



# **Marjorie Harris Carr**

Defender of Florida's Environment

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University Press of Florida

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## Blending Science and Marriage in the New Deal Era

Gender discrimination prevented Marjorie Harris from proceeding directly to graduate work in zoology after she completed her bachelor's in science at Florida State College for Women (FSCW). Soon after graduation, however, the Resettlement Administration hired her as the first female federal wildlife technician. Harris was assigned to the Welaka Fish Hatchery, located near the St. Johns River in north central Florida. This position served three key purposes in her professional and personal life. First, Harris's work at the fish hatchery inspired her later research on the large-mouthed black bass of Florida, which would become the subject of her master's thesis. Second, this position introduced Harris to the Ocklawaha River, whose preservation and restoration would later command thirty-five years of her attention. Third, Harris's work at the fish hatchery prompted her to conduct research at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where she met Archie Carr, who was completing his doctoral dissertation in herpetology. Their meeting prefaced the establishment of a personal and professional partnership that would benefit both scientists in their future scholarly and conservation activities. As the young couple began their partnership, however, Harris would face a series of challenges to her ability to combine marriage with a scientific career.

The Welaka Fish Hatchery was part of America's national fish-hatchery system, which was founded in the late nineteenth century. (Welaka, which means "chain of lakes," was the Timucua name for the St. Johns River.) Today,

the national hatcheries, which were originally charged with replenishing fish supplies for recreational purposes, culture more than one hundred aquatic species to replace fish lost through natural disasters, pollution, habitat loss, dam construction, and other events that interfere with the natural life cycles of native fishes. Established in 1926, the Welaka National Fish Hatchery was incorporated into the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1938. The only national fish hatchery in Florida, the Welaka Fish Hatchery is a warm-water hatchery whose purpose is to raise fish native to the Southeast and release them into rivers, streams, and lakes. The hatchery is located by the St. Johns River, which has been described as the “bass capital of the world.” Harris’s studies of the fish of the St. Johns would later lead to her selection of bass as the subject of her graduate thesis at the University of Florida (UF), “The Breeding Habits, Embryology and Larval Development of the Large-Mouthed Black Bass of Florida.” As a wildlife technician, her duties at the Welaka Fish Hatchery included a mixture of biological research, field research and collecting, and aquarium management.<sup>1</sup>

As the nation’s first female federal wildlife technician, Harris benefited from the expanding professional opportunities the New Deal made available to women. The New Deal in particular and Depression conditions in general contributed to the feminization of clerical work. This process benefited employers, who compensated female employees at a lower rate than what they had previously paid male employees who performed the same tasks. The New Deal also played a major role in increasing women’s presence in public life in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

After American women gained the suffrage, the 1920s witnessed a sharp backlash against women’s concerns. Yet the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the hardships brought on by the Depression, and the implementation of the New Deal programs redefined relationships among the federal government, society, and the individual. This resulted in an overall improvement in women’s status that would not be matched until the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the lack of an organized women’s movement, the 1930s ushered in a new era of opportunity for women—especially college-educated women—in public life. Nonetheless, the American public was slow to accept women’s entry into public life. Four-fifths of Americans surveyed in a 1936 Gallup poll expressed the opinion that married women should not work if their husbands were employed. The federal government’s official policy reflected this public sentiment: Between 1932 and 1937, 1,600 married women whose husbands also

worked for the government were dismissed from government service. Still, women benefited from the social and economic restructuring that accompanied the New Deal.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1923 and 1939, the total percentage of women employed by the federal government increased from 15.8 to 18.8, representing an increase of ninety thousand government positions for women. In academic and professional science, women were perceived to be a threat. Since the dawn of the industrial age, women's labor had been compensated at a lower rate than men's, and women had been relegated to sex-typed jobs. As women's presence in science increased, these practices were extended to that field as well. Cultural beliefs about gender difference persisted in the 1930s, when women accounted for approximately 50 percent of the work force.<sup>5</sup>

One unresolved issue at the time concerned the future of the nation's college-educated women. Although some would pursue graduate educations or professional careers in the early twentieth century, most college-educated women who worked after graduation entered the female-dominated (and socially acceptable) positions of schoolteacher, nurse, librarian, social worker, or clerical worker. Yet the Depression era represented a time of social and economic reform, followed by a period of global war. Historically, American women's employment has experienced dramatic upswings during periods of great expansion and national emergencies, leading to important (temporary) progress.<sup>6</sup>

The Resettlement Administration's decision to appoint a woman to the biologist position at the Welaka Fish Hatchery was indicative of this overall shift in women's favor. However, not all government bureaucrats supported the extension of traditionally male-dominated positions to women. After spending four years at an all-female institution, Harris enjoyed the camaraderie of her male colleagues at the Welaka Fish Hatchery; nonetheless, as the only female biologist at the hatchery, Harris encountered some resistance. "The program's director was very uncomfortable with a woman biologist," she recounted. "He didn't know what to do with me." Zoology was an unusual career choice for a woman to make in the 1930s. It involved getting dirty in the field: collecting and preserving insects, spiders, reptiles, fishes, mollusks, birds, and other assorted creatures; hunting for specimens by hand or by rifle; and engaging in a host of activities women traditionally shunned. To Harris, however, exploring rural Florida on rugged collecting trips was second nature.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to working with fish, Harris, who had specialized in ornithol-

ogy at FSCW, assumed research responsibilities in the aviary housed at the Welaka Fish Hatchery. World War I veterans constructed the aviary during the hatchery's expansion under the New Deal. In the fall of 1936, Harris's colleagues were unable to identify the source of an illness that afflicted the hatchery's quail population. The hatchery's laboratory lacked the equipment required to diagnose the disease, but Harris suspected that it was a condition that also affected chickens. "I had minored in bacteriology," she explained, "so I took the quail over to a laboratory at the University of Florida." Because Harris's supervisor refused to allow her to test her hypothesis during working hours, she made several trips to UF after work, conducted her research at the university's laboratory at night, and drove back to Welaka in time to start work the following morning.<sup>8</sup>

Harris spent several late nights toiling over a microscope in a UF laboratory near the zoology department. The young male scientists at UF were awestruck by the presence of the twenty-one-year-old female scientist who had descended upon the science building in high heels and a lab coat, toting a box of sick quail. One graduate student called Harris the most beautiful woman he had ever met. Another graduate student, Horton Hobbs, reported to his friend Archie Carr that he had just met the love of his life. Archie was intrigued. He made himself presentable, headed to campus to work on his dissertation on the geographic and ecological distribution of the reptiles and amphibians of Florida, and promptly introduced himself to Marjorie Harris. The chemistry between them was instantaneous. It was love at first sight, and alas, there was no hope for poor Horton Hobbs.<sup>9</sup>

Marjorie Harris helped finance their courtship by convincing her supervisor at the fish hatchery to purchase a collection of local fish specimens from Archie, who reciprocated by nominating her for full membership in the Florida Academy of Sciences. Harris was already a charter member of the Academy, but because she was female, her current membership was only at the associate level. (As science underwent the process of professionalization in the early twentieth century, it was customary for women to be excluded from full participation in professional organizations such as scientific academies.) Archie's two-hour drive from Gainesville to Welaka was also assisted by his brother, Tom, who loaned him a truck he had inherited from an aunt. Archie's brother was impressed with Harris's "business-like" demeanor when he first met her, in addition to the fact that she wore boots.<sup>10</sup>

Archie teased Harris for taking a position sponsored by the New Deal. "I

love to look at you even if you are a resettlement woman,” he wrote in December 1936. “You talk so cute too.” Archie, a southerner, was amused by Harris’s New England accent. Although the pair had just met in October, Archie already signed his letters with love. Yet Archie’s next letter, which he wanted to be a “cheerful, happy first love letter,” was instead filled with doubts. Harris had just lost her position at the Welaka Fish Hatchery. She was fired after she challenged a colleague who took credit for her discovery of the cause of the quail illness, which she had investigated independently at the UF laboratory. A frantic search for a new position ensued, driving Archie closer to his love interest while simultaneously leaving him feeling inadequate as a potential provider for Harris. This crisis caused the young couple to make a rushed decision about the future of their relationship.<sup>11</sup>

Archie had already proposed to Harris, but marriage was a risky venture during the Great Depression. Archie feared that she would only agree to marry him because of the turmoil stemming from her dismissal from the fish hatchery. Moreover, he was unable to support her financially, so they would have to live separately while he finished his dissertation. This scenario would only be feasible if Harris could find work as a biologist, and even then, the newlyweds would have to endure more than a half year of separation. Archie advised Harris to heed her mother’s advice on the matter and think with her mind, not her heart. Archie, a struggling graduate student, claimed that his love was selfish because he had little to offer her, while what she offered him was priceless. “I have so much to gain,” Archie warned Harris. “You are everything I need and want. You will make my life far more important and satisfying than it could be without you. Can I do these things for you? Listen to your mother and stop feeling and think. This is a warning, my dearest, because I’m going to marry you the minute you weaken. I’m going to be a louse and take a wife I can’t support, and let her live away from me and work, and ignore the risk of losing her respect—the minute you weaken. You are magnificent. I profit so greatly. I don’t want to clip your wings. Think hard.”<sup>12</sup>

Although his intentions were serious, Archie did not want to curtail Harris’s professional ambitions. He was aware of the implications of their potential marriage for her career in science. This explains why his letter contained both a marriage proposal and a plea to be reasonable and end their affair. He confided that writing a three-ream dissertation left him sleep-deprived and admitted that his letters might be “screwy.” The following day, Archie sent Harris a hand-delivered letter that revealed the depths of his insecurity. “Your

earthly loveliness is as stable and indomitable as a rainforest,” he professed. “I’m too skinny and probably will be bald in a couple of years. My right arm is pretty well wrecked. I have to do almost as much physical work as mental to feel right. I should have been a farmer or a mackerel fisherman, and I’m trying to be a scholar.”<sup>13</sup>

Archie’s father, Archibald Fairly Carr Sr., was a Presbyterian minister who had relocated the family from Fort Worth, Texas, to Savannah, Georgia, in 1920. While attending college there, Archie developed osteomyelitis in his arm. Although penicillin would have cured the disease quickly, it was not available at the time. As a result, Archie underwent six major operations on his right arm. The surgeries resulted in an immobilized elbow and enormous scars that Archie usually kept covered. “It was a big blow to Archie emotionally,” his brother Tom explained, adding that Archie had to decide whether he wanted his arm to be permanently frozen in a straight or bent position. He decided that the bent position would be more functional, so his doctors ensured that his right arm remained in that position for the rest of his life.<sup>14</sup>

Archie spent a year in a cast and weighed a slight 109 pounds upon leaving the hospital in Atlanta. His father promptly found work for him as a manager of a terrapin farm in Tidewater, Georgia. The physically demanding job was therapeutic; every day, Archie caught one hundred pounds of fish to feed the turtles. This early experience with turtles stimulated Archie’s interest in the species at a time when very little was known about them. In 1930, the Carr family moved to Umatilla, Florida, where Archie’s father planned to enjoy semi-retirement. Archie enrolled at UF, and his father worked part-time as a minister at a small church in Umatilla. He hoped to use the profits from a small orange grove on their property to supplement his modest income from the church. According to Tom Carr, hunting and fishing were his father’s true passions. The Carr family’s hunting cabin in the Ocala National Forest still stands. In 2007, Tom donated the rustic cabin to the U.S. Forest Service, and its restoration was completed in 2012. As children, Archie and Tom learned about the outdoors and science from their father, who shared the work of Einstein and other scientists with his congregation and enjoyed quoting cosmology in his sermons. Both of the Carr brothers went on to complete doctorates in science.<sup>15</sup>

Archie felt inadequate as a suitor. In particular, he was sensitive about his disabled right arm. He speculated that Harris would meet many men through her work in zoology, men who would value what he described as her great