

MARJORIE COURTENAY-LATIMER: MORE THAN THE COELACANTH!

By Susan L. Jewett.

I had the great pleasure of spending two weeks with Miss Latimer in October 2003. I was mesmerized by her stories, greatly impressed by the diversity of her accomplishments and knowledge, and enamoured by her kindness, good humour and warmth. I can't give an appropriate tribute in this short article so I will simply share some snippets of her life, as told to me while conducting interviews with her or obtained through other research I did while in South Africa.

Marjorie Eileen Doris Courtenay-Latimer was born on February 24, 1907 in East London, South Africa, two months prematurely. She weighed but a pound and a half, lacked finger and toenails, and was given little hope of survival. The doctor placed her in a shoebox with oil, an apparent treatment of the day for preemies, and fed her with an eyedropper. Her father described, in his diary, how all the baby clothes were too large for his "tiny morsel" so they had to dress her in doll's clothes. Despite her precarious beginning, she rallied and grew stronger by the day. Before she was a month old the family had to relocate to Cape Town and Marjorie survived the journey by ship.

This was a second marriage for Marjorie's mother, Willie, who had been courted simultaneously by Eric Courtenay-Latimer and a Mr. Pyne. The former had no job and little to offer materialistically, whereas Mr. Pyne provided the promise of a

secure future. The rival suitors flipped a coin and Mr. Pyne won, marrying Willie and producing two daughters during their brief marriage. Mr. Pyne, however, succumbed to pneumonia soon after the birth of their second child. Willie then returned to the family home on Aunt Lavinia Walton's farm near Addo, where she later renewed her acquaintance with Eric, eventually marrying him.

Marjorie was the first child of this union, and was followed by five sisters. Marjorie was thin and frail throughout her childhood but had a strong will to live. At seven months of age, without ever having stood, she suddenly got up, walked across the room and plopped herself down on her mother's lap. Soon after that she began speaking German, the language of some neighbouring children but one unfamiliar to her parents. Her fluency in German preceded her command of English. She was a mischievous child, always picking people's flowers, bringing home baby ducklings and kittens, and stubbornly holding on to her own beliefs such as, at age six, when she argued with adults insisting that a lotus lily should be called a water lily since "lotus" was "a dreadful word" and such a beautiful flower deserved a beautiful name-----"water lily"! Her younger sister Norah, who Marjorie called Ittychap, was her favourite and the two were forever getting into trouble; becoming ill from eating poisonous berries or the tips off of matchsticks, or getting into some type of mischief that inevitably led to punishment such as standing in the corner or going to bed. One day Marge and Norah discovered an owl they believed to be trapped behind a waterfall. Marge was elected to go and rescue it after Norah offered her petticoat to use for capturing it. Marge succeeded in getting the petticoat over the owl, only to have it escape as she handed it out to

Norah. The owl flew off with the petticoat trailing behind, entangled in its talons, leaving the girls to explain the story to their mother and finding themselves sent to bed for the evening!

Marge contracted nearly every childhood disease possible, many life threatening, but managed to pull through ail of them despite her frailty. Other brushes with death included the time her mother, responding to her daughter's claim of a VERY large rat in the back garden, discovered a Bengal tiger that had escaped from the local zoo, separated from the children by only a small fence! Likewise her father discovered Marge one day on the porch, while still a very young tyke, mesmerized by a huge cobra. She was fascinated by its raised hood and swaying motion, and apparently was spared a bite only by the veranda railings separating the snake from her. She, in fact, thought it a game and screamed when her father pulled her away and took her inside!

Marge's parents cultivated a love of nature in their children, sharing their own appreciation of it and their self-taught knowledge. This was further stimulated by numerous family picnics and camping trips. Marge recalled with pleasure sleeping out under the stars on such trips. At an early age she started collecting birds' eggs and nests, amongst other things, and became adept at mushroom identification, a skill taught to her by her mother who had her children collect mushrooms for the family dinners during hard times. In her later life, Marge would establish a bird sanctuary at Gonubie in the East London area. In addition to collecting natural history objects, Willie, Marge's mother, acquired over time an impressive collection of

jewellery and artifacts of the native Xhosa people, which would prove useful to Marge in later years.

The family moved frequently due to the father's employment with the railroad and his frequent reassignments to different stations. At one such location near the coast, Marge was frightened, as a child, by the flashing light of a distant lighthouse on Bird Island. After her mother explained that the light was put there to help sailors find their way safely through the rocks to shore, the light took on a special meaning for Marge. As a teenager she convinced a boyfriend to take her to the top of a lookout hill, not to neck, as was the custom with the teens, but to get a better look at the lighthouse at night. She was fascinated with the light and vowed to go to Bird Island one day.

One significant event stands out in Marge's school years. She excelled in her studies, especially nature studies, but at times daydreamed in class. One of her teachers at the Holy Cross Convent was Sister Camilla, whose father was a paleontologist at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. Sister Camilla passed along the teachings of her father to her students and was discussing fossil fishes one day while Marge was not paying attention. "A fossil fish has ganoid scales; a fossil fish has limb-like fins" taught Sister Camilla. "You---- little Latimer---- what is a fossil fish?" In Marge's words, "little Latimer didn't know what a fossil fish was." "Little Latimer, write 25 lines----- a fossil fish has ganoid scales; a fossil fish has ganoid scales." Miss Latimer kept that schoolbook with the 25 lines all her days, and the lesson learned was to prove critical in years to come.

Despite her love of nature, Marge enlisted in training to become a nurse. After a sudden transfer of the family back to East London, however, she was approached by a naturalist friend who suggested she apply for a job at the newly established East London Museum. She described herself as "scared to death", dressed in a straw bonnet and a dress depicting the bluebells of Scotland, looking like a country bumpkin compared with the beautiful, nicely dressed other women who were applying for the job. Terrified, she shook all over when called before the twelve men on the Board of Trustees for her interview. "I was such an ignoramus" she told me. The Board thought otherwise, perhaps because, in response to a question about a local frog (platanna), she could describe the frog in great detail, as she also did for several native birds. Soon thereafter she was offered the job and was the museum's sole employee, not only then but for 15 years to come. On Marge's first day on the job, August 24, 1931, she assessed the museum's holdings: six ragged bird skins, infested with dermestid beetles, a box of flints belonging to one of the board members who thought them to be valuable stone implements and some newly constructed but grossly oversized 6 foot deep shelves. She burned the birds, discarded the flints and took an axe to the shelves. After convincing her mother to sacrifice some old evening gowns, she tore them up to drape over the now smaller shelves and brought in all her family's collections from home. She told a white lie to the board member about the flints, telling him the ones on display were the best selected from HIS collection. Her mother's collection of Xhosa cultural items were the prize possessions of the museum at that time, along with a purported dodo egg provided by Marge's Aunt Lavinia, and all remain on display in the museum today.

The museum opened to the public on September 23, 1931 after an incredible month of hard work by Marge, with help from her family. Over the coming years, Marge built up the museum's collections nearly single-handedly. By mutual agreement with the board, all of Marge's vacations were spent conducting field collections. Soon after taking on the job, Marge met Eric Wilson. Prior to Eric she had other suitors and was even engaged to one fellow, Alfie, who offered a secure future, and met with much approval by the family. His lack of appreciation for nature, however, convinced Marge that the match was not a good one. She broke off the engagement. When she met Eric Wilson she was quite taken by him although she resisted dating him for some time. His great appreciation of nature, however, and times spent together picnicking and collecting specimens won her over and she fell very much in love with him. When, in 1935, Eric was called up by the military to quell a nearby uprising, he proposed to Marge, asking that she marry him upon his return, which she promised to do. Sadly, Eric succumbed to pneumonia while away, never to return. Marge was heart-broken and vowed to devote the rest of her life to the museum, which she did.

In 1933 on one of her expeditions to a tidal pool to collect organisms, a gentleman approached her asking who she was and what she was doing. "Collecting for the East London Museum", she responded. "Oh, I didn't know such a museum existed" came the response from J.L.B. Smith, then a chemistry lecturer at Rhodes University. Subsequently she and JLB stayed in contact and exchanged specimens and information about specimens they each collected. Eventually she became close friends with JLB and his wife Margaret. Bird Island still

held a fascination for Marge. After pestering the harbour master for months on end, he finally agreed, in 1936, to allow her to go to Bird Island, which was normally only visited by men, provided she find another woman to accompany her. Her mother, always supportive of Marge, readily agreed when asked. Her father disapproved. After packing supplies to last for about six weeks the women prepared for their departure, only to have the father change his mind at the eleventh hour by deciding to join them. Hasty preparations had to be made to get a permit for him and accommodate an extra passenger. The father came to regret his decision when he found himself stranded on the island for weeks, bored to tears and without any radio contact with the outside world at a time when the King of England was abdicating his throne. For Marge, however, the trip was a great success. She collected all sorts of marine organisms, plants and animals. She learned to shoot. When the supply ship stopped at the island she worked out a deal with its captain, Hendrik Goosen, to provide him with rabbits that she had shot in exchange for his agreeing to haul back her collections aboard his ship. It took him several trips to get all her collections back to the mainland. His interest in Marge's efforts continued after her return to East London and Capt. Goosen offered to supply her with excess marine organisms from his trawls, for the museum's collections.

This set the stage for the coelacanth discovery, which followed in 1938 when Capt. Goosen came into port on the 23rd of December of that year with a load of specimens for Marge. It is worth pointing out that had it not been for the confluence of several actions resulting from Marge's work ethic and more, the discovery would not have occurred. Christmas was close and Marge was very busy at the museum completing the

preparation of an important fossil reptile (still on display in the museum) but her values were such that she felt she must go to the harbour to wish the kind fisherman, who had been such a help to her, the "compliments of the season." Furthermore, when she spotted the strange large fish that was unknown to any of the fishermen, Sister Camilla's words came rushing back to her ----- "a fossil fish has ganoid scales; a fossil fish has limb-like fins". It couldn't be a "fossil" fish but it so looked like one! Knowing it had to be something important, she went to extreme lengths to save it, beyond which many would have done. Her board chairman told her to discard it as it was only an ordinary rock cod. Knowing better, she ignored him. Finally, it was her earlier acquaintance with J.L.B. Smith that permitted her to know who to go to with this discovery. The rest is history and another story, which I will not delve into in this account.

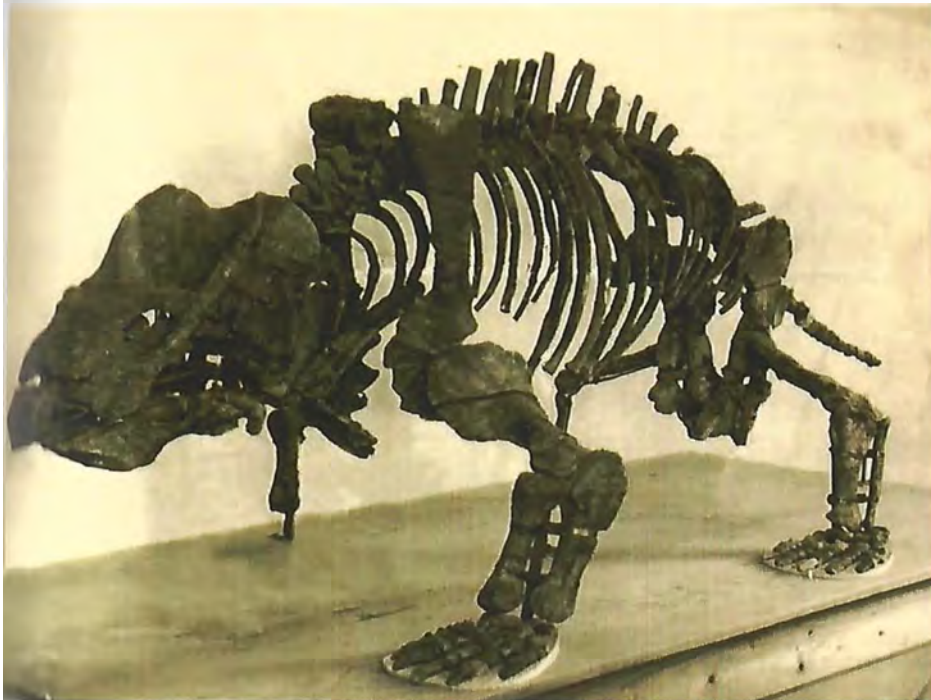
From this episode I will mention only the fact that Marge was greatly hurt, and felt she had been unfairly spoken of, when JLB wrote in print that the discarding of the internal organs of the coelacanth was one of the great crimes of the century. Marge had tried desperately to preserve the specimen intact and only resorted to having it stuffed by a taxidermist when it became evident that her small supply of formalin was insufficient to preserve it. After receiving JLB's belated telegraph stating she must save the organs, she even went to the municipal dump to try and retrieve them, but to no avail. Smith did, however, honour Marge by naming the genus, *Latimeria*, after her. Smith had to wait another 14 years before he could lay his hands on another coelacanth. Marge's vision for the museum was to create an environment wherein, if a person had only five minutes to spend, could learn



^At work in the early 1940s.

<Marjorie in a relaxed mood in the 1930s.

∨*Kannemeyeria simocephalus*, 1938.
Photos: East London Museum.





Marjorie at her desk,
1953.
Photo: Courtenay-Latimer family.

Mr G. G. Smith, Chairman of
the Board of Trustees of the
East London Museum from
1942-1973. Photo: East London Museum.



The second Museum building which was opened on November 11th, 1950.
Photo East London Museum.

something about natural history. She always created displays with children in mind and tried to incorporate baby animals in them whenever possible. She also tried to recreate natural environments with appropriate fauna and flora. Although some displays are a bit dated and exaggerated by today's standards, many, which are still visible in the museum, are quite beautiful in my opinion. One example that demonstrates how different museum displays of her time were from today's museum exhibits is this script, which accompanied a stuffed bird: "This beautiful bird was a pet and companion to Mrs. Paul Davies for 18 years. She reared it from a fledgling, having saved it from being eaten by a young native boy. It sang most sweetly old melodies like 'Pop goes the weasel, Westminster chimes' etc."

The coelacanth brought great fame to the East London Museum and people came from miles around to see the "fossil lish". Marge kept the museum open in the evenings to accommodate the crowds. The specimen remains on display in the museum and is in quite good shape, despite it all, having undergone a "tune-up" by a more experienced taxidermist some years later. Marge herself was greatly lauded and received many awards over the years, including an honorary doctorate from Rhodes University in 1973, the Freedom of the City of East London and many more honours.

Marge retired from the museum in 1973 after 42 years, first as curator and later director. She moved to the Tsitsikama region of South Africa where she lived for 15 very enjoyable years. She purposely decided to leave town so as not to be tempted to tell the succeeding director how to do things, which, as she stated, so many do. Marge bought a small house and then, nearly single-handedly, built an extension to the kitchen using

skills she had acquired by taking a bricklaying course at the East London Technical College. She called her home "Mygene", a derivation of her childhood nickname, Genie, given to her by her father because she always went around singing "Genie with the light brown hair."

Marge's return to East London came about at the request of her sister in the late 1980s, and Marge took up residence in the house adjacent to her childhood home, where her sister resided. Unfortunately her sister died three years later. In her latter years, never one to remain idle, Marge took up sculpting, painting and of course continued to collect news articles about the coelacanth. She began sculpting a bust of J.L.B. Smith, but was devastated when she learned of his suicide and was never able to complete the sculpture.

While I was searching through the East London Museum's library archives I discovered a collection of watercolour paintings of mushrooms, done by Marge over a period of many years, starting at age 14. Each painting includes anatomically important features and is accompanied by carefully documented time and place of collection in addition to brief personal notes. Some of these descriptions are delightful to read, such as the one which accompanies the picture of a cluster of beautiful brown mushrooms, painted when she was 18 years old: "Bushman's River. Drawn on top of the world. It's lovely and quiet here all by myself. Bushman's River mouth, Easter Monday, 1925. Alfie and Ittychap drew them in the drawing books. Found on decaying wood."

In addition to conducting oral history interviews with Marge, the purpose of my trip to South Africa was to attend a coelacanth conference. Marge had been asked to speak at the opening

reception of the Coastal and Ocean Exploration Conference on the evening of October 28, 2003. My friend, Nancy Tietz, and I escorted her to the East London Museum for the event that evening. Marge was resplendent in her black sequined evening gown topped by her beautiful wavy white hair, beaming from ear to ear. It was a night I will never forget. Although she was excited about attending the event and hoped to attend the talks to come in the days ahead, she was not terribly keen on giving a speech, nor did she look forward to the inevitable throngs of people who would want their pictures taken with her. Her speech, which was largely a recounting of the coelacanth discovery, was very well received and, of course, she was the highlight of the evening. As she had feared, however, she was mobbed by people wanting to be photographed with her. In addition to meeting numerous African officials and scientists, she met Mark and Arnaz Erdmann, discoverers of the Indonesian coelacanth, for the first time. By the end of the evening Marge was quite exhausted and, as a consequence, was unable to attend most of the talks presented during the rest of the conference.

Marge had many friends with whom she had regular visits and correspondence, right up to her last days. She survived all her sisters and when she died on May 17, 2004, left behind only nieces, a nephew and their children. I feel extremely lucky to have spent time with Marge. We became very close in a short time. The last time I spoke to Marge was when I telephoned her at Christmas time. She spoke of missing me terribly ----- "I tell you were one of my own, and then you were gone". I shall always treasure our times together and that special sentiment she shared with me during our last conversation. I hope I've allowed you to get some sense of this remarkable woman who

has given so much to her museum, community and science in general. Now she is gone and I miss her greatly.

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