

Biography Debut about Sea Grant Founder, Athelstan Spilhaus

Hi, I'm Jesse Schomberg. My colleague Sharon Moen is here with me today. Sharon is Minnesota Sea Grant's Communications Coordinator. Welcome to The Sea Grant Files, Sharon.

SM: ---happy to be here---

So, Sharon, you've written a book! What's it about?

SM --- It's about several things but primarily it is a biography of a fellow named Dr. Athelstan Fredrick Spilhaus ... or, Spilly as some called him. Not only did Dr. Spilhaus come up with the Sea Grant concept, which is why I started writing about him, but his work spanned science, public art, America's Space Race with the former Soviet Union and even "the Roswell Incident" that led to all sorts of UFO fervor.

The title of Sharon's book is *With Tomorrow in Mind: How Athelstan Spilhaus Turned America Toward the Future* It's available through Minnesota Sea Grant and on Amazon.com and a few bookstores for \$14.95. What did you learn while writing this biography?

SM --- developed a whole new level of respect for people who write biographies! I also developed an appreciation for the convoluted way that some ideas become real things....take Spilhaus's comic strip and Sea Grant for example....He wrote Our New Age each week for 15 years because of a chain of events that started in Paris....he was on the board of the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization, which is a whole other fascinating story...anyway, another ambassador at the UNESCO Paris meeting asked that the U.S. stop exporting dreadful comic strips that made up the bulk of reading material available for new literates in other countries. Spilhaus thought about this for several years until the surprise and stunning launch of Sputnik made him so mad that he became a comic strip author to encourage Americans to become more science-savvy than the Soviets. Our New Age ran in over 100 newspapers, including the Boston Globe, which is how President Kennedy came to tap Spilhaus for service, but that's another story.

Sea Grant was conceived in the back of a taxi. Spilhaus was the keynote speaker at the annual meeting of the American Fisheries Society being held in Minneapolis in 1963. He hadn't prepared his speech and was thinking about what he could say. A light went on when he thought about the land grant extension program at the University of Minnesota, where he was dean of the Institute of Technology. He gave a riveting speech about applying the land grant concept to America's coasts...it was so riveting, in fact, the National Sea Grant Act was signed within 3 and a half years.

Why don't more people know who Dr. Athelstan Spilhaus was?

SM --- I think because his work was so broad and some of it was classified that he didn't become rock-star-famous the way, say, his contemporary and sometimes colleague Buckminster Fuller did. Even though Walter Cronkite said he was the most interesting person he had ever interviewed, he was maybe more scattered ... in an "ultimate Renaissance man" way ... than most famous people are. I found as I've been talking to people, too, that his name ... Athelstan Spilhaus ... also daunts people.

Of all the things Dr. Spilhaus did, what are some of the most outstanding?

SM --- Gosh, there are so many to choose from! National Sea Grant Program, of course, a government, university partnership to support America's coastal economies and ecologies.

Bathythermograph, first tool allowing oceanographers to study currents and eddies ... became critical instrument during WWII that allowed Allied troops to overcome the way sound bends in water to more accurately target German subs with SONAR.

Roswell Incident,...and here I'll quote what was written in the Economist in 1998, the year Dr. Spilhaus passed away. "It would be unfair to blame Athelstan Spilhaus for what came to be called the Roswell Incident. All the same, he was the engineer in charge of an experiment that resulted in many otherwise sane people becoming convinced that aliens had arrived on earth."

*I think the way Dr. Spilhaus so ardently wanted American's to know and appreciate science is outstanding: he wrote *Our New Age*, he orchestrated the U.S. Science Exhibit at the Seattle World's Fair, he designed the Plaza of the Solar System that still stands outside the McGraw-Hill Building in New York City. He was willing to put enormous energy into the concept of an experimental domed city that almost got built in Aitkin County, Minnesota so that society could improve how we handle waste, space, and overcrowding.*

Whimsically, he also patented tropical ice skates.

Is there a take home message from Spilhaus's life?

SM --- I like what Paul Schmelzer, arts writer and editor for the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis said about Spilhaus after reading the book:

"A dreamy pragmatist or a pragmatic dreamer? Whichever, Athelstan Spilhaus's unique mind and audacious vision melded science and art to imagine new futures, sparking many who encountered his work to think differently about their own creative potential."

I think Spilhaus's life is a testament to the potential within each of us.

Thanks for joining us, Sharon. Sharon's biography about Athelstan Spilhaus, *With Tomorrow in Mind*, is available through Minnesota Sea Grant, Amazon.com and bookstores. For more information about Dr. Spilhaus, visit Minnesota Sea Grant online at www.seagrant.umn.edu.

This episode of the Sea Grant Files was produced by Sharon Moen, Mariah Schumacher and me, Jesse Schomberg. For more information, or to listen to other episodes of the Sea Grant Files visit the Minnesota Sea Grant website at www.seagrant.umn.edu. You can also follow Minnesota Sea Grant on Facebook or Twitter. Thanks for listening!