

Gene Stratton-Porter: Great Visionary Naturalist

Delivered to Quest Club

(Virtually via Zoom)

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Having lived through nearly a dozen Quest papers in the making, between spouse, friends and colleagues, I approached the assignment of my first Quest paper with both anticipation and a bit of trepidation. Would I get a subject at least interesting to me? Would I be forced to research a subject anathema to my liberal arts mindset? **Slide 1.** Imagine my delight when “Gene Stratton-Porter: Great Visionary Naturalist” was thrust upon me! This was an exemplary Hoosier and I was thrilled to delve into her life and times. Thank you to the Quester who submitted this fascinating paper topic. As I gleefully mentioned my topic to unsuspecting collaborators, I immediately heard stories of how her life impacted and informed them.

Slide 2 Extremely close to home, an original 1904 copy of *Freckles*, complete with broken spine showing it had been well read, was living in our basement, a relic of the Haines family library. My mother-in-law who was visiting at the time unearthed it when she heard my topic because she was certain she’d seen it “down there.” It had been given to her young uncle, ten-year-old Karl Spence Latimer of Syracuse, New York. **Slide 3** Pasted inside the book was a small clipping from a long-ago newspaper entitled “Who She Is” with word of explanation for young Karl, “Many persons who have read the novel *Freckles*, a dramatization of which will be played at the Bastable (Theatre) for the remainder of the week, have asked, ‘Who is Gene Stratton-Porter?’ and to those and others it will be interesting to know that she is Mrs. Gene Stratton-Porter of Geneva, Ind., and is one of the most notable women in the West. As a naturalist she takes rank with the foremost in America, and as an author she has achieved remarkable success. Mrs. Porter’s cabin is a luxurious log cabin containing 14 rooms and is located in sight of the Limberlost swamp, and Mrs. Porter herself is the Bird Woman who figured so prominently in

Freckles, while her daughter, Miss Jeannette, is the Swamp Angel. It was while making a series of studies of a nest of vultures in the Limberlost Swamp that she obtained the material for *Freckles*.”

That is the basis of everything, in one little paragraph! My search led me in ever-widening circles. Shortly after receiving my topic, an article about Pandy Selking **Slide 4**, a Decatur seamstress who specializes in recreating the many different outfits worn by Gene, appeared in the Fort Wayne *Journal Gazette*. The article featured many photos of her creations and led to me meeting Pandy **Slide 5** and hearing about Gene’s influence on her life and career. It also led to my purchase of one of her “movie producer” dresses **Slide 6** that I had hoped to model for all of you in person today, but since you can only see me from the shoulders up, this photo will have to do **Slide 7**. All Questers should know by now that it would not be a Haines paper without a costume!

Many Questers have influenced this paper. My email to Todd Pelfrey resulted in a connection to Terri Gorney, our local GSP expert as well as to the material used as reference regarding Gene’s life in Fort Wayne. Betsy Yankowiak and Angie Quinn provided some thoughts on wetlands and Gene’s influence as a naturalist. Adie Baach provided pronunciation assistance and Mick McCollum’s 2007 paper on wetlands was a helpful read. And Steve Smith’s phone call last week telling me that he currently owns one of Gene’s former residences on Sylvan Lake was yet another fascinating coincidence.

Gene and her family owned homes within walking distance of my Foster Park office; her Limberlost Cabin in Geneva **Slide 8** is conveniently located midway between our home and our daughter's in Richmond. Even in a pandemic, this cabin, a state historic site, was staffed and Bruce and I enjoyed a fabulous private tour by Teresa Fravel-Cox, a glorious docent who brought Gene to life. Gene's Sylvan Lake Cabin at Wildflower Woods was once intimately toured by a colleague of mine as a young boy with relatives who served as caretakers there; his recollections led to reading Gene's story "The Last Passenger Pigeon." Another colleague told me that a home on his Wildwood Avenue block **Slide 9** was once owned by Gene, who bought it for her daughter. I can foresee that my Pandora's Box of GSP will continue to generate nuggets of knowledge and interest for years to come.

Somehow, I had grown up never reading any of her works, but authors I've read have been inspired by her, including J.K. Rowling, who was a huge fan of Gene's. It would not surprise me if many Questers have their own stories to relate about Gene Stratton-Porter and I look forward to hearing those.

There are many ways to organize a biography to provide insight into the life of a remarkable person. This one will revolve around the topic as assigned: Gene Stratton-Porter: Great Visionary Naturalist.

We shall begin with “Great.”

In 1863, Geneva Grace Stratton was born on her family’s Hopewell Farm in Lagro, Indiana, smack in the middle of the Civil War. She was the last of 12 children, born to loving, devoted and rather mature parents. Mary Stratton was 46 and Mark Stratton was 50 when Geneva Grace arrived. **Slide 10** By all accounts, her mother was an inspiration, a talented and artistic woman of Dutch descent who could not only keep a beautiful home and thriving family, but also was a talented plant nurturer who obviously passed her gift of working with plants, flowers and trees to her daughter. Sadly, Mary Stratton died when Geneva was 12 and the loss was immense.

Gene’s father was of British descent. **Slide 11** Mark Stratton was well-read, a clear thinker and possessed a tenacious memory. He was a farmer, a Methodist minister and a guardian and helpmate to his fellow citizens. Gene’s parents were her first and primary teachers, and the beautiful Hopewell Farm was her first schoolhouse. Instead of a desk, she sat under trees and followed fencerows in her pursuit of birds, moths and butterflies. She had her own corner garden where she grew vegetables, flowers and more. Both parents encouraged her love and nurture of birds, with her mother bestowing the name Bird Woman and her father conferring upon her the ownership of every bird on their property.

Her unconventional early education, was aided by forays into the fields with her father and brothers. She invested her time quietly caring for baby birds and learning to be a trusted agent to a mother bird so that she might be allowed to peep into a nest and offer morsels of insects, crumbs and fruit as a peace offering. At home she had a few books of her own, and ready access to the schoolbooks of her older siblings, as well as to her father's daily recitation of the Bible, and discussion of the Great Books of which he was so fond.

Writing later of her father she said, "He has had me well educated in the necessary and artificial things of life." (Gene Stratton Porter Collection)

As her mother's health deteriorated, the family moved from their beloved Hopewell Farm to the city of Wabash, so they could be nearer to medical facilities. At this point, Geneva began attending school and she immersed herself into the many magazines and books that were available to her. As told in Ewart's "A Little Story of the Life and World and Ideals of 'The Bird Woman,'" she especially loved one collection and described it thus: "The one volume in which my heart was enwrapt was a collection of masterpieces of fiction belonging to my eldest sister. It contained 'Paul and Virginia,' 'Undine,' 'Picciola,' 'The Vicar of Wakefield,' 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and several others I soon learned by heart, and the reading and rereading of those exquisitely expressed and conceived stories may have done much in forming high conceptions of what really constitutes literature and in furthering the lofty ideals instilled by my parents. One of

these stories formed the basis of my first publicly recognized literary effort." (Ewart, pp 14-15). Indeed, this collection of stories led Gene into one of her first forays in doing something her own way. A school assignment called for her to prepare and present a paper on Mathematical Law. Loathe to research this, she wrote, "I put off the work until my paper had been called for several times, and so came to Thursday night with excuses and not a line," she remembered. "I was told to bring my work the next morning without fail. I went home in hot anger. Why in all this beautiful world, would they not allow me to do something I could do, and let any one of four members of my class who reveled in mathematics do my subject? That evening I was distracted. 'I can't do a paper on mathematics, and I won't!' I said stoutly; 'but I'll do such a paper on a subject I can write about as will open their foolish eyes and make them see how wrong they are.'" (Ewart, pp 15-16).

She wrote an astounding paper on "Picciola" by Saintine. When the time came for her to deliver it, it was so acclaimed by her peers and principal that he told Geneva to wait after she had begun and he returned with the superintendent and asked her to begin again. Gene wrote, "One instant the room was in laughter, the next the boys bowed their heads, and the girls who had forgotten their handkerchiefs cried in their aprons. For almost sixteen big foolscap pages I held them, and I was eager to go on and tell them more about it when I reached the last line. Never again was a subject forced upon me." (Ewart, pp 17-18) I think Gene would have made a marvelous Quester.

Though Gene missed the last three months of school due to the illness and death of a sister and never actually graduated from high school, she was a lifelong learner and also had parental encouragement to study music and art. Her siblings had been to college, in which Gene was not interested, and she wrote, “What small measure of success I have had has come through preserving my individual point of view, method of expression, and following in after life the Spartan regulations of my girlhood home. Whatever I have been able to do, has been done through the line of education my father saw fit to give me, and through his and my mother's methods of rearing me.” (Ewart, p 18). It is notable, however that as her writing career progressed, she had critics who disparaged her nature studies because of her lack of proper credentials. Later in the paper I’ll address her creative handling of this obstacle.

Another great story about Gene is how she met her husband, Charles Dorwin Porter. **Slide 12**

As Questers will no doubt recall from Kory Klosterman’s fascinating paper on Chautauquas a few weeks ago, these events were places to see and be seen, all while being educated.

Unfortunately, though the Sylvan Lake Chautauqua was the place where Charles first set eyes on Gene, she took no notice of him there. At age 20, she was recuperating from a bad fall and she was fast friends with another girl who also enjoyed unladylike pursuits in the water and woods. Several months passed and Charles took the bold step of writing to Gene without the benefit of an in-person introduction. Despite his decidedly awkward mis-use of Genevieve instead of Geneva in his salutation, he professed, “Having been rather favorably impressed with your appearance, I venture the forwardness to address you. Barring the rules of etiquette and asking your pardon, I would respectfully solicit a correspondence from you. . . . We will trust to

Fate for the outcome.” He shrewdly introduced some personal references in the letter who could vouch for him and ended by asking, “May I hope to have a line from you? Or do you think I have over reached all bounds of propriety as a great many young (and old ones as well) Americans have done before me?”

Gene took a full ten days to reply and offered a soft rebuke on her name, which she explained was “just Geneva, or among my friends, Gene.” She lamented the absence of her mother to provide advice on how or if she should respond to his letter, but admitted to remembering “the general outline of your face and figure.” She agreed to correspond, but wrote, “I cannot exactly see any harm, but won’t you please not ask me to write again unless you are certain you can respect me as much as if you had formed my acquaintance in the authorized way?” She ended her missive with this: “I scarcely know why I have written you; a woman’s greatest reason is sometimes, ‘because!’ But I hope you will be pleased and if I’ve been good to write you a long, long letter at an early date, go thou and do likewise.” (Gene Stratton Porter Collection).

Charles and Gene’s courtship thus commenced. Charles was considered a catch. He was a well-to-do and respected druggist, businessman and more. They married in 1886 when Gene was 23 and Charles was 36. They settled in Decatur, setting up housekeeping in his family’s homestead and then moved to Geneva in 1888. Theirs was an unconventional relationship for the time. She reveled in being Mrs. C.D. Porter and in keeping house. Jeanette was born in 1887, ten days after Gene’s 24th birthday. Charles’ business affairs often kept him in Decatur and away from

home for stretches of time but when with her, they often went to the sometimes dangerous Limberlost Swamp together to learn more about an area that held great fascination for Gene. She wore her unconventional but practical “men’s clothes” and Charles helped by toting heavy equipment in and out of the swamp. They packed guns in case of snakes or worse.

Charles took Gene to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. They returned sufficiently inspired by what they had seen and immediately set to work to plan and build the 14-room Limberlost Cabin in Geneva, which today serves as an Indiana State Museum historic site **Slides 13-14-15**. At the time, Gene was around 30 years old. Touring this beautiful home is a treat. Gene’s writing area, her moths and her greenhouse solarium all are available to tour as if no time had passed and I half expected her to come out of the kitchen during the visit.

Slide 16 This home was truly the heart of her work. In 1895, at age 32 she began writing and publishing nature articles based on the plants, birds and animals she was able to befriend in the nearby Limberlost Swamp. In this home she had a tremendous moth collection and spent hours monitoring and chronicling them, sometimes sleeping in the same room where she could hear them as they were scratching their way out of their cocoons. She grew cuttings and plants in her own solarium. She drew and painted and at Christmas in 1895 she received as a gift from her daughter and husband her first camera, which she immediately set out to master. And master it she did. **Slides 17-18** Her nature articles were some of the first to ever be illustrated by photographs of live specimens; the practice in that day was to photograph birds that had

been killed and then stuffed. Gene thought this abhorrent and often spent days or weeks in the woods getting the perfect shot to accompany her work and she felt it her duty to provide the best work possible. She also learned how to develop her own photographs, turning her kitchen and bathrooms into darkrooms and using her best turkey platters as developing baths. At one point, executives from a photographic print paper company came to visit her to learn how she was able to provide such fine work, but she was embarrassed to tell them the truth and attributed her excellent results to the unique qualities of Indiana water.

Now, we shall move to "Visionary."

Gene was ahead of her time in a multitude of ways. Born to older parents who left her to her own devices on many occasions, she had the opportunity to be self-sufficient and inquisitive, and was supported in these efforts. Nature and nurture filled her heart, soul and mind in such a way that she imagined her future and then made it happen.

Being a good wife and mother was important to Gene, and she took pride in her housekeeping skills that were imparted to her as a very young girl by her mother, but she longed for more.

She wanted to write and publish her nature studies. She envisioned that being financially independent could go hand-in-hand with motherhood. She wrote, "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 even knew I was working. I argued that if I kept my family so comfortable that they missed nothing from their usual routine, it was my right to do what I could toward furthering my personal ambitions in what time I could save from my housework. And until I could earn enough to hire capable people to take my place, I held rigidly to that rule. I who waded morass, fought quicksands, crept, worked from ladders high in air, and crossed water on improvised rafts without a tremor, slipped with many misgivings into the post office and rented a box for myself, so that if I met with failure my husband and the men in the bank need not know what I had attempted. " (Ewart, p 24) Gene was truly a strong and determined woman who knew what she wanted. **Slide 19**

I cannot say that she was the first woman to hyphenate her last name, but she was one of the earliest pioneers of using both her maiden and married names. Her name in itself is unusual. Born as Geneva Grace Stratton, it was shortened early in life to Geneve, and by the time she met her husband, she was referring to herself as Gene, and Charles sometimes referred to her as Genie. Once married, she referred to herself as Mrs. Charles Porter, but signed legal documents as Geneva S. Porter. When she began writing, she referred to herself as Gene Stratton Porter. Many people assumed she was a man. Stories abound regarding her first publishers being shocked when they met in person and discovered she was a female and demanded that her husband sign some early contracts on her behalf.

Gene's greatest desire was to write nature studies but she was not taken seriously by the establishment. In order to get around this, she wrote popular novels with likeable and upstanding characters and lush natural backdrops as a way to get her non-fiction published. That little clipping from Syracuse indeed called her a naturalist, but most folks knew her as a novelist. Gene's pragmatism made her see that experts in the world of science would never take her seriously as a scientific chronicler of nature, but her visionary abilities knew that she was capable of great work in this area. To solve the problem, once she established herself as a prolific and profitable novelist, she advocated for her nature studies to be published by promising to write a novel for each piece of non-fiction and her publishers were more than willing to acquiesce. Ironically, she objected to a similar practice she encountered later in her career as a movie producer when she discovered that some film distributors wanted her movies to serve as the starring attraction in a package of lesser-quality productions.

Her clout as an author and as an independently wealthy woman allowed her to take on Hollywood. She wasn't satisfied with the movies made of her books, so she became a movie producer in order to make sure that her stories were true to their roots. Twenty-three films have been made from her eleven novels, five of them by her own Gene Stratton-Porter Productions, one, if not the first, of the woman-owned film studios. Several of her books were made into more than one movie. *Freckles* became a movie four times and there have been three separate productions of *A Girl of the Limberlost*. Her characters and settings were important to her and she felt obliged to present characters who were wholesome and represented Midwest values. Of *A Girl of the Limberlost*, Gene wrote, "This comes fairly close to

my idea of a good book. No possible harm can be done by anyone in reading it.” (Morrow, p 81) Indeed, most critics were enthusiastic of her lovable and plucky female characters. And the public was smitten. “Only 55 books published between 1895 and 1945 sold upwards of one million copies. Gene Stratton-Porter wrote five of those books—far more than any other author of her time.” (Aalto)

There is an exception, however, to her sugary characters. In *Her Father's Daughter*, published in 1921, the heroine makes decidedly racist remarks about a Japanese classmate (Aalto).

She was a visionary in terms of her homes as well. Gene's Limberlost Cabin was much celebrated for its unique characteristics and forward-thinking design and Gene enjoyed it very much. But she had a desire for a new home. As she gained fame, people often peeked through her windows and trampled her grounds, much to her dismay. She also had the desire to pay for a home independently. Charles' money had built Limberlost Cabin and she had bowed to some of his wishes in building it. If she paid for this new one herself, there were no such restrictions. She wanted it to have all the bells and whistles she desired.

Her second “cabin” at Sylvan Lake in Rome City **Slide 20** was larger and grander than the Limberlost Cabin in Geneva. Her desire was for the Cabin at Wildflower Woods to be a more remote retreat and enable her to use her skills as a home designer to fashion a new home that

allowed more fully for her photographic and nature pursuits. Quester Steve Smith now lives in a nearby home on Sylvan Lake that belonged to Gene while she was building her dream cabin. He told me how a small ferry would transport her to and from the building site each day.

Not only did Gene create a wonderful home, but the woods around the home literally blossomed under her care. Bertrand Richards wrote of this, "By 1916, the same ravages which had destroyed the Limberlost in Adams County were to threaten the new Limberlost around Wildflower Woods in Noble County. Drainage ditches were planned and were actually cut, lowering the levels of the natural lakes so abundant in the region. Fortunately, Sylvan Lake was a man-made lake and was little affected by the drainage project. Its immediate area and particularly the swampy portion of her holdings were safe from destruction. And so it was that when her efforts to oppose the drainage project failed, she began her frantic struggle to move to the protection of her own land for its preservation all the native flora she possibly could. She had selected her site with the thought in mind that it represented the best of swamp and forest and lake land. She had planned from the start to concentrate in one area the widely scattered flowers, shrubs and trees which in nature are not so concentrated, and she had worked consistently but not hurriedly toward this goal. How well she fought can be seen by the visitor to Wildflower Woods. . . . Many of the plants she brought in have established themselves and are found in a greater profusion than in almost any other section of the state." (Richards, pp 34-35) Dr. Bruce Kingsbury, professor of biology and director of the Environmental Resources Center at Purdue Fort Wayne, teaches Indiana Master Naturalist courses at Wildflower Woods,

and told me that contemporary natural history education is still occurring at this spot.

(Kingsbury)

By 1923, after visiting for extended periods, Gene was determined to make California her permanent home. Richards summarized it nicely: “She purchased land on Catalina Island and in the Los Angeles suburbs and started the construction of a summer home and ‘workshop’ on the island and a winter, or permanent, home on her ‘baby mountain’ overlooking the city and ocean. The island house was completed and occupied for one season; the mainland home was not yet finished at her death. That popular writing in the first quarter of the twentieth century was not only popular but profitable can be established by the fact that each of these homes cost in the neighborhood of a half million dollars.” (Richards, pg 37) **Slide 21** And in her own visionary way, her second California property was at 395 Madrono Lane. This magnificent new home was the very first in an area she was sure would become popular: Bel Air.

Let’s move to “Naturalist.”

Gene was a born naturalist. Her parents and family were early adherents of not taking more than was needed from nature and replenishing what you did take. In the story, “The Last Passenger Pigeon,” Gene recounts searching for quail eggs as a young girl. The children were taught that if the quail egg was germinating, then by all means leave it be. But if was fresh, they

were allowed to bring it home to hard boil and consume as a delicious treat. She wrote, "But by the time I was ten years of age, we began to notice that quail were growing scarcer, so the edict went forth that no more eggs must be eaten and no more traps must be set. Father had discovered by bitter experience that when the quail were not ranging freely through his grain fields, bugs and insect pests were damaging his grain until his crops were not so large as when the birds had been more numerous. These things he studied out and began to pass along to his neighbours, even to put in his sermons that he preached in the pulpit. He began to see even that long ago that the springs were drying up, that the creeks were nearly dry in summer, that the rivers and lakes were lowering in volume, and from that time on our whole family began to practice and to preach conservation along every line." (Stratton-Porter)

Her father was similarly inclined toward Passenger Pigeons and never allowed them to be trapped or shot by his family, even though they were more numerous than quail. She tells of watching the pigeons disappear in her own lifetime, along with the desecration of forests around her family farm. These and related events in her life had strong effects on her regard for the importance of nature in the environment. She saw for herself the consequences of human destruction around her.

One of Gene's first published articles was the result of her decision to no longer adhere to the fashion of hats trimmed with bird feathers, and sometimes, whole stuffed birds. By the late 1890s the demand was so rampant it was estimated that five million birds were killed each

year. Like many women, Gene had enjoyed wearing hats decorated with bird parts. But as she grew aware of the issue, she resolved to never wear such trimmings again and began to speak out about the practice. Not long after a public display in a millinery shop where she used scissors to cut all the offending parts off a hat she had just purchased, she submitted an article to *Recreation* magazine “recounting her experience and suggesting that women’s hats be trimmed in peacock feathers or ostrich plumes, which could be gathered without harming birds.” Her article appeared in February 1900. At the age of 36, she had finally launched her publishing career.” (Morrow, p 69)

In a March 2020 article in *Smithsonian* magazine, Kathryn Aalto summarized: “For seven years Gene delved into everything moth-related, and this influenced not only her novel *A Girl of the Limberlost*—the teenage Elnora and her widowed mother emerge from metaphorical cocoons to become their better selves—but also her nonfiction *Moths of the Limberlost*, which included reproductions of her painstakingly hand-colored photographs. ‘Her observations are scientifically valuable, her narrative is entertaining, her enthusiasm catching, and her revelations so stimulating that one readily forgives some minor defects in bookmaking,’ said a review in the *New York Times*. (Today, dozens of her moths and butterflies are on display at her old Limberlost cabin, including a spicebush swallowtail butterfly, a red admiral and an io moth suspended in flight.)” (Aalto)

She fought a valiant battle to protect the Limberlost in her belief “that rainfall would be affected by the destruction of forests and swamps. Conservationists such as John Muir had linked deforestation to erosion, but she linked it to climate change.” (Aalto) Gene mourned the loss of the Limberlost, where draining began as early as 1890. She also fought for the lakes and other wetlands.

Generally credited with playing a large part in its restoration due to her fervent advocacy, her pursuits made the name “Limberlost” world famous. Naturalist Curt Burnette wrote that not only are there myriad instances of Limberlost in and around Adams County, but his research has found Limberlosts in other Indiana cities, and in Michigan, Illinois, Tennessee, Arizona, Virginia, Ontario and South Africa. (Burnette) I’m certain there are Questers who are familiar with the local Limberlost Girl Scout Council, which now is known as the Girl Scouts of Northern Indiana-Michiana.

I believe that Gene would be in the thick of the current discussion about saving wetlands in our region. In the Perspectives section of the Fort Wayne *Journal Gazette* on Valentine’s Day of this year, three separate op-eds touch on the issue that is in the news as the Indiana legislature debates and votes on bills regarding the interests of private ownership and environmental conservation. Indeed, in his op-ed “Draining the Swamp,” Phil Bloom references Gene Stratton-Porter and her work to save the Limberlost Swamp and Loblolly Marsh. Gene would have been dealing with these two potentially conflicting interests herself. “Despite all her rustic pursuits,

Stratton-Porter was no stranger to the prerogatives of wealth, both hers (from book sales) and her husband's. Ironically, perhaps, while she was writing about the disappearance of the Limberlost, Charles was adding to his fortune selling oil from (the many) wells on his farm" (in Adams County). (Aalto)

And there is so much more.

Personally, I was interested in knowing how our fair city of Fort Wayne may have played a part in Gene's life. Terri Gorney explained that based on her reading of society pages at the time, the town figured rather heavily in her life. Because Charles was reluctant to let on to his Decatur family and neighbors that he was corresponding with a young woman, he used his Fort Wayne address in his letters to and from her. Charles' family lived and worked in Fort Wayne and he had regular business in town. Most of their dating took place in Fort Wayne and involved regular use of trains. She shopped in Fort Wayne and her family owned homes in the Southwood and Foster Park areas. Gene owned a home on Forest Park for many years and she purchased one on Wildwood for Jeanette in the hope that Jeanette would leave her unsuitable first husband and "come home." The Fort Wayne Allen County Historical Society even chronicled Gene's parasol in their bicentennial issue of the *Old Fort News*.

In light of our current health crisis, one might reasonably wonder how Gene weathered the Spanish Flu Pandemic. In the spring 2018 issue of the Friends of the Limberlost newsletter,

Adrienne Provenzano recounted how the flu pandemic affected Gene Stratton-Porter. The year 1918 was a busy one as usual for Gene. She was living at Sylvan Lake and had just finished *A Daughter of the Land*. “She continued to transplant many varieties of native and non-native plants to her ever-expanding flower gardens on this beloved property . . . Fatigued as the year went on, and in need of rest, in the fall she chose to spend a month at the Clifton Springs Sanitarium and Clinic in upstate New York, letting the sulfur springs restore her energies.”

(Provenzano) In a letter to her sister regarding her stay at the sanitarium, Gene revealed a little-known fact that she was actually suffering from serious acute gastric distress that seemed to be mystifying her doctors. Gene detailed her many unpleasant symptoms, her disdain for the opinions of some of the physicians both locally and at the sanitarium and included this stern message: “Now with the understanding that it is strictly between us and that you pitch this in the furnace as soon as you have read it, I will write you exactly what has happened, but for my feelings sake, for the sake of my income past, present and please God future, I have to got to keep my mouth shut about sickness, and my friends must do the same or they cease to be my friends.” (Gene Stratton Porter Collection) In the end, Gene responded to rest and an extremely bland diet for what she came to believe was a stomach ulcer.

Then sometime in late 1918 or early 1919, she contracted influenza and battled it in her characteristically stalwart way at her Sylvan Lake cabin, with “no nurse and doctor 40 miles away!” (Morrow, p 110) By spring 1919 she was working on a new nature book and Wildflower Woods had become a frenzy of activity as fans dropped by. Sadly, the Cabin at Wildflower

Woods never truly became the retreat that Gene had envisioned for herself; her writings about the Limberlost had inexorably tied her to her very famous cabin in Geneva.

In many ways, it makes perfect sense that Gene would make a new life for herself in California.

As a self-taught writer, artist and photographer, Gene was full of talent and ability, coupled with confidence and pragmatism. Her time and legacy in California became another chapter in a colorful and rich life. It is easy to conjecture what she would have done next had she not been killed in an auto accident at the age of 61. Gene was a rich source of inspiration for California newspaper columnists that detailed her unique life and contributions. When she died, she was eulogized the world over.

Had she not passed away at such an early age, she would have continued to do great, visionary and naturalist things. Many of her siblings lived long healthy lives and had she lived longer, Gene most assuredly would have become even more well-known. She was a sought-after speaker and was a founding member of the Izaak Walton League in 1922, and continued to write magazine articles promoting conservation.

When she died, Jeannette and Charles chose to inter her at the Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery and her final wish to be buried in the wild was not granted until 1999 when her grandsons moved Gene's and Jeanette's remains to Wildflower Woods in a memorial that

overlooks Sylvan Lake. The state of Indiana now owns both Limberlost and Wildflower Woods; thousands of visitors are entreated to the delights of these historic sites every year. Gene Stratton Porter Productions, which continued under the leadership of her son-in-law James Meehan after her death, went out of business in the late 1920s as talking pictures became fashionable. Her many books, while not as widely read today, remain as classics and Indiana University Press reissued eight of her novels in the 1980s and 1990s. Her non-fiction works and poetry have been rediscovered and her legacy lives on through a rich collection at the Indiana Historical Society and through the work of groups such as Friends of the Limberlost, which regularly blogs and sponsors events highlighting Gene's works.

Slide 22 In *Nature's Storyteller*, Morrow writes, "It was a deeply felt concern for the environment, more than a desire for others' esteem, that propelled her to champion wildlife and wild places. As she demonstrated throughout her career, and as she noted in 1916, 'the task I set myself was to lead every human being I could influence afield; but with such reverence instilled into their touch that devastation would not be ultimately complete.'" (Morrow, p 145)

The end.

Thank you very much for listening.

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