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Marie Curie: Physicist and Woman

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Marie Sklodowska was born in Warsaw on November 7, 1867. Girls were not allowed to attend college in Poland, so Marie found a well-paying post as a governess in rural village which she held for three years while helping her older sister complete medical school in Paris. Then Marie moved to Paris and graduated first in her class at the Sorbonne with a master's degree in physics in 1893. In 1895, she married the talented young physicist, Pierre Curie. Marie decided to investigate the radioactive components of the mineral pitchblende for her dissertation. The work involved chemical analysis of a ton of material in an unheated shed. Pierre joined her and at the end of 1898, the Curies announced the discovery of radium and polonium. Through 1899, Marie labored to measure the atomic weight of radium. In 1903, Marie earned her doctorate, the first for a woman in France, and the Curies split the Nobel Prize in Physics with Henri Becquerel. They became widely known, besieged by the press and frequently invited to make presentations and be awarded honors. They hated fame and both suffered bad health. In April, 1906, Pierre Curie was struck by a wagon and killed instantly. Marie was left as a single mother with two young daughters. Fortunately, the Sorbonne hired her to fill Pierre's position. In 1911, she was rejected for membership in the French Academy of Science because she was a woman. Also in 1911, she was accused of having an affair with a married French physicist Paul Langevin. The resulting scandal hit the press and brought angry mobs to her home. In the middle of this hullabaloo, she was informed that she had won a second Nobel Prize, this time in Chemistry. When World War I broke out, Marie mounted x-ray units on cars and became a heroine. She visited the United States in 1921 where President Harding presented her with a gram of radium. She continued her scientific studies in spite of declining health until her death in 1934.

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