



Robert W. Bonynge  
1863-1939

Founder of the  
M. Alida Bonynge Memorial in  
THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY TRUST  
415 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10017

*In 1940, the will of Robert W. Bonyng established the M. Alida Bonyng Memorial, to be administered by The New York Community Trust for charitable purposes.*

Alida Bonyng was the woman behind the man, the devoted wife whose quiet support allowed her husband to climb rapidly to national prominence.

Born in New York on March 31, 1860, Mary Alida (pronounced a-LIE-da) Riblet was one of three children of William Hunter Riblet, who was president of the Peter Cooper Insurance Company. He was commissioned as a brevet colonel at the start of the Civil War and commanded the Seventh Regiment. The Riblet family traced their ancestry back to another patriot, Peter Riblet, who served as a young private in the Colonial Army. The family liked to recall that Peter's role in the Revolution was delivering a load of hay to General Washington at his Valley Forge headquarters.

Alida Riblet was graduated in 1880 from the Normal School, which is now Hunter College, in New York. When she was twenty-six years old, she married a brilliant young lawyer of twenty-three. His name was Robert William Bonyng.

Robert Bonyng (pronounced BONning) was born in New York City on September 8, 1863, the son of Robert and Susan Burchell Bonyng. He was graduated from the City College of New York with an A.B. degree in 1882 at the age of nineteen, and three years later he had received both an M.A. from CCNY and a law degree from Columbia University Law School. In 1885, he was admitted to the New York Bar, an experience that he decided to put to use for the benefit of young law students preparing to take their bar examinations. He and a colleague, Edwin C. Ward, analyzed the questions asked of applicants over a nine-year period, then arranged and classified them according to subjects, showing the number of times each question had been repeated. Their published work was "1,500 questions propounded to the applicants for admission to the New York State Bar." Such organization and attention to detail was a professional



*M. Alida Riblet Bonyng*

characteristic that became a hallmark of his legal career.

Rob Bonyng and Alida Riblet were married in New York on January 20, 1886, the year after his graduation from Columbia. After Rob had practiced law in New York for three years, the two young people decided that the city did not provide enough of a challenge for them. They moved to Colorado, where Rob established a practice in Denver.

The Bonyngs had not been in Colorado very long, however, before Rob took his first plunge into politics. He was elected a member of the Colorado House of Representatives in 1893 and 1894. From 1896 to 1898, he served as a member of the Colorado Board of Pardons. The next step was national politics. When Theodore Roosevelt visited Denver, Rob Bonyng was in charge of planning his route through the city. In the election of 1900, Robert ran for the U.S. House of Representatives from Colorado's First District and was defeated.

But, as opponents learned time and again during

his long and distinguished career, Robert Bonynge was an exceptionally tenacious man. When election time came around in 1902, he was again a candidate and, it appeared, was again unsuccessful. His opponent in that election, John F. Shafroth, was declared the winner. Bonynge refused to admit defeat. He eventually succeeded in exposing gross frauds that had been committed in the election and introduced the case of *Bonynge v. Shafroth* before the House Committee on Elections. In a dramatic address before the House of Representatives, Shafroth conceded defeat and withdrew. A triumphant Robert Bonynge was finally seated on February 16, 1904, mid-way through the second session of the 58th Congress. Bonynge was one of 197 members on the Republican side of the aisle in a House that was divided fairly evenly under the administration of Theodore Roosevelt.

Bonynge had barely taken his seat in the House when it was time to begin a new campaign. He won handily in the 1904 election, and while the 59th Congress was in session he served on the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization and submitted a report on the Immigration Bureau in 1906. He was again victorious in that year. However, he was defeated in the next election, and it was the last time he ran for public office. When the 60th Congress adjourned in March, 1909, Robert returned to his law practice in Denver.

In 1908 Robert Bonynge was appointed a member of the National Monetary Commission, on which he served until 1912. During those years he delivered addresses throughout the country, under the auspices of the National Citizens League of Chicago, advocating monetary reforms. In a speech to the St. Paul Association of Commerce on "Reform Banking Legislation," he advanced his plan "to break Wall Street control of American finances, to remedy the defects of the present banking system, and to aid and protect business by preventing panics."

In November, 1912, Rob and Alida returned to New York, where Rob again established a law practice. In 1916, he was named Chief Counsel for the New York State Industrial Commission. During the two years that he served, he organized its legal department.

Meanwhile, Rob Bonynge had earned a reputation as an outstanding campaigner, and he traveled with

Cover photo:  
in Congress,  
1904-1909.



June, 1938.

Calvin Coolidge during his bid for the Vice Presidency as Warren G. Harding's running mate in 1920.

It was from President Harding in 1923 that Robert Bonynge received the most important appointment of his career. Acting under an agreement of the Treaty of Berlin signed on August 10, 1922, the President named Bonynge Agent of the United States before the German-American Mixed Claims Commission, succeeding Robert C. Morris (who himself later established a fund in the New York Community Trust). Robert Bonynge spent the next sixteen years fulfilling the duties of his position. In addition, from 1925 to 1927, he served as United States Agent before the Tripartite Claims Commission, involving the United States, Austria, and Hungary.

One of Bonynge's first official acts was to file a brief on behalf of twelve life insurance companies against Germany to compensate for losses paid to Americans in connection with the sinking of the *S. S. Lusitania* in May, 1915, with the loss of 114 American lives. Within a year of his appointment, he had adjusted over 200 claims, for which U.S. citizens received settlements totalling over \$12 million. By 1930, he had handled over 24,000 claims and secured adjustments aggregating with interest over \$300 million, thus, according to *The New York Times* account of his accomplishment, "bringing order out of chaos left by the World War."

But the high point of his work with the Mixed Claims Commission was his persistency in handling the infamous and long-drawn-out "Black Tom Case."

On the night of July 29-30, 1916, fire broke out at the Black Tom, New Jersey, terminal of the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company in New York Harbor. The terminal was full of railroad cars loaded with ammunition, and certainly it was a likely target for German saboteurs. Six months after that holocaust there was another, this time in Kingsland, New Jersey, where the plant of the Canadian Car and Foundry Company was similarly destroyed. Although public opinion held strongly for sabotage, there was only circumstantial evidence, and the case against Germany would be difficult to prove.

Among those convinced of German responsibility was Robert Bonyngé. He fought for years to have the case decided in favor of the United States. He began his presentation of the case in the fall of 1930, fourteen years after the fire had occurred, claiming \$22 million in damages for the Black Tom fire and \$18 million for the Kingsland incident. However, upon what the Commission regarded as only circumstantial evidence, the case was decided in November, 1930, in favor of Germany.

The news stunned Bonyngé, who told *New York Times* reporters, "The decision comes as a complete surprise to me. It seems almost incredible . . . In my opinion the testimony in both cases overwhelmingly establishes that Germany was responsible for both disasters."

He was determined to find proof to support his conviction. In January of 1931, Bonyngé asked for a rehearing of the case, and the following July he filed a petition requesting that the case be reopened. In January, 1932, after months of research, he was able to file new evidence seeking to prove that German agents were indeed responsible. Years passed. The case disappeared from the news. But it was never out of Robert Bonyngé's mind.

As a result of his continuing efforts, the United States began proceedings, in March, 1936, to reopen the Black Tom Case. The following May the Claims Commission held a new series of hearings. Bonyngé

was off on another of his many trips to Germany. Finally, in the spring of 1937, the Commission reversed its earlier decision, and the German government was ordered to pay the heavy claims laid against it. An admiring colleague called Bonyngé's handling of the case "a monument to his ability, industry, integrity and resourcefulness . . . The story of his fight after apparent defeat, and in exposing fraud, deceit, trickery and perjury, affords the material for a most dramatic chronicle, play or movie. Had Mr. Bonyngé been a publicist or a self-advertiser, the public would have heard more of his great attainments."

In 1939, when the City College of New York awarded its Townsend Harris medal to its illustrious alumnus, it paid this tribute to Robert Bonyngé: "Maker of law in the Legislature of Colorado and in the House of Representatives, adviser to national and state bodies of economic and social significance, you became, at last, the skillful and trusted agent of the entire nation in some of its most intricate international adjudications. For sixteen years you've labored patiently, bravely, and wisely to settle, with good to your own nation and without harm to others, the vexing problems of equity and justice arising from the economic confusion of the World War. In you your Alma Mater finds particular reason to rejoice."

Absorbed as he was in his duties with the Commission, Rob Bonyngé was a man of many interests. He was a member of a number of legal societies, including the American Bar Association, the New York State Bar Association, the New York County Lawyer's Association, and the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. He kept up old acquaintances through his college fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon. He belonged to the Veterans Association of the Seventh Regiment, the Union League Club, the University Club of Washington, D.C., and the West End Association in New York, which he served as president in 1932 and 1933. He was also active in the National Republican Club, served on its Executive Committee from 1914 to 1916, and was its president in 1917 and 1918. At St. Matthew's and St. Timothy's Episcopal Church on West 84th Street, where he was recalled by the rector as being "a very faithful man," he was a vestryman from 1922 until his death.

At his side through this long, varied, and rewarding career was Alida Bonyngé. When the voters of Colorado's First District elected him to the House of Representatives, Rob and Alida moved to Washington, D.C., returning to Denver for cool, pleasant summers, a habit they continued through his work with the National Monetary Commission. Later, when Rob traveled to Europe — Germany, Switzerland, the Hague — on behalf of the Mixed Claims Commission, Alida went with him. And when they established a home in New York, she presided graciously over their handsome apartment overlooking Central Park. Their home was furnished with fine antiques and Oriental rugs, cut glass and family silver, and hung with Robert's favorite prints and paintings. Having suffered a great loss when their only child, a boy, died soon after his birth during their days in Colorado, they took extra delight in visits from a large number of nieces and nephews and other young relatives. They attended the theater often, enjoyed the opera, and were frequent guests at the White House.

On August 8, 1937, a year and a half after the gala celebration of their Golden Wedding Anniversary, Alida Bonyngé died at the age of 77. To honor her, Robert planned in his will for the establishment of the M. Alida Bonyngé Memorial in the New York Community Trust.

When Robert William Bonyngé died two years later on September 22, 1939, more than two hundred friends and colleagues gathered to pay final tribute to the man they remembered as "very modest, unassuming and retiring, yet strong in character and convictions; frank, manly, square, sound and forceful in expression and conduct . . . a most useful and valuable citizen and a genuine friend."



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