that did not openly challenge the contemporary roles of women; they were not promoting birth control in order to liberate women from motherhood. The Arkansas birth control advocates provide one good example of this. They consciously avoided controversy and sensed that community support was crucial to the success of their endeavor.

The Formidable Roberta Fulbright

NAN SNOW AND DOROTHY STUCK

"MOTHER, REMEMBER NOT TO TALK TOO MUCH."1 Senator J. William (Bill) Fulbright's oft-repeated admonition to his mother, Roberta, always went for naught. Each time she visited him in Washington, D.C., he gave the same sage advice. Each time she ignored it. She had good intentions. It was just that the urge to tell a good story or dominate a discussion was too much to overcome. Garrulous by nature and a skilled raconteur, she was not hesitant to share her opinions in conversation or in her Northwest Arkansas Times newspaper column, appropriately titled, "As I See It." "They loved her in Washington," her granddaughter Patty Fulbright Smith recalled.2 She was as much at home there as she was in Fayetteville, where she wielded power as comfortably as did the solons in Washington.

Her ebullient nature sometimes led observers of Bill Fulbright's career to view her as superficial, domineering, and obsessed with her son's success. While she took great pride in her son, as well as her other children, Roberta Fulbright was a much more complex individual than this viewpoint indicates. Endowed from childhood with a sense of self-confidence and secure in her own considerable intellect, she was a powerful figure in northwest Arkansas long before her son's ascendancy to national prominence in the U.S. Senate. She relished her son's success, but she was even more engrossed in her wide-ranging business interests, her newspaper, campaigns for civic improvement, the University of Arkansas, and the politics of northwest Arkansas.

Dorothy D. Stuck and Nan Snow are the authors of Roberta: A Most Remarkable Fulbright (University of Arkansas Press: Fayetteville, 1997).

1Patty Fulbright Smith, interview by authors, Texarkana, Arkansas, April 18, 1997.

2Ibid.
Although Roberta Waugh Fulbright lived most of her life in Fayetteville, she was not a native Arkansan. Both her maternal and paternal grandparents migrated to Rothville, Missouri, from Virginia in the mid-1800s during this country's great westward movement. There they settled on adjoining farms, enduring the harsh weather extremes of north central Missouri and suffering the effects of the Civil War in a state that was home to both Union and Confederate supporters. Roberta's parents, James Gilliam Waugh and Pattie Stratton Waugh, made their living farming the Missouri land, just as their parents had done. Roberta was born Valentine's Day, February 14, 1874, in Rothville. She was soon joined by brothers William Thomas, James Gilliam, and Charles Merriweather. A sister, Lucy, died in infancy.

Despite the difficulties of farming the frontier land and the family's meager resources, Roberta always viewed her childhood as a happy one. Her mother, particularly, instilled in her a sense of self-worth and saw to it, despite the sacrifice, that Roberta attended the University of Missouri for two years. By this time, she had already taught school briefly and become the organist for the four congregations sharing the Rothville community church. In securing this latter position, she replaced the man who had given the congregations the proper pitch for singing hymns with a tuning fork when no accompaniment was available. Her eagerness in obtaining this job (although it involved displacing someone else) was a precursor of the assertiveness she would display later as a businesswoman, newspaper publisher, and political player.

She participated eagerly in activities at the University of Missouri and joined Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority despite her early assessment of "their snobbishness." It was an affiliation which remained important to her throughout her life. Also while a student at the university, she heard a lecture by Walter Williams, a journalist of international stature and founder of Missouri's school of journalism. This single lecture instilled in her a love of journalism, but she returned home to become a country school teacher.

Social life in Rothville centered around the church and the Friday night gatherings at the town hall. A highlight of these gatherings was an old-fashioned debate. Roberta, full of late-teen wisdom and college experience, joined eagerly in the debates with the men of the community. Her audacity caught the attention of Jay Fulbright, eight years her senior and the son of another farm family, Bill and Ida Fulbright.

During their courtship, Jay saw in the young woman the perfect helpmate for his ambitious plans. Their marriage on October 30, 1894, united neighboring families, just as the marriage of her parents had done. While Jay planned on becoming a businessman, financial necessity required that the young couple start life on a farm. Their first child, a daughter whom they named Frances Lucile, was born September 26, 1895. Two years after moving to the farm, Jay had accumulated enough capital to buy the bank in nearby Sumner, and the family moved to town. A second child, Anna Waugh, was born March 17, 1898. Then two sons were added: Jay Jr., called Jack, born September 2, 1899, and James William, called Bill, born April 9, 1905. Despite her responsibilities as a wife and mother, Roberta found time to help out at the bank, which was unconventional behavior for women at the turn of the century.

In search of new business ventures and educational opportunities for their children, Roberta and Jay moved their family in 1906 to Fayetteville, the agricultural trade center for northwest Arkansas and home of the University of Arkansas. In Fayetteville Jay became a major stockholder in two banks, Arkansas National and Citizens. He also invested in banks in small neighboring towns. In addition to investments in banking, real estate, and timberland, he expanded into a variety of retail, wholesale, and manufacturing businesses. These included Fulbright Wholesale Grocery Company, Ozark Poultry and Egg Company, Crystal Ice Company, Fayetteville Mercantile Company, Phipps Lumber Company, the Washington Hotel, the Democrat Publishing and Printing Company (publisher of the Fayetteville Daily Democrat), and the Combs, Cass and Eastern Railroad. He quickly established himself as a successful businessman and community leader.

Always outgoing, Roberta involved herself in family, club, and social activities. The family's third move in Fayetteville, to a grand, two-story home at 5 Mont Nord on a hillside overlooking downtown Fayetteville and the University of Arkansas campus, provided them with a home worthy as
a gathering place for local leaders and University of Arkansas faculty members.\(^4\)

On April 2, 1911, Roberta gave birth to twin daughters, Helen Stratton and Roberta Epperson (Bo). She was now thirty-seven years old and the mother of six children.

The 1920s brought a sudden change of fortune. In 1923 Jay became ill, and, with dramatic swiftness, died only a few days later on July 23, at age fifty-six. The exact cause of death was never determined. Roberta, now a widow at forty-nine, had no time to recover from the shock. Quickly, she was swamped with business problems. For all his entrepreneurial acumen, Jay died without leaving a will. Also, his businesses were not solely owned. His business partners, anxious about their own well-being, moved quickly to protect their positions. Competitors, too, sought their claims. Roberta was plagued by a series of lawsuits; the family feared bankruptcy. Some Fayetteville businessmen sensed an opportunity and were determined to take advantage of it. Roberta was as equally determined that they would not. Gradually, although some Fulbright assets had to be liquidated, she worked her way through the maze of business entanglements to place the Fulbright holdings on a firm footing. It was an accomplishment that even the businessmen were forced to admire. Roberta’s battle with the male-dominated business establishment left its imprint on her. Some years later she wrote:

> So long as a woman does poorly and the lords of creation can say, “Oh, it’s nothing but a fool woman,” they are fairly content, for they must, every mother’s son of them, have a woman to do much of the work. But let a woman do WELL and she is all but burned at the stake. I will say for the benefit of those who may be interested, I did not choose business as a career, it was thrust on me. I did choose it in preference to going broke or dissipating my heritage and that of my children.\(^5\)

She was aided in all of her battles by her formidable presence:

> A solidly built fireplug of a woman, her full, square face and the determined set of her jaw accented by simple glasses and the ever-present hat, gave her an authoritarian countenance which served her well in difficult encounters. She walked with a purposeful, stately carriage in sturdy, sensible shoes, announcing through her appearance that here was someone to be reckoned with. Her resonant voice sometimes cracked as she spoke, but never did it interfere with her gift of gab or her ability to dominate a conversation.\(^6\)

The Fayetteville businessmen had not dealt with a woman with such a forceful approach. Consistently, all who knew her—whether they supported or opposed her—described her as the single-most dominant personality they had ever known.

She and her family formed the Fulbright Investment Company to oversee the array of businesses. She assumed some company titles. She became president of Phipps Lumber Company, Citizens Bank, the Bank of Elkins, and the Fayetteville Ice Company; vice president of Fayetteville Mercantile; and publisher of the newspaper, the *Fayetteville Daily Democrat*. Like Jay before her, she relied on managers familiar with the businesses to oversee most daily operations.

Still, tragedy waited in the wings. On April 8, 1925, oldest daughter Lucile, now married and the mother of a young son, died with unexplained suddenness as her father had done. For Roberta, it was another severe blow. Despite the setback, she emerged confident in her abilities and eager to establish her position as a community leader. She possessed a clear advantage in this pursuit. As the publisher of the *Daily Democrat*, she had a forum from which to espouse her views. In March 1933, at the behest of Lessie Stringfellow Read, her friend and *Democrat* editor, she began writing...

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\(^4\)Mont Nord was the name given to the street in the early 1900s. The area had been known as North Mountain but was changed to the French spelling to impart elegance to the neighborhood. However, a city plat dated 1918 gives the hybrid name Mount Nord. Current maps and street signs get around the problem with the abbreviation Mt. Allan Gilbert, *A Fulbright Family Chronicle* (Fayetteville: Fulbright Investment Co., 1980), 47; 1918 Plat, Mount Nord addition, Washington County Circuit Clerk’s office.


an opinion column, "As I See It," which appeared on the editorial page. She wrote it at night—she often could not sleep—in longhand, in pencil, on a legal pad. Her almost illegible handwriting drove newspaper staffers to distraction. Over the course of twenty years, she wrote an estimated two million words, in the view of Walter J. Lemke, a University of Arkansas journalism professor, "an astonishing figure."

Well-read and articulate, she wrote about anything and everything: war and peace, religious philosophy, her Missouri upbringing, the potential of the northwest Arkansas region, politics and government, her family, gardening, her travels, and even the zippers on women's dresses. While denying she was a feminist, she continually promoted equal roles for women. On one occasion, after overhearing a conversation between two men talking with pride and affection about their wives, she declared:

All fine relationships are based on appreciation. The more thorough the appreciation the better the relationship. . . . We are created male and female. Our relation, the one to the other, is always the most important social question in the world. It's the most important, individually, and I think, collectively.

I have read recently several articles on "How to get along with women." I say get along with them as you do with any other human beings, by appreciation of what they do and are. Treat them decently and squarely and forget your superiority complex.

Science tells us the male of the human species is the vainest animal that lives. We females know it and eternally feed that ego, but sometimes it would seem to me their own sense, and sense of humor, would resent having to be flattered at every turn. Women are willing to set men on a pinnacle just to please them. Women do not resent men, why should men resent women?"  

The advent of her column in the 1930s coincided with a period of political corruption and upheaval in Fayetteville and Washington County. In response to the flagrant practices of the local political machine, local citizens formed the Good Citizenship League. The battle was joined, and Roberta, in her position as newspaper publisher and columnist was drawn into it: "She did not rush to judgment. Her business involvement tended to make her a political pragmatist, but only to a point. That point was when pragmatism collided with her sense of civic responsibility and duty and her moral commitment to honesty, decency and fair play. The heavy-handed practices of the Washington County political machine pushed her to that point."  

It was not a level playing field when Roberta and Lessie joined the fray. It is fair to say that neither woman was experienced in the machinations of political in-fighting. They were, in fact, novices. On the other hand, the "ring," as the group of political operatives was known, controlled not only the county Democratic central committee and city and county offices but a circuit judge as well. Undaunted, these determined women wrote columns and editorials calling for action, indignantly citing the abuse of power. In spite of their best efforts, they made little headway in the 1934 primaries and faced increasing criticism from those who supported the political machine.

A column written by Roberta in February 1935 was undoubtedly in response to the criticism. This single column, more than any other, clearly voiced her opinion about the role of the press. Whether she was recalling the words of Walter Williams at the University of Missouri or whether her own righteous indignation at the illegal political maneuvering in her county compelled her to speak out, it was obvious that she believed it was her newspaper's obligation to continue the fight:

We hear sometimes (not often) that we need a courageous press. Do you know what we think? We think we need a courageous populace. We are, so far as I know, the only ones who have stuck up our heads to be shot at.

We are labeled unfair when we print (without comment) court proceedings. What would it be to NOT print them, I ask you.

The "unfairness of the press" is such an easy way to cover one's own shortcomings. A paper is a mouthpiece for a community; not a standing army, not a detective agency, not a law enforcement body.

Our own opinion is that we have courage oftimes not even born of discretion.

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1Roberta Fulbright, As I See It, compiled by W. J. Lemke (Fayetteville: n.p., 1952), unnumbered.

News belongs to the people, and fair newspapers print it. Also, they study the needs of the community and strive to further them.10

A break in the conflict came in 1936, when both city and county officials were charged in federal court with involvement in a car-theft ring and bootlegging operations. No guilty verdicts were returned in the first round of trials, but the caustic comments of a federal judge about Fayetteville’s acceptance of questionable law enforcement changed the game, giving Roberta and the Good Citizenship League the momentum they needed. She exposed poll tax fraud and supported league candidates in bitterly contested city and county races, and her candidates won. The sheriff pleaded guilty in federal court to charges of conspiracy, and Roberta’s recommendation for his replacement was accepted by the governor.

Although she was subjected to harassing lawsuits, virulent attacks in the ads of candidates, and threats of violence, she never blinked first and seldom blinked at all. For a time in 1934, when she first became involved in the local political battles, she considered the idea of running for Congress but decided against it, saying, “I am lame in the knee so cannot ‘stand’ for election as they do in England and by the same reason cannot RUN as they do here. I could sit in Congress and I believe I could represent this district comfortably but I believe I must leave politics to the politicians.”11 Despite her unwillingness to run, she had over the decade attained a new political power to link with the economic power she had established earlier.

In 1937 Roberta changed the name of her newspaper to the Northwest Arkansas Times to reflect its increasing circulation and widening sphere of influence. As writer Irene Carlisle observed, “Roberta Fulbright’s opinions bear a good deal of weight in her locality and she exercises a sort of benevolent despotism over the community.”12

The presence of the University of Arkansas dominated life in Fayetteville and Roberta took a proprietary interest in all of its activities. Through her newspaper, she influenced the public perception of its success or failure. Her interest in the university began during the gatherings of faculty members at Mont Nord. Also, from the time they moved to Fayetteville, Jay and Roberta, along with other community leaders, feared that efforts to move the university to the state capital of Little Rock would succeed. For many years, Roberta kept a vigilant eye on any such suggestions. She judged governors and legislators by the level of their financial support for the university. Her editorial support for gubernatorial candidates sometimes hinged on their attitude toward the school. This did not mean that the university was immune to her own criticism. She lamented that increased funding went to athletics rather than academics. Yet she supported her young sports editor Bob Wimberley, despite pressure from the board of trustees, when he revealed the board’s unwillingness to fulfill contract obligations to a departing coach. At the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority house, she was a powerful presence, and the members looked up to her with respect, and even a little healthy fear. She loved the camaraderie she shared with the students, and she was gracious in loaning the use of her home for special events.

When longtime university president John C. Futrall was killed in an automobile accident in 1939, Bill Fulbright, then a thirty-four-year-old, part-time law school faculty member, was selected as the new president by the board of trustees. Gov. Carl Bailey, ex-officio chairman, had recommended Fulbright to the board. Governor Bailey and Roberta Fulbright had become friends and political allies when, through her newspaper, she supported him for a second gubernatorial term. Political lore has always fostered the belief that Roberta suggested to her friend Governor Bailey that he appoint her son to the presidency, a contention she steadfastly denied in her newspaper column.

Bill Fulbright’s tenure would be short-lived. Roberta went on the attack in 1940 when gubernatorial candidate Homer Adkins made Governor Bailey’s involvement in the university an issue. Bailey, seeking a third term, faced an uphill battle against the feisty, folksy Adkins. After a campaign visit by Adkins to Fayetteville, Roberta told her readers, “Well, Mr. Homer Adkins, candidate for governor ‘has came’ and we will also say he ‘has went.’”13 It was a blatant parody of what she considered to be the candidate’s poor grammar. Now Roberta Fulbright had placed herself in the midst of one of Arkansas’s most enduring political rivalries:

13Northwest Arkansas Times, “As I See It,” August 5, 1940.
Although they had not faced each other directly, the clash between Bailey and Adkins would not be their first. In 1933, Bailey supported Brooks Hays in a losing race against David D. Terry for the Fifth Congressional District seat. Adkins supported Terry. The bitterness of that political fight spawned a rivalry for political leadership between Adkins and Bailey that continued for more than ten years. The alliances formed in support of these two politicians created some of the most persistent factional divisions in Arkansas political history.

There are those who, in retrospect, have questioned Roberta’s decision to jeopardize her son’s position by taking such a strong stand in what appeared to be a losing race for Bailey. Those observers did not understand the nature and character of her personality. Roberta did not back away willingly from a fight; in fact, she relished one even when the odds were against her.

When Adkins defeated Bailey, it was apparent that Bill Fulbright’s days as university president were numbered. The board of trustees, controlled by Adkins, fired Fulbright in June 1941. The day following her son’s firing, Roberta expressed her views:

I would like to make an addition to the statement which seems to have rankled the heart of the present governor.

I repeat, Arkansas prefers a hand-shaker to one who does constructive things.

There is a vast and tremendous difference between building and wrecking. Some Arkansans cannot discriminate. All over the state institutions are feeling the axe of the wrecker.

Such statements were not designed to heal any wounds. Her political experience and her competitive nature kept hope alive that the battle would be joined again and that the outcome would be different. As fate would have it, she was right. In 1942 Third District congressman Clyde Ellis decided to vacate his seat to seek election to the U.S. Senate. At the same time, he approached Bill Fulbright to run for the vacated congressional seat.

Fulbright, who professed no compelling interest in politics, nevertheless agreed to consider the suggestion. His wife, Betty, and Roberta encouraged him to make the race. Roberta even said she would run if he did not.

Bill Fulbright ran for the seat and won. During his first term he learned that Homer Adkins planned to run for the Senate. Feeling that he could not serve in the same congressional delegation with Adkins, he, too, jumped into the Senate race. Five candidates made the race, including incumbent Hattie Caraway, but it came down to a run-off between Fulbright and Adkins. Despite her earlier outspokenness, Roberta remained silent through the campaign. Clearly, at the behest of her family, she relined in her combative spirit. When Bill Fulbright emerged the winner, she said, “May I say fervently, I believe the best man won.” It was a restrained statement in victory. The battle had come full circle.

Comparisons between mother and son have cropped up invariably in biographical assessments of the son. There is no doubt that Roberta’s fostering of intellectual discussions, her combative nature, and sensitivity to injustice provided Bill Fulbright with a guide for his approach to public service. In his doctoral dissertation on the senator, Kurt Tweraser wrote: “His mother especially provided him a model for coping with failure and for doing one’s best even when complete success is not possible. She herself had to overcome recurring temptations to withdraw and to contemplate her virtues.”

By this time plagued by recurring heart problems, she began to relax her pace and indulge herself in her favorite activities. With her children now grown and with families of their own, she turned increasingly to her newspaper and her garden. “There are a few things more rewarding [than] a family, a newspaper, and a garden.” Her newspaper, the family realized, was like her seventh child. As for gardening, it was her passion. “If anyone doubts I am a Democrat, they should see my garden... The common herb have acquired all the best space and attention, the second raters have about

14Stuck and Snow, Roberta, 144.
run out the ‘elite.’” Her modesty aside, many in Fayetteville saw it as the most beautiful garden in northwest Arkansas.

Her large, extended family still gathered on Mont Nord for holidays and special occasions. “As I have remarked before,” she told her readers, “my own clan belong to the atomic variety and age, and my only claim to any distinction is that I have withstood the racket fairly long.”20 In truth, she was the head of her family and everyone knew it. While she could be stern and unrelenting, her grandchildren found her fascinating and amusing. Intellectual discussions were always a part of life at Mont Nord, and she encouraged the grandchildren to participate. In 1947 she was elected Arkansas Mother of the Year. In 1949 the John Brown University Press published a volume of her poetry, *Sea Foam and Dashes of Spray*, which could most appropriately be described as simple verse, primarily about her travels abroad. Also in 1949 she led the way in the founding of the Arkansas Newspaper Women, the forerunner of the Arkansas Press Women.

She regularly dined at the family-owned Washington Hotel, eating her favorite fried chicken and mashed potatoes. Evalena Berry, wife of the hotel’s manager, Allen Pool, recalled her visits, “Everybody bowed and scraped when she came in, not because they were afraid of her, but because they were so impressed with her.”21

Always an active club woman, she rarely allowed that to interfere with business. Once, when the local chapter of the American Association of University Women asked her to donate ice cream from the family ice company, she declined. When a disagreement broke out between two members at a subsequent meeting, and the group divided into two camps, she clapped her hostess on the shoulder and declared, “I like a good fight—I’ve had a good time today and you can have your ice cream.”22

As illness and advancing age overtook her, she was frequently confined to bed at home. Her columns dealt less with politics and more with philosophical musings about religion, love, and peace. She had not lost interest in Fayetteville and northwest Arkansas and still gave her opinion as to what was needed: a library on ground level, a new Boys’ Club, better streets and sidewalks, and a new hospital. Neither had she lost her global interest, writing often about the need for the United States to act responsibly in its role as a world leader. There was little in life that did not interest her, and she continued to read and remark about the things which fascinated her.

Years later her cousin Dorothy C. Stratton would marvel: “What a woman. Where did she get her genes?”23

Roberta Fulbright died January 11, 1953, in her home at Mont Nord. She was a month shy of her seventy-ninth birthday. The Arkansas legislature passed a memorial resolution in her honor and sent a delegation to her funeral service which was also attended by Gov. Francis Cherry and other dignitaries. The *Arkansas Gazette* eulogized her by saying that, “Many millions around the world knew her as the mother of a distinguished son, but those who had had the good fortune to live in the hill country of Arkansas knew her in her own right—a tireless, strong woman who had created for herself the role of matriarch in the town of Fayetteville.”24

Roberta Fulbright’s legacy remains. The Fayetteville Public Library building bears her name. Her influence on the University of Arkansas is evidenced by the dedication in 1959 of Roberta Fulbright Hall, a women’s residence hall. During this country’s bicentennial she was one of the thirteen mothers featured in *Mothers of Achievement in American History 1776–1976*, a book compiled by the American Mothers Committee.

Roberta Fulbright’s accomplishments were significant by any standard of measurement. In a period when women were neither recognized nor acknowledged as business and political leaders, she was both. Her remarkable achievements—her lasting impact on a region’s development and a state’s history—were eclipsed by her son’s storied career, as well as subjected to the lack of recognition for women in the annals of Arkansas history.

Roberta Fulbright was, in truth, a formidable woman with a strong sense of purpose, who spoke her mind, prevailed over adversity, and left her mark. Intelligent, determined and courageous, she set an example for the man who made the Fulbright name legendary.

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19 Ibid., April 15, 1949.
20 Ibid., October 2, 1950.
21 Evalena Berry, telephone interview by authors, Little Rock, Arkansas, July 2, 1996.
22 Louise McCleary to Eloise Baerg, July 6, 1943, from the files of Gretchen Baerg Gearhart.
23 Dorothy S. Stratton, letter to authors, April 1, 1997. Stratton, herself an achiever, was dean of women at Purdue University and later director and captain of the U.S. Coast Guard SPARS during World War II.
24 *Arkansas Gazette*, January 12, 1953.