

## SOME MEMORIES OF MARGE

By Auriol Batten

The first time I ever saw Marge was in December 1938, when I visited the East London Museum to see the remarkable fish that had been caught a few days earlier and I remember her as a slender, dark-haired young woman seated at a desk near the top of the stairs, poring over a book. I was not to see her again until 1951 when I called on her at the new museum as a result of Nils Andersen's coming down from Durban to open the Queenstown Society of Artists Exhibition. Nils came to stay with me for a few days before he returned to Durban and he met Marge when he visited the museum. He was very impressed with her and insisted that I make her acquaintance.

A few days later I called at the museum, taking my three-year old daughter, Diana, with me as well as her nanny, Mrs. Mildred Matshobeni. I left the two outside while I went in to meet Marge, and my friendship with her dates back to that day. I shall never forget my embarrassment when I discovered that my child had found a piece of soft shale while her nanny was chatting to friends, and had drawn large pictures on every one of the immaculate slate tiles that constituted the front path of the museum. Marge was very amused at my discomfiture and assured me that no harm had been done and that the first shower would remove all traces of the small artist's work.

Marge loved children and always did everything that she could to foster scientific interest in the many specimens that they brought to her be it a shell, insect, flower, dead bird or anything else that attracted their attention.

My second visit to the museum at Marge's invitation followed a few days later and I wondered who the grey-haired man was who was sitting at a table in her office. He scowled at me from under his eyebrows. He seemed to warm to me a little later when he discovered that I was interested in plants and presented me with a small red orchid plant. I later discovered that he was Mr. G.G. Smith, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Museum and that the museum revolved around what he said and did. He was an indefatigable man, a brilliant engineer and there seemed to be nothing he could not do. He was totally committed to building up the museum and was Marge's right hand man as long as he lived. He was also extremely generous and dipped deeply into his own pocket for the benefit of the museum. When I first got to know him, he was engaged in the revision of the genus *Haworthia* and Marge spent every free evening for years illustrating his descriptions (pen and ink drawings). Unfortunately the revision as such was never published. At that time, I had started a pottery school at the East London Technical College which Marge joined and GG designed and made excellent electric pottery wheels for each of us. Marge proved to be a very able potter and she was also very good at modelling.

Although we bought much of the clay that we used, we were constantly on the lookout for sources of clay, so when GG reported that excellent clay was being dug out for the sinking of the pylons for the old bridge over the Fish River, we went to the site and collected a fair quantity. Unfortunately the clay contained a large percentage of salt, which could have damaged the linings of our kilns. GG invented a means of

removing salt but it was not very successful and the wonderful clay remains unused to this day.

Together with Ashley, my husband, we went on numerous collecting trips and one of the most enjoyable was to Mbotyi in Pondoland. We were accompanied by Marge's mother and also took Enoch, the handyman from the museum, to help skin birds because Marge was engaged in building up the ornithological collection at the time. Marge and Enoch worked late into the night skinning birds by lamplight.

An amusing incident occurred on that trip when we all walked to Drew's Beach to collect shells. We were all wearing bathing costumes because it was so hot, Marge's being a floral brown and white. Unfortunately it turned cold and started to rain, so Marge donned a new navy blue corduroy jacket that she had brought along just in case. Unfortunately the dye in the jacket was not fast and in no time Marge's bare skin was covered with huge blue blotches which she tried to scrub off with sand in the surf, but to no avail. Shortly afterwards a party of Pondo women passed and they were aghast at her condition and asked what was the matter. Ashley explained that she was his wife and that he had beaten her for disobedience. They were shocked to the marrow!

On the same trip we visited the wreck of the *Grosvenor* and Marge and I went a short distance into the tunnel by means of which it was hoped to reach the wreck.

Marge never wore slacks on a collecting trip, always a dress/skirt, and never went bare legged. She never failed to return from a field trip with her stockings torn to shreds.



I.-R: Jurgen Schauer, who worked with Hans Fricke on research about living coelacanths for the Max-Planck Institute in Seewiesen, Germany, Nancy Tietz, Director of the East London Museum, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer with the submersible JAGO in East London harbour, 1990.

Photo: Hans Fricke.



Mark Erdmann, who discovered the Indonesian coelacanth in 1997, with his wife Arnaz and their daughter, meet Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, the guest of honour at the opening function for the Coastal and Ocean Exploration Conference held in East London in October 2003.

Photo: East London Museum.



L-R: Rear Admiral (j. g.) D. R. W. Forsyth, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the East London Museum, Dr Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, Dr Tony Ribbink, Director of the African Coelacanth Ecosystems Programme, SAIAB, at a dinner given at the East London Museum in Marjorie's honour on October 18th, 2001.

Photo: *Daily Dispatch*.



L-R: John Steele, Head of Art at Border Technikon, Kevin Cole from the East London Museum, Dr Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, Lesley-Anne Foster, Director of Masimanyane, with Marjorie's footprint for the Heroes Park Foundation collection, 22nd October, 2003.

Photo: *Daily Dispatch*.

Marge loved flowers and was a keen gardener. One of her favourite plants was *Erica bauera* and she had a beautiful bush full of pink flowers which were never picked, but when my third child, Christopher, was born, Marge picked them all and brought them to me. She became Christopher's Godmother and GG his Godfather, so it was no wonder he was practically brought up in the museum. He became a junior subscriber at a very tender age and attended every function. He was spotted at one of these by Miss Dickie, a teacher and a strict disciplinarian, who asked Marge what right he had to be walking around the exhibition with a glass of wine in his hand, to which Marge replied, "He's a subscriber and has as much right as yourself!"

She was a great animal lover and among her pets were a pair of polecats (stinkcats, she called them) and a baby bat which she kept in her cleavage for warmth. When Christopher accidentally dug up a batch of 14 black house snake eggs, she took them home with the intention of rearing them, but was persuaded to hand them over to a young herpetologist, who shared them with his friends. They were proudly displayed at a Herpetological Society meeting a few months later.

Marge accompanied Ashley, Christopher and me on our first trip to Namaqualand. She was aghast at our extravagance because Ashley had booked accommodation, saying it was normal simply to sleep on the ground next to the car! Ashley was a keen yachtsman and he wanted to teach Christopher to sail. To that end he built him a small yacht and invited Marge to accompany us on a short holiday to Lake Pleasant. When we were nearly there, Marge spotted a new road being built which was cutting through the middle of a

midden. As a result Marge, Christopher and I spent the next few days searching for tools and artifacts, and found some wonderful things, while Ashley sailed the little yacht alone.

Marge, however, did help Ashley with his sailing at a later date. At that time sails were very expensive and money was rather short and Ashley needed a spinnaker and wanted me to make one for him (and for his friend, as it turned out later). Unfortunately no space was large enough to spread out the enormous sail that I was expected to copy. To Marge this was no obstacle. She took us into the museum one night and helped spread out the sail on a huge expanse of floor at the foot of the stairs from which a huge specimen of a manta ray had been temporarily removed and helped to cut out the two spinnaker sails.

Marge was also very interested in antique china and mounted two wonderful exhibitions of pieces which she personally collected on loan from the length and breadth of the Eastern Cape. A friend, Mrs. Alexa Anderson and I were invited to assist her and no one else was allowed to touch the china. It all had to be washed and transported upstairs to the exhibition hall and we worked bare-footed for fear of falling and damaging a piece. Fortunately Marge was able to return every piece undamaged. She was also an authority on Wedgwood china and owned a significant collection. The Wedgwood factory sent out china on loan and Marge displayed the pieces beautifully, having stencilled all the drapes herself with Wedgwood garlands. As a reward she was offered the choice of any piece that was sent out and she chose a beautiful tall black and white urn, which she displayed alongside her own Portland vase.

One of the other students of my pottery class was my aunt by marriage, Hertha Bokelman, who had come to this country from Germany as a botany student to do her practical under Mr. Herre at Stellenbosch. I lost contact with her for some years after I stopped teaching pottery, but when we met again in 1960, I discovered she was considering writing a book on the wild flowers of the Eastern Cape, something I was thinking of doing myself. We decided to join forces and Marge and GG offered to help with the collection of specimens because they had a vast knowledge of the local flora. Marge also had friends at Kirstenbosch [Cape Town], Miss Winifred Barker and Dr Joyce Lewis who were prepared to identify the specimens, and the work began. We never worried about publication – Marge said she would scrub floors if necessary to pay for that. This proved unnecessary because Dr Hey sent T.V. Bulpin who undertook that aspect and we dedicated the work to Marge in recognition of all the help she had so generously given.

Marge and I both attended St Alban's Church and we were struck by the lack of a figure to grace the incomplete column in the nave. Father Topping was the priest at that time and he agreed, so Marge suggested that I model a figure of Jesus Christ using a small figure she had as a guide which she would then have cast at the museum. This was done and the young technician, Errol Hayden, skillfully cast the figure in fibreglass using a waste mould. After overcoming certain difficulties the figure was finally erected in its present position.

Marge was a most hospitable person and her home was always open to her friends as well as complete strangers at times. I stayed with her many times at "Mygene" at Witelsbos and



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“Mygene” wore evidence of her skill as a builder because she had taken a course in bricklaying before she left East London, being the only woman on the course. She was also a very caring person who did all she could do to heal the sick. She was no stranger to hard work either and I came across her many times at the museum doing the washing and ironing herself when she was short of staff. One day I came upon her laundering the draperies of a four-poster bed she had managed to secure for Gately House.

The last time I remember going out with her was to a locality on a krantz [cliff] overlooking the Kwelera River when she was in her late eighties, but I had promised to take her with me if I ever went there again. So it was that Avril Sonemann and I picked her up one day when I had to go to a spot to collect *Streptocarpus bauera* for illustration. Marge walked from the car to the spot without difficulty but once we got there she disappeared over the krantz to our great alarm. Since we could do nothing we decided that if she met her end there she would die happy, but she reappeared about half an hour later dragging herself up with the help of shrubs, full of smiles and the basket she was carrying full of treasures.

Marge was very much a doggy person and over the years had a succession of fox terriers all of which she spoiled terribly. They always accompanied her to the museum and slept in a basket under her desk. One winter Marge and I each bought ourselves a beautiful angora stole. One day I noticed hers peeping out of her dog's basket. I was not surprised therefore when I walked into her office one chilly day a short while later when she remarked, “You know, my stole like yours didn't wear very well!”

Auriol Batten is the holder of an Honorary Doctorate in Science, a Trustee of the East London Museum and in her own words “an artist, botanist, collaborator and life-long friend.”

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