

Consuelo Northrop Bailey



The first time Consuelo Northrop Bailey entered a court of law was at age fifteen as a spectator of the inheritance trial of Emily Houghton, a prominent St. Albans citizen. The main argument against Miss Houghton, who rightfully deserved the money, was that she was too small a woman to be inheriting such a big amount of money! The case appalled Consuelo and surely stayed in the back of her mind as she completed law school became City Grand Juror of Burlington, and then launched her career in politics, serving the Republican Party as Speaker of the Vermont House of Representatives, Lieutenant Governor of Vermont, and National Committee Woman from Vermont.

Consuelo Northrop was born on October 19, 1899, in Sheldon, Vermont. Though her childhood was in some respects normal for a girl at the time, filled with hay jumping, ice skating, gathering sap, and playing Parcheesi, her father always saw her as "his only boy." Her father, Peter Bent Brigham Northrop, had himself wanted to study law but was prevented from doing so for financial and health reasons. He encouraged Consuelo to complete her education and then to pursue a legal career. He also passed on to her an interest in government and a love of Vermont.

After acceptance at the University of Vermont, Consuelo moved to Burlington with her mother and sisters, Frederika and Mary. Despite a bout of Spanish influenza and World War I which almost prevented her from studying German, Consuelo graduated from the university and was a Phi Beta Kappa. Shortly thereafter, she taught Latin, history and reading at the Shelburne school. She also managed the girls' basketball team, always encouraging the girls toward their fullest potential.

From 1922 to 1925, Consuelo attended Boston University School of Law which she recalled as three years of incredibly hard work. Upon returning to Vermont and even before passing the bar exam, Consuelo was appointed Grand Juror of the city of Burlington. She passed the bar on October 8, 1925, becoming the seventh female lawyer in Vermont. When an opposing attorney offered to help her with a bootlegging case, he was told emphatically that "Miss Northrop will take care of herself!"

In 1926 and 1928 she was elected State's Attorney for Chittenden County and helped prosecute cases ranging from bigamy to the operation of illegal dance-halls. She began her career in politics when she was elected to the State Senate in 1930. One of her favorite memories was the "Mock Session" where the legislators laughed at themselves through skits and musical numbers. In 1931 she served as secretary to Vermont Congressman E.W. Gibson in Washington, D.C. Meeting President Herbert Hoover at a White House party during her time in Washington at the height of the Depression, in her normally assertive manner, she said, "Courage, Mr. President."

When Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, Charles Evans Hughes, allowed Consuelo to practice before the Supreme Court in 1931, she was the first woman to do so. In 1934, Consuelo was elected Vice-Chairman of the Republican State Committee, and in 1935, she was elected the Republican National Committeewoman representing the party in Vermont. This was a post she was to hold for thirty-seven years. Her Republican views were strong and consistent, an example being her hearty criticism of Franklin D. Roosevelt for hurting the self-respect of Vermonters through what she called "his New Deal alphabet soup."

A fellow republican, Albon Bailey, also attended the Republican National

Convention in Ohio in 1936. They were married a year later and set up the law firm of Bailey & Bailey in Burlington.

Consuelo represented South Burlington in the Vermont House in 1951 and again in 1952 after writing personal letters to all one thousand homes in South Burlington. In 1953, after campaigning around Vermont in all kinds of weather, she won the Speakership of the House. This grass-roots style of campaigning also helped her win the post of Lieutenant Governor in 1954. She met people at general stores, gas stations and churches. She even strengthened her fingers so she could win a milking contest against all the Lieutenant Governor and Governor candidates! Her focus in each elected post was to uphold the things she loved most about Vermont: the independence, unpretentiousness and hard work that she thought marked every Vermonter.

After serving a term as Lieutenant Governor, Consuelo cut down her activities to make time to care for her husband who was suffering from Parkinson's disease. When he had to stay in a hospital in Montreal, she visited him so often that the border patrol officers knew her by name.

Consuelo continued to contribute to national and international politics. She traveled to Dusseldorf, Germany, as a member of Women in Public Life. There she was impressed with the number of German women in politics and marveled at the still-functioning churches and universities which had been hard hit by the war.

When her husband died in 1961, Consuelo was devastated but kept active in political affairs. As the Secretary of the Republican National Committee, she made speeches in the freezing cold and wind so fierce that the audience could barely hear her. At the Republican National Convention in Miami in 1968, she proudly called the roll of states which nominated Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew for President and Vice-President of the United State. Later she was a delegate to two United Nations conferences: one in Geneva was on the status of women, and the other in Paris, was on the preservation of historical buildings and other important sites. Sprinkled throughout her autobiography are letters of thanks from Republican Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, and Bush, all of whom recognized the outstanding service Consuelo gave to her party and country. In 1973, Consuelo resigned from the Republican National Committee and a year later friends hosted a "Salute to Connie Bailey Dinner" where Ronald Reagan was the principal speaker.

Consuelo Northrop Bailey, the Vermont woman of many "firsts," died on September 9, 1976 at the age of 77. She had finished writing her book, *Leaves Before the Wind* but did not live to see it published. She left an impressive legacy as a trailblazer for women lawyers and public servants in her beloved state of Vermont to follow.

—Sarah Savitt, a Senior at South Burlington High School

Reference:

Bailey, Consuelo Northrop. *Leaves Before the Wind*. Burlington, Vermont. George Little Press, 1976.