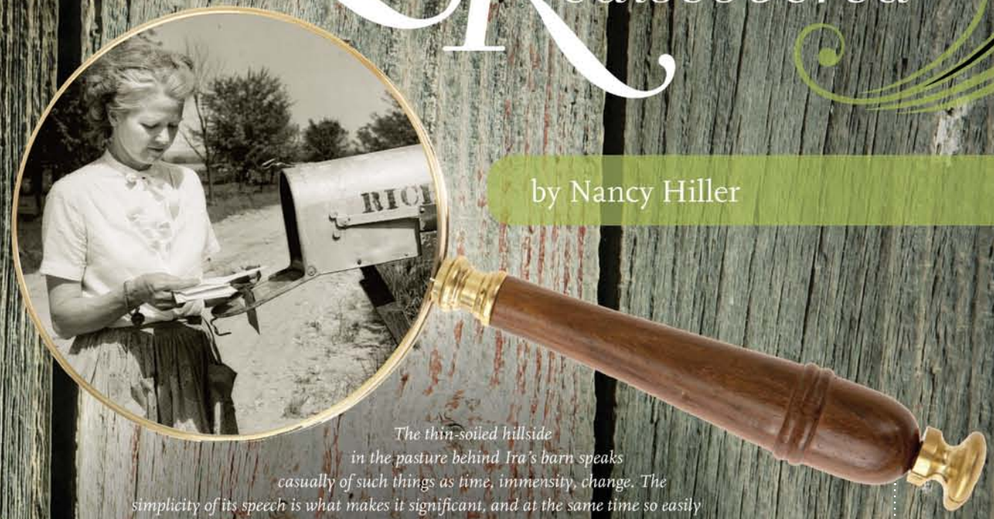
Rachel Peden Rediscovered

by Nancy Hiller

Author Rachel Peden walks to the mail box with son Joe, daughter Carol, and the family's beloved dog Rose in this photo from 1951. Peden's husband, Dick, is leaning against a tree in the family's front yard.



The thin-soiled hillside
in the pasture behind Ira's barn speaks
casually of such things as time, immensity, change. The
simplicity of its speech is what makes it significant, and at the same time so easily overlookable. —Rachel Peden, The Land, The People, *p. 323*

Rachel Peden's observations about her neighbor's well-worn landscape might just as aptly be applied to her own work. For three decades, beginning in the 1940s, she wrote about rural life, recording her contemplations of plants, animals, soil, seasons, and her quirky farm neighbors, with their peculiar dialects and pithy sayings. Her regular columns in *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Muncie Evening News* were widely read and won her fans well beyond Indiana. She also authored three books, which were published by Knopf. But mention her name today, and you will almost certainly be met with quizzical looks. Rare is the scholar of Midwestern literature who has heard of her.

Peden's work is notable for more than the beauty of her expression. She wrote with humor, insight, and prescience about subjects relevant to our own time--the blessings of community, the importance of limiting urban sprawl, and the many virtues of small- scale farming. In 2006, Indiana University Press, at the urging of former director John Gallman, decided the time had come to pull Peden back from the brink of obscurity. When the press reissued her first book, *Rural Free* (originally published in 1961), it introduced a new generation of readers to the power and artistry of her prose. This August, the press will release her second title, *The Land, The People* (originally published in 1966).

Inset (in magnifying glass): Peden submitted her stories to the *Indianapolis Star* and the *Muncie Evening News* by mail and often received fan mail from readers of her articles and books. One of Peden's pen names, "Mrs. R.F.D.," reflects the importance of the post office to her work as a writer. "R.F.D." stood for "Rural Free Delivery," the address system formerly used for country roads without names.

Dick and Rachel Peden circa 1930.

The February day was ending in a cold sunset; no red clouds, no pinkness, no orange-colored glory. Only a dazzling silver disk in a gray muslin sky; a hill from which bushy, dark trees pushed upward; a wind blowing coldly out of the north.

But the day's meager thawing had sharpened the icicles that hung in a harpstring row from the henhouse roof, and when I brushed my hand across them they fell with a musical shattering. —Speak To The Earth, *pp.* 3, 4

"Rachel Peden understood that our patch of Indiana is as worthy of attention as any other place on earth," says Scott Russell Sanders, IU professor emeritus of English. "She looked out on this place and saw the human drama and the processes of nature playing here as they play everywhere." For Sanders, Peden's focus on the everyday and her ability to find wonder in the smallest, most-taken-for-granted detail help explain why she has been ignored by a prevailing culture that thrives on the new, the improved, the "extreme." Yet at the same time, Sanders is among those who consider Peden's capacity to see the world in a grain of sand largely responsible for her literary force.

Though he has made his career as an author and scholar of Midwestern literature, Sanders did not become aware of Peden until 2007, when singer/songwriter Tim Grimm happened to mention Peden's name. "Oh, Scott, you would love her!" Sanders recalls his friend exclaiming. He dutifully read a used copy of *Rural Free*, followed shortly by her other books, and came to understand his friend's enthusiasm. "She's a fine writer," he says. "Her writing gives us a sense of what it feels like to live in a particular place, a place that is deeply and intimately known." As it dawned on him that this author from the mid-20th century had focused on many of the same subjects that formed the backbone of his own work, he was all the more astonished that Peden had eluded his notice for so long.

Life

She would come to identify herself as "a farm wife first," but Peden started out with far less earthy aspirations. Born in 1901 in Redkey, Indiana, 18 miles northeast of Muncie, Peden spent most of her childhood on her family's orchard homestead near the border between Morgan and Monroe counties. Her father, Benjamin Franklin Mason, grew peaches, apples, and strawberries and became known in the world of fruit cultivation for developing a variety of peach called the Shipper's Late Red. "The Masons did not consider themselves farmers," says Peden's daughter, Carol Schilling, who explains that "B.F." considered his work as an orchardist more sophisticated than the mere cultivation of corn or hay. Peden honored her father's conceit by referring to him as "the orchardist" in many of her stories.

Peden was the third of seven children, with five sisters and a brother. Early on, the children attended a one-room school, but in a very real sense they were also educated at home. They helped their parents and hired farm hands plant seeds, shell walnuts, can fruit, and sew clothes. The family's income was modest, so like most country children of the early 1900s they made many of their own toys as well as the bulk of their entertainment, playing on haystacks in the barn or fashioning dolls out of corncobs and other found materials. The lush simplicity of this childhood economy shaped Peden into a self-reliant individual who refused to take even the smallest of comforts for granted.

After high school in nearby Martinsville, Peden attended Indiana University in Bloomington, where she majored in sociology and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in just three and a half years. Though many women of her generation hoped, as family friend Kitty Burkhart says, to add "the M-R-S" to their official degree, Peden embarked on adult life eager for a modern career. Early on, she wrote for *The Martinsville Reporter*, and one of her first assignments was to interview travelers at a railroad station. Peden would commemorate the significance of that experience decades later when she told a writer for *The Hoosier Farmer* that she was instructed to "listen to people and analyze what they say." As her various publications make clear, this was a piece of advice she took to heart.

We talked about Audrey's father, John, a large, boisterous man who loved a hearty joke and would go to any effort to make one. In an ice-cream-eating contest once, John got as far as a start on the third quart. His conversation was always interesting; he was keenly observant and expressed himself freely in good, made-up words such as "caviness" for canvas, "savich" for sandwich, "donged" for dawned. When he said, "It finally donged on me," he meant, "I finally realized." —Speak To The Earth, *p.* 226

After her early reporting job, Peden was hired as women's editor of *Farm Life* magazine, a national publication based in Spencer, some 20 miles northwest of Bloomington. Her sister Nina worked there also. "She loved that job," recalls Peden's daughter. After work on Friday evenings, the sisters socialized with other young people on the courthouse square. In an impish moment on one of those occasions Rachel and Nina decided they would make the next young man they encountered fall in love with one of them. For Rachel, that man was Richard Peden.

Dick worked for the post office in Spencer but came from a family with a long history of Owen County farming. Dick and Rachel were married in 1929 and lived in a short succession of rented houses, one of them a grand old manse on a county road about four miles east of Ellettsville. The place was difficult to heat, with solid brick walls and ceilings over 10 feet high—Peden would later tell her children that in an effort to reach warmer altitudes, she ate dinner seated on top of the piano—but the couple adored the location. In November 1939, their son Joe was born; his mother was 37, an exceptionally advanced age at that time for a mother to bear her first child, and a testament to the importance she placed on her career.

Farm Life folded in the late 1930s, a casualty of the Depression, and Dick decided the time had come to fulfill his dream of having his own farm. He and Rachel had very little money, but while driving one day along their favorite country road they discovered an old farm they could afford, because it had been repossessed. They bought the place in 1941.

"She was furious when they moved in," says Schilling. A farm wife was the last thing Peden wanted to become in mid-career. The house was on a road without electricity or plumbing. "It was a junky old house on run-down land," Schilling remembers her mother saying. "It was February, it was cold, and they had to heat the place with wood." When their horse lay down and died, Peden "felt that the horse had taken the easy way out."

But as winter turned to spring, and then to summer and fall, Peden gained a deepening appreciation for her new home.

The June 1929 cover of *Farm Life* magazine, for which Peden worked as women's editor. Her story, "*What Price* Home Making? When is a Housekeeper a Homemaker? How Much Does Machinery Help?" appeared in the June 1929 issue. *Farm Life*, based in Spencer, Indiana, boasted over a million subscribers—a circulation any print periodical would be thrilled to have today.

It is June and the wheat is ripening. Mornings are mild. The morning light is blue and gold, the color of contentment….

The ripening field, motionless in sunlight, seems the very symbol of peace. If the field is then gently brushed by wind the sense of peace becomes underlined by a surge of joy, a reverence in which the whole conviction of creation for a purpose is indelibly coded. —Speak To The Earth, *p.* 235

Peden focused on the glad parts of her new life and found wonders all around her. There was the beauty of her surroundings, which shifted with the seasons. There was her garden, which made her feel "useful, poetic, comforted, overworked, justified for living…." There was the tightly knit community centered on the Maple Grove Christian Church, some of whose members had local roots going back a century or more. Among these neighbors, Peden discovered a wealth of characters whose stories she treasured and whose knowledge of old farming ways she recognized as a valuable heritage too readily dismissed by many agricultural experts. Three years after moving to the Maple Grove community, Peden gained a new neighbor, Carol Brown, who became her closest friend. In 1942, her joy in being a mother to Joe was deepened with the birth of her daughter, Carol, through whose young eyes Peden came to see her family's place in novel, often humorous, ways. "To watch a child's pleasure in your farm is one of the happiest ways to appreciate it yourself and realize new truths about it," she would later write.

I had cracked a pan of black walnuts and thrown them out under the althea bush for the birds. Carol, then in the fifth grade, had helped me, and we admired the beauty of the shell's [sic] inside profile….

Later she came to me with her palms held shut. "I want to show you a family I have," she said and, opening her hands, disclosed some halves of walnut shells.

"They're all monkeys," she said. "This is the father monkey." She handed me the largest shell, which did indeed bear a startling resemblance to a brown face surrounded by shaggy hair….

The next shell, being smaller, was of course the mother. As in the standard American family, there were also a boy and a girl. One shell remained in the child's hand. It was half of a dry, immature walnut, lighter of weight, paler in color. Its underdeveloped outside ridges were shallower and less intricate, less monkeylike. In fact, it looked more like a human face than a monkey's. "And this is a salesman," continued Carol matter-of-factly. —Rural Free, *pp.* 205, 206

Letter writing was a mainstay of communication in the '40s, and Peden wrote frequently to her sister Nina, who had married and moved to Indianapolis, describing the splendors of her country location and sharing stories about her family and their neighbors. Nina showed the letters to her husband, Eugene C. Pulliam, publisher of several Indiana newspapers. Pulliam was impressed by Peden's writing. He knew that rural life, and farming in particular, were integral aspects of Indiana history, and he decided they deserved a place on his papers' editorial pages. "I don't care what you write about, so

long as it has a farm flavor," he told Peden when he invited her to write a regular column.

Under the pen names "Mrs. R.F.D." (for "Rural Free Delivery," the branch of the U.S. Postal Service devoted to mail delivery for residences and businesses on unnamed rural roads) and "the Hoosier Farmwife," Peden wrote about her family and a variety of other subjects. She wrote about her garden, the "chief harvest" of which, for her, was "the therapy of working in it, and the acquaintance of my neighbors from the natural world that I meet there." She wrote about animals—insects and mammals, wild and domestic, living, dying, and dead.

The Peden family (Dick, Carol, Joe, and Rachel from left to right) in the living room of their home on Maple Grove Road, 1951.

Peden also wrote about the changing rural landscape, where horses had been almost entirely replaced by gasoline-fueled tractors and small fields were growing ever larger. She wrote about the slow alterations to her community as young people left for city jobs, and she warned against the dangers posed by pollution, loss of soil, and nuclear weapons, which she saw as outgrowths of a "proud, tumultuous society." Some readers subscribed to *The Indianapolis Star* just for her columns, which appeared four times a week, and at least one grammar teacher at Bloomington High School used the columns in her classes as examples of good writing.

Among Peden's greatest fans was a resident of Muncie, whose son, Angus Cameron, was senior editor at Alfred Knopf Publishers in New York. At his mother's urging, Cameron offered Peden a book contract, which resulted in the publication of *Rural Free*. Peden's second book, *The Land, The People*, was originally published in 1966 and won her the Indiana University Author's Award, though she had no formal affiliation with the institution other than as an alumna. Her final book, *Speak to the Earth*, was published in 1974, the year before her death.

"She was one of the first women who figured it all out," Schilling says today. After establishing herself professionally as a writer and editor, Peden learned to love being a farm wife. "She stayed at home, she had children, and she wrote about the experience."

When Peden died, letters of appreciation poured in from readers around the state. She also had fans beyond Indiana. Celestine Sibley, a columnist for *The Atlanta Constitution*, penned a fond farewell to a writer she called a friend, though the two had never met. In 1976 Peden was inducted into the Monroe County Hall of Fame.

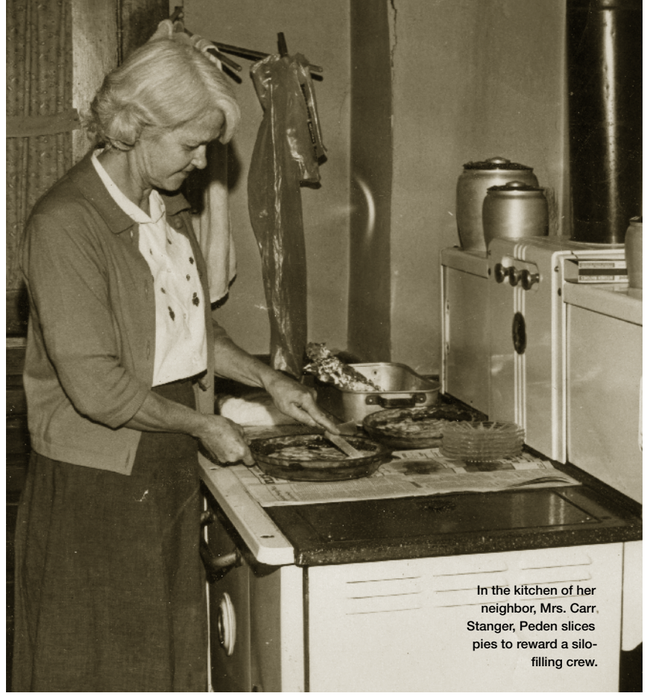
Becoming unknown...

An exceedingly shy woman, Peden had always shunned the limelight and refused to engage in self-promotion. "Rachel was happiest when at home in her own world," recalls Burkhart, the daughter of Peden's best friend Carol Brown. "She felt intimidated by her work's commercial success" and took part in book signings only out of gratitude to her readers and publishers.

Over time, Peden's books fell out of print, and her name became increasingly less familiar. Though her modest nature undoubtedly contributed to her lack of renown, some suggest additional explanations. An obvious one, cited by Scott Russell Sanders, is gender; as Sanders says, before the 1960s, even educated and accomplished women were expected to be wives and mothers first, artists or professionals second. Given this reality, Peden would have had to struggle far harder than a man to gain professional recognition. But she had not been interested in fame.

A third perspective on the lack of recognition afforded Peden's work following her death is offered by Bloomington singer/songwriter Tom Roznowski, who places Peden with other Indiana authors such as Gene Stratton-Porter, Booth Tarkington, and Theodore Dreiser in what he calls a "Hoosier School" of literature. These authors "shared a confidence in the beneficial effects of rural values on Americans," he says, but they were writing in an era when economic activity and cultural attention were being diverted from rural to urban centers. Their deviation from mainstream national perspectives led them to be marginalized relative to other, supposedly more significant writers. While all the members of the Hoosier School were acclaimed in their own day, all have since been effectively disregarded by social and literary historians.

Sanders agrees that Peden's literary standing was probably limited by her Midwestern location. Rather than seek wider acclaim by moving to one of the nation's "cultural power centers," Peden, to use Sanders' expression, "stayed put." In an era before contemporary electronic media, the cost of staying put was even higher than it is today.



In the kitchen of her neighbor, Mrs. Carr Stanger, Peden slices pies to reward a silo-filling crew.

...then rediscovered

When Tim Grimm and his wife, Jan Lucas, relocated from Los Angeles to western Bartholomew County in the early 1990s, they were eager to acquaint themselves with Indiana's rural culture. On a visit to New Harmony, they stopped at a used bookstore and asked the proprietor to direct them to work by Indiana authors. They left with a copy of *Rural Free*.

Lucas and Grimm were so charmed by Peden's stories that they composed a series of songs inspired by her work, which they proceeded to perform at venues around the state. One such performance took place at a benefit for the Sycamore Land Trust, where John Gallman and Peden's son Joe, by then a widely respected figure in Indiana farming, were guests. Moved by the musical evocation of Peden's words and imagery, Gallman suggested to Joe that the IU Press should republish her work, which led to the 2009 appearance of *Rural Free*.

Others have encountered Peden's writing as a result of her contributions to the history of Maple Grove Road. Nancy Hiestand first learned of Peden's work in the mid-1990s, when she authored the documents nominating Maple Grove Road to the National Register as Indiana's first Rural Historic District. Hiestand read Peden's books in the course of her research and was impressed by their record of how traditional farming communities functioned. But quite apart from her work's documentary value, Hiestand marvels at Peden's closely observed descriptions of nature, which often prompted reflections of cosmic significance. A tiny violet plucked from the yard spoke of "miracle and infinity." The spiral of a snail's shell was "the pattern of evolution."

Peden combined humor with some of life's weightiest subjects, whether she was relating a tale about her husband's search for a pair of missing long johns or analyzing the resemblance between George Washington's visage and a frog flattened on the road. She drew from a perspective broad enough to encompass things that ordinarily appear unconnected—one which enabled her to appreciate death as life's completion without in any way diminishing life's worth. This blend of depth and levity gives her work a reassuring quality and reminds us of a reality more enduring than the technology-bred distraction of our contemporary day-to-day. As Lucas says, "Rachel slows me down to the speed of nature." Ultimately, Peden's writing expresses a philosophical attitude shaped by an understanding that human beings, for all our discoveries and accomplishments, are but one among countless life forms—and yet, no less significant on account of that smallness. ❊

The song of the cricket is said to instill a note of content into a house. It does, of course, if you are the cricket. It does also, to some extent, if you consider that the voice of the cricket in today's complex world is just the same as it was in an earlier American era, or even in a much more remote civilization. The same voice undoubtedly was heard by Indian women picking off the small maize ears they had produced by poking a hole in the ground with a pointed stick and dropping in a dead fish along with the precious seed. The same voice sang much later, too, when farmers went out on frosty autumn days with a hickory shucking peg and a team and wagon to gather a load of corn before the ground thawed….

The voice of the cricket is a theme of reassurance carried from an ancient civilization into our modern one. If I ever have to dive for survival into an underground [fallout] shelter, I hope there will be a cricket familiarly "ye-up, ye-up, ye-upping" there. —Rural Free, *pp. 11, 12.*

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