

Book Review: *Lost Stories*, by Ronald L. Stuckey

Review by John K. Chidester, originally composed for the Mount Vernon News on January 13, 2004

What could be so special about a place that it would draw someone into a 30-year labor of love assembling stories and sketches of its natural features, its history and its people? Ask Ronald L. Stuckey, the author of “*Lost Stories: Yesterday and Today at Put-in-Bay*.” Or ask the committee of the Ohioana Library Association that decided to honor Stuckey with one of its annual book awards. Better yet, read the book yourself. It’s filled with nostalgia for a place whose story is pure enchantment.

Ronald Stuckey is a retired professor of botany whose academic career at Ohio State University included many summers at the school’s Franz Theodore Stone Laboratory on Gibraltar Island. No, not the Gibraltar in the western Mediterranean, the one that’s a six-acre hunk of rock at the opening of Put-in-Bay on Lake Erie’s South Bass Island. Stuckey’s initial trip there as a student in 1959 gave him his first whiff of island fever, from which he never recovered. For twenty or so years he conducted research and taught summer classes on the island. He also started collecting the pieces of local history and lore that would, thirty years later, become his book.

But Ronald Stuckey is only one of the stars of this story--and only one of the authors of his book. His main collaborator is a woman who died more than 80 years ago and who is acknowledged in the book’s subtitle: “Including Theresa Thorndale’s ‘*Island Jottings*’ of the 1890’s.” Theresa Thorndale was the pen name of a woman who grew up on a farm well inland in northern Ohio but made her way to South Bass Island sometime in the 1880’s and before the end of that decade had become the island’s correspondent for the Sandusky Register. She also wrote a book, “*Sketches and Stories of the Lake Erie Islands*,” published in 1898 and reissued in a revised and expanded edition in 1913, in conjunction with the erection of Perry’s Monument. That second edition appeared under her real name, Miss Lydia Jane Ryall.

Stuckey spent years hand-copying her articles from microfilm copies of the Register. He also gathered other related items from several north coast newspapers and added his own extensive observations and commentary. The result is a captivating portrait through time, from the mid-19th century to the present, of a place whose fortunes have been as variable as the Lake Erie weather.

In flowery, swooping prose typical of her day, Theresa Thorndale wrote of vineyards and orchards, of fishermen and tourists, of her own adventures rowing a boat into the path of a lake steamer at night, and of the fluid interplay of everyday life and special events in a setting of incredible natural beauty. She chronicled the rise of the Hotel Victory, a lavish tourist attraction reputed to have been the largest resort hotel in North America at the time. It failed financially, was sold at auction and brought back to life, only to burn to the ground in 1919, a year before Thorndale's death but long after she'd left the island and her career in journalism.

Other prominent points of South Bass Island history vividly portrayed in this book include the lighthouse at Parker Point (now owned by OSU), the ice companies on Peach Point, the actor's colony that was home to vaudeville performers, two major fish hatcheries (one federal, one state; go figure), the sumptuous clubhouse of the Cincinnati Fishing Club, the family mansion of Civil War financier Jay Cooke, Crystal Cave and Perry's Cave, and sundry other features of island life and lore.

Ronald Stuckey's lifelong romance with South Bass Island and its environs was the driving force behind "Lost Stories: Yesterday and Today at Put-in-Bay." That same romance fueled Theresa Thorndale's stories, and it runs through the lives of all the people who appear in these pages. Clearly, it's an easy place to fall in love with. Don't be surprised if Stuckey's book makes you want to go there.