

## **Carolyn Shoemaker (1929 – 2021)**

### **Huntress of Comets and Asteroids**



Carolyn Shoemaker is a remarkable woman. She is best known for her co-discovery of comet Shoemaker-Levy-9, a celestial fragmented object that orbited Jupiter in 1993. Carolyn, her husband Gene, and Canadian astronomer David Levy observed through telescopes as fragments of the comet collided with Jupiter, creating bright plumes and dark spots on the planet's surface. The comet's path culminated in spectacular fiery collisions with the planet in July 1994, an event that was witnessed by professional and amateur astronomers around the world. In 1997 Carolyn and Gene were involved in a car crash in Australia. Gene was instantly killed, while Carolyn sustained severe injuries. Undeterred and gifted with exceptional stereovision,

Carolyn continued her work of comets and asteroids and went on to discover 32 comets and more than 800 asteroids throughout her career. She holds the record for most comet discoveries.

#### **Personal Life:**

Carolyn Shoemaker, ne Spellmann, was born in Gallup, NM. Her family and brother moved to Chico, California, where she grew up. Carolyn took an uncommon path to become an astronomer. In her youth she had never been interested in scientific topics. She studied history, political science, and English literature at Chico State University, CA, and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in these fields. In 1950 she met her future husband Gene Shoemaker, a planetary geologist, at her brother's wedding. Gene and Carolyn got married a year later and had three children, Christy, Linda, and Patrick. After her children went off to college and inspired by her husband's stories about geology, she took an interest in science and began studying astronomy at Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona.

#### **Career:**

Shoemaker began her career in 1980, at age 51 searching for comets and asteroids at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, CA, and the Palomar Observatory, San Diego, CA. In 1989 she began work as an astronomy research professor at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ. Both Carolyn and Gene worked as staff members at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff. After Gene's death, she continued her work at Lowell Observatory.

#### **Honors and Awards:**

Honorary doctorate from Northern Arizona University; Rittenhouse Medal from the Rittenhouse Astronomical Society; NASA Exceptional Scientific Achievement Medal.

#### **References:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carolyn\\_S.\\_Shoemaker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carolyn_S._Shoemaker)

<https://astrogeology.usgs.gov/people/carolyn-shoemaker>