

Ivy Julia Cromartie

STRANAHAN

PHILANTHROPIST AND INSPIRATION

by MARY MCGREEVY

"Women will love her, that she is a woman,
"More worth than any man:
"Men that she is the rarest of all women."
— Shakespeare, *A Winter's Tale*¹

Ivy Julia Cromartie Stranahan was an early Broward County pioneer and an unusual person deeply involved in and dedicated to improving the lives and living conditions of other humans. Her biographer, August Burghard, describes her as "Thoughtful, positive, argumentative." She felt deeply for those who were underprivileged or downtrodden, and she worked to improve their lives, convincing others to assist. Her concern brought a significant change for the better in the lives of many citizens of her adopted hometown, Fort Lauderdale. Not only in her lifetime, but in years afterwards, people in Fort Lauderdale—Seminole Indians, disenfranchised women, the needy, blacks, older persons, children, and many others—benefited and will continue to benefit from institutions she founded and ways of thinking she inspired.

Mrs. Stranahan's interests did not

stop at people. Probably the area's first ecologist, she grew many varieties of flowers and vegetables and was an important member of the Garden Club. At one state garden show, she had a rose named in her honor. Deeply appreciative of the natural environment, she opposed the building of waterways and other construction that threatened to destroy the marvelous fishing in New River, on which her home was built. She was an early member of the Broward Audubon Society, and opposed the killing of birds to market their feathers, even though her husband had traded manufactured goods for pelts, bird plumes, and alligator hides with the Seminole Indians during his early years in Fort Lauderdale. She also helped the Federation of Woman's Clubs in their efforts to preserve the ecology of Florida by setting aside some of the land that eventually became part of the Everglades National Park—Royal Palm Island—as a state park. She was an inspector of that area for the woman's clubs for many years.

Anyone who knows about Ivy Stranahan's life and activities can find inspiration and courage in her battle to

preserve native plants and animals in their natural habitat, a habitat which, in Broward County, has seen enormous destruction since the early years of this

Ivy Stranahan's enduring fame as a leading Fort Lauderdale pioneer is due as much to her long life of community and public service as to her early arrival or her position as the settlement's first schoolteacher.

This article, outlining Mrs. Stranahan's many achievements, contributions, awards, and honors, was prepared for the Broward County Women's History Coalition in their nomination of Mrs. Stranahan to the National Women's Hall of Fame.

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Ivy Stranahan.

century, when the State of Florida began dredging the North New River Canal:

The rock ledges of the north and south branches [of New River] were dynamited as the dredges worked their way through rock to muck westward. The first humus-laden dark water began to creep unnoticed down the clear current of the lovely river, staining the bright white bottom sands.²

Mrs. Stranahan also worried about the effects on the New River when the Federal Highway tunnel was constructed beneath it between 1958 and 1960. "I resent such modern improvement as the Federal Highway Tunnel," she said, "But I think I have adapted well to the new civilization."³

Although she conceded that the City of Fort Lauderdale lost much of its natural beauty to development, she also hoped that the new residents would "take up an interest in their gardens that makes up for some of lost nature."⁴ One of the bougainvilleas at her home is now about eighty years old, and is still growing very strong, much like a tree, reaching up to the second story of the house, where its bright, purple blossoms, brilliant in the

sun, are reminders that she was a strong-willed person who overcame many difficulties and bloomed in the community.

While recognizing the destructive forces of civilization, Mrs. Stranahan also believed that communities contain structures to implement cures and improvements for the social ills that occur in their formation. Some of the organizations that work toward these ends are often women's service clubs and associations that demand not only dues and contributions from their members, but also volunteer work, planning, education, and communication. In many of these organizations, Ivy Stranahan stood as a founder, a pioneer, a dauntless lobbyist, a courageous speaker, a very hard worker, and an enthusiastic promoter. Few have or ever will equal her efforts. Throughout her long life, she continued to be an active member of many of the organizations she helped found, often serving as an officer or trustee in them. It is impossible in an article of this scope to catalog her numerous memberships and activities; it would be harder still to record all the honors she received over her lifetime.

Among the most prominent and most

important service clubs that Mrs. Stranahan helped found was the Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club, that town's first women's organization. The Woman's Club was organized in 1911, at the same time that the men were establishing a board of trade in order to plan the incorporation of the town. Thus, the women worked side by side with the men, at one in their goal to form a unique and clean community with high aspirations. The first task undertaken by the Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club, which was originally called the Ladies' Civic Improvement Society, was the development of means of collecting and removing trash. To this day, Fort Lauderdale has a reputation of being a clean city where residents are concerned with the upkeep and appearance of their property. It was during Mrs. Stranahan's administration as president of the society, in 1913, that its name was changed to the Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club. The following year, she and her husband donated to the club a piece of property on the corner of Andrews Avenue and Park Street, which is now known as Stranahan Park. The Woman's Club began collecting money for a permanent building on the site. The building was completed in 1917.

On its fifty-second anniversary in 1963, the Woman's Club honored its past presidents, including Mrs. Stranahan, noting that she had been a founder and charter member as well as a president of the club. During those years, she had also worked actively on most of the club's projects, including the founding of the library in 1914, canning, cemetery improvement, World War I activities, education, fund-raising, emergency shelter, tree planting, the naming of Port Everglades, staging weekly concerts in Stranahan Park, hospital work, selling bonds during World War II, projects to help the mentally handicapped, civil defense, Easter Seals, and many more.

Another organization in which Mrs. Stranahan was extremely active was the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, Inc., which now maintains her papers, photographs, and other effects in their archives. She helped found the historical society in 1962, served many years as a trustee, and inaugurated a trust fund for its benefit from her personal money.

Although her husband, who came to the New River in 1893, is usually acclaimed as the first resident of modern Fort Lauderdale, both the Stranahans were instrumental in establishing the community. In 1899, the handful of residents in the area, several of whom had come to



Fort Lauderdale's first schoolhouse, 1899
(courtesy Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).

farm after the Florida East Coast Railway was completed between Palm Beach and Miami three years earlier, petitioned the school board of Dade County, of which today's Broward County was then a part, for a school and a teacher. Ivy Julia Cromartie of Lemon City, who had studied to be a schoolteacher and had recently passed her exams, was hired for the job. Edwin Thomas King built the one-room schoolhouse for the original class of fourteen pupils, and Miss Cromartie lived with his family that first year, beginning in September 1899, walking over one mile to school each morning over a virtual nature trail populated with wildlife.

One year later, Ivy Cromartie married Frank Stranahan, the proprietor of the local trading post. It was for his bride that he built the Stranahan House in 1902. From this sturdy structure of Dade County pine, and later from a commercial building near the railroad tracks in Fort Lauderdale's rapidly growing downtown, Stranahan operated a trading post, store, and post office, and also served as Fort Lauderdale's first banker. Mrs. Stranahan has often been called "The First Lady of Fort Lauderdale."

As she helped her husband at the trading post, the new Mrs. Stranahan had frequent contacts with the Seminole Indians, who, in those early years, formed the foundation of the post's market—bringing in skins to exchange for dry goods, calico, traps, and ammunition. Mrs. Stranahan gathered the Indian children around her and taught them the rudiments of reading and writing, as well as

instructing them in the Christian faith and advising them to pursue further education. She also helped the tribe settle disputes with the federal government. In 1924 government officials asked her to help persuade the Indians camping in the rapidly growing southeast Florida towns to move onto a reservation established for them just west of Hollywood. She invited mistrustful Seminole leaders to inspect the reservation property and drove them there to see it. The local Indian agent provided the Seminoles with materials to build their own houses, and paid them for their labor, while Mrs. Stranahan supervised the details of the major move, assuring the Indians that the government would keep "its word" to them and honor them on their own reservation and homesite. On occasions when the government failed to live up to its promises, she tirelessly pleaded the Indians' cause with officials both in Florida and in Washington. Usually, she was able to get the problem settled to the satisfaction of the tribe, and, at one point, received a scroll from the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs in recognition of her accomplishments in bettering Seminole-white relations. She spent over fifty years working with the Indians, and was one of the founders of an active and important organization, the "Friends of the Seminoles."

Had Mrs. Stranahan worked only with the Indians, she would have been important to Florida and American history. However, her interests, accomplishments, and concern for others covered many areas and activities besides being a true "friend of the Seminoles." She helped black people

in their struggle for a better standard of living, served as county welfare chairman, and assisted in the founding of Broward County's first black hospital.

She and her husband also helped found Fort Lauderdale Memorial Hospital, and donated the ground on which that facility was built. This hospital served the community in the 1920s and '30s. Mr. Stranahan was treated there for exhaustion and nervousness shortly before he committed suicide, in May 1929, by tying an iron weight on one of his feet and jumping into the New River in the rear of his home at a spot that was approximately twenty-five feet deep. He knew the waters well, and had been a ferryman on this very spot some thirty years earlier.

Mrs. Stranahan overcame her grief to continue to work for community causes in an outstanding manner. With her husband gone and the local economy left a shambles by the collapse of the Florida land boom and the onset of the Great Depression, she ran her substantial home, where she and her husband had once hosted many community parties and dances, as a guest house. She eventually leased the bottom floor for a restaurant, and a large extension was added for that purpose. After her death, the house was acquired by the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society. It then passed to the Friends of the Stranahan House, Inc., which restored it to its 1913-1915 appearance. Today it is Fort Lauderdale's oldest documented building, and is operated as a historical monument and museum, continuing to serve the community by providing insight into how the pioneers lived and what activities occupied their energies along the trade route of the New River.

Both Stranahans were unstinting in giving of themselves, money, resources, and time to the Fort Lauderdale community. A center for civic and cultural life located in the heart of the city's downtown, Stranahan Park remains the site of the Woman's Club, as well as the modern, eight-floor, glass-encased Broward County Main Library, which offers the latest in computer cataloging, video tapes and records, and research volumes of import. Stranahan Park is a fitting place for this impressive building, since the Woman's Club established the town's first public library in 1914. Looking out of the glass expanse from one of the upper floors of the library at the tiny Woman's Club building, one cannot help but marvel that seventy-eight years are squeezed into one capsule of time. Surrounded by the modern technology of the late twentieth century, it is hard not to wonder what time it is inside the historic building



The restored Stranahan House, 1984.

below, and to reflect that:

Time present and time past

*Are both perhaps present
in time future,
And time future contained
in time past.⁵*

Today, women are still using

the building, planning for a better, more enlightened, and more welcoming community.

The Fort Lauderdale Historical Society is in the process of installing a bronze plaque honoring Mrs. Stranahan on a "Walkway of Fame" in Stranahan Park. Spaced across the steps of this park from Broward Boulevard to the west entrance of the library, these plaques bear testimony to the fame, fortune, and accomplishments of Broward leaders of long ago.

As befits a former schoolteacher, many of Mrs. Stranahan's efforts were directed at children. She helped found and worked for many years at the Children's Home, being honored with a plaque for these efforts in 1966. She was further honored for her place in history as Fort Lauderdale's first schoolteacher when Stranahan High School was built and named for her and her husband. The students there dedicated their first yearbook to her, writing about her life and printing pictures of her through the years.

As her services as county welfare chairman illustrate, Mrs. Stranahan worked for many years to help the poor. Well-acquainted with their plight, she lobbied strenuously for the passage of the Homestead Exemption Act in 1933. In a

speech supporting the act, she stated that, while education and other concerns were of vital importance, citizens first had to have homes. That a home serving all the needs of its owner was a top priority for Ivy Stranahan is evident today at the Stranahan House. At the rear entrance to the house is a restored office, indicative of the building's public functions as a trading post, bank, post office, and center of business activities. In another section of the house is a cozy and comfortable living room which was used for relaxation and to host guests and parties. During Fort Lauderdale's rugged pioneer period in the early years of the century, it was considered an honor to dine with Mrs. Stranahan in her lovely dining room,

which boasted the top civilities of formal dining in the area—china, crystal, and a lace tablecloth.

Ivy Stranahan lobbied her government for many causes, and for her efforts received many awards. The Rosicrucians honored her as a humanist in 1965. In 1968, she received an honorary degree from Drake College of Fort Lauderdale for her unselfish efforts on behalf of education in the State of Florida. That same year, Florida Governor Claude Kirk declared February 18 "Mrs. Stranahan Day," to be celebrated across the state. The American Red Cross honored her for her many years of volunteer service in 1958. Pine Crest School appointed her a member of their board of trustees from 1966 to 1967. Today, Pine Crest is one of the leading prep schools in the nation. In 1968, she was awarded a certification of recognition from Stewart Udall, United States Secretary of the Interior and one of the nation's leading environmentalists, for her work with the Seminole Indians. Although her only professional certification was as a teacher in 1899, Mrs. Stranahan continued to educate herself and keep up with events and issues that interested her. In what would today be called "continuing education," she took courses in home economics and American government from the University of Florida-Florida State College for Women General Extension Division.

For Mrs. Stranahan, as well as for many other women of her time, one of the most important causes was suffrage. Much activity on behalf of this cause was handled by the Woman's Clubs, which joined together in the Florida Federation of Woman's Clubs (FFWC) to sponsor suf-



Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club building in Stranahan Park, 1920.

frage on a statewide level. In 1913 representatives of the FFWC formed a separate organization, the Florida Equal Suffrage Association (FESA). In 1917 Mrs. Stranahan served as president of this new group. In this capacity, she tried to get the National Women's Party to help the FESA organize for suffrage, but was unsuccessful. The Woman's Clubs proved to be better organized than the FESA, and Mrs. Stranahan believed that they were therefore better suited for the arduous political battle necessary to obtain woman's suffrage.

When World War I began, Mrs. Stranahan urged all suffragettes to buy Liberty Bonds, but, in general, suffrage organizations did not become involved in community service. Their most important tasks were holding meetings, presenting lectures, and influencing congressmen, senators, and legislators. In 1918, after her term as FESA president ended, Mrs. Stranahan became first vice president of the organization and continued her work for the suffrage cause until the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920.

Ivy Stranahan believed in people and wanted to help them gain the best they could in life. People, in turn, were grateful to her and learned to believe in the future and in the improvement of the human race. A large part of that future depended

on further economic development, but to this goal Mrs. Stranahan added the dimensions of preservation of nature, education, political reform, and improvement of living conditions, and she did so with enlightened humanism and dedication.

Although she took a keen interest in issues of national and state importance, Mrs. Stranahan had a real stake in the civic improvement of Fort Lauderdale. As a business person and community leader, she was named one of the first members of the city's planning and zoning board. In this capacity, she did much of the planning for Andrews Avenue, which, in the 1920s, became downtown Fort Lauderdale's main artery, and for Las Olas Boulevard, which runs from the downtown eastward, through what were once mangrove marshes and are today luxurious waterfront subdivisions, to a lovely, high, breezy beach, the pride of Fort Lauderdale. For centuries, as people sailed along the coast or visited the uninhabited wilderness region, this beautiful stretch of beach caught their attention. In 1839, the third of three Seminole War military installations named Fort Lauderdale was constructed on this site. In the late nineteenth century, a government house of refuge for shipwreck victims was located there. Before a bridge was built over the waterway that separated this beach section from the small town of Fort Lauderdale

in 1917, the young Stranahans and many of their friends often came to this spot for picnics and beach parties. Sometimes they would spend the night at the House of Refuge. The Coast Guard established a base on the site during the 1920s, and today, Bahia Mar, a lovely hotel and yachting center, occupies this location. Much has changed since the Stranahans first pioneered here, but many of the causes they supported are still of utmost importance in many people's minds—the conservation of nature, the preservation of wildlife, the preservation of old buildings and historical sites, the teaching of history, good government, and keeping a clean, prosperous, welcoming town environment.

Endnotes

1. This was quoted at Mrs. Stranahan's funeral by speaker August Burghard.
2. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades: River of Grass* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, revised ed., 1988), 314.
3. Anne Fries, "First Lady of Ft. Lauderdale Is Proud of Her City's Progress," *Fort Lauderdale News*, June 23, 1967.
4. *Ibid.*
5. T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1964).

PROCLAMATION

State of Florida
Executive Department
Tallahassee

WHEREAS, Ivy Julia Stranahan has valiantly served the community of Fort Lauderdale and her fellowmen since the day she arrived in 1899 to become the first school teacher, and

WHEREAS, many of the helpful and worthy programs of the bustling and dynamic city of today were instituted through the untiring efforts and unswerving vision of Mrs. Stranahan in the past, and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Stranahan through the years has adopted as her own problems those of people in need of education, understanding, consideration and kindness, and


WHEREAS, the lives that have been touched by this great humanitarian, whether as recipients or as benefactors, are richer for that contact, and

WHEREAS, the Floridians everywhere, who has established an example to emulate and a standard to achieve in service to God and man;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Claude S. Kirk, Jr., by virtue of the authority vested in me as Governor of the State of Florida, do hereby proclaim February 18, 1968 as

MRS. STRANAHAN DAY


in Florida, and urge all citizens to appropriately mark this day in honor of our precious fellow Floridian.



BY MY HAND AND THE GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA,
this 18th day of February, 1968.

Claude S. Kirk, Jr.
GOVERNOR

United States Department of the Interior



Certificate of Recognition

To all to whom these presents shall come, greeting:

Know ye that special honors represented by this certificate are bestowed upon "The First Lady of Fort Lauderdale,"

Ivy Julia Stranahan

in recognition of a lifetime of unselfish and devoted service to the Seminole Indians of Florida.

Her warm friendship with these people and her sympathetic understanding of their problems have been materially responsible for the excellent relationship that exists today between the Seminoles and their non-Indian neighbors.

Presented this eighteenth day of February, 1968

Two of the many awards and honors Mrs. Stranahan received during her lifetime (courtesy Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).

Robert S. Lyman
Commissioner of Indian Affairs

Henry U. Deere
Secretary, United States Department of the Interior

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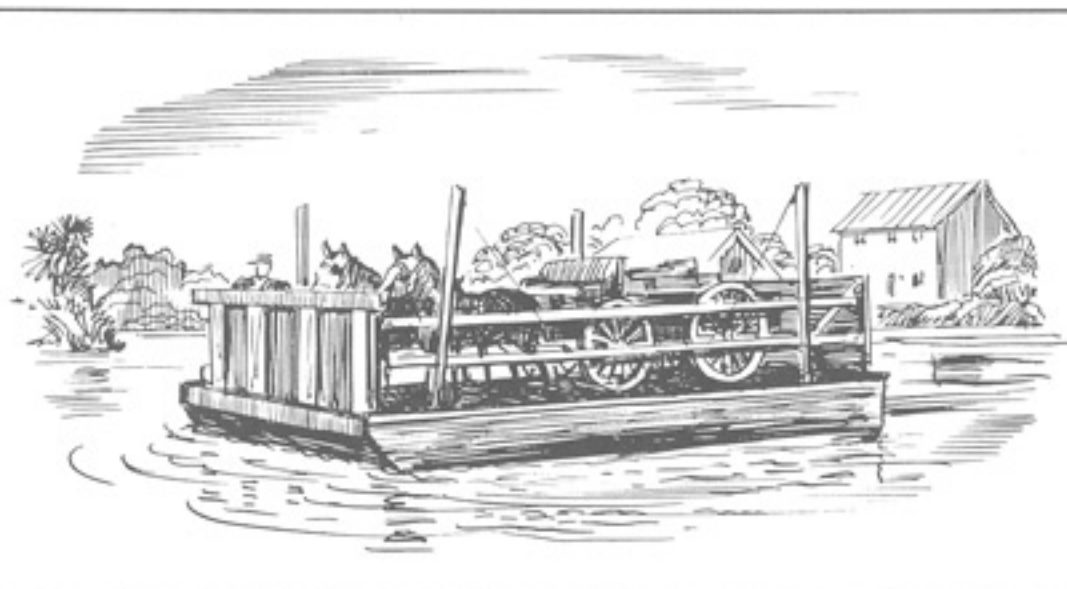
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The Broward County Women's History Coalition Archives, Ivy Julia Cromartie Stranahan Memorial Archive: women's papers, speeches, news articles, memorabilia, esp. in regard to Women's History Month, March 1990.



New River ferry operated by Frank Stranahan in the 1890s
(courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).