Jeannette Rankin
First Lady for Peace

by Jackie Beyer

Jeannette Rankin was the first woman elected to the United States Congress. Born in Missoula, Montana, Miss Rankin was a leader in the women's suffrage movement, and later elected to represent her home state two different times. Representative Rankin holds the distinction of being the only woman who voted to give women the right to vote. An active pacifist she was also proud to state "The first vote of the first woman member of Congress was a vote against war." She is an inspiration for all young children, especially girls, to enter the world of public service and strive for change that will improve the lives of American families.

Jackie Beyer read a book about Montana when she was in fourth grade and finally moved to Missoula when she was 21 to attend the University of Montana. She first learned about Representative Rankin when she volunteered at the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center. She met her husband on a mountainside near Eureka where they live in a small cabin on 20 beautiful acres. When not painting or enjoying Montana she works as a teacher.
For children and their families everywhere, that they may live in a world of peace.

“Once men and women have decided that they don’t want war, a way will be found to dispense with it. Of that we may be sure…”

Jeannette Rankin

Special thanks to the Montana Historical Society, Kurt Wilson of the Missoulian, the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center for making this book possible.
It is not for myself that I am making this appeal, but for the six million women who are suffering for better conditions, women who should be working amid more sanitary conditions, under better moral conditions, at equal wages with men for equal work performed. For those women and their children I ask that you support this measure.

Jeannette Rankin
February 1, 1911 addressing the Montana state legislature on women's suffrage.
Once upon a time there was a woman who believed in peace. She believed that humans were capable of living in a world without war. She spent her whole life teaching people about her ideas many of which were so popular she was elected to represent her state as a Congresswoman two different times! The first time there had never before been a woman in the United States Congress in all of history.

She believed all children should have the opportunity to grow up in safe healthy households where they would have happy childhoods like hers. She also thought their parents should be protected from dangers at work.
Here Jeannette's intellect was challenged by her professors and New York City's nearby slums inspired her to work for change. Jeannette graduated in 1909 with a degree in social work and returned to Missoula to set about making social change. After a short time in Missoula she headed to Washington State where she worked in several orphanages but it broke her heart to see the cruelties of the system on the children she worked with. Orphans, whom she placed in homes, were returned and would cry in her office. She felt that she needed to do something to improve the system, which she believed was one of the biggest causes of poor people's misery.

In Seattle, Jeannette once again enrolled in school, aiming to learn how to promote positive social legislation in the government. One day she saw an advertisement in the school newspaper looking for volunteers to hang up posters that promoted equal voting rights for women. This is where Jeannette found her destiny. She joined the suffrage movement and would become an advocate for women's and children's rights for the rest of her life.

The suffrage movement would give women the right to vote and Jeannette believed that if women had the right to vote they would be able to get the government to pay more attention to helping all mothers create healthy, clean, loving homes for their children. Leaders in the suffrage movement noticed Jeannette for her bravery including one instance where she hung a poster up in a barbershop, a place that women never went.

Jeannette's determination came because she was so sure women cared for children differently than men, that women would vote for laws that protected the poor children and families she had seen in the cities. After four months of hard work, the suffrage amendment passed in Washington State and women earned the right to vote.

Jeannette returned to Missoula for Christmas where she heard about a suffrage bill in Montana. Jeannette came up with an ingenious idea and wrote to the state legislature asking if she could speak about the bill. She was given permission to speak which had never happened before.

On February 1, 1911 Jeannette gave her first speech to the Montana legislature. The Capitol building in Helena was full of excitement. Jeannette was very nervous even though Wellington had spent hours coaching her speech. She worried that they would laugh at her, but instead she received great rounds of applause. The legislators even chipped in to order her a bouquet of purple violets. The men were polite and realized right away that she was serious. After her speech various women's groups from New York to California asked Jeannette to come work for them. She traveled from state to state helping women organize and gave endless speeches and lectures.

In 1914, she returned to Butte to lead Montana's suffrage campaign after the legislature had been given a referendum to decide whether women in Montana should have the right to vote. Jeannette was able to unite various groups of people, including miners, housewives, immigrants, and union workers to join together. She spoke to everyone she could, driving to remote ranches if she thought it would gain a single vote. She preferred to talk to common citizens and would speak outside pool halls and saloons, opera houses, dance halls, at women's teas, even stopping picnickers to educate them. She would tell children, “Ask your fathers why they won't let your mothers vote.” It worked and the suffrage bill passed giving Montana women the right to vote on November 3, 1914.

Jeannette decided that the best way to use the women's newly found right to vote was to run for one of the Congressional seats herself. She asked her brother Wellington what he thought and not only did he support her decision, he offered to be her campaign manager. The women who had worked for the suffrage bills with her weren't sure about this idea and tried to convince her to run for a smaller office, but Jeannette was determined, and they soon supported her. Her family came from around the nation to help with her campaign. She drove endless miles up and down steep mountain roads; through endless prairies across the vast state giving speeches and talking to everyone she possibly thought might vote for her. She would claim, “I only need every other vote, plus one more.” She won the election by more than 7500 votes! She was instantly national news and the press surrounded their Missoula family home for days.

But Jeannette's time as a Congresswoman would prove to be a difficult challenge. In April of 1917 President Woodrow Wilson called the legislators to a special session of Congress to vote on the United States entry into World War I. Jeannette couldn't believe it, her goals when she ran for Congress were to improve the lives of children and families in the United States and couldn't see that war was going to improve anything. The horrors and sadness war brought to families were things she wanted to prevent. Jeannette just didn't believe war was a proper method for settling disputes and...
The woman’s name was Jeannette Rankin, and she grew up in the mountains of Montana. Jeannette had five younger sisters and one brother. The family lived in a home in Missoula, Montana that had some of the only indoor plumbing in town. During the summer they lived on a ranch in the country. Jeannette loved riding her horse around the large ranch.
After college Jeannette got her first look at big-city slums and the horrible living conditions of many people when she went to Boston to visit her brother Wellington. Children as young as six years old worked in dirty factories, men and women alike worked in dangerous conditions for long, long hours each day. This led to very unpleasant domestic life, which seemed so different compared to her delightful childhood. She saw children dressed in flour sacks and mothers that could turn a child over to the orphanage without crying.
Montana was one of the first states to let women vote and Jeannette had worked hard to help women get that right. One time she even put a sign up in a barber shop, a place women did not go in those days.

Jeannette thought she could help more children especially ones from poor families if she worked in the government so she ran for Congress. And in the fall of 1916, she won! They called her the 'Lady from Montana.'

The first thing Jeannette was asked to vote for as a Congresswoman was if the United States should send troops to Europe for World War I. Jeannette believed that civilized people should be able to settle their disputes without war and that war’s effects on the family were too horrible so she voted “no.”

This caused a lot of people to be upset but Jeannette said that she didn’t care if she got reelected, but what history would say 50 years from now. Jeannette said “Wouldn’t it be a shame if we died knowing we didn’t do everything in our power to promote world peace?”

Washington State was one of the first places to let women vote and Jeannette worked hard to help women get that right. One time she even put a sign up in a barber shop, a place women did not go in those days.
Then she was asked to lead Montana’s suffrage campaign. Jeannette was able to unite various groups of people including miners, housewives, immigrants, and union workers to join together. She spoke to everyone she could, driving to remote ranches if she thought it would gain a single vote. She preferred to talk to common citizens and would speak outside pool halls and saloons, opera houses, dance halls, at women’s teas, and even stopping picnickers to educate them. She would tell children, “Ask your fathers why they won’t let your mother’s vote.” It worked and the suffrage bill passed giving Montana women the right to vote on November 3, 1914.
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I want to stand by my country but I cannot vote for war. I vote No.

Jeannette Rankin • April 2, 1917

Jeannette Rankin on her first day in Congress April 2, 1917
She worked with the other Congressmen to pass laws that limited the number of dollars companies could make from the supplying the military because she thought the large profits encouraged war.

She tried to get laws passed that would improve the lives of America’s citizens. At that time, people including young children, worked ten, twelve, or even longer hours a day for low wages. Jeannette helped limit the number of hours employees could work to eight, and set age limits so small children wouldn’t have to work in factories.
The first vote of the first woman member of Congress was a vote against war.

Jeannette Rankin
First woman elected to the United States Congress 1916

Historical image brought to life in watercolor by Jackie Beyer

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519 So Higgins  Missoula, MT 59801
I knew if women could just get the right to vote they would force the government to take care of the poor children, because women understand what families need more. Governments should protect our homelife.

Jeannette Rankin

After working hard to gain a woman's right to vote, Jeannette Rankin ran for Congressional office and won! She became the first woman elected to the United States Congress in 1916.

She helped to make laws requiring companies to be responsible for providing safe working conditions in their factories and mines where many men and women were injured or even killed just trying to earn a living.
After her term in Congress Jeannette went to Switzerland and help found the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Returning to the United States Jeannette worked for a variety of peace organizations.

Jeannette bought a home in Georgia where the local children loved her. She lived a simple life without plumbing or refrigeration. She taught the girls how to sew and practice parliamentary procedure. She let the boys listen to the baseball games on her radio.
As a lobbyist for the National Council for the Prevention of War, Jeannette Rankin tried to get Congress to make war against the law. She brought documents and gave speeches that war was as bad as cannibalism and if people would just decide to live without it, war would be gone forever.

Miss Rankin was the first woman elected to the United States Congress in 1916. 

Historical image brought to life in watercolor by Jackie Beyer. © 2004

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Jeannette testifying before the House Naval Affairs Committee
As a lobbyist for the National Council for the Prevention of War she tried to get Congress to make war against the law. She brought documents and gave speeches that war was as bad as cannibalism and if people would just decide to live without it, war would be gone forever.
When World War II started brewing Jeannette worked harder, even leading a motor tour from Washington D.C. to Chicago to promote peace and encourage citizens to vote for politicians who were for peace.

Finally in 1939, Jeannette decided she had to return to Montana to run once more because she was afraid the government would try to send soldiers to Europe again. She was sure parents around the country really didn’t want to send their sons to fight and maybe die. And she was right because she won a second time! But then Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Jeannette still didn’t think war was a way for countries to get along so she still voted ‘no.’
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After this term she left the government in Washington, D.C.
and traveled around the world, studying peace and teaching
people about her pacifist ideas.
She helped to make laws requiring companies to be responsible for providing safe working conditions in their factories and mines where many men and women were injured or even killed just trying to earn a living.
She worked with the other Congressmen to pass laws that limited the number of dollars companies could make from the supplying the military because she thought the large profits encouraged war.

She tried to get laws passed that would improve the lives of America's citizens. At that time, people including young children, worked ten, twelve, or even longer hours a day for low wages. Jeannette helped limit the number of hours employees could work to eight, and set age limits so small children wouldn't have to work in factories.
In 1968, she returned to Washington, D.C. again to lead the Jeannette Rankin Peace Brigade. She thought if 10,000 women marched to represent each of the 10,000 soldiers that had already died in Vietnam, the government would see that the people wanted them to stop the war. A few years and many protests later the soldiers finally came home.
Jeannette Rankin on her first day in Congress April 2, 1917

Jeannette Rankin would be proud to see all the citizens from around the world standing together to promote peace today. The peace movement of the twenty-first century is larger then ever and able to organize on a global scale like she would never have imagined.

Jeannette Rankin spent the last five years of her life giving speeches and trying to urge people to work for peace.

On May 18, 1973 she died in her sleep at 93 years old.

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Bibliography


Other Resources:

Jeannette Rankin Peace Resource Center: www.jrpc.org

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom: www.wilpf.org

United Nations: www.un.org

Jeannette Rankin biography: www.peacewomen.org
Glossary

Advocate: one who pleads another’s cause or in support of something.

Credibility: that can be believed; reliable. Dissenter: one who disagrees.

Environmentalist: a person working to solve environmental problems, as and water pollution.

Industry: any large-scale business activity.

Legislation: the making of laws and the laws made.

Legislature: a body of persons given the power to make laws.

Lobbyist: one who tries to get legislators to support certain measures.

Pacifist: opposition to the use of force under any circumstances; specifically refusal to participate in war.

Platform: a statement of policy, especially of a political party.

Progressive: moving forward; of or favoring progress, reform.

Referendum: the right of the people to vote on certain laws.

Social Reform: to improve life in the community.

Suffrage: the right to vote.
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