**Rachel Carson: Environmentalist and Writer**

**“Man’s way is not always best”**

By Kathy Wilmore

Rachel Carson

When you hear the world "revolutionary," what image comes to mind? An angry, wild-eyed man toting a machine gun, perhaps? Or do you look back in history to see someone like George Washington or Paul Revere? How about the environmentalist and writer Rachel Carson? She may not look the part, but Rachel Carson was a true revolutionary. Her work as a writer and scientist stirred people up and helped launch a new age of environmental awareness in the United States.

In 1962, Carson published *Silent Spring*, her fourth book on nature. It had an almost fairy-tale beginning: "There once was a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings."

However, something in that town went horribly wrong. Sickness and death appeared everywhere: among flowers and trees, cattle and sheep, even humans. "There was a strange stillness," wrote Carson. "The birds, for example — where had they gone?... The few birds seen anywhere... trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of...(many) bird voices there was now no sound: only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh."

Carson went on to explain the cause of that eerie silence: "Pesticides" (insect-killing chemicals) had gotten into the water, air, and soil and were killing or sickening all sorts of creatures — including humans. "Can anyone believe," she wrote, "it is possible to lay down such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth without making it unfit for all life? They should not called "insecticides" [insect killers] but biocides [life killers]."

If we are not more careful with the chemicals we use, warned Carson, the nightmarish silence described in *Silent Spring* could come true.

**Anything But Silence**
The reaction to Carson's book was anything but silence. It caused such an uproar that a *New York Times* headline declared: SILENT SPRING IS NOW NOISY SUMMER.

Chemical manufacturers were furious with Carson. They ran ads telling Americans to ignore *Silent Spring*. They questioned Carson's abilities as a scientist, calling her a hysterical fanatic. Pesticides, they said are perfectly safe — don't worry about a thing.

But Americans did worry. The White House and the Congress were flooded with letters from anxious citizens demanding that something be done. President John F. Kennedy called for a special committee of scientists to investigate Carson's claims. Congress also formed an investigation committee.

The soft-spoken Carson would rather have spent her days on the rocky coast of Maine, where she did much of her research as a "marine biologist" (scientist who studies sea life). But the storm of debate surrounding her book and its critics pulled her into the limelight.

**Coming to Terms with Nature**
In defending her research, Carson told Americans to think for themselves. Who had the most to win or lose if she turned out to be correct? "As you listen to the present controversy about pesticides," said Carson, "I recommend that you ask yourself: Who speaks? And why?"

The main thing to consider, she said, is our future. What kind of world do we want to leave our children? "I deeply believe," Carson told Congress, "that we in this generation must come to terms with nature."

Carson's ideas may not seem revolutionary today. But back in 1962, few people were familiar with such terms as pollution and ecology and environmental awareness. U.S. industries were constantly coming out with useful and exciting new products, but few people stopped to think if there could be negative side effects to any of them. Humans did what was convenient for them. Nature to most people was something that just took care of itself.

**A Message To Remember**
President Kennedy's commission supported Carson's warnings. So did other government studies. Armed with such new data and the public outcry, Congress began passing laws to ban or control the use of potentially dangerous pesticides. It also called for more careful testing of chemicals' side effects. In 1970, Congress established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to reduce and control pollution of water, air, and soil.

Rachel Carson did not live to see all of this happen. She died of cancer in 1964.

What about us? Can we avoid the "silent spring" that Carson predicted? In the 31 years since *Silent Spring* first appeared, people have grown far more aware of our impact on the environment. But we still use many potentially deadly chemicals.

A 1993 *New York Times* article says that "68 pesticide ingredients [not in use] have been determined to cause cancer. One out of every 10 community drinking-water wells contains pesticides... Farmers exposed to "herbicides" [weed killers] have a six times greater risk than others of contracting certain cancers. Children in homes using pesticides are seven time as likely to develop childhood leukemia [a form of cancer]."

"There remains, in this space-age universe," wrote Rachel Carson, "the possibility that man's way is not always best." We would do well to remember her warning.