



## Carson, Rachel (1907-1964)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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An official U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service photograph of Rachel Carson (ca 1940).

Rachel Carson, a marine biologist who helped found the environmental movement with her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, had an 11-year romantic relationship with a married woman.

Born on May 27, 1907 in Springdale, Pennsylvania, Carson loved the natural world but assumed that she would spend her life as a writer. She won several creative writing awards as a child and entered the Pennsylvania College of Women (now Chatham College) with the intention of pursuing a degree in English. She left college with a B. A. in zoology. She earned an M. A. in biology from Johns Hopkins in 1932.

Much more responsible and bookish than her two older siblings, Carson became the sole support of her widowed mother and her late sister's offspring in the early 1930s. These family obligations and a lack of social graces may have made it difficult for her to form romantic relationships.

Carson pursued a career in science. She taught zoology at the University of Maryland from 1931 to 1936, spending summers at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. In 1936, she took a civil service job as an aquatic biologist with the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (later the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) in Washington, D. C.

Combining the imagination of a creative writer with the scientist's passion for fact, Carson had the ability to make science understandable to a layperson. Her first book, *Under the Sea Wind* (1941) described ocean life. *The Sea Around Us* (1951) won the National Book Award for nonfiction and made Carson a national celebrity. Now financially independent, she resigned her government job in 1952 to become a full-time writer.

Carson developed the idea for *Silent Spring* (1962) when a friend complained that pesticide spraying had killed the birds in her yard as well as the intended insects. Research and observation revealed that long-lasting chemical pesticides, including DDT, caused immense damage. Evidence also indicated that pesticide residue entered humans to trigger physiological changes.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, very few people concerned themselves with the environment. *Silent Spring* changed everything. Carson's eloquence prompted the federal government to move against water and air pollution. Her research scared everyday Americans into becoming ecologists.

The nature of a writer's life made for very lonely days. Eager for emotional closeness, Carson jumped at the opportunity to develop a relationship with a fan.

The relationship began when Carson broke ground for a summer home in Southport Island, Maine in 1952. Dorothy Freeman (1898-1978), a summer resident of the island along with her husband, wrote to Carson to welcome her. The women met for the first time in 1953 and would continue to share every summer for the remainder of Carson's life. When apart, they exchanged letters.

Many of the letters were destroyed following Carson's death. The ones that survive indicate a very close emotional relationship but not necessarily a sexual one.

Whether or not their relationship was sexual, Carson and Freeman were acutely conscious that it could be described as lesbian. Hence, shortly before Carson's death, they destroyed hundreds of letters.

Following years of battles with cancer, Carson succumbed to heart failure on April 14, 1964 in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Carson is notable as a successful activist who also loved a woman. By warning about the dangers of the indiscriminate use of pesticides, she made an enormous contribution to the world and saved countless lives.

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**Caryn E. Neumann** is a doctoral candidate in Women's History at Ohio State University. A past managing editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, her essays have appeared in the *Dictionary of American History* and *Notable American Women*, among other places.