

Gene Stratton
PORTER

Author and Naturalist



THE INDIANA
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

wishes to

express its

APPRECIATION

to

DOUBLEDAY-DORAN COMPANY,

Copyright Owner

and to

MRS. JEANNETTE PORTER MEEHAN,

author of

THE LADY OF THE LIMBERLOST

whose biography of

her mother

was the principal reference work

used in the compilation of

this booklet.

Cover photo by

FRANK N. WALLACE

Gene Stratton Porter

Author and Naturalist



Museum Shop
INDIANA STATE MUSEUM
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"Artistry, integrity and devotion to nature . . ." Of all the words written about Gene Stratton Porter, these best summarize this remarkable woman who became one of Indiana's most widely known authors.

At the turn of the century, before the days of "women's lib," Mrs. Porter achieved a degree of liberation to which few women could have aspired.

Although most people know her as the author of *Girl of the Limberlost* and other works of fiction, few realize that she also won national acclaim as a naturalist.

Her fiction reflects her dedication to nature and is enriched by the astute observations of a true scientist. This integrity accounts in large part for the continuing fascination her work holds for later generations.

She must have appeared highly unusual to the other ladies of her time as she took to the field in a knee-length khaki skirt, high leather hiking boots, a blouse or sweater and a hat of neutral color to blend into the landscape. Following her marriage to Charles Darwin Porter, her little black horse and buggy loaded with paraphernalia became a common sight in the swamps and woodlands around Geneva. Carrying a revolver as protection against Massasauga rattlers, she was often seen lugging camera and tripod, and sometimes even a stepladder, to the site of her current study.

Keeping meticulous records of her observations, she also made watercolor illustrations and masterful photographs of birds and moths in their natural habitat.

Certainly this devotion to nature required a high degree of self-discipline and dedication, especially in view of the fact that Gene Stratton Porter was wife, mother and chatelaine of a 14 room house when she first began to write nature articles for publication.

It was when her daughter Jeannette was old enough to enter school that Mrs. Porter found herself with more time and determined to write down some of her findings in the field.

Although she dreaded failure and the possibility of embarrassing her husband and child, she finally submitted some pieces to *Recreation* magazine, and was encouraged when her first published article brought her the princely sum of \$16.

A year later she accepted a place in the natural history department of *Outing* magazine and wrote her first piece of fiction, a short story entitled "Laddie, the Princess and the Pie."

Soon, the magazine articles gave way to books on nature. *The Song of the Cardinal* began as a magazine article for *Century* magazine, but was expanded from 10,000 to 50,000 words at the urging

of the editor. Mrs. Porter assembled the text and illustrations for the book in less than a month; and the volume was published in 1903.

The discovery of a black vulture's nest inspired her next book, *Freckles*, which was published in 1904. During the next two years, she wrote a series of articles for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which were later collected into one volume along with some additional field experiences. This was published under the title *What I Have Done With Birds*.

There followed a steady stream of books in the next few years. Most were written in the Porter homes at Geneva and Sylvan Lake. In 1919, she purchased a home in California and continued to write there until she died in an automobile accident in 1924.

Not since Audubon has America known a naturalist such as Gene Stratton Porter. Her photographs and books record such intimate charter studies of wild songbirds that her work in this area has never been surpassed.

Her two homes in Indiana, where many of her possessions can still be seen, are now preserved as State Memorials.

Jeannette Porter in the Library of Limberlost



In order to give the reader some insight into the influences which molded a woman of Gene Stratton Porter's stature, we have excerpted here some of the memories of her mother which were recorded by Mrs. Jeannette Porter Meehan.

* * * *

Gene Stratton Porter was born in 1863 at Hopewell Farm near Wabash, Indiana. Her father, Mark Stratton, was an ordained minister who conducted three services every Sunday at the little church which stood on the corner of his farm.

Stratton's Christian ethic was an active one. He donated the land for the church, a cemetery and a country school and participated in their construction. As the father of twelve children, he also furnished a large share of the congregation and the student body. He, his wife Mary Schallenberger Stratton, and three of their children are buried in the cemetery which he helped to clear.

In addition to being an ardent student of the Bible, Stratton was also an avid reader of history and could recite whole paragraphs from the famous histories of the world. He often traveled miles to deliver sermons, lectures and talks on civic improvement and politics.

His love of beauty and order was manifest in the appearance of his farm. From him Geneva learned to love the wild things which sheltered there. He taught her to listen to the songs of the birds, to delight in their presence, and to appreciate their usefulness in protecting the fields and orchards from insect pests. Little did he dream that he was laying groundwork for a lifetime avocation, or that the little girl who listened so intently would go on to become one of the outstanding naturalists of the world.

Once, Gene remembered, when she was very small, her father tied a kerchief over her mouth, and walking very softly, lifted her up to peek in a hummingbird nest where two tiny eggs glimmered like irridescent pearls.

From her mother, "A 90 pound bit of delicate porcelain, pink as a wild rose, plump as a partridge, having a big rope of bright brown hair and bearing the loveliest name ever given a woman," the child learned the art of growing wild things . . . bluebells and star flowers, lilies and daffodils . . . which would fill her own gardens in later life.

Gene also learned from her mother the joys of a well kept house, savory meals, gracious hospitality and beautiful things to delight the eye. Like all the Stratton children, she was assigned her own duties from early childhood. She picked up the clothespins, carried chips to the woodbox and fireplace, pounded bricks into scouring dust for knives, and when she was a little older she ran errands, swept walks, fed the chickens and gathered eggs.

Mary Stratton's untimely death was preceded by failing health, so when Gene was still quite young, she came more and more under the tutelage of her father and brothers. She often followed the boys when they were plowing, eventually taking to the shade of the fence-row for a nap, and awakening to find birds, rabbits or other wild creatures peering into her sleepy face from the cover of the bushes.

As a farm child she enjoyed the usual pleasures of the out of doors. She earnestly planted onion sets, radishes and wildflowers in her own garden plot. She fed butterflies with sugar water on the cellar window screen and searched for bird nests. Two of her favorite playmates were Bobby, a bantam rooster, and Hezekiah, a tame blue jay whom she dressed in a coat, pants and sunbonnet.

At the age of nine Gene came face to face with tragedy for the first time when her brother Leander died. She would later immortalize him as "Laddie" in one of her books.

In 1874, when Mary Stratton's health showed no improvement, the family moved into the town of Wabash in order to be closer to a doctor. Geneva entered school for the first time, and here it was that her classmates shortened her name to "Gene", which she would continue to use throughout her life.

School was torture to the youngster after the freedom of the farm. Although she was already an avid reader, she found mathematics an anathema. After a period of adjustment, however, she became a very able student.

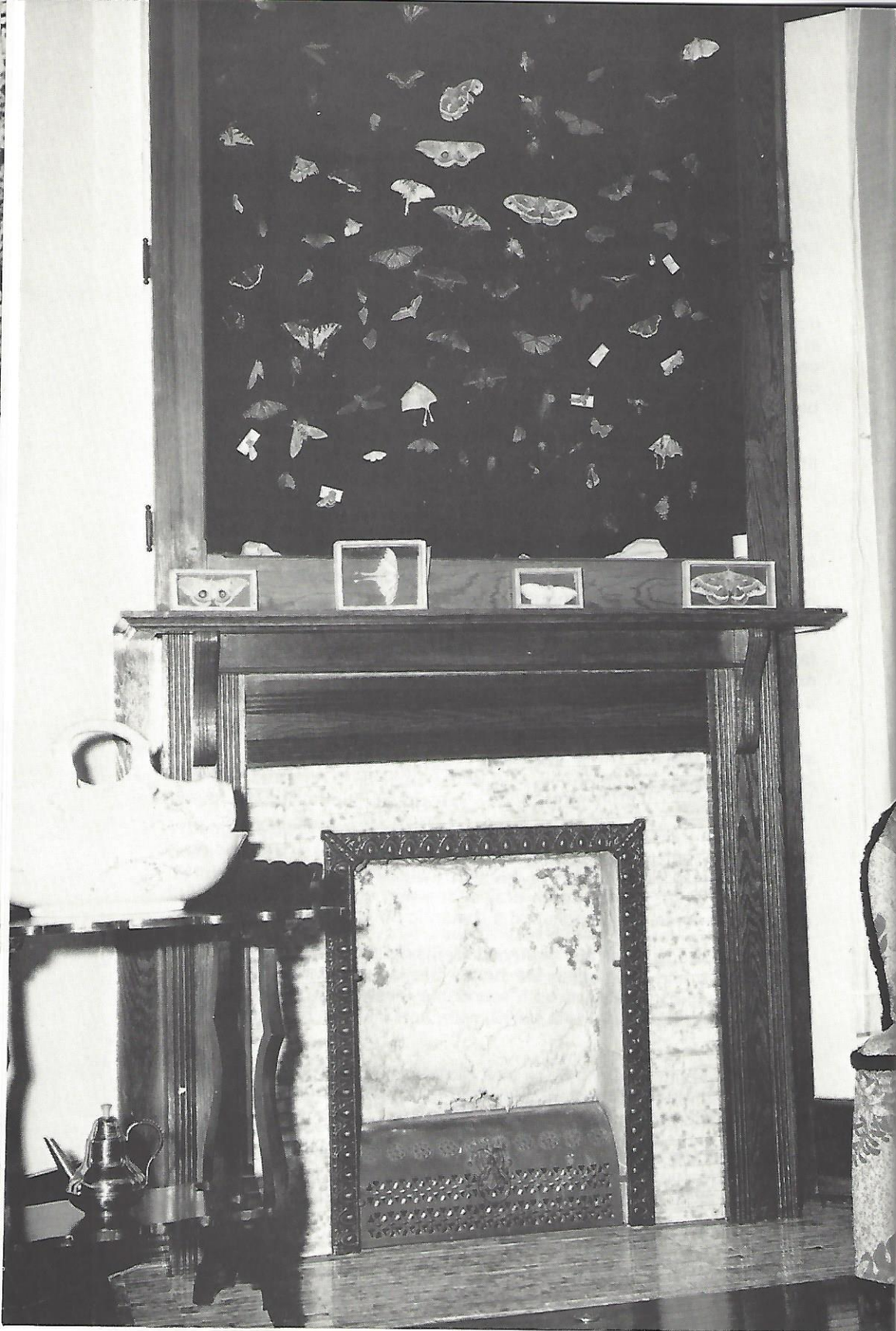
As a child, her own library consisted of only two or three books, so she frequently borrowed from her sister a favorite volume which contained "Paul and Virginia," "Undine," "Picciola," "The Vicar of Wakefield" and "Pilgrim's Progress."

"Picciola" inspired her first literary success. She was assigned to write a paper on mathematical law for rhetoric class. Not finding the assignment agreeable, she decided instead to write a review of "Picciola." When this met with praise, she was encouraged to begin a volume of verse, two novels and a romantic book of rhyme.

In 1881, Gene made her first visit to Sylvan Lake near Rome City where she would later make her home. She accompanied her sister Florence to the resort and both found the lovely lake so agreeable that they returned again in 1883 with her sister's husband, Will Compton.

The following summer Gene was destined to meet her future husband at Sylvan Lake when she visited the resort with the Rev. Wilkinson and his family.

Charles Darwin Porter, a druggist from Geneva, Indiana, was also vacationing at the lake and was struck by the lovely girl with keen gray eyes, striking brows, and beautiful dark brown hair.



After learning her name, he introduced himself and asked permission to correspond with her. Her response to his first letter was frank and inquisitive, leading to an even more engrossing series of letters, and finally to marriage.

The young couple's first home was in Decatur, where their only child Jeannette was born and Gene settled into the routine of being a wife, mother and homemaker.

After moving to Geneva, Charles Porter's business affairs flourished. He built new quarters to house his drugstore, a bank and a hotel. He organized the Bank of Geneva, serving as its first president; and when the Trenton oil fields opened, the money flowed into his enterprises.

The Porters were soon affluent enough to feel they could build a home of their own, and they soon moved into Limberlost Cabin in Geneva.

Living as they did on the fringe of the Limberlost Swamp, Gene's early love of nature found a perfect laboratory for exploration. She managed her home with care and dispatch and then treated herself to sorties into the swamp.

One story concerning Gene Stratton Porter when she lived in Geneva paints a vivid portrait of the kind of woman she had become. On a June night in 1895, fire broke out in the town's business district, and it was Gene who organized the men into a fire-fighting brigade and sped them to the fire in slippers and wet towels to protect their faces and hands from the burning timbers.

"Her hands were blistered and her feet burned and bleeding," writes Jeannette Meehan, "but her courage never faltered, and for three long hours they fought . . . and won. Mother's courage saved Dad's property and that of many others."

Even holocausts have their humorous moments, and Gene Porter liked to tell about the hotel cook whom she told to throw stove water on the steps as the fire threatened to flank the fire fighters. Several minutes later she returned to find him pouring milk on the steps.

"Why are you doing that?" she queried.

"Why, ma'am," he replied, "the water in the stove tanks was boiling hot, it wouldn't have put out the fire, so I got milk out of the icebox because it's ice cold!" Gene Porter was still chuckling when they bandaged her burning feet.

As her interest in the swamp grew, Gene turned to photography as a means of recording her finds in their natural state. With a 4x5 View camera, given to her for Christmas by her husband and daughter, she soon mastered the art so thoroughly that a manufacturer of photographic print paper sent a representative to find out how she achieved her results.

She was embarrassed to tell him that she worked in the family bathroom with the window shuttered against the light and rugs



“Dream Girl’s Bedroom”—Limberlost Cabin

stuffed into the cracks beneath the door. She finally satisfied him by saying that her success was undoubtedly due to the “wonderful water of the area and certain of its chemical properties.”

In actuality she knew that much of her success could be credited to her husband, who supplied her with the finest chemicals and personally measured them for her solutions.

Following publication of her first books, described earlier, she found the approval of her family made her work easier. Charles provided continuing encouragement and assistance. He enlisted the neighbors and townspeople to assist in Gene’s search for birds, their nests, and young. Soon farmers and their wives, school children and even men from the oil fields flocked to the Porters’ door to tell the “Bird Woman” about some strange bird or moth they had seen.

Although his own work prevented him from accompanying his wife into the swamp, Charles hired a man to help her carry her equipment, which often weighed more than 100 pounds. He provided her with a safe horse; and when he could go along, he rowed the boat, waded creeks, jumped ditches, tore down and replaced fences, climbed trees and crawled into hollow logs . . . patiently and willingly assisting her in any way he could.

In 1907, *At the Foot of the Rainbow* and *Wings* were published, and two years later *Birds of the Bible*. Then, in 1909, the book which was to make Gene Stratton Porter a major American author hit the bookstands. *A Girl of the Limberlost* won such an immense world audience that it became the first American book to be translated into Arabic. Since that time her works have been translated into seven foreign languages as well as braille and are estimated to have attracted fifty million readers.

Mrs. Porter's daughter acted as her typist until her marriage in 1909, at which time Lorene Miller, a schoolteacher, was engaged to help prepare her manuscripts.

The year 1910 brought *Music of the Wild* and a piece for the International Biblical Encyclopedia. Then she turned to the life of her father to create the central character in *The Harvester*. In 1912, *Moths of the Limberlost*, illustrated with beautiful watercolors and photographs, was published. The following year she finished *Laddie*, a highly biographical novel in which the central character was modeled after the brother she lost in childhood.

At about this time ditches were being built to drain the Limberlost to make it suitable for muck crops, and the great stands of timber were being harvested. This destruction of her favorite study area reminded Mrs. Porter of the undisturbed beauty of Sylvan Lake where she had spent so many happy days as a young woman.

The Porters soon purchased 150 acres of land along the lake shore, which they called "Wildflower Woods" and turned into a sanctuary for all sorts of birds and wildflowers. Here they built a new home, similar to the Limberlost cabin, and moved there permanently in 1914.

Mrs. Porter promptly busied herself in perfecting her "Eden." She hired tree surgeons to cut out dead trees around the home and to fill cavities in all of the trees. At the rear of the house she laid out a garden for vegetables and "tame" flowers. By actual count she brought in and set the roots of 3,000 plants, trees, shrubs and vines during her first two years at Wildflower Woods.

The following year Mrs. Porter paid a visit to her daughter and son-in-law in Philadelphia, and Jeannette vividly recalls the incident which inspired her mother's next story *Michael O'Halloran*. On the way home from a shopping trip, the mother and daughter were asked by a newsboy to buy a paper. When they paid no attention and hurried on their way, the boy ran alongside Mrs. Porter, looking up at her "with appealing brown eyes."

"You have a kind face, lady. Far down the street I saw you coming, lady, and I thought you'd surely buy a paper!" Gene Porter bought *all* of the boy's papers and immortalized the incident in print.



On her return home, she completed an expanded revision of *What I Have Done With Birds* and it was published in 1917 under the title *Friends in Feathers. A Daughter of the Land*, a semi-biographical work drawn from her life on the farm, appeared in 1918, and the following year the publication of *Homing with the Birds* brought a letter of high commendation from the world-renowned author Christopher Morley.

At this time, several changes occurred in Gene Stratton Porter's life. The film industry was negotiating for rights to several of her books, and after a visit to the East in the summer of 1919, she went to California to discuss these arrangements. In order to be more available for consultation she purchased a small house there and started work on another book.

She returned to Wildflower Woods in the spring and spent the summer getting her new work ready for publication. She wrote the following about her work during the preceding winter:

"All winter I have been at work on a book. I am a little in doubt about its being the 'great American novel'; that is such an elusive bird. I should love to snare it; but I fear this is just a plain little story cut clean from the pages of life as I have seen it lived, with no romancing and no sentimentalizing: which is an innovation for me. Some way, with the pressure of the war on, I could not write just as I always have, the bare facts would uncover; but it has, I think you will grant it, a quality of vigor and freshness. It will be out in mid-August . . . At least it has the usual qualification of my work . . . truth. I have done my best, and I hope you will find it a great improvement over some of my former efforts. I surely like to be a growing thing. I know there are clean, moral, homekeeping men and women, and of such I choose to write. I know there are plenty of the other kind, also, but they have their writers in plenty to chronicle their salacious doings. Why should I?"

At this time Gene Stratton Porter was 56 years of age, and her chosen vocation was making demands on her which were difficult to satisfy from her home at Rome City. Since her husband felt it necessary to remain in Indiana, Mrs. Porter had to make a difficult decision. She finally decided to establish residency in California in 1920; however, she continued to make regular visits to Wildflower Woods, and she and Charles maintained an amicable relationship until her death. Charles Porter died in 1926.

During her first two years in California, so many offers for her work came in that she had little time to plan the building of a new home. The motion picture industry besieged her with requests to film *Girl of the Limberlost* and *Michael O'Halloran*, and she was also writing for *McCalls* and *Good Housekeeping* magazines. At the same time her first volume of poetry, *The Firebird*, was also at the printers.



Living Room—Wildflower Woods

In a departure from her customary style Mrs. Porter wrote *The White Flag* which, probably because of its rather seamy realism, was not as popular with her regular readers.

In 1923, *Jesus of Emerald* was published, a poem based on a description of Christ she had unearthed while researching *Birds of the Bible*. In the "afterword" she wrote, "In the economy of nature, nothing is ever lost. I cannot believe that the soul of man shall prove the one exception."

Early in 1924 plans for two homes, one on Catalina Island and one in Bel-Air, were completed. The one at Catalina was equipped as a summer workshop. The Bel Air property, intended as winter quarters, was situated on five acres of land in the hills six miles from the ocean.

"There is a pair of mockingbirds courting on the chimney straight in my line of vision, and back of them are the Gothic spires of one of the most beautiful churches in the world, and back of them are the Santa Monica hills."

Keeper of the Bees was conceived and written in her Catalina garden, as was *The Magic Garden*. The latter dealt with the children of divorced parents, a condition with which she felt acute sympathy in light of her own secure childhood. This book is said to have been completed by her daughter after Mrs. Porter's death.

In the 21 years since her first book was published, Gene Stratton Porter had completed nineteen books and numerous articles and short stories. Hollywood had adapted three of her works for the screen. But she still continued to write, tend her garden, feed the wild creatures near her home, do the makeup, layout, photography and some watercolor illustrations for her books, and answer the voluminous mail which came to her.

In November of 1924, having completed the work she had planned at Catalina, Mrs. Porter returned to Los Angeles to spend Thanksgiving with Jeannette and her family.

Then at dusk on an early December evening, Mrs. Porter's chauffeur rushed into her Bel Air home with a nasty gash on his forehead and asked the housekeeper to call Jeannette.

His news was tragic. Just a few blocks from home, their car had stalled and was struck by a streetcar. Mrs. Porter lay in the wreckage . . . a motionless shape huddled beneath a blanket, the great grey eyes gazing unseeing into the night sky. The "Bird Woman" never regained consciousness.

Her daughter wrote in *The Lady of the Limberlost*

"As I look back over the years, it appears to me that the two most noticeable things about mother were her eyes and her hands. Her eyes were clear, cool gray, with brown splotches. They had a piercing quality when she gazed straight at you that penetrated to the very depths of your soul, and she read character almost infallibly . . . the thing that struck me most forcibly as Mother lay sleeping was the absolute quiet of her hands . . . Hers were such busy hands . . . they fluttered over everything, the velvet cheek or the silky curls of a baby . . . the down on a butterfly wing, or the grain in a beautiful piece of wood . . . In the old days, when we did field work together, I have seen her stop the horse, clamber down from the buggy, and straighten a wild flower, broken by some careless foot, pat the dirt around it, prop it up with a stick or stone, straighten the petals and leaves carefully, and give it a drink from her thermos bottle."

Mrs. Porter herself wrote,

"I have waded shallow rivers, fought the quicksand on lake shores, worked for days in the slime of swamps and marshes, and in high trees. I have carried forty pound cameras and ten foot ladders across plowed fields from the first dove of March to the latest migrants of October, and through the snow and ice, picturing winter birds in any location, but strictly in accordance with their natures, taking sufficient time and patience until they became so accustomed to me that they would live out their lives before my lenses."

Decades later, hundreds of Gene Stratton Porter's readers still enjoy the serenity and beauty of the world she depicted so well in her books, and many visit her homes in Geneva and Sylvan Lake to see for themselves the world which inspired her work.

Limberlost Cabin



Gene Stratton Porter and her husband designed and built "Limberlost Cabin" in 1894. Here, she wrote her early nature articles and completed her first book, *The Song of the Cardinal*.

The Porters named their new home for the great swamp which stretched in unbroken swale, underbrush, trees and marsh for many square miles south of the town.

The two-story home is constructed of cedar logs from Wisconsin, mitered at the corners and chinked with cement. The upper story and roof are shingled with redwood shakes stained to the color of the logs below.

There are 14 rooms in the house. The entrance hall, dining room and library are paneled in quarter-sawed oak ordered especially for the home from mills at Kokomo. Also on the first floor are a conservatory, music room, two bedrooms, kitchen and bath. Four additional bedrooms are on the second floor.

Since Mrs. Porter wrote of the lives and locales familiar to her, those familiar with her books will recognize the "Dream Girl's Porch and Bedroom", "Freckle's window", and the "Harvester's fireplace." A portion of Mrs. Porter's collection of mounted moths and much of her furniture and memorabilia are also preserved here.

Limberlost Cabin was presented to the State of Indiana in 1947 by the Limberlost Conservation Association of Geneva. It has been maintained by the State as "Limberlost State Memorial" since then. The Memorial is open year round, and there is a small admission charge.

Wildflower Woods

In 1913, Gene Stratton Porter's beloved Limberlost Swamp was drained, and she ranged the countryside seeking a new site for her home and work. She found what she was looking for near Sylvan Lake, where a virgin forest harboured an endless variety of flora and fauna.

Here the Porters built a new cabin of Wisconsin white cedar logs, much like the old one. Local wild cherry, hand-rubbed and waxed, was used to panel the entrance hall and dining room, while maple and hard pine trimmed the upper rooms.

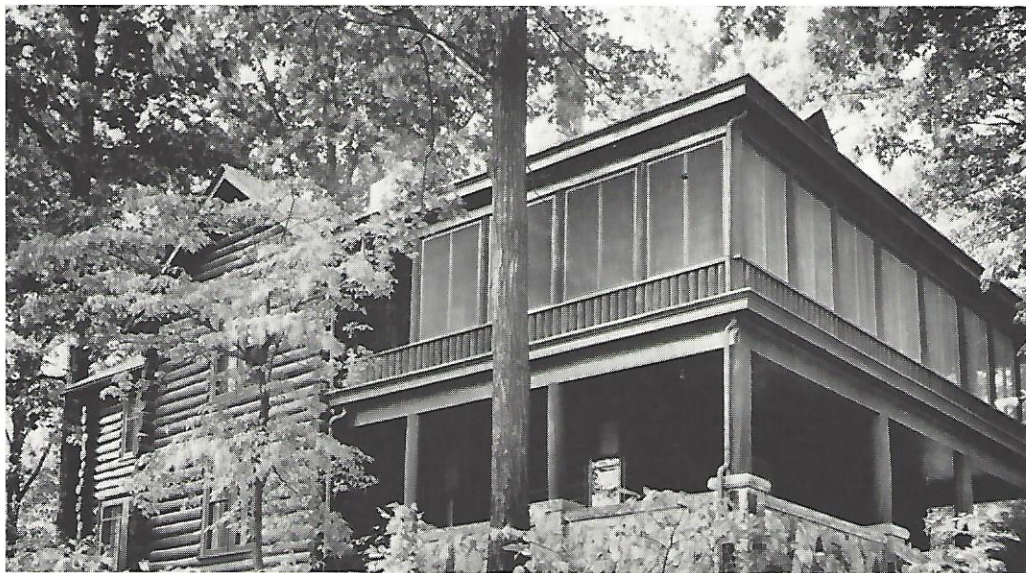
Among the notable features of the home is a living room fireplace which contains a number of miniature carved stone Aztec heads, collected in Mexico by Charles Porter.

Two owls, designed by Mrs. Porter and carved from Bedford limestone, adorn the entrance posts at the main gate.

The house contains 14 rooms—six rooms and a photographic darkroom on the first floor and seven bedrooms on the second.

Gene Stratton Porter's library may now be seen in her study at Wildflower Woods, through the generosity of the author's daughter, Mrs. Jeannette Porter Meehan, who gave the reference works to the Memorial in 1950. Much of the Porters' furniture and memorabilia are also on display at the Memorial.

Mrs. Porter's home in Wildflower Woods is now known as the "Gene Stratton Porter State Memorial". It is open to the public year round, and there is a small admission charge.



Books By Gene Stratton Porter

TITLE	YEAR PUBLISHED	WHERE WRITTEN
<i>NOVELS</i>		
THE SONG OF THE CARDINAL	1903	Geneva
FRECKLES	1904	"
AT THE FOOT OF THE RAINBOW	1907	"
A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST	1909	"
THE HARVESTER	1911	"
LADDIE	1913	"
MICHAEL O'HALLORAN	1915	Rome City
A DAUGHTER OF THE LAND	1918	"
HER FATHER'S DAUGHTER	1921	"
THE WHITE FLAG	1923	Los Angeles, Cal.
THE KEEPER OF THE BEES	1925*	Catalina Island, Cal.
THE MAGIC GARDEN	1927*	"
<i>NATURE STUDIES</i>		
WHAT I HAVE DONE WITH BIRDS	1907	Geneva
WINGS	1907	"
BIRDS OF THE BIBLE	1909	"
MUSIC OF THE WILD	1910	"
MOTHS OF THE LIMBERLOST	1912	"
HOMING WITH THE BIRDS	1919	Rome City
TALES YOU WON'T BELIEVE	1925*	Catalina Island, Cal.
<i>FOR CHILDREN</i>		
MORNING FACE	1916	Rome City
<i>POEMS AND ESSAYS</i>		
THE FIRE BIRD	1922	Los Angeles, Cal.
JESUS OF THE EMERALD	1923	"
LET US HIGHLY RESOLVE	1927*	"

Mrs. Porter also wrote numerous magazine articles and stories.

* Published Posthumously



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