

1-1-2010

***The Life of Ruth Bryan Owen: Florida's First Congresswoman and America's First Woman Diplomat* by Sarah Pauline Vickers**

Doris Weatherford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory>

Recommended Citation

Weatherford, Doris (2010) "*The Life of Ruth Bryan Owen: Florida's First Congresswoman and America's First Woman Diplomat* by Sarah Pauline Vickers," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol24/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

and the U.S. Colored Troops.

Waters and Edmonds thus succeed only partially in making known the “secret” history of the Floridians’ war.

JOHN DAVID SMITH

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The Life of Ruth Bryan Owen: Florida's First Congresswoman and America's First Woman Diplomat. By Sarah Pauline Vickers (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 2009. xviii, 231 pp. Dedication, acknowledgments, preface, introduction, B&W photographs, bibliography, index)

Every Floridian should know Ruth Bryan Owen: she was the first congresswoman from the South, and Florida voters elected her in 1928. That was just eight years after Florida women got the vote via the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution – which Florida did not ratify until May 1969. Sally Vickers, who earned both a Ph.D. and a J.D. from FSU, recently published a biography of Owen. This work begins to fill a void on Owen’s fascinating life but still leaves room for more extensive exploration.

The problems begin with the subject’s name. Writers of women’s history deal with this difficulty every day: Thomas Jefferson, for example, is Jefferson all his life, but many women have three or four surnames during the course of their lives. In this case, the biography’s subject was Bryan at birth; Leavitt after her first marriage (which ended in divorce); Owen after her second (when she was widowed); and Rohde after her last. Which name to use indeed poses a problem, but the bottom-line rule is consistency. Vickers instead uses as many as three variants on a page – a real frustration for those new to the subject.

If readers can get past such editorial neglect, Owen’s life is well worth examination. She was the daughter of the famed William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan – and her mother’s life also merits attention. Mary Baird Bryan earned a law degree from the University of Nebraska in 1888 when Ruth was three years old. The very first law degrees granted to women were in 1871 (by Washington University in St. Louis), and it was extremely unusual for a married woman to go to college at all in this era, let alone a young mother. This milestone of educational history, however, goes unexplored, as do other aspects of young Ruth’s formative years.

Even such basics as the place being discussed require the reader to put in effort: in her first pages, Vickers refers to “Jacksonville” several times without adding the state, and only when the Bryans move to Nebraska does it become semi-clear that the biography begins in Jacksonville, Illinois. Nothing is said about family life in Washington during Ruth’s childhood in the 1890s when her father served in Congress,

and her college years in Illinois and Nebraska are covered in two paragraphs.

Her first marriage, to William Homer Leavitt, an artist much older than she, also is quickly dismissed, and the chronology is further confused by skipping forward to mention the 1943 accidental death of her second child. A more ambitious biographer might have tracked down the birth date of the Leavitts' first child: they were married on October 3, 1903, and both Vickers's book and other short encyclopedia biographies say that the baby was born in 1904, sans birthday. This is another example of how women's history requires deeper probing and more curious biographers: Vickers simply dismisses the marriage as "willful," "defiant," and "naive," leaving unmentioned the possibility that young Ruth Bryan wed because she was pregnant.

The couple divorced in 1909, and according to Ruth's biography in the standard Harvard-published *Notable American Women*, she went to Germany to study voice, where she met the British army officer Reginald Owen. Vickers's book does not mention this and offers no explanation of how the couple met, beyond: "iconoclastic almost to the point of recklessness, Ruth fell in love." They married in 1910, and Ruth accompanied Owen to assignment in Jamaica, where, without knowledge of her experience in Germany, the reader would be left to wonder how she "talked German all the afternoon" with diplomats.

She bore her third child in England in 1913, and stayed there while her husband was assigned to Egypt. After a course in nursing, she followed him there and nursed in a Cairo hospital during World War I. He contracted what would turn out to be a fatal illness, and at the war's end they moved to Coral Gables, where her parents had retired in 1916. A fourth child, Helen Rudd, was born there in 1920.

William Jennings Bryan, of course, was celebrated for his oratory, but Mary Baird Bryan also was an outstanding speaker. In 1917, while her daughter Ruth was in Egypt, Mary Baird Bryan lobbied for women's right to vote in Tallahassee. Legislators were so excited about her appearance that the *House Journal* contained seven separate entries on her upcoming speech, and the *Tampa Tribune* said that the lawmakers listened intently as she spoke for an hour and a half. Ruth Bryan Owen inherited that ability, and for the rest of her life, she supported her children by working the national lecture circuit. The detailing of her speeches and the tough travel schedule that they required form the best part of Vickers's book.

William Jennings Bryan died in 1925 and Reginald Owen in 1927. In the years between and after, the two widows plotted strategy for winning a seat in Congress. The 1926 race against the incumbent, William J. Sears, was not successful, but Ruth Bryan Owen defeated him in 1928. Florida's population at the time was so small that it was entitled to only two House seats, and the district ran along the eastern side of the state from the Georgia border to Key West.

With two female aides often accompanying her, she drove her own car, which still was something of a novelty. "The Spirit of Florida" was emblazoned on its rear spare tire, and it and she attracted much attention. Floridians elected her in the

Democratic primary – the only election that mattered at the time – but Sears argued that she was ineligible because she had lost her citizenship when she married an Englishman. The 1922 Cable Act had corrected that particular injustice for women, but he made a legalistic case that the seven-year waiting period for citizenship had not yet been met. Her congressional colleagues did not buy the argument, but the issue nonetheless was a distraction during her first term.

The year in which Owen was elected, 1928, brought victories for three congresswomen named Ruth – Ruth Bryan Owen of Florida, Ruth Pratt Sears of New York, and Ruth Hanna McCormick of Illinois. The relationship between the women from Illinois and Florida would have been a wonderful addition to this book, as Ruth Hanna McCormick was the daughter of Republican boss Mark Hanna, who had managed the presidential campaign of William Jennings Bryan's old nemesis William McKinley. Both Ruths had grown up immersed in their father's politics, and how they dealt with each other in Congress could make a fascinating read. Unfortunately, McCormick's name doesn't even make the index of this book.

Having lived and traveled around the globe, Owen was an excellent choice to be the first woman on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. She also presciently advocated a cabinet-level Department of the Home and Child, and she played a strong role in the preservation of the Everglades – a longtime legislative goal for her mother, her aunt May Mann Jennings, Tampa's Kate Jackson, and other members of the Florida chapter of the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

When her 1932 reelection campaign was not successful, the new Democratic president, Franklin Roosevelt, appointed Owen as the nation's first female ambassador. The chapters on her service in Denmark are the most thorough of the book, and Vickers especially shines when she discusses Owen's lectures on that nation back in the United States.

Marriage, however, again proved an impediment to her career. While in the United States in July 1936, Ruth Bryan Owen wed Borge Rohde, a Danish noble, at Hyde Park, New York, with the president and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in attendance. According to Danish law, she automatically became a Danish citizen with marriage, and therefore no longer could serve as an ambassador. Vickers does a good job of documenting the objections that Secretary of State Cordell Hull had in regard to her continued service, and the upshot was that she was forced to resign. Instead of returning to Denmark, she and her new husband spent their honeymoon campaigning for Roosevelt's 1936 reelection.

That tale is well told, but the last eighteen years of her life are covered in a nine-page chapter – and much of that is devoted to explicating Hitler's rise. Both Roosevelt and his successor, Harry Truman, appointed Ruth Bryan Rohde to positions that dealt with the founding of the United Nations, and Vickers does give a nod to that, but again the biography lacks detail on its subject's life, while using space to retell well-known history.

Two sentences are all that we find on the wartime service of her husband

and son, and virtually nothing is said of how she spent her war years. She died in 1954 of a heart attack in Copenhagen, where she had gone to accept an award from the Danish government. The proclamation accompanying the award, which Vickers quotes, includes a tantalizing suggestion of wartime service in thanking the former ambassador for her “contributions ... especially during the occupation.” It would be interesting to know more about that, but once again a piqued appetite goes unfilled.

Sally Vickers appears to have devoted much of her professional life to the memory of Ruth Bryan Owen: the 1995 edition of the Florida Humanities Council’s *Forum*, which celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, included an article on Owen by Vickers. She clearly has done a great deal of research: although the book’s bibliography is padded with irrelevant titles, it nonetheless contains evidence of many trips to archives. It is to be hoped that she will tackle the topic again – this time with a more capable editor. As it is, the biography has the feel of a master’s thesis turned into a book: the middle of the sandwich has fine filling, but the bread surrounding it, at the beginning and the end, lacks substance.

DORIS WEATHERFORD

Tampa, Florida