



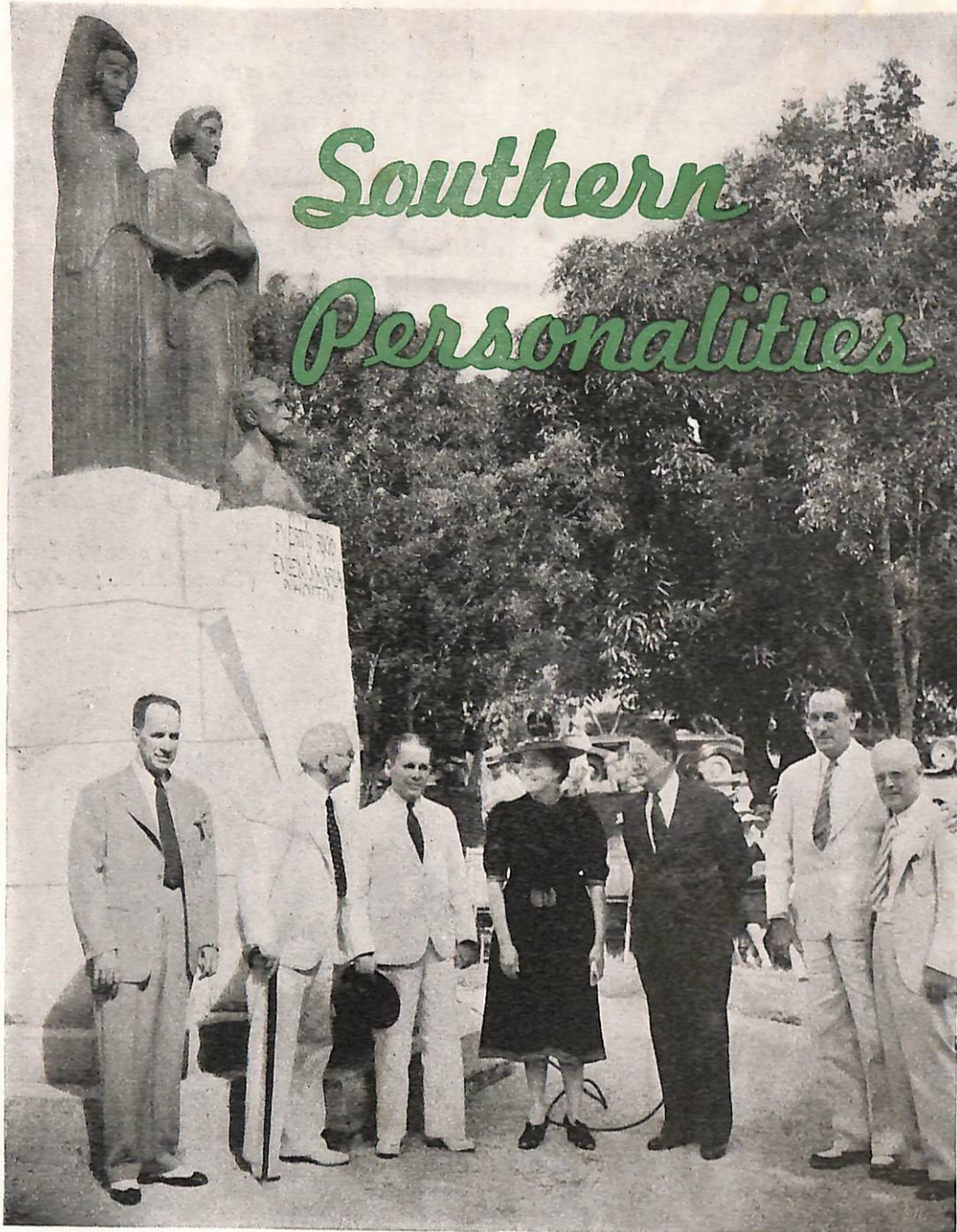
MUNA LEE

Poet and Feminist

By
**MARY
REID**

Muna Lee was speaker at the unveiling of this statue of Eugenio María de Hostos, great Puerto Rican patriot, during the World Congress of Education Association. Here she is shown with other leaders at the Congress

Entrance to the University of Puerto Rico, with the bell tower in the background



IF YOU were in New York, or Washington (or Geneva before the present war) and met dark-haired, soft-voiced, sparkling brown-eyed Señora Luis Muñoz Marín—member of the governing board of the Ibero-American Institute of the University of Puerto Rico, and of the governing council of the World Woman's Party—and were also told that she was the first woman ever to address a Pan American Conference, you might not realize that she is also the poet Muna Lee and a native, not of Latin America, but of Mississippi. However, generous space in both *Who's Who in America* and the *Handbook of Oklahoma Writers* will verify these interesting facts.

For Muna Lee is the wife of Luis Muñoz Marín, noted journalist and publisher, and senator-at-large from Puerto Rico. She is also the mother of two charming children: Luisito, a son, whose portrait, painted by the Spanish artist Cristobal Ruiz, was exhibited at the Bonestall Galleries in New York this year; and Munita, who was a lovely dark-eyed belle in sixteenth-century Spanish court dress at the Ponce de Leon Carnival.

Through her contributions to *National Poetry* and other magazines, Miss Lee is known to many. She is prominent politically through her work with the National Woman's Party, for which she acted as director at one time, with headquarters in Washington; and because she is on the governing council of the World Woman's Party, a new international venture made urgent since the position of women has become more precarious in foreign nations. This organization is dedicated to preserving and extending equality for women, and combating attempts in international treaties to take away the rights of women to employment, to make contracts when married, and like injustices.

In Latin America, Señora Muñoz Marín is noted not only for her work at the University of Puerto Rico, where she has been Director of International Relations since 1927, but also for her writings in the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *West Indian Review*, *Diario Centro America La Nueva Democracia*, *Revista Bimestre*, *Cubano*, and other Latin-American periodicals.

It is remarkable that one woman can combine so many varied activities and also have a delightful home life; and it is interesting to learn what influences formed such a rare personality as Muna Lee, that unusually successful combination of brilliant political mind, much feminine charm, and the gift of poetic expression.

She was born in Raymond, Mississippi, on January 29, 1895, to Benjamin Floyd and Mary (McWilliams) Lee, and is the oldest of six children. In 1902 her family moved to Hugo, Oklahoma, then a straggling town of tents, where they lived for nine or ten years. The most varied memories flash from her childhood in that

"incredibly ugly and incredibly beautiful Indian Territory town. Murder and sudden death were of frequent occurrence . . . seemed the natural order of things. The streets were unpaved and mud a thing to be dismissed from one's mind as a grotesque exaggeration."

In contrast were the prairie flowers, great masses of billowing color and fragrance. There was never-ending fascination in her father's drug store, where long rows of blue glass jars were filled with strange substances labeled in abbreviated Latin . . . tantalizing suggestions of a world beyond the prairie. There were also intriguing directions wrapped around patent-medicine bottles, printed in a dozen languages.

Selecting a pile of books from the racks in her father's drug store, Muna Lee used to curl up inside an empty packing case and read for hours . . . paper-backed editions of *Chicot the Jester* and *Sherlock Holmes*, or a Henty book—"Anything," she says: "George Eliot, Victor Hugo, Charlotte M. Braeme . . . I think literally thousands of books!"

Often she listened to the men who would

come into her father's store to talk politics, and as her father was an ardent Democrat, she became one, too. One night, when she was twelve or thirteen, Robert L. Owen spoke in a crowded room over the store; and he immediately displaced Henry of Navarre in her affections and became her first real, "flesh-and-blood" hero.

Later Muna Lee attended Blue Mountain College in Mississippi; then the University of Oklahoma; and last the University of Mississippi, where she was graduated at eighteen.

After her graduation she taught for four years. Then she prepared herself for the civil-service examinations in less than a month, and went to New York to translate French, Spanish, and Portuguese for the Government.

One evening in New York, Luis Muñoz Marín, a young Puerto Rican poet, novelist, and journalist, presented himself to her with a letter of introduction and with some of her lyrics which he had translated into his own language.

Six months later, on July 1, 1919, they were married, and her home in New York City was the gathering place for many interesting literary personages at her delightful Sunday teas.

Señor Muñoz Marín's father was Luis Muñoz Rivera, poet, dramatist, and one of Puerto Rico's great men, whose birthday is a national holiday. Many statues have been erected to him, streets and plazas named in his honor; for he was the idol of his people when he served as prime minister during the Spanish regime and, after 1898, as congressman.

Señora Muñoz Marín does not underestimate the importance of diplomacy and legislation in cementing closer bonds between the two Americas, but she suggests other, more simple ways for promoting good neighborliness. Friends enjoy the same songs, ballads, and books, and women friends always exchange recipes. Then why shouldn't countries do likewise?

She thinks there is a regrettable national tendency to underestimate the importance of methods of cookery. The University of Puerto Rico is doing its best to forestall any further complications in the Americas by pre-

paring a series of bulletins on tropical foods, under the direction of the home-economics department. In the tropics are many fruits and vegetables which should be a valuable addition to the North American diet; and North America has many which Latin America needs.

"I am not speaking of our more spectacular fruits and vegetables . . . such as pink coconuts, found in a few spots in Puerto Rico and the Phillipines; the white eggplant, with fruit actually the color and size of an egg; or the rose-apple, which is almost as much a flower as a fruit. I refer rather to such everyday, practical vegetables as the *yautia*, which is—how shall I describe it?—like a potato that grows buttered, with none of the potato's drawbacks and all of its advantages. It is nourishing and delicious, but does not make one put on flesh." It should certainly prove popular with feminine North America!

"The adaptations of your recipes in Latin America might amaze you; but we are amazed to see you making salad of alligator pears. We

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