

Rachel Carson, local girl?

by Bruce Sidwell — Takoma Park, Maryland

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From my recent readings on Rachel Carson, I've been intrigued by her possible links to the Sligo Creek watershed. Turns out she lived in six locations around Northwest Branch and Sligo Creek. She even rented a small house at 7724 Maple Avenue, Takoma Park, in 1943-4. That address is now affixed to a low apartment building down by Sligo Creek. So it is highly likely she walked along the creek and through the neighborhood on her way to work downtown or to shop.

My knowledge of Rachel Carson was updated over the last year by enjoying a new biography titled, On a Farther Shore: The life and Legacy of Rachel Carson by William Souder. It's well-done and presents an uplifting story of an admirable person whose impact on history continues, though she died back in 1964. An earlier biography, Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature by Linda Lear, is also quite good.

Rachel Carson was born in 1907 in a rural area outside Pittsburgh. Her childhood interest in writing and nature was greatly encouraged by her mother. Although her parents were poor, they sacrificed to see that she attended a women's college in the area. She then earned a Masters degree at Johns Hopkins while working part-time. As the depression deepened, and she became the chief breadwinner for her family, she decided not to pursue a doctoral degree in science. Instead she went to work for the Federal government as a science writer in what is now the Department of the Interior.

Right from the beginning of her professional career, she was much respected for her writing. It was always thoroughly researched and accurate. More than that, she also had a great talent for clarity and a poetic way of expressing even the most difficult topics. Her writings for the government were mainly about wildlife and fishing. They included some exceptional pieces on wildlife refuges such as the one at Chincoteague, Virginia. She also regularly contributed articles to newspapers and magazines including the Baltimore Sun and The Atlantic. In November 1941, despite having to perform her regular government duties, she put out a full-length book, Under the Sea-Wind. It describes scientific aspects of the ocean for the general reader. Although it got enthusiastic reviews and was named a selection of the Scientific Book Club, it didn't sell well, probably because it came out exactly as national interest was captured by our entry into World War II.

In 1951, Ms. Carson tried again with The Sea Around Us. It was enormously successful, topping the NY Times bestseller list for more than six months. She suddenly became famous. With financial success she was able to quit her government post and concentrate on writing for herself. In 1956, she came out with another bestseller, The Edge of the Sea.

By the end of the 1950s, Rachel Carson was one of the best known non-fiction writers in the country. So when she started a book on the growing problem of mis-use of pesticides, people took notice. Due to her desire to "get it right", her research took several years. She was also heavily hampered by illness during the writing of the book, principally breast cancer. Silent Spring came out in September of 1962. Despite a huge effort by the pesticide manufacturers and many pesticide fans in agriculture to discredit her, the message of the book got through to the public and ultimately the U.S. government. This was mainly due to the truth and balance of this work. Rachel Carson died of cancer on April 14, 1964, less than two years after the publication of Silent Spring. However, at her death, the impact of her work to combat the profligate use of pesticides was already being felt. More stringent testing and restrictions on the most careless uses were put into place in the 1960s. But it did take until the mid 1970s to require more complete testing and to get rid of the uses of the worst pesticides.

Rachel Carson never advocated for a complete ban on all pesticides. What she pushed for was that they be adequately tested for their impact on humans and other animals, and the total environment. She also advocated that users be kept from dangerous practices. She was hopeful that very targeted pesticides be available which would not harm the environment. Having worked on government regulation of pesticides for many years, I know we have a long way to go to meet her standards. But, although it sometimes feels that we are still awash in a sea of pesticides, progress has been made. For example, we are no longer subjected to persistent broadly toxic chemicals, and pesticide regulations require rigorous (if not perfect) testing of pesticides before they enter commerce.

Finally, a few more tidbits about Rachel Carson's local touches. Despite only living in Takoma Park for about two years, she lived most of the last half of her life within a stone's throw in nearby Silver Spring (her last home may be visited in the White Oak area). She was very active in the Audubon Society of D.C. (now the Audubon Naturalist Society, headquartered about 15 minutes west of Takoma Park). She went on nature forays with them and even served on their board.

Ms. Carson (who never married) adopted her grand-nephew. She enrolled him in a school on Carroll Avenue just outside the Takoma Park limits called Cynthia Warner. My mother, who was science teacher there, received a couple of visits from Rachel Carson, during the 1962-1963 school year. On her last visit, she autographed my mother's copy of Silent Spring. I inherited it, and re-read it for this report. I won't loan it to anyone, but the Takoma Park Library carries copies of all Ms. Carson's books.

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