Alice French and Octave Thanet  
(March 19, 1850 - January 9, 1934)

“Her characters live, if their ideas and clothes are not now the mode.”  (Book of Iowa Authors, p.91)

“Her books have a secure place in the world of letters, although the number of her readers is at present small--too small by half, for good writing does not deserve neglect.”  (Book of Iowa Authors, p.88)

“... is it not true that the very hospitality of the short story to every kind and rank of emotion adds to its precision as the reflector of life?”  -- Alice French (Octave Thanet)

“What I have written already must stand for me in literature, as I myself will stand or fall by the judgment of the generation in which I lived and for which I wrote.”  --Alice French (Octave Thanet)

“While Octave Thanet is really a woman, Alice French of Iowa, she nevertheless writes like a man.”  The Dial, May 1890.

Alice French was born in Andover, Massachusetts, on March 17, 1850, to George and Frances Wood French.  Alice was the oldest of several siblings: Morton, Nathaniel, George, and Frances, who was the only one of Alice’s four sisters who survived infancy.  Alice’s family was well-to-do, and lived among several literary neighbors, including Harriet Beecher Stowe (Uncle Tom’s Cabin) and the family of Louisa May Alcott (Little Women, etc.).

When Alice was six years old, an epidemic of tuberculosis convinced George French to accept the invitation of Reverend Henry Washington Lee, the first Episcopalian Bishop of Iowa and also the brother-in-law of Frances, to move to Davenport, Iowa.  George began a lumber business, French & Davis, and was awarded the contract to help build Camp McClellan.  By 1861, George had been elected mayor of Davenport, and would be reelected the following year.  In 1866, the French family helped to establish Davenport’s first Unitarian Church.

Alice attended the local Davenport schools until the age of sixteen.  She then enrolled in a new private girl’s school in Poughkeepsie, New York, which later became the prestigious Vassar College.  However, Alice found the school’s curriculum and policies to be too restrictive, and after completing her first year, she transferred to the Abbott Academy in Andover, Massachusetts.  She studied composition and English literature, and began writing stories, though she did not consider writing as more than a pleasant pastime until several years later.

After graduating, Alice returned to her family in Davenport.  There, she resumed old friendships with Celestine Fejervary, daughter of Count Nicholas Fejervary, and other well-known Davenport citizens.  She traveled to Europe with her family, meeting other persons of means and high social standing.  While in England, she met and became good friends with Andrew Carnegie, and was permitted to join a foxhunt with Queen Victoria.

The first of Alice’s short stories was published in a local newspaper in 1871, under the pen name ‘Frances Essex.”  Other stories followed, but it wasn’t until 1878 that her first ‘notable’ story, titled “Communists and Capitalists” was published in Lippencott’s Magazine, under the name Octave Thanet.  “Octave” was the male version of the name of her Abbott Academy roommate, and ‘Thanet’ was a word Alice had once seen written on the side of a freight car.  Some critics and scholars have suggested that the French family considered writing an unacceptable occupation for one of their own, leading Alice to adopt her pseudonym.  However, most appear to agree that Alice was merely avoiding the assumptions and prejudices with which the publishers and readers of the day might have viewed women writers.  Certainly, Octave Thanet’s true gender soon became an open secret without affecting her growing popularity, and Alice herself always proudly described herself as an authoress.

In 1887, Alice’s first collection of short stories, Knitters in the Sun, was published and received rave reviews.  The New York Sun stated that Octave Thanet had ‘no superior and very few peers.”  Alice’s first novel, Expiation, set on a plantation after the Civil War, was published in 1890 to equally glowing press: the Boston Beacon stated that “Miss French has with the work taken her place among the very foremost of American writers of fiction.”  The next year, she released her second story collection, Otto the Knight.  Between 1896 and 1900, Alice had over fifty of her
short stories and five books to her credit. At that time, Alice was one of the highest paid authors in America, averaging five cents a word. Her friend Mark Twain, in comparison, had to self-publish much of his own work.

Alice wrote about social issues of her time, including labor and business practices, social responsibility, personal relationships, and religious issues. A product of her time and upbringing, she held decided views, most appearing to support the status quo. One of her most acclaimed works, Man of the Hour (1905), attacked the movement towards organized labor, and vilified communism. Her most recognized anthology, Stories From a Western Town, was set in a fictionalized Davenport, and followed the Lossing family and those connected to them through several of her pet themes. The collection extolled the societal benefits and personal rewards, including marital happiness, of strong, honest, compassionate business and political leadership. Stories From a Western Town was one of Theodore Roosevelt’s favorite books, one of the few, it is reported, that he brought with him on African safari.

It is interesting to note that Alice French, despite excelling in an occupation that tended to favor men, and writing equally well from the Points of view of either gender, was not in favor of the women’s movement. Like Annie Wittenmyer, another influential Iowa woman, she believed that the ability to vote was irrelevant to the natural talents of women. She felt that learning to cook would be a far better and more practical use of a suffragette’s time. Alice herself was a superior cook, and preferred to give cooking lessons than writing advice to her young literary protégés. In this way, as some literary critics believe, Alice was following the Victorian ideal of womanhood, which counseled a separate but equal circle of influence. The women in her novels used their intelligence, good sense, patience, and other innate virtues for the benefits of their families. They could certainly be assertive and powerful, and exhibit other ‘manly’ traits when forced by circumstance, but resumed their own ‘natural’ habits and personalities once a man arrived on the scene.

Although Alice held the institution of marriage in high esteem in her stories, she never married, and was quoted as saying that she didn’t think marriage would suit her. Instead, she set up household with her childhood friend Jane (called Jenny) Crawford, who had been widowed after a brief marriage. Alice and Jane divided their time between the French family home in Davenport and a country plantation in Arkansas called Clover Bend. It was in Arkansas that Alice began to dabble in photography, setting up a lab for developing her own pictures. When Clover Bend was half-destroyed in a fire in 1898, the ladies had it rebuilt and renamed it ‘Thanford’ a combination of Thanet and Crawford.

Alice was a founding member of the Davenport Writers Club, the membership of which boasted local authors George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, Arthur Davison Ficke, Floyd Dell, and Harry Harrison. Her Davenport home was the site of many dinner parties and impromptu readings, as well as meetings of the literary society that she also helped establish. By 1914, she and several of her peers formed the Society of Midland Authors, of which Alice was the Iowa representative.

In 1899, she reminded her old friend Andrew Carnegie that he was an honorary member of the Davenport Library Association, and urged him to make a contribution toward a large public library building. Mr. Carnegie donated a generous $75,000, and the new library was dedicated on May 11, 1904. Although the original Carnegie building is no more, the present public library owes a debt of gratitude to Alice French.

Alice did not limit her community involvement to the literary. She was active in club work, and served for several years as president of the Iowa Society of Colonial Dames. During World War I, she organized Red Cross relief efforts and participated in many patriotic organizations, using her popularity to urge Americans to join the war. Her generosity to the less fortunate was marked: she often ‘adopted’ entire families, providing food and warm clothing during long Iowa winters. When a young lady she employed as a waitress married, Alice not only hosted the wedding reception in her home, but gifted the bride with a wedding dress—a Worth gown Alice had once worn to the White House.

In 1923, Octave Thanet was honored by the Allied Arts Association of Chicago as one of the foremost midland authors. Three years later, she was one of the prominent or notable local citizens presented to the Prince of Sweden upon his visit to Davenport.
Despite these honors, the last years of Alice’s life were not easy. Her eyesight became poor, and despite a cataract operation in 1917, she eventually began dictating her work. However, her writing style and Victorian values were no longer as popular as they had been, and although she was still known affectionately in literary circles, she did not command as loyal a readership, and her book sales declined. Alice, who had become extremely overweight, developed diabetes, eventually losing a leg to the disease in 1927, confining her to a wheelchair. Unable to continue their lavish lifestyle, or manage the 10th Street house, she and Jenny moved into rooms at the Blackhawk Hotel.

A few years later, the Great Depression caused Alice’s bank to fail, leaving her virtually penniless. But the most devastating blow came in 1932, when her companion and friend Jenny Crawford died. Alice spent her last few years in an apartment in Bettendorf, dependant on relatives. Her health already poor, she caught a respiratory infection in December of 1933. Falling into a coma for two days, Alice French passed away on January 9, 1934.

Although times and literary styles have changed, and the name Octave Thanet has passed into unfortunate obscurity, the author’s stories and novels still give piercing insight into the culture, politics, and social mores of the 19th century, as well as providing examples of complex, yet delicately drawn characters. As Lydia Market Barrette stated, “The number of her readers is at present small--too small by half, for good writing does not deserve neglect.” And certainly, if the works of Octave Thanet have had great influence on the literary world, no less so have the community works of Alice French helped develop present day Davenport, Iowa.

Barrette, Lydia Margaret. “Alice French (Octave Thanet).” Book of Iowa authors by Iowa authors. (Des Moines, Iowa: Iowa State Teachers Association), 1930.

