

INTRODUCTION

In the 1930s, Josephine Roche was a progressive celebrity. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt hailed her as “one of the friends and acquaintances who have been and are an inspiration to me.”¹ The *Literary Digest* suggested Roche as a presidential candidate.² In a poll conducted by Bamberger and Co., Josephine Roche bested Elizabeth Arden as “the most prominent woman business executive in the country.”³ *American Women: The Official Who’s Who among the Women of the Nation* named Roche one of the republic’s ten most outstanding women.⁴ Radio stations broadcast dramatic reenactments of episodes from Roche’s life, and schools in Colorado displayed her photo next to those of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Charles Lindbergh.⁵ At New York City’s posh Cosmopolitan Club, Roche received a National Achievement Award for her contributions to the “culture of the world,” and an official at the founding convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a new militant labor federation, introduced her as “the greatest outstanding liberal in our country” and “the greatest woman of our time.”⁶ Two historians confirmed the judgment in 1939, dubbing Roche “one of the most distinguished women in American public life.”⁷

Gray-eyed, square-jawed, and sparking with energy, the middle-aged Josephine Roche was celebrated in the 1930s because she was the second-highest-ranking woman in Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal government and the only American woman to run a coal company. Remarkably, she operated the company as an experiment in progressive labor relations: workers and owners alike weighed in on virtually every aspect of company policy. Roche had been a committed progressive reformer since her graduation from Vassar College in 1908, after which she stumped for women’s suffrage, opposed jail time for juvenile crime, and sought to incorporate immigrants more fully into American life. Her activism took its

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extraordinary turn in 1927, when she inherited her father's shares in the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company (RMF), an expansive coal mining enterprise in Colorado. Instead of simply living off her inheritance, she amassed enough shares to become the majority stockholder of RMF, ousted its anti-labor management, and invited the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) to unionize the company's miners. She signed a historic contract with the workers in August 1928 and, as head of RMF, fought doggedly to protect her progressive industrial enterprise from both the ravages of the Great Depression and the efforts of competitors to drive her out of business.

Roche's version of industrial management won widespread acclaim and admitted her to a national political elite. Shortly after Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated as president in 1933, Roche ran for governor of Colorado on the slogan "Roosevelt, Roche, and Recovery," and when her whirlwind primary bid failed, Roosevelt appointed her assistant secretary of the treasury. From that position, Roche helped to hammer out the founding legislation of the U.S. welfare state—the Social Security Act—supervised a massive expansion of the U.S. Public Health Service, directed the National Youth Administration (NYA), and oversaw the development of a national health plan that would be enacted piecemeal over the decades after World War II. Indeed, when Medicare passed in 1965, it was identified on the floor of Congress by Oregon's Senator Wayne Morse "as a reality made possible in no small part by the historic struggle of one of this country's most illustrious citizens, Josephine Roche."⁸

This biography seeks to explain first how Josephine Roche moved from a small town on the Great Plains, where she was born in 1886, to the nation's capital, where she joined Roosevelt's administration in 1934. Especially significant in explaining her achievements were her education at Vassar, mentoring by a progressive reform community in Denver, and the meaning she made of the momentous coal strike in Colorado that culminated in the Ludlow Massacre of 1914. After witnessing the injustices perpetrated by coal mine owners against their workers in that conflagration, Roche spent much of the rest of her life trying, in her words, to "right the wrong of Ludlow."⁹

This biography also explains how, having achieved renown in the 1930s, Roche largely disappeared from history and memory, a disappearing act made all the more mysterious by Roche's stunning post-New Deal resume. In the late 1940s, after turning sixty, Roche undertook an entirely new challenge: she relinquished her shares in RMF and became director of the United Mine Workers of America Welfare and Retirement Fund, which she built into one of the largest and most influential private health and pension programs in the United States. In her work at the fund, Roche aimed not only to improve the living standards of coal min-

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ers but also to support organized labor and to restructure American medicine in such a way as to make it more accessible to Americans of modest means. She built a pathbreaking hospital chain and promoted the development of managed care in medicine. In other words, Roche continued to build institutions with which Americans live in the twenty-first century. She did not leave the fund until 1971, when she was driven out at age eighty-four in the midst of a murderous contest for control of the mine workers' union. How could such a woman disappear from history?

The explanation has many layers, and the narrative ahead emphasizes two of them. The first was the anti-communist crusade of the 1940s and 1950s, which convinced Roche to dodge the public spotlight for a decade, thereby surrendering the name recognition she achieved in the 1930s.¹⁰ This self-effacement then allowed widespread assumptions about old women—especially that they lacked initiative and authority in public life—to shape popular representations of Roche in the 1970s and after. These representations attributed the bulk of her achievements in the postwar decades to her partner at the fund, John L. Lewis. To the extent that Roche was remembered at all after 1971, she was considered nothing more than a rubberstamp to Lewis, a gross misrepresentation that this biography will correct.¹¹

John L. Lewis was, of course, a titan of organized labor, and he was an intimate friend and ally of Roche over many decades. She admired him tremendously. But in their operation of the mine workers' Welfare and Retirement Fund, Roche was more often in the driver's seat than Lewis. Setting the record straight on this point is vital not only to Roche's memory but also to our larger understanding of women's roles in shaping American life and the processes by which those contributions have so often been obscured. Sorting out the partnership between Roche and Lewis is a contribution to gender justice.

The restoration to history of an important and fascinating woman does not, however, constitute the full meaning of Roche's life story. Because she remained active from the Progressive Era (1890s to early 1920s) through the New Deal and the Great Society, her biography also offers a new way of conceptualizing the trajectory of progressive reform in twentieth-century America.¹² Progressivism was a major strain within American political culture that emerged in the late nineteenth century among activists anxious to secure their country's signature institutions—political democracy and the rough social equality on which they believed democracy depended—in the face of challenges posed by a new corporate and industrialized economy. Rapid urbanization and massive immigration were among those challenges. Over the course of the early twentieth century, progressives created new institutions, within both government and civil society, aimed to make democracy viable in their increasingly

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impersonal society riven by differences of class, nationality, gender, and race.

In a field-shaping book on reform movements in the early twentieth century, historian Richard Hofstadter famously identified the period from 1890 to World War II as the Age of (Progressive) Reform.¹³ The 1920s, he argued, represented only a “temporary reversal” in the fortunes of reformers and so should not deter us from understanding the entire period as one dominated by reforming ideals. When viewed through the life of Josephine Roche, Hofstadter’s “Age of Reform” appears not to have ended in the 1940s but to have continued into the 1970s. What Hofstadter could not have known as he penned *The Age of Reform* in the 1950s was that he was writing in yet another of progressivism’s “temporary reversals.” The embers of progressivism were smoldering through the immediate postwar decade just as they did in the 1920s, and they would flame up once more in the 1960s. This book, in the process of narrating Roche’s life story, makes the case for an Age of Progressive Reform that reached from the late nineteenth century into the 1970s.

The progressivism of the 1960s and 1970s was, of course, hardly identical to that of the early twentieth century or the New Deal. Changes in context as well as creed differentiated the twentieth century’s three progressive episodes. Roche’s life brings some of those differences into sharp focus. But of even more interest here are the ways that ideals forged during the Progressive Era not only survived to shape the policies and institutions of the New Deal in the 1930s, as many other historians have argued, but also endured the shocks of the late 1940s—especially the Cold War and an emboldened anti-communist campaign at home—to reemerge in public policy and social movements in the 1960s.¹⁴ Roche’s life story cannot bear out the whole of the continuities and changes in the progressive tradition from the Progressive Era through the Great Society, but it does provide a remarkable vantage point from which to capture significant aspects of that whole.

Indeed, Roche was positioned within the progressive reform movements of the twentieth century in such a way as to make her life unusually revelatory of a multifaceted, decades-long progressive history shared by women and men alike. Roche was formed equally by progressive communities in the East, where as a young woman she witnessed the struggles of new immigrants crowded into urban neighborhoods, and in the West, where discriminatory railroad rates and drought were greater concerns. She operated not only in reform networks dominated by women but also in those dominated by men. She absorbed the tenets of social science progressivism, a strain that emphasized public policy as the solution to social problems, as well as those of labor progressivism, which envisioned the self-organization of workers as the crucial component for promoting

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social justice.¹⁵ She carried those ideals through the tempering processes of economic depression in the 1930s, global war in the 1940s, and unprecedented prosperity in the 1950s, bringing them to bear in the explosive 1960s. As a result, Roche's life refracts multiple strains within the progressive tradition as they shot through the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.

In fact, Roche's life responds to many of the most important questions raised by historians about progressive reform. How, for instance, could the same reform movement encompass both moral reformers and labor progressives, the former seeming determined to *constrain* workers through campaigns against alcohol, prostitution, and gambling and the latter seeking explicitly to *empower* workers? Did World War I, with its attempt at economic planning and promise of national self-determination, enthrone progressive ideals, or, as it suppressed dissent and tolerated attacks on diversity in the United States, entomb them? Is the New Deal better understood as the culmination of progressive reform or the generator of modern liberalism? Were Cold War liberals the heirs to or betrayers of their progressive forbears? If, as many historians argue, robust health and welfare benefits in the private sector stymied the development of a comprehensive welfare state in the postwar United States, why were coal miners, who had one of the best private health programs in the country, clamoring in the 1960s for federal aid? Given the emergence of racial justice as the premier concern of reform campaigns in the 1960s, did that era represent a decisive break from the past, or did it express values consistent with earlier progressive episodes when class justice dominated the agenda? In sum, how are we to conceptualize the history of progressive reform in twentieth-century America?

As they unfurl in the chapters ahead, answers to these questions depend in part on how we identify the central concern of early twentieth-century progressivism. Without question, Josephine Roche's primary concern was inequality. Over the years, she filled her files with reports on the concentration of wealth within a tiny elite, and she continually insisted that the threat to all things American came from "economic inequality, intolerance, human denial."¹⁶ Economic inequalities, however, were not the whole of Roche's concern. She aimed to diminish inequalities of power, too. Wealth and power were (and are) intimately related, of course, but they were not identical and were sometimes treated independently. When Roche pressed for women's suffrage, workers' participation in managerial decisions, or racial minorities' leadership in devising policies for eradicating racial injustice, she was seeking to equalize relations of power. When she sought minimum wage laws, progressive taxation, or unemployment insurance, she directly addressed inequalities of wealth. When she hoped "to see all the workers of Amer-

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ica organized in unions,” she hoped for the diminution of inequalities in both arenas.¹⁷

Diminishing inequalities of wealth and power was for many reformers the center of the progressive impulse. Although this desire did not motivate them all, it did inspire millions of reformers, and it crossed multiple categories of reform.¹⁸ The concern with inequality also connected reformers in the early twentieth century with those of the New Deal and the Great Society eras. Unlike more radical activists, progressives rarely expected perfect equality ever to reign, but they passionately believed the current degree of inequality in their society was intolerable and must be reduced if human beings were to lead worthy lives and America were to deliver on its democratic promise. Progressive methods for decreasing inequalities included public policies aimed at ensuring individual economic security and regulating corporate power as well as the promotion of a more inclusive and vigorous democracy. For Roche, the most significant engine of what she called a “dynamic democracy” was an aroused and organized citizenry, especially a thriving labor movement.¹⁹

By setting inequality at the heart of progressivism, Josephine Roche’s life story suggests that the period from the late nineteenth century into the 1970s constituted an age of progressive reform, broken by two brief reversals. The reversals were periods when, at the level of national politics and government, progressivism did not dominate. The first temporary reversal occurred in the 1920s, when conservatives won the White House and reformers scrambled to fashion responses to such innovations as welfare capitalism, the Bolshevik experiment, and a newly organized and defined U.S. patriotism. Another reversal occurred in the long 1950s, when the Cold War’s anti-communist crusade together with a growing economy destroyed many progressive organizations, ostensibly melted workers and employers into the same “middle class,” eroded commitment to democratic decision making, and built a nearly unbreachable wall between reformers and their former allies on the left. These changes were significant enough to require a new label for those who continued to press for some items on the earlier progressive agenda. Like so many others, Roche temporarily ceased to be a progressive and became a Cold War liberal.²⁰ But progressivism lived on in smoldering bits and pieces within postwar liberal politics as well as in private sector experiments and emergent social movements in the 1950s. As Roche’s story shows, those embers helped to produce the century’s final episode of progressive reform in the 1960s and 1970s. The Great Society embodied a new progressivism produced by cross-fertilization between a new left and postwar liberalism.²¹

Although this book is not specifically about women’s progressivism or female reform, it does contribute to U.S. women’s history.²² Most obvi-

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ously, Josephine Roche expands our notion of what it meant to be a woman in the first six decades of the twentieth century. She did things that our current histories would not lead us to expect women to do—like becoming a coal magnate on the eve of the Great Depression.²³ But her story also helps to explain why so many of Roche’s female firsts remained *sui generis*. Her experience reveals the kinds of cultural and political moves that dulled the potential for broader change that her gender breakthroughs might otherwise have carried. Despite her astonishing success in the coal industry in the early 1930s, for example, Roche was often represented more as a “humanitarian” than as a businesswoman, making her achievement in industry more about the allegedly female characteristic of charity than about the ability of women to achieve a healthy bottom line.²⁴ Similarly, when Roche was exercising power over thousands of men in the New Deal government, she was simultaneously subordinated to some of those same men by serving tea at administration functions. Perhaps most sobering, Roche’s biography shows how a woman of such accomplishment and significance was written out of memory and history altogether, robbing subsequent generations of the capacious expectations for women that her example might have created. In sum, this life story helps to explain how American women’s prospects could improve so dramatically across the twentieth century and yet remain unequal to men’s.

Roche’s biography speaks in other powerful ways to our own time as well. Her story resonates especially with our current experience of increasing economic inequality, a trend that resumed in the late twentieth century after several decades of diminution and continues unabated in the twenty-first. In part because of the gradual abandonment of innovations pioneered by progressives in the early and mid-twentieth century, income inequality began to reincrease significantly in the 1970s. The result is that, in 2012, the top 10 percent of income earners in the United States claimed 50.4 percent of the country’s annual income, a percentage higher than at any time since 1917. As for recent trends, between 2009 and 2012, the incomes of the highest-earning 1 percent increased by 31.4 percent, while the incomes of the remaining 99 percent grew by only 0.4 percent.²⁵ Wealth inequality is even greater than income inequality, having reached levels unmatched since before the Great Depression. Between 1983 and 2010, the top 5 percent of Americans scored 74.2 percent of the nation’s increase in wealth, while the bottom 60 percent of Americans suffered a decline.²⁶ In 2005, the top 1 percent of Americans owned over 30 percent of the nation’s wealth; the top 20 percent owned over 80 percent.²⁷ For those who worry that these levels of inequality are constricting individual lives, eroding national community, and depriving the world of contributions from those hampered only by lack of resources rather than deficiencies of ability or desire, Roche’s life reveals a deep vein of

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historical precedent from which to draw insight and inspiration. It offers a potent political heritage that insisted private property carried public obligations, corporations had responsibilities to workers and consumers as well as to stockholders, economic security was a prerequisite for the exercise of genuine liberty, and the self-organization of workers was the *sine qua non* for social justice. Progressivism rejected the inevitability of inequality and devised effective ways to diminish it. As a result, by the 1950s, Americans achieved the highest level of economic equality in all of U.S. history.

As the foregoing would suggest, this biography is overwhelmingly a political biography. Roche was, to the everlasting consternation of reporters, an extremely private person. But she left enough evidence of her personality and interior life for us to know her as a woman of energy, conviction, and, to use one of her favorite words, guts. Her godson reported long after her death that Roche disdained people with no “guts,” and she was given to chiding anyone she perceived as gutless. When one member of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal cabinet suggested that Roche would give the administration much needed “charm,” she retorted, “What this administration needs is guts.”²⁸ At a meeting of mine operators where Roche was urged to the speaker’s rostrum because the proceedings reportedly needed “some beauty,” she responded, “What this meeting needs is guts.”²⁹

Roche was proud of her own mettle. Throughout her life, she sought new challenges that would both promote the cause of social justice as she defined it and move her into realms previously barred to women. Although her stint as Denver’s first policewoman in 1912–1913 ended in abysmal failure, for instance, she always included it in her life story, gleefully narrating tales of her late-night prowls in the city’s dicey saloon district.³⁰ Those tales confirmed her courage and demonstrated her gender innovation; they painted her as the gutsy person she wanted to be. In her mid-twenties, she brilliantly articulated this aspect of her personality after riding a “half-broken” horse. “I’ve had some wild gallops on a horse that isn’t quite broken yet,” she reported to a friend, “a few men have been on him, but no woman, so the hours spent with him have been most exhilarating exercise.”³¹

While Roche was a woman of intense conviction, her love of risk, of creating something from nothing, of being “in the thick of it,” as she sometimes put it, led her to some unsavory choices.³² In fact, whenever Roche was faced with the choice of either remaining true to her full set of moral and political commitments or being fully effective on behalf of only a few, she always chose effectiveness. It was a trait that explained many of her decisions, some of which were frankly corrupt. In the 1930s, she accepted secret loans from the United Mine Workers of America to

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keep her coal company out of bankruptcy, and in 1940 she refused to campaign for Franklin Roosevelt unless he found public money to keep her coal company afloat. Most spectacularly, her career ended in an explosion of accusations that she had violated her fiduciary responsibility to beneficiaries of the coal miners' welfare fund by colluding with the miners' union.

Josephine Roche was no saint. Part of what makes her so interesting is precisely her willingness to get down in the muck of economic and political life. She had no interest in polishing a pristine moral reputation. She was interested in exercising power on behalf of her most cherished values. Sometimes, she felt she had to choose some of those values over others, and she was willing to fight dirty to defend them if she thought she had to. Her shady dealings never enriched her personally; they were aimed at preserving what she saw as progressive institutions built to improve the lives of workers. Even when her choices were not admirable, they were understandable. They remind us that our imperfect world does not offer any of us perfect options and that compromise is often at the center of an effective life.

As a child, Josephine Roche rode a stagecoach into the Rocky Mountains for family vacations, and she lived to see a man on the moon. Her longevity as a participant in American life makes her individual story peculiarly revealing of the continuities and changes in the progressive reform tradition in twentieth-century America. The verve with which Roche led that long life was captured in an interview when she was eighty-five and campaigning for democracy within the coal miners' union. A reporter asked if she planned to retire soon and write her memoirs. She snapped back, "Oh no, I'm going to do things now. I only have 10 minutes left, and I'm afraid I didn't fight hard enough."³³ That progressive fight and the woman who made it are the subjects of this book.