

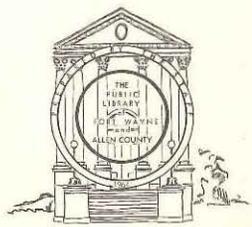
VF - Indiana-Biography ⁵⁰
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Gene Stratton Porter

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FOREWORD

Although Gene Stratton Porter resided in this city only a few weeks in 1913, her life was closely associated with the Fort Wayne area. Born in rural Wabash County and educated in Wabash, the noted Hoosier author established residence successively in Geneva, Decatur, and Rome City. She was intimately connected with Coldwater, Michigan, and Winchester, Indiana; and her literary and social activities frequently brought her to the Summit City, where she had close relatives, friends, and admirers. The G. R. & I. Railroad linked together many of the communities where she lived her formative years and was the chief mode of transportation in her youth.

Gene Stratton Porter was neither a classicist, nor a naturalist, nor yet a realist in literature. Some critics have denominated her writings "opiates for the masses"; others characterized them as being of "molasses sweetness"; still others found them too imaginary. Certainly a best-seller in her day, she was a romanticist in the best Hoosier tradition of George Barr McCutcheon, Meredith Nicholson, and David Graham Phillips--those other best-sellers of that golden day of Indiana authors. President William Lowe Bryan of Indiana University once included her in a list of fourteen best-selling Indiana authors. In the larger national field of literature, her place is with those other contemporary best-sellers, Harold Bell Wright and Harold McGrath.

Gene Stratton Porter won wide popularity and a special place in the hearts of her readers; no contemporary author was better loved or acclaimed by the reading public. Fifty million readers of her own day enshrined her in their affections; countless thousands

of later generations still read her volumes avidly and experience the same pleasant and refreshing glow as did their grandparents, parents, uncles, and aunts in the first quarter of this century. Although the professional literary critics found no especial merit in her works, Mrs. Porter was amply rewarded, both by royalties from the sale of her books and the acclaim of a large segment of the reading public who found inspiration and recreation in her words. Indeed, the financial returns from her works were seldom surpassed in her day by other contemporary authors.

To the citizens of Fort Wayne and northeastern Indiana, the name of Gene Stratton Porter is as familiar as the names and deeds of local heroes and leaders of the present and distant past. The boards and the staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County are pleased to present this brief resume of the life and work of the Hoosier author in response to frequent inquiries about her.

It is hoped that this publication will stimulate reminiscences among Mrs. Porter's friends and acquaintances and reacquaint her large retinue of readers, both young and old, with their beloved author.

Geneva Stratton, later better known as Gene Stratton Porter, the youngest of twelve children, was born on Hopewell Farm about ten miles from Wabash, Indiana, August 17, 1863. Her father, Mark Stratton, was a farmer and ordained minister and had lived in Wabash County since about 1834. Mr. Stratton was a high-principled man with unusual mental powers and some education. Mrs. Stratton also possessed abilities of high quality.

To the end of her life, Mrs. Porter gave her father credit for her literary success. He devoted much time to instructing her by precept and by example. He found the time to give her and his other children that which they lacked in formal education. One of his contributions was the oft-enforced admonition to finish a task once it was started. He taught her economies which she practiced all of her life; many years later she remarked that her instruction in thrift at home as a child prevented her use of the telegraph later when she could well have afforded it.

Geneva Stratton had little schooling in any formal sense of the word. Her father's knowledge of history, literature, and the Scriptures was monumental. He had read the great English and American historians of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; he knew much of their writings by rote. He could recite from memory most of the Bible with references as to the source of his quotations. He transmitted not only this knowledge and the wisdom based upon it to the child but imbued her with a zeal to teach herself; this she did. Always a woman of firm convictions, she usually had sound information to support her views.

Mark Stratton was a fervent abolitionist and assisted in the escape of fugitive slaves for several

years before Geneva's birth; a secret tunnel on his Wabash farm served as one of the stations of the famed underground railroad. The family was a strong supporter of the Union cause and stoutly adhered to the newly-organized and dominant Republican party. This partisan influence infiltrated the life of Geneva so strongly that when Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, was elected president in 1884, the young non-voting Geneva (for women did not then vote) felt that disaster indeed had come to her country.

After the death of his wife, Mark Stratton, too old for farm work, moved with his family to Wabash, where he believed his children would have better educational facilities. Geneva was eleven years old at the time.

During her school days in Wabash, Geneva began to develop an interest in writing. Strongly rejecting any and all pressures to write on subjects of no interest to her, she did write convincingly and interestingly on topics vital to her. She sometimes neglected her arithmetic for writing. There is no evidence that she, at this time, believed there was any commercial value for the product of her pen. But she did change her given name from Geneva to Genevé, and was called Gene by her family and friends thereafter.

Gene was now becoming familiar with Sylvan Lake near Rome City; at twenty-one, she had visited it three times. This was where she later wrote many of her books. Genevé, always interested in the natural wonders of the rather primitive woodlands of that day, now became interested in fishing and water sports. For the remainder of her life she liked to fish.

At Sylvan Lake she met a Geneva druggist, Charles Darwin Porter. Their acquaintance developed into a romance, and they were married in 1886. For a year they lived near the Court House in Decatur; thereafter they took up residence in the village of

Geneva.

The new Mrs. Porter assumed the duties of a housewife just the same as any other American girl who married and settled down. As her husband's business grew and prospered, he became interested in the local bank and served as its presiding officer and cashier. The money he invested in land, which eventually produced oil, augmented his income considerably.

Together, after a visit to the exposition in 1893, they designed a home of fourteen rooms modeled after Forester's Building at the Chicago World's Fair. Known as Limberlost Cabin, it was their home for twenty-six years.

A fire which destroyed a great deal of property in Geneva served to demonstrate Mrs. Porter's capacity for leadership. She ran to the scene, quickly took command of those willing to assist her, formed a bucket brigade (for there was no fire-fighting equipment), and directed her neighbors in their efforts to quench the flames. In the process, she became seriously burned.

Mrs. Porter, whatever her innermost strivings, gave no serious attention to writing for many years. Her interest in photography, however, developed after her family gave her a small camera for a Christmas present. She became so skilled that one manufacturer of photographic print paper asked her about the methods she employed with his product to attain such excellent results.

Aside from husband, home, and family, Mrs. Porter's life interest seems to have been that great reservoir of natural wonders, viz., the Limberlost Swamp immediately south of Geneva. The swamp, where a man named Limber became lost and was never found, was said to serve as a refuge for evil persons. This heavily-forested, water-soaked, primi-

tive region harbored wildlife of great variety in its dark and treacherous bogs.

Mrs. Porter became interested in the bird life of the bogs and developed a skillful technique of photographing it. She was happiest clad in hip boots and knickers, exploring the swamps of the Limberlost. In her home she kept innumerable specimens of swamp life. Love birds, canaries, and parrots were likewise her companions. At first she was lured by birds, but flowers and insects soon thrust themselves upon her.

When her only child, Jeanette, entered school, Mrs. Porter found time to practice writing in secret. She submitted some of her nature pictures to RECREATION, and was soon a staff member of the magazine. Her first check for sixteen dollars was spent for photographic equipment, as were her later earnings; in two years she had invested about fifteen hundred dollars.

At this time, she switched from RECREATION to OUTING and wrote under the tutelage of Casper Whitney, editor of OUTING. One of the short stories she wrote under his direction was published in METROPOLITAN, then a leading national publication. Meanwhile she continued her researches in nature in the Limberlost.

Mrs. Porter's love for wild creatures influenced her strongly against the ruthless tactics of hunters and plunderers. One winter day, during a trip to the woods to feed the birds, she discovered the broken and frozen body of a cardinal lying in the road, left by the hunter who had slain it in target practice. "Song of the Cardinal," a short story inspired by the incident, was submitted to CENTURY. The editor replied that he liked the story but would urge her to expand it into a full-length novel, which she did in a month of intensive work. Original illustrations depicting the life of the birds portrayed in the story ac-

companied the book, which met immediate approval when it came off the press in 1905. It also met acceptance in other lands, and during its vogue, was published in seven languages.

SONG OF THE CARDINAL, her first large-scale publishing success, began the controversy over the authenticity of Mrs. Porter's natural history. Some critics disputed the nature facts set forth in the book. Although characters were sometimes composites, all of Mrs. Porter's books and stories were autobiographical and were based upon true incidents. This fidelity to life contributed toward the success of her efforts.

FRECKLES, one of her best-known works, had its beginning when Mrs. Porter saw a beautiful black vulture feather fall from the sky. Accompanied by her husband, she traced it to a nearby nest in a hollow log in the swamp and began the very disagreeable task of surveying the scene. However, perseverance and disregard for the presence of the foul-smelling carrion on which the vulture fed, enabled them to observe and photograph the nesting of these creatures through the incubation period to the final emergence of the young from the shell. The book intertwined this episode with the life of a Scotch logger, a great deal of wood lore, and the epochal character of Freckles. It was published amid great acclaim in 1904, and during the next ten years, sold 670,733 copies. Eventually sales reached more than a million copies in America and five hundred thousand in Great Britain.

The popularity of FRECKLES was so great that Mrs. Porter published a sequel to it in 1909, GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST. This work, illustrated by one hundred pictures, gave her world fame. Again, nature lore supplements the story in a most unique fashion.

LADIES' HOME JOURNAL accepted articles on birds in 1904 and 1905, for by this time Mrs. Porter was an accepted writer for the masses. Her novels

included a great deal of nature lore. This proved rather unpalatable to some at first, but eventually was accepted as Mrs. Porter's way. This was the period of deep and abiding interest in nature writings stimulated by Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, John Burroughs, Ernest Seton Thompson, and Luther Burbank. Their works, together with the new interest in the conservation of natural resources, gave the literature of nature a continuing impetus. Mrs. Porter's writing was a thread in this substantial pattern.

AT THE FOOT OF THE RAINBOW, issued in 1909, had a balanced ration of nature lore and romance. BIRDS OF THE BIBLE, also published in 1909, was a very scholarly work and required a great deal of research. It was by no means decisively popular, but is interesting and replete with illustrations--some of which were collected abroad with painstaking care.

About this time Mrs. Porter was employed as a contributor to INTERNATIONAL BIBLE ENCYCLOPEDIA. For four years, she also served as specialist in natural history and photography on PHOTOGRAPHIC TIMES ANNUAL.

While making photographs of birds in the spring of 1910, Mrs. Porter became interested in their music, calls, and sounds; the result was MUSIC OF THE WILD. She dedicated this book to her husband's brother, Dr. Miles Porter, then a physician in Fort Wayne.

Mrs. Porter also collected moth specimens and eggs and brought them home for study. She sometimes placed eggs on her pillow so that she might be wakened by the sound of the moths breaking from the cocoon. Besides making photographs of their egg-laying and other activities during their short lives, she painted water colors of them. Her easel was made for her by her father when she was a child. MOTHS OF THE LIMBERLOST, published in 1912, grew from these labors and studies.

Mrs. Porter's public, now a definite segment of the reading population, awaited the coming of each new book with the Gene Stratton Porter signature. In 1911, she published HARVESTER, which became her most popular book. LADDIE, another very popular novel, was published in 1913.

By this time Mrs. Porter alternated each serious book of nature with a romantic novel liberally sprinkled with nature facts and lore. During her residence at Geneva, she wrote five novels and five nature books and adopted the practice of publishing a book on her birthday.

Agricultural interests began dredging the Limberlost region after 1913, and its virgin beauty was soon transformed into a lush pattern of onions, celery, and sugar beets. Oil wells, frequently-traveled roads, and modern fences left no place for birds and moths and temporarily ended Mrs. Porter's research in nature. Her thoughts turned to her childhood at Sylvan Lake, so she purchased one hundred fifty acres of virgin timberland at its edge, named it Wildflower Woods, and built a cabin named Limberlost in memory of the first cabin at Geneva. One of the outstanding features in her new home was a fireplace which contained stones from every state in the Union. The kitchen was regarded as a showplace by the people of the community; large and well-furnished, it was used as a model and an object lesson for groups of women interested in homemaking and home economics.

Her remarkable garden contained more than three thousand varieties of plants. She employed a tree surgeon to repair damage to old and valuable trees and improved the property near Rome City in other ways. She also went to unusual lengths to preserve the bird life against destruction and was particularly interested in perpetuating a colony of horned owls.

During her residence there she cataloged more than twenty-three thousand flowers and plants

and published four books: MICHAEL O'HALLORAN (1915), MORNING FACE (1916), DAUGHTER OF THE LAND (1918), and HOMING WITH THE BIRDS (1919). Because of a paper shortage the publisher asked Mrs. Porter to cut MICHAEL O'HALLORAN one hundred pages after it was practically completed. This she did, and still met the deadline.

At the outbreak of World War I. Mrs. Porter was engaged in the revision and enlargement of WHAT I HAVE DONE WITH BIRDS. Although she attempted to do whatever war work met her hands, she managed to complete the revision, FRIENDS IN FEATHER, in 1917.

In 1922 and 1923, Mrs. Porter wrote editorials for McCALL'S. Although this was a new experience, her work was regarded as very successful.

Her first book of poetry, FIRE BIRD, was published in 1922. This was a definite attempt to meet the requirements of the literary critics with a work of top literary quality. Its reception, however, was disappointing; as poetry, it failed to communicate itself to its readers. "Euphorbia," another poem, which ran as a serial in GOOD HOUSEKEEPING, was never published in book form and immediately passed into the realm of the forgotten.

Throughout her career Mrs. Porter disciplined herself to a definite amount of time for work each day; from this regimen, she was unwilling to be diverted. Although neighbors and acquaintances sometimes refused to understand, the author persisted in her schedule. At times Mrs. Porter also placed restrictions on invasion of her privacy at Sylvan Lake. She remarked that her property rights were not respected and that as an example, on one occasion, thoughtless fishermen dug angle-worms in her carefully cultivated gentia bed.

For reasons of health, Mrs. Porter decided in 1922 to make her home permanently in California,

where she had been wintering for several years. Since royalties from the purchases of fifty million readers were pouring into her purse, and she could buy almost anything she wanted, she planned to build two houses in California; one was at Bel-Air, near Los Angeles, and the other was at Avalon. The work on these began in 1923. Here she wrote MAGIC GARDEN and KEEPER OF THE BEES.

Turning her attention to the possibility of screening her stories, she organized Gene Stratton Porter, Inc., a Delaware corporation, to produce motion pictures of her novels. She was assisted by her daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. James Meehan, and Mr. Meehan became her director. Some attempt was made to deflect these screen stories toward a sensational love interest both untoward and foreign to the original story. Mrs. Porter protested stoutly, so the stories were screened with great fidelity to the original text.

Mrs. Porter's health throughout life was unusually good. However, at one time, she received serious injuries in a fall; later she submitted to four severe surgical operations on her jaws and facial bones because of impacted teeth. In 1923, Gene Stratton Porter, while driving her car in Los Angeles, became involved in a collision with a city streetcar and was killed instantly.

For many years, some of Mrs. Porter's works have been required reading for pupils in the English classes of the Fort Wayne high schools, which has reinforced the demand for these titles. Inquiry into the holdings of this Library reveals that at present (1953), there are 650 active copies of Mrs. Porter's titles. In all, this Library has purchased, during the last half-century, 2,580 of her books. Of these FRECKLES is the most widely read; 353 copies have been worn out and 119 copies are still active. GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST ranks second with 377 worn out and 90 still available.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Mrs. Porter and her books was to induce people to wander in the out-of-doors and investigate nature. Her considerable ability as a story-teller enabled her to hold and influence her readers.

A boulder, known as Elephant Rock, lay in the St. Mary's River a few miles north of Decatur and is probably the largest of its kind in the state. Youths called themselves skaters only when they could reach Elephant Rock and return. Since Mrs. Porter wished such a rock as a monument when she died, the school children of Adams County accordingly placed it across the street from the old Porter homestead.

The State of Indiana has now taken over both the home at Rome City and the one in Geneva as state memorials. When she moved to California, she offered all her Sylvan Lake property to the State of Indiana on the condition that she be reimbursed for the cost of the buildings and the expense of the garden, but the State was not prepared to act on the proposal at that time.

Mrs. Jeanette Meehan, daughter of Mrs. Porter, has written two books--a biography of her mother, LADY OF THE LIMBERLOST, and a novel, FRECKLES COMES HOME. In 1927, Mr. Meehan, in his capacity as director of films for Gene Stratton Porter Inc., came to Sylvan Lake with a group of thirty-five persons to film HARVESTER.

Besides her daughter and four grandchildren, Mrs. Porter was related to other persons in and near Fort Wayne. Mrs. John Heller of Decatur was a cousin; Merlin Wilson of Fort Wayne was a nephew; two sisters, Mrs. Florence S. Compton and Mrs. Ada Wilson, were residents of Fort Wayne for many years.