

One After the Other: Collecting in *A Girl of the Limberlost*

By Beth Nardella

In Gene Stratton-Porter's *A Girl of the Limberlost* from 1909, Elnora Comstock grows through her habit of collecting. She begins as a fascinated child gathering interesting items while at play. On the first day of her freshman year in high school, she learns that she can make money from collecting moths and her knowledge of their habits. She pays for her education by selling the insects and artifacts she gathers in the swamp near her home to distant collectors, using a character named the Bird Woman as a liaison. One Summer while gathering items to sell, Elnora meets Philip Ammon, a rich city boy living with his uncle in the country to recover from an illness. With her work ethic and self-education adding to her intrinsic value, she becomes a commodity to him. She possesses the necessary attributes that a cultured, affluent man like Philip is looking for in a woman and before the close of the novel, they marry.

Although the novel is full of the kinds of stereotypes of womanhood prevalent in the early 1900s and is essentially a romance novel for teenage girls, *A Girl of the Limberlost* was transformative. Much of the novel's overwhelming popularity is due to Elnora. She is charming and generous, kind and honest, yet also steadfast and resolute. Generations of young women have seen her as an ideal role model because of these positive character traits. Throughout the course of the novel, Elnora overcomes many hardships: she is able to go to school because she works hard, and she excels while there; she has a strained relationship with her mother but she is not insolent (although

not always obedient); and she wins Philip Ammon without being calculating. Her honesty, strength, and perseverance appeal to readers because she also has faults. Elnora's character is believable and, as such, encouraging.

A Girl of the Limberlost gives an important glimpse into a realm where scientists and educated amateurs engaged jointly in making discoveries, cataloging their finds, and establishing an economy of exchange, both intellectual and financial. Stratton-Porter used her vast historical knowledge of nature and the Limberlost Swamp to create an accurate portrait of this exciting historical moment in which the fictional Elnora engages the minds of her young readers through the vehicle of moth collecting. Elnora moves from collector to collected through her marriage to Philip Ammon in a transitional period of time during which moth collecting evolved from hobby to science, and women gained status in universities.

Specimen Collecting Evolves

The entomologist's collecting activities contributed to the stereotype of eccentric 'bug hunter' so common among nineteenth-century Americans. After all, the capture, pinning, and arrangement of specimens in cabinets were the most conspicuous 'activities' in which entomologists engaged, and these activities reinforced the impression of eccentricity that was associated with the collecting and hoarding of esoteric items of nonutilitarian value.

— W. C. Sorensen, 34

Moth collecting has been a documented activity for hundreds of years. While Asian cultures showed some of the earliest interests, it has also been present in Europe for over 400 years (Epstein). The early 1800s saw the first studies of American Lepidoptera with subsequent publications and collections. The most notable collections of that time

period belonged to Titian Peale of Philadelphia and Count Castleman, whose collection was housed at the National Institute in Washington, D.C. (Sorensen 21). There were also several entomological societies active before the late 1800s comprised of self-designated scholars in the field (“literary gentlemen”) who, among other similar endeavors, published catalogs of American insects. These groups had strict requirements for membership.

At the time, very few entomologists were actually making a living from their studies. There was no need yet for such occupations. In fact, the wider field of natural history had yet to produce many income-generating positions (Barrow 496). The Smithsonian Museum was not established until 1846 (“History”). Andrew Carnegie gave Pittsburgh the funding for its Museum of Natural History in November of 1895, but it wasn’t finished until 1907 (“Walk”). Until the 1850s and the building of these museums, there weren’t any institutions in the United States to hire a naturalist, and it would be years before someone would carry the specific title of Entomologist. Pivotal changes to the practice of entomology did not occur until institutions such as Harvard began adding entomology programs. It was then that the need for elite societies of entomologists was eliminated.

When entomologists began to be trained in colleges and universities, they also began to come from more diverse segments of the population. Although still widely middle and upper class, entomologists dropped their elitism and began to create ties to other communities such as farmers and horticultural groups (Sorensen 35). In addition, entomological collections were becoming increasingly financed by agriculture and

commerce. These agricultural entomologists also maintained correspondence with European groups, exchanging specimens and information instead of animosity (Sorensen 63).

Because of these recently formed interest groups, entomology and nature studies became part of the curriculum at primary and high schools nationwide. Women were also beginning to be accepted in the field (Bonta 145). Anna Botsford Comstock pioneered the nature studies movement. With her husband, she “built the entomological department at Cornell into one of the outstanding departments of the United States” (Sorensen 84). She was instrumental in developing a program in the New York public schools that taught students about the importance of nature and our relationship to it. Her philosophy included the importance of actually going outside to study nature directly. After the experimental program was successful, it was implemented in schools nationwide. Her *Handbook of Nature Study*, a compilation of the materials she developed for her work in the schools, is still popular and in print today with translations in eight languages and twenty-four editions (Yaple 7). Kohlstedt writes that Comstock “carved out a niche for her own interest in natural history and biology and simultaneously formed a new site where women’s traditional prospects might intersect with exciting opportunities that involved genuine career advancement” (4). Anna Botsford Comstock was essential to the founding and growth of the nature studies movement. Ironically, she was not granted tenure at Cornell until 1919, the year women were first allowed to vote. She was 65 years old (Comstock 254). Comstock brought nature study into the elementary school curriculum. By 1909, when *A Girl of the*

Limberlost was first published, women such as Elnora were able to find work teaching in this field.

Anna Botsford Comstock was also a part of the staff of *Country Life in America*, one of the popular special interest magazines of the time which promoted the idea of moth collecting. During the years 1905 – 1914 it printed more than five articles about the practice, significant for a magazine whose audience consisted of wealthy city dwellers living vicariously through its photographs of country estates (Bussel 3). Aside from popular science and entomological journals, it was one of the few periodicals to even mention moths or write about collecting them. These articles ranged from the proper way to hunt and save specimens to listing the going rates for different types of larvae and cocoons. Stratton-Porter wrote several articles on variety of topics for them during this time. Its readership became primarily the upper-middle class or, as Sowards puts it, the “yacht, polo pony, and estate set” (Sowards). Like *House Beautiful*, which also premiered during the same time period, it soon began to glorify a rural lifestyle for its readership rather than those actually living and working in the country (Karson xviii-xix).

Most moth collectors were of the bourgeois class, collecting moths as a hobby. Dr. Epstein, Research Associate for the Smithsonian Institution, agreed. “Much like today,” he wrote, “the amateur hobbyists ruled. Some were physicians, others were from wealthy families. Around 1908 the only way to be a collector was to be employed by agriculture (U.S. or state), a university (often state funded) or be a wealthy collector” (Epstein). The working class did not have enough hours in the day to collect. In addition

to time, a collector would need both equipment and space to properly gather, classify, and preserve specimens. The end of the elitist Entomological Societies and the rise in popularity of insects at the beginning of the 1900s led to a wider range of collectors and, consequently, a more common and widespread understanding of their habits and nature (Sorensen 60). Further, serious collectors in America and abroad wanted to complete their collections with specimens from different regions of the country and the world bringing about an international trade of insects. Through the Bird Woman, Elnora gathered moths and butterflies for these collectors.

Elnora as Collector

And because he asked questions, even laughable questions, about the birds with no feet before he ever saw them; because he knew where beetles might be found and how to lure butterflies to a bit of dried dung; and most of all because he walked alone through the forests, for hours and days, and was comfortable there, and at peace, the islanders ascribed mystical powers to him. The birds, they claimed, came down from the trees to meet him.

— Andrea Barrett, 121

Collections are dependent on classification. This is why moths make the perfect collectible. Although there are certainly a finite number of moths, there are infinite ways to think about a collection. Collectors make many choices in how to organize and categorize specimens. When a collector figures out how he or she wants to organize a collection, the next choice is how far to take it. It isn't necessary to decide this from the start; part of the collector's passion is taking the collection further just as it nears completion. Since moths flourish almost all over the world, collectors have opportunities for creating large sets. A worldwide exchange economy revolved around the sale and trade of moths. In 1912, R.P. Dow suggested that entomological groups were the best

places to meet other collectors. He also listed publications such as *The Entomological News* and *The Canadian Entomologist* for their articles and advertisements by those seeking to trade (60). Elnora, however, worked through the Bird Woman. Stratton-Porter wrote herself into *A Girl of the Limberlost* as this character. To Stratton-Porter, life and work were interconnected. In fact, she was often called “The Bird Woman” by fans (Richards 33). He wrote, “her life was her work, and her work was drawn from her life itself. By her own admission, everything that she wrote was taken from her own life and experience” (Richards 17). Elizabeth Ford writes that Stratton-Porter “enters her narrative and offers herself, not as a fictional construct, as a surrogate mother to her audience as well as Elnora” (150). The Bird Woman can be a model for girls who share their passion for nature. Elnora met her by way of a sign she had put up in town saying (41):

WANTED: CATERPILLARS, COCOONS, CHRYSALIDES, PUPÆ CASES, BUTTERFLIES, MOTHS, INDIAN RELICS OF ALL KINDS. HIGHEST SCALE OF PRICES PAID IN CASH.

In addition to novels, Gene Stratton-Porter wrote and illustrated a number of nature books from *The Moths of the Limberlost* to *Homing with the Birds*. She needed specimens to photograph, draw, and paint. These came from all over the world. She would pay locals who lived near the swamp for the items they would bring to her and use these as capital to enhance her collection, in turn, enhancing her work. “I exchange them with foreign collectors,” says the Bird Woman. “I want a complete series of the moths of America to trade with a man in India, and another in Brazil. Others I can

exchange with home collectors for those of California and Canada” (*Limberlost* 51). In the novel, the collaboration benefited both Elnora and the Bird Woman just as it did Stratton-Porter and her local contacts in the author’s real life.

Elnora did not begin with the sign in the bank window. She began collecting moths, other insects and even arrowheads when she was a child. Collecting is common in children. This was studied as early as 1906 by Elizabeth Howe, an elementary school teacher. She wrote, “the collecting instinct seems to arise in the majority of children, comparatively few have never collected” (466). She also found that the types of things children collect depend on where they live. Children who lived in rural areas tended to collect from nature, where children of other “localities” leaned toward stamps and buttons (468). Further, she writes, “The reasons for collecting are interesting. Things were collected, in the majority of cases, without any thought of value, but apparently, first, simply to own something, and, second, to increase the quantity of that something” (469). Only about half of the children with collections make any type of arrangement with them. Elnora pinned some of her moths in a case given to her by Freckles, a neighbor, but does not seek out ones she does not have until she needs them to sell. For her, it’s about owning something beautiful; having a space of her own.

Again, a significant aspect of the collection is its classification. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes, “The collection is not constructed by its elements; rather, it comes to exist by means of a principle of organization” (155). Elnora doesn’t arrange her moths, as a typical collector would, nor does she arrange the “Indian stuff.” It is “piled up” in

Wesley Sinton's woodshed. Stewart also writes that a collection is about the whole (152). After meeting with the Bird Woman on her second day of high school, Elnora is concerned only with the *sum* of the parts: the dollar amount that paid for her tuition, her books, and her wardrobe. She doesn't have a collection, nor is she a collector. As a child, and like other children of the time period, she was merely a gatherer. Elnora saved pretty things, and unusual things, because she didn't have anything to call her own. She didn't want to complete a set, she just wanted more. We even hear it from Elnora herself when she admits her problems with the term "collector." "That 'collected' frightens me," she says to the Bird Woman. "I've only gathered. I've always loved everything outdoors, and so I made friends and playmates of them. When I learned that the moths die so soon, I saved them especially, because there seemed no wickedness in it" (*Limberlost* 45 – 46). It's almost pious; as if she is preserving them to make their short lives last longer. Elnora's fear of the term "collected" foreshadows her hesitation to marry Ammon, as it will force her to give up the life she has predicted for herself: teaching, living in a home near the swamp, being among nature.

Throughout *A Girl of the Limberlost*, Elnora is described as an innocent country girl, ignorant of city life and society but she is also smart and driven, with strong morals. Morality was central to Stratton-Porter's writing. In 1916 she stressed that she only writes for "moral men and women who work for the betterment of the world." Her readers should "do their best instead of their worst" (80). Elnora's character is a model for these readers. She is hardworking and aspires to go to college, an uncommon goal for a girl of the time period. While "nineteenth-century domesticity and ecological

sensitivity appeared to go hand in hand,” writes Amy Green (145), making a career from nature study was still a new concept for readers. Elnora learns about the world around her in order to one day share her knowledge with future generations of young school children. At first she collected specimens while she was in school to help the teachers with their instruction (Phillips 155). Later Elnora would use this self-education in her own classroom. Teaching was an appropriate occupation until marriage and children. Stratton-Porter writes Elnora’s chosen career path as an unusual endeavor, but nature study was becoming quite conventional for women, especially by 1909, the date of the novel’s first printing. As Vera Norwood explains in her introduction to *Made from this Earth*, the nineteenth century brought about an increase in women’s nature study as a hobby which eventually led to its place as a suitable profession. She writes:

For a good many women, teaching children about butterflies, botanizing and birding on leisurely Sundays, sketching wildflowers collected in local terrain, and making an old-fashioned flower bed exemplify appropriate female behavior. Focusing on the environment, making it one’s familiar and home, has been key to women’s appreciation of nature. During the early nineteenth century, influential European and American women encouraged botanical study as a particularly suitable endeavor for women. (xviii)

Nature study was encouraged as part of a new American girlhood. This move was partly a reaction to the published writings of European visitors to America in the 1850s who claimed that American women seemed little more than “hothouse” flowers, “isolated

from nature” and leading “protected lives” inside the safety of the their urban homes (Norwood 4).

As the country became more industrialized, Americans began to connect nature study and women’s social roles. Norwood writes that this reflected “broad societal concern with defining women’s place. Specific arenas of nature study and conservation became identified as peculiarly suited to women’s domestic responsibilities” (xvii). The more women learned about plants and animals, the more of this knowledge they could pass on to their children, therefore increasing the value of the home and family. Further, they began to link nature study with religious morality:

Women’s role was to remind husbands and children of the republican virtues increasingly at risk in industrialized America. Ironically, idealized farms were offered as model households, in part because on small farms the family seemed closer to romanticized nature. Women instructed their children in the morals taught by nature study carried out in the domesticated fields and woods on the family grounds. Such duty required that nineteenth-century women become better educated, particularly in the burgeoning science of botany. (Norwood 2-3)

Literature geared towards young girls at the time also portrayed nature study as a religious endeavor. Susan Cooper, famed American author and naturalist James Fenimore Cooper’s daughter, felt that it was “women’s duty to use nature study for moral education. ... [She] used plants and animals she saw in nature as a springboard

for religious meditation and moral instruction” (Norwood 30). Cooper was part of an American movement emphasizing the importance of the environment. She felt that Americans needed to be more knowledgeable about nature and that morality was linked to an understanding of the natural world (Johnson 49). The most important attributes a woman of the nineteenth century could have were purity and piety. After Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement which emphasized the importance of nature, nature was inextricably linked with purity and society located piety in nature study.

Nature study provided Elnora the attributes necessary toward becoming a commodity for Philip Ammon. Elnora spent her formative years as a poor country girl and identifies with the uncultivated swamp. When Ammon enters her life, he can't see her as a society girl like his fiancée Edith Carr. He complains to Elnora that Edith, “takes pride in being just a little handsomer and better dressed than any girl of her set. She is interested in having a beautiful home, fine appointments about her, in being petted, praised, and the acknowledged leader of society. She likes to ... have her own way about everything” (*Limberlost* 286). When Elnora asks how Edith spends her time he scoffs and explains that her days are filled with “endless shopping, to find the pretty things; regular visits to the dressmakers, calls, parties, theatres, entertainments” (287). In contrast, he sees Elnora in her own environment, framed by her living landscape. Elnora *is* nature and Ammon is seduced by the natural world. Having grown up in Chicago, he sees the swamp as something to be desired. It is Elnora's only tool for competition in his world of Culture and refinement. Appropriately, he sees Elnora through this lens. Several scenes in the novel show Elnora through his eyes. During their first meeting, he studies Elnora

while being spied on by her mother. “Even the watching mother could not blame him.” The narrator continues, “Against the embankment, in the shade of the bridge, Elnora’s bright head and her lavender dress made a picture worthy of much contemplation” (264). She is part of a composition with nature as backdrop. The metaphors continue with another portrait of Elnora catching moths in the swamp:

She stood on the path holding a pair of moths. Her eyes were wide with excitement, her cheeks pink, her red lips parted, and on the hand she held out to them clung a pair of delicate blue-green moths, with white bodies, and touches of lavender and straw colour. All about her lay flower-brocaded grasses, behind the deep green background of the forest, while the sun slowly shifted gold from heaven to burnish her hair. ...“Oh, what a picture!” exulted Ammon at her shoulder. “She is absolutely and altogether lovely! I’d give a small fortune for that faithfully set on canvas!” (293)

Elnora is presented as beautifully and ornately framed by nature. She is always perfectly composed in the landscape, surrounded by a flawless natural setting. The colors of her hair and dress are the colors of the environment. However, Ammon creates a commodity out of the scene by wanting to pay to have it painted. He cannot appreciate Elnora as she is. He wants to bring her, on canvas, into his world. Elnora’s knowledge of the plants and animals of the Limberlost Swamp combined with her impeccable morals, kind personality, and appreciation of nature locate her in a domestic sphere and more desirable, to Ammon, than that of the typical society girl whose days are filled with mindless tasks.

Elnora becomes Collected

I said that 'all sorts and conditions of men' were among those interested in forming collections of moths, and it may be inferred that there are queer specimens among the owners of the cabinets as well as in the drawers of the cabinets themselves. ... Some collectors amass their material from an apparent simple satisfaction in possessing rare or odd specimens. They have ... no higher artistic interest in their possessions than that they have something no one else has got, and which it is difficult to obtain. A sort of purposeless mania seems to fall upon many of them. ... I have even heard of one rabid collector, now happily deceased, who destroyed every specimen he had or could buy up of a certain rare exotic species, except one pair in his own collection, so that he could say he was the only one who had it!

— Augustus Grote, 388

Ammon is the primary collector in *A Girl of the Limberlost*. On his second day with Elnora he calculates her uniqueness:

He looked at the girl in wonder. In face and form she was as lovely as any one of her age and type he ever had seen. Her school work far surpassed that of most girls her age he knew. She differed in other ways. This vast store of learning she had gathered from field and forest was a wealth of attraction no other girl possessed. (282)

Ammon was raised in an upper-class city family. As such, he is used to having his way and getting what he wants, at any cost. He also knows that he likes rare, hard-to-find objects. He isn't interested when "there's too many of them, all too much alike" (264). Ammon continues for another paragraph describing Elnora's relationship to nature and her manner toward animals. Ammon sees Elnora "as representative of womanhood" (Foster 24). She is a perfect specimen, an item targeted for a collection. As such, these items become more desirable the longer they are studied (Elsner and Cardinal 2).

At the same time, Ammon's interest in Edith, his high society fiancée, quickly fades, as is often the case with a completed collection. His descriptions of Edith are in stark contrast to those he composes of Elnora. He explains Edith's faults in detail: she is "strictly ornamental," he says, while Elnora is "ornament enough for the Limberlost" (*Limberlost* 303). The reader only sees Edith through Ammon's eyes. After returning to Chicago, he designs a dress inspired by the Yellow Emperor moth for Edith to wear at a ball he gives in her honor. Instead of working to create an Edith that is unique, instead, he creates a copy. In making Edith into a moth—and there are millions of moths—he further raises Elnora's status as an individual. Elnora is unique. As an imitation, Edith becomes less a part of the commodity culture Philip desires: nature, self-reliance, values. As Susan Stewart writes, "Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical" (133). In the economy of collecting, being "authentic" is always more important than just classification. Philip has found nature in the Limberlost and tries to recreate it out of the city's materials. When a real Yellow Emperor moth flies into the ballroom, Edith's imitation is exposed. In capturing the moth, Philip tries to enact capturing Elnora, as he has once failed to do when he asks to kiss her before leaving the swamp for Chicago and is rejected. Again Stewart explains, "The collection presents a metaphor of 'production' not as 'the earned' but as 'the captured.' The scene of origin is not a scene of transformation of nature, it is too late for that" (164). Philip pins the moth but loses Edith when she learns the moth will be sent to Elnora. Edith dramatically returns her engagement ring to him and shouts, "You may 'complete your collection'

with that!" (366). Edith expects that Philip will come to her later, as he's done in the past.

Instead, he goes to the Limberlost to replace Edith with Elnora. When he cannot have Elnora as soon as he gets there, (he is powerless in the swamp) Elnora becomes even more desirable. As Baudrillard insists, collecting is about control (86). For Philip, it is no longer about the collection. It is about control, which Elnora has gained.

As the collector assumes the identity of the collection, items in the collection also lose individual identity. Bal argues that each piece in a collection is a sign. He writes, "objects are inserted into the narrative perspective when their status is turned from object-ive to semiotic, from thing to sign, from collapse to separation of thing and meaning, or from presence to absence. The object is turned away, abducted, from itself, its inherent value, and denuded of its defining function so as to be available for use as a sign" (111). When Elnora leaves Philip at the Limberlost after Edith's visit, she changes her status from present (physically and emotionally) to absent. Elnora becomes, as Bal explains, an "object" that moves to a "sign" for the collection Philip cannot complete. Like a rabid collector, when Philip's rare species leaves him with only a note, he breaks down and sobs. Three weeks later, he suffers a physical and nervous breakdown. He believes Elnora is dead and therefore completely unobtainable. He returns to health only after Elnora promises to be his, completing his collection with the rarest of the species.

Collection Complete

Oh, it is a perfect picture, all of it! I should like to hang it on the wall, so I could see it whenever I want to; but it isn't real of course; it's nothing but a picture.
— Elnora, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, 455

Elnora does want to marry Philip Ammon. Educated, attractive, rich, and passionate about nature, Ammon embodies everything girls of the early 20th century were looking for. Today's women readers may find this predictable ending a little ridiculous for their tastes, arguing that a girl like Elnora wouldn't fall for such a sickly city boy. Modern readers would also find the defense of domestic merits to an ex-fiancée unlikely. However, Elnora does this in the chapter, "Philip Kneels to the Queen." Edith Carr tells Elnora, "You may have a summer charm for a sick man in the country; if he tried placing you in society, he soon would see you as others will. It takes birth to position, schooling, and endless practice to meet social demands gracefully" (*Limberlost* 419). Elnora bites back: "As for managing a social career for him he never mentioned that he desired such a thing. What he asked of me was that I should be his wife. I understood that to mean that he desired me to keep a clean house, serve him digestible food, mother his children, and give him loving sympathy and tenderness" (419). The novel reinforces stereotypes while adding to them, a plot turn that would not appeal to contemporary readers who would rather see Elnora keep her job as an elementary school nature teacher or continue on to college than become a domestic object.

In the early 1900s, women were trophies signifying their husbands' wealth. Not only were their spending habits representative of his income, women themselves were

watched as evidence of that wealth. Veblen explains that women were seen as the property of men. Additionally in advanced societies, women's function in the social system was to "put in evidence her economic unit's ability to pay" (69). He writes that this was acknowledged by society, ultimately, through her dress. For the upper classes, they brought to the marriage not only a dowry, but the social status of their father's family and the propriety the family (through education and social skills) afforded. It brings us back to Elnora's argument. Veblen discusses the very virtues that she claimed to have over Edith. He lists:

The admissible evidence of the woman's expensiveness has considerable range in respect of form and method, but in substance it is always the same. It may take the form of manners, breeding, and accomplishments that are, *prima facie*, impossible to acquire or maintain without such leisure as bespeaks a considerable and relatively long-continued possession of wealth. (69)

These are the attributes a turn-of-the-century girl must possess in order to be a commodity for an educated man of good social standing such as Philip Ammon. Elnora is all of these and more, she insists. Consistent with Veblen's list, Elnora's work ethic and self-education through nature added to her intrinsic value—and unlike Edith Carr, she didn't lead the life of leisure usually essential for such standing.

Thorstein Veblen, in an essay published just before *Limberlost*, detailed a woman's place in a marriage as primary consumer. He begins by explaining that a man's social

standing depends on his wealth. Veblen explains further the role women play in this equation:

The immediate and obvious index of pecuniary strength is the visible ability to spend, to consume unproductively; and men early learned to put in evidence their ability to spend by displaying costly goods that afford no return to their owner, either in comfort or in gain. Almost as early did a differentiation set in, whereby it became the function of woman, in a peculiar degree, to exhibit the pecuniary strength of her social unit by means of a conspicuously unproductive consumption of valuable goods. (69)

The more he *shows* he has money to spend, through his wife's wardrobe and outward display of that wealth, the higher his rank in society.

Edith, however, does undergo a remarkable transformation as a result of Elnora's influence, a strategy no doubt employed by Stratton-Porter to help convey her message of virtue. Edith realizes after finally letting Ammon go that she has been the source of trouble. "It is all my selfishness, my unrestrained temper, my pride in my looks, my ambition to be first," she says while, unfortunately, placing much of the responsibility for her failures on her mother (469). This is an enormous step for Edith to take; she is trying to make amends. While walking through the forest she comes across a rare moth she knows is important to Elnora and brings it to her as a peace gesture, ending the novel. Elnora was powerful enough to move even the most unlikely subject.

Conclusion

A Girl of the Limberlost addresses the complexity of collecting in a transitional period for America. It reinforced turn-of-the-century values while instilling new ideas concerning education for women and nature studies. Gene Stratton-Porter's novels were immensely popular for these reasons. They were on best-seller lists, serialized in magazines, and made into successful films including *Michael O'Halloran* (1923), *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1924), and *Laddie* (1926) (Richards 68 – 69, 122 – 124). Her work reached millions. In one of the most significant books on Porter, Bertrand Richards examines the importance of her work for its audience and of the popular acclaim her novels received. Most importantly, he discusses how her books inspired readers to get involved with nature: “*A Girl of the Limberlost* is no doubt at the same time the shallowest yet one of the most enthralling of Porter's romances. It also reached a vast audience and, with *Freckles*, did much to quicken the interest of a large public in nature—in the outdoors and the plant and animal inhabitants thereof” (79). Readers of Stratton-Porter's fiction and non-fiction, such as American author Annie Dillard who credits Gene Stratton-Porter for fostering her love of science, were inspired to become involved in nature study (161).

During the early 1900s in America, moth collecting reached its peak. Stratton-Porter's knowledge of moths and the Limberlost Swamp worked in tandem to layer romance with scientific facts. Although the book is, to a large extent, a romance novel for young girls whose heroine abandons higher education to become a wife and mother, Elnora's

transformation was due, in part, to her love of the environment and dedication to nature study.

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