



‘Silent Hattie’

First woman elected to U.S. Senate had Tennessee roots

Photographs courtesy of the Library of Congress



Not a lot of Tennesseans have heard of Hattie Caraway, but perhaps they should have. A native of Tennessee, she was the first woman ever elected to the U.S. Senate.

Caraway was born on Feb. 1, 1878, under the name Hattie Wyatt, in the tiny Humphreys County community of Bakerville. She grew up in nearby Hustburg. As a child she worked on the family farm and helped in her father’s general store — two occupations that were typical of kids in her generation. Unlike most girls her age, she got an extensive education — first enrolling in Ebenezer College in Hustburg and later attending the Dickson Normal College, graduating in 1896. While at that school, she met Thaddeus Caraway. After he got his law degree, the two married and moved to Jonesboro, Ark.

Thaddeus Caraway became an attorney and was elected to be one of Arkansas’ two U.S. senators in 1920, then re-elected in 1926. During this time, Hattie Caraway focused on raising their two children and spent very little time socializing with people in Washington, D.C.

Then, in November 1931, Thaddeus Caraway died unexpectedly. The governor of Arkansas nominated Hattie Caraway to finish out her husband’s term, a nomination that was confirmed by a hastily called elec-

Hattie Caraway’s portrait by artist John Oliver Buckley hangs in the U.S. Senate Collection.

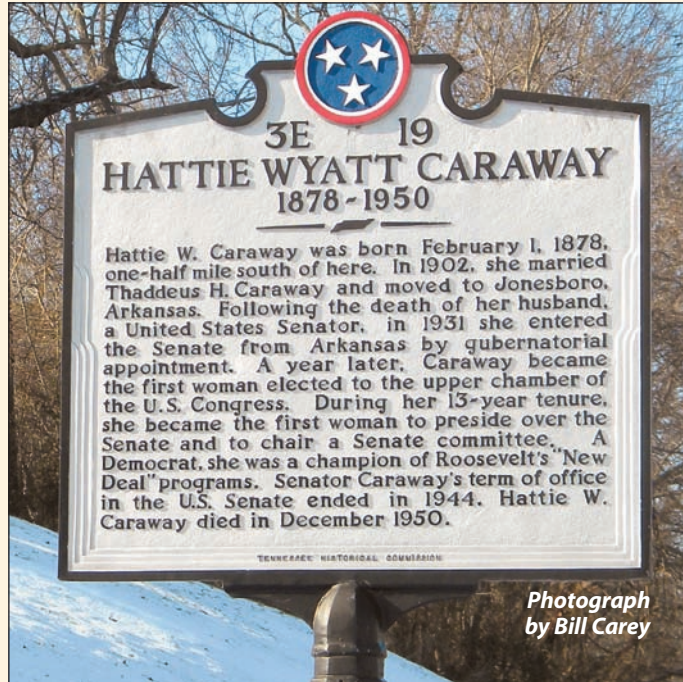




tion a month later. At the time, practically all of the political powers in Arkansas (including the governor) did not expect Caraway to run when her seat came open for election the next year.

Caraway's decision to run in the fall of 1932, therefore, came as a shock to many people. No one gave her campaign much of a chance until July of that year, when Louisiana Sen. Huey Long came into Arkansas and campaigned heavily for her. Why the immensely powerful Long did this is a matter of speculation. Some believe that he was sympathetic toward the widow Caraway, while others simply think it was Long's way of "getting back" at Joseph Robinson, an Arkansas politician running against Caraway.

In any case, Hattie and Huey crisscrossed the state, holding a dozen rallies per day that August. "Interest was so great that many rural people lined the roads to get a glimpse of Huey and Hattie and were rewarded with music from the sound



trucks and literature from the vans as they passed on their way," a book called "Hattie and Huey" (by David Malone) explains. An estimated 200,000 Arkansas residents came to see the great Louisiana politician sharing the stump with the shy Caraway.

It sounds like a scene from the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" And when it was over, Caraway won the election against her heavily favored rivals.

Caraway was re-elected in 1938 (this time without the help of Long, who was assassinated in 1935). But she lost to William Fulbright in 1944. During nearly 14 years in the

Senate, Caraway was not very vocal — earning the nickname "Silent Hattie" — and was a loyal ally of President Franklin Roosevelt. While many of her colleagues made long speeches, Caraway could be seen knitting or reading in the Senate chamber. She also had a tendency to vote along with her fellow senators from the South — voting against anti-poll tax and anti-lynching legislation. But during her tenure, she became the first woman to serve a six-year Senate term, the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate, the first woman to chair a Senate committee and the first woman to preside over the Senate.

(Caraway was not, however, the first woman to ever serve in the U.S. Senate. That honor went to Mrs. Rebecca Fulton of Georgia, who served for two days in the Senate in 1922.)


Hattie Caraway died in December 1950 and is buried in Jonesboro, Ark. I'm sorry to say that it does not appear as if anything in Tennessee is named for her, although there is a historic marker honoring her adjacent to the cemetery in Bakerville, where her brothers are buried.

The residents of Bakerville, and there aren't very many of them, are proud to point out that Hattie Caraway isn't the only famous person to have come from there; it is also the native home of Capt. William R. Anderson, a former U.S. House member and captain of the first Navy submarine to have passed under the North Pole.

Dean Bush, a member of the board of the Humphreys County Historical Association, helped in the research of this column.



At top, a historical marker near her Humphreys County birth site tells the story of Hattie Caraway, who in 1932 became the first female elected to the U.S. Senate. Above are Caraway and her husband, Thaddeus, whose senate seat she took after his death.



Tennessee History for Kids

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of "Tennessee History for Kids," an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.

