

# Cornelia Bryce Pinchot (1881–1960)

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Cornelia Bryce Pinchot was a modern woman, one who wished to excel in her feminine role as wife and mother—while sporting a successful career.

*My feminism tells me that women can scrub a floor, cook a dinner, paint a picture, charm her husband, swim the Channel, bear a child, and battle for the Lord—all on the same day, so to speak. And be the better for it. Her child too (CBP Manuscript).*

This viewpoint evolved over years of activity, first in the Suffrage Movement and later as wife of Gifford Pinchot and advocate for labor reform.

## Involvement in the Suffrage Movement

Born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1881, “Leila” was raised in the wealthy Victorian tradition, much as Gifford Pinchot was, with frequent travel between New York, Europe, and Newport. She was educated in private schools and enjoyed competitive sports—especially hunting, polo, and driving. Her family background provided her with an ability to appreciate her status—while working for public good. Her father, Lloyd Bryce, was an editor for the *North American Review*, paymaster general of New York, and minister to Netherlands at The Hague. Her mother, Edith Cooper was the daughter of one of New York City's mayors and granddaughter of Peter Cooper—inventor, philanthropist, and founder of Cooper Union, a tuition-free college of science and engineering.



Cornelia  
Bryce  
Pinchot  
circa  
1900

Grey Towers, USDA Forest Service

In the spring of 1914, a columnist for the *New York Tribune* wrote: “Miss Cornelia Bryce—beautiful, cultured, charming, with the utmost of wealth & position at her command, she chooses as her chief interest, the causes of the working woman.”

As a young woman, Cornelia Bryce served on the board of managers of the Bellevue Hospital in New York. Her duties were to visit the hospital, manage the Nurses' Home, and run the social service department. She was also involved in the study of employment in New York City—serving as a chairwoman for the women's committee to establish working rooms for women. After the di-

sastrous Triangle Fire in 1911, Cornelia served as the fire inspector for the Committee of Safety. This committee was responsible for developing better safety laws for women employed in buildings.

*I cannot remember just when or how I first became interested in the suffrage movement—but I do know that it came more through my active interest in liberal politics than through the usual resentment against women's political discrimination per se. Many of my family had held elective offices of one kind and another. I remember more than once dining with an ex-president who took me into the smoking room to talk politics with the men after the women had left the table, and it never struck me that this was in any way unusual. I had not learned to think of myself in terms of a downtrodden and disenfranchised female (CBP Manuscript).*

*I joined actively in the suffrage fight and gave considerable time to it, but I must admit that quite aside from the essential justice of the proposition, I saw women largely as a new group of voters. I worked to help enfranchise them with even more interest in their responsibilities than in their rights.*



Cornelia  
Bryce  
Pinchot  
marching  
in  
Suffragette  
Parade in  
New York  
City

Library of Congress

## Progressive Politics and Gifford Pinchot

Her earliest memory of her political heritage was handing out literature in her father's campaign at the age of six. She met Gifford Pinchot while campaigning for former President Theodore Roosevelt during the Progressive ("Bull Moose") Party Campaign of 1912. She was one of the few persons whose whirlwind energy matched Pinchot's. And in Roosevelt's words, "she had one of the keenest political minds that I have ever known."

With wealth, energy, enthusiasm, political ambition, and the stamp of approval from Roosevelt, Cornelia and Gifford were equally matched, and very much in love. (One of Gifford's biographers said he was as much in love as a man half his age.) They were married at her parents home in August 1914—during the midst of his first senatorial race (she was 33, and he was 49).

She saw her association with the energetic, progressive politician and conservationist as an opportunity and a challenge (Furlow n.d.:327). Together they worked to raise the consciousness of humankind—about its place in the world and its responsibilities. Cornelia traversed the State, speaking to individuals and handing out leaflets in support of her husband. On one speaking tour she gave as many as nine speeches a day. A landslide defeat was not a welcome wedding gift—but did not totally deflate the Pinchots.

*And if you are a woman and marry a Pinchot, or if you elect to buck the dominant political machine (and one follows the other as the night the day), you must expect to lose just so often—possibly half the time. But it is a good game. And a little like a love affair, exciting and self-satisfying whether one loses or not (CBP Manuscript).*

Commenting on the close interaction between Cornelia's home and the political sphere, a reporter said: "She spends her apparently inexhaustible vitality in a continuous effort to tie up politics more closely to life; to make the two come together, meet, touch...." She believed that through contact provided by political equality, men and women would become more realistic in their relations; that together men and women could know more—"Two minds don't think as one; it would be dreary if true" (Furlow n.d.:13).

Her daughter-in-law later seconded this notion, when she commented on Gifford and Leila's relationship. "Gifford was very proper, moral, conventional—for good. Leila was a natural rebel—loved to upset people by doing outrageous things. They complemented each other. It was a delight to be with them."

After their son, Gifford Bryce Pinchot was born, Cornelia focused considerable attention on education and child labor reform. Her demand that women play a vital role in developing educational policy coincided with her hope that the "Early Victorian theory that females should not be educated" was gone forever. (She herself had not been encouraged to go to college, but to fulfill her social obligation with a coming out party.) She later started an experimental school for children in the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania area, which emphasized life-style learning—such skills as carpentry, cooking, and caring for living things. She also served on the Milford School Board, often commuting from the State capital, for the meetings.

She played a vital role as the Secretary of the Pennsylvania Woman's Suffrage Association. In this position, she used her time, money, and influence to help ratify the 19th Amendment. By 1920, after 52 years of campaigning for suffrage, women could do more than voice their concerns; they could vote for those who represented their interests. Cornelia Pinchot could finally vote for her husband.

Pinchot's 1921 campaign for governor of Pennsylvania was consuming. Starting out with odds of 100 to 1, the Pinchots campaigned vigorously for honesty in government, equal enforcement of

laws, and improved economy—"For Cleaning up the Mess in Harrisburg."

Pinchot won the respect of the League of Women Voters during a candidacy luncheon, based on the advice of his wife—"I warned him that women didn't want hot air and generalities." After winning the campaign, Gifford wrote: "It was due to Mrs. Pinchot and the women she organized—far more than to any other single factor that we won (McGeary 1960:285)." The *New York Times* reported that "the greatest fear of the machine leaders was not of the nominee, but of his wife's proved political generalship."

*Leila was always at the center of what was going on. She was wonderful at drawing people out. A very professional politician. Always had ideas—More skillful of the two in terms of politics. The place [Grey Towers] was always filled with high-level people. She had a wonderful use of language (Interview with Mrs. Gifford B. Pinchot).*

During these initial years in office, the Pinchot platform had no more important plank than the pledge to make Pennsylvania a better place for women and children. Two related bills went before the legislature: working hours for women, and working hours for minors. By 1925, Governor Pinchot established the Bureau of Women and Children. At that time, one out of five women, 16 years and older, was a wage earner—15 percent were married—most were native born (CBP Papers).

Mrs. Pinchot often spoke on behalf of the Governor, to special interest groups and over the radio.

She received several tempting offers, including a full-page advertisement for Ponds' Cream, which her sister-in-law, Ruth Pinchot, encouraged her to consider. Following are a few excerpts from the two women's letters related to the enticing offer.

This from Ruth Pinchot, in 1924: *Katherine Leckle, a good friend of mine—a publicity agent who has spent her life working for lost causes—is now doing a piece of work for an advertising firm.*



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*She is getting prominent women to endorse Ponds' Cream, and, of course, for every name she gets, she receives what I imagine is a considerable sum. The other day she asked me if I would ask you to do it—for the following considerations.*

*First, you will get one thousand dollars on the day you consent to have your name used, which you can contribute to some charity, or start Giffie's nest egg with—or whatever; second, in the interview with you which will be published, she will stress and thereby advertise whatever special piece of work you want stressed, that is, law enforcement, women in industry, etc. The last thing which makes the proposition so interesting, because the campaign which Pond's Extract Company is conducting is done through newspapers and women's magazines reaching literally millions. Katherine tells me that Mrs. Belmont has received any number of letters asking about the National Women's Party for her ad.*

*It seemed to me a form of advertising that was decidedly worth considering, and I therefore gladly send the suggestion to you. I am enclosing a sample of the spreads already used so that you can see they have a certain amount of dignity.*

Four days later, Cornelia replied:

*I am thrilled with your offer—and started to sketch out an interview along the lines suggested. One snappy title occurred to me, HOW I RUSHED MY HUSBAND IN TWO YEARS FROM THE BRASS RAIL OF A SALOON INTO THE GOVERNOR'S CHAIR... Soon after my marriage I witnessed, to my dismay, that my husband's erstwhile passion was cooling perceptibly. He never seemed to want to be with me any more. Could it be that I was losing that schoolgirl complexion—that I was gradually becoming saddled with a skin one hates to touch? My friends did not seem to tell me. In my agony and despair, I remembered that the great benefactor of the human race, Mr. Pond, who had sufficiently labored to save just such shattered marriages as mine—and to rebuild the human race. I dashed over to a dry goods store and almost over night the miracle happened. Now my husband spends all his nights at home, and brings with him*

*a train of powerful politicians, with whose help, as you know, he has been landed into his present exalted position. As he leans over me to kiss me at night he breathes, 'Leave but a smear of Pond's upon your lips and I'll not ask for wine.'*

*Don't you think that should be worth at least \$5,000 instead of the paltry \$1,000 you offered me?*

*I wish I could do it, but Gifford has turned tyrant, and has put down his foot—and seriously, I think I better not. Sproul got himself into all sorts of trouble advertising a safety razor.*

*I suppose when Gifford gets out of office my name will be worth nothing—but if I need a thousand dollars then as much as I do now I will certainly come to you.*

In spite of this last phrase, denigrating her own worth, Cornelia began to gain her own political prowess during these years. In 1928, she sought the Republican nomination for the United States congressional seat from the 15th District of Pennsylvania.

*I am not one of those who believe that women have any better contribution to make politically than have the men; it is not a question of better or worse, but of all together lending a hand. And I believe this combination of housewife and politician will render a real service to the state.*

The tone of the Pinchots' campaigns during the 1920's and 1930's (she ran twice more for Congress, losing all three elections) focused on human resources: Labor reform, education, and honest control of the machine bosses.

## The Human Side of Conservation

Gifford Pinchot's definition of conservation—"the wise use of natural resources for the greatest good, by the greatest number in the long run"—was being altered during those years. Adding a human component—the conditions of workers, education

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for the betterment of society, and securing resources for international peace, Pinchot began to believe that the principles of conservation must go beyond scientific management of natural resources—to include human resources as well. In a speech he wrote several years later, he stressed:

*The conservation problem is not concerned only with the natural resources of the earth. Rightly understood, it includes also the relation of these resources and of their scarcity or abundance to the wretchedness or prosperity, the weakness or strength of peoples, their leaning towards war or towards peace, and their numbers and distribution over the earth (CBP Papers, Box 43).*

This was in large measure due to Cornelia's influence. She believed "a man's view about conservation might well be taken as the acid test to determine his attitude towards public questions of all sorts" (Furlow n.d.:340–41). She was also sensitive to the concerns of those who wanted their share of the "public good." During Gifford's second gubernatorial victory in 1930, he concluded:

*I think you'll agree that the strongest weapon I had was Cornelia Bryce Pinchot, whose work against sweats is known throughout the U.S. She is this administration's best contribution to the cause of workers on farm or factory, mill or mine.*

A 1933 telegram from Cornelia to the Hosiery Workers Union read: "Regret impossible to be with you. Tied up here with the Sweatshop Committee and then going to Pittsburgh to help the steelworkers organize."

During these early years of the Great Depression, she supported her husband's efforts to secure funding relief from the Federal Government. While serving on the Republican Women's Council, she asked the women to join Gifford's plea to President Hoover for Federal funds to the States.

She also corresponded with Eleanor Roosevelt and held a dinner in Harrisburg in her honor, shortly before Mrs. Roosevelt became the First Lady. Mrs. Pinchot wanted to demonstrate the

quality and value of the foodstuffs provided for Pennsylvania's needy through the Community Market Plan, which operated in three cities across the State. She succeeded in developing an interesting menu to feed 50 people, for a total cost of 5½ cents per person. The following day, Mrs. Roosevelt attended the Governor's conference on child health.

Cornelia was a strong supporter of the people's rights throughout the course of President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs, which effectively combined human and natural resource programs. In 1934, she tangled with the Administrator of the National Recovery Administration, writing:

*I recommend a definite change of policy...your present plan of allowing the steel trust, the automobile magnates, and big business generally to flout the government [is] un-American, utterly wrong, and must inevitably lead to the failure of the NRA.*

She also supported her husband's urging of President Roosevelt to call an international conference that would outline a strategy for world peace, based on cooperative efforts among nations to conserve human and natural resources. (FDR received the plea by noting that Pinchot was a "wild man—an individual who could not be controlled.")

At the end of Pinchot's second term as governor, he became ill with shingles. Cornelia managed much of the business at the governor's mansion for almost 3 months. In his final message to the general assembly, the governor voiced special thanks to his wife, "whose advice in this emergency was indispensable. Indeed, throughout both my terms Mrs. Pinchot's assistance in dealing with the human side of government has been invaluable. In her the people of the Commonwealth have an ally impossible to duplicate or replace" (McGeary, 1960:385–386).

In 1943, Cornelia was a founding member of the Committee of 100. This committee was dedicated to the creation of an America of justice and equality for our African American fellow citizens. Within 7 years, the committee had increased the

legal defense and education fund budget for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People by \$120,000.

After World War II, Mrs. Pinchot organized an exhibition at the Library of Congress, entitled "Warsaw Lives Again." The year following Gifford's death she traveled to Greece. At that time, Greece was having a terrible time; refugees were everywhere. Cornelia reported the conditions of the troubled country to President Truman. People took her quite seriously—all doors were open to her and what she had to say.

In 1949, 3 years after Gifford's death, Cornelia Bryce Pinchot attended the United Nations Scientific Conference on Conservation and the Utilization of Resources—the conference Gifford had envisioned years earlier. Scientists and interested observers from around the world were invited to share their collective wisdom. During this conference she called on the delegates to regain her husband's broad conservation ideal, stating:

*Every true conservationist knows that man himself is a natural resource; that without man's energy, the energy of coal, of electricity, of oil, or atomic fission itself is inert and meaningless. To sidestep the human and political implications of conservation, to deal with it exclusively in terms of materials, matter and technical processes, is to take a long step backward from where we stood a generation ago (CBP Manuscript).*

On October 15, 1949, she spoke at the dedication of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (a ceremony renaming the Columbia National Forest in Washington State to honor Gifford Pinchot), stating:

*Today this Service is still outstanding in its high morale, its devotion to duty, its creative and imaginative leadership. It sets a pace that many government departments might well be advised to follow (Cornelia Pinchot 1950).*

When the Forest Service celebrated its 50th anniversary, a few years later, she created a series of radio broadcasts for the occasion.

## Reflections on Her Life

In 1935, Cornelia Bryce Pinchot began writing her memoirs—details of her childhood, wealthy upbringing, series of suitors, interests in architecture, antiques, and progressive struggles against political bosses. She had sailed the South Seas, ridden a dromedary in Egypt, stalled in a plane over London, been stoned by angry mobs while picketing the working conditions in textile mills. Writing in her manuscript, she claimed:

*At fifty, life is never stale, dull, and unprofitable to me. On the contrary, it is exciting, constantly opening out fresh vistas of adventure and interest. The fact that these interests are outside of myself and beyond my immediate personal life certainly is an*



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Cornelia Bryce Pinchot and Gifford hunted, fished, and camped together



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asset—and perhaps what makes a political life so satisfactory to me (CBP Manuscript).

The Pinchots life together was joined with crusading zeal. They fostered causes that were international, interracial, interparty. They shared a home together where “love was vivid, and vital. Not only romantic love...but the real steady everyday kind of love between husband and wife. Love of laughter and fun, love of work, love of life.” They hunted, fished, and camped together. They shared the expenses for their political campaigns and the upkeep of Grey Towers. Gifford financed the farming and automobile maintenance; Cornelia paid for the mansion’s alterations and landscape design. They are remembered by many across the country for their warmth and hospitality as well as their dynamic energy.

Reflecting on her life as a modern woman for an article in *The Nation* magazine, Cornelia wrote:

*Some years ago I marked down, pursued, and captured one of the few really big men I have ever known—one who never turned his back but marched breast forward—and lived happily ever after (Showalter 1978).*

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## Collections Consulted

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New York, New York:  
The Cooper Hewitt Museum Library

Roslyn, New York:  
Bryant Library  
Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts

Washington, DC, Library of Congress papers of:  
Amos R. E. Pinchot  
Cornelia Bryce Pinchot  
Gifford Pinchot □