Madame Chair

Westwood, Richard

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Jean Miles Westwood was one of the most unusual persons I have known. She was born in Price, Carbon County, Utah; her mother from a family called Potter, one of the pioneer families in the region, and her father, also of old Mormon stock, an employee of the U.S. Post Office. She went through Carbon High School, but did not get very far with her college plans when other things, including marriage, intervened.

She was young during the Depression and World War II, and that changed her life. Growing up in Carbon County, Utah, a coal mining region that is one of the most politically liberal areas in the western United States, she, too, was of that political persuasion. She saw the iniquities in society and whenever she could moved to try and overcome those things that were in her mind unfair.

Cursed with a body that had numerous health problems, she in her youth experienced more medical crises than most people experience in their entire lives, and they dogged her as she aged.

She married a unique man, Richard Westwood. He was from Moab, Utah, and remembered his unusual upbringing in the little river town very well, later writing a memoir of his childhood and two other books on early Colorado River runners. Dick and Jean were a mixed couple in terms of religion—she Mormon; he a non-Mormon in Utah. He joined that church before they married at her parents’ request.

The young couple, Dick Westwood and Jean Miles, moved from Carbon County to San Diego and married near the onset of World War II. When they returned to Utah, they went into the business of raising mink in West Jordan. A mink coat was a symbol of success in the United States in the years from World War II until the 1970s. The Westwoods were very successful not only in the farming and selling of mink but also in breeding selective mutations for distinctive colors that sold at high prices.

It was in West Jordan, Utah, that Jean Westwood became active in politics—first in the schools, but moving from them into the Democratic Party. Jean insisted that many things in our lives could be improved,
and all who lived in Salt Lake County found themselves with a fellow citizen who asked many questions, on a variety of topics, and who was an active, deliberate agent of change.

She rose rapidly through the Democratic Party and gained a national reputation. Her husband supported her without stint in this remarkable career, as she rose from Utah to the national stage, to become the first woman ever to chair the Democratic National Committee. Succeeding Larry O’Brien as chair, she joined him in suing Nixon’s reelection campaign over the offices burgled in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C., in 1972.

Jean Westwood kept good records of what had happened to her. In 1972 she had become a key partner in the effort to elect George McGovern president of the United States. In spite of being told by many people not to do it, Jean was determined to be a part of that campaign. By helping lead it, gaining experience and a wide network of contacts in and out of Washington, D.C., and then being elected the first woman to head the national Democratic Party, or any major national political party, Jean Westwood became a powerful figure.

Her autobiography was a notable accomplishment completed late in her life. I feel close to this work because at my suggestion, Gregory Thompson and I started doing oral interviews with Jean Westwood in 1987. Dr. Thompson secured funding through the Special Collections Department of the University of Utah’s Marriott Library. I am still astounded that we did not finish that amazing set of interviews until we had enjoyed forty hours of conversation. Gregory Thompson and I are both of the opinion that it is one of the most remarkable oral histories that we have completed, and that includes well over a thousand individual oral histories.

This outstanding woman was most unusual for her times. Her work building roles for women in politics was a very practical way for her to help advance feminism. More involvement of women in powerful political positions gave women as a whole more power and a greater voice in national decisions. She accomplished this while maintaining the rest of her life as a wife, a mother, and a businesswoman in a most competitive arena.

Her book is the history of one pioneer woman who succeeded in the political world by overcoming the limits of gender politics. She did so out of a deep belief in the ethical responsibilities of government. She will be a lasting figure in the histories of twentieth-century Utah and the United States.

Jean Miles Westwood died in 1997.
Jean Westwood conducting an August 1972 Democratic National Committee meeting. Rep. James O’Hara, parliamentarian, is to her left.