

Rachel Carson's "The Sense of Wonder": Where, When, and What?

– Dan Styer; 6 August 2024

One of my very favorite essays is Rachel Carson's "The Sense of Wonder". I have read it hundreds of times just to hear the eloquence of the words and to remind myself of the wisdom of its messages. It helped shape the way I reared my children and the way I teach my students. The descriptions of land and sea and people are so vivid that a reader can almost smell the balsam, hear the waves crash, feel the sand underfoot, and witness the expression on a child's face.

According to Linda Lear's biography, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, 1997), "The Sense of Wonder" was written in February, March, and April of 1956 (pages 280–285) and published in the July 1956 issue of *Woman's Home Companion* under the title "Help Your Child to Wonder". Carson wanted to expand the essay into a book – "I want very much to do the Wonder book," she wrote to her friend Dorothy Freeman in 1963, "that would be Heaven to achieve" – but her death from cancer came just one year later, with the book still in preliminary stages (pages 284, 290, 466). The unexpanded essay was supplemented with photographs (by Charles Pratt and others) and published as a standalone slim volume in 1965 (page 483), then supplemented with different photographs (by Nick Kelsh) and republished as a slightly thicker volume in 1998.

The only place actually mentioned in the essay is Carson's summer cottage, "Silverledges", facing the Sheepscot Bay from the west side of Southport Island, Maine, and for many years I thought, uncritically, that all the stories in the essay came from that location. But then it struck me that the ghost crab, a critical player in one of the stories, does not live north of New Jersey. So some other location is necessary. And if one more is needed, perhaps three more are! Most of the stories in "The Sense of Wonder" take place at Silverledges, but this document suggests locations for three of the stories that don't.



Rachel Carson's cottage "Silverledges" viewed from the rocky shore. (Photo by Bob Quinn.)

The Ghost Crab Site

“The Sense of Wonder” begins: “One stormy autumn night when my nephew Roger was about twenty months old I wrapped him in a blanket and carried him down to the beach in the rainy darkness. Out there, just at the edge of where-we-couldn’t-see, big waves were thundering in, dimly seen white shapes that boomed and shouted and threw great handfuls of froth at us. Together we laughed for pure joy. ... A night or two later ... we were searching for ghost crabs”.

Roger Christie, grandnephew of Rachel, was born 18 February 1952 (Lear, page 236), so his 20 month birthday was 18 October 1953. Lear notes that “Rachel, her mother, Virginia, Marjie, and baby Roger went to Myrtle Beach [South Carolina] for a week in November [1953]” (page 249). Carson had previously visited Myrtle Beach “in the spring of 1952 ... [staying] in the T & C Motor Court owned by the Thomases” (pages 229–230).

It’s probable that during the November 1953 visit the Carson family again stayed at the T & C. A postcard found at

https://digital.hagley.org/2007214_063

shows the “T and C Motor Court. Located Four Blocks South of Business Section of Myrtle Beach, S.C. ... One Block from one of America’s Finest Strands. Facing King’s Highway. 50 Comfortably Heated Cottages 20 Kitchens. Resident Owners: Mr. & Mrs. W.C. Thomas.” And the 1949 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map

https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3914mm.g3914mm_g081671949/?sp=4

shows a 30 unit Motor Court at the southwest corner of Third Avenue and “The King’s Highway”, 212 North King’s Highway (latitude/longitude 33.687301, -78.888762). (Today the site of a Dollar General store.) All this suggests that the beach where the waves boomed and Roger and Rachel laughed was on the strand (as the Thomas family calls the beach) at the foot of Third Avenue, about 33.685270, -78.885102. So much for the “where”.



Atlantic Ocean from the foot of Third Avenue, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Second Avenue pier to right. (Photo taken December 2012, snipped from Google Maps, © Google.)

When, in November 1953, was there a “stormy autumn night” at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina? The website Weather Underground has a long store of historical weather data. The page at

<https://www.wunderground.com/history/monthly/us/sc/myrtle-beach/KMYR/date/1953-11>

shows high winds at Myrtle Beach on 6 November 1953.

The Garden of Insect Music

After discussing bird song, Carson notes that “There is other living music. I have already promised Roger that we’ll take our flashlights this fall and go out into the garden to hunt for the insects that play little fiddles in the grass and among the shrubbery and flower borders. . . . Perhaps you are drawn, step by step, to a bush from which comes a sweet, high-pitched, endlessly repeated trill. Finally you trace it to a little creature of palest green, with wings as white and insubstantial as moonlight. Or from somewhere along the garden path comes a cheerful, rhythmic chirping, a sound as companionable and homely as a fire crackling on a hearth or a cat’s purr. Shifting your light downward you find a black mole cricket disappearing into his grassy den. Most haunting of all is one I call the fairy bell ringer. I have never found him. I’m not sure I want to.”

Carson’s cottage in Maine was a summer home. If Rachel and Roger were to go out listening for insects “this fall”, that is the fall of 1956, they would have done so from her home in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. From 1 July 1937 until her death on 14 April 1964, Carson lived in six different suburban homes. Fortunately, the “Friends of Sligo Creek” have sorted them all out:

<https://www.friendsofsligocreek.org/home/how-we-work/sligo-story-archive/rachel-carson-lived-here/>

In the fall of 1956, Rachel would have searched with Roger for insects in the garden of her rented home at 204 Williamsburg Drive, Silver Spring, Maryland, where she lived from September 1949 to 14 July 1957.



*Rachel Carson’s home, 204 Williamsburg Drive, Silver Spring, Maryland.
(Photo taken June 2022, snipped from Google Maps, © Google.)*

And now I must ask, not “when”, but “what”. What species was Carson describing? The green insect with insubstantial wings fits the description of a Green Lacewing (*Chrysoperla*). A video recording is available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4TqHQXtp3c>.

The Mole Cricket (*Neocurtilla hexadactyla*) is described at

<https://orthsoc.org/sina/351a.htm>.

I can't identify Carson's “fairy bell ringer”, but Wil Hershberger, at

<https://songsofinsects.com/blog/the-fairy-bell-ringer>

makes a case that it is the Tinkling Ground Cricket (*Allonemobius tinnulus*). (All three of these links include sound recordings. Incidentally, the last two species don't live in Maine.)

The Headland

“I remember a summer night when such a thought came to me strongly. It was a clear night without a moon. With a friend, I went out on a flat headland that is almost a tiny island, being all but surrounded by the waters of the bay. There the horizons are remote and distant rims on the edge of space. We lay and looked up at the sky and the millions of stars that blazed in darkness. The night was so still that we could hear the buoy on the ledges out beyond the mouth of the bay. Once or twice a word spoken by someone on the far shore was carried across on the clear air. A few lights burned in cottages. Otherwise there was no reminder of other human life: my companion and I were alone with the stars. I have never seen them more beautiful: the misty river of the Milky Way flowing across the sky, the patterns of the constellations standing out bright and clear, a blazing planet low on the horizon. Once or twice a meteor burned its way into the earth's atmosphere.”

Carson's beloved summer cottage was *not* on a headland peninsula, “all but surrounded by the waters of the bay.” The most reasonable site is the nearby peninsula at Newagen Seaside Inn: three miles south of the cottage at latitude/longitude 43.785965, -69.660720. (Cape Newagen, about 500 yards to the east, is less likely because it faces east to the uninhabited Damariscove Island, whereas the peninsula at Newagen Seaside Inn faces west across Sheepscot Bay to the cottages of Georgetown Island.)

The night without a moon was likely the night of a new moon. The friend and companion was likely Dorothy Freeman, whom Carson first met in July 1953 (Lear page 244). The meteors were probably from the Perseid meteor shower, which runs from 14 July to 1 September, with a peak on 12 August.

The three August new moons between Carson’s meeting Freeman and the publication of “The Sense of Wonder” fell on 9 August 1953, 28 August 1954, and 17 August 1955. My planetarium program (Stellarium) shows that on all three of these dates the Milky Way was above, but only on 28 August 1954 was there a planet (namely Venus) low to the west.

Furthermore, on 28 August 1954 the weather conditions in Portland, 30 miles away, were fair all evening:

<https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/us/me/portland/KPWM/date/1954-8-28>

In contrast, the skies were cloudy all day on 9 August 1953 and 17 August 1955.

This location was clearly significant to Dorothy Freeman: this is near where she scattered Carson’s ashes during the summer after her death. The site is now marked with a plaque: “Rachel Carson: Writer, Ecologist, Champion of the Natural World. 1907–1964.”



(Photo by S.K. Shandlin.)

Reflections

I have had fun speculating on the locations and times of these events that so vividly struck Rachel Carson, and that she described with such accuracy and poetry. But these speculations raise the danger of hagiography. You don't need to visit these places in order to experience the wonder of the world in which we live. The message of "The Sense of Wonder" is that wonderful things surround us wherever we are: "You can listen to the wind, whether it blows with majestic voice through a forest or sings a many-voiced chorus around the eaves of your house or the corners of your apartment building, and in the listening, you can gain magical release for your thoughts. ... If you are a city dweller, you can find some place, perhaps a park or a golf course, where you can observe the mysterious migrations of the birds and the changing seasons. And with your child you can ponder the mystery of a growing seed, even if it be only one planted in a pot of earth in the kitchen window."

This message came to me strongly just a week ago today. My morning run took me twice across a bridge over Ohio's Vermilion River, once near the run's beginning and then again near the end. On my first crossing I noticed a Great Blue Heron flying down at river level. On my return I stopped for a cool-down stretch on the bridge's guardrail. I spied a Great Blue (perhaps the same one) stock-still in the river. Then a Green Heron flew under the bridge and landed on a river rock. Just before landing he stuck his neck out and lifted his crest ... this was the first time I had ever seen a Green Heron's crest.

When my job brought me to Ohio 39 years ago, I thought I'd never see anything like this. I cursed my fortune and wished that I had gone instead to a renowned beautiful location like Aspen, Colorado. But it's not a matter of traveling to a renowned location, it's a matter of keeping your eyes open to see the beauty in the location where you are. Small creatures scamper in Mansfield, Ohio, as well as in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Insects sing in Parma, Ohio, as well as in Silver Spring, Maryland. The stars spangle above Florence, Ohio, as well as above Newagen, Maine.

And so I will close exactly as Rachel Carson did: "The lasting pleasures of contact with the natural world are not reserved for scientists but are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of earth, sea, and sky and their amazing life."