

# The Indiana

*A Magazine Exploring Indiana History*

# Historian



“My seven-passenger automobile I transformed into a dray. A big, ten-bushel store box filled the tonneau. There were long boxes for each of the running boards and frequently I threw coffee sacking over the engine hood and loaded it with swamp mosses and bulbous plants, with pitcher plant and rosemary, as high as I could stack it and allow space for the driver to see over”

*(Tales You Won't Believe, 175).*

## *Gene Stratton-Porter*

# Focus

## A note on names

Gene Stratton-Porter was born Geneva Grace Stratton. She published as Gene Stratton-Porter, but she referred to herself, and was most frequently referred to, as Mrs. Porter. We use Gene Stratton-Porter and Mrs. Porter in our text. We use Gene in the timeline. Quotations and titles contain original spelling.

Mrs. Porter built two Limberlost Cabins. The first in Geneva is now Limberlost State Historic Site. The second on Sylvan Lake, Rome City, was part of a property she named Wildflower Woods. The Rome City home is now Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site.

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*The Indiana Historian* provides resources and models for the study of local history to encourage Indiana's citizens of all ages to become engaged with the history of their communities and the state of Indiana.

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Gene Stratton-Porter was a woman of contrasts, contradictions, and strong emotions. Living at a time when women generally stayed at home, she was a self-trained writer, naturalist, and photographer. She wrote to her future husband strongly condemning confining marriages, yet expressed pride in her family roles and later provided for her extended family. She became very rich through hard work; she spent that money to achieve her dreams and was generous to others. Millions of copies of her novels were sold, but critics did not take them seriously.

Mrs. Porter's writings made her a very public person, but she regretted her loss of privacy. She expressed enormous confidence in her own abilities and purposes, but she expressed also her fear of failure. She was untiring in her efforts to observe and document nature, but the scientific community ignored her.

She wanted to be independent—intellectually and physically—and determined that writing was the means to assure both. Essential to that independence was her relationship to the natural settings where she lived. She also had a strong desire to instill her love of nature in others in order to improve their lives and preserve the natural world.

This issue of *The Indiana Historian* provides only a brief introduction to Gene Stratton-Porter, generally using her own words. The timeline throughout the issue provides the broader context of her life and times.

We hope that our readers will delve deeper into Mrs. Porter's work, which is her legacy to Indiana and the world.

Limberlost State Historic Site, Geneva, and Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site, Rome City, memorialize her life and accomplishments in Indiana.

## You be the historian

Gene Stratton-Porter's major work (discussed later in this issue) focused on plants and wildlife of the Limberlost Swamp. Swamps and other lands saturated with water are now generally called wetlands.

Pending release of the Indiana Wetlands Conservation Plan in July, 1996, the Indianapolis *Star*, July 7, editorialized: "It's hard to believe Indiana ever contained the kind of swampland described . . . [by Gene Stratton-Porter], but it did. Today, only 750,000 acres of wetlands remain, compared to 5.6 million acres at the time of pioneer settlement."

Most of those wetlands were drained for agricultural uses. Historian Clifton J. Phillips notes, "By December, 1919, Indiana had the largest percentage of farms under drainage in the nation" (*Indiana in Transition* [Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau and Indiana Historical Society, 1968], 134).

There has been recognition of the value of wetlands to the environment—a concept emphatically expressed by Gene Stratton-Porter—prompting initiatives, such as the plan of the State of Indiana.

- Research the history of wetlands in Indiana. Explore your own area and map where there have been and are wetlands.
- Explore the value of wetlands to the environment.
- Interview environmental, agricultural, and business interests on the current issues regarding wetlands conservation.
- Hold a formal debate on wetlands using historical and current issues.

# Gene Stratton-Porter's writing

According to one modern scholar, Bertrand F. Richards, "Gene Stratton Porter was one of the best-selling writers of the first quarter of the twentieth century" (123).

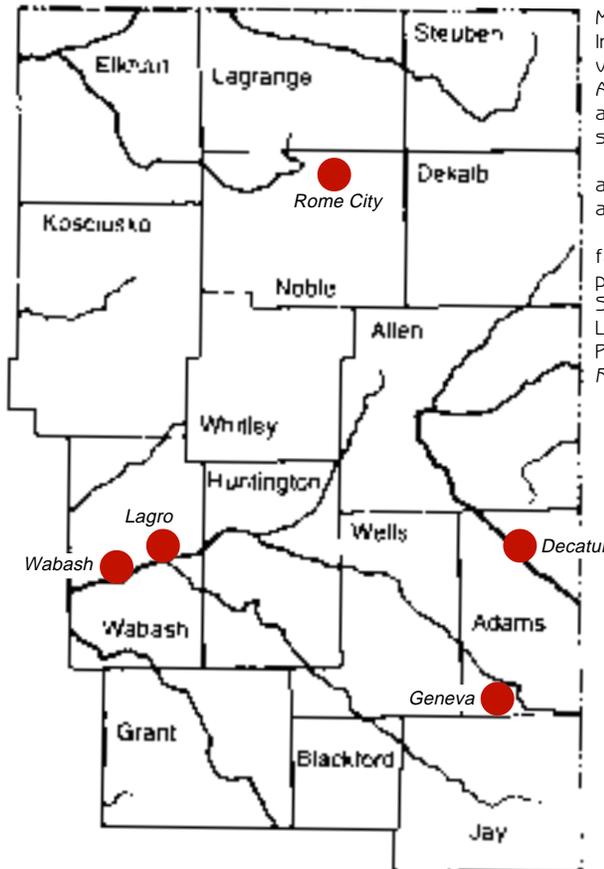
This great success at writing enabled Mrs. Porter to fulfill her goals: independence, living with and studying nature as she wished, and persuading the public to care about nature. She was able to write her way:

... my books have proved my publishers wrong in the beginning when they said my stuff never would sell enough to pay for publishing it. . . . My formula for a book was damned by three of our foremost publishers in the beginning, and I never have changed it a particle. . . .

What my work proves for me that I have done was to lay out a straight course in the beginning, starting with a nature book and alternating with nature novels . . . keeping to the same location and to people I know and to ideals I cherish (quoted in Meehan, 309).

Richards, having examined Mrs. Porter on her own terms and in the context of her time, agreed that she achieved her goals:

Her observations were true, and her pictures—both photographic and word—are authentic. . . . she was able to write interestingly of nature with scientific accuracy

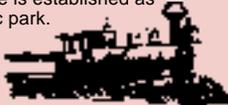


Mrs. Porter lived in northeastern Indiana for most of her life at the various locations noted on this map. At Rome City is Sylvan Lake, alongside which Mrs. Porter built her second Limberlost Cabin.

Limberlost Swamp included approximately 13,000 acres of Jay and Adams counties.

On May 29, 1996, 188 acres of farmland were reflooded to restore part of the original Limberlost Swamp; it will be part of the Geneva Limberlost State Historic Site. Portland (Indiana) *The Commercial Review*, May 29, 1996.

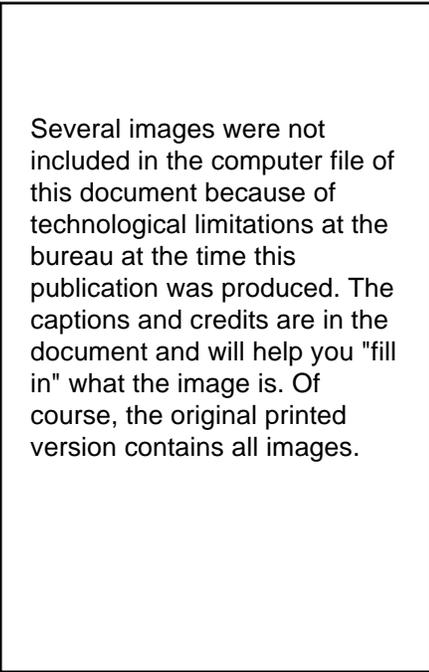
although not in scientific jargon. What she wrote, the average American layman could read and understand. But even more importantly, and much more in accord with her intent, readers might be led from the perusal of any of her books directly into the great outdoors itself to see, to appreciate, and to learn to love nature firsthand (Richards, 140-41).

Stratton-Porter Timeline	<p><b>December 24</b> Mark Stratton and Mary Shallenberger marry in Ohio.</p> <p><b>1835</b></p>	<p><b>June</b> Strattons move to Wabash County, Indiana.</p> <p><b>1838</b></p>	<p>Strattons move to a farm near Lagro, Wabash County.</p> <p><b>1848</b></p>	<p><b>August 17</b> Geneva Grace (Gene Stratton-Porter), the twelfth and last child, is born.</p> <p><b>1863</b></p>		<p><b>February</b> sister Mary Ann dies in accident.</p> <p><b>1872</b></p>	<p><b>July 6</b> beloved brother Leander (Laddie) drowns in Wabash River.</p> <p><b>1872</b></p>	<p>Stratton family leases farm and moves to Wabash, Indiana.</p> <p><b>1874</b></p>
Other Events in History				<p><b>1863</b> November 19 President Lincoln delivers Gettysburg Address in the cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.</p>	<p><b>1869</b> May 10 first transcontinental railroad in the U.S. is completed at Promontory Point, Utah.</p>	<p><b>1872</b> Yellowstone National Park Reserve is established as a public park.</p> 		

*Illustrations on the timeline are from popular magazines contemporary to the time.*

# "a little bird woman"

Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites Division, Department of Natural Resources.



Several images were not included in the computer file of this document because of technological limitations at the bureau at the time this publication was produced. The captions and credits are in the document and will help you "fill in" what the image is. Of course, the original printed version contains all images.

Gene Stratton-Porter, age 10.

Gene Stratton-Porter's passion for nature began very early. She related in *Homing with the Birds* that she was just a small child, nursing a chicken hawk, when her mother remarked to her, "What a little bird woman you are!" (18) It was true.

She was fascinated by the birds that lived on her father's

farm near Lagro, Wabash County. She wrote, in *What I Have Done with Birds*,

In one season, when under ten years of age, I located sixty nests, and I dropped food into the open beaks in every one of them. Soon the old birds became so accustomed to me, and so convinced of my good intentions, that they would alight on my head and shoulders in a last hop to reach their nests with the food they had brought. Playing with the birds was my idea of fun. Pets were my sort of dolls. It did not occur to me that I was learning anything that would be of use in after years; now comes the realization that knowledge acquired for myself in those days is drawn upon every time I approach the home of a bird (6).

Her father was aware of her great love for birds. In *Homing with the Birds*, Mrs. Porter revealed to her readers his very special gift:

He then proceeded formally to present me with the personal and indisputable ownership of each bird of every description that made its home on his land. . . . In that hour I was almost dazed with the wonder and the marvel of my gift, and to-day, after a lifetime of experience among the birds, this

gift seems even more wonderful than it did then (21, 24).

Mrs. Porter developed a unique philosophy of bird study, demonstrating her love and respect for nature; she explained it in *What I Have Done with Birds*:

This is the basis of all my field work,—a mute contract between woman and bird. In spirit I say to the birds, "Trust me and I will do by you as I would be done by. Your nest and young shall be touched as I would wish some giant, surpassing my size and strength as I surpass yours, to touch my cradle and baby. I shall not tear down your home and break your eggs or take your naked little ones from the nest before they are ready to go, and leave them to die miserably. I shall come in colors to which you are accustomed, and move slowly and softly about, not approaching you too near until your confidence in me is established. I shall be most careful to feed your young what you feed them; drive away snakes and squirrels, and protect you in every way possible to me. Trust me, and go on with your daily life. For what small disturbance is unavoidable among you, forgive me, and through it I shall try to win thousands to love and shield you" (2).

Stratton-Porter Timeline	<p><b>February 3</b> Gene's mother dies.</p> <p><b>1875</b></p>	<p>Gene attends her first Island Park Assembly chautauqua on Sylvan Lake near Rome City.</p> <p><b>1881</b></p>	<p>Gene attends her second Island Park Assembly chautauqua; begins correspondence with future husband, Charles Porter.</p> <p><b>1884</b></p>	<p><b>October 5</b> Gene and Charles become engaged.</p> <p><b>1885</b></p>	<p><b>April 21</b> Gene and Charles marry and move to Decatur, Adams County.</p> <p><b>1886</b></p>	<p><b>August 27</b> daughter Jeannette is born.</p> <p><b>1887</b></p>
Other Events in History	<p><b>March 7</b> first U.S. patent for a telephone is awarded to Alexander Graham Bell.</p> <p><b>1876</b></p>	<p><b>March 31</b> Wabash, Indiana becomes first city in U.S. to have all streets lighted by electricity.</p> <p><b>1880</b></p>			<p><b>October 28</b> President Grover Cleveland dedicates the Statue of Liberty.</p> <p><b>1886</b></p>	

# Seeking “a form of self-expression”

Through her marriage to Charles Dorwin Porter in 1886, Mrs. Porter gained a measure of financial security and independence. She expressed pride in her role as a wife and mother, but she wanted to do more. Even the beautiful Limberlost Cabin built for her by her husband in Geneva did not help. She expressed her strong feelings in *Homing with the Birds*:

In those days I was experiencing constant struggle to find an outlet for the tumult in my being. . . . During my early days in that Cabin I went through more agony than should fall to the lot of the average seeker after a form of self-expression (44).

In her 1928 book, *Lady of the Limberlost*, Jeannette Porter Meehan wrote of her mother during that time:

. . . the fever to write had raged within Mother until it became a compelling influence and dominated her whole life, her home, her entertainments, her amusements, and her work. After I was old enough to go to school, Mother spent many secret hours with her pen (123).

Mrs. Porter wrote about what she knew best—nature.

Self-expression was not the only reason Mrs. Porter began to write for publication. In 1895,

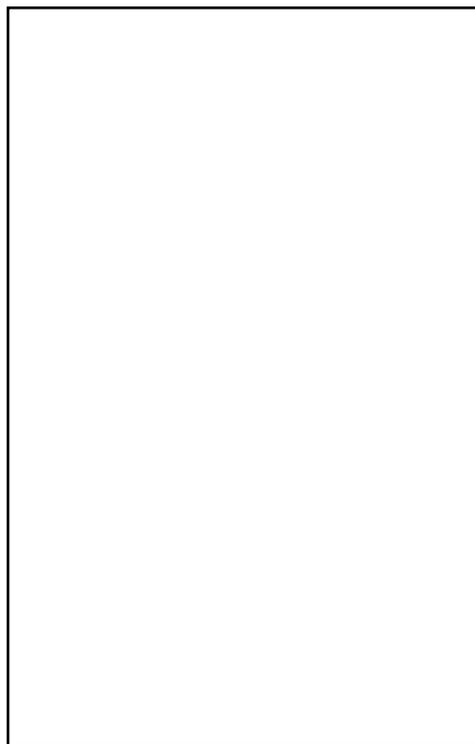
Charles Porter had committed his remaining assets to his new bank. Mrs. Porter knew that financial freedom was as important as her creative self-expression. She later wrote about the tension between a career and family:

Then I took a bold step, the first in my self-emancipation. Money was beginning to come in, and I had some in my purse of my very own that I had earned when no one knew I was working. I argued that if I kept my family so comfortable that they missed nothing from my usual routine, I had a right to do what I could toward furthering my personal ambitions . . . until I could earn money enough to hire capable people to take my place (Meehan, 124).

This first bold step was obtaining her own post office box in case her work was not accepted and returned by publishers.

Her successful nature writing had gone undetected through careful planning:

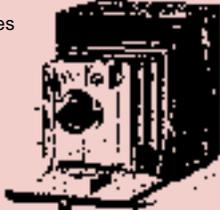
My husband’s drug store carried books and magazines . . . few people in our locality read *Recreation* and *Outing*. None of them were interested in photography, and very few in Natural Science, so that what I was doing was not known (Meehan, 124).



Gene Stratton-Porter

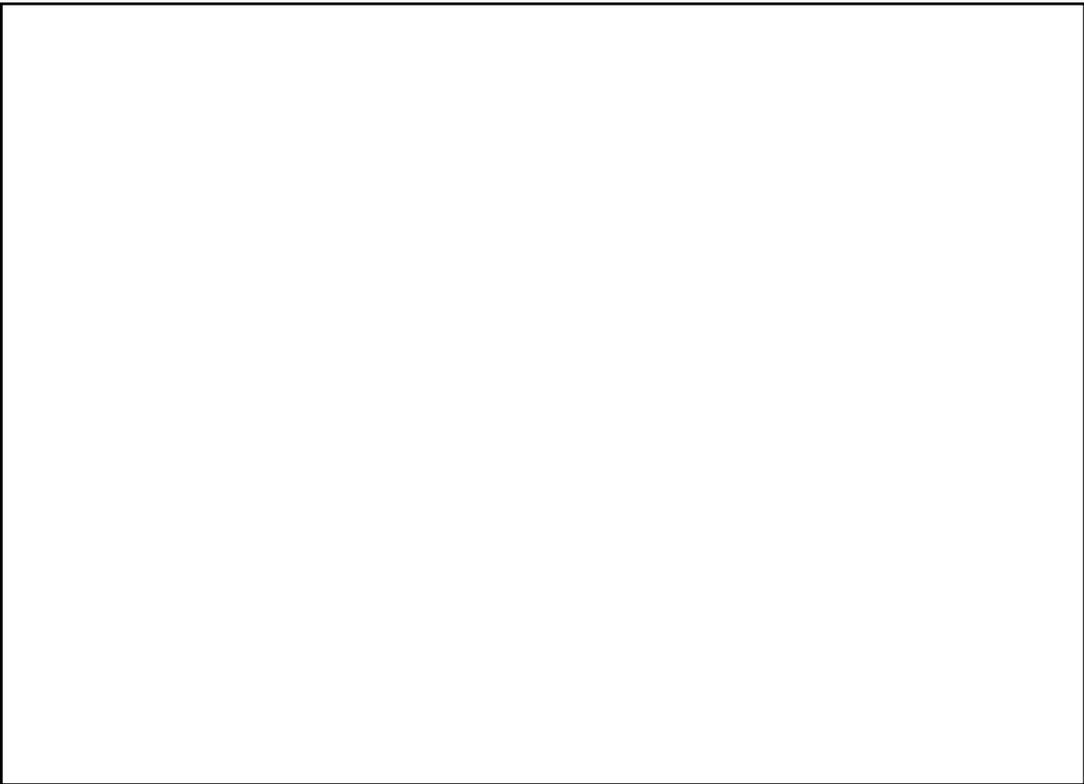
Her first short story was published in 1901 in *Metropolitan* magazine. She was immediately discovered by an alert—and complimentary—clerk in her husband’s store. Soon Mrs. Porter was confidently writing both fiction and nature materials regularly and with great popular success.

Indiana State Museum Historic Sites Division, Department of Natural Resources.

<p>Gene and Charles move to Geneva, Adams County.</p> <p>1888</p>	<p>January 10 Gene’s father dies.</p> <p>1890</p>	<p>Charles starts the Geneva Bank.</p> <p>1892</p>	<p>Gene and Charles visit World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.</p> <p>1893</p>		<p>Spring Lemberlost Cabin, Geneva completed.</p> <p>1895</p>	<p>Gene begins to write and publish nature articles.</p> <p>1895</p>
<p>November 6 Benjamin Harrison of Indiana is elected President of the U.S.</p> 	<p>October 1 U.S. Congress establishes the Weather Bureau.</p>	<p>The Folding Kodet. . . .</p> 		<p>June 11 Charles E. Duryea receives first U.S. patent for gasoline-driven automobile.</p>	<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Stratton-Porter Timeline</p>	

# Illustrating her observations

The growth of Little Chicken, the Black Vulture, was documented in detail by Gene Stratton-Porter: "The baby was a perfect dear to pose and in two weeks answered to his name and took food from my hand as readily as from his mother. When he was almost full-grown and only a trace of down showed about his ears, he would follow me across the swamp with his queer rocking walk, humping his shoulders and ducking his head; looking so uncanny in that dark weird place I had to set my muscles hard to keep from giving a scream and running as if for life" (*What I Have Done with Birds*, 87).



Indiana State Museum, Historic Sites Division, Department of Natural Resources.

Mrs. Porter submitted her first work in 1895 to *Recreation* magazine, but she had no illustrations. She recounted her dilemma in *Homing with the Birds*:

The editors who had accepted my work began to send me drawings of mounted birds, articulated with wire, stuffed with excelsior, and posed by men. . . . those pictures repelled me. I was horrified (47-48). The solution came as a Christmas

gift from her daughter, who would later recall,

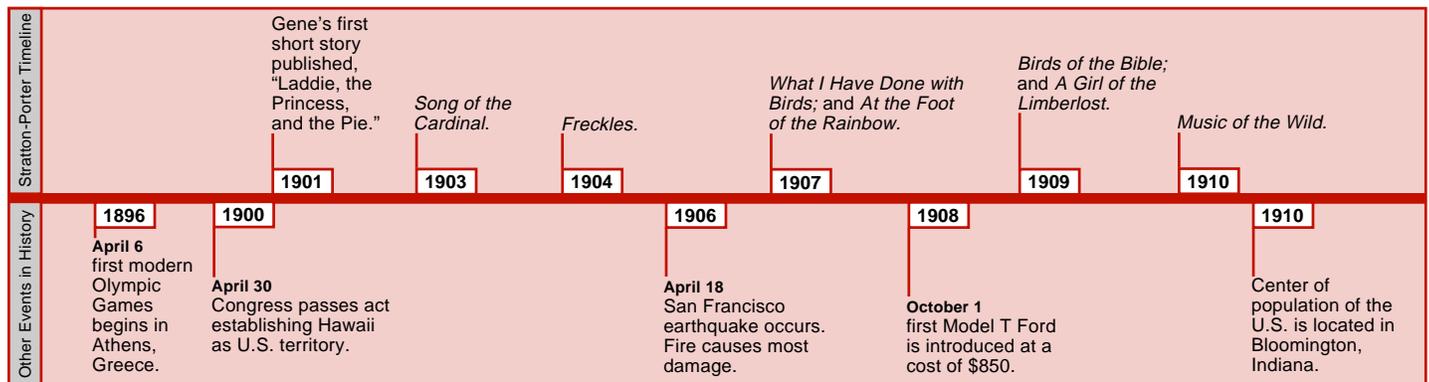
I bought Mother's first camera, a little four by five Vibe for which I paid ten dollars. Later, when she began the serious work of photographing wild life and needed a larger camera, she purchased one with money she obtained by selling some old family jewellery [sic] (Meehan, 115).

Mrs. Porter stated in *What I Have Done with Birds*,

When I decided that the camera was the only method by which to illustrate my observations of bird life, all that was necessary to do was to get together my outfit, learn how to use it, to compound my chemicals, to develop and fix my plates, and tone and wash my prints (6).

She mainly used glass plates for her pioneering nature photography, requiring great skill and careful timing.

In *Homing with the Birds*, she



described her first attempt to take a photograph—of a pet parrot:

That was a most amusing picture, sadly undertimed and overdeveloped; but before the weak streaky print left its first bath I was shouting through the Cabin like an insane creature, for although the picture contained almost every defect of a beginner's work I could see clearly that it was a perfectly natural, correct reproduction of a living bird. I had found my medium! I could illustrate what I wrote myself! (49)

With hard work, she mastered the skill of photography:

I spent over a thousand dollars in equipment. All of the money accumulated from nature articles and a few stories went to pay for four cameras, each adapted to a different branch of outdoor work, also a small wagonload of field paraphernalia (*Homing with the Birds*, 50).

She improvised a darkroom:

I . . . used the kitchen sink for plate and print washing. . . . my dark-room was the family bath, my washing tanks the turkey and meat platters in the kitchen sink (*Homing with the Birds*, 50).

Mrs. Porter often went to great lengths to obtain a photograph. Perhaps, the best example of this was related in *What I Have Done with Birds*.

A man sent word he had found in Limberlost Swamp, a hollow elm log, and there "was a nest containing a bird baby as big as a Gosling, but white as snow, and beside it a pale blue egg

heavily speckled with brown and shaped like a Hen's, but large as a Turkey's" (75).

She convinced her husband Charles to take her into Limberlost Swamp, which she had promised not to enter. She labeled the dangerous trek as

. . . the beginning of a series of swamp-studies that is, in all probability, without an equal in natural history or photography. The Limberlost at that time was no joke. It had not been shorn, branded and tamed. . . .

. . . Every few yards I expected the light carriage we drove to be twisted to pieces. We left it . . . and started on foot with an ax, hatchet and two revolvers . . . .

. . . I wore waist-high rubber waders. We had to cut our way before us . . . . For two hours we searched for that log. The time was late June; there was not a breath of air stirring inside the swamp; there were steaming, fetid pools everywhere, swarms of flies, gnats, mosquitoes, and poisonous insects, masses of poisonous vines and at every step not only the ground, but the bushes about, had to be watched for rattlesnakes. The muck was so spongy we sank ankle-deep, bushes scratched and tore at us and logs we thought were solid let us down knee-deep (79-80).

Finally they found the log, and Mrs. Porter set up her camera. Charles Porter gently drove the mother bird from the nest,

. . . entered the log, crept its length and carried out the baby

and the egg in his hat, which we previously had lined with leaves. The odor was so unbearable we could work about the log only by dipping our handkerchiefs in disinfectant and binding them over our mouths and nostrils (83).

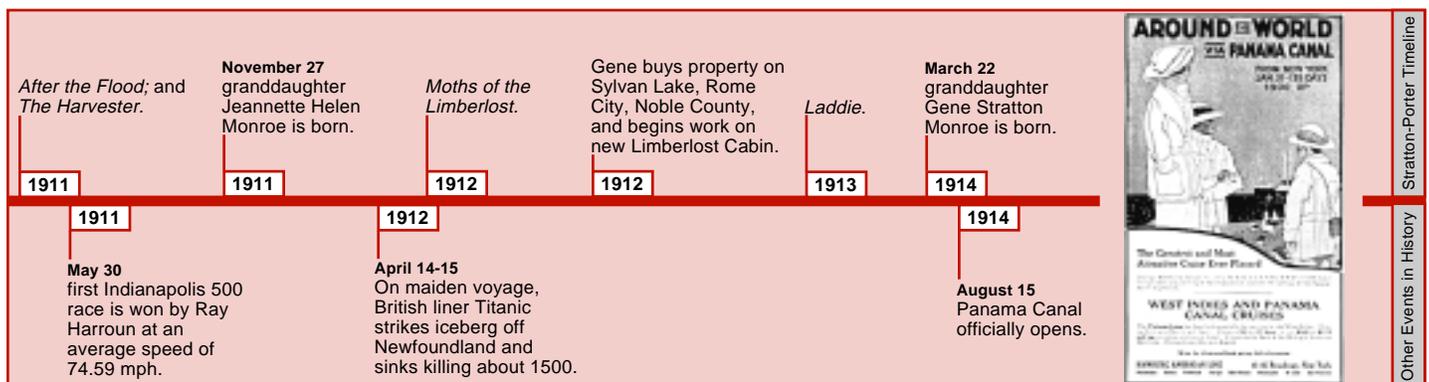
They worked to clear away brush and cut down several trees to get good light, photographed the little Black Vulture and the egg, and Mr. Porter gently replaced them. For weeks the Porters visited the nest, even taking a dead calf for the baby and its parents to feed on. They named the baby, Little Chicken.

Mrs. Porter summarized her success:

That season the Limberlost yielded me the only complete series of Vulture studies ever made, dozens of studies of other birds, material for a novel, more natural history stuff than could be put into several big volumes, many rare specimens and much priceless experience in swamp work (87-88).

### You be the historian

- Explore the development and techniques of photography.
- Take photographs of natural history subjects and create an exhibit.



# The Limberlost laboratory

At Limberlost Cabin in Geneva, Mrs. Porter pursued her study of nature, even in her home. Her daughter Jeannette described the cabin:

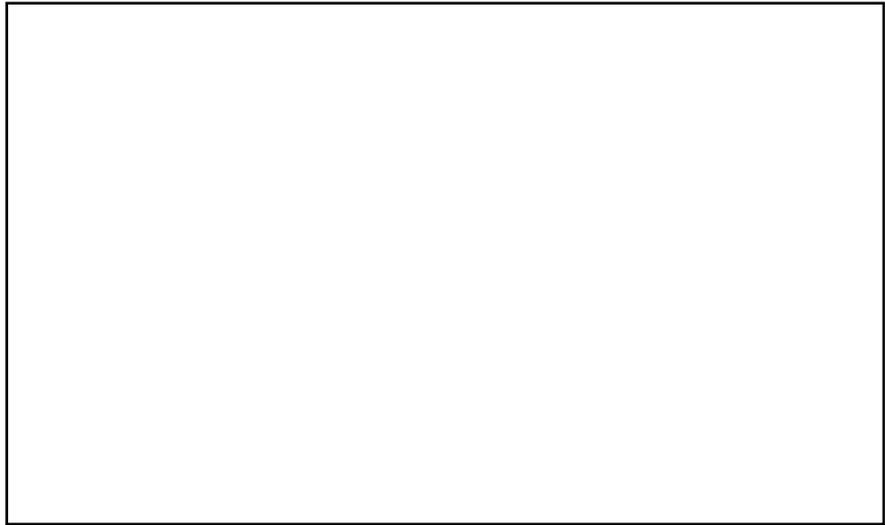
Almost any place in our house you might find a glass turned down over a little patch of moth eggs on a rug to protect them . . . a wounded bird, which was being doctored, perched almost anywhere . . . several different size boxes containing baby caterpillars just hatched, feeding on the particular kind of leaves that they ate . . . cocoons pinned almost anywhere, and newly emerged moths and butterflies flying through the house and feeding on the flowers in the conservatory (Meehan, 119-20).

Mrs. Porter, however, came to realize that she must respect nature:

The more I studied and thought, the more clearly I saw . . . I had no right to keep wild creatures in captivity . . . the only way to know and to study them rightly was as they lived, in the abandonment of perfect freedom (*Homing with the Birds*, 47).

Mrs. Porter conducted extensive field research in the swamps, woods, and meadows. Those studies and the photographic documentation formed the basis for her nature publications and her novels.

Her nature laboratory did



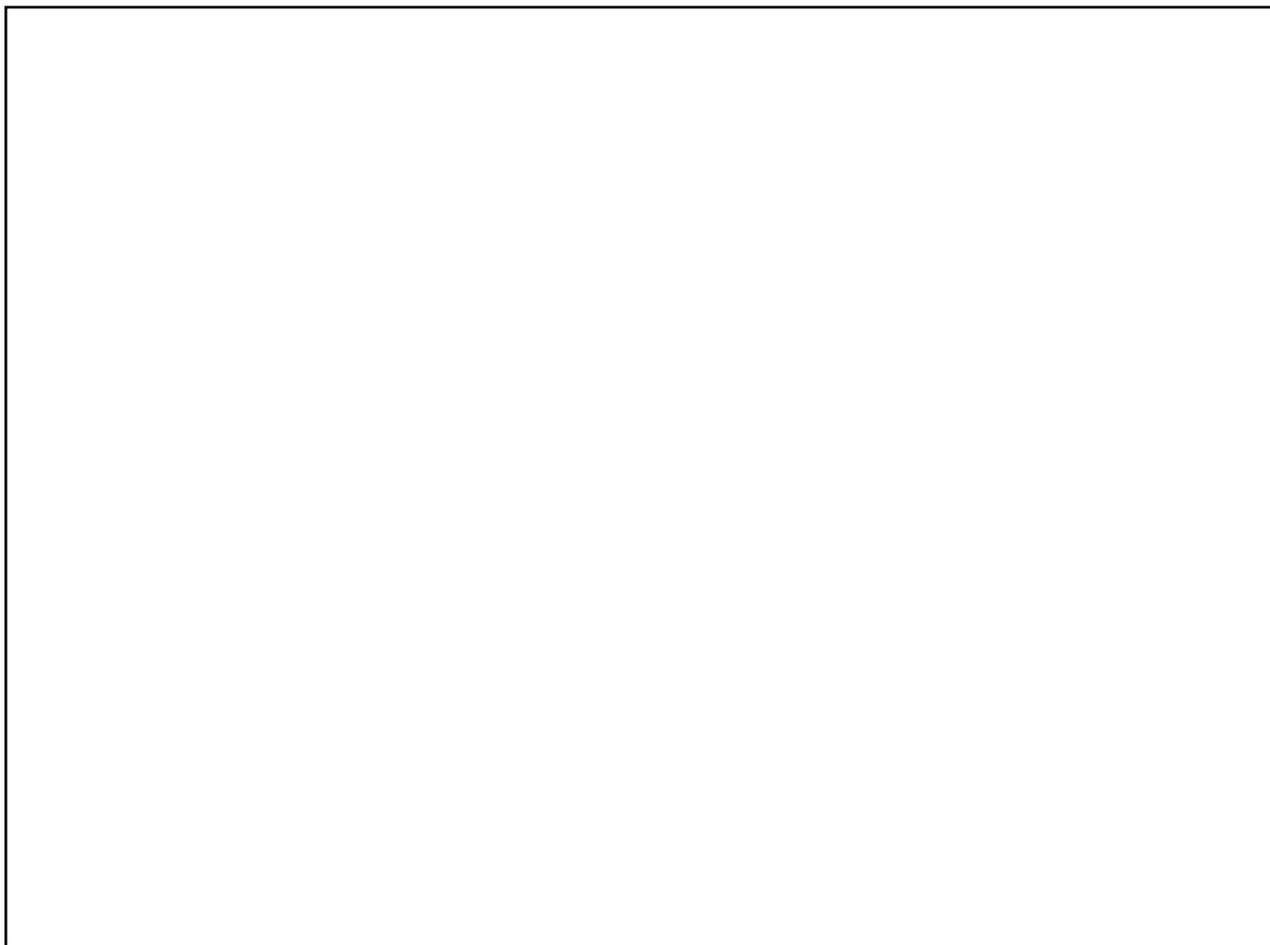
The Forestry Building at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition inspired the design of both of Mrs. Porter's Limberlost cabins. The name Limberlost was taken from the big swamp near her Geneva cabin, reportedly so named for a man named Limber (or "Limber Jim"), who had been lost in the swamp. Limberlost Cabin, Geneva (above) and Limberlost Cabin, Rome City (below).



Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites Division, Department of Natural Resources.

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Stratton-Porter Timeline	1915 <i>Michael O'Halloran.</i>	1915 Spring Gene moves into new Limberlost Cabin.	1916 <i>Morning Face.</i>	1917 <i>Friends in Feathers.</i>	1917 Paramount Studios produces the movie, <i>Freckles.</i>	 <p><b>For the Nation's Defense</b></p> <p>The Nation's defense is not in gun or shell-making alone, but in the care of health and stamina who do the work of the army at home, so through the great industry of the nation.</p> <p>Building sturdy men for national defense is largely a question of food and exercise. The best food for preparation and enjoyment is</p> <p><b>Shredded Wheat</b></p> <p>Being made of the whole wheat it supplies all the essential for the building of the perfect human body, and is prepared in a digestible form. A daily diet of Shredded Wheat means preparation for any trial that calls for physical endurance in manual labor.</p> <p>The shredded wheat cereal is made from the best quality wheat, which is then steamed, extruded and broken into the shape of a ring, and is ready for use with milk, cream, or fruit.</p> <p>THE SHREDDED WHEAT COMPANY, NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y.</p>	1918 <i>Daughter of the Land.</i>	1918 Fall Gene checks into New York clinic for health reasons.
Other Events in History	1915 January 25 first transcontinental telephone call crosses U.S. from New York City to San Francisco.	1916 Conservation movement in Indiana and centennial of statehood promotes establishment of state parks.	1917 April 6 President Woodrow Wilson signs resolution entering the U.S. into World War 1.	1918 November 11 World War 1 ends.				



not last. She wrote in *Moths of the Limberlost*,

... soon commerce attacked the swamp and began its usual process of devastation. Canadian lumbermen came seeking tall straight timber for ship masts and tough heavy trees for beams. Grand Rapids [Lumber Company] followed and stripped the forest of hard wood for fine furniture, and through my experience with the lumbermen "Freckles" story was written. Afterward hoop and stave

men and local mills took the best of the soft wood. Then a ditch, in reality a canal, was dredged across the north end through my best territory, and that carried the water to the Wabash River until oil men could enter the swamp (4).

With the slow but steady destruction of her beloved Limberlost Swamp, Mrs. Porter—now wealthy from her writing—in 1912 decided to build another cabin on Sylvan Lake at Rome City.

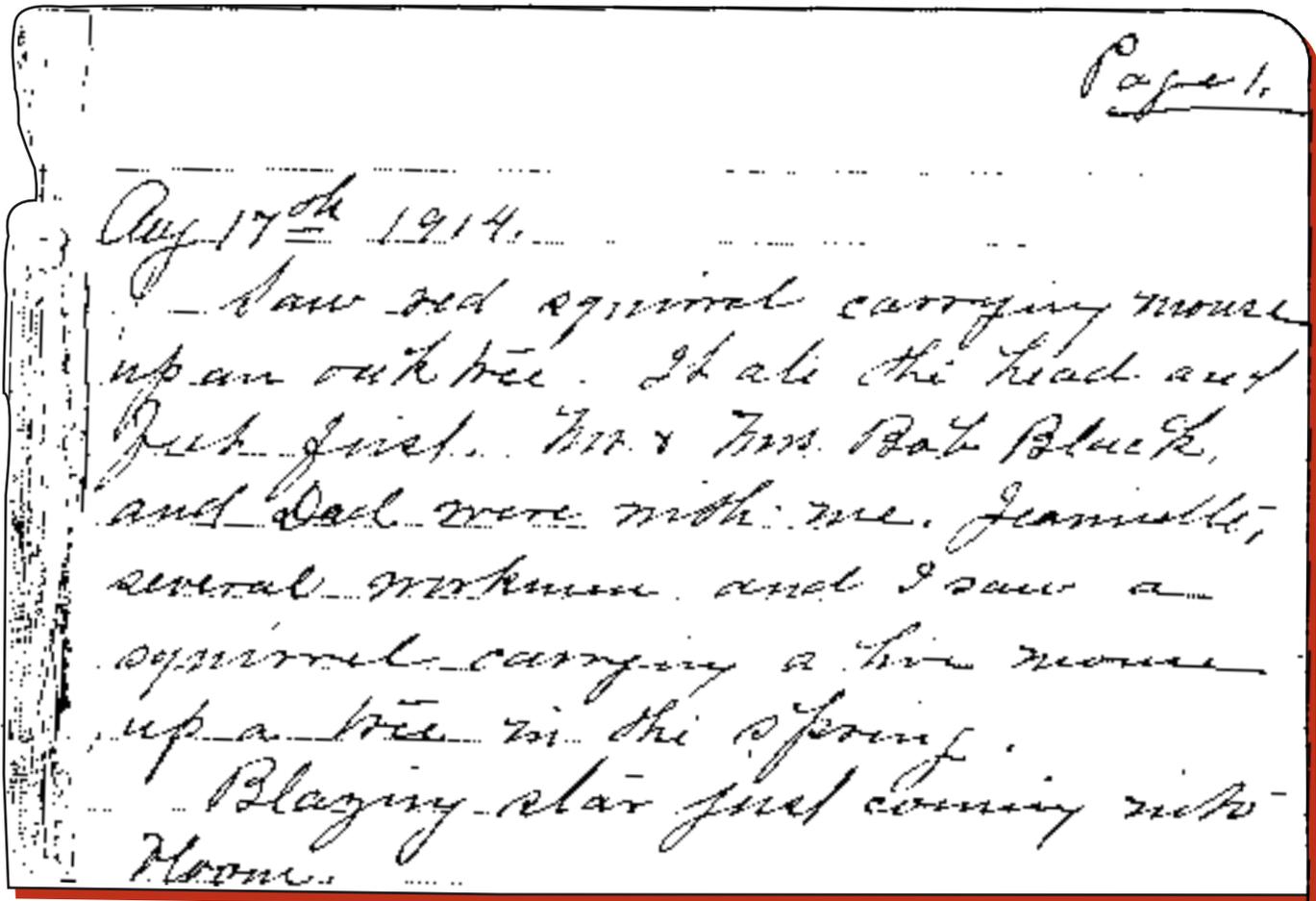
One of a series of photographs from *Moths of the Limberlost* (facing 126). A friend had brought Mrs. Porter these two *Cecropia* cocoons, and she documented the moths emerging after several months of observation (113).

Gene helps fight state drainage law for Noble and LaGrange counties.	<i>Homing with the Birds.</i>	Gene moves to Los Angeles and sells Limberlost Cabin in Geneva.	<i>Her Father's Daughter.</i>	Gene works with filmmaker, Thomas Ince, to film <i>Michael O'Halloran</i> .		<i>The Fire Bird.</i>	<i>The White Flag; and Wings.</i>	Fall Gene writes to Indiana Governor Warren T. McCray offering Wildflower Woods for a state bird and wildflower preserve.
1918-1919	1919	1919	1921	1921		1922	1923	1923
		1920			1922			
		September 7 first New York to California mail plane leaves New York City; arrives in San Francisco on September 11.			October 4 three radio stations carry first play-by-play coverage of the World Series.			

Stratton-Porter Timeline

Other Events in History

# Crafting Wildflower Woods



Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites Division, Department of Natural Resources.

Above is part of page 1 of Mrs. Porter's personal journal of life at Limberlost Cabin, Rome City. She also kept meticulous records of everything that was planted on her property.

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the determination of Gene Stratton-Porter than her work in building her new Limberlost Cabin and crafting the surrounding grounds—all known as Wildflower Woods—on Sylvan Lake.

In an article in *McCall's*,

published posthumously in November 1926, Mrs. Porter commented on Limberlost Cabin in Geneva:

The first house that I was on the job in building was paid for by the man of the family, and naturally what happened inside the house was not an individual emanation; it

Stratton-Porter Timeline	<p>January Gene starts her own movie production company.</p> <p>1924</p>	<p>Gene buys lots on Catalina Island and in Bel Air and begins building houses.</p> <p>1924</p>	<p>June grandson James Meehan is born.</p> <p>1924</p>	<p>December 6 Gene dies in an accident in Los Angeles.</p> <p>1924</p>	<p><i>Tales You Won't Believe;</i> and <i>The Keeper of the Bees.</i></p> <p>1925</p>	<p>Charles Dorwin Porter dies.</p> <p>1926</p>	<p><i>Let Us Highly Resolve;</i> and <i>The Magic Garden.</i></p> <p>1927</p>	<p>October 9 grandson John Meehan is born.</p> <p>1927</p>	
Other Events in History					<p>January 5 first woman governor, Mrs. William B. Ross is inaugurated in Wyoming.</p> <p>1925</p>	<p>Henry Ford introduces 40 hour work week.</p> <p>1926</p>	<p>May 20 Charles A. Lindbergh begins first solo trans-Atlantic flight from Long Island, New York to Paris, France.</p> <p>1927</p>		

Mrs. Porter planting by  
Sylvan Lake, Rome City.

was a compromise (quoted in Long, 134).

This time there were no compromises. Mrs. Porter now had her own money to build it exactly the way she wanted it. In an article, “Why I Always Wear My Rose-Colored Glasses,” in *The American Magazine*, August 1919, she explained:

Over four years ago, because my house did not contain a suitable workshop, because my location had been devastated by lumbermen, farmers, and oilmen until it was impossible to find natural history subjects to illustrate my nature books, and because by that time I had earned sufficient money to do as I wished, I decided to change my location. I moved to a lake shore in northern Indiana, typical Limberlost country, built a big log cabin, having a secluded library, printing-room, dark-room,

and every photographic convenience I could think of for my work, shut away from the remainder of the household. Here I came to live on a one-hundred-and-twenty-acre tract, having a mile of winding lake shore, about fifty acres of which I am devoting to the work I so love (118).

Frank N. Wallace, a tree surgeon who later became state entomologist, was hired by Mrs. Porter to help create a healthy woods. They cleared dead wood, repaired damaged trees, and treated sick trees. He later stated that, “The tree work took something over two months for a crew of six to eight men” (Wallace, 2).

When the woods had been put in proper shape, Mrs. Porter and her crew laid off six, one-acre flower beds. They gathered flowers and plants—one color for each

bed—from the surrounding woods and transplanted them. According to her daughter, “By actual count, she brought in and set the roots of three thousand plants, trees, shrubs, and vines in the first year or two” (Meehan, 180).

Mrs. Porter was tireless in creating a perfect sanctuary for plants and wildlife. In *Tales You Won't Believe*, she provided an example:

We brought in swamp soil and . . . worked up equal parts of pure field and woods dirt and muck, and then we went to the true sphagnum tamarack swamps and brought in great loads of moss that we cut in sections, some of it three feet in depth, and carpeted our bed (168).

In the midst of this hard, physical labor, she still wrote books. By now she was world-famous. Ironically, the fame

August 15th, 1919.

Director E. J. Woodbury,  
Experiment Station,  
La Fayette, Indiana.

Dear Mr. Woodbury:

The people of Noble and LaGrange Counties are much concerned over the passage of a drainage law which they feel will ruin the two counties.

Men, Gene Stratton-Porter and a committee of citizens have addressed the Governor and it is proposed that a local investigation be made during the week of August 20th for the purpose of ascertaining facts and making a report, which report should be submitted to the extra session of the legislature for the purpose of repealing or modifying the Act.

This Committee, aside from the Chairman of our Commission and myself, should include a competent soil expert, drainage engineer, fish culturist, and meteorologist, the latter to pass upon the rainfall with regards to its relation to the lakes.

I may be able to find all of these people except the soil expert and would like to know whether you can recommend such a one to me.

Thanking you for the information, I am

Very truly yours,

Richard Lieber, Director,  
The Department of Conservation.

13

As a result of citizen protests, Richard Lieber, director of the Department of Conservation, held a hearing on the 1917 drainage law. Lieber and the Conservation Commission recommended repeal of the law as "ill-advised, unscientific, impractical, and uncertain of results." The law was repealed in the second special session of the General Assembly in 1920. *Yearbook of the State of Indiana*, 1920, p. 306.

which provided her money and freedom to create her sanctuary, also drew uninvited visitors to spoil it.

Wallace recalled,

Even though Mrs. Porter had many "No Admittance" signs put up at Limberlost Cabin there would often be as many as twenty-five cars on the grounds at one time and it was sometimes very embarrassing to have fifty or more

people walk past and look us over while we were eating our dinner out in the yard (Wallace, 5).

In *Tales You Won't Believe*, as an example of the need for education, Mrs. Porter described the thoughtless destruction of nature:

I have had trespassers on my own premises gather handfuls of snow-balls and hepatica and adder tongue lilies and spring beauties,

carry them in hot hands for an hour, find them wilted, and throw them on the ground. And I have seen, since the advent of the automobile, the cars from the city travel into the country and the white glory of the dogwood, or a red haw in bloom, or the purple mist of a red bud, transferred from tree to car until nothing but a discouraged stump bearing ragged, broken branches as high as men and women could reach, remained of what before had been a thing of symmetrical, soulful beauty (174-75).

Curious admirers were not the only danger to Wildflower Woods. A far greater threat came in 1917, when the Indiana General Assembly passed a law which allowed for the drainage of state owned swamp land in Noble and LaGrange counties.

Mrs. Porter wrote in *Tales You Won't Believe*, of her resolve:

When I had definitely learned that this devastation was proposed, it was up to me to begin fighting a water battle. Also, I must work with all my might to save every specimen I could in case the battle should be lost (174).

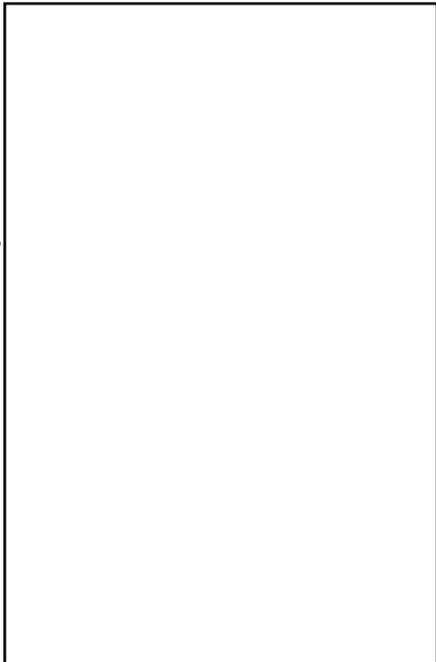
Along with others, Mrs. Porter did battle, and that legislation was repealed. The swamp land, however, was later drained.

In 1918, the years of hard physical work, exposure to the out-of-doors, worry over World War I, and her fight to save the swamp land, had taken their toll on Mrs. Porter, now fifty-four years old. She checked herself into a clinic in New York where she stayed a month.

After returning to Wildflower Woods, Mrs. Porter completed work on *Homing with the Birds*. She then was apparently ready for a change. In the summer of 1919, she moved to Los Angeles, California.

# A new life in California

Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites Division, Department of Natural Resources.



This photograph of Mrs. Porter was taken ca. 1920 in California by Edward S. Curtis.

She wrote to friends, "Mr. Curtis, the Indian photographer, made a new boots-and-breeches picture of me in one of the cañons the other day" (Meehan, 220).

In California, Gene Stratton-Porter began a new life in many ways. She wrote to friends with some humor,

I have lain aside boots and breeches and put on crêpe and beaded chiffon and a French bonnet with roses and a veil; and I stand up and speak my little piece with the best of them (Meehan, 220).

The natural scenery in California was very different from Indiana, and it affected Mrs. Porter strongly:

I see so much on the desert, in the cañons, and on the mountains that other writers have failed to mention . . . I have no words in which to express what the ocean does to me, and the cañon does a bit deeper, and the desert deepest of all (Meehan, 218).

She continued writing—including editorials for *McCall's* magazine and poetry. After working with the motion picture industry, she formed Gene Stratton-Porter Productions in January 1924, working with the young director, James Leo Meehan, who had married her daughter Jeannette in June 1923.

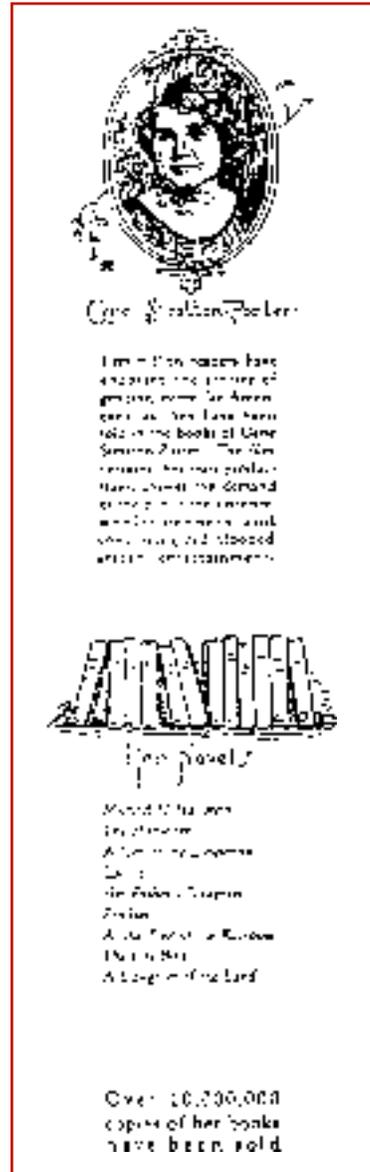
Mrs. Porter realized that the only way to translate her work to the screen her way was to do it herself. Her first production was *Girl of the Limberlost*. She commented to one correspondent,

Every dollar of money that went into this picture I earned myself, most of it in the fields and woods and in the swamps . . . It is the extent to which I am willing to go in order to prove that our young people are being shown the wrong kind of pictures (Meehan, 244).

In 1923, she offered to sell *Wildflower Woods* to the State of Indiana. In 1924, she began building two California homes—one of which was on five acres of land on Catalina Island. She began again to create the natural environment she required:

On the mountain I am going to set my workshop, fashioned much like Limberlost Cabin in size and arrangement, but differing from it in architecture, as it must conform to this location; and around it I am going to begin growing the wild flowers of California. I want it, also, as I want any spot on which I live, to become a sanctuary for the birds (Meehan, 278).

Mrs. Porter did not complete this dream. She was killed in an automobile accident on December 6, 1924.



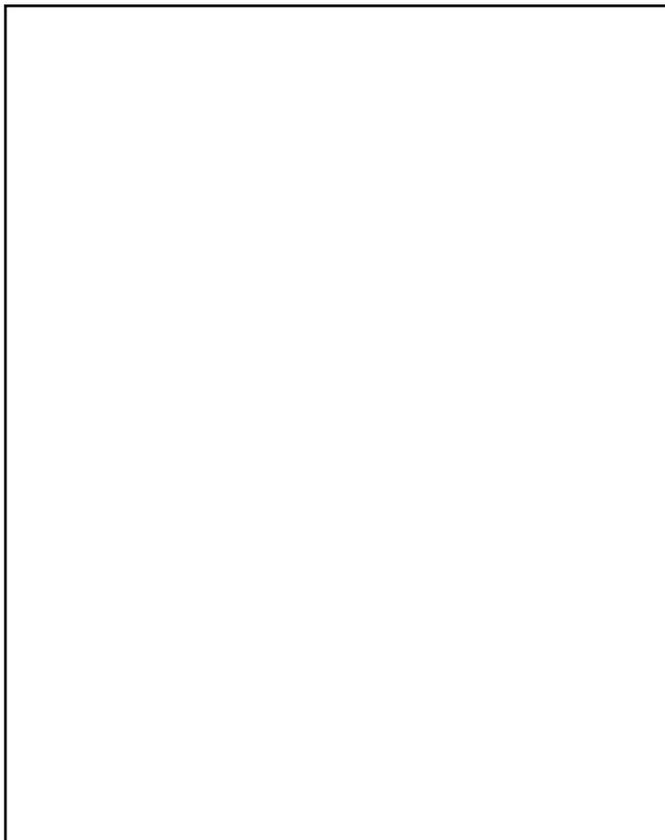
James Leo Meehan, Jr., John E. Meehan, and Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington.

This sidebar from the Gene Stratton-Porter Productions letterhead leaves no doubt about Mrs. Porter's goals.

# Behind the scenes

"Behind the scenes" presents some aspect of how the Bureau staff produces each issue of the magazine. The focus may be, for example, the research process, an interpretation problem, etc. It also enables us to thank our partners and demonstrate that research is a collaboration with often unexpected twists and turns.

Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites Division, Department of Natural Resources.



Gene Stratton-Porter with one of her granddaughters. Her first granddaughter, Jeannette Helen Monroe, was the focus of *Morning Face*, published in 1921. *The Keeper of the Bees* (1925) was written for her second granddaughter, Gene Stratton Monroe: "into the 'Little Scout' she wove the actual character and disposition of Gene and dedicated the book to her. She constantly watched Gene at her work and at her play . . . just to hear the little girl's comments and note her reactions" (Meehan, 292).

This issue of *The Indiana Historian* provides a limited introduction to Gene Stratton-Porter using mainly her own words. It is not a biography, but it has prompted some thoughts about biography.

Gene Stratton-Porter documented her life in great detail. She wrote probably thousands of pages—privately and for publication—describing her life and work. As we explored materials for this issue, some elements of her life seem very clear. Other elements were quite elusive.

For example, in a letter to an old friend in Indiana, probably in early 1924, Mrs. Porter wrote the following self-evaluation:

As the years go by I can see myself changing. . . . I really am quite a respectable person by this time. Life has moulded me and hammered me and taught me and punished me and delighted me until I have deepened and broadened so that I would be very much more worth while as a friend than I could possibly have been as the narrow-minded, bigoted creature that you knew. I have tried with all my might to keep sane, to keep sweet, to be true to my friends and just to my enemies (Meehan, 276).

What she meant by this evaluation only Mrs. Porter knew completely.

Much of any individual's life—and the past in general—is lost to the future because sources have not been preserved. The goal of a biographer should be to provide the most complete and accurate story possible using and carefully analyzing available resources.

In Mrs. Porter's case, the available resources leave many questions unanswered about who she was and how much she accomplished. The definitive story of her life and work has not yet been written.

Why is biography important? Historians have come to realize that the stories of people—famous and ordinary—are crucial to an understanding of history. Such stories help to set the record straight. Personal papers, such as letters, journals, and business records, are one important resource for the biographer.

Individuals, family members, and friends often preserve personal papers. Libraries, archives, and museums have collected and will continue to collect and preserve such personal papers. These materials enable interested historians—young people or adults, professional or avocational—to set many records straight.

## You be the historian

- Try gathering resources and writing a brief biographical sketch of a friend or relative. Share your sketch with that person and others to evaluate how accurate you have been.
- Locate personal papers in a nearby repository and begin compiling biographies of individuals.
- Begin urging people to deposit their personal papers with a repository for historical use.

**Note regarding resources:** Items are listed on this page that enhance work with the topic discussed. Some older items, especially, may include dated practices and ideas that are no longer generally accepted. Resources reflecting current practices are noted whenever possible.

# Selected resources

## Bibliography

- Long, Judith Reick. *Gene Stratton-Porter: Novelist and Naturalist*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1990.

Provides an overview of Mrs. Porter's life and work, using official records and other resources to establish more accurately dates and incidents.

- MacLean, David G. *Gene Stratton-Porter: A Bibliography and Collector's Guide*. Decatur, IN: Americana Books, 1976.

Useful reference for books and magazine articles by and about Mrs. Porter.

- Meehan, Jeannette Porter. *The Lady of the Limberlost: The Life and Letters of Gene Stratton-Porter*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1928.

Meehan provides insight into her mother's personal and professional life; quotes many letters and other writings not otherwise available.

- Richards, Bertrand F. *Gene Stratton Porter*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.

Good reference on her writing and reception by critics and the public.

- Wallace, Frank N. "Gene Stratton-Porter and Her Studies of Native Plants," mimeograph typescript, [1925], Indiana Division, Indiana State Library.

Paper read at the March 1925 meeting of the Garden Flowers Society, Fort Wayne.

## Works by Gene Stratton-Porter

The following items were used in preparing this issue:

- *Homing with the Birds: The History of a Lifetime of Personal Experience with the Birds*. 1919.
- *Let Us Highly Resolve*. 1927.
- *Moths of the Limberlost*. 1921.
- *Tales You Won't Believe*. 1925.
- *What I Have Done with Birds*. 1907.
- "Why I Always Wear My Rose-Colored Glasses," *The American Magazine* (August 1919), 36-37, 112, 114, 117, 118, 121.

Indiana University Press has reprinted *Freckles*, *The Girl of the*

*Limberlost*, *The Harvester*, *The Keeper of the Bees*, and *Laddie*.

## Selected Student Resources

- Asher, Sandy. *Wild Words! How to Train Them to Tell Stories*. New York: Walker and Company, 1989.

Advice for young creative writers, including how to put ideas on paper. Intermediate readers.

- Bellamy, David. *Our Changing World: The Roadside*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc./Publishers, 1988.

Colorful illustrations help to tell how the balance of nature is disrupted in a wilderness area when a highway is constructed. Intermediate readers.

- Challand, Helen J. *Disappearing Wetlands*. Chicago: Childrens Press, 1992.

The ecological role of wetlands, including how wetlands are formed and what life they support.

- Dubrovin, Vivian. *Write Your Own Story*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1984.

Some of the ways to write a short story. Beginning readers.

- Evans, Art. *First Photos: How Kids Can Take Great Pictures*. Redondo Beach, CA: Photo Data Research, 1992.

An easy to read introduction to basic photography.

- Hilton, Jonathan, and Barrie Watts, consultant eds. *Photography*. Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press, 1994.

Excellent work on cameras, how to take good photographs, and how to correct the most common mistakes. More advanced readers.

- Lasky, Kathryn. *Think Like an Eagle: At Work with a Wildlife Photographer*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992.

A professional photographer tracks wildlife in three regions of the United States. Advanced readers.

- Leslie, Clare Walker. *Nature All Year Long*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1991.

A simple text and good illustrations describing different plants, animals,

and landscapes outdoors during each month of the year. Early readers.

- Liptak, Karen. *Saving Our Wetlands and Their Wildlife*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1991.

Different types of wetlands and their wildlife are described in this easy to read work.

- Parker, Philip. *Your Living Home*. New York: Thomson Learning, 1995.

Excellent, easy resource on household ecology, including insect life found in most urban dwellings.

- Silver, Donald M. *One Small Square Pond*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1994.

Excellent work for intermediate readers on pond ecology with activities and outstanding illustrations.

- Sisson, Edith A. *Nature with Children of All Ages*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982.

Excellent resource for educators including activities and chapter bibliographies. Can be read by intermediate readers.

## Other Resources

- Special thanks to **Margie Sweeny**, Curator, and **Pat Bolman**, Naturalist, of the Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site, Box 639, Rome City, IN 46784. Call 219-854-3790 for information, hours, and tours available.

- Limberlost State Historic Site, Box 356, Geneva, IN 46740. Call 219-368-7428 for information, hours, and tours available.

- Indiana Humanities Council, 1500 North Delaware Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202, 317-638-1500, has Mrs. Porter's books available for loan and will allow modest grant funds for a performance by Marcia Quick, an actress who portrays Mrs. Porter.

- Forthcoming in the Fall 1996 is a new documentary, *Gene Stratton-Porter: Voice of the Limberlost*. To borrow the video, contact the Indiana Humanities Council, 317-638-1500. To purchase the video, contact Ball State University, Office of Academic Research, 317-285-1600.



## Indiana Historical Bureau

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Gene Stratton-Porter was a gifted artist. These charcoal sketches reveal a personal side. Left is one of her daughter Jeannette and her father Mark Stratton. Right is Jeannette at age twelve.

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