

THE DAME AMONG THE DANES

AMERICA'S FIRST FEMALE ENVOY REMEMBERED
AS BELOVED, ELOQUENT AND CONTROVERSIAL

BY ANN MILLER MORIN AND KRISTIE MILLER

By the early 1930s, Ruth Bryan Owen, the South's first congresswoman, had become a star speaker on the Chautauqua Circuit, booked coast to coast at town and city lecture halls. When Franklin Roosevelt tapped her to be the first woman chief of mission overseas, therefore, he received an irate letter from one of Owen's fans in Lincoln, Neb., berating him for sending her to a foreign country. "We don't feel we are so deeply indebted to any country that we need give them the prize of all American women," the writer protested. "Heavens knows it's seldom enough we have a taste of the white meat. So why send the choice bit to the Danes?"

Louis Howe, the president's secretary, replied that FDR was sorry she felt that way but was "very glad indeed that Mrs. Owen [accepted] this very important post." So off Owen went, in May 1933, with three of her four children and three grandchildren in tow.

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She had become very fond of Denmark and the Danes, having toured the country one previous summer in a van with her family, during which time she tried to learn enough of the language to communicate with ordinary people. This curiosity, coupled with industry, was typical of Owen. She was a "people" person, like her father, William Jennings Bryan, the silver-tongued orator from the West whose rousing populist speeches changed the course of American politics.

Being Bryan's daughter had given her several advantages, among them name recognition, eloquence as a speaker, and a handsome physical appearance. But in 1932 those advantages were overtaken by the disadvantage of her father's notoriety as a prohibitionist (which she was not), and cost her her re-election bid as a congresswoman from Florida, despite the Democratic victory that swept Roosevelt to power.

Ruth Bryan was 5 when her father was elected to Congress (D-Neb.) in 1891, and she sometimes rode to the Capitol on his shoulders. Bryan became a power in the Democratic party, and at the age of 35 was nominated to run for president against William McKinley in 1896. Despite his loss, the party chose him as its presidential candidate two more times, in 1900 and 1908, only to watch him defeated

each time. President Woodrow Wilson, who triumphed over William Taft in the 1912 election, chose Bryan as his secretary of State in 1913, a position he held for two years.

The oldest of three children, the precocious Ruth Bryan participated in her father's presidential campaigns. In 1896, when she turned 11, she answered some his correspondence, and by age 22 she had become his campaign secretary.

Her mother, born Mary Baird, was unusually well educated for her time and had passed the Nebraska bar exam. An ambitious and energetic woman, she felt compelled by social convention to use her talents to help advance her husband's career. She was an early supporter of women's liberation and encouraged her eldest child to believe she could achieve a career in a male-dominated society.

Ruth Bryan attended the University of Nebraska but left before graduating to marry William Leavitt, an artist twice her age, in 1903, one day after she turned 18. The couple divorced in 1909, leaving Ruth the single mother of two children. She had met a British army officer, Reginald Owen, while studying voice in Europe, and they married in 1910. They were stationed in Jamaica, where she bore a son, but when World War I broke out, Owen was sent to serve in the Egyptian-Palestine campaign. Ruth Owen herself spent nearly a year in London and then moved to Cairo, just before civilian travel was stopped, to be near her husband. She worked as a nurse in Egyptian war hospitals. Her husband, suffering from kidney disease, known as "trench nephritis," became one of her patients, and remained an invalid for the rest of his life.

The Owenses moved to Florida near Ruth's parents, where the warm climate was thought to be good for her husband's health. Now with four children and a dependent husband, she earned the bulk of the family income as a speaker on the Lyceum and Chautauqua lecture circuits. Her biographer Sarah Vickers

reports she was often torn between family and career. After her father's death in 1925, Ruth Bryan Owen became active in politics, an uphill battle given that Florida had not even ratified the 19th Amendment allowing women to vote. She ran for Congress in 1926 from Florida's fourth district, losing the race by a narrow margin. Major Owen died at the end of 1927 and, as a distraction from grief, she plunged into a second campaign, touring her large district in a new green 1928 Ford coupe. She was elected in 1928 by a substantial margin, although her opponent promptly challenged her right to serve in Congress.

The Constitution requires a member of Congress to have been a U.S. citizen for seven years. As a woman who had married an alien in 1910, she was forced to forfeit her American citizenship under the terms of a 1907 law. Although the Cable Act, which reversed the 1907 law, had been passed in 1922, it didn't take effect until 1925, and her defeated opponent claimed Owen had therefore been a citizen for only three years. Owen argued her own defense before the House Elections Committee on the grounds that no such liability had ever affected a man, and her election was unanimously approved. The case led to legislation correcting the flaws in the Cable Act and may have been her most important contribution in Congress. The House Foreign Affairs Committee voted to increase their membership by one, in recognition of her familiarity with foreign affairs, to make room for her as the first woman to sit on a major congressional committee.

When Ruth Bryan Owen was named ambassador to Denmark in 1933, there was still resistance to women entering diplomacy, among the most chauvinistic of male preserves. But 12 years after women won the right to vote, there was clamoring for their right to serve abroad with men.

Although in 1930 Owen was able to fight off a challenger who favored repeal of the prohibition amendment, by 1932 the tide was running against her. Although not personally a teetotaler, she had always supported prohibition. In 1932, she ran on her record in Congress, and her belief that unemployment was the more important issue, but a repeal candidate defeated her in the primary.

Owen's service to the Democratic party and especially to President Roosevelt, for whom she had campaigned vigorously, led to her diplomatic appointment. There was, as ever, resistance to women entering all-male preserves, among which diplomacy was one of the most chauvinistic, but it was 12 years after passage of the equal suffrage amendment, and women were clamoring for the right to serve abroad with men. The Roosevelts, especially Eleanor, were eager to increase women's representation, and Owen was an excellent example of American womanhood to send overseas.

Owen not only appreciated the charm and culture of Denmark, she found it to be "a laboratory of progressive social legislation." Her enthusiasm for all things Danish, her remarkable energy and her handsome appearance made her popular with the Danish people. She claimed Denmark as her "motherland," based on limited evidence that the first Bryan in America (circa 1620) had an Irish father and a Danish mother. One of her most important tasks was to improve trade relations hurt by the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, and she even managed to convince the Danes to overlook her vote for its 1929 passage in Congress.

In addition to her efforts to

improve U.S.-Danish commercial ties, much of her energy was devoted to dealing with economic hardships in her own embassy. She earned a salary of \$12,000 a year, not nearly enough to entertain properly and to travel as extensively as she wanted. Therefore, she used her annual leave giving lectures for the Chautauqua organization, earning \$1,000 a week for eight weeks, two-thirds of her entire annual ministerial salary. On her visits to the States she spent weekends with the Roosevelts at their home in Hyde Park, N.Y.

In 1936, Roosevelt was running for re-election and his campaign manager wanted Owen to return to the States to use her considerable oratorical skills in the campaign. Owen had ambitious plans to make her campaign tour by plane, piloted by a woman. Furthermore, she envisioned the word "Roosevelt" in neon under the wings of the plane, to be illuminated when they landed and took off at night, while loudspeakers blared campaign music. Unfortunately, the plan had to be abandoned as too costly and impractical. Eventually, she settled for an automobile tour.

Ruth Owen announced she was coming home early for a rest before she began campaigning. What Democratic headquarters did not know was that she was arriving early to marry a Dane, Borge Rohde, a captain in the Danish King's Life Guards, eight years her junior, whom she had first noticed because he ordered the King's Life Guards to play American tunes whenever they passed the U.S. legation. The wedding of Ruth Owen and Capt. Rohde took place at Hyde Park in the picturesque Episcopal church to which the Roosevelts belonged.

Flowers from their Hyde Park estate decorated the church, and the Roosevelts hosted the couple's wedding supper in their mansion overlooking the Hudson River.

Members of the Democratic Party and the State Department were not so supportive. Democrats worried her controversial marriage would affect FDR's re-election. A letter to New York City's James Farley, chairman of the National Democratic Executive Committee, from a judge in Montgomery, Ala., expressed the typical reaction: "Mrs. Ruth Bryan Owen is making a spectacle of herself and is being ridiculed all over the nation ... it's up to some of you ... to squelch her. A 52-year-old widow who marries a 41-year-old man is ridiculous enough ... but when a 52-year-old fool widow, who represents the greatest nation on earth as an ambassador, marries a 41-year-old foreigner and parades him across the front pages of all the papers in her own country, [she] brings ridicule not only on her, but upon the administration which sponsors her. ... This escapade will cost Mr. Roosevelt his election, unless he promptly removes her." Although the judge got their ages wrong — she was 50 and he was 42 — he accurately captured the attitude of the general public.

Even more serious were the supposed implications of the marriage for her ministerial appointment. Secretary of State Cordell Hull weighed in with two complaints. He first questioned the legality of the new Mrs. Rohde remaining U.S. minister to Denmark. Once more, the question of citizenship had arisen to bedevil her. By marrying a Dane, Mrs. Rohde had acquired Danish citizenship under Danish law.

While she did not lose her American citizenship, as she had with her marriage to Owen, she did become a bi-national, legally half-Dane, and therefore, Hull insisted, must surrender her legation. The second complaint was that it was deemed unsuitable for her to be speaking for Roosevelt on the campaign trail while remaining one of his emissaries. Therefore, for these two reasons, he said, she must resign immediately.

Having planned to take part in the presidential race, Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde had no contracts with Chautauqua and her \$1,000-per-month ministerial salary was her only source of income. Although she had hoped to retire at the end of the year to enjoy life with her new husband, she could not do without her ministerial salary because expenses for house and servants in Copenhagen continued while she was on leave, and her services to the Democratic Party would be unpaid. Roosevelt, recognizing her dilemma, wanted to allow her to stay on as minister until January, but Hull was adamant, and in the end, Ruth Rohde resigned immediately, on Aug. 29, 1936. Roosevelt reluctantly accepted her resignation the following day.

The couple spent many months helping Roosevelt in his re-election bid. The following year, Capt. Rohde applied for U.S. citizenship and Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde resumed her career as a lecturer and writer. In 1942 she published *Look Forward, Warrior*, a call for international cooperation that prompted Roosevelt to make her a special State Department assistant to help draft the charter creating the United Nations. In 1949 Truman named her an alternate delegate to the U.N. General Assembly, a term that ended in mid-1950. Afterwards, she continued her work

for world peace, founding the Institute for International Government in 1952, and serving as its president through 1953.

Even before the United States entered World War II, Borge Rohde wanted to join the U.S. Army training program and become a commissioned officer. His wife wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt, who was told by the War Department that only men between 21 and 36 were eligible for regular army commissions. Borge was 46, and couldn't qualify for a reserve commission, either. However, once the United States entered the war, Rohde's experience was needed; he served as a major in the Coast Artillery Anti-Aircraft Division and, later, as a staff member of Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's invasion army.

In 1954, when the Rohdes were 68 and 60, they decided to retire, and bought property in Jamaica where Ruth had been happy so many years before. They began with an around-the-world cruise, planning to visit 25 ports of call. In July, they arrived in Denmark, where Ruth Bryan Rohde received the Order of Merit from King Frederick IX for furthering Danish-American friendship. A few days later, on July 26, still in Copenhagen, she suffered a heart attack and died. Fittingly, her ashes were buried in a cemetery in the countryside just outside of Copenhagen.

Although Ruth Bryan Owen served at a diplomatic post only slightly more than three years, in many ways she was an ambassador most of her adult life. As a woman in the world of men, she represented southern womanhood in Congress; as an American in Europe and for the last decade of her life, she worked on behalf of world peace. ■