

Exploring Rachel Carson's Roots

By Christine Hucko

When Rachel Carson's parents moved to Springdale, Pennsylvania, in 1900, the town of 1,200 people was depicted by a local newspaper as a place of "woods and farm land, picturesque streets ... and pretty little frame dwellings set amidst overhanging apple trees and maples." It was here, on her parents' 64-acre property, where a young Rachel had her first encounters with nature as she wandered the family's bucolic grounds full of curiosity.

Carson, widely credited for helping to set the environmental movement in motion, was born in Springdale in 1907. Along with her parents and two older siblings, she lived in a clapboard house situated on a hillside bordering the Allegheny River. The house consisted of four rooms: a dining room and parlor on the first floor, and two bedrooms on the second. There was a lean-to kitchen in the back.

Maples stood in the front of the home, in addition to a lilac bush and a weeping mulberry. Behind the house was an orchard made up of apple and pear trees, and woods that at the time of Rachel's birth were still "wild and untouched."

Scattered about the yard were outbuildings including a stable, chicken coop, and springhouse.

With her older siblings at school and her father away for work, Rachel often got the undivided attention of her mother, Maria, who is said to have delighted in Rachel from the start. The mother-daughter pair regularly took walks in the woods, read, talked, and sang together. Maria Carson realized that her daughter had "exceptional gifts" and made it her task to cultivate Rachel's talents so that Rachel could escape small town life and domesticity.

From an early age, Rachel seemed to be drawn to books and to the earth's creatures in equal measure. When she wasn't turning a sharp eye toward birds, flowers, and insects near her home, she was engrossed in books that educated and inspired her while also stoking a budding desire to create stories of her own. Carson's dazzling literary life began at the tender age of eleven when a story she wrote was published in a children's magazine called *St. Nicholas*, and culminated in the publication of her momentous book *Silent Spring*.

In 1925, Carson left Springdale to study English at the Pennsylvania College for Women—presently Chatham University—determined to become a writer. A fortuitous encounter with a dynamic young biology professor fanned the flames of Carson's other passion:



science. After much agonizing, she decided to switch majors. She feared a switch would require her to forsake writing forever. Little did she realize at the time, however, that science would form the basis of her literary work to come.

When Rachel returned to her hometown in 1929, it was clear that a once-charming Springdale had yielded to industry. What stood out now were not the town's farms and woods but rather its polluted air and water. The dirtiness made it easy for Rachel to say goodbye when the time came later that summer to depart for Massachusetts to conduct research.

The Carson family had spent their entire time in Springdale without sufficient means. So when Rachel left the house in 1929, her family went with her. At different times in 1930 and 1931, mom, dad, sister, and brother left Springdale "somewhat abruptly," leaving debts in their wake. After they relocated, the home had several new owners and changed in appearance through the removal of the porch and the addition of rooms in the back.

In 1975, the Rachel Carson Homestead Association acquired the house and has been looking after it ever since. The organization plans to restore the home to its original form and to turn the inside into a museum. The aim in both cases is to educate the public about Carson's roots, early inspirations, values, and impact, while also leaving guests with the sense of wonder she is famous for.

"The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction," Carson once said. For the renowned scientist and nature writer, a sense of wonder first struck right here in Western Pennsylvania near the Allegheny River. 🌿

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