

Introduction

Genius

While serving as US attorney general for eight years under President Bill Clinton, Janet Reno told a lot of stories about her late mother, Jane Wood Reno. Usually they involved the unlikely story of her mother building the family home largely by herself from the ground up—hacking a foundation out of the limestone that underpinned the Dade County pine scrub and constructing a sprawling rustic house that Janet lived in her whole life. Sometimes she mentioned her mother wrestling alligators, or the 104-mile beach walk her mother undertook alone over a six-day period. The stories were usually intended to reinforce Janet's steely determination that a woman could do anything she wanted to if she put her mind to it. The general portrait the public got of Jane Wood Reno was of a mildly irascible, eccentric pioneer woman raising her children on the edge of the Everglades, with a strong adventurous streak.

Her daughter Janet usually avoided the stories about her mother that had been more embarrassing to her personally, like when her drunk mother called a state trooper a “baby-faced pipsqueak,” poured beer on the heads of company who offended her, or trapped skunks that she later released outside the local police station. Nor did Janet Reno talk about the formidable depth of her mother's intellect, and her exceptional career as a prize-winning reporter for the *Miami News*. As much as Jane Wood Reno's children proved to be intellectual heavyweights in their respective fields, her daughter Maggy reflected that none of them was an intellectual match for their mother. Lost in the annals of Florida journalism history was the recognition that Jane Wood Reno was, in her prime, a titan of an investigative reporter, winner of two national and many local awards, and one of the rare woman journalists doing substantial hard-news reporting for a big-city paper in the 1950s.

Jane Reno was equally at home among tugboat captains and the greatest minds of the twentieth century. One of her favorite stories was of the night she spent drinking with playwright Tennessee Williams in Key West. Toward the

end of the evening, Williams announced, “Jane, you’re a bitch.” He paused, adding with a big smile, “And I love bitches!” She fell asleep in the swimming pool that night, and Williams later paid tribute to her by including a bit character in one of his lesser-known plays that drunkenly falls asleep in a pool. In the complex personality of Jane Reno, the intellectual side was capable of impressing any company she chose to keep. Neither those who enjoyed her gregarious company nor those who incurred her displeasure soon forgot it.

In the 1950s she worked on a memoir with Dr. Sarah Sidis, who along with her husband, Boris, produced one of the greatest child geniuses ever known, William James Sidis. By the age of eleven, William was lecturing at Harvard and pointing out flaws to Einstein on the theory of relativity. As a child genius herself, Reno was able to relate. Fellow adventurers also captured her imagination, and she interviewed Amelia Earhart as a cub reporter at the *Miami Herald* in 1937 during Earhart’s final, fateful attempted voyage around the world. The Miccosukee Indians’ close bond to nature and the Everglades fascinated her. She became one of their most trusted friends from the outside world of white people and learned to wrestle alligators from them. They concocted an honorary title for her of Indian princess and named her Apoongo Stahnegee, the “messenger,” for her accurate reporting on their affairs and her championing of their land claims as the last undefeated tribe of nonreservation Native Americans in the United States.

Her life was marked by an unlimited freedom of the spirit, which travel helped stoke. At the age of seventeen she caught a glimpse of fascist Italy en route to spending two years immersing herself in Greek life at the beginning of the Depression, with eye-opening adventures in the rapidly modernizing Turkey of Kemal Ataturk as well. She took her children on endless adventures all through the wilderness of Florida and the mountains of the Carolinas. She shared Greece, Turkey, Iran, Australia, New Zealand, and the Galapagos Islands with her grandchildren.

New technologies fascinated her. She walked away unscathed from a small plane crash as a student at the University of Miami in 1929, eventually got a degree in physics in 1937, and was in on the ground floor—or reef, as it were—of the pioneering of scuba diving in south Florida in the early 1950s. To help promote a new scuba regulator that was one of the first competitors to Jacques Cousteau’s Aqua Lung, she did what was likely the first underwa-

ter scuba interview in history. Her young children became her guinea pigs with whom she shared the wonders of the ocean, and her daughter Maggy became a proficient diver by age twelve.

Reno's groundbreaking career as a woman journalist was inspired by writers like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, whom a fifteen-year-old Reno interviewed while still in high school. After getting her Depression-era training in the women's section of the *Miami Daily News* and in the home and design columns for the *Miami Herald*, Reno took a break from journalism to raise her children and then returned to it with a vengeance. Her first freelance article for the *Miami Herald* in 1949 after a twelve-year hiatus won her a national *Big Story* award, the first of two such awards. No other woman journalist in the country during the 1950s could claim such an accomplishment.

Her intellectual curiosity was limitless, both inside and outside her professional lives. She excelled as a reporter and initially got around the sexism that forbid women from doing certain kinds of reporting by writing prolifically under a number of male aliases. The chauvinist publisher of the *Miami Daily News* could not bring himself to have her on staff the first few years, which suited her as it allowed her much more freedom to pursue topics considered "quirky" by the staff news writers. Do-it-yourself articles and home and design were her bread and butter at first, but she quickly expanded her repertoire to include stories on timber men, lighthouse keepers, tugboat captains, watchmakers, scuba divers, and a wide range of other topics. When her worth to the paper became indisputable, they brought her on staff and gave her a hard-news investigative reporting feature that allowed her more latitude than most of her male colleagues had. She wrote immodestly of her success and the slings and arrows that came with it in a letter to her sister: "I am certainly the best known and best newspaper woman in Florida, having become twice blasted in the current session of the Legislature. . . . I get a good deal of hammering in return on some of these things, and am subject to plenty of acid criticism within and outside of my office—things that begin with, 'You and your goddamn vain hyperthyroid, look what you did now.'"

Always with a flair for the dramatic, she thrilled in going undercover on behalf of the Kefauver Commission, a Senate investigative panel, to expose the black-market baby racket in Miami. Wearing a fake diamond ring and driving a Cadillac, she pretended to be a wealthy New Jersey socialite in search of a baby

to adopt. For her second *Big Story* award, "Scoop," she raced north to a Florida state prison with a Miami detective to hear a prisoner's confession implicating accomplices on the Miami police force. She constantly received laudatory letters to the editor about her tackling of topics that rarely got detailed attention otherwise.

Her grounding as a social worker during the Depression gave her keen insight into systemic failures, which came to a head after the most savage storm of the twentieth century decimated the Florida Keys in 1935. The various failures of government that resulted in the deaths, during that hurricane, of World War I "Bonus Army" marchers who were working on federal relief programs in the Keys drove her out of social work and back into finishing her education. Social work also left her with a great deal of empathy, which served her well as a journalist in championing the downtrodden and underdogs.

She exposed the conditions in which migrant farmworkers lived, forming the basis for a colleague to write a Pulitzer-winning series on the plight of migrant workers the following year. When a psychologist testified to the US Senate about beatings at an unnamed reform school, Reno followed the story to Marianna, Florida, and revealed the alarming abuse of boys taking place there. The governor expressed concern but failed to act; fifty years later, while the school was still open, unmarked graves with fifty-two bodies were discovered in the burial ground at the school.

Although sharp-witted intellectual women were not an anomaly in the early twentieth century, ones as fearlessly practical as Reno were less usual. After her small sailboat flipped in Biscayne Bay in 1935 with a friend on board, she left her friend sitting on the hull of the boat and swam a mile and a half to shore to get help. During World War II, she raised hens and did stunts for Civil Defense watching for Nazi planes. She could shoot a rifle with uncanny accuracy, once dispatched a bear ransacking their cabin in the Smoky Mountains, and was happy as could be camping rough in the wilderness. In her sixties, she comfortably wielded a chainsaw while removing all the invasive species on her property to convert it to the subtropical oasis that it is today.

Her final career as a public-relations woman allowed her dramatic side and lightheartedness to flourish. She brought Buckminster Fuller to the Miami Seaquarium to speak about the power of dolphins, got humorist Art Buchwald to escort a dolphin to its new home as a mate for a lone seaquarium dolphin