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This panel from artist John D. Pusey's mural, *The House of the Interpreter*, depicts the excitement of scientific exploration and discovery.

2
Letters

3
Editors' Page

20
Focus

32
Destination Indiana

48
Hoosier Home

Front Cover: Detail
from Lilly House mural
depicting athletic
courage.

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4
The House of the Singing Winds
by Selma N. Steele

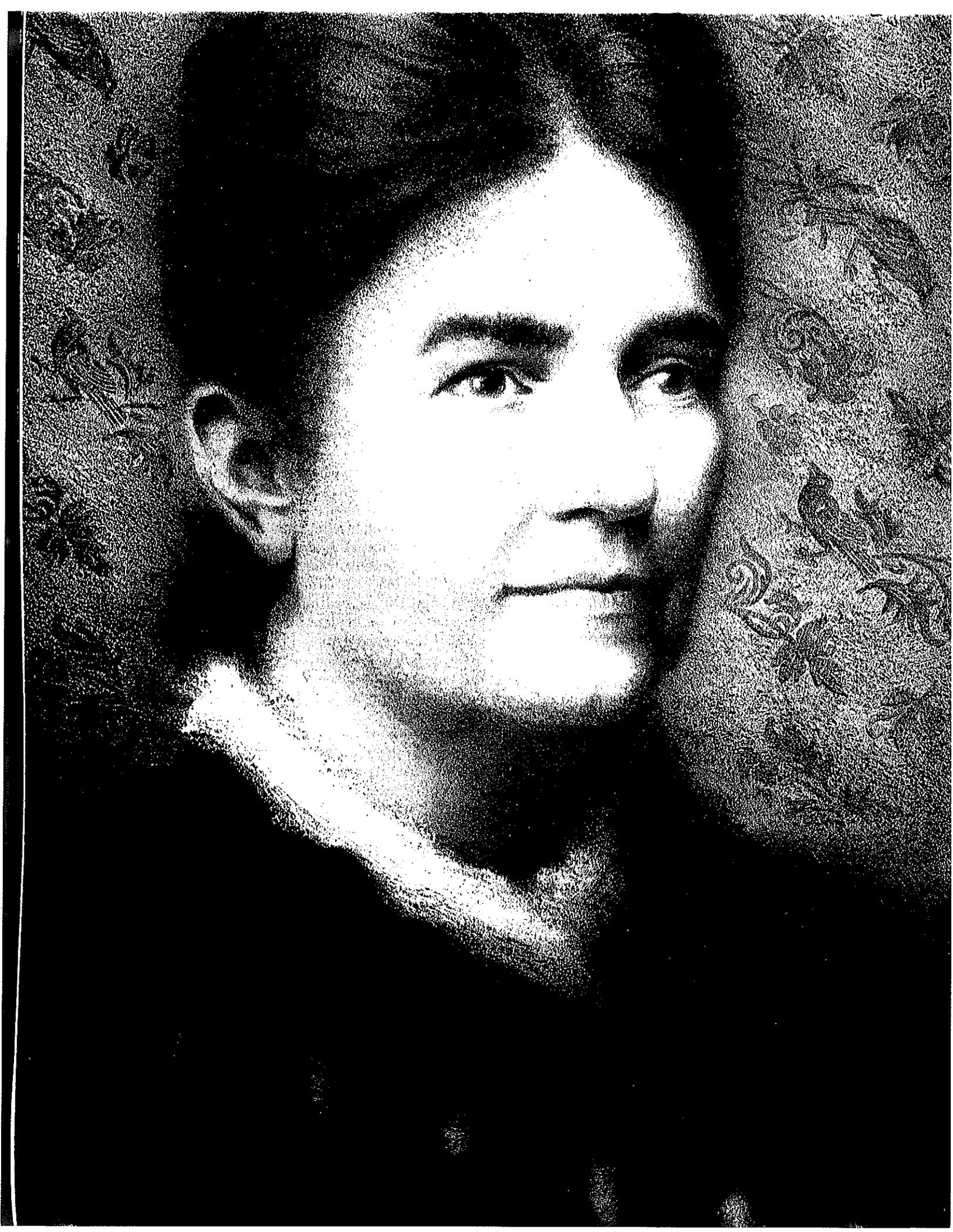
10
Theodore C. Steele: A Chronology
by Judith V. Newton

22
**Remembering Elwood and the
Wilkie Notification**
by Don W. Carlson

30
**Excerpt from Homer E. Capehart:
A Senator's Life, 1897-1979**
by William B. Pickett

32
**The House of the Interpreter:
Origins of the Lilly House Mural**
by J. Kent Calder

40
Gene Stratton-Porter: The Hum of Life
by Judith Reick Long



Gene Stratton-Porter

The Hum of Life

J U D I T H R E I C K L O N G

Born the youngest of twelve children on a farm in Wabash County in 1863, Gene Stratton spent much of her childhood roaming the woods and observing wildlife. In this chapter from *Gene Stratton-Porter: Novelist and Naturalist*, which will be published by the Society in September and distributed as a benefit to all members, young Gene and the rest of her family discover her innate affinity for the natural world.

By the time the twelfth and final blessing had been added to their household, the pioneer struggles of the Strattons had eased considerably. Twenty-five years had gone by since their immigration to the Wabash valley, and the forests had faded away. In keeping with Mark Stratton's most-used word, "tidy," his farm presented a neat appearance. A public highway now bisected his acreage, yet not a weed grew in any fence corner on either side of the road. Bridges spanned the creeks that ran the length of his land, and oak rail fences contained his bountiful fields. His wife's industry was equally in evidence. Close by the house a large vegetable garden flourished behind a screen of cinnamon pinks and hollyhocks.

A shining double carriage with side lamps and patent leather trimmings occupied space in the big red barn, also home to a pair of long-tailed matched grays. Nearby, a two-story house sat solidly on two-foot-square hewed hardwood beams. Inside, dainty paper graced the parlor walls, and baskets of flowers danced between bands of cream and green velvet. The parlor furniture, red cherry and black walnut, was covered with shiny black haircloth. In back of the parlor, off to one side of the kitchen, an ample pantry overflowed with barrels

of sugar, flour, and cornmeal. Two fireplaces in this farmhouse held backlogs big enough to burn for days, and throughout all of the rooms except the kitchen, soft paddings of wheat straw underlay bright carpets.

Out behind this comfortable dwelling stood a neat woodshed, although the most inviting picture there was the orchard in springtime, its fallen blossoms a big pale pink blanket with a border of deeper pink. In the corners of this orchard bloomed privet, catalpa, and sweet lilac. Among the many flowers surrounding her childhood home, there was one that the youngest Stratton was fondest of recalling. She remembered especially the intoxicating scent of the petals of a sweetbrier that spread its wide branches near a corner of the family's back porch. This fragrant rose was also her mother's favorite. Proud of the overall appearance of her home and its grounds, she considered it a privilege to have been born on such a well cared for farm: "No other farm was ever quite so lovely as the one on which I was born after this father and mother had spent twenty-five years beautifying it."

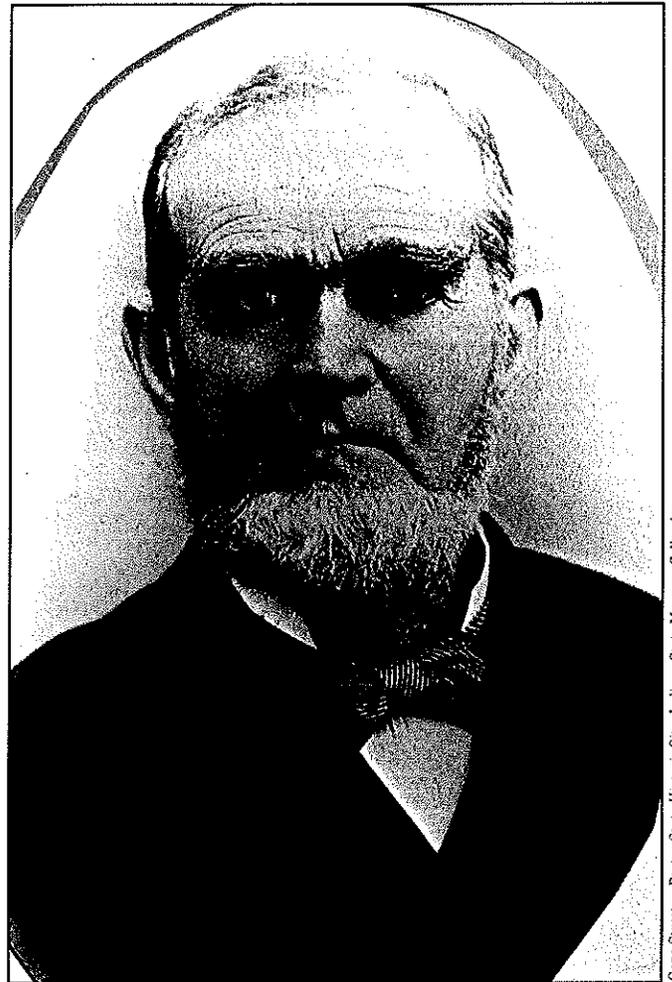
One of her earliest distinct memories concerned a bird. She was much perplexed one morning to find a woodpecker lying still in the grass. It had been shot by one of her brothers as it raided the fruit in the orchard. Determined to revive this creature, she first spread its wings and tossed it into the air. That failing, she launched it from a second-story window, but still it would not fly. Next she pried open its beak and stuffed it with green gooseberries. It was not until she asked her father what she could do to help the woodpecker fly that she heard, for the first time, the word *dead*. And when she heard it, immediately she sensed its import—not because of her father's explanation, however lucid that might have been, but because of her own unsuccessful resuscitative efforts. Much distressed, she tendered her father a business proposition: "If you will make the boys stop shooting woodpeckers, I will not eat another cherry. The birds may have all of mine." She said he agreed to this, but her mother declared that such a sacrifice was unnecessary. Mary Stratton commanded that the bird shooting stop, stating that there were enough cherries in the orchard for everyone in the family, as well as enough for the birds.



Mary Stratton's illness allowed Gene, the youngest Stratton, a great deal of freedom to explore her natural surroundings.

When Gene was only a toddler, her mother contracted typhoid fever, a disease from which she never fully recovered. This unstable physical condition may have been caused by an occasional sequel to typhoid fever known as typhoid spine, a stiff back accompanied by physical weakness and severe pains in the spine. Gene later had little use for any clinical explanation, however, preferring to attribute the vacillating state of her mother's health to sheer exhaustion, brought on by long years of pioneer drudgery.

When her mother took to her bed and her older sisters took over, Gene must have sensed that she was underfoot in the house because she took to the out-of-doors. Allowed to wander the farm unsupervised, she roamed at will, napping in fence corners while her father worked the fields nearby with his hired help and her brothers. She later described these preschool years: "By the day I trotted from one object which attracted me to another, singing a little song of made-up phrases about everything I saw while I waded catching fish, chasing butterflies over clover fields, or following a bird with a hair in its beak." Her daughter, Jeannette Porter Meehan, tells that she was given to understand that her mother "ran wild all day, and no questions were asked so long as she appeared on time for meals."



In 1848 Mark Stratton purchased the Wabash County farm on which Gene would be born and raised.

Gene's closest family relationship at this time was with her teenage brother Leander, whom she affectionately called Laddie, and whom she later wrote that she adored. No less strong than Gene's love for Laddie was his love for her. An ideal older brother, he was thoughtful and kind.

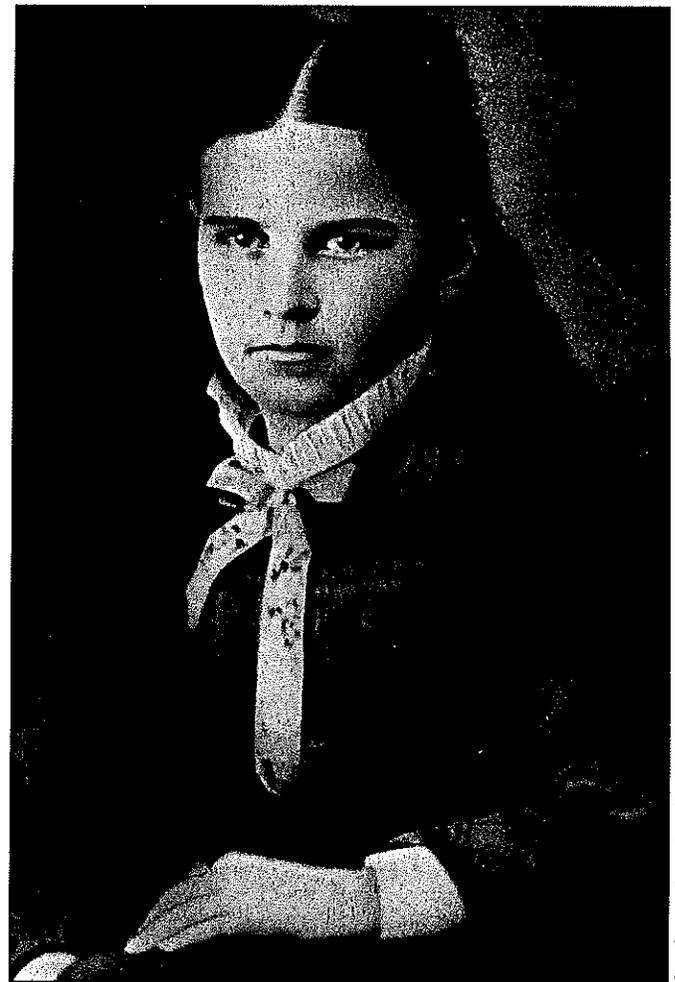
On the other hand, her adolescent brother Lemon, three years younger than Laddie, was considerably different. Although he looked angelic, Lemon was inclined to devilment. A little towhead, his mother sometimes called him "weiskopf." Lemon was undoubtedly the namesake of the Reverend Orange Lemon, the presiding elder who had appointed Mark Stratton a local preacher. The name of this divine, however, did not always fit. There were many times when it must have seemed to the Strattons that they should have named their son Demon instead of Lemon for he was more than ornery. Once, when he talked Gene into swinging on a sapling, she flew completely over the top of it and landed in the pigpen. Another time, he put a noose around his little sister's neck and pushed her off a barrel, having first explained to her that she should tell him when she was finished hanging, then he would replace the barrel. She was rescued in the nick of time by her father, who by chance was working close by in the barnyard. Lem-

An unusually energetic and alert child, she explored her surroundings with intense curiosity. And as she wandered, she looked up, as children do, not down, and thus it is no wonder that her attention soon came to be fixed on birdlife.

on's fiendish ideas met with more resistance from Ada who, at nearly Lemon's age, was old enough to take care of herself. Sometimes, buffered by the presence of Ada, Gene played "Indian" with her sister and her devilish brother. She also liked to go with them down to the nearby creek where all of them, especially Lemon, took great delight in pushing into the water the big black snakes that sunned themselves on the logs lining the creek.

Ordinarily, however, because of her mother's illness and the industry of the others in her family, the smallest Stratton played by herself. For companionship as she roamed the farm, she liked to cradle a doll made from an ear of corn and wrapped in the wide leaves of a catalpa. An unusually energetic and alert child, she explored her surroundings with intense curiosity. And as she wandered, she looked up, as children do, not down, and thus it is no wonder that her attention soon came to be fixed on birdlife. Heavy concentrations of birds—especially wild pigeons, which frequently darkened the sky in droves—were exceedingly common during the nineteenth century, a familiar sight to any farm child. Young Gene Stratton had more than the average child's spontaneous interest in the study of living things, however, and she liked to sit for long periods in a forked branch of a catalpa in the dooryard, watching the larks that undulated overhead in scattered flocks and the swallows that darted back and forth under the eaves of the barn. Up among the clouds she sometimes glimpsed the red-tailed hawk, a bird she would always envy because its freedom was even greater than her own: "I envied these birds their power to soar in the face of the wind, to ride with the stiff gale of a beating storm, or to hang motionless as if frozen in air, according to their will, as I envied nothing else on earth."

One day, while wandering the fields alone, she pushed through the tall grass of a meadow to its far side, on her way to play in a nearby brook. When she got there, she made an unexpected discovery. There, in a towering oak tree overhanging the brook, hung a bird nest bigger than a bushel basket. Observing it quietly for a few minutes, she soon learned that this huge nest was the home of a pair of red-tailed hawks. Immediately, she began to worry. She had heard her father state in no uncertain terms that the red-tailed hawk was a



Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site, Indiana State Museum Collection

Gene Stratton, age ten.

predator to be eliminated. Thus she told no one she had discovered a hawk nest, but instead returned to this site every day, to consign telltale rabbit and chicken skeletons to the current of the brook where they were quickly carried downstream.

Early one morning, while inspecting a robin's nest in the orchard, she heard the crack of a rifle. Looking up, she saw a large bird spinning to earth. She found it in the milk yard—a chicken hawk—one wing held out stiffly, its tip bleeding and broken. Standing over this injured bird, prepared to club it with his rifle, was her father. Automatically, she lunged. Her father whirled, the butt of his weapon narrowly missing her head.

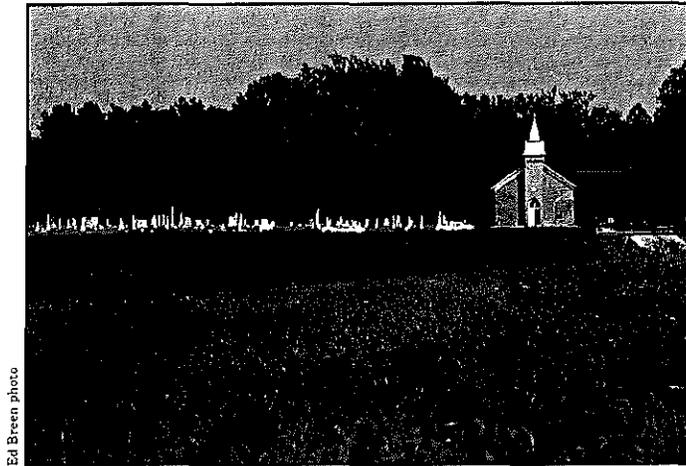
"Are you mad?" he shouted. "I barely missed brain-ing you!"

"I'd rather you did hit me than to have you strike a bird when its eyes are like that! Oh, Father, please don't kill him! He never can fly again. Give him to me! Do please give him to me!"

"Keep back! He will tear your face!"

"He won't! This bird knows me. He knows I would not hurt him. Oh, do please give him to me!"

Like others of his kind, this hawk was nearly two feet in length, with long curved talons. Nevertheless, with



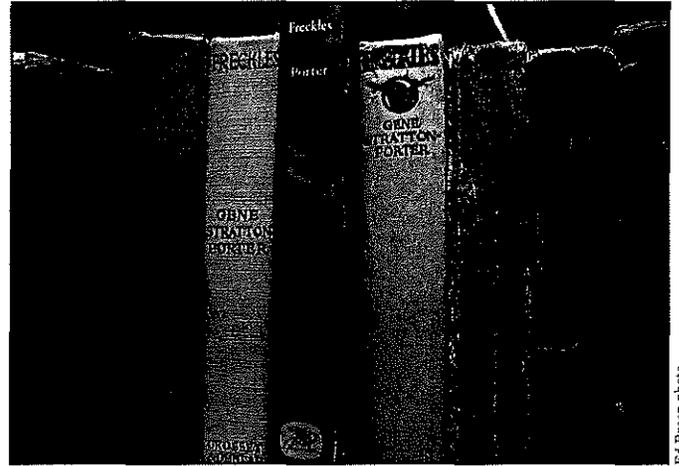
Ed Breen photo

Hopewell Church was built in 1872 on land donated by Mark Stratton. It is now a museum and community center devoted to the memory of Gene Stratton-Porter.

no fear, Gene laid her small hands on this bird to protect it. Her father fixed his piercing gaze on her in defeat: "God knows I do not understand you. Keep the bird, if you think you can!" and with that he stomped away. With the aid of her mother, who gave her a white powder to treat its injured wing, the hawk recovered and, much to the wonderment of her father, within a month began to follow Gene like a puppy and would eat from her fingers.

This display of sympathy for a wild bird was nothing compared with what happened next, a behavioral manifestation so peculiar that her father was moved to consult the family doctor. He could not believe it when his youngest said that she could detect sounds that were to him, and to others in the family, inaudible. Much to Gene's pleasure, on her daily perambulations over the farm she had begun to sense a force usually undetectable by mankind—an irregular outdoor rhythm, an audible current. As a child, she did not know she was experiencing anything out of the ordinary. She felt this rhythm, more than heard it. Yet she heard it too. She liked to play with this invisible force, much as other children play with tangible objects. Often she climbed to the second story of the barn and there, on a beam, as on the keys of a piano, beat out the rhythm of force and sound that she felt and heard around her. These special rhythms that she sensed as a child were reinforced by various other sounds on the farm. When sent to gather chips for the fireplace, she said she heard music as her brothers cut great ricks of wood.

Because of this behavior, Mark Stratton knew that his youngest was different from his first eleven children. Lacking precedent, he consulted the family doctor. The doctor, who knew the family well, gave Mark Stratton an apt explanation why Gene preferred the out-of-doors, inasmuch as she was being reared there almost exclusively. However, he could not medically explain her unusual extrasensory notions, nor did he know how to effect a cure for such strange deportment.



Ed Breen photo

The books of Gene Stratton-Porter sold at a rate of 1,700 copies a day from 1907 to 1924, the year she died.

Perplexed and concerned, Mark Stratton was left to devise his own solution. An experienced parent, he must have known he could not divest his child of her peculiar belief in natural rhythms, nor could he change what seemed to be an overly protective attitude toward birdlife. Thus he did what must have seemed to him the next best thing. As might be expected, he called upon religion to respond to this child of nature. He gave her a special gift, a gift from the Creator. Formally, as if he were presenting the keys to God's kingdom, he endowed his daughter with all of the birds that made their homes on his land as her own personal property. Yet, even as he was elaborating on his wondrous gift, she scarcely heard him:

Even while he was talking to me I was making a flashing mental inventory of *my property*, for now I owned the hummingbirds, dressed in green satin with ruby jewels on their throats; the plucky little brown wren that sang by the hour to his mate from the top of the pump, even in a hard rain; the green warbler, nesting in . . . wild sweetbrier beside the back porch; and the song sparrow in the ground cedar beside the fence. The bluebirds, with their breasts of earth's brown and their backs of Heaven's deepest blue; the robin, the rain song of which my father loved more than the notes of any other bird, belonged to me. The flaming cardinal and his Quaker mate, keeping house on a flat limb within ten feet of our front door, were mine; and every bird of the black silk throng that lived in the top branches of four big evergreens in front of our home was mine. The oriole, spilling notes of molten sweetness, as it shot like a ray of detached sunshine to its nest in the chestnut tree across the road was mine.

With her father's sanctified gift of all the birds on his farm, Gene's morning rounds to inspect their nests quickly became ritualized. Selecting sixty-four of them for daily observation, she chased away cats, red squirrels, and snakes. Tiptoeing carefully among the nests, first she observed what a mother bird chose to feed her young. Then, stuffing half her breakfast in her apron



Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site, Indiana State Museum Collection. Ed Breen photo

Fireplace in Gene Stratton-Porter's "Cabin in Wildflower Woods," where the author lived from 1914 to 1919. Now the Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site, the property is part of the Indiana State Museum system.

pocket, she scoured the farm for more food: insects for her wrens; grubs and worms for her red-winged blackbirds; caterpillars for her tanagers; and bugs for her robins in summer, berries in the fall. When she needed grain, she robbed the bins in the barn.

One particular bluejay, a type of bird curious by nature, began to follow her on her daily rounds. Delighted, she plied him with food. Before long she had earned his constant companionship. She named him Hezekiah and taught him to roll cherries across the floor on command. Then her oldest brothers, Jerome and Irvin, gave her another pet, a bantam rooster. She named this one Bobbie and taught him to crow on cue for "Amen!" when she imitated church services out in the orchard.

This almost total preoccupation with birdlife necessarily came to a seasonable end when her personal properties flew south for the winter. Still, insofar as the youngest Stratton was concerned, wintertime on the farm had its compensations. When the snow was crunchy, she liked to play on a hill next to the orchard, coasting across the frozen cowslip bed on a meat board. And wintertime meant family togetherness. When the sun began to set behind the big woods every night before five o'clock, as the youngest she always had the seat of honor on her father's lap after dinner:

Every winter night of my memory, up to the time that I was big enough to go to school and to take my place at the table with my slate and pencil, I went to sleep in my father's lap. When I was ready for bed, I would unbutton his vest, curl up on his breast and pull his coat around me, between him and the book or paper he was reading. And except when he had to turn a leaf or a sheet, my feet were in the care of his big, strong right hand, held there, . . . chafed lovingly, given little tender grips and touches, to reassure me of his love and care. My left arm used to creep up around his neck, and play with his hair and in his beard, and stroke his cheek in response, and it never bothered him.

Snuggled against her father's chest, she loved to listen as he read aloud with emphasis and gusto. One of his electrifying deliveries—the tale of John Maynard who steered his burning boat while he slowly roasted at the wheel—always caused her to sit up straight. Another story she liked to hear was from Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd's tragedy, *Ion* (1835), that of Clemanthe and her lover's immortal answer to the question, "Shall we meet again?" According to her, "I am convinced my father could equal a great actor in reciting that, for he believed in and loved that answer, and his heart thrilled to its depths when he repeated it."



Gene Stratton, age sixteen.



As an adult, Gene Stratton-Porter pioneered in the field of wildlife photography.

As the one in the family with the most imagination, Gene thrived on her father's recitations. With the natural receptivity of a child to meter, she liked to entertain her family in turn by dramatizing children's rhymes, acting and chanting with all the inflection she could muster. Soon she began to compose her own stories and poems:

I cannot remember the time when I was not tugging at my mother's apron, begging her to "set down" things which I thought were stories and poems. I was literally pushed and driven, so that I found an outlet by slipping away alone, to recite these efforts from improvised platforms on the fences, trees, and in the barn loft, or by delivering impromptu orations on almost every feature of our daily life. In this, I found unspeakable delight.

Her customary platform was in the orchard, atop two wide boards slipped between the rails of a fence corner. Designed to shelter a brooding turkey hen, these boards boosted her to a view of the meadow below, the adjoining wood pasture, and the fields across the lane. From this elevation, in imitation of her father, she recited poetry. To the best of her ability, she delivered selections from such works as "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "The Prisoner of Chillon," and "Genevieve" before she was six years old.

Formally, as if he were presenting the keys to God's kingdom, he endowed his daughter with all of the birds that made their homes on his land as her own personal property.

Many years later several of her acquaintances would complain that they could not understand a new book of poetry, *The American Rhythm*, written by a mystic named Mary Austin. As a small child Austin had a profound reverence for the out-of-doors. She said that she talked to God under a walnut tree when she was five years old. Unlike her friends, Gene Stratton-Porter had no such difficulty understanding: "It was about the life we lead in this great land of ours—the song of the axe stroke, the sweep of the scythe, the hum of life where it strikes in measured rhythm that I have heard all of my life."

Judith Reick Long was an antiquarian book dealer who spent the last thirty-five years of her life studying the life and collecting the works of Gene Stratton-Porter. Long completed her book-length biography shortly before her death.

From *Strike at Shane's*

Gene Stratton-Porter's First Novel

Although students of Indiana literature have long taken it for granted that Gene Stratton-Porter's first article appeared in 1900 and that her first novel, Song of the Cardinal, was published in 1903, biographer Judith Long attributes a new novel to Porter that precedes the latter by nearly a decade. Published anonymously by the American Humane Education Society of Boston, the same organization that originally published Black Beauty, The Strike at Shane's depicts a late-nineteenth-century Indiana farm where the animals decide to go on strike because of mistreatment by cruel and greedy farmer Shane.

The meeting having re-assembled, Dobbin called for suggestions as to the proper remedy for their misfortunes, and the proper course to pursue. All were silent but *Bay Dick*, who was in favor of kicking everything to pieces on the farm, and to show how it was to be done he wheeled around and kicked the top rail off the fence.

"If you will allow me to make a suggestion," said the mule, "perhaps I could give you some ideas on this subject."

"We will hear what you have to say," said Dobbin.

"I have been in the service of the street car company for several years," said the mule, "and I know when the street car drivers got dissatisfied with their wages they went on a strike. That is, they quit work until their difficulties were fixed up in some way, and they got what they wanted. I know we mules had an easy time of it while the strike lasted.

Now, why couldn't you all go out on a strike and refuse to work until you get better treatment?"

"That would probably result in more blows and worse treatment instead of better," said Dobbin.

"No," said the mule, "if farmer Shane had to do without you for a while he would perhaps begin to appreciate your services and would come to his senses and treat you better."

After some further discussion this plan grew in favor and was adopted, and the mule which had been in the street car strike gave them full instructions how to proceed.

"I'll not do another day's work," said Dick, "and I'll kick everything to pieces they hitch me to."

"Hold on there," said the mule, "no violence to persons or property. That was the rule in the street car strike. Just quit work and let farmer Shane get along the best he can."

"That's right," said Dobbin, "no violence in this strike."

"Well, I'll do the best I can to keep cool," said Dick, "but they mustn't push me too far."

"Now, we will hear from each member as to the course they intend to pursue," said Dobbin. . . .

"I will not kill another rat or mouse on the farm, if they eat up all the grain," said Puss.

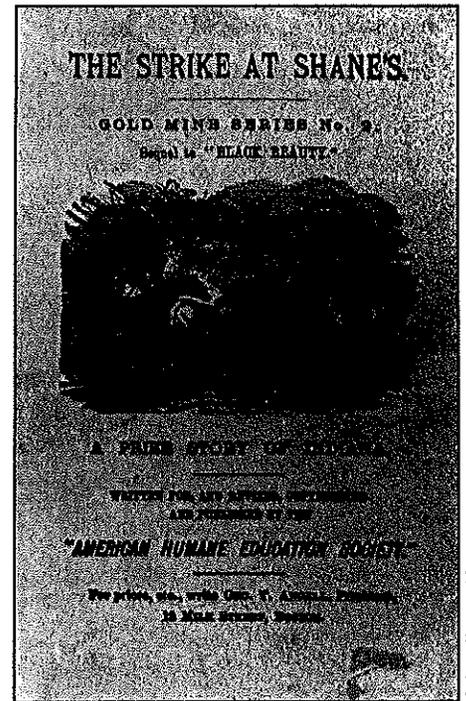
"Thank you for that," said a big rat, that came up out of a fence corner, where he had been hiding and listening.

"I want you to understand that it is not out of any consideration or respect I have for you that I made that statement," said Puss, and she walked over towards the rat, who immediately dropped back into his hole.

"Quite right and proper," said Dobbin; "we want no such characters in this convention."

The snake and toad said they would move over to the next farm.

"I shall move off the farm just as soon as my mate gets well of a wound received the other day from Shane's gun," said the quail, "and I promise you that



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no quail shall come on this farm this summer."

"I have a grievance against farmer Shane myself," said a hawk, that had perched unseen on the top of the oak, "and I will agree to kill all the chickens on the farm."

"Put him out! put him out!" screamed the hen; and the other birds quickly sought cover.

"I'll fix him," said the kingbird, and he made a quick dash at the hawk, and struck him in the back with his sharp beak.

"I'll help," said the crow; and between them they soon drove the hawk away.

"I spend almost the whole of my time catching worms and bugs," chirped the robin. "It is true, that is the way I make my living, but those worms would destroy many dollars' worth of crops. Last summer almost my whole family was killed by Shane because we took a few cherries, and I promise you there shall not a robin remain on the farm nor catch a worm on it this summer."

So said all the birds; and it was then and there arranged that there should be a general emigration of birds from the Shane farm.