



Caption: Rachel Carson at the dock at Sam Cahoon's Fish Market in Woods Hole in 1951, just after the publication of her best-selling book, *The Sea Around Us*. Ms. Carson enjoyed her conversations with scientists and fishermen and went to sea for 10 days on the Fisheries vessel, Albatross III, in 1949. Behind her is the fishing dragger, Priscilla V., owned by Jared Vincent of Woods Hole. (Photo by Edwin Gray. Courtesy of the Lear/Carson Collection, Connecticut College.)

Summers in Woods Hole Spur Rachel Carson's Love of Ocean

By Deborah G. Scanlon

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When Rachel Carson came to Woods Hole from her home in Pennsylvania in the summer of 1929, she traveled the last part of her trip by boat. From New York City, she took steamers to New Bedford, then to Woods Hole. It was cheaper and more interesting, she noted later, than traveling by train. It was also her first look at the ocean, which captivated her, and would become the focus of much of her career and writing.

Years later, in 1951, John Valois was a young college graduate in his first year at what is now known as the Marine Resources Center at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole. In the 1950s, the center was known as the Supply Department. His supervisor asked him to take a well-known writer to Lake Tashmoo on Martha's Vineyard to collect *Arenicola marina* (lug worms). That author was Rachel Carson, who was working on *The Edge of the Sea* at the time, and she and Mr. Valois chatted while they were collecting and then back at the dock.

Ms. Carson had just published *The Sea Around Us*, to much acclaim. She would publish three more books before her death in 1964, including *Silent Spring*, a book detailing the indiscriminate use of pesticides such as DDT, which greatly influenced the public's awareness of ecology.

"Rachel Carson was a turning point in the environmental movement," says Hugh W. Ducklow, director of MBL's Ecosystems Center. "*Silent Spring* was the original wake-up call about the pollution of ecosystems. Modern environmentalism started right there."

This year marks the centennial of Ms. Carson's birthday. Her biographers mention her time in Woods Hole as important and influential in her life, but little is known about her stay in the village. As Mr. Valois notes, she was reserved. "She was not the type of person you could go up to on the street and say, 'Hey, how's everything going, Rachel?'"

Fortunately, Mr. Valois has kept careful notes of his talks with Ms. Carson and interesting details of her residence in Woods Hole.

Rachel Carson's first visit to Woods Hole was the summer after her 1929 graduation from the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College) in Pittsburgh. She had intended to major in English and become a writer, but she was intrigued by her science courses and switched her major to biology. Her advisor was Mary Scott Skinker, who had been a student in the MBL's Protozoology course in 1928. At her urging, Ms. Carson, who was headed for graduate school at Johns Hopkins University in the fall, came to the MBL for six weeks with her college roommate, Mary Frye.

The two friends rented a room at a home on Millfield Street and, for \$7 a week, ate at the MBL Mess Hall.

Mary Frye was enrolled in the Invertebrate Zoology course. Ms. Carson, according to records in the MBL archives, was a beginning investigator, studying the cranial nerves of turtles.

Mr. Valois points out that Ms. Carson's advisor at Johns Hopkins was not aware that MBL researchers studied only marine animals, and not turtles, but the MBL was able to supply her with turtles for her research.

Ms. Carson, according to Mr. Valois, would go to Invertebrate Zoology course lectures in MBL's Old Main Building with her roommate in the morning then head to the lab in Lillie for research in the afternoon.

She played tennis, picnicked on Naushon Island, and learn to swim in the six weeks of August and early September that she was in Woods Hole in 1929.

In *Rachel Carson, Witness for Nature*, biographer Linda Lear states, "There is no doubt that the genesis of all Carson's sea books, but particularly *The Sea Around Us*, belongs to this first summer in Woods Hole."

Ms. Carson left Woods Hole and started her graduate studies at Johns Hopkins, continuing her work on turtles. But, Mr. Valois says, after seeing squid, starfish, anemones, scallops and other marine life, she began to change her interest and focus, and her master's degree zoology in 1932 was titled "The development of the pronephros during the embryonic and early larval life of the catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*): An essay."

In August 1932, Ms. Carson was back at the MBL, again as a beginning investigator. This time, according to her application, she wished to pursue "Embryological studies on certain *Teleosts* (bony fish)." She stayed for a month.

Ms. Carson had intended to obtain a Ph.D., but her father died unexpectedly, and her mother and other family members depended on her for support. She began writing radio scripts on marine subjects, and eventually became an aquatic biologist and writer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (now the National Marine Fisheries Service). She also sold her writings to such publications as the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Baltimore Sun*.

In 1941, Ms. Carson published her first book, *Under the Sea Wind*. The *Enterprise* reprinted a chapter in 1951, and Ms. Carson told the newspaper, "In writing this chapter, I actually had in mind a slightly modified version of the harbor at Woods Hole. In fact, I wrote the chapter there, and used to stand on the Fisheries dock and watch the schools of young mackerel moving up and down along the stone breakwater with squids and other predators often darting among them."

Later that decade, Ms. Carson returned to Woods Hole, this time to the Fisheries Service,

to write another book. She lived in the Fisheries residence on Water Street, and asked to be taken on a trip aboard the Albatross III, the Fisheries research vessel. Her request was denied. No women were allowed on research ships. She contacted the Fisheries director in Washington, DC, and was finally granted permission for a 10-day cruise to George's Bank in the Gulf of Maine in 1949.

That cruise was the basis for *The Sea Around Us*, published in 1951, which immediately went on the best seller list, where it remained for 86 weeks.

Mr. Valois said that Ms. Carson returned to the MBL for two summers in the early 1950's. One summer, she spent much her time writing in the MBL library; another summer, she conducted research in a lab in the Crane wing of the Lillie Building. MBL scientists Paul Colinvaux and Llewellya Hillis were delighted to discover in a "Once Upon A Time" column in *The Enterprise* that she had lived in their house on Brooks Road with her mother one summer.

Summer 1951 was one of her last visits to Woods Hole. She would sit on the docks at the Fisheries and at Sam Cahoon's Fish Market, talking to scientists and fishermen. Ms. Carson told *The Enterprise* in 1951 that "Woods Hole is a wonderful place to come to for research. There are biologists here from all over the country. If you want to talk to them you just come here in the summer instead of traveling all around the country to find them in the winter."

It was during this summer that John Valois took her collecting in the MBL's boat Tern.

"She tended to get seasick," Mr. Valois remembers, "so she would sit on the boat with her back against the engine cover. But she was always smiling. She observed everything and took pages of notes. We started to chat when we put the dinghy in the water at Tashmoo to go onto the flats. She talked about her next book, *The Edge of the Sea*, and I asked her how she first came to Woods Hole."

Ms. Carson told him the story of how exciting it had been to see the ocean for the first time on her trip to Woods Hole in 1929, how she didn't go below deck until complete darkness. "The smell of the salt air and the sounds of the sea were unlike anything she had experienced," Mr. Valois recalls her saying.

For Mr. Valois, who retired as director of the Marine Resources Center in 1990, Ms. Carson's writing is "poetry in prose. If you are ever having a bad day, just read her books. Everything will be OK."

Rachel Carson retained a connection to Woods Hole as member of the MBL Corporation from 1952 to 1963, but spent the rest of her summers in Southport, Maine.

In 1958, a friend in Duxbury told Ms. Carson that the state's spraying of DDT had killed birds in her bird sanctuary and ruined ponds and nests, which prompted Ms. Carson to

begin writing *Silent Spring*, published in 1962. She died of cancer in 1964.

Ms. Carson's works are treasures for all who enjoy nature. Her earlier books share her wonder and love of the ocean; her final book warns of the outcome if we do not protect the natural world. In an editorial on May 27, 2007 – 100 years after Ms. Carson's birth – the Boston Globe quoted a 1963 interview with Ms. Carson in which she cautions: "Man's attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is part of nature and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself."

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