

The Extraordinary Life of Jane Wood Reno: Miami's Trailblazing Journalist

**George Hurchalla. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. 318 pp.
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Jane Wood Reno was larger than life. She could wrestle an alligator, hike along a desolate coastline, build a house with a wild menagerie, and drink with anyone. But she was much more than her wildest adventures. Reno was a mother of four who encouraged her children to find both adventure and academic excellence. She had the respect of the Miccosukee tribe as an honorary princess. And she was a tough, tenacious journalist whose award-winning investigations earned her a desk in the male-dominated newsroom of mid-twentieth century America.

Best known as the mother of Janet Wood Reno, the U.S. attorney general from 1993-2001, Jane Reno (1913-1992) has been given her due in a biography penned by her grandson, *The Extraordinary Life of Jane Wood Reno: Miami's Trailblazing Journalist*. Author George Hurchalla probed family papers and recollections, using raucous anecdotes and passages from Jane's many letters and articles, to bring his grandmother to life in the book's pages. In doing so, he portrays a fearless woman who followed her instincts and championed the forgotten and abused members of society.

Born in Macon, Georgia, to a lawyer father and a mother whose family had seen its share of hardship, Wood and her family moved to Miami in 1925, when the area was shifting from a frontier outpost to a boomtown. As a teenager, Wood found it "exciting. The city had really become itself—jubilant, high of heart, wild," she recalled.¹ Her love of journalism emerged when she became associate editor of her high school newspaper and wrote sports stories for the *Miami News*. One of the most memorable interviews 15-year-old Wood conducted was with local celebrity Marjory Stoneman Douglas, the noted author of *The Everglades: River of Grass*. "She was so nervous that her pencil broke while doing the interview," Hurchalla writes.²

Wood enrolled at the fledgling University of Miami at age 15, intending to major in English. However, she was too easily diverted. She ignited worry and newspaper headlines when she and three bored friends decided to run away. It was a lark that sparked kidnapping concerns, until the weary young women entered an Ocala police station and asked to go home. This is just one of many colorful adventures in Wood's life, which yielded countless lessons. Jane's travels in Greece alerted her to the inherent racism that accompanied her southern upbringing – a flaw she long worked to overcome. "I have never been a 'true Southern lady,'" she conceded, "But I am rather a good Georgia cracker."³ Her worldview was also altered by her role as a social worker during the Depression, where she encountered "grinding poverty every day."⁴ Consequently, Wood spent much of her life championing the causes of the poor, the downtrodden, and the politically powerless.

¹ George Hurchalla, *The Extraordinary Life of Jane Wood Reno: Miami's Trailblazing Journalist*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020), 11.

² Hurchalla, 16.

³ Hurchalla, 30, 49.

⁴ Hurchalla, 61.

In 1935, she was particularly moved by the plight of World War I veterans who had been working on an overland highway in the Keys when a hurricane hit, washing out a railroad bridge, killing many workers, and leveling the veterans' tent camps. Wood was angered by the Red Cross response and quit social work, returning to college and working part-time at the newspaper. Her path eventually crossed with Henry Reno's, a reporter for the *Miami Herald* who was early to report on the hurricane's devastation. The two married in 1937. That union created four remarkable children, including Janet Wood Reno and Maggy Hurchalla, a long-time advocate for growth management and restoration of the Everglades. They followed in their mother's fearless footsteps, embracing nature and standing up to political power.

George Hurchalla's book is full of lively vignettes about the incredible Jane Wood Reno. It covers, for example, Wood's interview with Amelia Earhart (she was the only reporter in the office when Earhart landed in Miami) and Wood's embrace of the new SCUBA technology, leading to what may have been the first underwater interview. And her research for an award-winning story about the Seminoles allowed her to gain hard-earned trust among tribe members. In the 1950s, Wood also befriended members of the Miccosukee Tribe and was allowed to attend their private ceremonies, a rarity for outsiders. This group later pronounced her Princess Apongong Stahnegee, an honorary title that meant "because we like the way you do things." Jane reflected on that special moment: "And I cried. It was the greatest honor I ever received."⁵

At the start of her career, Wood coped with sexism by using a man's name as her byline. Later on, she earned all kinds of kudos for investigative reporting on a diverse range of topics, including illegal adoptions, city police corruption, the plight of migrant workers, and corporal punishment at a state school for boys – which later became a major state scandal. Wood went from being relegated to the women's section of the paper to a front-page, full-time staffer; this was a remarkable feat for a woman journalist of her era. In her later years she worked in public relations, handling accounts for National Airlines and the Miami Seaquarium. She even joined the two entities in one memorable stunt that involved flying a male bottlenose dolphin from Miami to live with a lonely female dolphin in Italy. The "romance" gained international attention, to her and her clients' delight.

Although Hurchalla's style is entertaining and readable, the book would have been stronger had it drawn from more sources beyond the family. Personal memories can be cloudy, as any archivist or historian knows, and the book could have included more objective voices from across the communities that Jane touched. But the portrait the author lovingly paints is clear. Wood was always an independent and independent-thinking woman. At the end of her life, there was no question that she had made a difference in her community. As the *Miami Herald* stated, "There can be no finer epitaph than this: She did it all."⁶ This public history biography offers a personal perspective that the public would appreciate. It also gives special insight for scholars of women's history, journalism, and social activism in the twentieth century. Any researcher looking for background on Jane's two famous daughters would benefit from this text, as well; it particularly contributes to an understanding of Janet Wood Reno's life, with its many glimpses into politics and major events during a critical and dynamic period in Florida's history. But at its core, it is the story of how one woman threw off the societal constraints of the era to forge her own path. A valuable and enjoyable read.

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⁵ Hurchalla, 228.

⁶ Hurchalla, 300.