Honore Willsie:
A Step Ahead of Her Time

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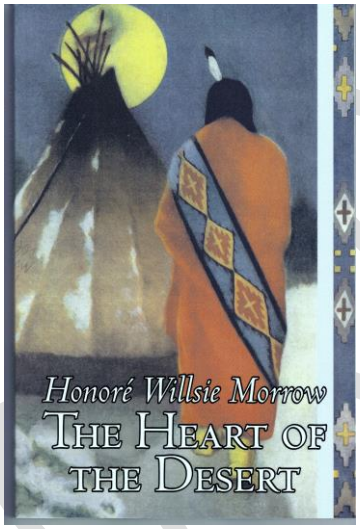
In the early twentieth century, a time when American women could not vote, the primary image of woman was an upper class lady who wore a corset and fancy dress, and sat home all day, not working, as her only occupation was as wife and mother. Honore Willsie, one-time Cranford resident, did not fit this description. Willsie, though married, did not just sit at home. Instead, she had a career writing several books and being the editor of a magazine. In this light, Willsie can be viewed as a part of the group of women who, in seeking a life beyond the home, contributed to the feminist movement and the goal of achieving social equality for women.

Honore Willise was born Honore McCue in 1880 in Ottumwa, Iowa, to two descendents of families from the East that had moved to the West, William Dunbar McCue, a lawyer, and Lilly Bryant Head McCue. Unlike most women of her time, Honore Willsie received a higher education, attending the University of Wisconsin where she earned her bachelor's degree in history. After graduating college, she took on a more traditional role when she married Henry Willsie, an engineer, in 1901. Willsie and her husband lived in various places including a mining camp in Arizona, a location that would inevitably influence Willsie's later writing, before moving back East.

The reason behind Willsie's move east was so that the aspiring writer could focus on her career. Willsie's ultimate career goal was to write her own stuff—in other words, Willsie wanted to publish her work on whatever subject she chose which, in her case, was historically based fiction. However, in the early 1900's, this was extremely difficult for even male authors to accomplish due to the editorial policies of magazines. In an interview for the *New York Times*, Willsie later stated that authors were often forced to write pieces that only focused on what mainstream audience would read. Thus, in the early days of her career, Willsie met with several different publishers based in New York City in order to sell some of her stories as well as current event articles to magazines. Eventually, Willsie's work was featured in magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Collier's*.

Because of her exposure in these magazines, Honore Willsie and her works grew in popularity, leading to the publication of her first book, *Heart of the Desert* in 1913. *Heart of the Desert* was a controversial novel—fitting to be written by an unconventional female author—that featured taboo topics such as an interracial romance between a white woman and a Native American man. Nonetheless, the novel was a success. Critics praised both Willsie's story, and they said that her main protagonist was masterfully written and suspense driven to both capture and keep her reader's attention. After *Heart of the Desert*, Willsie then went on to write several more books including the culmination of her research on Abraham Lincoln (the *Great Captain Trilogy*, 1927-1930), a novel on missionaries in the West (*We Must March*, 1925), a murder mystery (*Judith of the Godless Valley*, 1922), a novel on the poor treatment of Native Americans (*Lydia of the Pines,* 1917), as well as biographies of Bronson Alcott and Mary Todd Lincoln among other things.



However, Willsie was not only an author. She was also a magazine editor from 1914 to 1919, during the tumultuous times of World War I. The magazine Willsie worked on was called *The Delineator*. Started in 1873, *The Delineator* was a women's magazine that originally focused on dressmaking, something considered traditional women's work. Later, though, *The Delineator* expanded its subject matter to include short stories and articles on current event topics similar to what Willsie had written in the past.

During the productive time that Willsie both wrote her first books and began working as the editor of *The Delineator*, she and her husband were living in Cranford, New Jersey. The couple moved to Cranford in 1910, and, in a 1911 issue of *The Cranford Chronicle*, there is an announcement regarding a story written by Honore titled "Youth's Sweet Scented Manuscript" being published in *Pearson's Magazine*. In Cranford, Willsie resided in Hampton Hall before moving to 7 Berkeley Place in the fall of 1911. Willsie also owned a fair share of land in the town separate from her husband that equaled over seventy acres northwest of what is today Nomahegan Park. Though Willsie eventually left Cranford to move closer to her job as the editor of *The Delineator* in New York, she still returned to the town to be a speaker at local organizations such as the Women's Progress Club in 1914 and 1917.

The topics that Willsie spoke and wrote about often dealt with current issues that were not associated with the traditional affairs of women at the time. World War I, as the most influential global event of Willsie's lifetime, greatly affected Willsie's thoughts. For example, she stated in an interview that the war was not only causing humanity to reevaluate its search for what occurs after death, but it would bring about a new philosophy for writers as well. Honore Willsie also spoke out

about the role of women, pointing out that woman, in raising children, set their future values. Even though this statement is far from full out women's liberation, Willsie's argument fits in nicely with similar arguments from the first wave of feminism that women are more than just incubators, and, in shaping the opinions of the future generation, they had valuable opinions that should translate into the right to vote. Further topics that Willsie elaborated on included a more liberal stance on the then controversial and rare practice of divorce as well as immigration on which she stated that "to be an American you must have a certain philosophy of government," not a specific birthplace.

It is not surprising that Honore Willsie had a less traditional view of society. In 1922, Willsie divorced her first husband. She remarried a year later in 1923 to William Morrow, a publisher. Willsie then had two daughters and a son with Morrow, and took on the traditional role of motherhood though it was also during this time that she wrote some of her later books. However, Willsie continued her more liberated life after Morrow's 1931 death when she, like many of the other expatriate American writers of the Lost Generation, moved to Europe. Willsie lived the rest of her life in England before dying of influenza during a 1940 visit to see her sister in Connecticut.

Through her active life, Honore Willsie disapproved the stereotype of the passive Edwardian woman and showed that women in the early twentieth century did more than just sit around in the house and have children. As such, Willsie was also a sign of the changing times in which women could be more than just wives and mothers. Her experience illustrates that women were gaining more social power and had more options to get educations and have careers. Willsie's local connection brings this transition toward modern society and more equality for women closer to home. In fact, Honore Willsie is both an individual who symbolizes the movement toward equality for women, as well as someone who brings the larger women's movement back to the modern individual.