

Rosalie Edge-National Park Service

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Rosalie Edge

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Portrait of Rosalie Edge by Carsten Lien

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Quick Facts

Significance: Conservationist, Suffragist, Writer, Agitator

Place of Birth: New York City, New York, U.S.

Date of Birth: November 3, 1877

Place of Death: New York City, New York, U.S.

Date of Death: November 30, 1962

Place of Burial: New York

Cemetery Name: Woodlawn Cemetery

Rosalie Edge: The National Park Founding Mother You've Never Heard Of

By Annika Robbins

If you've read a little about our national parks—or even just a map of one—some of these names might look familiar: Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, Theodore

Roosevelt. You may have even visited some of the beautiful natural places they helped protect, and which are named in their honor.

But there's a name you probably haven't seen on trail signs, park pamphlets, or anywhere else. It's the name of a woman without whom there would likely be no Olympic National Park: Rosalie Barrow Edge. Rosalie was a fierce activist who transformed the conservation movement in her lifetime. But she was also a woman—an unglamorous, middle-aged, troublesome woman who was noncompliant by nature. Perhaps that is why history has largely overlooked her in favor of her male contemporaries.

Born Mabel Rosalie Barrow in 1877, she was the daughter of wealthy and well-connected parents. She grew up in a stately townhouse off Gramercy Square in New York City. She was educated at a private school for young women, she moved in the most exclusive circles of New York society, and she married well, catching the eye of equally well-to-do Englishman Charles Noel Edge. They married abroad in 1909 and spent the first few years of their life together in Asia, before returning to the United States. The return voyage from Liverpool to New York would prove life-altering for Rosalie, who spent her time on the ship in the company of Sybil Haig Thomas.

Haig Thomas was a prominent British suffragist and feminist who detailed the struggle for women's rights in England to a captivated Rosalie. Her time in Asia had kept her unaware of the political turmoil in the West, and she was galvanized by Haig Thomas's stories. "It was the first awakening of my mind," she said in an interview years later. But at the same time, Rosalie was expected to fulfill her role in society as a mother and homemaker. She and Charles started a family. Son Peter was born in 1913 and daughter Margaret in 1915. Just a few weeks after the birth of her daughter—and maybe because of it—Rosalie Edge went out to fight for women's rights.

Rosalie joined the offices of the National American Women's Suffrage Foundation and was soon knocking on doors and marching in the streets for the cause. The organization quickly recognized Rosalie's gift for persuasive writing and speaking, and recruited her to serve as its corresponding secretary and treasurer. Her position allowed her to work directly with pioneering suffragist leaders Carrie Chapman Catt and Mary Garret Hay. Close to the heart of the movement, Rosalie took careful note of how an efficient and effective activism campaign was organized. She also wrote and published numerous compelling pamphlets, a skill that would become a hallmark of her future battles for conservation.

By 1921, Rosalie's fight for women's suffrage had ended, but a battle of wills was still being waged in the Edge household. Charles, Rosalie's husband, had been vocally against the women's rights movement. Rosalie, who had been successful at driving change for women across the nation might have had less patience now for a more traditional role. After 12 years of marriage, Charles and Rosalie separated. It was the closest thing to a divorce that their upper class position would allow. And while still married on paper, they would live separately for the rest of their lives.

No longer tethered to her husband, and with her children both in their late teens, Rosalie had a newfound sort of freedom. She took passionately to birding. At forty-eight, she worried she was too old and inexperienced for her new hobby, writing that her eyes were for "sewing buttons [and] reading receipt books," not spotting birds half hidden in bushes. Nevertheless, she continued her outings to the park, and soon had a notebook filled with careful details of the birds

she had seen. She did not yet know that her quiet and often solitary pastime would lead her to become one of the most vocal activists in the conservation movement.

One bright summer day in 1929, a pamphlet landed on the desk in Rosalie's hotel room while she was traveling with her children in Paris. It was no doubt sent by a fellow birder. Its title, in large bold lettering, read *A Crisis in Conservation* and it painted a grim picture of the state of wild birds in North America. The California condor, the trumpeter swan, and the bald eagle were among the species in danger of extinction. Birds were being slaughtered by the tens of thousands for fashion and for sport. And the National Association of Audubon Societies (now the National Audubon Society) wasn't protecting them. In fact, the NAAS was *facilitating the destruction*, by taking money from shooting groups in exchange for hunting access to protected lands and not enforcing bag limits. Rosalie couldn't believe what she was reading.

"I paced up and down, heedless that my family was waiting to go to dinner," she wrote in her memoir. "For what to me were dinner and the boulevards of Paris when my mind was filled with the tragedy of beautiful birds, disappearing through the neglect and indifference of those who had at their disposal wealth beyond avarice with which these creatures might be saved?"

If the suffrage movement was the first awakening for Rosalie, then conservation was the second. And just as she had with the suffrage movement, Rosalie plunged straight into the heart of the fight. Stirred to action by what she had read, she reached out directly to Willard Van Name, the author of the pamphlet and a zoologist at the American Museum of Natural History. Rosalie asked him about his pamphlet, and he confirmed that everything in it was true. An appalled Rosalie committed then and there to take action against injustices done to the natural world. By the end of the year, she and Van Name had formed a committee of two to publish exposés on the Audubon Society. Van Name, who had spent his career in the same elite circles as the Audubon Society's most influential members, was privy to their inner workings, and called out their behavior in his pamphlets. Rosalie, energized by the cause, took on all other responsibilities of the committee. They wrote pamphlet after excoriating pamphlet on the NAAS. [*Unfortunately the author of this article neglects to mention that [Irving N. Brant](#) was the third major member of this committee-the Emergency Conservation Committee or ECC. It helped quite a bit that Brant had the ear of FDR and of his Secretary of the Interior-Harold Ickes. Aside from writing the definitive biography of James Madison, Brant wrote the excellent memoir: [Adventures in Conservation with Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) published in 1989-FOMB ed. note.*]

Van Name was worried that if he expressed his personal views in public, his careers would be ruined. But Rosalie, whose wealth meant she wasn't dependent on a job, and who wasn't mired in the internal politics of the NAAS, had no such fears. Determined to inform as many people as she could of the NAAS' egregious behavior, she brazenly decided to sue them for their mailing list. The list was made up of over 10,000 nature lovers who would certainly be appalled that the organization in charge of protecting wildlife was secretly profiting off of under-the-table trapping and shooting. When the NAAS pushed back on her suit, she doubled down, insisting it was within her First Amendment rights to share what she had discovered about the NAAS's dealings. The judge agreed. The audience for the Emergency Conservation Committee's pamphlets was now much bigger, and would only continue to grow.

Rosalie's work with Van Name to expose the NAAS had opened her eyes to the devastation wrought by those pursuing profit at the expense of nature. She saw it in Yellowstone, where park employees were instructed to shoot and club pelicans to death and destroy any nests so as not to interfere with fishing tourism. She saw it in the starving elk in Grand Teton, who were forced from winter grazing grounds by cattle ranchers looking to fatten their herds. She even

saw it out her Upper East Side window, as the Dust Bowl blew massive plumes of dirt from over-plowed earth thousands of miles across the country. It was not merely birds or beasts who were threatened. Entire ecosystems were in peril.

One such ecosystem was the primeval forest of Washington state's Olympic peninsula. A previous attempt to establish a national park in the area had been made years before, but had been unsuccessful. The ECC reignited the fight with its 1934 pamphlet "The Proposed Olympic National Park: The Last Chance for a Unique and Magnificent Park." The country's last undisturbed groves of Douglas fir, Sitka spruce, hemlock and red cedar were on the chopping block, it said, having been targeted by lumber interests. The ancient forest that sprawled far beyond the existing borders of what was then the Mount Olympus National Monument—and all the living things within it—must be protected... or risk being lost forever.

The national monument wasn't good enough, the ECC argued. A national park would allow for a larger area of land to be set aside, and afford stronger legal protections for preserving it. Theodore Roosevelt had established Mount Olympus National Monument, within Olympic National Forest, in 1909 to protect the habitat of the Roosevelt elk. Despite those efforts, the herd had been poached to less than five hundred animals in the following decades. The borders of the monument had also been encroached on by timber companies, who sought to sell the massive old growth trees as prime lumber. Vacation homes, hotels and resorts were being constructed on land leased by private interests from the Forest Service. If development continued, there would soon be little left of this magnificent forest. Immediate action was needed.

Thousands of pamphlets were sent to mailboxes across the country, and soon found their way to the desks of many government officials, including politicians and Forest Service administrators. While the public mostly supported the idea of a park, the Forest Service and the National Park Service weren't as pleased. If the proposed park was established, the government would lose the income generated by selling land access to extractive interests like mining and timbermen. Without access to those lands, they warned, those industries would fail and jobs across the Olympic peninsula would be lost. They countered the ECC with a proposal of their own, which included a much smaller park and blatantly excluded the areas where the largest trees were. It was sent to the Secretary of the Interior's office, where it was rubber stamped for approval. However, a copy of the anemic plan was leaked to Van Name before it could be published. He was so upset by the removal of the ancient old-growth forests from the proposed park that he left his office, caught the next train to Washington, D.C., and was in the offices of the Secretary of the Interior by that evening.

Van Name set out his case for the park in person, and explained his concern that the Forest Service and the Park Service were exploiting public land. The Secretary listened attentively. Then he asked Van Name to draw up new borders. Van Name seized the opportunity and drew an even larger boundary area than what the ECC had originally proposed in their pamphlet. The new park would now encompass the rainforests of the Bogachiel and Hoh valleys, and--at Van Name's insistence--development would be limited to only a few areas, so that the true wilderness could remain.

In March 1935, Van Name's expansive proposal was introduced into Congress as H.R. 7086 by Washington state representative Mon Wallgren. The bill required that the 730,000 acres of the original Mount Olympus National Monument, in addition to 400,000 acres of the Olympic National Forest surrounding it, be designated as the Olympic National Park.

The legislation was met with fierce opposition and conspiracy theories in both Washington D.C. and Washington state. In Congress, a representative from a lumber town in Washington insinuated Rosalie was on the payroll of some wealthy yet secretive interest group. When she arrived in Port Angeles in the summer of 1935, she was accused of being a spy sent by the Canadian timber industry to upset the American market. Undeterred, Rosalie made it a point to speak to locals on the peninsula. She met with women's clubs, chambers of commerce, and people with private holdings in the proposed parkland. She recruited the Seattle Mountaineers, a climbing club, as a local anchor for her growing grassroots movement.

And then she returned to Washington, D. C. to testify in Congress. There she spoke on record for the entire nation about the singular beauty of the Olympic wilderness. And dismantled the prevailing argument from the Forest Service that the park would ruin the timber economy. If the forests were allowed to be logged, that might sustain the region for a few years, she conceded. But eventually, the trees would all be cut. And then there would be nothing left. A national park, on the other hand, would create a perpetual revenue stream as tourists came from all over to visit it. As always, Rosalie commanded the room with her speaking. But it wasn't enough. Congress, locked in a stalemate, ended the session without passing the bill.

Rosalie refused to give up. Buoyed by support from his constituents for the park bill, Mon Wallgren was reelected and returned to Congress in 1937 with another bill for Olympic. Like any good politician, Wallgren hoped for a compromise: his new bill would still create a park, but it would be 100,000 acres smaller than originally proposed. The ECC was furious, and fired back with a new pamphlet. It was titled *Double Crossing the Project for the Proposed Mount Olympus National Park: No Economic Need, but Only Commercial Greed, the Obstacle to the Mount Olympus Park*. It had the intended effect. By the fall of 1937, the ECC had stirred up so much contention about the park and its trees that President Franklin Roosevelt decided to visit the peninsula to see the truth for himself.

The Forest Service and lumber interests tried to limit what the president saw and heard about the park. They blocked anyone who didn't have an interest in the timber industry from working closely with the president. They booked up all the hotel rooms so that the experts traveling with , and advising, the president would have nowhere to stay. They moved boundary signs to make it look like the clearcut wastelands were on private land and not in the national forest. But despite their underhanded efforts, the threat to the forests was evident. "I hope the lumberman who is responsible for this is roasting in hell," Roosevelt reportedly said when driven through some of the clearcut area. Moved by the overwhelming beauty (and fragility) of the wilderness, he promised a larger Olympic Park that had yet been proposed, big enough to include a corridor of forest that reached all the way to the sea.

With the President's backing and victory in sight, Rosalie paid a personal visit to Mon Wallgren: "I [...] told him how I had looked forward to his receiving honor for his part in establishing the Park, and for saving the forests, and that I feared he was jeopardizing his future." The congressman was persuaded to put forth yet another bill for the park. The final hearing lasted eleven days, with hundreds of people in attendance. Finally, on June 29, 1938, the national monument and the surrounding forests were declared a national park. Rosalie would later call the victory "perhaps the greatest achievement of [the] committee."

While the hardest battle was won, the war was not over, and Rosalie would continue to fight for the Olympic wilderness well into her 70s. In 1947, the forests were once more under attack. Bills were introduced into Congress, endorsed by the Department of the Interior, that would carve out 56,396 acres of un-logged forest from Olympic National Park. Rosalie's many years of

work were at risk of being thrown away. “The property of the people handed officially to the despoilers,” she lamented. “The green and living legacy left to us by our great President to be guillotined in the saw mill. I sat stunned.” But Rosalie was never one to stand idly by. Hurrying to her desk, she urgently wrote *The Raid on the Nation's Olympic Forests*. “The response was immediate, electric,” Rosalie later recalled. “The Department of the Interior found itself in grave disfavor, with a flood of protests pouring in.” It would be the most widely distributed and successful publication for the ECC.

The Emergency Conservation Committee published its final pamphlet in 1955, but Rosalie continued her advocacy for conservation until her death at age 85 in 1962. The threats to public lands that Rosalie fought—extractive interests, air and water pollution, constant encroachment—are the same that conservationists and advocates for the land face today. She held them off admirably in her time, and left behind a more principled Audubon Society, a raptor sanctuary, and about five national parks—as she helped protect not only Olympic, but also Sequoia, Kings Canyon, Yosemite, and Grand Teton before putting down her pen for good. Her belief that everyone, ordinary citizens and scientists alike, has a moral responsibility to care for nature shaped legislation, the environmental movement, and the very landscapes she fought so hard for. Her name might not be widely recognized, but her work is all around us.