



# Caxtonian

Journal of The Caxton Club of Chicago

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## Gene Stratton-Porter: a Link Across Generations and Eras

*Girl of the Limberlost.* Last summer, when I heard *Caxtonian* editor Bob Cotner mention the title of Gene Stratton-Porter's 1909 work, I momentarily lost track of our conversation. The very sound of these four words took me back to a moment in my childhood when I first found my mother's copy of this book on our recessed book shelf next to the fireplace. My mother, born in the last part of the 19th Century, treasured certain books. *Little Women* was her odds-on favorite. When I tried to read Louisa May Alcott at age eight — I simply found no connection. That link would come a few years later. *Girl of the Limberlost*, on the other hand, was riveting. From the beautifully designed embossed cloth binding, to the color-and-line illustrations, to the emotionally weighted story — everything about the book connected.

I should note, that this was in the 1940s, when we had already moved far away from the world Stratton-Porter recounts. My mother, who was in her 40s when I was born, had lived a life far removed from anything I could imagine. But she was a born storyteller.

Stratton-Porter showed me a world I could connect with the stories my mother told of her life on an Illinois farm and, also, with my own life on a smaller, more urban farm. My mother, on the other hand, idealized the world of Louisa May Alcott — the New England experience where everyone knew the rules — city-versus-country and the struggles between mother and child were not central to Alcott's story.

As I look back, I realize that *Girl of the Limberlost* tells a story perhaps too close to my mother's experience, perhaps even too painful. We first meet



*A never-before-published photograph of Gene Stratton-Porter gathering botanical specimens from a huckleberry marsh near Albion, IN, ca. 1920. Used with permission of the GSP State Historical Site.*

Elnora, the bookish girl, as she sets off on her first day of high school from the seclusion of the Limberlost, a dark almost primal wilderness of trees, swamps, and wildlife, untouched by city ways. Stratton-Porter writes: "Behind her lay the land on which she had been born to drudgery and a mother who made no pretense of loving her, before her lay the city through whose schools she hoped to find the means of escape and the way to reach the things for which she cared."

Elnora's first day of high school reflects so many of the ways country and city values clash: she had the wrong dress, clumsy shoes, no information about books and tuition money, and, in fact, no apparent resources to make her escape to the world of knowledge she craved. But most

important for me was the shame she felt: "In one burning flash came the full realization of her scanty dress, her pitiful little hat and ribbon, her big, heavy shoes, her ignorance of where to go or what to do: and from a sickening wave which crept over her, she felt was going to become ill."

From this powerful beginning, Stratton-Porter shows us how Elnora uses her mind, courage, spirit of independence and the resources available in the Limberlost as her means of release, with the help of loving neighbors, a rich benefactor, and a change of heart by her misguided mother. Of course, along the way, she also finds the strong man who recognizes and admires her strength of character, providing the ultimate avenue of escape for her. Stratton-Porter is writing in 1909, after all, and is nothing, if not clear-eyed about her time and place.

In 1909, she was also aware of the potential for loss occurring in the Limberlost as developers were taking over so much rural land, whether to strip mines or to timber, oil, and mineral leasing that she mentions as a financial opportunity for Elnora to realize her dream of escape. The fragile nature of the land, the idea that wild life was being killed off are touched on as part of the context of Elnora's life and the lives of her neighbors. Elnora earns money hunting valuable moths to sell to collectors, but the Limberlost is losing ground and fewer and fewer specimens are to be found. A contemporary reader cannot help but recognize Stratton-Porter's ambivalence about these changes taking place in the Limberlost, even as she extols the 19th

*(Continued Inside)*

# Caxtonian

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Founded 1895



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# Musings...

*O to go back to the place where I was born,  
To hear the birds sing once more,  
To ramble about the house and barn and over the fields once more,  
And through the orchard and along the old lanes once more.*

From "A Song of Joys"  
Walt Whitman

I first visited Gene Stratton-Porter's Limberlost home, Wildflower Woods, on Sylvan Lake near Rome City, Indiana, aboard a school bus with my third-grade class — that would have about 1944, I should guess. The place didn't seem so unusual at the time, for there were unexplored woods and distant shores of remote lakes all around us then in Noble County, Indiana. At an early age, I had begun roaming, usually alone, summer and winter, over trails, along shorelines, and beside clear streams, often with a cane fishing pole over my shoulder and a small tackle box in my pocket. Later, a camera became my companion, and I recorded on film many wilderness places around my home.

One dark night, I recall from my early teens, a friend and I were camping in a pup tent pitched in a woods a few yards from the narrow channel that separated the two basins of Little Long Lake, and a dreadful storm came up. We lay snugly but with some trepidation within the tent in our sleeping bags and looked out the open flaps across the channel as heavy rain pelted the tent, and winds whipped the leaves and bent the trees. Suddenly a bolt of lightning struck a large oak tree across the channel with a deafening crash of thunder, and burning chunks of the tree flew in all directions. That lake — and most of the other wilderness retreats of my early years — are completely built over now, and youngsters must find it difficult to experience and to enjoy the wilderness so readily as we did often in the lake region of Northern Indiana.

I have returned regularly over the years to Stratton-Porter's Limberlost home since my first visit — as recently, in fact, as this fall — in great measure because it is a reminder of a landscape that I dearly love. While other scenes that were as wild as this have disappeared, the Limberlost remains unchanged although not undisturbed. It is of importance, as well, because of the home at the center of the woods and near the lakeshore. The beautiful cherry woodwork, preserved specimens of moths and wildflowers, and simple elegance of furnishings of the home reflect the character of its creator, an important woman of our culture who was one of the first women professionals to hyphenate her name.

The child is always mother of the elder. I now write at an 1884 oak rolltop desk that my wife Norma bought for me in 1968 and which I recently restored to its original beauty. The desk came from the office of the Superintendent of Schools in the Noble County courthouse in Albion, Indiana, one of the lesser losses when school consolidation took place in the 1960s. The desk is symbol, it seems to me, of the quiet heritage of a small town surrounded by wondrous natural beauty of which Gene Stratton-Porter yet stands as patron saint. Blessed are all who ramble along the old lanes of youth leading toward a gentle luminosity in later life.

Robert Cotner  
Editor

## A Checklist of Books By Gene Stratton-Porter 1863-1924

*The Song of the Cardinal*, 1903.  
 \**Freckles*, 1904.  
*What I Have Done with Birds*, 1907.  
*At the Foot of the Rainbow*, 1907.  
*Birds of the Bible*, 1909.  
 \**A Girl of the Limberlost*, 1909.  
*Music of the Wild*, 1910.  
 \**The Harvester*, 1911.  
*After the Flood*, 1911.  
*Moths of the Limberlost*, 1912.  
 \**Laddie*, 1913.  
*Birds of the Limberlost Especially  
Prepared for Katharine Minahan*,  
 1914.  
 \**Michael O'Halloran*, 1915.  
*Morning Face*, 1916.  
*Friends in Feathers*, 1917.  
 \**Daughter of the Land*, 1918.  
*Homing with Birds*, 1919.  
*Her Father's Daughter*, 1921.  
*The Fire Bird*, 1922.  
*The White Flag*, 1923.  
*Jesus of the Emerald*, 1923.  
*Wings*, 1923.  
 \**The Keeper of the Bees*, 1925.  
*Tales You Won't Believe*, 1925.  
 \**The Magic Garden*, 1927.  
*Let Us Highly Resolve*, 1927.

\* Indicates motion pictures produced based on this novel. From David G. MacLean, Gene Stratton-Porter - A Book Collector's Guide, 1995. Used with permission of the author.



A great blue heron nesting beside Sylvan Lake, IN. Photograph by Gene Stratton-Porter. Used with permission of GSP State Historical Site (57-947-5-1110).

## Major Gift Creates New Possibilities for Caxton Club

*"Like our fellow bibliographic societies, we have, as a result of raising printing costs and the emergence of new publishing patterns, been unable to print and publish volumes as substantial as those we used to. We have attempted to keep our dues modest, so that younger and less affluent members might participate in the activities of the Club, and we have succeeded remarkable well in that attempt. We hope, however, that at some future date your President will be able to report that once again the Club will have rooms in which it can mount exhibitions and hold meetings, without an increase in dues."* — Norman Cram, "Report of the President," The Caxton Club Yearbook 1971.

I am sure that he was unaware of President Cram's notion at the time; nonetheless, Caxtonian Gerald F. Fitzgerald has taken an all-important first step toward making Norman Cram's fond hope a reality. The Caxton Club has recently received a gift from Fitzgerald worth in excess of \$50,000, an amount that nearly doubles the club's assets.

This gift has a very restricted purpose. The gift and its income are to be used by the club to obtain, by lease or purchase, space to be used as club rooms.

Fitzgerald, whose eminent collection of polar books was given to the Newberry Library, was inspired by the history and traditions of The Caxton Club when he arrived early for the Centennial Gala, January 1995, at the Newberry Library. The sight of the two exhibition galleries filled with Caxtoniana aroused his interest in seeing The Caxton Club in a home of its own — rooms it could call its own, where Caxtonians could meet, relax, and even view ever-changing exhibits of books.

Not a person for idle talk, Fitzgerald began immediately to explore his plans with some of the club officers and to look around for a suitable location for club rooms. He found a space he liked just off Michigan Avenue near Grant Park garage. Last spring he hosted the officers and some Council members to a

visit to the rooms, which are attached to the Chicago Athletic Club.

The members of the Council who were present were very impressed by the possibilities that could restore the kind of club experiences formerly enjoyed by earlier Caxtonians and enlarge the enjoyment of current and future Caxtonians. Such speculation on the future possibilities of the club was just so much wishful thinking until recently, when Fitzgerald made his gift to the club.

The gift is really a challenge grant, for a limited time. If the funds are not used for the designated purpose for which donated by January 1, 1998, then the funds will revert to a local library. For the time being, the Council has taken measures to safeguard the investment made by Fitzgerald. It is exploring options to use the gift to acquire rooms. At least one other Caxtonian has offered to contribute additional funds to help realize Fitzgerald's dream. But if the dream is to become a reality, additional funds must be found. The officers and members of the Council want the input from club members — and all input is invited. Even now options are being explored for affordable ways to make this dream a reality — if it is the wishes of the club.

The entire Caxton organization extends its appreciation to Gerald Fitzgerald for his generous gift and his dream of what this club may become in its second century — a vision even greater than that of the founding Caxtonians.

Thomas J. Joyce  
President

## Magicians on Bill At Holiday Revels

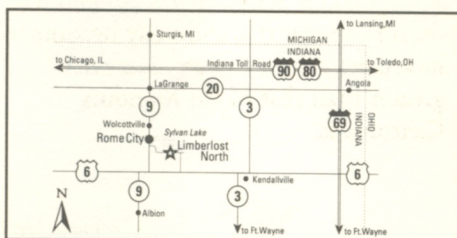
Master magician Jay Marshall and his pal Lefty will introduce nationally known prestidigitateur John S. Railing to Caxtonians and guests at the Holiday Revels, December 18, at the Mid-Day Club.

But Railing will not be doing magic this evening even though he is widely considered to be one of the country's best close-up magicians and has appeared twice on the "Today" show and been featured in *Playboy* magazine. An extraordinarily gifted person, Railing has been a futures trader with the Chicago Board of Options Exchange. He is an attorney and is currently a corporate executive in Chicago.

He is, as well, an avid collector of modern first editions and French photography books. But his main focus is, not surprisingly, in the area of pop-up books. Railing is one of the foremost authorities on three-dimensional publishing and has one of the largest private collections with more than 4,000 items.

It is his pop-up collection and his expertise in the creation of three-dimensional representation that will be the focus of his illustrated talk, "Pop-ups for the Holiday Season." Caxtonians one and all will want to be part of this year's Holiday Revels!

## Limberlost Preserves Legacy



The cabin in Wildflower Woods, designed by Gene Stratton-Porter in 1913 was her year-round home until 1919. Guided tours of the site (shown on map above) are conducted March through December, Tuesday-Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. For information, telephone 219/854-3790.

## Famed Caxtonian, 'Chef Louie,' Dies

Caxtonians note with sadness the death on October 4, of Louis I. Szathmary, II, affectionately known as "Chef Louie" among his many friends and associates. He was a remarkable man, remembered not only as a master chef but also as a bibliophile, teacher, writer, and philanthropist.

A native of Hungary, he immigrated to the United States in 1951, learned the culinary arts in New York City, and moved to Chicago in 1959. He eventually became the owner of the popular Bakery Restaurant on Lincoln Avenue, where he entertained notables from around the world. He provided banquets for the Chicago International Film Festival and opening nights at the Lyric Opera. Chef Louie achieved what some consider the greatest culinary honor in the country when he was asked to serve as "Chef Laureate" of Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R. I.

An avid bibliophile and reader, he amassed a personal library of more than 45,000 books, among them cookbooks, collections of menus and restaurant memorabilia, Hungarian literature, Hungarian reference materials including rare maps, and an outstanding Franz Liszt collection. After retirement, he devoted his energies to finding homes for these collections in the libraries of appropriate universities. He also wrote

five books on the culinary arts and edited several others. In 1990 the Chicago City Council honored him by naming the alley behind his restaurant Szathmary Lane.

Chef Louie was a familiar figure at Caxton Club dinners, readily recognized by his silver hair, sweeping white moustache, and ample girth. He joined the Caxton Club in 1968, spoke at a dinner meeting in 1973 on "Five Hundred Years of Hungarian Printing," and hosted several Caxton Club Holiday Revels at his restaurant.

In Nicholas Basbanes' *A Gentle Madness*, in which Chef Louie is profiled, he said that "When you buy books, you buy some to read, some to own, and some for reference. You want to possess the books, you want to own them, you want to hold them. Perhaps you even hope that you will read them.... We should look forward, not backward. Instead of crying about what we lost, we learn to do for the future. So the books I give away now, they stay in my heart, just like all the others."

Caxtonians mourn the passing of a dear friend and exceptional bibliophile, and we extend our sympathy to his wife, Sada, and his daughter, Magda.

Frank J. Piehl and  
Glen N. Wiche



"Thunderhead," 1938, linoleum block art by Paul W. Ashby (1893-1993), Kendallville, IN, one of a series on Indiana landscapes. Caxtonian Paul F. Gehl of the Newberry Library observed: "Ashby's work has a lyrical quality to it." From the collection of Robert Cotner.

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## Gene Stratton-Porter

(Continued From Page One)

Century virtue of progress. Now we have all lost treasures such as these, as family farms are overrun by expressways and strip development. Today, urban sprawl and the new media have blurred, at least to some extent, the distinction between country and city values that existed only a few generations ago.

I'm not sure, however, that these themes came through to me on my first reading, back so many years ago. What I recognized then, and I now see as a link connecting her world with ours, is the potency of Elnora's feelings as she entered a totally new environment where she was expected to know the unwritten rules.

*Girl of the Limberlost*: simply hearing those words over the phone that day unleashed images of Elnora, my mother, the grandmother I never knew, family farms with their woods and swamps, dimly lit natural history museums, their walls lined with dusty glass cases of moths and insects lovingly collected -- all are sadly gone. What remains, however, is the way one writer's work forms a connecting link bridging the beginning of the present century with its end: A connecting link with friends and Caxton Club colleagues, such as Bob Cotner, who share a love of books, their feel, their often beautifully crafted illustrations, and above all, the words that touch us revealing pain as well as pleasure.

Laurel M. Church

*Editor's Note: Caxtonian Laurel Church was born and reared on a family farm at Higgins Rd. and Cumberland Ave., just outside suburban Park Ridge, where a small truck-gardening community prospered until of the late 1950s. Construction of the Kennedy Expressway cut a swath through all of the farms, displacing everything in its path; the house and brick barn her parents had built were replaced by the Cumberland cloverleaf. Dr. Church is chair of Communication/Art Department, Aurora University.*

## A Review

### Stratton-Porter Biography Captures Spirit of the Limberlost

*Gene Stratton-Porter - Novelist and Naturalist.* Judith Reich Long. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1990. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Robert Cotner

In the 1940s, when our insurance man knocked at the front door monthly, my mother would call from the kitchen, "Come on in!" He would enter, remove from a nail behind front door the small envelope containing the month's cash payment, and write on the outside of the envelope the amount and date. By that time, my mother would have entered the room to greet him with a smile and a few pleasantries, and he'd leave saying, "See you next month."

But we would always see him before the next visit, for he and his family lived two blocks south of our house in Kendallville, Indiana, and I grew up with his children as friends and schoolmates. His daughter Judy, a year older than I, was a tall, slender young lady. She was — as most of us were in those years — without clear definition.

I was therefore pleased to learn on a recent visit to Gene Stratton-Porter's Wildflower Woods, near Rome City, Indiana, that Judith Reich Long had written what is considered by many to be the best biography of the "Bird Lady" of the Limberlost, *Gene Stratton-Porter - Novelist and Naturalist*. Published posthumously — Long, like Stratton-Porter, having died while yet in the midst of her creative career — the book captures both the natural beauty of the Limberlost and the personality of Stratton-Porter.

An antiquarian book dealer from Marietta, Georgia, Long was, as well, a gifted historian, naturalist, and storyteller. She traces the family history of Stratton-Porter with insight and intelligence, helping us understand how the remarkable woman, Geneva Grace Stratton, matured into one of America's

important novelists, naturalists, and photographers — Gene Stratton-Porter. Long's discussion of Stratton-Porter the naturalist is as rich and illuminating as that of family and social history. Long recalled one of the first opportunities for Stratton-Porter to achieve national attention, which came as a result of her field photography of nature, and particularly of bird life: "In 1904 her camera fever paid large rewards. Edward Bok, a nature lover and the flamboyant editor of *The Ladies Home Journal*, wrote asking to see her portfolio. They met in Chicago, and impressed by her fine prints, Bok ordered an illustrated series of articles for his magazine. The six-month series, titled 'What I Have Done with Birds,' exposed Gene Stratton-Porter's work to its widest audience to date."

The biography, well-illustrated throughout, traces Stratton-Porter's life from the farmlands of Indiana to California, where she became associated with people in the motion picture industry, built two homes, and was tragically killed when her auto was struck by a speeding streetcar near her home on December 6, 1924.

Long's struggle to complete her work on Stratton-Porter before cancer took her own life is evident in the final chapter of the book. Her husband assisted the staff of the Indiana Historical Society in completing the manuscript for publication. Long's father — our long-ago insurance man — spoke to me last month with sadness as he talked of his daughter. "You know," he told me, "her mother was from Rome City, and Judy had a natural attraction to Gene Stratton-Porter from her earliest years."

Long's biography will inform generations of people, young and old alike, of this remarkable American, whose work is yet studied far beyond the borders of the Limberlost.

# Book Marks

## Luncheon Programs

All luncheon meetings, unless otherwise noted, are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th floor of the First National Bank of Chicago, Madison & Clark, Chicago. Luncheon and discussion, 12:30 p.m.

### December 13.

Caxtonian Susan Levy, executive editor of the Lakeside Classic series with R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, will speak on the "Origin, History, Production, and Distribution of the Lakeside Classics."

### January 10.

Peter and Donna Thomas, visiting crafts people at Columbia College — printers, paper-makers, and bookbinders — will talk on "The Word According to Peter."

*Ed Quattrocchi  
Leonard Freedman*

**Important Note:** Members planning to attend luncheons must make advance reservations by phoning either the Caxton number, 312/255-3710, or Quattrocchi at 708/475-4653. Luncheon for members and guests, \$20.

## The Caxtonian Described By A Hoosier Publisher

...[T]he Caxtonian is delicious...like a rich, intellectual dessert that dissolves the pedestrian troubles of the day.

George Witwer, Chairman  
Kendallville [IN] Publishing Company

## Gathering at the River

*Is it  
crossing over Jordan  
to a city of light, archangels  
ceaselessly trumpeting over  
the heavenly choirs: perpetual Vivaldi,  
jasper and endless topaz and amethyst,  
the Sistine ceiling seven days a week,  
the everlasting smirk  
of perfection?*

*Is it  
the river Styx,  
darkness made visible, fire  
that never stops: endless murder  
too merciless to kill,  
massacres on an endless loop,  
the same old victims always  
coming back for more?*

*Or is it the silky muck  
of Wabash and Maumee, the skirr  
and skim of blackbirds,  
fields of Queen Anne's lace  
and bumblebees? Well,  
go out once more, and feel  
the crumble of dry loam,  
fingers and soil slowly becoming  
the same truth: there in the hand  
is our kinship with oak, our bloodline  
to cattle. Imagine,  
not eons of boredom or pain,  
but honest earth-to-earth;  
and when our bodies rise again,  
they will be wildflowers, then rabbits,  
then wolves, singing a perfect love  
to the beautiful, meaningless moon.*

*Philip Appleman*

From *New and Collected Poems*, University of Arkansas Press, 1996. Used by special arrangement with Appleman, a native of and frequent pilgrim to Kendallville, IN.

## Dinner Programs

All dinner meetings, unless otherwise noted are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th Floor of the First National Bank, Madison & Clark streets, Chicago. Spirits, 5 p.m., dinner, 6 p.m., lecture, 7 p.m.

### December 18.

Caxtonian John Railing will entertain at the annual Holiday Revels at the Mid-Day Club, and there is a rumor Caxtonian and magician Jay Marshall and his pal Lefty will make an appearance.

### January 22.

Anthony Hoskins, reference librarian of the Smith Family Genealogy Center at the Newberry Library will speak on "Anthony Wydville, Earl Rivers: Caxton's Patron and Translator of the First Book Printed in English, 1477." Hoskins is a "16 greats grandson" of Lord Rivers, a 19th generational descendant.

*Karen Skubish*

Advance reservations, which are absolutely necessary, may be made by phoning the Caxton office at 312/255-3710. Any special meal requirements (such as vegetarian) need to be made in advance. Members and guests, \$35.

The First National Bank of Chicago's parking garage, 40 S. Clark Street, offers a special parking rate after 5 p.m. to guests of the Mid-Day Club. When you leave, please tell the parking attendant you were at the Mid-Day Club, and your parking fee will be \$5.25.

FOX VALLEY 18:40 12/04/96 #3



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