

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Shirley Briggs

Date of Interview: April 24, 2000

Location of Interview: Avenel, Maryland

Interviewer: Mark Madison

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 1945-1948

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Information Specialist,
Washington D.C.

Most Important Projects: Conservation in Action, "Basic Guide to Pesticides"

Colleagues and Mentors: Rachel Carson, Howard Zahniser, Bob Hines, Clarence
Cottam, Dr. Lionel Albert

Most Important Issues: Early environmental movement (work with Rachel
Carson)

Brief Summary of Interview: Ms. Briggs discusses in background in art, her
relationship with Rachel Carson, what exactly an Information Specialist was, and the
National Audubon Society.

Keywords: employee, biologist, art, work of the Service

Mark Madison:

...interesting and some which you may find less useful, and we'll just go through this.

Shirley Briggs:

You sent me something on what might come up and it struck me as questions that were unanswerable in most cases.

Mark Madison:

Well, then just tell me, and we'll go on. But really, the questions I'm going to ask you, we just want to know more about your career, the three years you worked with us and Fish and Wildlife, what you went on to do, and then just...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I was in the Department of the Interior.

Mark Madison:

Yes, yes.

Shirley Briggs:

And I could tell you something about the Bureau of Reclamation.

Mark Madison:

We'd like to hear all of that.

Shirley Briggs:

Other outfits I dealt with there.

Mark Madison:

Great, but we'll ask you those, and just try and get a sense of the time and to your important conservation work and contributions. Does that sound reasonable?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, [unintelligible]. I mean, this is just; they called it environment, I think, which was a big, broad, meaningless word.

Mark Madison:

Shirley, if you don't mind, we'd like to start near the beginning with what inspired you to study art in college. What made you want to be an artist?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I don't know. I just [unintelligible] that seemed to be a major subject for graduate school, and I had more interest in sculpting. Whatever else, I don't know. I just always did that.

Mark Madison:

What type of art interested you? Were you interested in...?

Shirley Briggs:

I have a Master's Degree in sculptor, for heaven's sake, which I have not had much occasion to do recently. No, in recent years I've mainly done drawings. I've done quite a bit of illustration. Once a year I try to do a drawing so I can send something out for New Years. I've got quite a pile of them by now.

Mark Madison:

How did you move from later on teaching art at North Dakota State?

Shirley Briggs:

What?

Mark Madison:

Apparently you taught art for a little while at North Dakota State.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, here and there.

Mark Madison:

Then you eventually moved to the Washington area. What pulled you out here?

Shirley Briggs:

Let me see if I can remember. Well, I've always been here some. I had an uncle who lived here. It was a familiar, homey place, but what did bring me here really? It'll come to me. Was it the government job? Probably.

Mark Madison:

Didn't you work for a defense contractor?

Shirley Briggs?

What? Pardon me. You aren't speaking clearly or loudly enough.

Mark Madison:

Did you initially work for aircraft...?

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, Martin Aircraft, yeah, which now has a different name.

Mark Madison:

What were you doing for them?

Shirley Briggs:

Drawings. I can illustrate probably still obsolete airplanes. Yeah, it was very interesting. I found a sculptor came in handy. I can look at an engineering drawing of something and visualize it and draw it in ordinary perspective.

Mark Madison:

That's good. So how did you end up working for Fish and Wildlife? How did you go from Martin Aircraft to Fish and Wildlife Service?

Shirley Briggs:

I'm not sure. It may come to me. I was in the area, and that's something I was always interested in. I fell in with Rachel Carson, of course, which our offices were nearby, Department of Interior. We both liked to go out and explore the countryside and look for birds and all that sort of thing and was sort of the transition, I guess.

Mark Madison:

Shirley, what were your initial impressions of Rachel when you started with us?

Shirley Briggs:

She was more fun than anybody else.

Mark Madison:

Why so?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, she just was. No, she was so aware of everything that was going on and could see all of the inconsistencies and hilarity and what not, not all these dreary things that come up in the bureaucratic situation. She could make them hilarious. There was a man at the Government Printing Office named [unintelligible] that we had a terrible time with getting things properly designed and printed, because she cared a great deal that things were well done in that department, and we both liked to go out at the out of doors, and that was fun. She was so aware of everything. You saw a lot more if you were out with her somehow.

Mark Madison:

What do you mean? Did she more birds than you or look at them in a different way?

Shirley Briggs:

Everything, not just birds. But I mean, she was so conscious of the whole scene. Very bright people tend to be, and she was a very bright person.

Mark Madison:

Now, did you go on excursions for work, or did you go after work or on weekends?

Shirley Briggs:

Well no, this was after, we didn't go off in the middle of the day, no. But she was writing the Conservation in Action series, and I went with her doing the fieldwork from Chincoteague, and I didn't get to go on no longer when she called Kate Howell out in Salt Lake City. From then she got to go cross country a little more than I did.

Mark Madison:

Do you remember anything from the Chincoteague trip with Rachel?

Shirley Briggs:

Anything, well we were just a little fascinated by exploring it and meeting the people who were working down there and seeing the refuge area and so on.

Mark Madison:

Carson's interest was the oceans, right, and you were from the mid-west, from my understanding. Where were you born?

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, I'm from Iowa, but I had always had an uncle here in Washington whom we visited a good deal, so this was familiar territory.

Mark Madison:

Did Carson help you appreciate the ocean at all, when you went to Chincoteague and some of these places?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I never managed to get to the ocean, and when Rachel discovered that, we rushed right over. I mean, this was something you had to get to right away, and if you, where are you from?

Mark Madison:

Wisconsin.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, well then you understand. The ocean has a certain fascination for land based people, and I was very keen on seeing the ocean and learning all I could from Rachel, who was quite up on this, of course.

Mark Madison:

What were you doing for the Fish and Wildlife Service? What type of illustrations were you making for them?

Shirley Briggs:

Information Specialist was the title. That meant writing, illustrating, designing publications, that whole field.

Mark Madison:

What was your relationship with the biologists in the Fish and Wildlife Service that would feed you information?

Shirley Briggs:

Who?

Mark Madison:

The biologists in the field and so on, like Chincoteague and these places.

Shirley Briggs:

I don't think I had a relationship with them. We were just all working on the same thing.

Mark Madison:

Well, what type of projects did you tend to work on?

Shirley Briggs:

Whatever, well look at the Conservation in Action series, things like that, or there was a fisheries publication that came out. I seemed to have made fish a good deal, you know, that was how you referred to it. She is the fish, she is the something else.

Mark Madison:

What about drawing fish or drawing birds and so on, did your sculpting work help you with that or your birding help you with that?

Shirley Briggs:

I was trained as an artist. You learn how to do, look at something and draw [unintelligible] not imaginative, far out psychological things. These are just literal drawings which are the simplest kind.

Mark Madison:

Would you draw them from a picture, or would you have a stuffed bird or fish, or would you draw them outside from nature?

Shirley Briggs:

It was mostly by photographs. I wasn't out chasing a trout down a brook or something. That would have been a little difficult.

Mark Madison:

But they're mostly photographs that you drew from.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, yes.

Mark Madison:

What about the role of nature art, nature illustration in promoting conservation or environmentalism?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I think it's been very important, try to make it look good for people who don't see why all these creatures mattered. That's what the writing's about.

Mark Madison:

Now you said you did writing in addition to illustrating.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, that's what an Information Specialist does, anything that comes up. It was an all-purpose title.

Mark Madison:

Shirley, what time period, what years were you in the Fish and Wildlife Service?

Shirley Briggs:

I ought to have some reference material to look that up, I suppose.

Mark Madison:

Well, approximately, what era did you come in to Fish and Wildlife? We don't have to have the exact years.

Shirley Briggs:

When was it? Do you have the years Rachel was there?

Mark Madison:

'36 to '52. I've got down in my notes you entered in '45 and left in '48. Does that sound right?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, yeah.

Mark Madison:

So you were in Washington right at the tail end of the war and the Fish and Wildlife Service had come back from Chicago and consolidated there.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, yeah.

Mark Madison:

What was it like working in Fish and Wildlife in that era? Do you remember any of the issues that were going on or any of the priorities that you all were focused on in the mid-1940's?

Shirley Briggs:

What records do you have of what was going on that might...

Mark Madison:

Well, I would think that Fish and Wildlife, having been kind of moved out of Washington during the war and sort of in caretaker status, coming back, I would imagine you were probably kind of gearing back up at the end of the war but...

Shirley Briggs:

I suppose. Do you have anything on Dr. Lionel Albert [unintelligible]?

Mark Madison:

I don't believe we do.

Shirley Briggs:

He was one of the top people and, Burt, we called him. He and Rachel, I think, had an office together, and he was a fascinating person. He wrote plays and things, very literate, and was more concerned, I think, with the issues. Look him up. He's departed. He has a daughter somewhere I talk to occasionally.

Mark Madison:

You mentioned Conservation in Action, that series. Chincoteague was the first issue of it, and that's very interesting, because it was one of the first times our agency had tried to communicate with the broad public, to try and explain what the refuge...

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, and both Burt and Rachel were much concerned with how government publications looked. Before that they'd been the dreariest things you, well you've got a few probably. But they thought government publications should be as classy and striking and attractive as any commercial one or more so. It's important that the government expresses itself well, and Rachel had worked with that sort of thing, of course, trying to write up or edit all these reports so that somebody might actually read them. So there was much concern with fonts and type and illustrations and so on.

Mark Madison:

Is that what she was fighting with this Mr. [unintelligible] about all the time, he didn't want to spend money on that?

Shirley Briggs:

Oh, yes. He never wanted to do anything different or, in those days, whether anything actually got printed in more than black ink was a great issue. We were always battling for a color or two somewhere. That was pretty far out.

Mark Madison:

It's striking, because the Conservation in Action, I mean, they have striking covers. They're blue, they're green, they're red. She must have fought hard to get them to publish those with the good looking covers and rich photographs inside of them.

Shirley Briggs:

It was for our great issues.

Mark Madison:

Where did you go to work after Fish and Wildlife? You said you stayed in Interior.

Shirley Briggs:

Well I, you see, this is the war years. You couldn't get a permanent rating, and somebody came along who had been in there before and pushed me out of my job or something. There was a place with the Bureau of Reclamation. That's how I got into all the damn builders. I could have brought you some examples. I probably tried to glamorize that, too. But while there I also did various jobs for anyone else in the Department. There weren't many graphic sections around at the time.

Mark Madison:

Was it hard being a woman in Department of Interior in this period?

Shirley Briggs:

No. Now, there you go, sexism. No, I never found that there was any issue. The Bureau of Mines, I did quite a bit with. I didn't bother them, I don't think. If you

were, you know, in the job and in the rating, why there you were. I don't know how it was out in commercial life, but it was fine in the government.

Mark Madison:

The government was a fine place to work. Did you ever have any discussions with Rachel Carson about being a woman in government service, or did she ever talk to you about the fact that you guys were, there were a very limited number of women in professional jobs?

Shirley Briggs:

Rachel [unintelligible], I think, were the only ones in a professional level in Fish and Wildlife at that time, but that was partly because the information, publishing end of it was kind of slim, too.

Mark Madison:

But did you recall any discussions you may have had on that issue with her, or did it ever come up?

Shirley Briggs:

I don't think it ever came up. If you were competent and qualified and you did the job, fine. No one was making a big issue of it, as I recall. This was, as you mentioned, the end of the war. There weren't qualified people available much.

Mark Madison:

What's your earliest memory of Rachel Carson in like your first meeting? Can you tell us about that?

Shirley Briggs:

Do you do much trying to remember what things were like that far back?

Mark Madison:

It gets harder and harder with every year.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, she was a delightful person, and we liked to do a lot of the same things, and so did her mother. She came along sometimes. We just were both interested in the same, it's always nice to find someone like that.

Mark Madison:

Now, there was a difference in age. You were younger than Rachel Carson, right?

Shirley Briggs:

Somewhat, but now I'm older than everybody.

Mark Madison:

But Shirley, one of the things that came up in Linda's book that's very interesting is you and Rachel and Kay and Rachel's mother used to socialize, and did that...

Shirley Briggs:

We had more parties than I can see how we squeezed in. It was a very sociable time. There were quite a lot of people in Washington who had been here for the war and so on and were away from their own locations, and we just had little parties. There was a lot of socializing. I think I've commented some on it, I was amazed how much of this sort of thing went on. Where did we find the time? Well, we didn't have much else to do.

Mark Madison:

They truly were the good old days, all those parties. What about, you said you liked going birding and on excursions and so on. Did those experiences come back into your work at all? Did you have a stronger feeling for nature illustration, do you think, because you went out, because some people don't, some people would just not out with? There were quite a few naturalists, well known, in this area. Can you tell me a little bit about other personalities you and Rachel encountered?

Shirley Briggs:

Lewis [unintelligible], ran into him up at the Canal, I think. Is he still alive? I'm not sure. But he was a noted writer in the field and appreciated Rachel's skill at this.

Clarence Cottam was, of course, he was always very congenial and good friend. I get to feeling older and older when I drudge up these people. They're long gone. What names occur to you?

Mark Madison:

Clarence Cottam is one.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

I mean, he's very important to Rachel's work and that whole period.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

Did you have any remembrances about Clarence, I mean...

Shirley Briggs:

Cottam?

Mark Madison:

Yeah.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, he was just one of the better people who was trying to get the correct information out always.

Mark Madison:

Did you have a chance to go up to Patuxent at all while you were working with Fish and Wildlife?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, there was John George was out there and was in the Washington office some. Alas, he's now gone, darn it. I got a nice little folder from his memorial service with a good picture of him. But Cottam and John and some people I'd rather not, they weren't all that great, you know. There were some duds.

Mark Madison:

Can you remember any of the duds, or have you purged them from your memory?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, that might occur to me eventually. I never had much to do with them, if I could help it, nor did John. Who else was there? I am one of the queer people in this world that has kept a diary since I was child. I can sometimes go back through those, but I haven't had occasion to do it here. They said they wanted all my papers, some woman's, Iowa Women's Archive out of Iowa City, and I thought well, maybe I ought to just send all of that, but people like you keep showing up and want...

Mark Madison:

Don't send them yet. We'd like to keep on tapping you for information or, you know, ask about those years. What about after Reclamation, you worked with the Audubon, the magazine, the Audubon Naturalists. Was that a change from what you'd been doing previously?

Shirley Briggs:

Not especially. I'm trying to think about that. I seem to remember that more as a spare time connection, but it was one of the private outfits. It was doing the right sort of thing. I should have done more research on this, what did I do when.

Mark Madison:

Well, you just were editing it and so on. Let me ask you about something that's coming up right now. They're refurbishing the dioramas you did.

Shirley Briggs:

Hmm?

Mark Madison:

The dioramas for the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, I was doing them and some for the Park Service. They wanted littler ones, but that was very interesting from the standpoint of an artist. If you're doing a painting on a curved surface like this, perspective comes out all different. It was very intriguing to try to do that, of course this is very literal art. You've got to paint the background so it blends in with the foreground. I remember once, pardon me, I was painting away, and this guy came by. This was a sealed off part of the museum, the public wasn't around, but this man had a nervous breakdown right there, right by me. "Oh, this is terrible," he says, "it's cracked. I did the plaster work, and I never did this [unintelligible] I didn't know how to do it. I thought it would crack, it's cracked." So I got him by the hand and took him over and said, "No, that's just a line that was drawn to show where the photograph goes." But it was sort of a new departure for everybody, I guess, and in those days, this was a government contract just like to build a building or something, and some extremely unqualified people somehow got into all of this. One guy that was doing some of the [unintelligible] we finally decided was just plain color blind because his [unintelligible] came out mighty clear. But that's not the way to hire a professional of any kind, much less an artist, I'm afraid. Yeah, I did those for the Smithsonian. I heard from them recently. They're redoing all of that. I thought, well it lasted 40 years anyway. Come down and see the old thing again if you want to. I haven't done that yet, but then the Park Service wanted, you know, they were about maybe six feet and curved. I don't know what's become of all of them.

Mark Madison:

What were the Park Service dioramas of? I've seen the ones in the Museum of Natural History, and we're trying to save those, a few of them in the archive at the Fish and Wildlife Service. They're beautiful. What were the Park Service dioramas?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I think there's one down in Jamestown. They wanted to show what historic views were like, so I [unintelligible] around down at Jamestown trying to figure out what sort of house would have been on this foundation way back then or something. It was interesting. What sort of things would be going on. Well, one thing that used to go in the old days, the planters around would ride their horses in, and there were nothing else around but little one horse trails. There were some really proper roads, so they'd race to the dismay of the people trying to live there. That was kind of fun, and there were the, I read all of the reports of the King's Council or whatever the governing body was to see what all had gone on. Everything had gone on, believe me. Those old reports are kind of fun. We couldn't show all of that, of course.

Mark Madison:

Let me ask you about the Rachel Carson Council. You helped establish that in 1965.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

What was the purpose behind it when you first set up?

Shirley Briggs:

Just to keep her ideas in the public eye, I guess.

Mark Madison:

When you set it up, you wanted to keep Rachel's ideas alive, you said.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

Were those ideas mainly scientific ideas or outlooks on nature? What ideas specifically?

Shirley Briggs:

Both.

Mark Madison:

Would you like to elaborate a little on...

Shirley Briggs:

Elaborate, should have brought some of the early statements. Do you have any of that?

Mark Madison:

Yeah, I've seen some of the early statements. I'm wondering, for you personally, what do you think Rachel's most important scientific ideas were?

Shirley Briggs:

Her genius in writing Silent Spring and everything else is being able to look at a vast amount of detail and facts and history and put it together so it shows why it matters. That is why it still matters now. That was her great talent.

Mark Madison:

What do you think her environmental philosophy was or her conservation philosophy? Was it nature knows best?

Shirley Briggs:

Read Silent Spring.

Mark Madison:

I've read Silent, is it, you know, nature knows best or balance of nature, do you think?

Shirley Briggs:

What do you mean by those things?

Mark Madison:

They're vague terms, I agree. I mean, if you had to summarize, from your reading of Silent Spring, what do you think her most important environmental ideas were?

Shirley Briggs:

Seeing the whole picture and putting it together as she was able to do. Not many people can, but she did get Silent Spring written and hoped that she, by that writing and others, had accomplished what she mainly wanted to do, and as you know, she was quite ill and finished her work under severe difficulties.

Mark Madison:

Were you still seeing her regularly in the last year or so of her life when she was...

Shirley Briggs:

I don't have correspondence with her that other people do because we were on the [unintelligible] and if we wanted to communicate that easily.

Mark Madison:

Did she tell you ever what she hoped her legacy would be after she passed away?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, she'd written it. She hoped she had it on record, which I think she did.

Mark Madison:

There was a lot of criticism of her when the book came out and afterwards, and as a personal friend, that must have been a little difficult for you to hear. I mean, how...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, you knew if it was going to happen. There was no surprise in any of this. She was bringing up the reasons that the dominant economic courses in the country were, in some cases, opposed to. She was going to have opposition. She did in exactly the quarters we expected so...

Mark Madison:

How did she react to that, and how did you react?

Shirley Briggs:

Oh, the same way. We knew it was going to happen. She hoped she had made her case. In fact, enough to stand on its own, which as it had turned out, she had, so...

Mark Madison:

It got very personal though. Did that bother you or bother her?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, that's the way those idiots always behaved. That's what you expect from nerds like that, you know.

Mark Madison:

Shirley, this is really helpful. We really appreciate it. It's good to hear your own words. Even though some of this stuff is written down, as you noted it, it's good to hear you saying it. It moves people.

Shirley Briggs:

You know, Linda did a marvelous job by that biography. She worked on it for about ten years and kept calling me up, you know, who was at this occasion, what was, and so I just refer everybody to that book. She quizzed me very thoroughly.

Mark Madison:

Let's go back to the debate on Silent Spring after it came out in '62. Did you feel that the government was supportive of Carson, the Department of Interior?

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah. It was Udall then, and he was a valiant supporter, but I'm not so sure about the Department of Agriculture always, but Udall was splendid all along of that.

Mark Madison:

He was a good Secretary. We're hoping to get him to participate in this Carson conference we're doing next year.

Shirley Briggs:

Where is now, clear out southwest somewhere?

Mark Madison:

Southwest, yes. He just published a new article in American, I think it was American Heritage, American Heritage.

Shirley Briggs:

Oh, I haven't seen that.

Mark Madison:

We'll send you a copy through Linda.

Shirley Briggs:

Thank you, I appreciate it, yes, very much.

Mark Madison:

Do you think overall we made progress since Carson as regard to contaminants and pesticides and so on?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, yes, I think we have. I got out a book on it, big book. It's a few years back, though, A Basic Guide to Pesticides, which was the attempt to follow up, in a way, to Silent Spring. I'd hear all the dull detailed cases, one, two, and three, all this stuff. I hope it's still available. Quite the fool, I gave the copyright to Rachel Carson Council, I think, not knowing that any nitwit like this guy on the post was going to show up and take that over. He owned the copyrights as long as you're alive. I thought, well, I'm getting kind of old, you know. Don't ever do that. You may wish to hang on.

Mark Madison:

You wrote your book a couple of decades after Carson's book.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, yeah.

Mark Madison:

Were there things that Carson had missed that you noted, obviously?

Shirley Briggs:

No, what had gone on since, but it was just alphabetically. Here are all the chief chemicals and what we know about them. It's not anything you'd sit down and read for fun. It wasn't anything you wrote for fun either.

Mark Madison:

Now, you taught for a while with, was it the USDA on conservation philosophies? Was that...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, there is the graduate school of the USDA, which is not that [unintelligible] dealing with what they're doing, and under that, we have this series of courses, and that's, they take care of the keeping the books, and you would get paid a little for teaching it [unintelligible]. They didn't put any cap on that this last time, and I teach it at home, and I ran out of chairs, but that is an entirely separate institution from the Department and its daily workings.

Mark Madison:

What do you try and teach the students?

Shirley Briggs:

What?

Mark Madison:

What do you teach the students?

Shirley Briggs:

Environmental philosophy.

Mark Madison:

What do you try and get across to them when they leave your course?

Shirley Briggs:

The sort of things we're talking about, I guess. How has environmental consciousness evolved, what's the background of it in this country or wherever, what issues have come up and been important and so on.

Mark Madison:

Where do you start? Do you start with John Muir or [unintelligible] or Rachel Carson? Where do you begin your history?

Shirley Briggs:

Early 19th Century or before. I mean, what were the concepts way back when. What have we built on and come to understand the environment better and all that.

Mark Madison:

Do you think there was a change in environmental philosophy in the 1960's with Carson, your work, other folks in that period?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, yeah, it's evolved. Aldo Leopold and show what their concepts were, and we're up to that now. We hope we're there and looking forward for sure.

Mark Madison:

Do you see Leopold and Carson as being similar in some ways in their philosophies?

Shirley Briggs:

In every way, I would say, that they are the ones who expressed that, yes, I guess, yeah. They were the Bibles, I thought that we have.

Mark Madison:

Let me ask you, Shirley, we're talking about icons of the environmental movement and the conservation movement. Did you have any inkling at the time you were working with Rachel Carson and then up until Silent Spring that she is going to be considered a patron saint in conservation, that my personal friend here is really not only going to leave a legacy but is going to be regarded someday as a patron saint? I mean, how did fame, and she was getting a lot of fame in the time you knew her, a lot more since, but do you have any thoughts on the fame that surrounds Rachel Carson, and did you expect to...

Shirley Briggs:

Well [unintelligible] so she is who we refer to now, Leopold, Carson, a few others that kept up with the ideas and said them well, and this is how it evolved.

Mark Madison:

Did she or did you anticipate it, though?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, she had written Silent Spring, and after that, she obviously had said it for all of us.

Mark Madison:

It's an interesting point though. We remember Leopold and Carson because, in part, they were such good writers. You can reread their books again and again and...

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, you mean someone who not only knows it but can say it...

Mark Madison:

Yeah.

Shirley Briggs:

...from a persuasive way.

Mark Madison:

Can write it well. Do you think Carson learned any of that writing for the public while she worked with Fish and Wildlife, while you guys worked together? Did she get practice...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, that's where she was working, at Wildlife. How do you design and write these standard government publications so that they will be believed by the public. She learned a lot of that by editing all the reports in the Fish and Wildlife Service. She was editor in chief, and my job was when she came upon a particularly ridiculous sentence, she'd draw a picture of it, cartoons. I should have brought along a little book I have, the cartoons I drew of Rachel and me through some of this. I drew it just to let my mother know what was going on, but I do have these, we would go out in the fields somewhere, and doggone it, by the time we got back, Rachel was still neat as a pin, and I looked like the dickens. This was typical, and going out doing the job [unintelligible] and so on. I keep thinking maybe I ought to do something with them. A little descriptive writing of what it looked like, and there we are coming back from something.

Mark Madison:

I've seen a few of the cartoons in Linda's book.

Shirley Briggs:

I guess she did pick up a couple.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, they're beautiful. I mean, you know, it'd be wonderful if you published just a tiny thing of those cartoons.

Shirley Briggs:

How would I do that? Who would want to publish it?

Mark Madison:

Fish and Wildlife. Luckily, we have our editor from the publishing...

Shirley Briggs:

He should have wore a sticker.

Mark Madison:

David Klinger.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, maybe I could do it for you.

Mark Madison:

Do you want to collaborate on something?

Shirley Briggs:

Why not? I don't seem to be getting it done myself.

Mark Madison:

But I really think you are on this, writing well preserves you in people's memory and it has a big effect.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

It goes in with you saying she synthesized the science and saw the whole picture.

Shirley Briggs:

Which ones did Linda pick up? I've forgotten.

Mark Madison:

I think one was from Chincoteague, actually.

Shirley Briggs:

What?

Mark Madison:

There was a cartoon of going through a dumpster or a trash can. What was that?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, when Rachel was down at Myrtle Beach or somewhere, she would collect stuff and then she would try to, if it was still alive, put it back, or if not, sneak out to the municipal garbage can late at night and hide the smelly remains.

Mark Madison:

Here's the two pictures that were in the, the two cartoons.

Shirley Briggs:

No, Rachel's sunburned terribly, that's what this one is, and there we are coming back wherever we were staying at Chincoteague, and Rachel's neat as a pin, and I look pretty soggy.

Mark Madison:

How did she stay so neat while you got soggy?

Shirley Briggs:

Hmm?

Mark Madison:

Did she have a trick for staying so neat?

Shirley Briggs:

She just was neat. I don't know how she did it. I used to watch her and, yeah, those are the only cartoons that they, Linda did a remarkable job on that book, I must say.

Mark Madison:

Do you think she really caught the essence?

Shirley Briggs:

Hmm?

Mark Madison:

Did she leave anything out about Rachel that you would like to add?

Shirley Briggs:

I don't think so. Not that I could tell her. She was quizzing me all the time for several years but...

Mark Madison:

We've talked about Leopold. We've talked about Carson's philosophy. How would you summarize your own environmental philosophy?

Shirley Briggs:

I believe what they did. I mean, they said it better, I suppose.

Mark Madison:

But what do you...

Shirley Briggs:

I like to think I'm in there camp, definitely.

Mark Madison:

Do you think people are coming around to their philosophy more now than in the past?

Shirley Briggs:

Some people. Yeah, I think they've had quite an effect over the years. Not as much as we would hope, but we still have the people like the [unintelligible] Chemical Company and so on trying to put their case.

Mark Madison:

It was one of the biggest critics of Carson, [unintelligible] was. They sent out that traveling show with Dr., what was it, White Stevens, would go out...

Shirley Briggs:

Oh, that awful man, but he was so awful that we rejoiced, because he was so much the [unintelligible] of the industry that we hoped people would recognize. He was terrible. Frank Edgar kept trying on the other side. Is he still around? I'm trying to think of people I can refer you to. They're dead.

Mark Madison:

Was it discouraging having to deal with people like that on the other side? I mean did it get...

Shirley Briggs:

Some of them were so bad that we rejoiced that they were clearly seen as the other side, yeah.

Mark Madison:

You were with Fish and Wildlife for what, about three years, but yet you've stayed kind of in touch with the Agency.

Shirley Briggs:

With the Interior Department. This guy showed up and taken over my job at the end of the war, but I was still in the Department, and I was still working for various agencies if they had a project.

Mark Madison:

Through your life, you've kind of stayed in touch with your Fish and Wildlife colleagues and friends.

Shirley Briggs:

You know, until this year, we had a Fish and Wildlife retirees group that met for lunch once a month, but I haven't heard from them this year.

Mark Madison:

Was that the group Jo Quinter....

Shirley Briggs:

Who?

Mark Madison:

Jo Quinter, was she in that group?

Shirley Briggs:

I don't remember that name.

Mark Madison:

She had told me about a group that used to meet for lunch.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

And it just fell apart. We're setting that back up again.

Shirley Briggs:

Oh good, that was always fun.

Mark Madison:

Jo is spearheading it. She lives in McLean, Virginia, and we're sending the retirees Fish and Wildlife News again, and we actually have a retiree reunion once a year now out at NCTC. So we're trying to maintain these connections.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, there was still quite a few people in that group that went way back, and I was trying to find out what had happened to it.

Mark Madison:

So you've kept up with a number of those people through the years, Fish and Wildlife people.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, and that group especially, of course. They tended to go back to my time.

Mark Madison:

What made Fish and Wildlife people special? I mean, it's...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, you know, are there other agencies that [unintelligible] or not? I don't know anything about any others, but we were a group of people who shared concern and interest in conservation, environment, and what Interior is up to now, and all that sort of thing. I don't know how to compare them with anyone else. But if you're in touch with some revival there....

Mark Madison:

I will have them contact you.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

Because I know exactly the group you're talking about. Do you think we've done a good job, Fish and Wildlife, of carrying out Rachel's legacy?

Shirley Briggs:

Best they could. They have the same problems she had, I guess, of the, reaching the public.

Mark Madison:

What do you feel most proud of in the career that you had and the work that you've done? What would you consider your greatest contribution?

Shirley Briggs:

I'm not sure I had one. I just kept pegging away at this sort of thing as occasion permitted. That Basic Guide to Pesticide was the thing I worked on most recently,

and I have kept up with that toxicology through the years. That's been the main thing I guess.

Mark Madison:

Was that subject difficult for you, because you were trained in art, right? You weren't...

Shirley Briggs:

You seem to think people just do one thing, hogwash. I was brought up for a broad based education. I grew up in a University. I recommend this. Whatever a kid is interested in, there's some expert on the fact that will take him out and show him the mother flies or whatever. My father was a professor of political science, in which I have a great interest, too. If you can do some drawing on the side, that doesn't mean that's all you're interested in. You have to have a focus and a subject.

Mark Madison:

That's an interesting point. Do you think having an interest in art, though, also caused you to see things in a different way, to see nature differently, to see science differently?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I suppose you do. That gives you an angle, but how different, I don't know.

Mark Madison:

Your expertise, though, in chemistry and toxicology and contaminants, did that develop...

Shirley Briggs:

I should have taken more chemistry, looking back. I also should have learned Japanese but I...

Mark Madison:

Did you draw on that, though? From your relationship with Rachel Carson, do you think your knowledge in that area was increased, or did you just...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I think so. She was, of course had edited all the original research on that and was very concerned about it, yeah.

Mark Madison:

In one way you followed Carson, though. I mean, because her expertise was marine biology, and then she made herself expert on toxicology, and it was the same with you. I mean you...

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, I didn't study it in college, but it was something that mainly affected the things I was working on. I could have brought along a copy of Basic Guide to Pesticides and showed you but I...

Mark Madison:

Next time we'll bring along a copy and have you sign it.

Shirley Briggs:

What?

Mark Madison:

Next time we'll bring along a copy of the book and ask you to sign it, and then we'll put it back in our library.

Shirley Briggs:

Fine, you have it.

I was reading some of her Emily Dickinson connections.

Mark Madison:

This is the woman who was Emily Dickinson's editor first? What was she, was she the first editor of the Dickinson papers?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, her mother was the first one to get any of the poems published, and she knew all about this.

Mark Madison:

She had a huge house and refuge on some island in the...

Mark Madison:

Oh, this is Millicent Todd Bingham.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, right.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, the Audubon camp at which I worked at in Maine on Hog Island.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

Where did you and Rachel go to see here? It wasn't at Hog Island, it was down...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, she lived here.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, okay. So that's what we want to talk about. But you went to some place on the eastern shore.

Shirley Briggs:

Did she?

Mark Madison:

Well, I have pictures, and it wasn't...

Shirley Briggs:

Not on the eastern shore.

Mark Madison:

Okay, well then...

Shirley Briggs:

Maine.

Mark Madison:

Was it Hog Island then?

Shirley Briggs:

It was Boothbay.

Mark Madison:

Was she on the board of the Audubon ever?

Shirley Briggs:

Always, she went way back. I picked up recently a couple of her books based on the Dickinson business, Emily Dickinson's home and the other one. So I'm much reminded of Mrs. Bingham. She was, and her husband, too, was extremely nice, scientist and [unintelligible] amazingly.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, I've read a little biography of her, and she was a fascinating person and all the work they did in Maine and how that camp was established.

Shirley Briggs:

What biography?

Mark Madison:

Well, it was a little, actually a little write up of how her property there in Maine, the Hog Island property got deeded over to the camp and got established in the 1930's.

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, she kept trying to find someone that would do that sort of thing with it.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I was just up there a couple, a year or two ago. It's still going strong. It's a wonderful place.

Shirley, could you tell us a little bit about doing some of the birding with Rachel and Christmas counts?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, we were out on our own some, but we [unintelligible] with the local groups who did this systematically, and the important thing in this is to keep the records year after year after year in a consistent way. So we got involved with the Audubon Naturalist Society principally, and until I got so I couldn't hear the higher notes, I used to keep up with that. I'm not so good at it anymore, either on the higher notes of the birds or the steeper slopes of the park, but I did it for a long time, and people are going on with it, of course.

Mark Madison:

People said you were a very good birder. Did that effect how you observed natural at all, your birding?

Shirley Briggs:

I'm not that bad as a botanist either, I like to think. That I had studied in college to some extent. I just knew people when I looked for birds, and my, both my parents had had a course in ornithology in college, for heaven's sake, so this wasn't anything I picked up. That's what you did.

Mark Madison:

You said you drifted into the National Audubon Society, you worked with them. Do you have any remembrances of Howard Zahnizer?

Shirley Briggs:

Oh, Zahnzie. There was a splendid person. Yeah, I met one of the best people in that group. He was just a splendid person and was, of course, working on the sort of things we all thought were important.

Mark Madison:

What were some of these things that Zahnzie was working on?

Shirley Briggs:

Preserving the records of the, and noticing what was happening in the wilderness areas and so on. What do you know about Zahnzie?

Mark Madison:

Well, he worked for Fish and Wildlife, so he was a...

Shirley Briggs:

That's right.

Mark Madison:

Did you [unintelligible] actions with him? Was he still in the Agency when you worked for us?

Shirley Briggs:

Hmm?

Mark Madison:

Was Zahnzie still in Fish and Wildlife when you were working for us?

Shirley Briggs:

I don't remember. I knew him, whether from the office or some of these other outfits.

Mark Madison:

Roger Torey Peterson was also active in the National Audubon Society.

Shirley Briggs:

Old [unintelligible], yes. I miss him. I used to be able to write and ask him questions down there. Who was it, I was reading something that somebody had, a cat or something named, that they named Rajah Torey Peterson in honor of Roger. But yeah, he was very active in all of this.

Mark Madison:

Any other folks from the National Audubon Society you remember as friends?

Shirley Briggs:

Now there are different things here. National Audubon is a crew up in New York City. It is not the Audubon Naturalist Society. They're not connected or were ever.

Mark Madison:

What about the Audubon Naturalist Society?

Shirley Briggs:

That is in this region, yeah, and it goes back to 1895, which predates the crew up in New York, so we were proud of that. It was just a good, effective regional group that everybody belonged to and worked with.

Mark Madison:

Do you remember some of the fights you had in that group, what you fought for in the environment?

Shirley Briggs:

There you go, it's always a fight or a struggle. Some things just evolve, you know. I don't remember any particular fight. Did something come to mind?

Mark Madison:

Fighting for habitat or against roads or anything that...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, that road down [unintelligible] we all rose up about, but I don't know that we were so much into lobbying and worrying about legislation, but if there was...

Mark Madison:

Island Beach, Shirley, tell them about Island Beach. This fits right in. Do you remember when you and Rachel went down to Island Beach off the coast off...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, that's the Barrier Island.

Mark Madison:

Barrier Island, and you were both interested in trying to, Rachel got interested in trying to save it. It was in private hands.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

This was the time when they were going to ruin, take over those islands, and Rachel wrote a piece about it.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, well we went over there and explored it.

Mark Madison:

Yeah, but remember there was a hurricane that came and you had to get out of there real fast.

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, Rachel kind of regretted that. She'd always wanted to be in a hurricane and see what it was like, but we didn't want [unintelligible]. Later sometime, a hurricane came through Boothbay Harbor somewhere, and she decided she had had more than enough of that, but this illustrates her curiosity and interest in natural phenomenon, I guess.

Mark Madison:

Did you travel with Rachel in Maine at like Boothbay Harbor and so on?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, yeah, I used to like to get up there whenever I could. This was one of my favorite places, too.

Mark Madison:

Why did you and Rachel love Maine so much? What was special about Maine, because she obviously cared about it?

Shirley Briggs:

Ever been there?

Mark Madison:

Oh, yeah.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, then how do you think it's special?

Mark Madison:

Well you know, I love Acadia National Park and the seashore and so on, but I'm curious about what attracted...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, it was a fascinating part of the shore. Rachel wrote a whole book on the seashore, one of her best, and it was. We just both liked it there. You can't go into all the reasons why you like a place just off hand usually.

Mark Madison:

What did you used to do with her? What were your common activities when you were on the road with her, say, in Maine?

Shirley Briggs:

She kept trying to teach me how to play...

Mark Madison:

Pinochle.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah, and she never managed very well. I never got any good at pinochle.

Mark Madison:

So if you didn't play pinochle, what did you do in the evenings? Did you talk, have tea, star watch? What were some of the, did you spend a lot of time actually doing natural history type things?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I suppose so. It's a very interesting place, you go out and notice.

Mark Madison:

Now, were you gathering material for your art when you went on these field trips? Did you sketch?

Shirley Briggs:

No.

Mark Madison:

You didn't sketch?

Shirley Briggs:

You've got a phobia about this art thing. That's a side issue. It's something you do if you're doing illustrations or something. It's not that you go out looking for something to draw especially, unless you have a purpose.

Mark Madison:

Tell me about your diaries that you've kept.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I just have kept one. It's not one of these where you philosophize. I just found it useful in having a poor memory, to jot down when things happened, and that's what Linda kept pestering about all the time she was writing the book. Sometimes I just noted this happened, these people were there or something.

Mark Madison:

When Carson passed on, did you look back in your diary just out of curiosity just to see...

Shirley Briggs:

[Unintelligible] to do that.

Mark Madison:

Tell me about your interest in photography.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I just always did it. My father always did it. We had a darkroom in the basement. Started out with a brownie and worked up. I now have some rather fancy equipment, but I haven't been using it much lately. This is just something that was done. Most of these things just was a family interest or whatever.

Mark Madison:

Did you take a lot of pictures of Rachel Carson?

Shirley Briggs:

I seem to have the only collection of them. That's what I do nowadays, I answer requests. What do I have of Rachel Carson? I've got a little catalog of photocopies that are not terribly good photographic quality, but you can tell whether she's outdoors or in or something. I guess that's my main contribution to the cause is the [unintelligible] I have of the pictures, largely because I had taken quite a few of them, and some people have given me them, and I have got copy negatives of all of them so I can get prints made. I have given up keeping my darkroom in the basement all fired up. That's too much bother. I just take them down the street to somewhere and they can print, but I can do all the darkroom stuff if I got that ambitious, I guess.

Mark Madison:

Do you have a favorite picture of Rachel?

Shirley Briggs:

What?

Mark Madison:

Do you have a favorite picture of Rachel out of your whole collection, one you think is particularly nice?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, it depends on whether you want it indoors or out, old or young. I've got an awfully nice one of her about five years old. It was one of the family negatives that I guess her brother or somebody came up with. Her brother's a character. I guess he's gone now, too. I forget, I've lost it.

Mark Madison:

What about any shots on trips you and Rachel took together? Do you have any pictures you really liked from those times?

Shirley Briggs:

I don't remember. Some, I guess. I've got...

...Rachel and Buckle who was the refuge manager down at Chincoteague. Now she's certainly long gone.

Mark Madison:

Kay Howell.

Shirley Briggs:

She's still there out in Salt Lake City, the last I called.

Mark Madison:

Do you think she'd be a good person for us to interview?

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

Why?

Shirley Briggs:

She was involved with all of this. She's good looking or always was. She'd come out well. She's positive.

Mark Madison:

What are your memories of the three of you working together? Were you kind of a tight knit bunch?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, we were in adjoining offices and Burt Walford and so on. We would, I think this business we did in the closet heating water for afternoon tea was illegal, actually, but we did it. We just, twice a day or so, we would get together and compare notes.

Mark Madison:

What would you talk about over your tea?

Shirley Briggs:

Everything, what was going on in the office or outside. I told you there were more parties going on, which Kay was always kind of involved. At least the last time I tried to call her, there was still Mary Francis Howell, who I think shared an apartment with Kay or something. She might remember some of this, I don't know. She was still around, at least.

Mark Madison:

You've had a really diverse career, you've done a lot of things, you've got a lot of...

Shirley Briggs:

Scatter brained.

Mark Madison:

Well, that would be one way of characterizing it, but I look at you and I say, there's a real renaissance woman who's done a lot of things and a lot of interests. What kept you going through the years? Tell me a little bit more about how these diverse interests, how you've made...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, life is more interesting if you're involved in more things. Haven't you found that to be true?

Mark Madison:

Absolutely, but I'm overwhelmed by the things, the interests that you have and the things that you've developed on your own.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I think I was brought up, I say, if you grow up in the University, you're aware of a range of stuff.

Mark Madison:

So you really do credit your family and your early years with sparking all these different interests?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, I suppose. Isn't that true of anybody often?

Mark Madison:

Is there one thing you always had a strong passion for throughout your life?

Shirley Briggs:

I'm a little leery of that word passion. I think we've touched on most everything.

Mark Madison:

Sounds like a good place to end, and let us thank you very much, Shirley, for agreeing to talk to us, and we really appreciate your insights.

Shirley Briggs:

Do look up those retirees for heaven's sake.

Mark Madison:

I will get that information.

Shirley Briggs:

There was so, I don't know who was still around. Bob Hines used to come. He was one you should have talked to.

Mark Madison:

Tell us about Bob.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, he materialized from, they found him out in Ohio or something.

He showed up and proved to be thoroughly compatible. He was under Rachel for as long as they both were there, I guess. I miss Bob. He was fun, but he could have told you quite a bit about Rachel, no doubt, but he's gone, too.

Mark Madison:

You and Bob shared a passion for or a liking for photography, right? He took lots of pictures, my understanding is when he was in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Shirley Briggs:

Well, maybe some, yeah, and he, of course, maintained a marvelous file of drawings in everything. If you needed this duck or that moose or something.

Mark Madison:

What did you think of his art and did you...

Shirley Briggs:

Hmm?

Mark Madison:

What did you think of his artwork, and did you all collaborate on things or has one...

Shirley Briggs:

No, I wasn't in [unintelligible].

Mark Madison:

But as one artist to another, did you all ever talk shop?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, he, I would say the work he did, not an inspired visionary artist, just a good every day, get the stuff out that somebody wants.

Mark Madison:

I always ask this question in every interview I do with former Fish and Wildlife employees like yourself. What advice would you give to people entering Fish and Wildlife Service, new employees who are just starting their careers? You've had a long and varied career. Do you have any advice for people who are getting started?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, they will all have listened to this excellent tape they've got now.

Mark Madison:

I didn't prompt, I didn't pay you for that endorsement. I'll let the record...

Shirley Briggs:

Well, very sensible, if they focused on it, this is what new people need to know, and they did a good job.

Mark Madison:

Do you have any personal advice you'd give from your experience in government and in other jobs that you've had? What do you say to somebody like your students in your conservation classes who were kind of getting into this business?

Shirley Briggs:

Well they may already be in, they come from various agencies and interests.

Mark Madison:

Any advice?

Shirley Briggs:

Just find out what's going on and really see how their ideas jive, I guess. Every now and then I get someone who's work leads them into this or who ought to find a job that would be into it, and I, of course, don't know what all the jobs are anymore.

Mark Madison:

What's the best advice you ever got in your career?

Shirley Briggs:

That is one of these utterly impossible questions to ask.

Mark Madison:

Nothing's...

Shirley Briggs:

It's too vague and general.

Mark Madison:

Well, did you have a role model in your career in the government or in your career in art? Did you pattern yourself after anyone or look up to anyone?

Shirley Briggs:

Not anyone, no. I don't think people do that, do you?

Mark Madison:

Well, I think everyone's different.

Shirley Briggs:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

Was there anyone in particular you looked up to for guidance as a young employee?

Shirley Briggs:

Well, Clarence Cottam was around, Rachel was around. I don't know, depending on what came up.

Mark Madison:

Did you have a job that was your favorite?

Shirley Briggs:

I don't know, and then there was, I forget names now. Who was head of Fish and Wildlife in those days?

Mark Madison:

Was it Day?

Shirley Briggs:

Looked like a grizzly bear.

Mark Madison:

Albert Day?

Shirley Briggs:

He didn't look like a grizzly bear.

Mark Madison:

No, Al Day didn't.

Mark Madison:

Prior to Al Day, in the late '40's, it wasn't Gabrielson?

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, Gabe.

Mark Madison:

Tell us about Isaac Gabrielson.

Shirley Briggs:

Both my folks had been in college with him. We figured he was probably, of all the graduates at Morningside College, he was the most, what's the word I'm, he's more dirty language. The rest of them were quite proper. No, he was a marvelous character. I enjoyed knowing him.

Mark Madison:

What did you like especially about him?

Shirley Briggs:

I think more than anyone else, he looked like a grizzly bear. But no, he knew the field, and he was very articulate and active, vivid in his commentary.

Mark Madison:

He took an interest in what you folks were doing with publications and so on?

Shirley Briggs:

Yes, but we took an interest in what he was doing with the whole outfit. That's the main way it went.

Mark Madison:

Thank you so much, Shirley. We really appreciate this.

Shirley Briggs:

I hope I haven't led you astray.

Mark Madison:

You have not, clarified very much of our history, and we just appreciate your time, and we thank you so much for this.

Shirley Briggs:

I've got a lot of time.

Mark Madison:

I'm glad you loaned us a little of it.