

Juliet Strauss

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For Edward W. Bok, editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, America's leading woman's magazine at the turn of the century, the secret to his periodical's success was simple: find writing talent and publish the result. In describing his technique to a *New York Sun* reporter, Bok gave as an example a column he had first noticed in an Indianapolis newspaper. "It struck me as well done. I watched it for some time. Then I took pains to find out who wrote it," said Bok. He discovered that the writer was "a woman in a tiny out-of-the-way town in Indiana." After a favorable report from one of his staff, who traveled to the Hoosier state to visit the woman, Bok "made her an offer to do some work for us," which led to the column "The Ideas of a Plain Country Woman."

The woman columnist Bok described to the New York journalist was no stranger to the residents of her home town, Rockville, Indiana. From November 1905 until her death in 1918, Juliet V. Strauss, better known in her home state as "The Country Contributor" of *Indianapolis News* fame, produced for the *Journal* a steady stream of common-sense observations for the magazine's female readers. "I have no hesitation in saying that her contributions have been more widely read and . . . are more popular than the writings of any single contributor to the magazine," Bok said of his discovery. Strauss's direct, down-to-earth writing style, which often celebrated the joys of being a homemaker, was a hit with Hoosier readers who regarded her "as friend and counselor," the *News* noted upon the author's death.

Born on 7 January 1863 in Rockville, Juliet Virginia Humphreys was the second of four daughters raised by William and Susan (King) Humphreys. As a young girl, she received from her father the nickname "Gypsy" (later shortened to Gyp), because of her constant wanderings in Parke County's lush forests. Following their father's death in 1867, Juliet and her sisters were brought up by their mother, a strong-willed woman who played a key role in the future writer's education. A self-described "dilatatory pupil" while attending Rockville's public schools (she once told a gathering of newspaper editors that she never studied a lesson in her life), Strauss said she had something more valuable than any schoolhouse learning--"the close companionship of a cultured mother who had a vocation for teaching and who devoted her whole life to the care and education of her children."

Although no scholar, she did excel in one area-- writing. Discovering her talent, fellow classmates, especially boys, often used her skills to enliven their writing assignments. "Our teacher," remembered Strauss, "knowing my style, soon discovered this, and it was not seldom that a paper came back to its author with the blue pencil run through certain paragraphs with the word 'Gyp' in parenthesis beside them." Her talents might have made her popular with her fellow classmates, but Strauss's compositions did not always meet with complete approval. During literary exercises while in high school, she recalled that when she delivered her work the "preachers always fidgeted around and

the nice ladies in their rustling black silk frocks coughed apologetically behind their folded handkerchiefs."

One adult, however, recognized the youngster's ability. John H. Beadle, *Rockville Tribune* owner and later roving correspondent for the American Press Association, heard one of Strauss's works and visited her mother to inform her that her daughter had literary talent and should be encouraged to write. "Mother was rather shocked at the idea of one of her girls doing anything of a public nature. But she was progressive for the times and consented that I might write for the *Tribune* and learn shorthand," Strauss noted. Her first contribution for the newspaper was a satire on a masquerade party attended by the town's elite. To avoid disclosing her identity to the reading public, Beadle suggested she use the nom de plume, "La Gitani."

Isaac R. Strouse, who set the type for the story when no one else was in the office, also aided in keeping her identity a secret. "The bond of secrecy thus established between the writer of that dainty and practically perfect manuscript was perhaps the most impelling of the mutual attraction which we found in each other," Strouse said of the woman he would marry on 22 December 1881. The nuptials did not proceed without some disapproval, from the bride's family at least. When she told one uncle that she intended to marry an man whose life's work was to be a newspaper editor, the uncle chewed on a piece of straw for a moment before telling his niece: "Jule, don't you know that being an editor is the orneriest business in the world?"

Strouse, later partners with Beadle in running the *Tribune*, discovered that his new wife not only had writing talent, but possessed an independent mind as well. Many years before, Strouse's father had "Americanized" his family's name from the German Strauss to Strouse. Throughout her life, Juliet Strauss used the old German spelling of her husband's name, while Isaac Strouse used the newer version. "She never would write our name as it was written by my father after he changed the spelling to compel the people of a typical Hoosier pioneer community to call him 'Strouse,'" the editor recalled for a series of articles about his wife written for the *News*.

As Strouse took on more and more responsibilities at the Rockville newspaper, he found himself calling upon his wife for writing assistance. One day while Beadle was out of town and he was left in charge of the newspaper, Strouse was stopped on his way to the office by a man who had recently returned to town to attend a relative's funeral. The man handed the editor a ten dollar bill and said that he wanted an obituary of his relative in that week's *Tribune*. Strouse told the man there was usually no charge for such notices, but added that it might be impossible to get the sketch in the newspaper as, in order to get the edition out on time, he had to work the press himself. The man persisted, however, and Strouse took the money, had it converted into a five dollar gold piece, and ran home. Once there, he promised his wife that she could have the money if she wrote the sketch in time for that week's newspaper. She got the money.

On 9 February 1893 Strauss began what became a lifelong endeavor--a weekly column for the *Tribune* called "Squibs and Sayings." In describing how she began writing

regularly for the newspaper, Strauss displayed her usual modesty. She noted that her husband often would come home tired and careworn from his struggles with the newspaper's hand press and his interviews with subscribers "who wanted to pay in pithy turnips or green stovewood cut two inches too long for our little 'early breakfast' cook stove--and I hadn't the heart to refuse when he asked me if I couldn't write something to brighten up the paper." Strauss, busy at home with two daughters, did not travel in society circles much and found that "news was scarce and society items few and far between" for her column. Instead, she had to "'dig out' what I wrote from my head," Strauss noted.

Those early columns included a hodgepodge of information for the *Tribune's* readers. Strauss commented on everything from the plethora of advertisements jammed into magazines to the appearance in Rockville of the first woman bicyclist. As it would in her future work, Strauss's home life also played a prominent role in her "Squibs and Sayings" column. She even poked fun at her husband, the newspaper's editor, jokingly complaining one May that it was the time of year "when the faithful spouse has to exercise her Christian grace in listening to descriptions of the big bass that got away, heard in intervals of scaling the scant 'catch' of sunfish and goggle eyes, and warding off the stealthy advances of the cat . . . not to mention quieting sundry wails from the children, who insist upon 'watching,' and becoming chief mourners over every fish which is beheaded."

Writing for a small-town newspaper, however, produced its own set of troubles for the budding author. On one occasion, the community's rival newspaper published what Strauss called "a long, sarcastic, venomous criticism of me and my work." Although hurt by the article, she took comfort from those people in town who expressed their delight in her writing. "You would be surprised to know," Strauss said, "how well a kind or helpful word . . . is remembered all a lifetime--and too, how, though you may forgive them, the unkind word or act remains--a hurt that never quite heals."

Strauss also received early encouragement for her efforts from other Hoosier writers, including John Clark Ridpath and James Whitcomb Riley. Another male writer-- George S. Cottman--not only offered Strauss sound writing advice, but also served as a confidant for her troubles. Born in Indianapolis on 10 May 1857, Cottman had been apprenticed as a printer to the *Indianapolis Sentinel*. Possessed with a love of history and a deftness with words, however, he soon turned to making his living through writing. Traveling throughout the state on his faithful bicycle, he unearthed material on historical and natural subjects, which he turned into articles for area newspapers. Cottman, founder in 1905 of the quarterly *Indiana Magazine of History*, also became a key and active member of the Western Association of Writers, a loosely organized authors group formed in 1886 that worked to "cultivate the highest and purest style of literary work, and to encourage and assist in the development of a true and healthy American literature."

It was Cottman that Strauss wrote to in September 1896 asking for his opinion on a story she had written called "The Professors Moving." "I take criticism very well," she

wrote Cottman, "so if you have anything on your mind you would like to say to me I shall be glad to hear from you." Strauss got her wish. In a letter to her on 23 September 1896, Cottman offered a lengthy critique of Strauss's work, telling her that he took such a detailed look at it because "of certain literary powers evinced in them which, if carefully directed, might, it seems to me, result in work of more than transient value."

The Indiana historian praised Strauss's ability to capture the "picturesque character" of the state's early population. "I have long thought that these phases of life, now buried in oblivion, would some time prove a mine for some Indiana writer of fiction yet to come; and, so far as I am aware, you are the first person on the ground with any indication of a serious purpose," Cottman wrote her. He found, however, that Strauss needed to work on two areas: her story-telling ability and developing her own style. He offered the following advice:

Art--or, to be more specific, the story--is realism--the objective facts plus the imagination of the artist, who, out of a sense of harmony, proportions, fitness, beauty, combines those facts to serve his own purpose, and impressing into them meanings of his own.

Responding to Cottman's letter, Strauss agreed with his observation that she possessed a great fascination for portraying old times--a fascination so intense "that I forget all about my plot and even have to scrape around to get a semblance of a story upon which to hang the incidents." She also related to Cottman some of her frustration in trying to be both a housewife and a writer. While admitting that she had little spare time for outside reading, Strauss also, surprisingly, expressed a strong aversion for the writing work she had become best known for--newspapers. She wrote Cottman: "I have read only in a desultory way. Written poetry because I couldn't help it. Done newspaper work for fifteen years because I had to (I hate it) and written in all eight stories five of which I have sold. If you knew me, you would see how useless it is to urge me to become methodical and have a motif. There isn't any you know."

The demands of being a housewife and mother often kept Strauss from devoting as much time to her writing as she liked. In March 1897 she wrote to Cottman informing him that she could not be on the program for the WWA's annual convention. "I have so very many cares and so much hard work to do that I can find little time for writing," she informed Cottman. Due to some hard economic times, she had recently lost a small job writing for a Chicago newspaper, which "threw me back into the kitchen again, and, though I have a great fondness for the kitchen and think it is not half a bad place to be, I am unable to make much progress in literature," wrote Strauss. Although the Rockville native related to Cottman that she possessed "talent--and not genius," not being able to fully utilize her skills often frustrated Strauss. It made her sick, she wrote, "to see others who have scarcely a grain of talent printing their trash in respectable publications."

Despite her frustration at seeing others succeed while she struggled to find the time to write, Strauss's efforts did attract favorable attention. News editor Charles R. Williams was so impressed by an essay Strauss had written about the month of April that he signed her up to do a weekly column for his newspaper. Her first column, signed "The

Country Contributor," appeared in the News's 21 November 1903 edition. Strauss's work appeared during what came to be known as the "Golden Age of Indiana Literature"-- a time when Hoosier writers catered to readers who preferred writing that idealized traditional values or offered escape from an ever-changing world. Strauss's work in both the *News* and later in the *Ladies' Home Journal* fit in well with this period, as she often stressed to her readers the simple joys of life at home with a loving husband and children. She even celebrated the joys of cleaning house, telling one reporter that "if I want to be tip-top happy, I just light into housekeeping with all my might."

Used to living all her life in a small town, Strauss also used her column to editorialize on the superiority of life in the country over that in the city. She strongly disagreed with those who claimed that farm women had seen little of life. "It is the woman who has walked across the fields on a wild winter night to help a sister woman in her hour of trial, the woman who has dressed the newborn baby and composed the limbs of the dead, learned the rude surgery of the farm, harnessed horses, milked cows, carried young lambs into the kitchen to save them from perishing in the rough March weather--it is she who has seen life," Strauss wrote.

Although never mistaken for a suffragist (she once stated that "in no branch of art or industry has woman, as a class, proved herself the equal of man"), some of Strauss's work might strike a chord with women today. Throughout her life she called upon women to be themselves, lashing out particularly at what she called the "smart" ideal of womanhood--the perfectly groomed and well-mannered lady. "I say she is tiresome, that her 'taste' is questionable, that her influence on society is unwholesome," Strauss wrote. "I hope my women friends will begin a reform with resolutions to be less like somebody else and more like themselves, to do as they wish to do, not as some other woman sets the pace."

Besieged by scores of letters from women readers wanting more information about their favorite writer, the *News* prominently featured Strauss in a 5 May 1906 article by William Herschell, one of the newspaper's top reporters. Herschell visited Strauss's home in Rockville, known to her readers as "Grouch Place," and described it and its owner to an audience thirsting for more information about the mystery woman. Newspaper readers discovered through Herschell's story that Strauss "is perfectly contented when she is clad in her calico wrapper and sunbonnet and is 'pottering' around the house. She would rather make a garden in the rear of 'Grouch Place' than be presented as a lady at the court of St. James." Strauss's lack of pretense also shone through when she revealed to Herschell her doctrine for life: "Get happy and stay that way. When trouble comes meet it, get along with it as best you can, and then let loose of it." She also told the reporter that she liked to attend parties now and then but was "not much of a club woman and only a fair Presbyterian. Otherwise, I'm all right."

Despite the pressures of motherhood, family life, and newspaper deadlines, Strauss settled into a regular routine over the years, according to her secretary Bessie Skelton. Reminiscing about her six years working for the columnist, Skelton recalled that

Mondays and Tuesdays were set aside by Strauss to produce her columns for the News and Journal. "Very seldom did she hesitate about subject matter," Skelton noted. "The words seemed to flow from the end of her pen. She often said to ambitious and inquiring readers, 'The only way to write is to write:' that was all she could tell them- -that was her experience."

Strauss used the middle of the week as a time for dictating replies to letters she had received from her readers. Although deluged with mail, Skelton said that her boss made a point to answer every letter. In fact, Strauss had handwritten replies herself until the fall of 1912, when she suffered a bout of neuritis. "Sometimes her hand would cramp until she could hardly hold the pen," said Skelton. Strauss finally agreed to dictate letters, but Skelton said the writer refused to dictate her columns. "She had formed her habit of thinking and could not change it," Skelton said, adding that Strauss spent the later part of the week preparing her "Squibs and Sayings" column for her hometown newspaper.

One thing could and did disturb this routine--Strauss's two daughters. "Her first and last thought was always for the children--they must have a good, wholesome time," Skelton recalled. Strauss's daughter, Marcia F. S. Ott, later a columnist for the *Rockville Republican*, noted that her mother's writing was such a part of the family's daily life that "it was merely an accepted thing to us as children." Calling her mother the "most passionate mother I have ever seen," Ott recalled that Strauss "bruised her heart and hands alike . . .to make the way smooth for her children."

Strauss, whose *Journal* columns were published as *The Ideas of a Plain Country Woman* in 1906 by the Curtis Publishing Co., managed to find time for other pursuits besides motherhood and writing. Perhaps her greatest contribution to her native state came in 1916, the year Indiana celebrated its statehood centennial. Just a few miles away from her Rockville home stood a vast area of virgin forest called Turkey Run (also known as Bloomingdale Glens), which one writer described as a "paradise of rocky gorges, glens, bathing beaches and waterfalls." Discovering that this area was in danger of being bought by a timber company, Strauss wasted no time in trying to save the forest from destruction.

In April 1915 she sent a letter to Indiana Gov. Samuel Ralston appealing for his help in saving Turkey Run. Just a week after receiving her letter, Ralston appointed Strauss, Vida Newsom of Columbus, and William W. Woolen of Indianapolis to a Turkey Run Commission and charged them with the difficult task of preserving the forest. Strauss also expressed her concerns to her friends at the Indianapolis News, which included editor Richard Smith. Smith relayed Strauss's appeal to Richard Lieber, one of the state's noted conservationists. Lieber recalled the following conversation about the matter with Smith:

When I arrived at his office he said; "Juliet [Strauss] has been weeping on my shoulder. She says Turkey Run is going to be cut up."
And then he added: "You have to save those trees."

"Where's Turkey Run?" I asked.

"Darned if I know," said Mr. Smith, "but Juliet knows all about it."

"You don't mean Bloomingdale Glens, do you?"

"Yes, that's it. That what we've got to save."

In November 1915, Lieber met with Ralston to discuss with the governor his idea to establish a state parks system as a permanent memorial for the state's centennial celebration, which was being organized by the Indiana Historical Commission. Ralston appointed Lieber to serve on the Turkey Run Commission and, when the IHC met in January 1916, it passed a motion approving the state park movement. Later, the commission created a special parks committee with Lieber as its chairman (the Turkey Run Commission was merged into the new committee).

The first attempt to secure Turkey Run at a public auction on 18 May 1916 failed. The Hoosier Veneer Company of Indianapolis secured the property with a \$30,200 bid. At the auction's conclusion, Herschell remembered meeting a tearful Strauss along a path skirting Sugar Creek. "I am sick of soul," she told the *News* reporter. "Who would have dreamed that a few men's dollars could step in and destroy all this, the most beautiful spot in all Indiana, one that all the money in the world could not restore once it is gone?" Herschell recognized, however, the woman's tears not as those of resignation, but as "fighting tears." He was right; the fight to save Turkey Run was far from over. Six months after the initial auction, the parks committee reached a settlement with the timber firm, which accepted \$40,200 for the site.

Frequently ill later in life, Strauss still was able to write columns for her eager readers. She even supplied the *News* with a number of "emergency" articles in case she ever was unable, for whatever reason, to produce her weekly column. Just a week before her death, which occurred on 22 May 1918, Strauss's secretary called the newspaper to ask if one of the "emergency" columns, written a few months earlier, could be returned to her boss for revision. Strauss managed to make the necessary changes and returned it to the *News* before her death. The column, her last, which was titled "In Defense of Exaggeration," appeared in the newspaper on 25 May 1918. In praising its former employee, the *News* praised her work as offering "a very sound and helpful philosophy. One can read in them a love of simplicity and genuineness, an earnest and honest faith, a hatred of sham and pretense, and a belief in the home and family as the great educators."

A more permanent memorial to Strauss came four years after her death with the unveiling of a memorial to the author at Turkey Run State Park. Erected by the Woman's Press Club of Indiana, the sculpture, called "Subjugation" was crafted by Myra R. Richards. According to the Press Club, the sculpture captured the spirit of Strauss's writing- -the subjugation of the material to the spiritual. "We were all so grateful that Turkey Run had been saved from the timber interests and felt Mrs. Strauss should be memorialized for her leadership in creating public sentiment for this state park to be saved," noted Susan McWhirter Ostrom, at that time Woman's Press Club recording secretary.

But perhaps the best way to remember Strauss is through her own words. Reflecting on her life after her children had grown up and moved away from home, she was proud that she had "never followed anybody's lead. I lived my own life. If I wished to ride a horse, or play a game of cards, or go wading in the creek with the children, I always did it. I never strained my eyesight or racked my nerves to arrive at small perfections. I avoided rivalries and emulations. In short, I lived."