

## **Desecrating the Giants' Corpse**

Ben Grimes

Indiana is a state molded by glaciers. Even in the south, where the great ice giants could not reach, their melted waters carved the landscape. Before the loggers and industry barreled through, the glaciers had created a territory with millions of acres of swamp. A fourth of the land that would be dubbed “Indiana” was bogs, fens, marshes, wet prairies—swamp. And the swamp would resist that human domination as much as a landscape can, using malaria, sinkholes, impossible farming conditions, and providing no usable waterways for boats. But the land fell. It was drained, paved, and made to fit the new human mold.

In the midst of this defiant act of avarice emerged the preeminent America writer of her time: Gene Stratton-Porter. The early 1900s were the end of westward expansion. Apparently, everything had been claimed. Yet 13,000 acres of swamp had remained unsullied in Indiana. This was called the Limberlost and it was Stratton-Porter’s home, the basis for her scientific writing, and the setting for her most successful bestselling novels. nIndiana had somehow kept the will of its glacial creators alive this long, and Stratton-Porter thrived in its murky wilderness. From 1895 to 1913 she lived in the swamp. Until it was gone.

Gene had married a man named Charles Porter, a druggist by trade, and an enterprising mogul by deed. It was not long before he found oil in his wife’s beloved Limberlost. Gene was an environmentalist, preaching against oil drilling, while her husband owned and operated oil rigs in what was essentially her backyard. The final days of the Limberlost were depressing for the author. She eventually left, when it was clear there was nothing left. How did she reconcile this? Was it greed? Stratton-Porter was already a wealthy woman—her books sold millions. Was it love for the man who exploited the land that had brought her so much joy and success? Hypocrite though she was, her hand in the destruction of the massive swamp speaks to some aspect of “human nature.” Whether love or greed or something even less noble, it seems we have an endless capacity for destruction. With it comes little foresight. We should fear the future much more.

Fort Wayne, Indiana was wracked by devastating flooding twice, once in 1913, and again in 1982. Martial law was declared in 1913, and both times it cost thousands of people their homes and did millions in damage. 1913 was the same year the last of the Limberlost was drained, thus losing a massive part of the local watershed and a vital part of flood management for the city of Fort Wayne, since the swamp was in the county just south of Fort Wayne. The dead swamp’s reverberations were felt again in 1982 and continue to haunt the entire state.

Does this story mean anything to us 21<sup>st</sup> Century layfolk who have never sold a bestseller and never lived in a swamp? We could be living in a swamp. Maybe we should be living in a swamp. Maybe if one turn-of-the-century celebrity held those around her to the same standards she espoused, we would be

living in a swamp. We can try to make it a swamp again, if for no other reason than to avoid the devastating impacts of our own hubris. It seems we are the great formative giants of our own era, and what we've wrought is not life. Perhaps that can change, or perhaps the movement of the arctic palms of our glacial predecessors can never be replicated. Maybe we just have to cling to what's left and try not to drown.