

# The Oconee Enterprise Lifestyles

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## Before retiring in Oconee, Jeannette Rankin was elected as the first woman in Congress

BY CAITLIN FARMER

The first woman elected in congress, Jeannette Rankin, moved to Oconee County in 1926 and later purchased 44 acres of land in 1933 that she dubbed "Shady Grove" according to the historical marker that sits off Mars Hill Road, right before Rankin Road.

Rankin lived in Oconee until her passing in 1973, said the Jeannette Rankin Foundation Chief Executive Officer Karen Sterk.

On March 1, a Jeannette Rankin legacy lecture was held at the University of Georgia Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies to kick off Women's History Month, according to a press release.

The lecture was sponsored by the Jeannette Rankin Foundation, the Athens Chautauqua Society and the Russell Library, according to the release, and featured Historic Interpreter, Mary Jane Bradbury, who told Rankin's story.

"I like to tell stories about women from history from the point of view of the women. So it's a first-person interpretation of their stories," Bradbury said. "It is a form, an art form really, of telling stories from a point of view most people aren't familiar with so you learn the context of the time and then you can bring the person to life, it's a great way to present history."

The lecture shined a light on Rankin's life and motivations before moving to Oconee.

"Suffragist, pacifist and tireless advocate for social reform, Jeannette Rankin was the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress. She brought forward legislation for the 19th amendment and was the only woman to vote on giving women the vote," Sterk said.

The interpretation began with a reference to Rankin's first vote as a member of Congress, a vote against entering World War I.

"Sometimes I'm afraid that's what people are going to remember me for, that they'll think I'm unpatriotic or against our government in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. I figured the first time a woman had an opportunity to stand by what she believes in an official capacity, she ought to do it," said Bradbury from the perspective of Rankin.

Bradbury said that although Rankin gets a few lines in history books about being the first woman in Congress and voting against entering WWI and WWII, that tells people nothing about her story and the life she lived.

Rankin was born on June 11, 1880, near Missoula, Montana, to John and Olive Rankin, according to history.house.gov, and was raised on a ranch with her six younger siblings, five sisters and one brother.

Rankin went to the University of Montana where she graduated in 1902 with a degree in biology.

"Now what in the world was I going to do with that? It was becoming more acceptable for women to get an education in those days but she wasn't supposed to do anything with it," Bradbury said.

Although Rankin helped raise her younger siblings, she knew she didn't want to get married and have children, Bradbury said, but she was unsure what to do until two trips changed the trajectory of her life.

While visiting her brother at Harvard University, they took a trip to New York City where Rankin saw the Bowery.

"Families, children, were living in such conditions I wouldn't let my ranch animals live in and I didn't know that there was anything I could really do about it at the time," Bradbury said.

In 1907, she traveled to San Francisco following an earthquake and just like in New York City, she saw few people with wealth and many people with nothing.

Rankin then studied and began a career in social work, working at the Seattle Children's Home before realizing if she wanted to change things, she had to change the laws, Bradbury said.

"There comes a point when philanthropic activities [and] good intentions, aren't enough. If we're going to make a change, then we have to change the laws and if you're going to change laws, then you have to have people who can vote for laws about families and communities," Bradbury said.

By 1910, women had the right to vote in four states: Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado



Jeannette Rankin [submitted photo]



Mary Jane Bradbury stands dressed as Jeannette Rankin by a cardboard cutout of the historic figure. [Photo by Caitlin Farmer]

and Utah.

Women's suffrage was on the ballot in Washington and Rankin decided to campaign at the grassroots level, Bradbury said.

"Keep the issues single, be for nothing but suffrage and against nothing but anti-suffrage," Bradbury said.

Rankin believed that if a man and a woman had a family, the woman should have a say in what influences their family, Bradbury said.

"Yes, a woman should be there to nurse her child through typhoid, but she should have a say in the conditions that keep that typhoid from spreading," Bradbury said. "Don't you know, every county in the state of Washington passed women's suffrage and I was no longer wondering what to do with my life."

Rankin then went to work as a field secretary for the National American Women's Suffrage Association, traveling to several states and campaigning for women's suffrage before quitting to travel around the world.

After traveling to places like New Zealand where women had the right to vote for many years, Rankin returned to Montana to run for Congress as a republican.

"If women are half the people in the United States, shouldn't they be half the congress," Bradbury said.

At the time, many women had run for office and had been elected to their state legislatures, but no women had been elected to serve in Congress, Bradbury said.

Rankin traveled around Montana to campaign and speak to constituents before going to the polls where she cast her first-ever vote for herself, Bradbury said.

It took two days to count the vote and Rankin won by over 7,000 votes, Bradbury said, and was on her way to Washington.

"My platform when I ran for Congress was preparedness for peace," Bradbury said. "...the rest of my platform was votes for women, laws protecting women and

children and prohibition."

Bradbury said Rankin wanted her constituents to learn how to vote responsibly and for the candidate who would make the changes they wanted to see.

"You don't need to vote for parties. There's plenty of men to take care of party politics but there's not a single woman to take care of the needs of families and children and that's what I went to Congress for," Bradbury said.

Rankin's constituents, friends and family who were once against going to war, we're now encouraging her to vote for it.

Rankin was told that by not voting for war, she was showing that women are weak and have no place in public office and was forfeiting her ability to be re-elected.

"For a moment, before that dark cloud of war talk burst over the capitol, I experienced a moment of triumph on behalf of all women when I walked onto the floor of Congress, as a participant, not just an observer," Bradbury said.

Arguments over entering the war lasted three days before it was time to vote, Bradbury said.

Votes were taken by calling roll and saying each Congressional member's name twice.

The first time Rankin's name was called, she said nothing, Bradbury said, but the second time, Rankin spoke.

"I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war. I vote no," Bradbury said. "In 144 years of congressional voting, no one had ever made a speech."

At the conclusion of voting, 373 members voted for the war, 50 voted against it and nine did not vote, Bradbury said.

Following her vote against entering the war, Wellington told Rankin she would not be re-elected.

"I said, 'well I don't care about that, I want to know what they're going to say about me,'" Bradbury said. "Didn't the press pick up on that?"

Newspapers wrote about Rankin, calling her a "pawn of the Kaiser" or a "crying schoolgirl" and even a disgrace,



Mary Jane Bradbury does a historical interpretation of Jeannette Rankin. [Photo by Caitlin Farmer]

Bradbury said, despite 49 others voting against entering a war.

By 1918, the topic of women's suffrage and the 19th amendment came to the floor of Congress, Bradbury said.

"Women were picketing outside the White House with signs that said, 'Mr. President, you're so worried about the poor Germans who don't have a voice in their government. 20 million American women don't have a voice in their government. When are you going to stand up for them?' Those women were arrested, they were thrown into jail. They were forced. They were beaten and when word got out, well, we could no longer look away," Bradbury said.

Women's suffrage passed in the house before taking two years to pass in the Senate and nine more months to be ratified by the required number of states.

"And then in August of 1920, the 19th amendment granting most women the right to vote was added to the constitution, the exact same wording that Susan B. Anthony proposed 45 years earlier," Bradbury said. "And me, well, my brother was right, I wasn't re-elected."

Rankin then traveled around the world before being invited to join the Georgia Peace Society and purchasing land in Oconee to live on seasonally.

Rankin was eventually elected in Montana to serve in Congress in 1940 and won with 54 percent of the vote, according to history.house.gov, where she voted against entering WWII, making her the only person to vote against entering both world wars, Bradbury said.

What isn't in the history books, Bradbury said, is her humanitarian work.

She held children's camps at her Oconee residence, allowing all children regardless of their race and ethnicity to partake, Bradbury said.

Rankin felt strongly about people doing small things in their communities to help the bigger picture, Bradbury said, and she encouraged people to get involved in bringing people together because then things would be bound to change.

In her will, Rankin said she wanted the sale of her estate to go toward helping "mature unemployed women workers" and \$16,000 was later used to create the Jeannette Rankin Foundation, Sterk said.

Three years after Rankin's passing in 1973, the first scholar grant was given to an Oconee County woman, who used the \$500 to go to nursing school, Sterk said.

Today, Rankin's legacy lives on through the foundation which has awarded 1,800 scholar grants totaling \$4.4 million to women nationwide.

The recipients are women 35 years old and older nationally and 25 years old and older in Rankin's home states of Georgia and Montana, Sterk said.

The grants are unrestricted, meaning the women can use the money for anything they need, such as childcare, rent or other expenses that come with obtaining higher education such as books.

The typical recipient of the scholar grants is a mother with two children, Sterk said, adding that 75 percent of the women are the single-head of household and 56% are survivors of domestic violence.

Bradbury said she hopes people walk away from her interpretations with a different perspective on the topic or are provoked to learn more.

Bradbury said most people in Georgia don't know the Montana version of Rankin and wants people to know that Rankin was dedicated to what she believed and lived in a way that matched what she said.

"That's just not something that ever gets into her story and so I think it's the way she lived her life in small ways that absolutely was aligned with her bigger story that is inspiring to me," Bradbury said.

"Because, yes, it's wonderful to make a big splash, she did it twice, but then what's she do in between? Well, you know, she had this life that was dedicated to humanity, to making things better, to finding ways for people to connect, trying to get people to understand a peaceful world and that doesn't make the pacers every day, but she lived it every day."