Nina Otero-Warren was born Adelina Isabel Emilia Luna Otero on October 23, 1881 on her family's hacienda in New Mexico. Otero’s family was wealthy and powerful within their community. Her mother’s family were descendants of some of New Mexico’s earliest colonists and her father could trace his ancestry back to the Spanish occupation of the area in the 1700s. As railroads emerged in the region in 1881, large numbers of white immigrants began to displace the indigenous Native American, Spanish, and Mexican populations that already inhabited the area, with her father being killed by an Anglo squatter on the family’s land before her second birthday. Her mother remarried in 1886, marrying an Englishman named Alfred Maurice Bergere who had immigrated to the country as a teenager.

Otero-Warren, her two brothers, and her nine half siblings were all educated, with Otero-Warren attending St. Vincent’s Academy in Albuquerque at eleven and Maryville College of the Sacred Heart in Missouri for two years before returning to her family’s hacienda at thirteen, where she helped to educate her siblings and run the ranch. When Otero-Warren was sixteen, her family moved to Santa Fe where her stepfather earned a position as a judicial clerk. There, Otero-Warren became well-known in the social circles of the Santa Fe elite, meeting her husband, Rawson D. Warren, in 1907. Unhappy with the marriage, Otero-Warren divorced him after two years, but given that divorce was not common or accepted at the time, she instead described herself as a widow and retained Otero-Warren as her surname.

She then became active in New Mexico politics, specifically focused on women’s suffrage. In 1912, she moved to New York City to live with her half-brother while he attended Columbia University. While there, Otero-Warren volunteered at a settlement house, but after her mother’s death in 1914, moved back to Santa Fe and took over household duties, as was the expectation at the time, while continuing her activist work. Her work for suffrage garnered the attention of Alice Paul, who picked Otero-Warren to head New Mexico’s chapter of the Congressional Union, the predecessor of the National Woman’s Party. Paul and her colleagues recognized that Hispanic support in New Mexico was integral to success in winning suffrage, making Otero-Warren the prime choice, and she insisted that literature about suffrage be published in both English and Spanish.

Coming from a wealthy family, Otero-Warren never had to work, but chose to take a job as Superintendent of Public Schools in Santa Fe County, holding that position from 1918 to 1929, while still fighting for suffrage and taking care of her family. During her tenure in this position, the federal government was pushing for the assimilation of non-whites, but Otero-Warren worked to balance the government’s demands and her own pride in her Spanish heritage by arguing that both Spanish and English be allowed in the school system. Additionally, for a shorter period beginning in 1923, Otero-Warren was appointed as Santa Fe County’s Inspector of Indian Schools, using her position to criticize the federal government’s Indian school system after observing horrible conditions.

In 1921, fresh on the success of the 19th Amendment, Otero-Warren ran for office, running to be the Republican Party’s nominee for New Mexico in the United States House of Representatives. She won the party’s nomination, but lost the election by less than nine percent of the vote. Even after this loss, Otero-Warren remained politically involved, serving as the Chairman of New Mexico’s Board of Health, an executive member of the American Red Cross, and the director of an adult literacy program in New Mexico run by the Works Progress Administration. Throughout her life, despite never remarrying or having her own children, Otero-Warren acted as a mother for both her siblings and the community. In the early 1930s, with her partner Mamie Meadors she had met in the 1920s, Otero-Warren homesteaded, creating a ranch called “Las Dos” just outside of Santa Fe. They lived there for five months each year, improving the land, building other houses, cultivating the land, and maintaining the road for several years. In 1947, the two women also established a real estate firm, first called Otero Rawson Company, then called Rawson D. Warren Co., which they ran for several years. Otero-Warren died on January 3, 1965, leaving behind a legacy of fighting for a better life for those within her community and their suffrage rights.

Sources
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