UGA professor said, “I’ve never in my life been discriminated against as a woman.” The other guests were rather taken aback, but Jeannette said, “Well, I can believe you. If you never step outside the role that has been assigned you, you would never feel discrimination.”

Back to her work: As the result of her leadership in the peace movement, Jeannette signed a contract to give a series of lectures at Brenau College in Gainesville, Georgia. On October 25, 1934, the acting president of the college introduced Jeannette as “a likely candidate for a ‘Chair of Peace’” that the trustees were considering establishing. The next day The Atlanta Constitution reported that the chair had already been established and that Jeannette Rankin was the first “Professor of Peace.” Both she and Brenau were viciously attacked by the members of the American Legion Atlanta Post Number One. Many newspapers sprang to Jeannette’s defense as did The New Republic.

The Evening News and Macon Telegraph were not so kind. Editor W. T. Anderson characterized Jeannette as “a moral loser whose friends were pacifists, defeatists and communists.” He accused her of trying to undermine the manhood and patriotism of America, and complained that her vote against American entry into war in 1917 had helped give the Germans the impression America would not fight, therefore prolonging the war. In the fall of 1935, the assault on Jeannette intensified when a Legionnaire named Bill Janes wrote a column in The Evening News branding Jeannette a rank Communist. Incensed at being called a Communist, Jeannette sued Janes and The Macon Evening News for $50,000. Finally, two years after the libel occurred, she accepted an out-of-court settlement for $1000 and a front-page retraction. In a speech later, Jeannette said, “If you hear of anyone calling me a Communist, please send me their name and address. I think this is a good way to get money for the peace movement.”

In her anti-war activities Jeannette had long maintained that the military-industrial complex was one of the causes of war. In 1934 the Nye Committee investigated the ties between war and profit making and found that arms firms had indeed worked hard to encourage World War I. Tales of bribery, excess profit taking, and the sale of weapons to enemy countries abounded. Jeannette’s statements that money is the motive for war weren’t so far-fetched after all. Despite some setbacks in Georgia, Jeannette continued her lobbying efforts in Washington and elsewhere for the next several years. As World War II drew closer she hammered her point that preparing for war actually caused war. She was convinced that in eliminating war propaganda Americans could end the habit of jumping into war to settle international disputes.

In the spring of 1940 the tension between militarists and pacifists was at an all time high. Jeannette returned to Montana where she had spent time every year since she left Congress and shortly before her sixtieth birthday, she filed for the Congressional seat from the Western District. On November 5 she was elected to her second term by a substantial margin. This time she was one of seven female members of Congress.

Jeannette spent the first several months introducing bills to prevent war and being defeated every time. On December 7, 1941, she was on a train to a speaking engagement in Detroit when she heard the terrible news about the attack on Pearl Harbor. She got off her train in Pittsburgh and boarded another train back to Washington. History was repeating itself in many ways but this time when Jeannette Rankin entered the House chambers for the roll call vote on President Roosevelt’s call to war she was truly alone. She said that “it was a good deal more difficult than it had been the time before.” She knew she faced her political execution but she knew what she had to do. As she declared the sole nay vote, she was booed. When she left the hall and went to the cloakroom, near riot conditions existed. She escaped to a telephone booth where she dialed the Capitol switchboard for help and was rescued by Capitol police who escorted her to her office and stood guard outside. When she telephoned Wellington in Montana, he told her that Montana was 110 percent against her.

As one would suspect, Jeannette was inundated with venomous mail. She was called “Jap” and traitor, and many demanded her resignation. Yet much of her mail was quite supportive and some media coverage was positive as well. Some senators and
representatives sent her warm Christmas greetings saying they wished they had stood with her. She did not resign but finished out her term in dignity. The public outcry gradually died down and eventually she was largely ignored. On the first anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jeannette entered remarks in the Congressional Record casting doubt that the Japanese bombing raids had been an act of unprovoked aggression. On the contrary, she believed that “the attack was deliberately provoked, a planned instrument to arouse the American public to enter the European War.”

At the end of her term, Jeannette returned to Montana. “Her status had changed from daring politician to ‘old maid’ daughter caring for her mother.” She also spent time fixing up her second house in Georgia after the first one burned. This one purchased in 1935, was a cottage situated on thirty-three acres near Watkinsville.

A new period in Jeannette’s life began when she boarded a ship for a world tour in 1946. Her primary destination was India as she had become a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi, perhaps her first real hero. At the age of sixty-six, she took off driving alone across India (in her own car which had been delivered by ship). After spending two months learning about the lives of ordinary people, she found that Gandhi was in Bengal attempting to make peace between Moslems and Hindus. She decided to postpone meeting him and he was assassinated before she had another opportunity. She was able, however, to meet with Prime Minister Nehru.

“This trip was the first of seven that Jeannette was to make to India. It was also the start of journeys that would occupy her for the next twenty years. Besides India, her travels included Indonesia, Africa, Mexico, South America, Western Europe, Russia, and Turkey. After 1965, most of her travels were in the U.S. She took a final trip to India at age ninety.”

Jeannette learned much from her visits to India and her study of Gandhi’s teachings and methods, although her commitment to peace did not come from religious beliefs as his did. She had rebelled against organized religion as a youth but “neither encouraged nor discouraged the role of religion in the peace movement.” She remained agnostic all her life but was “knowledgeable of religion and freely quoted the Bible in references to peace.”

The 50s were mainly a time of travel and learning about other countries for Jeannette. She was distressed that she seemed to see the hand of corporate America at every turn in her travels abroad. She was distressed, too, about the Korean War that followed so closely behind World War II. In 1958, Jeannette was one of three women featured in John F. Kennedy’s article “Three Women of Courage” written for McCall’s magazine in response to the criticism he received for not including any women in his book Profiles in Courage.

Jeannette’s low profile in the peace movement for twenty-three years after World War II became a thing of the past when the Vietnam War heated up in the mid 60s. “In May 1967, she was invited to Atlanta by Georgia peace stalwart Nan Pendergrast (who later served on the board of the Jeannette Rankin Foundation) to speak against the Vietnam War before about 100 members of Atlantans for Peace. In her speech, she suggested that 10,000 women march in memory of the 10,000 men who had lost their lives in Vietnam. Her speech was picked up by the Associated Press and eventually led to the formation of the Jeannette Rankin Brigade. By 11:30 on the morning of January 15, 1968, nearly 5,000 women were gathered at Union Station in Washington, D. C. Dressed in black, they began walking in the snow up Louisiana Avenue to the Capitol with Jeannette Rankin, age 87, her white hair covered by a brown wig, in the lead. There was a large police presence and detention centers were prepared to imprison women who broke the law. They decided to forgo the opportunity to practice civil disobedience and did obey the 1882 law that forbade demonstrations on Capitol grounds. Most of the marchers continued to Union Square for a rally that included music by Judy Collins. Jeannette and sixteen others proceeded to the Capitol and presented Senator Mike Mansfield with a petition calling for an end to the Vietnam War.

Jeannette told Senator Mansfield, who had assumed her seat in Congress in 1943, that “We must bring the boys home from Vietnam.” He asked, “How are we going to do that?” “The same way we got them there – by planes and ships,” she replied. Although the march was largely ignored by the media and apparently had no effect on Congress, to Jeannette the march symbolized her life’s work. She concentrated on the effect it had on women and the encouragement it gave them to speak up. The large amounts of mail generated by this march prompted the Peace Lady to hire a secretary to help her respond. Reita Rivers, the person she hired became much more than a secretary and was kind enough to share her recollections of Jeannette with me.

During these last years of her life, Jeannette split her time between her ranch in Montana and her Shady Grove cottage not far from the crossroads that is now called Butler’s Crossing near Watkinsville. In fact she ate lunch every day with Blanche Butler. She also befriended Becky Barnett, whose family ran Barnett’s
grocery nearby when Becky gave birth to a severely handicapped child and her husband died three months later. According to Reita, Jeannette’s greatest genius was that she got along with all kinds and ages of people. She focused on the individual. “At the grocery store, she never went for the shortest line; she went for the longest (so she could talk with people). When she stopped for gas while traveling, she only got a few gallons at a time so she could stop again up the road and meet some more people.”

When I asked Reita about Jeannette’s physical appearance, she described her as diminutive with beautiful legs and a nice figure. She dressed elegantly, wearing heels and hose, and had dresses made of beautiful fabrics that she bought on her travels.

Jeannette never married, but she loved children. For a time, two of her sister Edna’s children lived with her. The three children of Wonder Robinson, who lived on Jeannette’s property, stopped off at her house every day for their afternoon snack when they got off the school bus. Jeannette also formed a club for boys and one for girls. She taught the children to swim and they made bathing suits that they dyed red. When they all jumped in the pool the whole pool turned red!

The Shady Grove cottage had more amenities than her original house in Bogart. The floor in the downstairs sitting room was dirt but was covered with tarpaper carpet, and beautiful rugs. She had a chemical toilet and the bathroom was heated by an old fashioned toaster opened up to expose the coils. When the kitchen door that led to the outside was opened, it hit things on the inside. So, Jeannette sawed it into three pieces, put hinges on it and made it into a folding door.

Some of you know of the other house Jeannette built on her property, now known as the Round House. She built it after Wellington’s death partly as an antidote for her grief. It was meant to be a place for older women to live and pool their resources sharing a common living room and kitchen, but it never actually served that purpose. It did, however, benefit women after Jeannette’s death when it and the rest of her Oconee County property were sold. The $16,000 proceeds became the seed money for the Jeannette Rankin Foundation that awards scholarships to women thirty-five years of age or older pursuing a post-secondary education. The Foundation has grown tremendously and become national in scope. As of June 2020 JRF has awarded +1,300 scholarships of $2,000 each to low-income women from all over the United States. The estimated economic impact to the Scholars is over $400,000,000.

According to Reita, Jeannette had self-doubts. She never thought of herself as smart, saying that her sister Grace was the smart one in the family. The last time she visited Reita, in her home before she left for California where she died in 1973 shortly before her ninety-third birthday, Jeannette became weepy and talked about how sad it was to see your closest friends die off and you’re still here. She said “I sometimes wish I hadn’t taken on peace. It was doomed for failure from the beginning. I should have taken on the plight of the American Indian. I might have been able to get some changes made there. But peace, it’s impossible.”

Despite her self doubts, Jeannette received a number of honors. Among them was being named in 1972 as the first member of the Susan B. Anthony Hall of Fame where she was described as the “world’s outstanding living feminist.” Her ninetyieth birthday was celebrated with a grand banquet at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington and was attended by many friends and dignitaries including her old friend Alice Paul. A statue of her was placed in Montana’s capitol honoring her as “an artist of human ideals.” Then, on May 1, 1985, twelve years after her death a statue of Jeannette was dedicated in the rotunda at the nation’s capitol, one of two from the state of Montana. It was a glorious day with festivities all day long. Several congressmen and congress women and the Governor of Montana sang her praises touting her independence, integrity, dedication, determination, and courage.

I will close with remarks made by the Honorable Claudine Schneider on that occasion: “Here was a woman who was ready to take on the world, ready to fight for a fairer society and never afraid to stick up for what she believed was right. ‘You don’t do the right thing because of the consequences,’ she once said. ‘If you are wise, you do it regardless of the consequences.’ In her later years she remarked, ‘If I had my life to live over, I would do it all again, but this time I’d be nastier.’ I think she did it right the first time; I only hope that the rest of us can live up to her standards.

Feminist, pacifist, leader – in both her words and actions – Jeannette Rankin was truly one of the great trailblazers of our time. It is fitting that her statue will sit in this building, to commemorate the unprecedented contribution she made to her country, and in recognition of the doors of opportunity she opened for future generations of women.”
Dedicated to the JRF Founders

Who followed Jeannette Rankin’s bequest to help “mature, unemployed women workers” by starting the Jeannette Rankin Foundation. Through the founders’ vision, guidance, and stewardship, hundreds of women have changed their lives through higher education.

The first Jeannette Rankin Foundation scholarship was awarded to Barbara Dixon (seated, center) in 1978. Source: Jeannette Rankin Foundation.
MISSION:

We provide scholarships and support to low income women over the age of 35 for post secondary education across the United States.

$16,000 in proceeds from Jeannette Rankin’s property in Georgia that became the seed money for the Jeannette Rankin Foundation.

$19,920 is the median household income for JRF Scholars, with an average household size of 3.

91%* of JRF Scholars either graduated or persisted towards their degree last scholarship year. (Compared to the national average of 8% - 30% for this demographic.)

+1,300 scholarships awarded.

$3,250,000 in scholarships turned into approximately $400,000,000 in increased lifetime earnings for JRF Scholars.