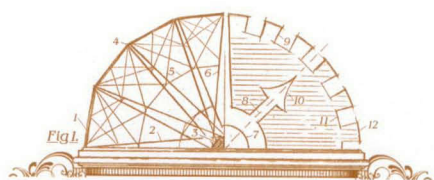


UP FRONT



INNOVATORS

By Nancy Gift

Rachel Carson

Rachel Carson has been called the founder of the modern environmental movement and this statement bears truth when considering the incredible popular and legislative response to her fourth book, *Silent Spring*. Naturalist writer John James Audubon noted extinctions and threats to wilderness. Upton Sinclair described how modern life alienated people from each other and from nature. But never before had a writer so clearly connected modern conveniences—as pesticides were then considered—with threats to the broader ecosystem and even our very bodies. The idea of environmental illness was, if not new, not at all well-accepted—even relatively obvious problems such as deaths due to air pollution were not yet recognized for their cause and effect. (Pittsburgh's own Devra Davis, professor of Epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, has written extensively about this, especially the tragedy of the Donora "Fog," of October 1948, in *When Smoke Ran Like Water*.)

The idea of an "innovator," though, is somewhat different from that of a "founder," and is distinct as well from a "pioneer." Founder implies a person taking leadership, deliberate or not, and without question Rachel Carson did act as a leader, speaking before diverse groups, from garden clubs to the U.S. Senate, to explicate her concerns

about our environment. Pioneer implies a person entering new territory, geographic or intellectual, and Carson was a pioneer in the territory of writing as activism and with her clear vision about possible consequences of pesticides and other synthetic chemicals. But an innovator implies something more creative than either of these.

Carson's innovation was her forging of a vision that the common citizen could eschew chemical solutions and modern conveniences for the sake of nature. While women of the Audubon movement foresaw the power of the rich consumer who could choose to buy hats without feathers to save endangered bird species, Carson saw the power of a lower or middle class consumer. Carson perceived power and possibility in everyday actions, and those who read *Silent Spring* saw themselves as capable of making a difference in the larger world, human and wild.

Carson herself grew up on a farm in a family without a great deal of consumer strength. Her father, failing to make a living from the family farm, had to sell it off piecemeal for development. Rachel herself struggled as a writer to earn a living to support her immediate and extended family. Perhaps her mother was one of those wonderful, creative Depression-era household managers who found ways to make new dresses from old and food from a rabbit and a few garden vegetables. We know that her mother encouraged young Rachel to write, read, and be outdoors. Attending college at Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University) implies a great



Rachel Carson's 1929 Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University) yearbook photo.

Rachel Carson Institute, Chatham University

deal of creative vision for a young woman at a time when few females attended college and job prospects were meager for all.

Carson had the creativity and spirit to study something seemingly utterly impractical for her gender—biology—and to know so clearly that her calling was to write about a world—the sea—which she had only imagined for her entire childhood. From that creative, gutsy first book *Under the Sea-Wind* she saw herself and other common people as having potential and power that could change the world for the better. In *Silent Spring* and in her letters and speeches afterward, she



focuses often on the choices of the housewife, the common farmer, and other everyday people. Though she does not write about race, her appreciation for other creatures (*The Sea Around Us*) and cultures makes her work a clear precursor to concepts such as environmental racism and environmental justice. Though she did not write about nature deficit disorder, she recognized the value of children and adults simply being outside (*The Sense of Wonder*), without human objects and products to distract their imaginations.

Rachel Carson saw us all—rich and poor, leaders and voters—as contributors and decision makers who could participate in promoting the health or sickness of the whole Earth. Her innovation was a product of many past ideals, from the Jeffersonian farmer to Susan B. Anthony's suffragettes, but Rachel Carson's citizen was a new person as well, capable of managing herself, her products, her health, and her very chemistry. Rachel Carson's innovation was the power of individual choice to change the world, and thanks to her, we have responded with changes—in regulations, farming methods, and markets. We are, as she believed us to be, capable and responsible for the resources used in our communities, and we continue to grapple with the choices and power she showed us that we have. ❁

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Woman's Home Companion July 1956 issue featured an article by Rachel Carson encouraging childrens' exploration of the natural environment.