

Talking Science with Marie Tharp, An Opportunity Lost
Bill Menke, April 16, 2023
after leading a nature hike sponsored by the Marie Tharp Society

I did not know Marie Tharp. I should have, and I could have, but I didn't. Today, I consider myself poorer for not having had the opportunity. Or rather, for not having *made* the opportunity.

I knew who Marie Tharp was. The Heezen and Tharp map of the Atlantic Ocean was published in 1957. I had seen it, and the similar maps that the two authored, back in 1968 when I took high school earth science. The new theory of Plate Tectonics was all the rage then, and the teacher highlighted these fascinating maps in class. Around the year 1978, as a grad student at Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory, Marie and I passed each other in the hall of the Oceanography Building several times. After the first encounter, I asked another grad student who she was, describing a middle-aged woman dressed in a long skirt, as was told, "That's Marie Tharp". Yet we never once spoke.

This was not overtly sexism thing on my part, even though the Nineteen Seventies were a more sexist era than today's. Aviva Brecher, my undergraduate mentor at MIT, was a woman geoscientist. I was comfortable talking science with her, and with women Research Scientists at Lamont, too, including Connie Sancetta and Shamita Das. However, I think that sexism did enter into it in a subtler way.

Marie's partner was Bruce Heezen. I never spoke with him either, but I had much less opportunity to do so. Bruce died in June '77, less than a year after I arrived at Lamont – unexpectedly and while at sea. He had had a notoriously stormy relationship with Maurice "Doc" Ewing, the founding Director of Lamont. Though Doc had left Lamont in '72, the shadow of their animosity hung over Lamont for many years. In a subtle way, I think that Marie was collateral damage. No one ever said anything bad about Marie to me, yet I think there was a faint undercurrent that steered people away from her. People spoke of her rarely, if at all. No professor introduced her - not to me or to any of the other grad students, as far as I know. And this is where the sexism comes in: she was a scientist in her own right and not an appendage of her late partner. I'm afraid that without ever thinking about it in those terms, I bought into the mentality.

Marie was sixty years old in 1980, when I was in the middle of my graduate studies – well short of retirement age and younger by almost a decade than me today. Anytime during that year, or in the next, or next, I could have tracked her down and introduced myself to her. I could have had a chat with her about the science of the ocean floor. But I didn't. It was an opportunity lost.