

Slimy Swamps, Slithering Snakes, and Springing Spiders:

Gene Stratton-Porter, Indiana author, amateur naturalist, feminist, and conservationist

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November 20, 2023

The Formative Years in Wabash County Indiana (birth to age 23)

Geneva Grace Stratton was born on August 17, 1863, in Lagro, Wabash County, Indiana. Her father, Mark Stratton (September 27, 1812 to January 10, 1890), was born in New Jersey, moved to Ohio, and finally located to their family farm in Lagro. He was a farmer and minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Hopewell. Her mother, Mary Shallenberger (March 11, 1816, to February 3, 1875), was born in Pennsylvania and married on December 24, 1835.

Geneva was the last born of twelve children when her mother was age 47. Her siblings included Catherine, Mary Ann, Anastasia, Florence, Ada, Jerome, Irvin, Leander or Laddie, Lemon, Samira, and Louisa Jane. Her mother was worn out and sickly from typhoid fever after birthing twelve children, so Gene was on her own and had the run of the family farm and woods.

Gene became fascinated with birdlife on the farm. Her father and brothers liked to shoot woodpeckers who were eating cherries out of their cherry orchard. Gene became so distressed that her father eventually forbade these activities after she tried to revive a dead woodpecker. Once her father shot a hawk and severely injured its wing. Gene treated it and it became her favorite pet. She was so distressed at her father's action that he eventually deeded all the birds on the farm to Gene. She had a pet blue jay named Hezekiah and a pet rooster Bobbie who had the run of the family's kitchen. She taught Bobbie to crow on the cue of "Amen" when she held church services in the farm orchard. Gene's bird activities eventually earned her the moniker "little birdwoman."

As a child she had a strict religious upbringing owing to her father being a minister. As an adult, however, although she believed in God, she remarked that "I am a member of no church, save the Big Cathedral of the Woods."

Gene's favorite sibling was her brother Leander or Laddie, but he died tragically when Gene was almost nine when he tried to swim across the Wabash River on a dare from friends. Her older brother Irwin, a Wabash College Student, tried to teach Gene, a toddler, her A, B, Cs, but she was a reluctant pupil and constantly squirmed out of his reach.

When she reached school age, she was enrolled in the Lagro school system, but she hated school. Her most successful teacher was her father who nightly drilled his children on the McGuffey Reader and their other lessons.

Gene took music lessons on the banjo, violin, and piano. She also took private painting lessons. During her adulthood Gene was an accomplished musician and painter.

As Gene's older siblings grew up, married, and left home, her father could no longer manage the farm alone, so when Gene was age 11 the family moved to Wabash, Indiana where she attended school. Not surprisingly, and at her firm insistence, all of her pet birds went with her. About a year after the move her mother died. Gene eventually dropped out of Wabash High School at age 20, just three months shy of her graduation.

Just shy of 18 years old, Gene wanted to broaden her horizons, and attended her first Chautauqua, an educational conference, at Sylvan Lake about seventy miles northeast of Wabash. She attended again several years later in 1884. An older man, Charles Dorwin Porter, spied her as she was walking around the grounds of the Chautauqua assembly. He liked what he saw, and, in order to maintain propriety, garnered her address from another assembly goer, and wrote her a letter introducing himself as a drugstore owner in Geneva, Indiana. Not a bit shy, Gene answered the letter and expressed an interest in continuing the correspondence. After a ten-month correspondence, they met, and in October 1885 they became engaged. It was during their courtship that Geneva Grace shortened her name to Gene. They eventually married on April 21, 1886, and moved to his childhood home in Decatur, Indiana where he had one of his drugstores.

The Limberlost Years in Geneva (1888-1913)

On August 27, 1887, Gene and her husband Charles welcomed their only child, a daughter, Jeanette.

Gene intensely disliked their home in Decatur and eventually convinced her husband Charles to move to Geneva, Indiana in the spring of 1888 where another of his drugstores was situated. In 1892 Charles founded the Geneva Bank. The Limberlost cabin, which is now an Indiana State Historic Site was built in 1895 and was financed the profits from Charles' 60 oil wells and other business interests including his drug stores, farms, hotel, and restaurant.

In 1893 Gene published her first book anonymously, *The strike at Shane's*. It was published by the American Humane Education Society as part of a contest. Stratton-Porter won first place in this contest and the prize was \$200. The novel is intensely autobiographical, and the main characters are her family of origin in which the father and one son shoot birds which inhabit their cherry orchard. Shane, the farmer, is a skinflint much like Gene's father Mark. Eventually the birds and farm animals hold a

convention in which they agree to go on a strike until the farmer and son agree to mend their ways. I cannot help but think that this is where George Orwell got his idea of a strike in his famous novel *Animal Farm* published over fifty years later in 1945.

Where did the term Limberlost Swamp come from? A young hunter, Limber Jim, had wandered in the swamp for three days until he found his way back to civilization. The swampland consists of 13,000 acres in Jay and Allen Counties.

Five months after Gene and Charles moved into their Limberlost cabin a nighttime fire destroyed the downtown area of Geneva just blocks away. Gene rushed in her nightclothes to help put out the fire. Charles' drugstore was destroyed. He not only rebuilt his drugstore but built and chartered a bank. Not long afterwards Gene began to write in earnest and began to submit articles to different magazines. In order to illustrate her articles she began taking pictures of birds with a box camera that she received from daughter Jeanette for Christmas. Later she acquired more expensive cameras and began developing her own film.

Gene photographed birds in the Limberlost Swamp and various neighbors' farm fields, along the Wabash River. On some of her forays into the swamp Charles accompanied her. At other times her daughter Jeanette, whom she had nicknamed Molly-Cotton, became her constant companion and helper. Soon townspeople began to gossip about this strangely attired woman and called her "birdwoman." While waiting sometimes for days on end for birds to warm up to her so that she could photograph the perfect pose, Gene developed an interest in moths and began to photograph them.

Much of Gene's early writing was for various magazines including *Recreation*, *Outing*, *Metropolitan*, and the *Ladies Home Journal*. Later she wrote monthly columns for *McCall's*. Her articles were richly illustrated by her pictures of birds as she loathed John James Audubon's paintings because he killed and dissected his subjects before painting them. In order to capture photos of her subjects Gene might spend a week gaining their trust in the forests and swamps around the Limberlost Swamp.

Gene's writing gained her financial independence from husband Charles. After the death of her brother Lemon she supported and reared his adolescent daughter. She also supported Jeanette after her first marriage and supported sisters Ada and Florence as they aged. Over the years Gene Stratton Porter wrote thirteen novels, eight nature studies and numerous poems and essays. Initially she hoped to alternate her novels with books on nature. Her novels were far more popular than her nature studies, however, although harsh critics panned her novels as containing too much nature and sappy romance.

Two of her novels, *Freckles* and *A girl of the Limberlost* prominently featured the Limberlost Swamp close to where Gene and Charles lived. In fact, Gene makes a cameo appearance as the "birdwoman" in *Freckles*, a one-armed security guard whose

fascination with nature and birds mirrors Gene's. *A girl of the Limberlost* is a romance novel based on hope and redemption. In this novel the "birdwoman" is actually Gene Stratton-Porter herself. The main character, Elnora Comstock, a poor country girl, is courted by Philip Ammon, a young man from the upper class of Chicago society. In my opinion this romance is upstaged by the relationship between Elnora and her mother, Mrs. Comstock, who is an embittered woman who blames her daughter for the death of her husband in the Limberlost Swamp as he was hurrying home to be with his wife who was about to give birth to Elnora.

Two of Gene's nature studies *What I have done with birds* and *Moths of the Limberlost* are based on Gene's field studies of birds and moths in the Limberlost Swamp. While collecting and photographing moths for *Moths of the Limberlost* Gene might get only two hours of sleep a night by staying up late and awakening to capture moths emerging from their cocoons, drying their wings, and preparing to fly.

The last novel written during her period in the Limberlost cabin is *Laddie: A true blue story*. In this intensely autobiographical novel Stratton-Porter depicts her brother Lemon as Leon who saves his family from an extremely long church service by reciting zingers towards members of his congregation and even family members. It appears that in this book Gene pokes fun at ministers and organized religion.

On February 6, 1909, daughter Jeanette married G. Blaine Monroe, an oilman from Pennsylvania. Gene had significant reservations about this marriage which was to end in divorce in 1920 due to Blaine's alcohol abuse.

The Wildflower Woods Years (1913- 1919)

Her spirits buoyed by the sale of her first few novels and nature studies, Gene achieved financial independence. Her writing was often interrupted by well-wishers who dropped by to chat. Her forays into the Limberlost became fewer and fewer because of the drainage of the swamp for farming, logging, and oil extraction, so she began to dream of having more solitude and a secure place to write. Gene hatched the idea of moving to Sylvan Lake, near Rome City, which was still more pristine and private. She could write privately and Charles could come up from Geneva on weekends and visit. The home in Wildflower Woods was born and financed entirely by Gene.

In preparing her newly purchased property Stratton-Porter had the woods cleared by workers and over several years planted by herself 90% of 14,000 trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. This house in Wildflower Woods, or Limberlost North, was designed and entirely financed by Gene. Her home even contained a darkroom designed by Gene.

In 1916 brother Lemon died. Subsequently, Gene assumed guardianship of Lemon's daughter Leah Mary who came to live with Gene for several years.

In 1917 the United States entered WWI. Gene lost her chauffeur and chief employee, Bill Thompson, who enlisted in the war effort, leaving Gene to manage Wildflower Woods on her own. This added responsibility along with her heavy schedule of writing exhausted Gene.

In 1917 Stratton-Porter urged the Indiana State Legislature to save the Limberlost swamp and wetlands. Although Indiana has been lukewarm to wetland preservation, segments of the Limberlost Swamp have been reclaimed and restored.

Gene was so exhausted that she entered Clifton Springs Sanitarium and Clinic in New York during the fall of 1918. When she returned from New York Gene resumed her heavy schedule of planting the grounds of Wildflower Woods and writing.

Unfortunately, her heavy schedule and the imposition of tourists and well-wishers took a toll on Gene. Subsequently, Gene decided to depart Indiana for the sunny climes of southern California where several relatives had already located.

The California Years: 1919-1925

In the fall of 1919 Gene moved to Los Angeles, California and bought a bungalow near her sister Catherine. Charles did not move with her, sold their home in Geneva, and lived in a boarding house. He began wintering with a friend in Daytona Beach, Florida. In 1920 Gene returned to Indiana to be with her daughter Jeanette who was divorcing her first husband Blain. Subsequently Gene, Jeanette, and her children returned to California where Gene bought a larger home.

Gene continued to write and wrote a column for *McCall's Magazine*. In one column she extolled the joys of housewifery. Subsequently she began to write poetry.

In 1922 Gene returned to Indiana to visit Wildflower Woods. She was horrified to find that people had been trespassing on her property and trampling her flowers. In 1923 she offered the property to the state of Indiana, but never got a response. It wasn't until 1946 that the Gene Stratton-Porter Association donated the property to Indiana.

In 1923 her daughter Jeanette married James Meehan, a Hollywood film producer. Subsequently Gene rewrote her will to give her entire estate to her daughter since she was now married to a stable individual.

During her time in California some of her books had been made into silent movies. Eventually Gene, with the help of her son-in-law Mr. Meehan, began producing films herself.

Now a permanent California resident Gene began to settle her roots there and constructed a 14-room home called Singing Water on Catalina Island in 1924. She also began to construct a grand home containing 14,000 square feet of living area in Bel Air, now a part of Beverly Hills.

Gene never got to live in her Bel Air home, however. She died on December 6, 1924, after her chauffer-driven car was struck by a streetcar. Initially she was buried in California, but many years later her grandchildren had her disinterred and reburied with her now deceased daughter Jeanette in Wildflower Woods, near Rome City, Indiana. Charles died a little over a year later in 1926.

Accomplishments of Gene Stratton-Porter

Over her lifetime Gene Stratton-Porter wrote twenty-six books including twelve novels, eight nature studies, two books on poetry, four collections of children's stories, and innumerable magazine articles. Her novels have been translated into over twenty different languages. Eight of her novels have been made into movies.

In addition to being an author and feminist, Gene Stratton-Porter was primarily a naturalist and conservationist. Her books on moths and birds were without peer at the time of their publication. Her writings are mostly responsible for the restoration of the Limberlost Swamp in Indiana.

A crowning achievement, two of Stratton-Porter's homes in Indiana have been made into state historic sites administered by the Indiana State Museum.

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