

MARJORIE COURTENAY-LATIMER

By Brian W. Watson.

Marjorie Eileen Doris Courtenay-Latimer was born in East London on February 24, 1907. She was the eldest of six daughters born to Eric Henry Courtenay-Latimer and his wife Willie Fulton (nee Raitt). Willie, a widow, already had two daughters. Her father was Captain Anastasis Robert William Raitt R.N. who was killed in March 1878 in an Eastern Cape skirmish.

Marjorie's father, Eric, was born in Simla, India in 1873, where his father was an assistant secretary to the Viceroy. Eric returned to England as a youngster and later emigrated to the Cape Colony and landed in Port Elizabeth. Eric took part in the 1893 Matabele Rebellion and served during the Anglo-Boer War. He married Willie in Grahamstown in 1906.

With a small inheritance he attempted diamond digging at Jagersfontein in the Orange River Colony. Having lost his money he joined the Orange River Colony Railways and was based at Frankfort.

After the reorganization of the Cape Colonial Railways Eric was posted to East London and here Willie's first daughter, Marjorie, was born in the suburb of Quigney in 1907. Eric served the railways of the Eastern Cape for the rest of his life. It is not known in what order he was Station Master, but some of the stations at which he served were Debe Nek, Waverley (Tarkastad), Thomas River, Thebus, Bailey and Chiselhurst and Southernwood in East London.

One can imagine the problems that a young family of eight daughters living in the country had in arranging schooling. Mother Willie rose to the occasion by ensuring that each child had an interest wherever they were. So it was that the girls gathered birds' eggs, insects, a host of botanical bits and pieces and a large and valuable collection of local ethnic artifacts. The girls also spent long periods at the family farm *Orlando* near Paterson (Sandflats) and spent long holidays camping at Bushman's River mouth.

In 1921, the first Museum Committee was started by Dr. George Rattray, Headmaster of Selborne College. In 1923, this Committee became a Board with the set purpose of building a museum for East London. A wood and iron shed was hired in Gladstone Street and a start was made on a collection. In 1929 the East London Municipality allocated land at the corner of King Street and Lukin Road and after the collection of funds a building was erected at a cost of 4000 pounds. The foundation stone was laid by the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Rattray, on January 17, 1931.

The Board now set about finding a suitable person to run the new museum. A young lady aged 24, who at that stage was involved in the Red Cross organization, was approached. Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer was interviewed by the Board at a special meeting held at 10am on August 12, 1931. She was offered the post of Curator at 2 pounds a month with a petty cash allowance of 5 shillings.

The first job for this new curator was to install the showcases provided by a local businessman and set them up for public display. There was little suitable in the way of artifacts so this



Photograph of the Courtenay-Latimer family c.1914. L-R: Mavis Pyne from Mrs Courtenay-Latimer's first marriage, Mr Eric Courtenay-Latimer, Norah, Mrs Willie Courtenay-Latimer with Elsie, Dorothy Pyne, Marjorie. The Courtenay-Latimers had four more daughters, Joan, Patricia, Lorna and Dondre, who died as a baby.

Photo: Courtenay-Latimer family.



Marjorie with five of her sisters in the 1940s. L-R: Marjorie, Elsie (behind), Patricia, Lorna, Norah and Joan.

Photo: Courtenay-Latimer family.



The East London Museum in 1931. Marjorie was appointed as Curator on August 24th of that year.

Photo: East London Museum.

Marjorie at the age of 24 as a newly appointed Curator outside the Museum in 1931. The nurse's uniform had been bought by her family for the nursing career that she had intended to pursue before her appointment to the Museum. Ever practical, Marjorie wore it anyway and a white outfit became a favourite work "uniform".

Photo: East London Museum



now curator used much of the material that had been collected by the Courtenay-Latimer family during their past years in the countryside and the museum exhibits were made ready for the official opening.

The first major exhibit was *Huberta* the hippo which was shown to the public on February 20, 1932 for the first time. *Huberta* had been collected by the Kaffrarian Museum and was being sent back to King Williams Town by sea after being mounted in Cape Town.

In 1934 Marge was introduced to paleontology when she went on an expedition near Tarkastad to excavate a Karoo fossil, an expedition sponsored by Robert Herbert Wilson. A fossil reptile was recovered and set up by her in the museum. This famous *Kannemeyeria simocephalus* is a rare example of a complete dicynodont fossil.

In 1936 Marge organized an expedition to Bird Island where she spent six weeks studying the sea bird life and published her first scientific paper, *Observations of Terns on Bird Island*. This expedition led her to forming friendships with the captains of the fishing trawlers operating out of Buffalo Harbour (East London).

The discovery of the coelacanth *Latimeria chalumnae* on December 23, 1938 was a direct result of Marge's interest in sea fishes and her friendship with the fishing fraternity in East London.

In 1936 Marge was a Founder Member of S.A.M.A. – the South African Museums Association. This was an organization in

which Marge took close interest until her recent passing. She served on Council for some 17 years and as Vice-President was made an Honorary Life Member and in 1986 a Fellow of this prestigious organization.

In July 1952 Marge attended the first meeting of the newly formed Advisory Council for Nature Conservation in the Cape Province. Her interest in botany first appeared in print when she co-authored with Chairman G.G. Smith *The Flowering Plants of the Tsitsikama Forest and Coastal National Park* in 1967. This publication brought together artists Hertha Bokelmann and Auriol Batten, the two artists who went on to produce *Wild Flowers of the Eastern Cape Province* with an acknowledgement that "much of the information originates from Miss M. Courtenay-Latimer's wide knowledge and experience". So was formed a long and fruitful friendship with Auriol Batten and Hertha Bokelmann.

Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer received an Honorary Doctorate from Rhodes University in 1973. This was followed by the Mayor and Council's Illuminated Address and Citation for outstanding service to the City, received in September 1976 and followed by the award of Freedom of the City in 1989.

When the new museum was erected in Oxford Street in 1951 a significant improvement was the introduction by Marge of dioramas for the display of birds and small animals. This new museum was opened in June 1952 by Dr. Douglas Hey, first Director of Conservation and Museums of the Cape Province.

Marge was an active and versatile naturalist and museologist. She was a Founder Member of the Border Historical Society

and this was recognized by the award of Honorary Life Vice-Chairman. She was also an Honorary Life Member of the Conchological Society of Southern Africa and the Wild Life Society of Southern Africa. She also received Honorary Fellowship of the International Society of Cryptozoologists, was a Life Member of the Friends of the East London Aquarium, an Honorary Life Member of the East London Museum, an Honorary Life Member of the Royal Society of South Africa and was a member of many other similar national and international organizations.

However, we will remember Marge for her dedication to our City, and for her service to our world-renowned museum.

Our dear Marge obtained her greatest wish last year when the Coastal and Ocean Exploration Conference was held here in East London. She was so happy and content to be able to meet so many of her scientific friends from around the world – face to face.

One of her ancestors, the Duke of Leeds, had this motto on his crest: “ubi lapsus quid feci”, which, when translated, means “what I have done remains” - an appropriate motto by which to remember our friend and mentor, Dr. Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer.

Compiled by Brian W. Watson, past Chairman of the East London Museum Board of Trustees, on May 25, 2004.
