

Spotlight on Classic Authors

Gene Stratton Porter

Born in 1863 in Wabash County, Indiana, Gene Stratton Porter was a naturalist, conservationist, wildlife photographer, and probably the most famous American woman author of her time. Her lifelong interest in plants and animals – especially birds – was learned early, from her life in rural Wabash. Her father taught her to value the balance of nature, and made her a playful present of all the birds on their farm. Her mother taught her the wisdom of plants and knowledge of species transplantation and conservation. At a young age, she also witnessed the gradual destruction of the wilderness surrounding her home. She would later write: “In pain, confusion and futile protest I watched the buffalo disappear from the prairies; the red horse, the bass, and the wood ducks from the forest; while as exquisite wild flowers as the circle of the globe knew vanished from the face of the earth.”

Shortly after her marriage Stratton Porter moved to Ge-Limberlost swamp. The Christ-young daughter Jeanette led except lumbermen ventured, and other animals. She began



to Charles D. Porter, in 1886, Geneva, Indiana, on the edge of the swamp, where few to photograph her beloved birds to send her photographs to *Rec- and* and to write pieces for them. These successes led her to publish her first nature books and works of fiction. With the publication of her novel *Freckles* in 1904, her popularity as an author was established. Both *Freckles* and its companion piece *A Girl of the Limberlost* are set in the Limberlost swamp, and translate Stratton Porter's naturalist interests into a fictional context.

While Stratton Porter's work was gaining her a national reputation, her beloved swamp was slowly being drained and destroyed for oil, agriculture, and fine timber. Because of this, she moved from Geneva in 1911, purchasing 120 acres of woodland in a remaining part of the Limberlost near Rome City. She named her land “Wildflower Woods”, and built a large cabin there, where she wrote, studied, and developed her photographs. She attempted to oppose the continuous drainage of the swamp, which threatened her acreage, and began to transplant the variety of flowers, trees and

shrubs from the Limberlost into this one area. Her success with this project can be witnessed today at the Wildflower Woods site, preserved by the state of Indiana. In her own words, at this time “life became one round of fight... to rescue every one of these delicate little blossoms possible before destruction overtook them.”

Stratton Porter lived and worked at Wildflower Woods for nearly fifteen years. After World War I, she began to make frequent trips to California, and established a permanent home there in 1923. She became involved in film production, basing some of her motion pictures on the plots of her novels. Tragically, she spent only a few years in this new style of life. On December 6, 1924, she and her driver were killed when their car was hit by a trolley.

In the world of young adult fiction, Stratton Porter is best remembered today for *A Girl of the Limberlost*, which is still getting 5-star reviews from many contemporary teens (www.goodreads.com). It tells the story of a sensitive, intelligent, and self-sufficient girl, Elnora Comstock, who grows up unloved by her mother on the edge of the Limberlost. Determined to finance her education, Elnora gathers moth specimens and arrowheads from the Limberlost and sells them to the “Bird Woman” – Stratton Porter’s fictional self-personification. Elnora’s strength, compassion, and insight into nature’s secrets win the love and admiration of all around her, and eventually attract the attention of the handsome convalescent Philip Ammon.

The human love stories in *A Girl of the Limberlost* are set against the backdrop of the wild and beautiful land around them. Stratton Porter’s message of living in harmony with nature and working to preserve its beauty is present throughout the novel. As Elnora teaches others about moths on her excursions into the swamp, the reader becomes a second audience for her wisdom; Mrs. Comstock’s philosophy of preserving the land and keeping it from the lumberman’s axe echoes the author’s own struggle to save Wildflower Woods; and the Bird Woman’s desire to educate city dwellers about the natural world through her books parallels Stratton Porter’s real-life work as a spokeswoman and advocate for conservation and ecology.

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