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## **So We All May Be Heard**

*by Marlene Cook, IWPA Historian*

Frances Johnston Owens (May 4, 1843 to Dec. 30, 1903) better known as Genie, was one of the 47 who founded the Illinois Woman's press Association to further the careers of women as professional writers, editors and publishers. As teacher, author, publisher and clubwoman, Owens and fellow IWPA members became part of a growing reform culture among women who saw the necessity of obtaining greater economic independence through paid employment.

Owens was elected IWPA treasurer in 1888, a position she held for 16 years and was a delegate to the National Editorial Association Conventions in St. Paul Minn. In 1891, in Portland, Ore. In 1899, and the International League of Press Clubs in San Francisco in 1892.

Born the youngest of 12 children in Sidney, NY, later moving with her family to Pennsylvania and Ohio, she began teaching in a one-room schoolhouse at age 14. when the family moved to Chicago in 1858, she enrolled in Chicago Normal School for Teachers, finishing second in her class. She taught at Foster School four years before becoming its principal. All this while she kept journals, six of them preserved at the Chicago Historical Society. A supporter of temperance, as were most of the IWPA founders, she joined the Independent Order of Good Templars, taught Sunday School and worked with Dwight L. Moody at the YMCA.

She was a musician, a singer, and played the organ at churches to earn extra money. She was a member of the Chicago Harmonic Union and sang at the Chicago observance of President Abraham Lincoln's funeral in 1865.

In 1864, she married William Lawson Hathaway Owens, a newspaper printer from Kentucky; they had five children. After losing everything in the Great Chicago fire in 1871, the couple moved to South Dakota where Owens helped her husband by writing and editing parts of the Clay County Register. She taught singing and grammar, sold musical instruments, played the organ at church and ran a lending library.

Life was tough and her husband often disappeared for weeks at a time. She once advertised, "Strayed or stolen, his office under new management, pays no debts of his contracting." After a fire destroyed the newspaper building, they moved back to Chicago where she published Mrs. Owens's Cook Book and Useful Household Hints which sold more than 100,000 copies across the country.

Her husband suffered from "sunstroke" and never recovered mentally. Believing he was wealthy, he ran up huge debts that forced Genie to hire a conservator. He disappeared again, this time for good; she divorced him in 1888 in absentia and moved to the Woodlawn Community on Chicago's south side where she became involved in a number of writing and publishing ventures.

Fires seemed to plague her life. Five times it destroyed her properties. And it was fire that finally took her life. December 30, 1903, Frances and her daughter died in the historic Iroquois Theater fire-the deadliest fire in Chicago history. They were at a holiday matinee of the popular musical Mr. Bluebeard. Of the 1,900 people in the audience, mostly women and children, at least 600 perished.

IWPA devoted most of its January 1904 issue of the Stylus (now PenPoints) to her memory and founded the Frances Owens Memorial Association to care for poor women writers when they became old and infirm.

She attributed her ability to cope with her many adverse situations to resolving to live a day at a time and not to carry over today's troubles to tomorrow. She taught herself to lie down, fall asleep immediately and wake 15 minutes later thoroughly refreshed. And every chance she had she attended concerts, entertainment, lectures or theater. Owens is buried at Graceland Cemetery in Chicago.

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