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Beach Bodies: Gender and the Beach in American Culture, 1880-1940

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**BEACH BODIES: GENDER AND THE BEACH IN AMERICAN
CULTURE, 1880–1940**

by

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B.A., History, Dominican University of California, 2010
M.A., History, Claremont Graduate University, 2012

DISSERTATION

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Requirements for the Degree of

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For my family.

And for Brandon. Who followed me to the desert so I could write about the sea.

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I love you all.

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that American beaches, within the world of leisure and pleasure, were significant contested spaces of social change and debate. Overtime, from about 1880 to 1940, social restrictions loosened at the beach, allowing men, women, and people of color to express themselves in ways that had been previously controlled, curtailed, or proscribed. The emergence of mass popular amusements at the beach attracted a wide array of the American population. Both working-class and middle-class Americans absorbed the culture of new beach attractions, such as amusement parks, piers, boardwalks, and bathhouses. In doing so, they interacted more with each other and, in turn, defined themselves by the type of beach vacations they could take. By 1940, the beach had become an essential vacation destination for Americans of all backgrounds.

As more Americans from diverse backgrounds began taking vacations and visiting leisure spaces, beachgoing became a national experience. Beaches could accommodate those visitors who wanted long vacations, day-trippers, and people visiting just for an afternoon excursion. The beach became a quintessential American leisure destination where Americans experimented with gender roles and social interactions.

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Introduction

“Sometime between the first of June and the last of August,” read *Taintor’s Guide Book* from 1892, “a very large proportion of well-to-do citizens of the civilized world pack their trunks and betake themselves to the sea-shore, some in search of health, some to amuse themselves, and others because it is the fashion.”¹ Beginning in the 1850s and growing in popularity through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the beach was a place that Americans could go for rest, relaxation, and good times. Whether for the entire summer season, a few weeks, or just a few days, the beach appealed to a wide variety of people. But all resorts were not created equally. The wealthiest of Americans went to places like Newport in Rhode Island, and Manhattan Beach on Long Island. Coney Island and Atlantic City appealed to wide swaths of the population with large beaches and affordable accommodations. On the West Coast, the residents of Los Angeles emptied the city on beautiful weekends and took the electric railway down to the public beaches of Santa Monica, Ocean Park, and Venice Beach. African Americans, barred from the majority of popular beaches in the United States, created their own resorts, both publicly and privately owned.² At times the social world of the beach mirrored that of the cities and towns that visitors came from, but at other times the beach offered people a sense of freedom from the constraints of everyday life, allowing them to disappear within crowds of similarly dressed pleasure seekers.

¹ *Taintor’s Guide Books: Seaside Resorts from the St. Lawrence River to the Gulf of Mexico* (New York: Taintor Brothers and Co., 1892).

² *Taintor’s Guide Books; American Summer Resorts: A Book for the Health and Pleasure-Seeking Public* (W.H. Henderson, 1898); and *The American Queen’s Dictionary of Summer Resorts in the United States and Canada* (New York: Queen Publishing, 1882).

This dissertation argues that American beaches, within the world of leisure and pleasure, were significant contested spaces of social change and debate. Overtime, from about 1880 to 1940, social restrictions loosened at the beach, allowing men, women, and people of color to express themselves in ways that had been previously controlled, curtailed, or proscribed. The emergence of mass popular amusements at the beach attracted a wide array of the American population. Both working-class and middle-class Americans absorbed the culture of new beach attractions, such as amusement parks, piers, boardwalks, and bathhouses. In doing so, they interacted more with each other and, in turn, defined themselves by the type of beach vacations they could take.³ Men and women mixed socially at the beach in new ways as well. Although going to the beach was an appropriate coed activity beginning in the 1850s, it was not until the late nineteenth century that women, especially young women, began pursuing work and leisure in the public sphere in greater numbers.⁴ This phenomenon, plus the already accepted coed nature of the beach, meant that women who visited the beach could interact with men and suffer little social backlash. Women also participated in activities normally closed to

³ According to many historians, leisure and vacationing helped define American personal and economic identity across class and race. For example, see Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 1–5; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 154; Colin Fisher, *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 1–5; and Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 2–6.

⁴ For women in the public sphere in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia.: Temple University Press, 1986); Hilary Hallett, *Go West Young Women: The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Jessica Sewell, *Women in the Everyday City: Public Space in San Francisco, 1890–1915* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

them, such as gambling, playing games like billiards or bowling, and, especially, swimming. Through that participation, women demanded autonomy over their leisure time. They argued for their right to enjoy the beach comfortably, safely, and on their own terms. This debate culminated in the fight for control over their own bodies: they wanted authority over what they wore and how they moved.⁵

African Americans and other people of color also enjoyed some new cultural freedoms while at the beach. Although their enjoyment was generally met with restrictions, African American beachgoing turned into not-so-subtle protests over segregationist policies and lack of safety in the 1930s. Beaches, particularly in Southern California and the Northeast, were some of the first desegregated spaces in the United States. Additionally, African Americans built their own resorts and bathhouses, creating cultural institutions that served black beachgoers for generations.⁶ By 1940, the beach had become an essential vacation destination for Americans of all backgrounds.

This study is limited neither to one beach or coastline in the United States, nor to one population or demographic. As more Americans from diverse backgrounds began taking vacations and visiting leisure spaces, beachgoing became a national experience. Beaches were easily accessible for many Americans. Some of the largest and most popular beaches were located just outside major cities. Beaches could accommodate those visitors who wanted long vacations, day-trippers, and people visiting just for an afternoon excursion. A person could say they were “going to the beach” and everyone

⁵ Jon Sterngrass, *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport, and Coney Island* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 133–35; and Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9–10.

⁶ For more on African American vacations, see Mark S. Foster, “In the Face of ‘Jim Crow’: Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel, and Outdoor Leisure,” *Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 130–49; Andrew W. Karhl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

would understand what that experience would be: changing into a bathing suit; going swimming; playing in the sand; visiting a pleasure pier. The beach became a quintessential American leisure destination that in many cases was free of some social constraints.

Yet beaches were contested spaces that required visitors and tourists to negotiate economic, gendered, and racial boundaries. For instance, the boardwalk was a very different place than the beach itself and behavior and clothing allowed on the beach was not necessarily allowed on the boardwalk. Women wearing bathing costumes on the sand were acceptable, but as soon as they stepped inside a hotel or on the sidewalk, the full weight of turn-of-the-century decorum dropped on their shoulders. Women on beaches were constantly under surveillance. Police officers and lifeguards monitored both their behavior and their clothing for any transgressions. At the same time, seaside cities and communities made money by staging beach beauty contests in which women would showcase their bodies in bathing suits that would, under normal circumstance, get them arrested for wearing. Many beach visitors, as described by Bryant Simon in *Boardwalk of Dreams*, preferred their leisure to be exclusive of too much difference, so they resisted any notions of racial inclusion. If a resort became too “undesirable,” they took their money to more-private and -exclusive places.⁷ In response to complaints from whites, public authorities could suddenly closed African American beaches if they became too popular and if the crowds of black beachgoers drew too much unwanted attention. Contested beaches often led to confrontation where marginalized and surveilled visitors fought for the right to access beaches on their own terms. Movie producer and director

⁷ Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.

Mack Sennett used the beach as the location for his famous Bathing Girl series, exploiting the acknowledged social freedoms of the beach to make movies that might otherwise be censored for showing women's uncovered bodies.

In geographic and geological terms, the beach or the seashore is where the ocean meets land. According to biologist Peter J. Hayward, the "seashore can be defined as a strip of land forming the frontier between land and sea."⁸ Historically, as argued by Alain Corbin in *The Lure of the Sea*, before the eighteenth century, European society viewed the ocean as an endless abyss, reminiscent of the Biblical stories of creation and the Great Flood. There was no sea in the Garden of Eden; no paradise could have endless ocean. The ocean, a place of darkness and the unknown, harbored dens of monsters. People viewed the beach as a place of the sea's rejections. The ocean spit up its rottenness and left it on the seashore.⁹

It was not until the 1750s that perceptions began to change. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the fear of the ocean was slowly replaced with a belief in the therapeutic potential of cold sea baths, the cool ocean air, and the drinking of seawater. The ill and the invalid began flocking to the seashore for its medical value. Doctors set the time, season, and number of baths a patient could take. The beach was finally seen as safe but hardly pleasurable. Yet, with the ill came their caretakers and families, who began to see the seashore as a place of peace, health, and relaxation. As seaside resorts developed for more than just the ill and their caretakers, the beach became important

⁸ Peter J. Hayward, *A Natural History of the Seashore* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 8

⁹ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 1–3, 4, 7, 13.

space for “investment, consumer spending, [and] social emulation,” but it was also a place of conflict between classes and lifestyles.¹⁰

Although the most elite of members American society had been visiting Newport, Rhode Island since the 1840s, it was not so different than the neighboring resort of Coney Island in New York. Jon Sterngrass, in *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport, and Coney Island*, finds that although these resorts catered to different economic classes, they were remarkably similar in execution, characterized by grand hotels surrounded by public and semi-public spaces filled with people.¹¹ After the Civil War, middle-class Americans began vacationing in earnest, and by the turn of the twentieth century vacationing had marker of middle class status as argued by Cindy S. Aron in *Working at Play: A History of the Vacation in the United States*. The growth of middle-class work through the expansion of large corporations, mass retailers, and government services brought with them a demand for white collar employees. These employees and their families shared a commitment to a more refined and domestic lifestyle in which taking a summer vacation was a marker. White collar employers, cognizant of the new warning of overwork, gave their employees paid time off for vacations. In the early twentieth-century vacations were championed for the working class, as a way to escape the drudges of labor in cramped and dirty cities. During the 1910s and 1920s the vacationing public expanded to include working-class white, immigrants, and African Americans.¹²

¹⁰ John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History, 1750–1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 3–4; Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, 57; and Aron, *Working at Play*. The one general history of the beach is Lena Lenceck and Gideon Bosker, *The Beach: The History of Paradise on Earth* (New York: Vikings, 1998) which chronicles a world history of beachgoing from ancient civilizations to today.

¹¹ Sterngrass, *First Resorts*, 1, 2.

¹² Aron, *Working at Play*, 46–47

Much of this new vacationing public visited beaches, and the beaches were built up to accommodate the expanded market with hotels, restaurants, boardwalks, pleasure piers, and bathhouses. The popularity of beach vacations created “a cultural experience that a wide cross-section of the population came to share.”¹³ It gave Americans a variety of ways in which to engage with the new American mass culture, or amusements available at the beach. Bryant Simon, in *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America*, argues that the beach resort town “manufactured and sold an easily consumed and widely shared fantasy” where people had “endless chances to act not as they normally did, but as they wanted to be.”¹⁴ In Atlantic City, the majority white clientele enjoyed masquerading as middle-class tourists regardless of their socio-economic status. In *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* by Kathy Peiss argues that women experienced leisure in a specific way. Her study focuses on young women in New York City, who, she argues, experimented with new cultural forms (such as going to Coney Island and the beach) that articulated gender in terms of sexual expression and social interaction with men. Through their leisure they helped create a heterosocial world based on modernity, individuality, and personal expression. While Lawrence Culver’s *Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* argues that Southern California, including its beaches, played a central role in the democratization of leisure. California boosters advertised the “California lifestyle” as one with accessible, year-round leisure, open to all socio-economic classes and people of color.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*, 6.

¹⁵ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 6; and Lawrence Culver, *Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

Many historians agree that leisure spaces offered a place for Americans to experiment, engage, and create new cultural forms. In *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, John F. Kasson says that the heyday of Coney Island in the mid-twentieth century “coincided with a critical period in American history, when the nation came of age as an urban-industrial society and its citizens eagerly, but painfully adjusted to the new terms of American life.” Sterngass argues similarly, writing that Coney Island, Saratoga, and Newport were “laboratories in which visitors could experiment with new or different ideas about the value of the work ethic, the significance of luxury in a democratic republic, the proper roles of men and women, and the relationship between community and privacy.”¹⁶ Lizbeth Cohen argues that working-class Americans and African Americans shaped their “commercial culture” and leisure for their own needs by patronizing ethnic stores and building businesses that appealed to their own communities.¹⁷

At the beach, Americans encountered new cultural expectations head on. Although some working-class Americans might have enjoyed dressing up as middle-class tourists on the Atlantic City boardwalk and others might have only wanted to go visit the working-class enclave at Coney Island’s bowery, the beach muddled socio-economic lines. The simple act of removing everyday clothing and donning utilitarian bathing suits erased a distinctive social marker. The variety of beaches and beach amusements appealed to working-class, middle-class, and wealthy Americans. Beaches were the natural spaces that Colin Fisher, in *Urban Green*, argues working-class Americans

¹⁶John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 3. Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 6.

¹⁷ Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 105, 128, 154

craved. While the piers, the hotels, the restaurants, appealed working-class Americans yearning for life outside of work and to middle- and upper-class Americans wanting to experience their leisure by showcasing their wealth.¹⁸

Gender and race become important lenses to use when examining beach leisure. While certain class distinctions blurred while visiting the beach, gender and race could not. The experiences of women and people of color matter because their pursuit of public leisure was new. Women's leisure had tended to be segregated from the public realm, not divided from their work, but intertwined with household responsibilities and family life. Young working women at the turn-of-the twentieth century pursued leisure in new public spaces, such as the beach. There they pushed social boundaries with fashion, beauty, and sport. As Betsy Wearing writes in *Leisure and Feminist Theory* "leisure can be a space for struggle and negotiation for women to move beyond cultural prescriptions of femininity."¹⁹ As they embraced new modes of public leisure, women also contended with increased surveillance and exploitation of their bodies in public realms. As Kathy Peiss argued, "women's embrace of style, fashion, romance, and mixed-sex fun could be a source of autonomy and pleasure as well as a cause of their continuing oppression."²⁰

African Americans and people of color found ways to enjoy beaches and resorts although their presence often irritated and offended white visitors. In many ways, African American beachgoers put their bodies on the line for the right to enjoy the beach. Public officials and white developers designated the most dangerous beaches as "colored

¹⁸ Fisher, *Urban Green*, 2, 5; and Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*, 8.

¹⁹ Betsy Wearing, *Leisure and Feminist Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), xv.

²⁰ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 6.

beaches.²¹ City governments They restricted African American access to public beaches, curbed African American use of their privately-owned spaces, curfews, and policing of mass public gatherings.²² Wealthier African Americans purchased beach property and turned it into seaside resorts for others. African Americans who could not access or afford to go to private black resorts fought segregation through protest and legal action. African American pursuit of leisure became a critical part of their resistance to segregation and white oversight. They supported their own bathhouses and beach businesses, which “offered blacks the ingredients from which to construct a new, urban black culture.”²³

Chapter one, “Boardwalks and Bathhouses,” describes the experience of visiting a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American beach. Like other vacation spots, beach resorts were defined by the class and race they served, but the amenities and layouts of beaches and beach resorts were strikingly similar. The chapter details the kinds of interactions and new activities that visitors could encounter at the beach. From rollercoasters to pleasure piers, swimming to surfing, the beach offered a myriad of ways to enjoy a summer’s day, while also introducing people to new versions of American popular culture.

Chapter two, “Bathing Suit Wars,” explains another universal experience of visiting the beach: wearing a bathing suit. Beach communities across the country had passed bathing suit ordinances and modesty law limiting the types of bathing suits

²¹Foster, “In the Face of ‘Jim Crow’ 131; and Douglas Flammig, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 273–74.

²² Regina Austin, “Not Just for the Fun of It: Governmental Restraints on Black Leisure, Social Inequality, and the Privatization of Public Space,” *Southern California Law Review* 71, no. 667 (1998): 672

²³ Fisher, *Urban Green*, 5; and Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 128.

visitors could wear. The chapter chronicles how women, in particular, fought to be able to wear comfortable and safe bathing suits while on the beach. Chapter 3, “Bathing Beauties,” describes the growth of bathing beauty competitions at beaches during the nineteen teens and 1920s. At the same time that women are fighting for autonomy over their bodies and clothing, entrepreneurs along with local chambers of commerce planned bathing beauty competitions where young women paraded in their best bathing costumes on the beach for cash prizes. Models, actresses, and professional swimmers participated in these contests that were eventually immortalized in news reels and movies. American beach culture was broadcast to the larger public for the first time.

Chapter 4, “Dangerous Waters,” interrogates the darker side of beachgoing during this period. Although very popular, beaches were also very dangerous. Most Americans couldn’t swim and access to swimming lessons was limited. Beaches began marketing themselves based on how safe they were. Local governments hired lifeguards as a public service, while hotels and bathhouses hired their own lifeguards to make guests feel safer. How did Americans respond to this epidemic of drowning? What roles did African Americans and women take to create safer beaches?

The story that follows is one of a singular space, the beach, and what occurs in that space. But this space exists in many different places and in many different communities across the country. The beach is important particularly because of its wide-ranging popularity and the patterns of behavior that seem to exist on every beach regardless of its specific geographical location. For this reason, the social changes and challenges that play out on the beach offer insight into national trends. Questions of women’s autonomy, sexism, segregation, racism, media influence, beauty, and health are

all disputed and debated in this space. The soft sand, the warm water, the lapping ocean waves, and the millions of happy visitors each year, belies the social transformations begun at the edge of the sea. As said by many visitors, written on hundreds and probably thousands of postcards: Come on in, the water's fine.

Chapter 1: Resorts and Boardwalks

In the introduction to his guidebook to the beach, Richard K. Fox began “We do not pretend that you can hear the roar of the surf, the music of the bands, the tooting of the steam boat whistles, the rumble of the railroad trains, the bustle of the crowds, in our pages. We do not pretend that you can see the fizzing fireworks, the variegated aspects of the sea and shore, the hotels, the clam shanties, piers, bathing houses and side shows.”¹ He was describing Coney Island, but he might as well have been introducing his readers to any large beach in the country. Whether small or large, rural or urban, most American beaches reflected characteristics and qualities listed by Fox. Besides the lure of the ocean and the beach, most visitors and tourists at American beaches expected some other kinds of amusements. For most of the nineteenth century, “sea bathing” was little more than a short immersion in water for medical purposes after which vacationers needed something else to do. Even when ocean swimming for pleasure became popular in the early twentieth century, the “bathing hour” lasted only two hours a day.² Visitors spent the rest of their leisure time strolling the boardwalks, visiting the piers, fishing, boating, and lounging. Knowing this habit, beaches built up their entertainment infrastructure by adding more spaces for sideshows, building movie theaters, and allowing private amusement companies to build pleasure piers with rollercoasters, merry-go-rounds, casinos, bars, and restaurants.

¹ Richard K. Fox, *Coney Island Frolics: How New York's Gay Girls and Jolly Boys Enjoy Themselves by the Sea* (New York: Police Gazette, 1881), 6–7, Hathitrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435017926965>.

² Julia Allen, *Swimming with Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale: Sport, Health, and Exercise in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2012), 224; and Eric Chaline, *Strokes of Genius: A History of Swimming* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 138–38.

As Bryant Simon described about Atlantic City, the sea was the primary reason a beachside resort or town: “Certain of the essential goodness and virtue of nature as embodied in the sea, middle-class visitors justified their Atlantic City trips. They could tell themselves that they were going to the world’s playground for the wholesomeness of the ocean. Assured at least one part of the resort offered natural, and thus morally decent, benefits, they could then turn to the edgier part of the city without much guilt.” This was not just true of middle-class visitors to Atlantic City. Beaches across the country had alternative amusements for visitors interested in more than the ocean. They were not always “edgy,” as Simon wrote, but the amusements, along with the beach, did offer the vacationer or visitor a chance to explore new cultural forms of mass leisure. Beaches at this time were generally characterized by bathhouses, boardwalks and piers, and long stretches of crowded sand, but they still retained their individual landscapes, personalities, and economies. Visitors could always find a beach that suited them and their friends and families. This meant that a large swath of the American public could take vacations at the beach and transform it into the center of the “democratization of leisure,” a space open to men, women, and children, and, in some places, to African Americans and other people of color.³

During the middle of the nineteenth century, before the furious building of boardwalks and pleasure piers that would occur in the 1870s through the 1910s, going to the beach was a rustic affair. In the 1860s, Coney Island was “known only as a sandy

³ Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47–48; and Lawrence Culver, *Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Culver argues that democratization of leisure occurred in Southern California and Los Angeles. I argue that the beach in general offered leisure activities to enough of the American public to establish leisure, and specifically the beach vacation, as part of American culture.

waste and windswept region, where the Atlantic surges beat with unrestrained violence.”⁴ Visitors from Brooklyn would daytrip for picnicking, crabbing, and fishing. The steamboats arriving at Coney Island wharf generally carried more women and children than men. Charles D. Shanly wrote “Family groups are always a feature here, the thrifty mothers carrying provision baskets, the jars that protrude from which, having probably been emptied during the voyage, are taken by happy fathers to the bar of some hostelry, there to be replenished with lager-beer or something stronger.”⁵ Santa Monica, California, attracted locals also. In 1871, B. L. Peel erected a large tent near the beach to accommodate twenty-five or thirty families. The next year a hotel opened, advertising that “a week at the beach will add ten years to your life!” Visitors could take a coach back and forth to Los Angeles every Saturday and Wednesday morning, giving visitors several days to swim, take carriage rides, and picnic.⁶

The rustic nature of some beaches appealed in part to those seekers wanting to open religious resorts away from the distractions of the city. Ocean Grove and Asbury Park, New Jersey, were the most notable of these destinations on the East Coast. Founded in July of 1869, Ocean Grove was meant to be a holy summer resort operating as a Methodist camp meeting. Unlike other beach resorts, such as Coney Island and Atlantic City, Ocean Grove banned drinking, smoking, and gambling. Everyday activities were

⁴ *Coney Island: An Illustrated Guide to the Sea* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Traux and Co. Publishers, 1883), 5.

⁵ Walter Creedmoor, “The Real Coney Island,” *Munsey’s Magazine*, August 1899, 745; and Charles D. Shanly, “Coney Island,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1874, 307 (quoted), copy in the Brooklyn Historical Society.

⁶ Luther A. Ingersoll, *Ingersoll’s Century History of Santa Monica Bay Cities* (Los Angeles: Luther A. Ingersoll, 1908), 141.



Fig. 1. "Mrs. Stone's Tent" at Ocean Grove, New Jersey. George H. Moss Jr. *Double Exposure Two: Stereographic View of the Jersey Shore, 1859–1910* (Sea Bright, NJ.: Ploughshare Press), 120.

meant to bring people closer to God.⁷ Methodist camp meetings were religious revivals popular during the turn of the nineteenth century. Methodists believed they could come away from the stresses of their everyday lives and “retire to meet with her Lord and Lover and return to the world transformed.”⁸ By the 1870s, instead of holding camp meetings in temporary clearings and fields, Methodists began meeting at designated campsites, such as Ocean Grove. These campsites had some permanent structures but were still very rustic. One visitor, George O. Martin remembered setting up a tent the night he arrived and sleeping on the hard ground using carriage blankets for warmth

⁷ Troy Messenger, *Holy Leisure: Recreation and Religion in God's Square Mile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3, 4, 11.

⁸ Steven D. Cooley, “Manna and Manual: Sacramental and Instrumental Constructions of the Victorian Methodist Camp Meeting during the Mid-Nineteenth Century” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 132

(although he also had a black servant, John Baker, to cook and clean during this camp meeting excursion).⁹ Days at Ocean Grove were long. At camp meetings people rose at five or five thirty in the morning, listened to preachers and attended prayer groups all day, before retiring to their tents at ten in the evening. But there was still time for leisure. By 1870, camp meetings began advertising their recreational value for their “salubrious air, delightful shade, and refreshing rest.”¹⁰

Directly to the north of Ocean Grove was Asbury Park. The proprietor, James A. Bradley founded Asbury Park in 1870 as a Christian resort dedicated to improving visitors’ minds, spirits, and bodies. He expounded the benefits of relaxation, bathing, and abstinence from alcohol. Bradley hoped that Asbury Park would appeal to a wider swath of white Christian Americans, with the resort permitting activities forbidden at Ocean Grove. Hotels allowed card playing and dancing; vaudeville and minstrel shows performed; and children could play on the merry-go-round or ride the roller toboggan. Still, it was a conservative resort. The boardwalk, unlike that of Atlantic City, was meant for contemplative strolls to “restore mind and body” and bathing hours at the beach were limited during the week and banned on Sundays.¹¹ Bradley successfully enforced these rules for thirty years, until the city of Asbury Park purchased the boardwalk from him in 1903 and began upgrading it to appeal to a wider array of tourists.¹² By 1909, the once-

⁹ Roger Robins, “Vernacular American Landscape: Methodists, Camp Meetings and Social Respectability,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 4, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 174; and George O. Martin, *History of Asbury Park and Long Branch* (n.p.: Privately Published, 1903), Hathitrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnzag3>.

¹⁰ Robins, “Vernacular American Landscape,” 175; and Rev. B. W. Gorham, *Camp Meeting Manual, A Practical Book for the Camp Ground: in Two Parts* (Boston, Mass.: H. V. Degen, 1854), 125–126, 155–156, Hathitrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433068280159>.

¹¹ Helen-Chantel Pike, *Asbury Park’s Glory Days: The Story of an American Resort* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 1, 5, 43–44; and Messenger, *Holy Leisure*, 20.

¹² Pike, *Asbury Park*, 45.

small Christian resort had 1200 hotels and cottages to stay in, 10 churches, 3 banks, 10 public halls, 2 daily newspapers, electric lights, water, gas, sewers, an electric railway, and telephone service. One guidebook said, “The people who frequent Asbury park appear to be in a league against [sic] any encroachment of the distended realities of the ultra-fashionable life. The ‘four hundred’ would not find the atmosphere of Asbury Park sufficiently permeated by exclusiveness; the ‘four million’ however, find it a place excellently suited to the purpose of a summer outing.”¹³

In comparison, summer social life at Newport, Rhode Island, was very different. In the same years that visitors camped in tents and rented small cottages at Asbury Park and Ocean Grove, the wealthy visitors to Newport secluded themselves in large country houses and participated in endless rounds of bathing, riding, dancing, and lounging. Visitors, mainly those who were invited, dined at exclusive dinner parties at expansive country homes until eleven at night, and then, after dinner, reconvene at the house with the biggest ballroom for dancing that lasted till dawn. Those who vacationed at Newport did so because it was exclusive and expensive; *Ladies Home Journal* referred to Newport as the “stronghold of the exclusive set.” These people attempted to create a sense of social distance. They tried their best to eliminate interaction with strangers of different social classes and to end any “see and be seen” aspect of resort life.¹⁴ Because of this, visitors avoided any activity where interactions with non-*tony* set might occur. For instance, by 1890, it was “no longer fashionable to bathe in the surf at Newport.” “Madame Hout Ton,” reported the *Ladies Home Journal*, “discovered that it was possible to meet her neighbor’s maid in the water, and then too, she came in contact with the

¹³ *Asbury Park: America’s Ideal Resort*, 1909, Special Collections, Rutgers University.

¹⁴ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 182–83.

summer tourist, who she regards as very undesirable.”¹⁵ A summer at Newport was less about fun than it was about fashion.

Long Beach, California, began much like Ocean Grove and Asbury Park than Newport. It, too, was known for its camp meetings and assemblies at the beach. Beginning in the late 1880s, Long Beach was home to the Chautauqua Grounds of the Assembly of Southern California. Chautauqua Assemblies were nationally known nondenominational-Christian camp meetings that combined the merits of a college education, a summer resort, and religious assembly, deriving their structure from Methodist camp meetings. Like Ocean Grove and Asbury Park, the Chautauqua assembly at Long Beach aspired to be a place where people could leave behind the rigors of their daily life and participate in morally uplifting leisure. One pamphlet about the assembly at Long Beach stated, “Possessing of the most favored, in fact unsurpassed situation, this charming sea-side resort fitly becomes the home of the Chautauqua Assemblies of Southern California. Here freed from the contaminating influence of the saloon and other demoralizing and kindred evils, it at once becomes a summer home, a highly moral city.”¹⁶ During the camp meeting of the summer of 1890, those interested could participate in close readings of the Bible, attend a young people’s day, go to talks on temperance and evolution, and then end the day watching fireworks. “Long Beach is one of the most charming Resorts on the Pacific Coast,” said one brochure for the meeting in 1890. “The beauty of ocean, mountain and landscape, the broad level beach strewn with a

¹⁵ “Where Life Is Like a Story: Fashionable Summer Life at Gay Newport,” *Ladies Home Journal*, August 1890, 2.

¹⁶ Andrew C. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 6, 11, 64. Quotation is from “Long Beach: The Chautauqua Grounds of the Assembly of Southern California,” 1887, Economic Boosters, Pre-1920, box 2, Long Beach History Collection, California State University, Long Beach.

countless variety of shells, the pleasant drives, picturesque scenery, invigorating climate, pleasant camp and cottage life, freedom from display of fashion and wealth, the Assemblies with their unsurpassed intellect and moral advantages, all conspire to make it the most desirable spot for rest and relaxation.”¹⁷

Most resorts and beaches found popularity in other ways, catering neither to the religious nor the most fashionable. The most popular beaches attracted visitors with clean and safe spaces, modern facilities, and oceanfront amusements. Coney Island was a great example of a transformation from picnic site for families to a resort for the masses. Coney Island was originally one of the most disreputable beaches to visit. A place plagued by conmen and three-card monte men known as “Coney Catchers.” “It is no exaggeration,” said one guidebook, “to say that respectable citizens, and especially ladies, could not visit the island then without danger of robbery or violence.” One author wrote, “An objectionable class of visitors took possession of it [Coney Island], and their presence gave it a reputation which excluded the more desirable element.”¹⁸ Another guidebook reported that during the Civil War, the entire western half of Coney Island was a resort for the lawless classes of New York City, “who gave the whole length of the beach such an unsavory name.”¹⁹ Coney Island was also dirty. Both the beach and the facilities for changing clothes needed a good cleaning. The dirt and grime of New York City constantly washed up on shore at Coney Island. Glass bottles, dead animals,

¹⁷ “Long Beach Assemblies Season 1890 Special Features and Attractions,” 1890, box 2, Long Beach Ephemera, Special Collections, California State University Long Beach. Ocean Grove, Asbury Park, and most likely the Long Beach Chautauqua Assembly were racially segregated spaces. Minster Robert E. Jones purchased 320 acres of land to open a Chautauqua resort for African Americans. For more on this resort, see Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012.), 54.

¹⁸ *Coney Island: An Illustrated Guide*, 6; and *The Story of Manhattan Beach* (New York: Francis Hart and Company, 1879), 24.

¹⁹ Creedmoor, “The Real Coney Island,” 745.

even human bodies could be found in the water at Coney Island. Julian Ralph, writing for *Scribner's Magazine* said in 1896 that there was “no possibility of bathing without coming away dirtier than we went in.”²⁰ If a visitor wanted to change into a bathing costume, they had to use what was once described as “tumbledown sentry boxes . . . hot as a Mozambique shanty” and full of rusty nails and unplanned boards. The changing rooms were not sex segregated either and “ladies were compelled to use rooms next to those of offensive men, whose conversation could be distinctly overhead.”²¹

A new, more-respectable Coney Island began to emerge in the mid-1870s. Entrepreneurs invested in new hotels, bathhouses, and amusements. By 1880, the whole of Coney Island had sixty hotels and five thousand changing rooms. It also had three distinct beach areas. West Brighton, including Norton's Point, was considered the working-class beach. With nothing but “merry go rounds, variety shows, liquor saloons, bath houses, photographic tents, hot corn and chowder pots, cane boards, rifle galleries, and catchpenny devices of every imaginable source.”²² Middle-class visitors to Coney Island frequented Brighton Beach where they could stay at the large and modern Brighton Beach Hotel with its 168 guest rooms, gas fixtures, and running water. Manhattan Beach, on the eastern edge of Coney Island, was developed for a wealthier clientele. The beach was quiet with still water and no undertow. The Manhattan Beach hotel, built in 1879, had 258 rooms, restaurants, shops, and large ballroom. The various

²⁰ Creedmoor, “The Real Coney Island,” 746; and Julian Ralph, “Coney Island,” *Scribner's Magazine*, July 1896, 12.

²¹ Ralph, “Coney Island,” 10; and *The Story of Manhattan Beach*, 37.

²² William J. Phalen, *Coney Island: 150 Years of Rides, Fires, Floods, the Rich, the Poor, and Finally Robert Moses* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2016), 41; and Creedmoor, “The Real Coney Island,” 746.



THE EFFECTS OF CONEY ISLAND BEER.

Fig. 2. "The Effects of Coney Island Beer." Richard K. Fox, *Coney Island Frolics: How New York's Gay Girls and Jolly Boys Enjoy Themselves by the Sea* (New York: Police Gazette, 1881).

dining rooms could feed up to 32,000 people in a 24-hour period. To keep its high-class reputation, the owner and developer, Austin Corbin, built large fences around the resort to keep out "disorderly characters," and Pinkerton detectives patrolled the train station.²³

Boardwalks, Piers, and Amusement Parks

Beyond the beach, Coney Island developed a string of alternative amusements for visitors. Amusement areas like boardwalks, pleasure piers, and even theme parks could be found at various urban and rural beaches in the United States. These amusements offered guests a variety of options for their summer days and nights. They were "respectable entertainment zones" where visitors could see and be seen while enjoying a bit a frivolous pleasure.²⁴ The small beach in Hingham, Massachusetts, had billiard rooms, bowling, shooting galleries, boats, "flying horses," swings for children, and a "Punch and Judy Show." Oak Island, Massachusetts, offered "Swings, flying-horses,

²³ Phalen, *Coney Island*, 38, 42, 44; and *The Story of Manhattan Beach*, 30, 34, 35.

²⁴ Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47–48.

bowling alleys, skating rink, shooting gallery, long rifle range (60 to 250 yards), and archery practice.” Long Branch, New Jersey, boasted a new iron pier. Even in ultra-fashionable Newport, Rhode Island, bands, balls, and a “pleasant promenade” eventually entertained upper-class guests.²⁵ All the way south in Palm Beach, Florida, visitors could golf, boat, and play tennis. At the Palm Beach Alcazar Hotel, guests could go to the casino and watch a cakewalk.²⁶

Atlantic City was the first beach town to capitalize on a flourishing boardwalk. Built in 1896, the Atlantic City boardwalk was forty feet wide, twelve feet high, and four miles long (eventually it was lengthened to eight miles).²⁷ Originally built to keep sand from the inside of hotels and the seats of railroad cars, the boardwalk eventually became Atlantic City’s greatest attraction. The city did not allow buildings on the oceanside of the boardwalk, and on the other side oyster sellers, vaudeville performers, sun parlors, and souvenir sellers abounded. It was the perfect mix of natural seaside setting and amusing entertainment.²⁸ For the city the boardwalk was a huge money maker. The Chamber of Commerce reported in 1921 that Atlantic City would become a graveyard if the boardwalk was ever removed: “Its miles of Oceanfront Boardwalk is the greatest dynamic force that attracts this vast throng of cash money spenders to the shore, upon who every beachfront and side avenue hotel, merchant, bank, store, shop, and boarding

²⁵ *Traitor’s Guide Book*, 36, 45, 63, 112

²⁶ *Seven Centers of Paradise* (Florida: East Coast Hotel Company, 1903), Hathitrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t2k64dv68>.

²⁷ *Atlantic City* (Pennsylvania Railroad, 1898), and *Atlantic City Playground of the Nation*, pamphlet, both in Special Collections, Sinclair New Jersey Room, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

²⁸ Vicki Gold Levi and Lee Eisenberg, *Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ten Speed Press, 1979), 18–19, 25.



Fig. 3. "Holiday Crowd on Boardwalk." The text underneath of the postcard reads "This is like the Easter Sunday Parade." Postcard from the pamphlet *Atlantic City: The Playground of the Nation*.

house depends upon absolutely.”²⁹ For visitors, the Atlantic City boardwalk was a place to walk, shop, and participate in middle-class leisure. One way visitors did this was by dressing up to walk on the boardwalk. “During the height of the season, in July and August,” wrote J. Murray Jordan in his Atlantic City guide, “the Boardwalk becomes a magnificent promenade of beauty, wealth, and fashion. More magnificent gowns, more lavish display of diamonds, and a greater number of beautiful women can be seen here between the hours seven and nine in the evening than at the most imposing function of any court in the world.”³⁰ The promenade was even more crowded on holidays. “The Easter Sunday parade,” said one guidebook from 1919, “of more than one hundred thousand people, dressed in the latest styles is a social pageant of surpassing interest not found in any other part of the world. Thanksgiving Day, Christmas and New Year’s test

²⁹ *Atlantic City Monthly*, March 1921, 5.

³⁰ J. Murray Jordan, *Atlantic City* (Philadelphia, Pa.: 1897).

the capacity of many hotels.” One visitor wrote home to Massachusetts to say “Having a fine time. It is GREAT here, I have been on the boardwalk many time[s].”³¹

Pleasure piers were also common features of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century beaches. By 1920, Atlantic City had six ocean piers: Heinz, Garden, Steel, Steeplechase, Central, and the Million Dollar. The Steel Pier had an auditorium, a theater, assembly hall, and was lighted at night by electric lights. The Heinz Pier extended eight-hundred feet into the ocean and was intended as a place for recreation, sea views, and as a permanent exposition of Heinz condiments. One woman, Florence, wrote to her friend: “We are having a fine time. Have been to Steel Pier, Million Dollar Pier, Steeple Chase, Garden Pier, Merry go rounds and all over.”³²

Three pleasure piers competed for beachgoers attention in the Los Angeles area; Venice, Ocean Park, and Santa Monica. All three were situated just a few miles from one another. Ocean Park’s Million Dollar Pier was constructed in 1911 and had two rollercoasters, a dance hall, two carousels, a vaudeville theater, and several large restaurants. According to *Sunset Magazine* Ocean Park offered “ice-cream parlors, frankfurter emporiums, picture postal bazaars, photograph galleries, Japanese ping-pong layouts, merry-go-rounds, shooting-galleries, African Dodgers, skating rinks, and the big scenic railway that winds around the huge Million Dollar Fraser pier built out over the

³¹ *Atlantic City: the Playground of the World* (Atlantic City Publicity Bureau, 1919).; and “The Nation’s Playground, Atlantic City, N.J.,” 11 July 1913, postcards: New Jersey, Atlantic County, Abescon-Atlantic County, Special Collections, Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick, New Jersey [hereafter postcard, Atlantic County, Rutgers University]. Atlantic City’s boardwalk was also home to the famous rolling chairs. Attendants, normally African Americans, pushed patrons up and down the boardwalk in wicker rolling chairs. For more on rolling chairs and the racial aspect of the practice, see Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*, page number.

³² *Atlantic City* (Pennsylvania Railroad, 1898); *Heinz: Heinz Pier, Atlantic City, N.J.* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Heinz Company, n.d.); “Capt. Young’s Cottage, Million Dollar Pier, Atlantic City, NJ,” 18 July 1914, postcards, Atlantic County, Rutgers University.

waves of Santa Monica Bay, and carrying an enormous dancing pavilion, an actually revolving café and real theater.”³³

Coney Island veteran Charles Looff built the pleasure pier at Santa Monica. This pier incorporated Looff’s signature Hippodrome with hand-carved wooden animals. There was also a rollercoaster known as the Blue Streak Racer, bowling and billiards, and a fun house named “What is it?”³⁴ But Abbott Kinney’s “Venice of America” was the most ambitious project on the Southern California coast. Kinney, after inheriting a substantial fortune, invested his money in a section of Santa Monica that he eventually called Venice Beach. In 1906 he hired architects, Norman Marsh and Clarence Russell, to build a city modeled after Venice, Italy, by draining the marshy land and building an extensive network of canals. Kinney originally wanted a Chautauqua Assembly-type program of events at Venice of America with musical performances, speakers, and art exhibits. But this plan failed to attract enough visitors, and Kinney’s Venice went the way of a pleasure center with rollercoasters, a fun house, a Ferris wheel, and a range of carnival shows and games, including, but not limited to fortune tellers and mediums, ping pong, dart games, a candy wheel, a rabbit game, a chicken farm, a roulette wheel, an aquarium of animal freaks, and shooting galleries. Of course, visitors could also ride in a gondola around the seven miles of concrete canals.³⁵

³³ Peter B. Kyne, “Sunshine and Seabreeze, Inc.,” *Sunset Magazine*, July 1911, 12.

³⁴ Jeffrey Stanton, *Santa Monica Pier: A History from 1875–1990* (Los Angeles: Donahue Publishing, 1990), 25; and James Harris, *Santa Monica: A Century on the Last Great Pleasure Pier* (Santa Monica, Ca.: Angel City Press, 2009), 22, 23, 26. Fraser’s Million Dollar Pier burned down in a disastrous fire in 1912 that took the lives of a dozen people, including several children trapped in a funhouse. It was rebuilt only to burn down again in 1924. See “Flames Eat Business at Heart of Ocean Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 September 1912; and “Where Spectacular Fire Played Out at Beach Resort,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1924.

³⁵ Andrew Deener, *Venice: A Contested Bohemia in America* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 21; “List of Business on the Venice Pier—August 27th 1911,” folder 13-2, Venice Petitions, January

Just south of Los Angeles, Long Beach, California, also had an extravagant pleasure pier and boardwalk known as the Pike. Col. Charles L. Drake of the Long Beach Bath House and Amusement Company opened the first bathhouse in Long Beach in 1902. Sixty thousand people attended the opening of the bathhouse, which also celebrated the extension of Pacific Electric street car service to Long Beach. Next, the Long Beach Bath House and Amusement Company built a wooden boardwalk along the beach, allowing concessions and other businesses to set up shop on the fledging boardwalk. From there the Pike grew steadily, adding a new pavilion, an auditorium, a skating rink, and a rollercoaster all by 1907. Four years later, Loeff, of the Santa Monica Pleasure Pier, built his famous Hippodrome at Long Beach.³⁶ The Pike continued to grow, and although the boardwalk was only five blocks long, there were six acres of amusements on the Silver Spray Pier, including several rollercoasters and four large dancehalls. Long Beach was advertised as having “the cleanest amusement zone in America, there are no wheels, games of chance or prize games allowed within the city, which tends to keep all undesirables from its midst,” a subtle hint that the purveyors of the Pike preferred a clientele of middle-class whites engaging in good clean fun.³⁷

Coney Island took the idea of pleasure piers to the next level and built fully enclosed amusement parks. The first one at Coney Island was Sea Lion Park built in

1911–September 1911, box cc-01-5002, Venice Collections, Los Angeles City Archives, Los Angeles, California [hereafter Venice Collection, LACA]; and Kyne, “Sunshine and Seabreeze,” 12.

³⁶ *The Pike on the Silverstrand* (Long Beach, Calif.: Historical Society of Long Beach, 2003), 8–17; and Walter H. Case, *History of Long Beach and Vicinity*, Metropolitan America series (1923; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1974), 521–22.

³⁷ Long Beach Chamber of Commerce, *Long Beach Telegram* (Calif.), 1923, p. 22, item 21, box 2, Long Beach Ephemera, Special Collections, University Library, California State University Long Beach.



Fig. 4. "Fore Court Looking Towards the Chutes." *Luna Park: The Electric City by the Sea*.

1895. The proprietors charged a single admission price that allowed visitors to enjoy all the entertainments without paying additional fees. It had one of the first rollercoasters with a loop that flipped passengers upside down. The ride was called the Flip Flap Rollercoaster. Another amusement, the Old Mill Boat Ride, took passengers through a dark tunnel filled with historical and scary tableaux. The tunnel was so dark that young unmarried couples needed to be chaperoned while riding.³⁸ In 1903, Sea Lion Park reopened as Luna Park, which billed itself as "By Day a Paradise—At Night Arcadia." The focal point of the twenty-two-acre park was the Kaleidoscope Tower covered in twenty thousand incandescent lights that changed color every second. Visitors could choose wild animal shows, a dog and monkey circus, a Chinese Theater, a bamboo slice, or a grand casino to spend their time in.³⁹ Then there was Steeplechase Park constructed around a steeplechase horse ride. In 1904, the park expanded to include a pier topped

³⁸Phalen, *Coney Island*, 91–93.

³⁹ Phalen, *Coney Island*, 111–113; *Luna Park: The Electric City by the Sea*, and *Luna Park: The Heart of Coney Island, All World's Amusement Exposition Opening May 2nd 1903*, both housed in the Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, New York.

with a three-story bathing pavilion with two thousand changing rooms.⁴⁰ Dreamland, opening in 1904, tried to attract upper-class patrons by charging a higher price and designing the park as a spacious, elite retreat. The park stressed the sharp physical contrast between its open grounds and congested Manhattan, where the richer guests of Dreamland lived. But it still had the requisite amusements: the canals of Venice, the Submarine Boat, a trip through Switzerland, and dances in the grand ballroom.⁴¹

Visitors who paid the initial entrance fee to get into the amusement parks and pleasure piers considered them more respectable and safer than other public areas. Outside the parks, licentiousness, gambling, drinking, and prostitution thrived. Inside the park, visitors could forget what existed outside the gates and enjoy their time in a fantasyland. Many beachside communities and resorts tried to make the spaces outside the piers and parks marketable to the same white middle-class visitors that frequented places like Dreamland.

To keep up respectability, beach communities scrutinized behavior. For instance, the Santa Monica City Council was concerned with alcohol consumption, and in 1917 the city council passed an ordinance that made serving liquor at dancehalls or cafes and restaurants illegal.⁴² Venice Pier got into trouble in 1911 because some vendors were serving liquor after 1 a.m. The report to the Venice trustees read:

Your committee further reports, upon reliable information, that the ordinances require the close of the sale of liquors of One o'clock A.M. of each day, and that in order to evade said provisions the said Ship Hotel and Auditorium, as the hour approaches, sends their waiters among their patrons to inform them that if they wish to secure further liquors they should order the same before that time, which

⁴⁰ Phalen, *Coney Island*, 95. 100.

⁴¹ Phalen, *Coney Island*, 121; and *Seeing Coney Island of Today: An Illustrated Guide and Souvenir* (New York: Cupples and Lean Publishers, 1904), in the Brooklyn Historical Society.

⁴² Ordinance no. 44, 28 February 1917, folder 1916–1918, ordinances 1–75, Santa Monica City Ordinances, Santa Monica History Museum, California.

is equivalent to an invitation to such patrons to secure additional supply of liquor to be drunk after the hour of closing has expired, thereby permitting, on many occasions, all night orgies by people feeling so disposed.

Venice Beach then made it illegal in 1912 for women to sing in public in cafes.⁴³ In fact, the Venice Beach chief of police made to the Board of Trustees a monthly report on the “moral status of the city” that detailed incidents of prostitution, gambling, and drinking in the city.⁴⁴

The behavior of women caused the greatest anxiety for beach resorts and communities trying to offer respectable leisure. Women’s public leisure and mixed-sex leisure was relatively new, and a fear existed about women behaving badly in the public sphere. Women wage-earners began participating in public leisure in greater numbers beginning in 1870. According to historian Kathy Peiss, “the perception of leisure as a separate sphere of independence, youthful pleasure, and mixed-sex fun, in opposition to the world of obligation and toil was supported by women’s experiences in the workplace. The workplace reinforced the wage-earners interest in having a good time.” At Coney Island, young working women could take time away from the drudgery of everyday life by dancing, swimming, and flirting. One Coney Island author described these young women as having “little coquettish ways which are quite pleasing to the loungers of the beach, [they] are by no means averse to making new acquaintances.”⁴⁵ The city manager

⁴³ Venice, California, report, 18 September 1911, folder 13-2, Venice Petitions, January 1911–September 1911, box cc-01-5002, Venice Collections, LACA; and Marshall to Board of Trustees, 14 October 1912, folder 34-1, May 1909–June 1915, box cc-01-513, Chief of Police Reports to the Board of Trustees, Venice Collections, LACA.

⁴⁴ Marshal to Board of Trustees, 30 June 1913, folder 34-1, May 1909–June 1915, box cc-01-513, Police of Chief Reports to the Board of Trustees, Venice Collection, LACA. Such anxieties about women at these resorts went far beyond the boardwalk as discussed more in chapters 2 and 3.

⁴⁵ Phalen, *Coney Island*, 131; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1986), 35, 115; and Fox, *Coney Island Frolics*, 8.

of Venice Beach reported in 1923 that he worried about the behavior of women at the Casino Dance Hall on Center Street Pier. He reported, “My attention has been called to the drunkenness of numerous dancers and to the lewd manner in which women were dancing.”⁴⁶ Middle-class women exercised autonomy as well when on vacation at one of these beach parks or piers. They engaged in competitive and physical activities such as bowling or billiards, that were generally reserved for men.

African Americans were barred from many beach resorts, whether by law or by an unofficial color line. At Coney Island, African Americans were subjected to de facto segregation that was more rigid in the gated amusement parks. In Atlantic City, African American visitors were not allowed on the boardwalk, had one beach area they could swim at, and were confined to segregated areas in restaurants and in movie theaters. At Belmar Beach, also in New Jersey, along the boardwalk black patrons were served with separate cups and plates and the movie theaters were segregated. Black visitors were barred from downtown Miami, Florida, and segregation laws banned them from the nicest beaches and resorts throughout the American South.⁴⁷ Even in California, where many African Americans found prosperity, they were excluded from many beaches and resort areas regardless of California’s antisegregation laws.⁴⁸

Even if African Americans chose to visit amusement parks and boardwalks, it was clear that they were not welcome. White visitors to Coney Island could act out any

⁴⁶ City Manager’s Weekly Report, 9 October 1923, p. 2, folder 28-1, City Manager’s Reports to the Board of Trustees, box cc-01-5013, Venice Collection, LACA.

⁴⁷ Phalen, *Coney Island*, 47; Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*, 13, 69; “Jim Crow Dishes’ for Negro Patrons is Latest Addition at Jersey Resort,” *Pittsburgh (Pa.) Courier*, 12 September 1928; Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 15–17; and Gregory W. Bush, *White Sand, Black Beach: Civil Rights, Public Space, and Miami’s Virginia Key* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 6, 7, 43.

⁴⁸ Marne L. Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles: Class, Gender, and Community, 1850–1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 4, 5; and Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 271–72.

prejudice they chose by playing racist games on the piers and boardwalk. Shooting games had Turkish people, Frenchmen, Prussians, and others as targets. One particularly offensive and aggressive game was called “Kill the Coon” or African Dodger, in which a black man, or a white man in black face, put his head through a canvas screen and the public tried to hit him with baseballs. “African Dodger” was specifically listed as a business run at Venice Pier in 1911.⁴⁹ Young’s New Million Dollar Pier at Coney Island advertised “Emmett Welch and His Minstrels,” boasting that “Welch’s Minstrels are favorably known all over the United States, and include some of the most famous men engaged in the black face art. . . . Fun galore for young and old prevails in their entertainment, and Welch’s Minstrels number their friends by [the] thousand, who never fail to see them in their summer engagement on the pier.⁵⁰ Atlantic City encouraged its white visitors to attend a “genuine negro cakewalk” on the pier. Cakewalk shows were popular in turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States as a form of minstrelsy, although the cakewalk was rooted in black American slave culture. Brooke Baldwin writes that the purpose “was to portray cakewalking blacks as buffoons who could never take the final step, no matter how high-kicking into white culture and high society.”⁵¹ Like minstrel shows, the cakewalk shows were derisive caricatures of African Americans created for the amusement of white audiences. Holding them at beach resorts was a clear indication to African American visitors that they were unwelcome.

⁴⁹ Phalen, *Coney Island*, 47; and “List of Business on the Venice Pier—August 27th 1911,” folder 13-2, Venice Petitions, January 1911–September 1911, box cc-01-5002, Venice Collections, LACA.

⁵⁰ “Young’s New Million Dollar Pier, Amusements for the Summer Season 1921,” HT Atlantic City Piers and Attractions, HT Cities and Towns, Aberdeen-Avon, New Jersey Uncatalogued Pamphlets, Special Collections, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

⁵¹ Brooke Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (December 1981): 207. For more on black face performances in U.S. history, see Brian Roberts, *Black Face Nation: Reform, Race, and Identity in American Popular Music, 1812–1925* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2017).



Fig. 5. "Man and Woman on Beach." Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905–1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Because of this widespread discrimination, African Americans founded and patronized their own resorts with similar kinds of amusements that could be found at places like Coney Island, Atlantic City, and Santa Monica. Bishop Robert E. Jones of the African Methodist Episcopal Church owned and operated a black retreat, founded in 1923 based on the Chautauqua Assemblies model in Gulf Port, Mississippi.⁵² Charles Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass, founded a resort for African Americans at Highland

⁵² Karhl, *The Land was Ours*, 52, 60.

Beach, Maryland, in the 1890s after he and his family were not allowed to rent bathing suits while visiting Bay Ridge Beach, Maryland. By 1927, Highland Beach was considered one of “the most exclusive and beautiful resorts in this section of the country.” The beach was lined with large cottages built by wealthy African Americans. Two hotels operated in what was considered first-class style, hosting open forums and lectures for guests. The resort owners planned to build tennis courts, a playground, and an illuminated walkway to the beach.⁵³ Barrett Beach, in Port Monmouth, New Jersey, opened in 1925. It was to be a new Coney Island where there was no segregation, restriction, or discrimination because of race. Barrett Beach boasted the same amenities as any white beach with dancing, music, and refreshments with the added benefits of southern cooking and “Negro League” baseball. Barrett Beach intended “to shower the colored citizen with its blessed peacefulness and Heavenly grandeur, its balmy climate, its lovely views, its perfect bathing, its 1,000 feet of clean sandy beach.”⁵⁴

Even in their own purportedly peaceful spaces, African American beachgoers endured harassment. Just after Barrett Beach opened, a ten-foot burning cross appeared on the beach scaring the seven-hundred visitors.⁵⁵ Located between Huntington Beach and Newport Beach in Southern California, the Pacific Beach Club burnt down under suspicious circumstances in 1926. The club, which included a club house, a bathing

⁵³ “Spurred by Denial of Bathing Suit, Son of Frederick Douglass Finds Highland Beach,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 September 1939; and “Highland Beach Is styled Best Resort,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 September 1927.

⁵⁴ “Barrett Beach,” advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 May 1925; “Charter Your Excursion Boats through Barrett Beach, Inc.,” advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 June 1925; “Mrs. B. Barrett Discusses Objects of Beach,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 April 1925; “New Bathing Beach and Resorts Rivals Coney Island,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 September 1924; and Mark S. Foster, “In the Face of ‘Jim Crow’: Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel, and Outdoor Leisure, 1890–1945,” *Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 2 (Spring 1999):137.

⁵⁵ “Burning Cross Scared 700 Citizens at Beach,” *Chicago Defender*, 8 August 1925.

pavilion, and dance hall, catered to African Americans in Orange County, California, who had few places, if any, where they could enjoy the beach. Before it burned down, “citizens of Los Angeles, neighboring white beach clubs, a railway and even state authorities threw obstacles in the path of the development.” Orange County supervisors tried to have the seven-acre property condemned before the fire and attempted to condemn it again after the fire. The *Chicago Defender* argued that the fire was set at the Pacific Beach Club specifically so that Orange County officials could condemn the property.⁵⁶ But African American vacationers were resilient, using the *Negro Motorist Green Book* to find safe places to vacation, building private resorts, and demanding access to safe beaches throughout the twentieth century.

Swimming, Sand, and Sun

The bathhouse loomed large in the beachgoers’ experience. Bathhouses, or large buildings full of dressing rooms and baths, and with beach access, were essential to the function of both beach resorts and public beaches. Bathhouses offered visitors a place to rent bathing costumes, get changed, and store their valuables. Some places had their own swimming pools and indoor plunges. The nicest bathhouses, or bathing pavilions, also had restaurants, gardens, and other amusements. In many places the bathhouse was both the figurative and literal entrance to the beach.

⁵⁶ “Pacific Coast Resort Guttled by Fire; Whites Who Made Threats Are Blamed,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 January 1926; “Inquiry Begun in Club Blaze,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1926; and Foster, “Prosperous Blacks and Vacations,” 140. The fourth chapter of this dissertation explores more fully African American experiences at public beaches in the United States, focusing heavily on black Americans’ activism to access safe public beaches.

Early bathhouses were simple wooden structures with a few changing rooms and bathing suit rentals. By the mid-nineteenth century, most Americans did not own a bathing suit, so renting one at the local bathhouse was an easy and inexpensive way to enjoy a day at the beach. Swimming had long been the domain of working-class boys and men throughout the nineteenth century. They swam in rivers, lakes, and bays that surrounded most American cities. They swam in the nude, they swore, they fought, and they evaded authority. Eventually, they created a masculine swim culture that excluded women. One of the main reasons women could not participate in this swim culture was that they lacked the appropriate garments. Although men and boys could swim naked, women could not. As historian Jeff Wiltse put it: men's nudity was a nuisance, but women's nudity was taboo.⁵⁷ Most of this swimming took place at lakes, rivers, and local swimming holes. "Bathing" for medical reasons took place at the seashore. "Sea bathing," popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, meant little more than immersion in cold or warm seawater which both men and women underwent for a variety of health reasons. As seaside resorts began to open to serve the growing vacationing public, the lines between bathing and swimming began to blur.⁵⁸ The bathhouse made finding appropriate clothing for mixed-sex bathing and swimming that much easier.

The first "proper" bathhouse at Coney Island was Venderveer's Bathing Pavilion, which was owned and operated by Lucy Vanderveer. She had begun her career at Coney Island, operating a small fruit and confectionary stand in the plaza of the Neptune House

⁵⁷ Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 9, 14.

⁵⁸ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 14, 15; Allen, *Swimming with Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale*, 224; and Chaline, *Strokes of Genius*, 138–39, 149.

hotel. She took the money made from her fruit stand and purchased twelve small bathing shacks, or individual bathhouses, on the beach. By the next year, she had purchased seventy-five individual bathhouses, and then increased that number to two hundred. In 1875, she opened a hotel called the Vanderveer House followed shortly by the Vanderveer Bathing Pavilion. This large bathhouse could accommodate up to five-hundred bathers, kept a large safe for bathers' valuables, had warm salt-water baths, a restaurant, a bar, and reception parlors.⁵⁹

Upper-class visitors to Manhattan Beach's bathhouse, several miles to the east of Vanderveer's, considered it one of the best bathing establishments in the country.

According to one writer,

The bathing-house has a frontage of five hundred and twenty feet, and comprises sixteen hundred and fifty dressing-rooms for gentlemen, and six hundred rooms for ladies. All these rooms are constructed of the best hard wood, tastefully painted inside and out, and all are supplied with running water and gas. The gentlemen's pavilion is a three-story structure, measuring eighty-four by one hundred and thirty feet; the ladies' pavilion is the same height, and measures eighty-four by forty-five feet. Between the two is a spacious amphitheatre, with seats for two hundred persons, who are thus afforded a view of the bathers and the ocean. Concerts are given in the amphitheatre daily, and the beach in front is reserved exclusively for bathers, who, in entering the water and emerging, are thus protected from intrusion and spectators.⁶⁰

A year later, another author in *Scribner's Magazine* wrote that Manhattan Beach's bathing pavilion "is picturesque and has unheard-of conveniences in the way of security, privacy, foot-tubs, and plate-glass mirrors."⁶¹ The Brighton Beach Bathing Pavilion, also in Coney Island, had 1,230 rooms on the second floor and could accommodate over 6,000

⁵⁹ Stockwell, *A History of the Town of Gravesend; and Coney Island: An Illustrated Guide to the Sea*, 22.

⁶⁰ *The Story of Manhattan Beach*, 36.

⁶¹ "To Coney Island," 359.

bathers in one day. The bathhouse could rent out as many as 12,000 bathing suits and 30,000 towels a day.⁶²



Fig. 6. "Entrance to Bath House, Long Beach, California, 9 September 1907. California Postcard Collection, box ten, University of California, Los Angeles.

The West Coast had its own luxurious bathhouses for visitors too. In the 1890s, two large bathhouses, North Beach and Arcadia, served the communities of Santa Monica and Ocean Park (before Venice Beach was even an idea in Abbott Kinney's mind). The North Beach Bathhouse remodeled in 1894 and reopened to the public with 50 heated bathtubs and 300 dressing rooms. A broad veranda running the length of the building opened up to the first floor's main entrance. Opposite the side with the 300 dressing rooms was a reception room and ballroom. On the second floor was a restaurant complete

⁶² *Coney Island: An Illustrated Guide to the Sea*, 52.

with a kitchen, three dining rooms, and a view of the ocean. Men got their haircut and beards trimmed at the barbershop and ladies had their nails done at the “manicure parlor.” After freshening up, everyone could stand for a souvenir portrait taken at the photography studio, also located at the bathhouse.⁶³ The Long Beach Bathhouse, the original shining star of the Pike, could serve 2,000 bathers a day between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. With 550 dressing rooms, on the first day of its opening when only 300 were available to use, Charles R. Drake said, “The rush has been so great that because of the lack of dressing room accommodations we have three times had to stop the sale of bath tickets.”⁶⁴ The Ocean Park Bathhouse, opening in 1905, took eighteen months and \$185,000 to build. The *Los Angeles Times* described its best features: “The private tubs are of fine porcelain. . . . The dressing rooms are convenient and so roomy there need be no crowding. The galleries will accommodate a large number of spectators, each seat commanding an unobstructed view of the plunge.”⁶⁵

Renting a clean, dry bathing suit was the ultimate luxury. The laundry at the Manhattan Beach Bath House was “the most wonderful laundry ever heard of.”⁶⁶ “In the old times at Coney Island,” wrote one visitor to Manhattan Beach, “if a visitor wanted to bathe, he was provided with a suit that was still wet from previous use, with towels in a clammy state of moisture.”⁶⁷ Another said: “We had been accustomed to ones [towels] that were damp if not actually wet. . . . So it was with the bathing suits. We had fancied it essential that they should be clammy and certain to strike a chill to our spinal columns

⁶³ “Opened Today: The New North Beach Bath-house at Santa Monica,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 June 1894.

⁶⁴ Alfred Dezenorf, “In Sunshine and Surf,” *Sunset Magazine*, December 1902, 152; and “Thirty Thousand Went to Long Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 July 1902.

⁶⁵ “Laving [sic] Place to Open Soon,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 1905.

⁶⁶ *The Story of Manhattan Beach*, 37.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

when we put them on.”⁶⁸ But the Manhattan Beach Bath House had twenty thousand fresh towels and twelve thousand clean bathing suits to rent. Two conveyer belts moved used and wet bathing suits to the laundry where they were washed and dried, and pneumatic tubes sent the clean suits from the laundry to the distributing department, where they could be rented out again. The Brighton Beach Bathing Pavilion also had an extensive laundry with ninety-three steam dryers and ten large centrifugal wringer machines. It only took twenty minutes to wash and dry a suit from start to finish.⁶⁹

Without access to a bathhouse, there was no way for beachgoers to reach the beach. A safe bathhouse for renting a bathing suit, storing valuables and belongings, and changing back into street clothes was essential for a happy day at the beach. Wearing bathing suits on the boardwalk or on the street was generally illegal, as was changing clothes in automobiles later, so the bathhouse in some ways offered the only access for swimming at the beach.⁷⁰ Particularly for African Americans vacationing during Jim Crow, accessible bathhouses offered a haven at segregated beaches. For instance, Wall’s Bath House in Atlantic City served African American patrons for twenty-five years before closing in 1925. It rented bathing suits and offered lounging under a pavilion, but it was also the center of the African American community in Atlantic City. Without Wall’s there was no place for African Americans to rent a bathing suit, change their clothes, access the beach, and meet people. Elijah Hodge, writing for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, said “With the closing of Wall’s comes the apparently reasonable excuse to put

⁶⁸ Ralph, “Coney Island,” 12.

⁶⁹ *The Story of Manhattan Beach*, 37; and *Coney Island: An Illustrated Guide to the Sea*, 52.

⁷⁰ Chapter 2, “Bathing Suit Wars” explains more deeply the politics and anxiety surrounding bathing suits on streets and boardwalks.

them [African Americans] off the boardwalk altogether.”⁷¹ At Long Branch, New Jersey, Mrs. C. C. Dixon ran a bathhouse for black beachgoers for fourteen years; an average of four thousand people patronized her bathhouse on summer weekends. Willa Bruce purchased property in Manhattan Beach, California, and opened a bathhouse and dining room for African American visitors. It operated for twelve years.⁷² These places became centers of communities, hosting dances and parties, bringing the African American community closer together, but unfortunately drawing the attention of disapproving white neighbors.⁷³

When visitors had rented their bathing suits and changed their clothes in a bathhouse, swimming and sunning were the order of the day. Even with all the boardwalks, rollercoasters, and concessions, the beach and the ocean were still the main attractions. Writing from Coney Island in 1874, Charles D. Shanly observed: “During the summer months vast numbers of people are daily to be seen bathing all along the stretches of this beach. Out from the bathing-houses come tumbling, indiscriminately, men, women, and children, all of them disguised beyond any possibility in their ‘wild attire.’”⁷⁴ *Heston’s Handbook* from Atlantic City declared: “The sea is a source of endless delight. The bathing in the pure surf, free from every defilement, is superb, and its invigorating pleasures are enjoyed by nearly all except the weakest of invalid visitors. Even those who do not bathe find pleasure in sitting under big umbrellas on the beach,

⁷¹ Elijah Hodges, “George Wall’s Bath House, Famous Atlantic City Lounging Resort, Passes,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 August 1925.

⁷² Edgar T. Bouzeau, “Open All Long Branch Beaches to Negroes: Dixon Beach Fight Results in Decree Beneficial to Race,” *Pittsburgh (Pa.) Courier*, 9 July 1938; and Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 272.

⁷³ Chapter 4, “Dangerous Waters,” chronicles the battles African Americans fought for access to safe and public beaches.

⁷⁴ Shanly, “Coney Island,” 309.

and watching the antics of those who are tumbling in the surf.”⁷⁵ Southern California had the added benefit of beaches open and accessible all year long: “Even in the midwinter, when the beaches on the Atlantic coast are deserted, numerous visitors may be seen at the Southern California resorts on a Sunday or holiday, enjoying a dip in the surf or gathering ocean treasures on the shining sands.”⁷⁶



Fig. 7. "A Group of Bathers." Atlantic City (NP, 1900). A Copy can be found in the Rutgers University Library.

For white visitors to beaches, there was a sense of democratic pleasure once men and women were in their bathing suits and in the sand. Since everyone wore the same unflattering wool bathing suits and generally looked disheveled and dirty getting in and out of the water, many sources remarked that the boundaries separating class and gender, while not disappearing completely, faded. One seaside guide reminded beachgoers: “The cynical may here insinuate that the emergence from the waves cannot, from the

⁷⁵ “Summer Days by the Sea,” *Heston’s Handbook*, 58.

⁷⁶ “At the Seaside Resorts,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1895.

necessities of the case, be as graceful or dignified as was the descent, and truth compels us to admit that dry clothes do make a difference. However, where there are hundred at hand in the predicament, what does one care for the clinging of wet bathing-clothes, especially when the excitement of the bath has caused a quicker flow of blood, and raised the spirits to a delightful exhilaration.”⁷⁷ Another guidebook explained: “Appearances are so deceptive that it would never be safe to judge the size of a man’s bank account by the clothes that he has on—especially if it is a bathing suit. Men whose talents have made them famous throughout the land—judges, lawyers, and ministers—arrayed in a suit of blue and white, mingle daily with the other bathers, ignorant of who they are and regardless of their social standing. It is no uncommon sight to see men eminent in their callings busily engaged in scooping up bucketfuls of sand for children whom they chance meet upon the beach.”⁷⁸ The same went for the fashionable resort of Palm Beach, Florida. According to one writer, “the Beach is not prized by Palm Beach visitors because of its bathing facilities, but because of the perfect spirit of camaraderie and democracy which reigns there. A Philadelphia Biddle is just as apt as not to come along and accidentally rub damp sand on a South Bend Smith. Anything may happen. A Vanderbilt may ask you what time it is. . . . The beach is only place in Palm Beach where everybody has an equal chance; and there everybody uses the same ocean and sits around in the same sand.”⁷⁹

To observers in the late nineteenth century, beachgoers looked ridiculous: “Men lie wallowing for hours in the sand,” said the *Atlantic Monthly*, “in which they roll like wild beasts, rubbing it madly into their hair, and plastering themselves all over with it.”

⁷⁷ *Traitor’s Guide Book*

⁷⁸ “Summer Days by the Sea,” *Heston’s Handbook*, 59.

⁷⁹ Kenneth L. Roberts, *Sun Hunting* (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1922), 31–32.

Women “flap about the water and scream like fowls to which that element is natural.”⁸⁰ Yet during the “bathing hour” from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. each day, thousands of people ventured out to the sand to sit, swim, and watch. The boardwalks and piers were not just for promenading but were perfect spots to sit and watch the merry bathers in the ocean. Manhattan Beach had a two-hundred-seat amphitheater for people to sit and watch others



Fig. 8. "In the Surf." J. Murray Jordan, *Atlantic City* (Philadelphia, Pa.: np, 1897).

swim in the ocean. People would pay an admission fee to watch “the feats of swimmers, the clumsiness of beginners and the ludicrous mishaps of the never-absent stout persons.”⁸¹

Swimming was the adventure everyone wrote home about. Entering the water for the first time and learning to swim a little bit, were noteworthy events to tell friends and family back home. Ida Middleton wrote her brother, Robert, in Peoria, Illinois, from

⁸⁰ Shanly, “Coney Island,” 309.

⁸¹ *Atlantic City*, Passenger Department, summer 1898; “Boardwalk and Strand,” *Heston’s Handbook*, 64; *The Story of Manhattan Beach*, 35; and Fox, *Coney Island Frolics*, 36.

Long Beach, California, in 1923: “Hello Robert, ‘come on in the water’s fine!’ Can’t you persuade mother and Auntie to bring you and David to Calif[ornia]? You would have a great time in the surf. I know because I’ve tried it.”⁸² Another woman wrote home to Marysville, Kansas, to say “this is my first trip to the ocean and I am surely loving every minute of the time.”⁸³ A more experienced swimmer at Asbury Park, New Jersey, wrote home to say: “I am having a dandy time. Wish you were here. The surf bathing is fine. I swim way out beyond the ropes and dive under the waves. Oh boy.” And another visitor wrote: “The breakers are fine. It is quite warm, and there is a great crowd in bathing. Wish you were here to enjoy it.”⁸⁴

There was a sense that women would be timid going into the ocean for the first time. *Taintor’s Guide* directed men “to escort a lady into the surf, at midday, with as much propriety and grace as he can display in leading her to a place in the ballroom that evening.” It warned men “that many ladies, especially such as have come to the sea-side as invalids . . . look with real terror upon the incoming breakers; and to drag them into the waves as they come roaring toward the beach is simply an act of cruelty which may cause harm instead of good. One act of thoughtless, and perhaps kindly-meant rough seas, may prostrate the nervous system.”⁸⁵ This may have been true for some women, but many others took to the ocean fearlessly, “strong swimmers, too, striking out boldly a good

⁸² Ida Middleton to Robert Owen, postcard, “Ocean Front, Long Beach, California,” 5 September 1923, box 10, California Postcard Collection, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles [hereafter box ten, postcards, UCLA]

⁸³ Katherine (no last name) to George Schmidt, postcard, “Bath House by Night, Long Beach, Cal.” 25 September 1914, box ten, postcards, UCLA.

⁸⁴ Postcard to Leslie Capo, “Greetings from Asbury Park,” 7 August 1928, and Postcard to Lydia Robinson, “Boardwalk as Asbury Park, 11 August 1925, both in box 21, Monmouth County, Allenhurst-Asbury Park (part), Postcards: New Jersey, Pictorial Collection, Rutgers University.

⁸⁵ *Trainer’s Guidebook*

distance from the beach.”⁸⁶ Nathalie Anderson Sawyer, writing for *Sunset*, recalled her trip to the beach in 1900: “I have learned to swim! Are you turning green with envy? The bathing here is so fine There are no big breakers except after a storm . . . and if you are not a ‘fraid-cat you can’t help learning to swim. How I do enjoy it, and hope to continue it.”⁸⁷



Fig. 8. "Interior of the Long Beach Plunge, New Year's Day," California Postcard Collection, box ten, special collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

In Southern California especially, beachgoers could swim at one of the bathhouses’ plunges instead of in the ocean. Possibly because the Pacific Ocean can be cold and rough, or due to polluted waters, bathhouse owners built large indoor swimming pools filled with heated seawater. The first swimming pools originated in the nineteenth century as municipal baths for working-class city dwellers. Cities such as Boston and Philadelphia built them to promote cleanliness and middle-class values in parts of the city

⁸⁶ Shanly, “Coney Island,” 309.

⁸⁷ Nathalie Anderson Sawyer, “A Girl’s Visit to Santa Barbara,” *Sunset Magazine*, December 1900, 50.

where bathing facilities were not readily available.⁸⁸ These plunges differed considerably and were more akin to the early indoor swimming pools built for private fitness and social clubs. These plunges were privately owned but not run as private clubs. If a swimmer could afford the entrance fee, then they were allowed to swim. In 1894, the North Beach Bathhouse opened two large plunges, one for men and one for women and children. Unlike sea bathing, plunge swimming was sex segregated. Historian Jeff Wiltse explains that all early swimming pools separated men and women due to the rowdiness of male swim culture and the “visual and physical intimacy” that accompanied swimming.⁸⁹ Men and women clearly saw swimming in a pool and swimming in the ocean as two very different social activities. At the North Beach Bathhouse, the men’s plunge was larger, from four to fourteen feet deep, while the women’s and children’s plunge was only two-and-half to four-feet deep. It was refilled with fresh water seven days a week.⁹⁰ The same went for the two plunges at Coronado Beach in San Diego. A warm plunge, heated to eighty-four degrees, offered a place where “babies, men and women sport, and frolic all day long jumping down the toboggan-slide, riding bucking broncos and shouting with laughter.”⁹¹ In 1908, Abbott Kinney and the Venice of America Amusement Company built “the largest salt water plunge in the world” with 660 dressing rooms and a seating

⁸⁸ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 9, 15.

⁸⁹ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 3, 15.

⁹⁰ “Open Today: The New North Beach Bath-house at Santa Monica,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 June 1894; and North Beach Bath House, advertisement, *Santa Monica (Calif.) Daily Outlook*, 9 August 1899. The Ocean Park Plunge also had separate plunges for men and women. Interestingly, beachgoing was a coed activity, but swimming, through the 1910s could sometimes be sex segregated. “Laving Place to Open Soon,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 1905.

⁹¹ “Coronado Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 January 1899.

gallery for spectators. The pool could hold 426,625 gallons and had a depth from three to twelve feet. Two hundred electric lights illuminated the pool for night swimming.⁹²

To compete with Abbott Kinney's massive plunge, Henry E. Huntington planned an even larger project for his beach resort of Redondo. Huntington's plunge had 1,350 dressing rooms, by far the most of any other plunge or bathhouse in the Los Angeles area, 62 tub baths, and could accommodate 2,000 bathers at one time. The plunge itself was 278 feet long and 107 feet wide and divided into three separate pools. One was for children at a depth of just one to two feet, the second for high divers and "fancy swimmers," and the third for the general swimmer. Like the other plunges, the water at the Redondo Beach plunge was very warm; the saltwater was heated to eighty-six degrees.⁹³ The plunges were advertised as safe, hygienic, and convenient places to swim. No one seemed to think it strange that these huge pools full of saltwater sat at the edge of the ocean. Other beaches and resorts had swimming pools for visitors, but they were built later in the mid-twentieth century when both private swimming pools and public municipal pools became more numerous. For instance, in the 1930s Montauk Beach built a 150-foot saltwater pool near the bathing pavilion and Jones Beach in New York opened several swimming pools in 1931.⁹⁴ None though were as large or as numerous as the pools in Southern California.

⁹² "Mammoth Plunge at Venice to Be Opened," *Santa Monica (Calif.)* 24 April 1908; "Begins New Bath-House," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 May 1907; and "Big Plunge is Bathing Place," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 June 1908.

⁹³ "Will Heat Ocean for Great Plunge," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 November 1908; and Redondo Beach Bath House Tri-fold brochure, box 87, Redondo Beach, collection 200, California Ephemera Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁹⁴ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 3-4; *Montauk Beach: A Distinguished Summer Colony on the Slender Tip of Long Island* (New York: Montauk Beach Development Corporation, 1932); and *Jones Beach State Park Official Guide* (Long Island State Park Commission, 1931), Long Island Pamphlets, vol. 10, Brooklyn Historical Society, New York.

In Search of Fun

In 1882 the *American Queen's Dictionary of Summer Resorts* described the summer season: "To those of ample means and unlimited leisure, the going out of town implies the shutting up of winter homes, from June to October, and the resumption of social gaieties under new conditions and amid the delightful surroundings of the fashionable resorts. . . . The majority of people, however, only have a few days, or a few weeks, at most, which they can claim for their vacation, and how to get the greatest good out of the smallest outlay of time and money, requires careful study."⁹⁵ *Queen's Dictionary* listed all the possible places Americans, monied or not, could visit during the summer. All were beaches.

From the religious resorts to pleasure piers, boardwalks, and bathhouses, the beach, and all the things that went with it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, offered Americans a variety of ways to spend their leisure time. Women found themselves participating in activities at the beach that were impossible to access other places. African Americans, although barred from most resorts and boardwalks, carved out leisure spaces of their own, building community and emphasizing the importance of black leisure time. One thing all beach visitors had in common was their search for fun. "Dear Marian," said one postcard from Atlantic City in 1920, "I am on the sand with Laur[a], Alice, Marie . . . and three other friends from Yardly + [and] we are all drinking in this lovely cool breeze this hot morning. . . . If the weather stays frine we'll have a good time. This aft[ernoon] we'll go to the Million dollar pier + then see Steeplechase to slide down the slide to amuse the children." In 1948 another postcard sent to

⁹⁵ *The American Queen's Dictionary of Summer Resorts in the United States and Canada*, introduction.

Massachusetts said: “Jane and I are here from the weekend. Weather gorgeous and we are soaking up the sun. Stayed on the beach and baked our legs this afternoon.” And a last letter: “Am almost sober now. When do we have the next party!”⁹⁶

⁹⁶ “Boardwalk Looking towards Dennis, Marlborough, and Traymore Hotels, Atlantic City, N.J.,” postcard, 14 July 1920; “View Showing Brighton, Marlborough Claridge Hotels and Million Dollar Pier, Atlantic City, NJ,” postcard, 21 March 1948; “Beach Front Hotels and Piers from Garden Pier, Atlantic City, NJ,” postcard, 17 April 1922; all in Atlantic County, Atlantic City (part), postcards: New Jersey, Pictorial Collection, Special Collections, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Chapter 2: Bathing Suit Wars

Twelve June 1921 was the hottest day of the year in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Although the mercury probably reached ninety degrees, Atlantic City was likely cooler than the surrounding inland cities from where the hundred thousand beachgoers traveled that weekend.¹ But people were still sweltering as they sat on the beach. In the 1920s, the majority of bathing suits were still made of wool, with only the newest and most expensive styles being made of lighter cotton or jersey fabrics. Atlantic City had made it even more difficult for women to stay cool. During the previous summer, the city council had forbidden the one-piece women's suit and bare legs. Due to discomfort from the heat or a desire to rebel against a law they saw as unfair, many women flouted the regulations and rolled down their stockings past their knees or went into the ocean barelegged. According to the *New York Times*, "many of the suits worn by women bathers approached so close to the limit that the beach guards said it was difficult to tell where the suit stopped and the law began."²

Between 1900 and 1935, beach communities all over the country passed laws governing the manner of dress and behavior on public beaches. Some ordinances outlawed certain types of bathing suits, others regulated dress only on the public boardwalks and sidewalks near the beach, and some ordinances decreed strict rules on beach behavior, from sun bathing to lounging to public displays of affection. In some ways, the passage of such ordinances made sense. Beachgoing, in places such as Venice

¹ *Atlantic City: The World's Playground* (Atlantic City, N.J.: National City Publicity Company, 1922), 16.

² Corinne Lowe, "Bathing Suits are Chic and Serviceable Too," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 June 1921; "Nymphs Raise 'Rumpus' against Resort Laws: Wanted Are Knees and One-Piece Suits," *Ogden (Utah) Standard Examiner*, 6 July 1920; and "Atlantic City Limits Suits," *New York Times*, 13 June 1921.

Beach and Santa Monica Beach, California; Coney Island, New York; Atlantic City, New Jersey; and Waikiki Beach, Honolulu, Hawaii, were only becoming more and more popular, with thousands of people visiting each weekend in the summer. The nature of beachgoing had changed. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, men and women rarely swam or waded in the ocean. When they did so, men and women swam separately, but by the 1850s mixed bathing seemed to have become the norm at the beach, with both men and women wearing versions of streetwear.³ At the turn of the twentieth century, as women began participating in the public leisure more than ever before, their presence at the beach became more visible. As Kathy Peiss explores in *Cheap Amusements*, young women, newly entered into the workforce, went to Coney Island where they spent their meager wages, met men, and visit the beach on the weekends.⁴ Fashions, both on and off the sand, changed rapidly during these decades too. The last vestiges of Victorianism, the rigid corsets and ankle-length shirtwaist dresses, gave way to more-comfortable, and more-revealing clothing for women. Men's fashion too experienced its own changes. Sportiness reigned and clothes became more casual. Showing expanses of chest and leg

³ In eighteenth-century Britain, as spas and "taking the waters" became popular, men and women wore long linen shifts or gowns and bathed separately. The same gender separation was also evident in early swimming when young men and boys would strip and swim nude in local lakes and rivers. Women and girls were not allowed. Sex segregation in municipal swimming pools was also normal until the twentieth century. Lena Lencek and Gideon Bosker, *Making Waves: Swimsuits and the Undressing of America* (San Francisco, Calif.: Chronicle Books, 1989), 21–25; and Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 9–14.

⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1986), chapt. 4. For more on women's changing roles in urban centers at the turn of the twentieth century, see Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Hilary Hallett, *Go West Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Joanne Meyerwitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Jessica Sewell, *Women in the Everyday City: Public Space in San Francisco, 1890–1915* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Barbara Welke, *Recasting American Liberty: Gender, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution, 1865–1920* (New York: Cambridge University, 2001).

became normal instead of unseemly. City councils, boards of trustees, ministers, and some women's clubs looked saw these changes on beaches and as vulgar and indecent. They linked improper clothing to improper behavior. These groups worked in tandem to pass laws governing beach clothing and behavior to keep the beach "free from objectionable features."⁵ Yet their efforts could not stem the rising tide of public opinion and popular culture. The increased popularity of swimming, a new obsession with fashion for the middle class, and sunbathing, for both men and women, made beachgoers seek sleeker and smaller bathing suits that directly defied bathing-suit ordinances. By 1935 the strictest bans and regulations had all failed. Their failure can be blamed in part on women choosing to show their bodies in public, whether for athleticism, comfort, or beauty.⁶

Changes in bathing suit styles also mirrored changes in beauty standards, particularly for women. Simply, the ideal body type for women moved from a fuller figure to a slimmer one. In the late nineteenth century, the ideal figure consisted of a full bust, a very slim waist, and full hips; it was an exaggerated version of the "natural" figure. The figure, except the hands, feet, and waist, should be "well padded with flesh." For women, it was "better to err on the side of plumpness." The slim waist was associated with delicacy and femininity, while the full hips and bosom symbolized motherhood. The

⁵"Talks Were Based upon Beauty Lines," *Santa Monica (Calif.) Bay Outlook*, 22 August 1916.

⁶ For general histories of bathing suits, see Sarah Kennedy, *The Swimsuit: A History of Twentieth-Century Fashions* (London: Carlton Books, 2007); Christina Probert, *Swimwear in Vogue since 1910* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981); Maureen Reilly, *California Casual: Fashions, 1930s–1970s* (Atlen, Pa.: Schiffer, 2001).



Fig. 1. Fashion plate from *Godey's Lady's Book*, January 1874 showing the popular female silhouette.

Victorian matron and mother was a style icon before the Gibson Girl and the flapper made their debut.⁷

At the turn of the twentieth century, a new ideal female type began to emerge. This modern beauty had a body that was young, healthy, slim, and “actively athletic,” the Gibson Girl.⁸ She participated in activities, such as rowing, riding, bicycling, walking, gymnastics, and swimming, in moderate amounts to preserve femininity. Apart from new tennis dresses and shorter dresses for riding bicycles, women’s new athleticism did not mean fashion became more comfortable. Women’s preferred silhouette developed into a

⁷ Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 108; and Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 106–112.

⁸ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 223; and Banner, *American Beauty*, 175.

straight shape with an easier waistline. By 1911, the same year that Venice Beach passed its first bathing suit ordinance, the straight silhouette had evolved into the notorious hobble skirt, a skirt so slim fit that it kept women from taking full steps, but accentuated and made thin legs fashionable. Young women began wearing these slim-cut dresses without corsets. From there, skirts rose to the ankle and then to the mid-calf. In 1918 Paris fashion houses showed dresses with dropped waistlines. Between 1921 and 1923, hemlines fluctuated between ankle and mid-calf, before making their ascent to the knees in 1924. Additionally, according to fashion and women's historian Valerie Steel, "twenties fashion minimized the breasts, which were associated with the mature woman and mother, and emphasized the 'long,' 'straight,' 'shapely' legs, which were associated with youth."⁹

With more-revealing fashions came more scrutiny of the bodies on display. The once "voluptuous" woman of the late nineteenth century was now considered to be overweight, replaced by the distinctly thinner Gibson Girl of the turn of the century and the flapper of the 1920s. Women began dieting, depriving themselves of food, using new fat-control devices, taking medication, and undergoing surgery all to fit into slimmer-fit clothing and participate in a society that now saw being overweight as a moral failure.¹⁰ Weight was also couched in racial terms. After World War I, African American women's bodies were targeted as obese, matronly, and ugly. The ideal white woman was thin,

⁹ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 235; and Daniel Hill, *As Seen in Vogue: A Century of American Fashion in Advertising* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 22–23; and Jill Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 50.

¹⁰ Late nineteenth-century cosmetic surgery handled weight loss by removing a woman's "apron" of fat around her stomach. The abdominal "apronectomy" or "demolipectomy" for abdominal fat was developed by Dr. Howard A. Kelly in Baltimore in the 1890s. Only in the 1920s did the principles of contemporary dermolipectomy develop. Today the demolipectomy or abdominoplasty is a common cosmetic surgery procedure colloquially known as the tummy tuck. Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 231, 234.

sleek, and strong. Although men dieted as well, by the 1920s dieting became and thinness was women had bound their self-control and self-worth to dieting and thinness.¹¹

The battle for the new feminine ideal happened at the beach. Arguments over athleticism, clothing, body type, and beauty all played out at the beach. The debate surrounding what that female body should look like and how it should behave also transpired at the beach. Young women began rejecting social mores of Victorianism, as they claimed the right to vote, to work outside the home, and to live without restriction, both socially and physically. Women fought for the right to dress and act how they chose at the beach, using the bathing suit as a symbol of their hard won freedoms. The move toward more practical bathing-suit styles highlights this transition. Women who wanted to swim could not be weighed down by Victorian corsets, skirts, and stockings. The beach was the first place where showing the shoulders, a part of the body commonly called voluptuous in the nineteenth century, became a matter of practicality rather than sensuality, where bare legs made their public debut, and where the skirt first disappeared. Here, at the beach, women struggled “to move beyond cultural prescriptions of

¹¹ Susan Bardo in her essay “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture,” calls American culture’s obsession with slim, tight, and young bodies, which began at the turn of the twentieth century, the “tyranny of slenderness.” Susan Bardo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 141. For more on the history of weight loss, see Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Katharina Vester, “Regime Change: Gender, Class and the Invention of Dieting in Post-Bellum America,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 39–70; and George Vigarello, *The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). For more on surgical fat removal, see Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, 230–233. For more on the confluence of race and weight loss see, Vester, “Regime Change,” 53–54; and Jill Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 61.

femininity.” They could “both challenge and resist dominant male definitions and control of the female use of the body” in this arena.¹²

Yet women’s activities at the beach were constantly contested. Conservative all-male city councils, church groups, and those old “Victorian matrons” found the new feminine ideal antithetical to previous forms of femininity and attempted to regulate how women, and to lesser extents men, dressed while at the beach. For many of these groups, immoral dressing was only the first step toward immoral behavior, especially in the context of beachgoing where young men and young women interacted more than ever before. The issues surrounding the bathing suit were less about what it exposed and more about what that exposure would lead to. The new styles of bathing costumes “were believed by some to be matters of great consequence, not only for the individual woman but for the nation as well.”¹³

Other women must have felt an acute anxiety about showing their bodies in the new bathing-suit fashions. Bodily imperfections could no longer be hidden underneath folds of clothing or tightly laced corsets. At the turn of the twentieth century, when beauty required thinness, fashion magazines and social commentators told women to reject new fashions that would expose their “deformity and excess.” They should wear inoffensive clothing in subdued prints and colors made from “quiet fabrics.” The new bathing suits did not fit these requirements and so some women rejected them, lest they become the subjects of public humiliation and embarrassment. For many women, the

¹² Betsy Wearing, *Leisure and Feminist Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), xv, 112. For more on feminist theory on leisure, see Rosemary Deem, *All Work and No Play? The Sociology of Women and Leisure* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Open University Press, 1986).

¹³ Wearing, *Leisure and Feminist Theory*, 240; and Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performances* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 9.



Fig. 2. Black women posing in “Costumes for Vacation Wear,” for *Half Century Magazine*, a fashion magazine for black women at the turn of the twentieth century. *Half Century Magazine*, August 1919, 17.

beach became a place of intense anxiety and personal shame, which bathing suit regulations only intensified.¹⁴

For African American women and other women of color, wearing the new styles of bathing suits may have also been difficult, but for different reasons. Black women and men had been stigmatized for centuries by the color of their skin, their hair, and shape of their lips and bodies. African features had been portrayed by white society as ugly and dangerous. In white spaces, white Americans expected African Americans to walk, dress,

¹⁴ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 161; Stearns, *Fat History*, 21–23; and Vigarello, *The Metamorphoses of Fat*, 145

and comport themselves in a way that indicated subservience to whites. At the turn of the twentieth century, African American women tried to combat the perception and portrayal of themselves as hypersexual, dangerous beings through demeanor, behavior, attitudes, and clothing. Middle-class black women dressed conservatively, deliberately avoiding wearing bright colors and prints, lest their style garnered unwanted attention. When they were at the beach, these problems could manifest in several different ways. At the few integrated beaches that were not segregated, black women probably wore very conservative clothing and bathing costumes. Displaying any more of their bodies than was absolutely necessary could have been interpreted as overly sexual. At beaches segregated by law or at beaches created by African Americans for African Americans, women probably dressed very fashionably, if still conservatively. After World War I, young black women began experimenting with new cosmetics and hairstyles; their visibility hinted at the possibility of more personal freedom for them. This new sense of freedom probably extended to the beach, where black women began to feel more comfortable with wearing the new abbreviated swimsuits on integrated beaches like those in California and parts of New Jersey.¹⁵

¹⁵ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 154, 168, 190; Nowile M. Rooks, *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9, 11; and Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 31–35. For more on the symbolism of African American fashion, see Carol Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); and Jasmine Sanders, "A Black Legacy, Wrapped Up in Fur," *New York Times*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/style/fur-black-women-history.html>.



Fig. 2. "Bathing Suit Fashions," *Vogue Magazine*, July 1899

Before the Beach Babe

The bathing suit of the nineteenth century was a shockingly impractical and dangerous garment for women. At the turn of the twentieth century, men wore fitted tank tops and above-the-knee shorts made from cotton or opaque wool. In contrast, women wore outfits more similar in cut and design to their everyday clothing. Generally before 1910, women wore ankle-length skirts, shortened just four to six inches from their normal dresses, stockings, a chemise, a blouse, and probably a corset.¹⁶ Many early beachgoers wore homemade bathing costumes or older clothing repurposed for swimming. "In old times," wrote one New Jersey beach observer, "a pair of overalls and perhaps a jumper for the

¹⁶ Patricia Campbell Warner, "Clothing as Barrier: American Women in the Olympics, 1900–1920," *Dress* 24 (1997): 56, 59; Mary A. Taft, "Out of Door Sports for Girls: Swimming, a Healthful Exercise," *The American Magazine* 6, no. 7 (1893): 282–83; and Hester Winthrop, "Time to Think of Swimming Suits," *Chicago Women's Press*, 17 May 1919.

men and a calico wrapper for the women were considered quite correct for bathing attire.”¹⁷ Until 1900 these swimming costumes, as they were more popularly known, were serviceable for the types of activities popular at the beach, such as wading in the ocean, “surf bathing,” or just getting their feet wet. At the new beach resorts and boardwalks popping up on both coasts, going to the beach was not necessarily the major draw for visitors. People enjoyed fishing, boat rides, or strolling along the various piers and boardwalks as much as or more than going to the beach itself for a swim. Visitors did not need a bathing costume for any of these activities.¹⁸

The growth in popularity of swimming for men and women changed all this. Advocates of swimming as healthful exercise and amateur female swimmers first called for a change to the old style of bathing costume. In an article for *The American Magazine* in 1893, Mary A. Taft argued for the virtues of swimming for women but found the current bathing costumes inadequate for the practice. “A good old-fashioned bathing suit of blue flannel is warm, serviceable and always looks well,” she wrote, “but its absorbent qualities are against it.” Taft recommended that women learn to swim in the outfit of an expert female swimmer: regular equestrian tights, black and footed, French flannel skirt and blouse (it dries in twenty minutes, easily packable, and will not shrink!), and shoes or sandals. Yet, she also warned her readers that expert swimmers always swim barefoot and that it was “better always to learn to swim without a skirt if possible.” The skirted

¹⁷ “Salt Water Day, New Style,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1904.

¹⁸ Peter B. Kyne, “Sunshine & Seabreeze, Inc.,” *Sunset*, July 1911, 3–18; “Coney Island’s Big Crowd,” *New York Times*, 5 July 1894; “Smiling Atlantic City,” *New York Times*, 9 February 1896; and “Sunday at the Sea-Shore: Long Beach and Coney Island Have a Great Day,” *New York Times*, 23 August 1880. For more on the development of seaside pleasure parks and boardwalks, see John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History, 1750–1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983); and Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

bathing costume clung to women's leg and made swimming more difficult. A few years later, an article in *Women's Life* published in 1897 called this style of bathing suit "cumbersome," although this term could be applied generally to women's fashions of the early twentieth century.¹⁹

As women moved toward less-restrictive clothing in their everyday lives, female athletes began advocating for a practical suit for swimming that was both comfortable and modest. To do so, female athletes first had to prove that exercise did not diminish or destroy their femininity.²⁰ Education reformers first made this argument in the 1830s when they initially advocated for physical education and exercise for women. The first published exercise book for American women was a course on calisthenics. It argued that upper-class women needed exercise to develop strength for the increased requirements of female education. The book detailed exercises to help with proper posture, to "unify strength and beauty," and instructions for how to jump in case of emergencies.²¹ Calisthenics was the most popular form of exercise for women through the 1850s, with gymnastics becoming increasingly popular by the 1880s, when two new gymnastics schools for women opened: Sargent's School of Physical Education in Cambridge,

¹⁹ Taft, "Out of Door Sports for Girls," 282–283; "The Improved Bathing Costume and the Way to Make it," *Women's Life* 7 no. 85 (1897): 299; and Elizabeth Ewing, *History of Twentieth Century Fashion* (Lanham, Md.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1992), 18–27. Elizabeth Ewing details the "cumbersome" women's fashions of the early twentieth century, from corsets to long skirts to stiff, high-necked blouses in her first chapter "Edwardian Sunshine for the Few, but Change in the Air, 1900–1909," *History of Twentieth Century Fashion*, 1–27. See also, Mary Walker, "Rules Unfair to women: Dr. Mary Walker Gives Her Views on the Subjects of Bathing Suits," *Washington Post*, 29 June 1927. For more on women's dress reform and exercise see, Gregory Kent Stanley, *The Rise and Fall of the Sportswoman: Women's Health, Fitness, and Athletics, 1860–1940* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 44–46.

²⁰ Those who advocated exercise for women as part of a healthy lifestyle had to convince detractors that exercise wouldn't "coarsen the upper class or strip young ladies of their feminine charm and social standing." Stanley, *The Rise and Fall of the Sportswomen*, 44.

²¹ Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800–1870* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 104–112.

Massachusetts, and the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics.²² Only a small percentage of women and girls could attend these schools. According to Mabel Lee, a physical education teacher in the 1910s and 1920s, most schools lacked physical education classes for girls. She wrote: “Practically unknown in our schools was any form whatsoever of sports, calisthenics, gymnastics, supervised games, rhythmical exercises or dance. School was just plain unadorned proverbial readin’, ‘ritin and ‘rithmetic.”²³

Australian swimmer and diver Annette Kellerman helped popularize swimming for women as exercise. She visited the United States in 1907 and scandalized Americans with her revealing bathing suit, although it covered her from head to toe. She wore a one-piece fitted suit of dark cotton or wool, with short sleeves and tight-fitting shorts to the knee. Sometimes she covered her legs with thick stockings. Lee remembered feeling embarrassed when seeing Kellerman perform diving at an event in 1914. “When she[Kellerman] first appeared on stage in her scant attire and bare legs, I was embarrassed and no doubt was my escort, but her great skills as a swimmer held us all enthralled and I soon forgot about her daring costume and relaxed and enjoyed her performance.”²⁴ Kellerman did not dress this way for publicity or attention, but for swimming. Seemingly embarrassed by all of the attention, she said: “There is nothing that I hate so much as making a show of myself. I think it’s horrible to pose in tights in front of an audience.”²⁵

²² Ibid., 290.

²³ Mabel Lee, *Memories of a Bloomer Girl: 1894–1924* (Reston, Va.: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, 1977), 28.

²⁴ Lee, *Memories of a Bloomer Girl*, 263.

²⁵ Warner, “Clothing as a Barrier,” 58; and “No Swimming for Annette,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 August 1910.

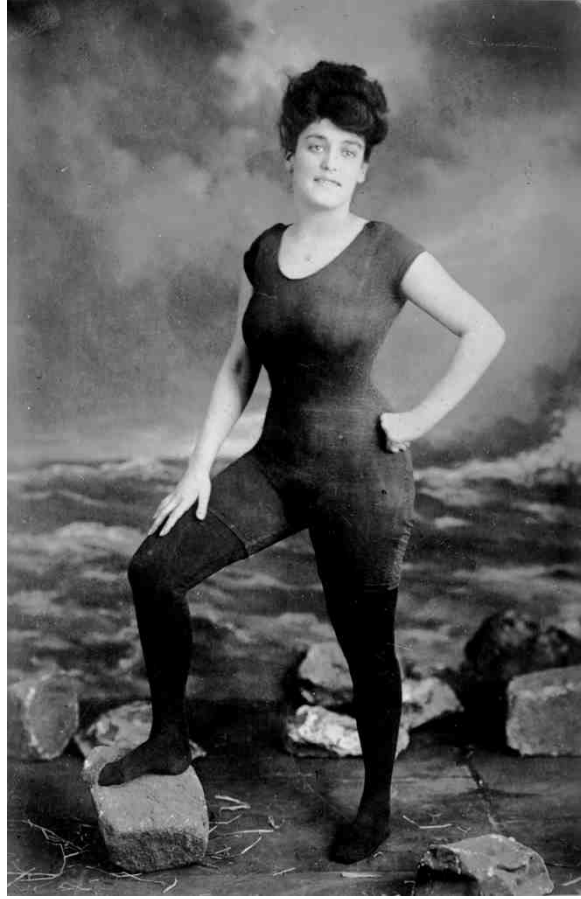


Fig.3. Annette Kellerman in her one-piece swimsuit, 1910

In Kellerman's own writings, she framed swimming as a way for women to be both athletic and beautiful. "Swimming is a great beautifier," she wrote in *Physical Beauty and How to Keep It* in 1918. "It combines in the one sport the benefits of splendid exercise, the invigorating tonic of the plunge bath, and if it be outdoors and especially if on the beach, the health building powers of air and sunshine."²⁶ She listed some unproven health and beauty benefits of swimming: it flushes clogged kidneys that cause puffy eyes; it invigorates a lazy liver that causes a dull complexion; and it relaxes the muscles to

²⁶ Annette Kellermann, *Physical Beauty and How to Keep It* (New York: George H. Doran, 1918), 86.

encourage bowel regularity. Swimming was also feminine: “Swimming develops and beautifies the muscles of the arms and shoulders, in fact of the whole body, without producing the hard-knotting muscles of the masculine athlete.”²⁷ With this presentation, Kellerman tapped into women’s new anxieties about weight, diet, and exercise. Women needed to be thin, but not weak; they needed to exercise, but not too much. They needed to shape their bodies into the feminine ideal through willpower alone, eschewing corsets and shapewear. Doing otherwise would mean personal and moral failure.²⁸

Women had multiple motivations for taking up a sport like swimming: weight loss, health, and beauty. Elizabeth Cady Stanton linked exercise to women’s emancipation. A strong body meant a strong “moral force.”²⁹ The impractical bathing suit became a significant barrier to women accomplishing these goals. On swimwear Kellerman recommended a practical suit similar to the one she wore. “If you would swim easily and decently by all means wear a swimming suit and not a bathing costume for exhibition purposes,” she wrote. “American women have too long been handicapped in the enjoyment of this excellent sport by silly styles in bathing costumes that make real swimming well-nigh impossible.”³⁰

Other serious swimmers wore suits similar to Kellerman’s. Two Australian swimmers, Fanny Durack and Wilhemina Wiley, both wore versions of Kellerman’s suit during the Stockholm Olympics in 1912, the first year women could compete in swimming. Probably constructed of thick wool or cotton due to their opaqueness, Wylie’s suit had had longer legs, fitting tightly just above the knee with a boat neck and cap

²⁷ Kellermann, *Physical Beauty*, 86.

²⁸ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 104–107; Stearns, *Fat History*, 75; and Vester, “Regime Change,” 49–50.

²⁹ Vester, *Regime Change*, 50.

³⁰ Kellermann, *Physical Beauty*, 88.

sleeves. Durack wore shorts cut to mid-thigh with a sleeveless, crewneck tunic that fell just below the pubic bone. Of all three suits, it was Durack's two-piece tunic suit that would become the standard for bathing costumes until the 1930s.³¹ The enjoyment of this excellent sport by silly styles in bathing costumes that make real swimming well-nigh impossible."³²

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³¹ Warner, "Clothing as a Barrier," 60–61. Australia, Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Britain, Norway, and Sweden were the only countries to have women's swim participants. Women could compete in the 100 meter freestyle race and 400 meter team race. Fanny Durack, winner of the 100 meter race, received her prize wearing a very conservative high-neck, ankle length, white dress Swedish Olympic Committee, *Fifth Olympiad: The Official Report of the Olympic Games, Stockholm, 1912*, pp. 725–27, 860, Digital Library Collections, LA84 Foundation Digital Library, <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll8/id/11660/rec/7>.

³² Kellermann, *Physical Beauty*, 88.

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.. WINNERS IN THE FIFTH OLYMPIAD.

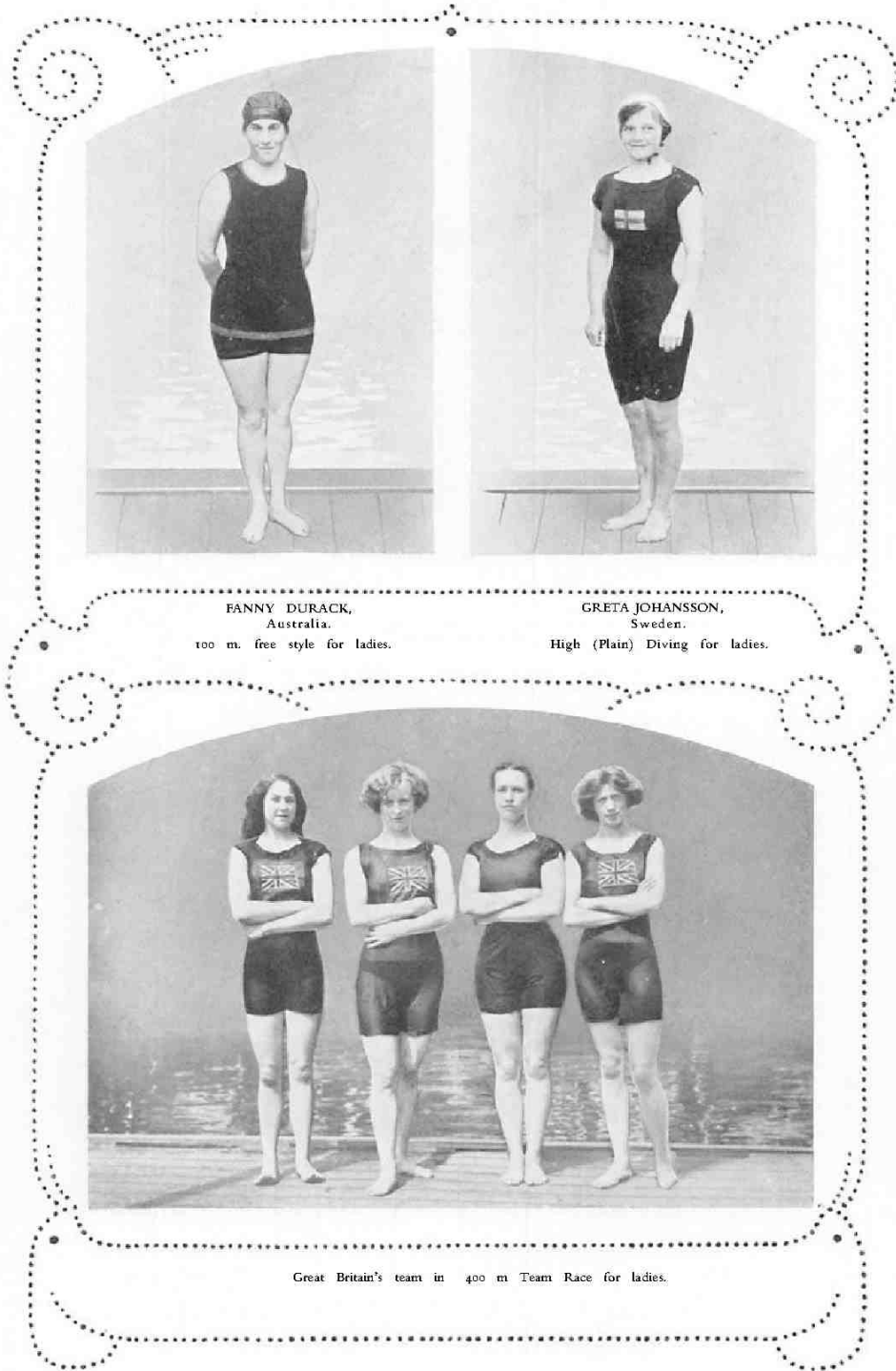


Fig. 3. Winners of the women's swimming events at Stockholm Olympics, 1912, wearing different styles of athletic swimsuits. Fanny Durack (upper left-hand corner) wears a men's style suit with a fitted tunic and shorts. *Fifth Olympiad: The Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm, 1912, plate 36.*

Soon women all over the United States began adopting modified bathing suits for swimming. “Well, it appears that Annette Kellerman started something,” explained the *Los Angeles Times* when the newspaper described the new fad of swimming for women hitting Los Angeles beaches. “With our beaches,” it continued, “and our crowd of girls, we have a showing to be proud of.”³⁴ The *L.A. Times* found it exceptional that so many women from Los Angeles and various beach communities thoroughly enjoyed and excelled at swimming. Seventeen-year-old Gertrude Johnson from Ocean Park, California, was one of these so-called “bathing maids.” For Johnson comfort seemed to be key, since she wore a boy’s suit (one-piece fitted wool suit with short sleeves and short legs) most of the time. Yet for the *Los Angeles Times*, modesty was a central issue: “You will never find her lying around the beach in a pretty bathing suit, but she runs down to the pier from her little home, drops her cloak, and dives. When she has been in the water long enough, she comes out and goes straight home. She had the advantage of having a mother who does not think her daughter should stay around the beach a great while in the state of undress.”³⁵

At Waikiki Beach, the mayor of Honolulu, Hawaii, Joseph James Fern, stated on record that women could wear “masculine bathing suits” on their beach specifically because of the new love of swimming so many women had developed. He said, “The regular women’s bathing suits are too heavy. When they [bathing suits] get wet they are so heavy they drag them [women] under water. A light suit is needed to swim fast in. So let them have the light suit. Any kind they want they can have, for all of me. I shall not

³⁴ “Girls Speedy in the Swim,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1910.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

butt-in. It is their business, and if they want a boy's suit let them have it. And anyway, unofficially speaking, just one citizen to another, a boy's suit is much better looking."³⁶

Swimming for women was fine as long as they did not draw too much attention to themselves when they were out of the water. For instance, in Atlantic City, Mayor Franklin Pierce Stoy declared cream-colored bathing suits illegal when several young



Figure 4. Bonwit Teller advertisement showing fashionable bathing costumes and accessories. *New York Times*, 11 June 1916, 11.

women wore suits the same color as their skin, more than alluding to possible nudity and emphasizing their state of undress. Mayor Stoy acted after a group of men began gawking at the young women from the boardwalk.³⁷ A modified bathing suit debuted to great fanfare at the Avalon Resort on Santa Catalina Island, California, in 1910. The suit was

³⁶ "Mayor Fern Gives O.K. to the Clinging Bathing Suit," *Honolulu (Hawaii) Star-Bulletin*, 28 July 1913; and Donald D. Johnson, "Joseph James Fern: Honolulu's First Mayor," *Hawaiian Journal of History* 9 (1975), 74-101.

³⁷ "Bathing Suit Law," *Honolulu (Hawaii) Evening Bulletin*, 24 August 1904.

two pieces. It had a tunic that cinched at the waist and came to the knee. The skirt of the tunic was slit up the side to reveal slim knee-length drawers, described as “tight little knickerbockers.” The young woman also wore no stockings, a shocking omission for the period. An *L.A. Times* reporter recorded the woman’s arrival on the beach: “An electric shock woke up the pier gazers, the divers and the bathers. Here was a thrill at the very end of the season, when princess suits of scanty cut had palled, when every style but the hobble gown had had its brief day in the bay of Avalon, here was the English bath suit away out here on the Pacific Coast — sans stockings and sans every other superficiality.”³⁸ For many who lived at the seaside communities, this lack of dress set a dangerous precedent. A bathing suit should be used for swimming and no other activity, particularly one that could result in interactions between the two sexes. The majority of the bathing suit ordinances explored in this chapter came from the idea that regulated clothing meant regulated morals. A woman walking around the beach in a revealing bathing suit must also have a revealing and inappropriate nature.³⁹ Once in the water, men and women were virtually invisible, their bodies blurred under the water’s surface. For those passing ordinances in these seaside communities, what one wore to swim in the ocean should not be what one necessarily wore to go to the beach.

Taking the Plunge

In the early twentieth century, beach communities passed the first laws governing beach attire. These laws mostly dealt with the transitional spaces between the beach, the

³⁸ “Avalon Electrified by the English Suit,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1910.

³⁹ Angela J. Latham explores the connections between fashion and morality in the 1920s in *Posing a Threat*, 66.

boardwalk, the sidewalk, and home. The ordinances did not, at first, regulate the types of suits worn on beaches. They were designed to create boundaries between the proper social areas of the boardwalk and the more liberal parts of the beach without scaring potential visitors away. Clothing was the major marker of this boundary. On the boardwalks and the streets, women wore ankle-length walking skirts, high-necked blouses, gloves, and hats. Men wore crisply cut suits, maybe striped or plaid, and stiff collared shirts.⁴⁰ According to J. Murray Jordan's pamphlet for visitors to Atlantic City, "during the height of the season, in July and August, the Boardwalk becomes a magnificent promenade of beauty, wealth, and fashion."⁴¹ Beach communities, for the most part, wanted to draw a distinct line between where it was appropriate to wear a bathing suit and where it was not. Most decided that it was inappropriate for "scantily attired" people to be walking on public streets with properly dressed patrons. At Asbury Park, New Jersey, chairman and founder James A. Bradley helped pass a law that made walking through the town in bathing suits illegal in 1900. The public notice of the law declared: "BATHING COSTUME NOTICE! Do not go through the streets in bathing costumes. It is coarse and vulgar, and is in violation of the city ordinance."⁴² For Bradley, the problem of women wearing bathing suits through town was a moral one. "No woman who had any respect for herself or for her sex," he argued, "will make a show of her form in the public street." Although men and women both participated in this "revolting practice," Bradley was most upset at women, who, he felt, were showing body types he

⁴⁰ Ewing, *History of Twentieth-Century Fashion*, 66–67; and John Peacock, *Men's Fashion: The Complete Sourcebook* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 114, 117, 125, 127.

⁴¹ J. Murray Jordan, *Atlantic City* (Philadelphia, Pa.: n.p.r., 1904), copy house at Rutgers University special collections. Bryant Simon argues that visitors to Atlantic City wore their best clothing and promenade on the boardwalk regardless of class. African American visitors were generally barred from this procession. Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*, 6–14.

⁴² "Asbury Park," *New York Times*, 15 July 1900.

did not want to see. He said of them, “Sometimes the show is one of beauty, but more often of beef.”⁴³

The same thing happened at Coney Island in June 1914. Reports of “immodest bathing costumes” made their way to the Welfare Committee of the Board of Aldermen, who decided to pass a law requiring bathers to wear “mantles,” “raincoats,” or “equally modest clothing” when they walked on public streets. Violators of the law would be fined ten dollars or spend ten days in jail for their first offense, and subsequent violators would be fined fifty dollars or spend thirty days in jail. This law tried to preserve the new respectable reputation of Coney Island. Rev. J. F. Kitzmeyer, a supporter of the new ordinance, said: “Surf Avenue, and the streets leading to it, have become the scenes of shameless immodesty. Men in one-piece suits, and women of all ages wearing not much more, form a continuous promenade. We have the souls of children to save. And we cannot save them while this carnival of downright immodesty goes on everywhere. And it lasts as long as the torrid rays of the summer sun draw careless strangers within our gates.”⁴⁴ Shortly afterward, Atlantic City, New Jersey, passed a similar law colloquially known as the “macintosh [*sic*] law,” which required that bathers in the street cover up to the knee. Visitors not properly dressed for the street were barred from entering the beach.⁴⁵

Similar laws also popped up on the West Coast. In June of 1911, the Board of Trustees of Venice Beach, California, passed an ordinance requiring people to wear

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “Need Blush No More,” *Washington Post*, 30 April 1914; and “Shocked by Parades in Scant Bathing Suits, the Seashore wants Mantles Worn,” *Washington Post*, 13 June 1914.

⁴⁵ “Orders for Silent Sunday,” *New York Times*, 7 July 1916; and “Enforce Rule on Beach,” *New York Times*, 14 July 1924.

bathrobes on the beach, specifically when people walked back and forth to the ocean and or lounged on the sand. Unlike at Asbury Park, certain Venetians especially disliked men's sartorial choices. The ordinance targeted men who wore "sleeveless, almost legless, and neckless" suits, forcing them to either cover up or lounge a safe distance from the boardwalk. Mayor Holbrook of Venice described the motives of the board: "You can say for me that one of the reasons people go bathing is to get their feet wet, and I will oppose any ordinance that limits the pleasure of bathing in a legitimate way. I can see why ladies who are delicately gowned would not wish to have their skirts brushed by a damp and sandy bathing suit on the streets, and we will see to it that this does not happen, but we are certain that Venice Bathers are far more circumspect than those of Atlantic City, Germany or France and we are not going to do anything that will make Venice appear to be ridiculously tight-laced."⁴⁶ Holbrook only wanted to delineate where bathing suits could be worn. Beachgoers could wear suits near and in the water, but once on the boardwalk or street, bodies had to be covered. Yet Holbrook's assertion did not stop J. E. Wright of Los Angeles from being arrested that same summer for wearing an abbreviated bathing suit. Since it was his first offense, the court fined him five dollars and told him to visit again only if he wore a more "covering suit."⁴⁷ Even farther afield at Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, police began enforcing the "Desha Law" requiring people to cover up on the way to the beach. Like Venice, police began took

⁴⁶ "More Surf, Less Surface Wanted," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 1911.

⁴⁷ "Adam-Like Suit Shocked Venetians; Arrest Followed," *Santa Monica (Calif.) Daily Outlook*, 23 August 1911.



Fig. 5. Actress Bebe Daniels wearing the dreaded one-piece suit for spread in *Motion Picture Classic*. “A Daniels Come Judgement,” *Motion Picture Classic*, 1916.

the law onto the sand, making critics complain, “If sun baths are to be taken only in robes and mackintoshes, the remaining popularity of the much sung strand will still further wane.”⁴⁸

Censors on Patrol

The laws quickly expanded to include the types of bathing suits that people could wear to the beach. Officials seemed most concerned over women’s wearing men’s-style bathing suits, also known as one-piece bathing suits and Annette Kellerman-style suits. The one-piece suits resembled more the style of those worn by female Olympic swimmers rather than the shortened, skirted, and corseted suits popular in the previous years. For instance,

⁴⁸ “Honolulu Policemen are Reported to Have Taken the Desha Law to the Beach,” *Semi-Weekly Maui News* (Hawaii), 21 April 1922.

in 1915 the two most popular suits at the Jersey Shore were a tunic sweater over shorts, with low arm holes and a low neckline and what critics called a “very meager union suit” that reached only halfway to the knees. Opaque stockings were sewed to the ends of knee-length shorts.⁴⁹

Beaches moved quickly to outlaw the one-piece suit. The Venice Beach City Council met on 25 June 1912 to discuss Ordinance 405 presented that day by Trustee McCarver. The ordinance regulated both women’s and men’s suits. It required that all women who went into the water wear a suit made of sufficiently heavy material that did not cling to the body when wet. The skirt of the suit needed to be at least fourteen inches below the waist and the neckline could not be cut more than two inches below the shoulder. Men’s suits had the same neckline requirement, but they had to be knee length. Ordinance 405 passed in the first round of voting and “many say it is an act of mercy to most men to compel them to cover their legs above the knee.” The punishment for breaking the ordinance? A \$300 fine or six months in jail.⁵⁰

The all-male Venice Board of Trustees seemed slightly uncomfortable passing regulations on women’s bathing suits. But they managed to do it anyway, after asking for a demonstration of the newest styles of women’s bathing suits. Women wearing suits popular in Atlantic City, Palm Beach, and other seaside resorts were to personally model these styles in front of the trustees so they could choose the most appropriate suit. Such a demonstration was agreed on by Mayor Holbrook as well. What standards the board of trustees used to assess these suits are unknown, as are the identities of the volunteer

⁴⁹ “Bathing Suit Censors,” *Washington Post*, 11 July 1915.

⁵⁰ “Living Models Will Parade: Venice Trustees Manifest Interest in Bathing Suits,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 June 1912.

models. It is easy to imagine that the models were young and thin and looked well in new popular bathing suit styles and cuts. The idea that the one or two styles deemed appropriate by the council might not fit every woman's body did not seem to cross the councilmen's minds.⁵¹ Patrons and business owners of Venice Beach disagreed with the ordinance and concerned citizens circled a petition against the proposed ordinance the very next day. Bathhouse owners and managers, whose businesses depended in part upon renting or selling bathing suits, were also against it.⁵²

Atlantic City outlawed one-piece suits and bare legs by 1920. In 1921 Atlantic City passed a stricter law outlawing one-piece suits for men and women. The regulation used very generalized language, leaving the police to decide what was appropriate. It read, "Women must wear suits that are neither too low in the front, nor back and skirts must be of reasonable length – at least half way to the knees."⁵³ Although Coney Island outlawed one-piece bathing suits by 1919, in 1921 the General Welfare Committee of the Board of Aldermen in New York City passed a stricter bathing suit law. They decided that women, aged ten years or older, would have to wear a bathing costume consisting of tights or bloomers, stockings, skirts extending to the knees, and a top that covered the shoulder blades.⁵⁴

A similar law was considered in Long Beach, California, when the Commissioner of Public Safety tried to pass a strict bathing suit ordinance. "His name was Peek, W. M.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Bathing Suits Up: That Is, They Are Down Too Far," *Santa Monica (Calif.) Daily Outlook*, 27 June 1912; and "Sea Beckons Eighty Thousand in Greatest Easter Rush Known," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1911.

⁵³ Bill Price, "Tough Summer Ahead at Atlantic City," *Washington D.C. Times*, 4 June 1921.

⁵⁴ "Nymphs Raise Rumpus against Resort Laws: Want Bare Knees and One-Piece Suits," *Ogden (Utah) Standard Examiner*, 6 July 1920; "Atlantic City Limits Suits," *New York Times*, 13 June 1921; "Nine Pretty Girls on One-Piece Suits Land in Nine Cells," *New York Evening World*, 10 July 1919; "Coney Asks More Modesty," *New York Times*, 25 June 1921

Peek,” wrote a punny author for the *Los Angeles Times*, “Mr. Peek became extremely piqued when he took a peek at the sights along the beach.”⁵⁵ In May of 1920, Peek introduced his bathing suit ordinance to the city council. If passed, it would have required men’s and women’s suits to have both sleeves and skirts. The back and front of the suits could be no lower than the armpits. For women in particular, the skirt of the suit needed to be at least one third of the distance from the hip to the knee. Stockings were required.⁵⁶ People walking to and from the beach had to fully cover their suits. Additionally, the Peek Ordinance, as it became known, had a beach-conduct section. It categorized improper conduct, which Peek determined to be wrestling, “spooning,” sand fights, and hand holding, a misdemeanor along with the dress code.⁵⁷ Even the super-fashionable Palm Beach, Florida, made it illegal for women to lounge on the beach in a one-piece suit in 1925.⁵⁸

To enforce these laws, beach city councils and police departments hired bathing suit censors, extra policemen, or female “copettes.” The censors and police officers patrolled the beaches to make sure people were dressed appropriately and to enforce “blue laws” that regulated morality and behavior. Censors were supposed to both patrol and protect women on the beach. On the one hand, censors wanted to monitor what women wore and how women exposed their bodies, and on the other, they wanted to protect women from the seemingly dangerous male sexual gaze. Newspapers constantly

⁵⁵ “Come on Now All you Art Students: Business Triumphs in Long Beach, Bathing Suit War Is Over,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 June 1920.

⁵⁶ “Come on Now All you Art Students”; and “Modest Maids At Long Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1920.

⁵⁷ “Blue Laws for Beach Bathers,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 May 1920; and “Modest Maids at Long Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1920.

⁵⁸ “The 1925 Bathing Girl’s Curious Dilemma,” *Atlanta (Ga.) Constitution*, 8 February 1925; “Life, Letters, and Fashions from Palm Beach,” *Vogue*, 1 April 1925, 64. This *Vogue* article describes Palm Beach as “A Link in that Bracelet of Resort Life that Encircles the Smart World.”

reported stories of how women dressed in these new bathing suits disrupted the normal workings of the boardwalk and beach. Men would swarm around women in one-piece suits, like part of a hungry mob. For the legislators of these laws, women's clothing and hypersexuality went hand in hand. One could not behave appropriately if everyone was not dressed appropriately. Their response was to limit what women could wear and patrol the ogling men, what some called "beach lizards."⁵⁹

A group of seven censors, five women and two men, patrolled Venice Beach on 4 June 1915 with a noncompliant crowd to do just that. Word of their arrival spread so quickly, there was no one left on the beach for them to censor. Eventually that afternoon, censors found Los Angeles swimmer and diver Venetia Walker and hauled her out for inspection. Her swimming suit was fine, but she was not wearing stockings, a clear violation to censor Mrs. Charles B. Meyer. Walker protested that she could never swim properly wearing "a pair of nasty old stockings dangling around her feet." Censor Meyer responded that it shocked her to see bare legs at the beach or in the water. It is difficult to articulate exactly how important stockings were in a twentieth-century women's wardrobe. Apart from swimming, there was no occasion where a woman could arguably forgo the thick, black, woolen stockings or the beige silk stockings she would have worn every day. Venice mayor Edward Gerety, who acted as a censor that day as well, made the final decision. He said: "A nice stocking on a nice plump leg always appealed to my esthetic temperament. . . . But I must say that personally, I wouldn't care to go swimming with a pair of socks on — myself that is."⁶⁰ Women with a passion for swimming won

⁵⁹ Price, "Tough Summer Ahead for Atlantic City"; "Wear Skirts, Panties Too," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 August 1911.

⁶⁰ "Bathing Censors Lose in First Beach Bout," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 June 1915.

that day. They did not have to wear stockings on the beach anymore, but it did not mean that beach censors would not return. “Sunday is to be a big day,” reported the *Los Angeles Times*, “On this day all the bathers will be called out of the water and lined up on the beach, and the searchlight of morality will be turned on them, and woe unto them if they are found lacking.”⁶¹

Police officers and censors began fining and arresting beachgoers all over the country. Anywhere from twenty to one hundred people could be arrested on busy summer beach days.⁶² Yet beachgoers resisted the laws that they believed would impugn their summer fun. Again, at Venice Beach, just days after the real bathing suit censors hit the beach, fake censors with measuring tapes, notebooks, and pencils, possibly sponsored by local businesses, went out to the beach to measure the lengths of women’s skirts. These fake censors sent men, women, and even the elderly off the beach for being immodest, only for the censor’s victims to sneak back to the beach later. They were all in on the joke, and “about the time that the sport played out the report drifted down the beach that the real censors were at work.”⁶³ Women on the beach talked back to police officers, ran from censors at the bathhouse, and harassed police officers when they wrote women

⁶¹ “Bathing Censors Lose in First Beach Bout,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 June 1915. Women didn’t even consider going stockingless outside the beach until the mid-1920s. Yet if a woman did not want to wear stockings, social convention dictated that she had to start shaving her legs, a prospect that was somewhat difficult unless she had a private bathroom to use. African America women’s magazines always recommended wearing stockings to the beach at the same time white women were considering casting them off during the 1920s. For more on bare legs, see Alma Whitaker, “Bare Legs,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 August 1923; “Summer Modes,” *Half-Century Magazine*, June 1919, 11; and “Costumes for Vacation,” *Half-Century Magazine*, August 1919, 17. For more on leg shaving, see Rebecca M. Herzig, *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 119–126.

⁶² “600,00 Visit Coney Island in a Day of Records,” *New York Times*, 21 July 1924; “1,300,000 Swarm to Seashore,” *New York Times*, 1 September 1924; and “27 Coney Bathers Fined,” *New York Times*, 29 June 1926.

⁶³ Al G. Waddell, “Fake Censors at Beach City,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 June 1915.

tickets for their clothing.⁶⁴ In Honolulu, women defied the bathing suit law by wearing fashionable “flapping, flowing into the breeze kimonos” over their suits. Some women just barely followed the law by sewing small skirts onto their one-piece bathing suits and rolling down their stockings down on hot days when no one was looking.⁶⁵

In the small beach community of Santa Monica, California, women protested the arrest and fining of Mrs. C. L. Smith, née Concha Hughes, for riding the electric tram with bare legs in 1916.⁶⁶ The judge who fined her, Marvin R. King immediately began receiving letters either decrying his actions or praising them. On 15 August, King received a letter from a woman living in Los Angeles. She wrote, “You men are bothering your poor heads a dreadful lot about the women’s attire.” She felt that men managed to dress pretty “vulgar” on the beach too. “Why not fine them,” she asked, and then answered, “but of course they are privileged characters, rather one-sided affair. . . . The trouble with you men, if you try and control your lower passions you would have something to occupy your thoughts instead of worrying so much about women.”⁶⁷ The most controversial correspondence was sent by a woman who signed her name Pearl. She had sent the judge a postcard. On one side was a painting of a naked woman and on the other she had written: “Dear Old Boy, We should worry. With love from Pearl.” She had a very important point to make. The picture on the back of the postcard was not just any

⁶⁴ “Her Garb Led to Cell,” *Washington Post*, 11 July 1914; Jessie Henderson, “Safer and Saner Fourth than Ever is Scheduled in ‘lil’ Old New York,” *Washington Post*, 2 July 1922; and “Nymphs Raise ‘Rumpus’ Against Resort Laws: Want Bare Knees, and One-Piece Suits,” *Ogden (Utah) Standard Examiner*, 6 July 1920.

⁶⁵ “The Optimistic Pessimist,” *Semi-Weekly Maui (Hawaii) News*, 2 September 1921; “Atlantic City Limits Suits,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1921; and “Safer and Sane Fourth,” *Washington Post*.

⁶⁶ The same day, officers arrested a sixteen-year-old boy for walking through a residential neighborhood without a coverup. “Dear! Dear! Human Form So Shocking,” *Santa Monica Bay (Calif.) Outlook*, 29 July 1916.

⁶⁷ “Judge King Gets Letters Pro and Con,” *Santa Monica Bay (Calif.) Outlook*, 17 August 1916.

painting. Called *September Morn*, it was one of the most reproduced and most censored pieces of art in the United States at the time. Although reviled by censorship boards, it sold nearly seven million copies on postcards, pins, and prints. It seems Pearl wanted to remind Judge King how easily something like the censorship of a painting or a bathing suit ordinance could get out of hand. No one else agreed with her. Authorities began looking for the so-called Pearl immediately, contending that she was probably in contempt of court when she called Judge King “old boy.”⁶⁸

There were plenty of supporters of the bathing suit bans. Judge King had a very vocal supporter in Rev. C. Sidney Maddox of the First Baptist Church in Santa Monica. He spoke at length on the “postage-stamp bathing suit” and his displeasure with the new styles that year. The sermon, titled “When Is a Bathing Suit a Bathing Suit? Is Judge King right? Are we coming to the Two-Piece Suit? Climate and Sunshine? Is the Home Safe?” described Reverend Maddox’s problems with the new styles of suit. It was not necessarily that the suit was smaller, although that was part of the problem, but that people who wore the new style suit used it as a tool of exhibition:

We have seen the evolution of the bathing suit in the last ten years. . . . The old-time mother-hubbard affair, trunks below the knees, a good full skirt, just as low, and an overskirt, arms to the elbows . . . and a dude collar. Then we came to the one-piece skirted suit, so common today, a decent comfortable thing, but some were not satisfied. They tightened them up a little and a little more. They cut and slashed until about all there is left of some of these suits is a string and two tassels. Where will be the end of this affair [?]. . . . There is no complaint about the scanty suit, even as long as they stay in the water; but the disporter, the sand

⁶⁸ “Girl Dares Judge to Pinch Her,” *Santa Monica Bay (Calif.) Outlook*, 19 August 1916. Officially titled *Matinée de Septembre*, *September Morn* was painted in 1911 by French artist Paul Chabas. A reproduction was first exhibited in a photographic shop in Chicago, where authorities removed it immediately. The original painting was purchased by an American and exhibited in New York, where it earned the ire of the famous censor Anthony Comstock. The hype made *September Morn* the bestselling print in the United States. “September Morn,” *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, ed. Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 506.

lounger, the one of a thousand, that rotten apple that would spoil the whole lot, is the one the good judge is after.⁶⁹

Former mayor of Santa Monica T. H. Dudley also agreed with Judge King. Dudley objected to the “lolling and parading about the beach in unseemly costumes.” After all, the judge was just trying to keep the beach “free from objectionable features.”⁷⁰ Advice columnist for the *New York Evening World*, Sophie Irene Loeb, agreed with the Coney Island bathing suit ordinance of 1919 for similar reasons. She felt that “the scant bathing suit has no place on a crowded beach like Coney Island.” She argued that “appearing in public in the least clothes possible” should be discouraged since it degrades the experiences of everyday beachgoers. Women who want to swim in those abbreviated suits, she said, can go elsewhere.⁷¹

Additionally, some in favor of the bathing suit ordinances argued that wearing the newest styles of swim suits was seen as a potentially humiliating experience for older, fuller Victorian ladies. Women’s magazines even proclaimed that only “slender women” could wear the newest styles. Such women, who either wanted to keep the old styles or refused to wear the new ones, needed to be protected from embarrassment by city government, while younger women, and men in many ways, needed to be stopped from

⁶⁹ “Bathing Suits Described as String and Two-Tassels” Size of Postage Stamp,” *Santa Monica Bay (Calif.) Outlook*, 21 August 1916. Three days after Reverend Maddox gave his “two tassels” sermon, 24 August 1916, a committee of citizens, made up of former city councilmen, appealed to the city engineer, John Morton, to design a municipal bathing suit. The new municipal suit would only be designed for women and would be appropriate for the street. This caused immediate outrage, most likely because such a suit would require skirts, sleeves, and stockings. Women who had dealt with the criticism of their own suits, began asking why men’s suit were not getting the same amount of attention. Some women found them “vulgar” and “disgusting.” Mary Benninger of Santa Monica said “We should worry about bathing suits. . . .If we did not like the present style we would not wear them. I wish that those who think we do not wear enough clothes would try to swim in more [clothes]. It would be ‘curtains’ for them.” Stadelman also commented, “If the truth were known however it is only those who never bathe in the surf who notice how immodest other people are. What we should do is let the matter drop. Just because some women choose to wear furs in the summer is no sign that we should bathe in cloaks and overcoats.”

⁷⁰ “Talks Were Based upon Beauty Lines,” *Santa Monica Bay (Calif.) Outlook*, 22 August 1916.

⁷¹ Sophie Irene Loeb, “An Answer to Girls Bathing Suits,” *New York Evening World*, 19 August 1919.

making “displays of public sexuality.” They felt that young women wore these abbreviated suits because it was fashionable and not of their own accord. They were slaves to fashion.⁷²

Atlantic City swimmer and Sunday school teacher Ada Taylor argued vehemently against this notion. She wrote to Dr. Charles S. Bossart, chief surgeon of the Atlantic City life guards and pro-stockings. She asked “Who attracts the really unfavorable attention: the girl bathers with bare legs or milady who rolls along the boardwalk with legs crossed, showing her costly silk stockings at least to the knees?” It was from practicality that young female swimmers wanted to discard stockings and show their legs, and that older, even respectable women, showed their legs for fashion and attention. A stockinged leg in tight sheer silk is more seductive than a bare leg they argued.⁷³ W. J. Stadelman, manager of the Santa Monica Bathhouse, saw the hypocrisy inherent in the California city’s legislation. He publicly denounced the bathing suit ordinance, noting that the city used the ubiquitous “bathing girl” on their advertisements to inland cities, but arrested real women when they wore the same style on the actual beach.⁷⁴

Tanning Hides

The emergence of sunbathing, or “getting a tan,” as a popular beach activity gave city councils another element to fight against. It was not that they considered lounging on the beach a problem in itself, but they found the new styles of bathing suits used for tanning

⁷² Latham, “Packaging Women,” 152; Hester Winthrop, “Time to Think of Swimming Suits,” *The Chicago Women’s Press*, 17 May 1919; and Latham, *Posing a Threat*, 34; and “Now the Rotarians Ask for One-Piece Suit,” *New York Times*, 8 June 1921.

⁷³ “The Battle against Bare Legs,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 July 1921;

⁷⁴ “Talks Were Based upon Beauty Lines,” *Santa Monica Bay (Calif.) Outlook*, 22 August 1916.

objectionable. Women's suits had changed dramatically in the latter half of the twenties. Bloomers, heavy skirts, and stockings disappeared at the same time that day dresses and skirts reached the knee. Necklines plunged in front and in the back, accompanied by cutouts and short briefs. Men lowered the shoulder straps of their bathing suits for the perfect unlined tan.⁷⁵

By the mid-twenties a good tan, once considered the evidence of outdoor manual labor, had become not only fashionable but a marker of youth, health, and vitality. Sunbathing for both health and pleasure originated in Germany in the late nineteenth century. After World War I, nude sunbathing became very popular. In the 1920s and 1930s, sunbathing became a cure-all—tuberculosis, fatigue, chronic illness, and childhood ailments could all be cured by sunbathing. One doctor believed that “direct sunlight, speaking generally, can be employed in pulmonary tuberculosis with safety and advantage.” Another doctor argued: “Sunlight exhilarates and enlivens. It induces gaiety, liveliness, and a sense of well-being. It braces up and cheers the soul. Like all stimulants, if pressed to excess it intoxicates and then exhausts; again, like all stimulants, if exhibited over too long a period its tonic action decreases.”⁷⁶ In health, one could equate sun with other stimulants like alcohol or caffeine: a little goes a long way.

In beauty, one could never have enough sun. The beauty craze surrounding sunbathing, or sunburning as it was sometimes called, began quite auspiciously when master clothier Coco Chanel announced in *Vogue* magazine in 1922 that no fashionable

⁷⁵ Joanna Bourke, “The Great Male Renunciation: Men’s Dress Reform in Inter-war Britain,” *Journal of Design History* 9, no. 1 (1996): 29; and “Eight Face Legal Tanning,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 1929.

⁷⁶ Hilary Roche, “Sun-Bathing and Pulmonary Tuberculosis,” *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 3701 (12 December 1931): 1112; and Henry Gauvain, “The Hastings Popular Lecture on Sun, Air, and Sea Bathing in Health and Disease,” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 3764 (25 February 1933): 60.

summer wardrobe would be complete without a tan.⁷⁷ *Vogue* described the fashion trend: “From a chic note, sunburn became a trend, then an established fashion, and now the entire world is sunburn conscious.”⁷⁸ From there, white women and men began spending hours at the beach, slathering themselves in olive or coconut oil, to get the perfect tan. Around them emerged a beauty industry niche exploiting sunbathing’s popularity. Dresses, color schemes, makeup, creams, powders, and lotions were all developed with the sunbather’s wants in mind. Cosmetic company Dorothy Grey promoted “sunburn cream” as a way to get a tan without the preceding burn, an early yet ineffective try at sunscreen. Hinds Cream promised to prevent “suncorch” and keep the skin soft, fresh, and youthful looking. The Walker Company’s skin bleach “Tan-Off” promised to get rid

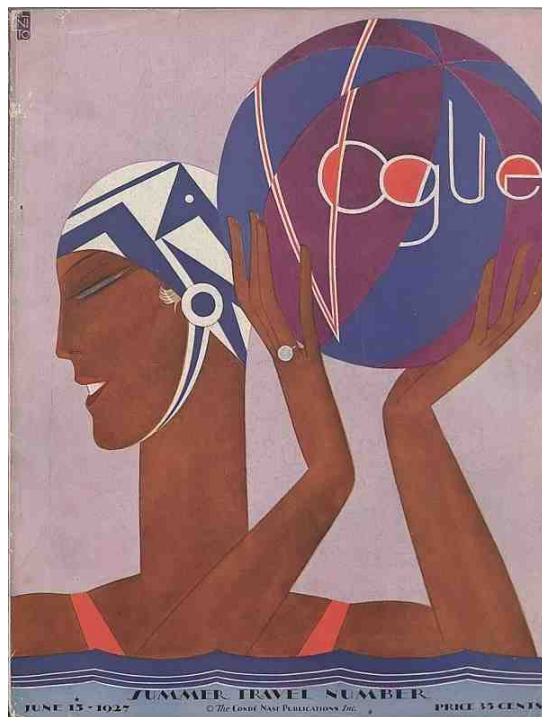


Fig. 6. Cover of *Vogue Magazine*, July 1927.

⁷⁷ Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, *The Beach: The History of Paradise on Earth* (New York: Viking, 1998), 200–202.

⁷⁸ “Back to Sunburn with the Mode,” *Vogue*, 20 July 1929.

of sunburn, freckles, and discoloration, while “Glory to the Sun” powder marketed itself to women who did not want to go into the sun at all, one of the first self-tanners.⁷⁹

Additionally, by 1929 swimsuit makers began creating designs friendly to the women who wanted to sunbath. Franklin Simon and Co. had the “Tan-Mode shirt.” Jantzen developed the “sun-suit”—“permitting, with modesty, a maximum exposure of skin surface to the healthful ultraviolet rays of the sun.” Abercrombie and Fitch had “sun-back” suits, Columbiaknit the “healthsun suit,” Ocean Bathing “sunback” suits, and Bonwitt Teller “low-back fashions for the high tide.” All were created for the sunbathing masses.⁸⁰ Women’s suits became almost completely backless. Backless dresses became popular as well, most likely so women could show off their new tan. Tan lines were anathema to the entire process, the fly in the suntan ointment. *Vogue* warned, “The bathing-suit should provide the lines of demarcation for all costumes.” The magazine said, “There is no single smarter sunburn gesture than to have every low-backed costume cut on exactly the same lines, so that each one makes a perfect frame for a smooth brown back.”⁸¹ The majority of women could not afford to custom order a new wardrobe based upon the lines of a bathing suit, but women wore the low-back suits all the same. Men, in

⁷⁹ Stanley Hoffland, “Tan is the Smart Shade this Summer, and Olive Oil Will Cure the Smart,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1926; Dorothy Gray Advertisement, *Vogue*, 22 June 1929, 99; Hinds Cream Advertisement, *Vogue*, 22 June 1929, 112; Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 223; and Glory of the Sun Advertisement, *Vogue*, 22 June 1929, 104. The first effective sunscreens did not hit the market until after World War II. “Sunscreen: A History,” *New York Times*, 23 June 2010. For more on the development of sunscreen see, Lenčenk and Bosker, *The Beach*, 213–215. Kathy Peiss describes the easy coexistence between tanning and white supremacy. Tanning was fine for white people as long as the boundary between being tan and being black was secure. For more, see Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 150–151.

⁸⁰ Franklin Simon and Co. Advertisement, *Vogue*, 8 June 1929, 7; Jantzen Advertisement, *Vogue*, 8 June 1929, 25; Abercrombie and Fitch Co. Advertisement, *Vogue*, 22 June 1929, 11; Columbiaknit Advertisement, *Vogue*, 22 June 1929, 104; Ocean Bathing Suits Advertisement, *Vogue*, 11 May 1929, 37; and Bonwitt Teller Advertisement, *Vogue*, 25 May 1929, 3.

⁸¹ “Back to Sunburn with the Mode,” 77.

an apparent move to avoid tan lines as well, began lowering the straps of their suits on the beach, fully exposing their chests and shoulders.

These, women's low-back suits and uncovered male chests, became a problem for beach authorities. Men in Atlantic City, Coney Island, and parts of Long Island, New York, were fined or arrested for wearing "topless" bathing suits or rolling the straps of their bathing suits down. But in the 1930s, as bathing suit styles continued to rapidly change, most of the ordinances forbidding topless or backless bathing suits on the East Coast were only partially enforced. For instance, Magistrate Thomas F. Casey gave five men suspended sentences for being topless on the beach because he felt it was only unseemly to be shirtless on the boardwalk.⁸² The Palm Beach Town Council considered banning sunback suits worn by "sun-tan faddists." After less than a month of deliberation, the town council decided that the individual conscience should guide was the "fashionable beach bather will wear."⁸³

The ugliest fight over proper sun-tanning attire occurred in Santa Monica, California. On 12 August 1929, 8 people—7 men and 1 woman (all from Los Angeles except one)—were arrested for lowering their bathing suit straps on the beach. Police took them to the station and booked them for "disturbing the peace." The sunbathers had only been caught because the police camped out in a nearby beach clubhouse and waited for bathers to break the law.⁸⁴ It seemed that the Santa Monica City Council had taken another crack at a bathing suit ordinance, this time outlawing the women's backless

⁸² "Shirtless Bathers Freed," *New York Times*, 15 June 1934.

⁸³ "Bathing Suit Inspection Is Threatened for Palm Beach: Sunbacks and Fronts Blamed," *Palm Beach (Fla.) Post*, 18 May 1929; and "New Beach Cop Starts Job Today but Not as Bathing Suit Censor," *Palm Beach (Fla.) Post*, 1 June 1929.

⁸⁴ "Eight Face Legal Tanning," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 1929.

bathing suit and men exposing their chests. According to the police chief of Santa Monica, his officers would “arrest any man who is stripped to the waist on the beach. As for the backless bathing suits for women the Santa Monica ordinance permits only a V-shaped opening in the back. Women’s bathing suits which expose the entire back to the waistline are not permitted.”⁸⁵ This was, as the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* put it, a “crusade against extreme or improper bathing suits.”⁸⁶

The police were not the only ones who took up this “crusade.” A local Santa Monica pastor, Dr. Albert Joseph McCartney, made headlines in beach communities and Los Angeles with his sermon, “Comes Again this Pageantry of Nakedness.” He argued for a more moral beach, a beach without the vulgar display of bodies on the streets, shops, and public parks. In particular, Pastor McCartney railed against sunbathing: “We don’t want to convert our public beaches into vast sanitariums for sunbathing . . . which wants to attract attention and travel roughshod over convention.” He called it the disease “of the feminine mind of both sexes,” implying that a woman’s desire to flaunt herself around men was the crux of the problem. One of Pastor McCartney’s supporters reiterated this point: “There is everything wrong in . . . attire used for display, a display that invites vulgar morons,” and “leering gangs.”⁸⁷

As in other bathing suit ordinance fights, Pastor McCartney had his opponents. Alma Whitaker, a *Los Angeles Times* correspondent, emerged as the fiercest. Whitaker took offense at the blame McCartney placed on the 200,000 beach visitors from Los

⁸⁵ “Scanty-Suited Bathers Jailed,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 1929.

⁸⁶ “Police Clear Beaches of Indecencies,” *Santa Monica (Calif.) Evening Outlook*, 22 May 1929.

⁸⁷ “Beach City Pastor Hits at Critics,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 1929; Alma Whitaker, “The Pageantry of Nakedness,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 May 1929; and Joseph Albert McCartney, “Alma Whitaker Challenged,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 June 1929; and “Decency without Prudery,” Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 1929.

Angeles for ruining the morality of the beach. As one of the 200,000 who tried to go the beach every few weekends, she argued that people do not go just for the sunshine; they go for the “ecstasy of God’s mighty ocean.” “Yet because I am not one of the fortunate who can live at the beach—and pay taxes there,” she wrote, “this pastor would deny me this exalting restorative.” The last time Whitaker had gone to the beach, she drove down with her friends and all their children. All around them were families happy to be at the beach. The pastor, she said, had injected something slimy and unwholesome into their lovely day.⁸⁸ H. M. Martin, a *Los Angeles Times* reader agreed with Whitaker’s response. He wrote: “The new convention, which accepts the lines of nature as a fact of nature is far more wholesome than that which assigns a purely imaginary indecency, quite arbitrarily. . . . Let us, therefore, be conventional and expose as much of our God-given bodies to the sun and air as we see fit, confident that decency and indecency are states of mind, and that those who wish to see no evil will see none. Nothing can be done about the other.”⁸⁹ One young man who had been arrested for indecency put this sentiment more succinctly: “I’ll try and find a beach where they have outgrown the hoop skirt era of prudishness.”⁹⁰

The End of the Ordinances

The anti-suntan ordinance did not last very long in Santa Monica. Sunbathing was just too popular and a line-free tan was too fashionable. Even Hollywood starlets wanted a tan; in 1929 a tan was the top beauty accessory. Joan Crawford had stopped wearing

⁸⁸ Whitaker, “The Pageantry of Nakedness.”

⁸⁹ H. M. Martin, “Sun Baths for Health,” Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 1929.

⁹⁰ “Scanty-Suited Bathers Jailed,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 1929.

makeup altogether, supposedly, to show off her “lovely natural brown skin.” Clara Bow, the literal “It Girl,” started sporting “a deep brown complexion.” Photographers had snapped a picture of Greta Garbo tanning at her Santa Monica house in nothing but a pair of shorts (apparently, she tried her damndest to get that photo plate back).⁹¹ Small town city councils and churches could not stem the tide of popular opinion, especially when bathing suit companies, cosmetic companies, and Hollywood all seemed against them.

In 1930 Santa Monica, Venice (annexed to Los Angeles in 1920), and Long Beach all gave up the fight to regulate beach attire. The Los Angeles City Council rejected a suntan regulation in the summer of 1929, just two months after Pastor McCarthy’s sermon and Alma Whitaker’s response. The Los Angeles City Council felt there were already enough regulations for decency at the beach, so “bare backs may burn on the beaches of Los Angeles all they want.”⁹² Before the start of the summer season in 1930, all the officials from different Southern California beach communities, including but not limited to Santa Monica, Hermosa Beach, Manhattan Beach, Redondo Beach, and Long Beach, met to discuss beach regulations. The purpose was to create uniform rules to apply to every beach in Los Angeles County. Visitors, going from one beach to another, unknowingly violated ordinances because of the variety of laws enforced at each place. After decades of failed bathing suit ordinances, the beach authorities at this meeting finally decided to let beachgoers use their “good judgement” when deciding what to wear to the beach.⁹³

⁹¹ Alma Whitaker, “Sun Tans Win in Movieland,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 1927; and “Snaps Greta Garbo taking a Sun Bath,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 November 1930.

⁹² “Los Angeles Not Disturbed by ‘this Pageantry of Nakedness,’” *Santa Monica Evening (Calif.) Outlook*, 24 July 1929.

⁹³ “Parley Called on Beach Rules,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 1930.

The same happened in Atlantic City. Mayor Harry Bacharach said that character and behavior were more important than the kinds of bathing suits women should be wearing. He inspected an exhibition of current bathing suit fashions and agreed to allow sun suits and bandeaus for women, but men would have to wear tops at least until 1937.⁹⁴ The beaches of New York state were bathing suit ordinance free by 1936, although, like in most places, people still had to be reasonably covered up while walking on public streets.⁹⁵

The battle over beach clothing had—mostly—ended. Nudity and female toplessness was still not allowed, like at most beaches today. It is not that bathing suit styles stopped changing. Since the first bathing suit ordinance passed in 1912 to their repeal in the 1930s, bathing suit styles for men and women had changed dramatically, and they continued to do so. The introduction of stretch and synthetic fibers made bathing suits in the thirties and forties sleeker and tighter than ever. Men's suits lost the tops, turning into briefs. Two-piece suits for women debuted in the 1940s, followed by strapless suits, and then by bikinis in the 1960s.⁹⁶ While these new suits certainly attracted attention, and some even became iconic—think Ursula Andress in *Dr. No* (1962)—no one was ever barred from beaches for wearing them.⁹⁷

Although science has proved beyond a doubt that overexposure to the sun causes cancer, the beach is still awash with people worshipping the sun and hoping for a nice

⁹⁴ “Bathing Styles Approved,” *New York Times*, 24 May 1932.

⁹⁵ “To Lift the Bathing Suit Ban,” *New York Times*, 3 June 1936.

⁹⁶ Peacock, *Men's Fashion*, 133, 141; and John Peacock, *20th-Century Fashion: The Complete Sourcebook* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 83, 91, 115, 139, 155.

⁹⁷ Bikinis made their debut on Los Angeles beaches in 1959, but they did not become de facto beachwear for women until well into the 1960s. Will Kern, “More Being Sold than Seen,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 1960; “Summer Forecast: It's a ‘Bikeeni’ Year for Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 1959; and Angela Taylor, “This is the Summer to Take the Bikini Plunge,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1966.

tan, without the side effects. What was once new in the 1910s and 1920s has become routine for modern-day beachgoers. Additionally, the beach is still a space for the creation and critique of the modern body. Each summer season, women's magazines and now fashion blogs implore women to get their "bikini body" before vacationing. A "bikini body" implies that there is an ideal body type for beach-going women, one decided by magazines and Hollywood instead of one regulated by city ordinances and boards of trustees.

Chapter 3: Bathing Beauties

By all accounts, actress Bebe Daniels had an illustrious career. She was a child star, slapstick comedian, glamorous movie star, musical comedy actress, and radio and television personality. In the 1920s, she made more than fifty films at Paramount Studios. She wrote her own screenplays and edited her own movies.¹ But before she hit it big, Daniels was an actress for Pathé, trying to capitalize on her rising star by posing in Hollywood magazines and competing in bathing beauty pageants. During the 1910s and 1920s, these two activities overlapped quite a bit. In July 1917, *Motion Picture Magazine* published a four-page spread on “Flickerville’s Big Annual Bathing Convention,” also known as the Venice Beach Bathing Suit Parade, a yearly bathing-suit beauty pageant held on the beach. Daniels is shown on the sand of Venice Beach in the foreground of the picture, sitting, wearing a vertical-striped bathing costume, matching head scarf, and lace-up beach shoes. She is surrounded by other young, female film stars also wearing fashionable bathing costumes: June Caprice, of the Fox Film Corporation; Anita Stewart and Lillian Walker, both Vitagraph stars; Grace Cunard, from Universal; and Pearl White, famous for starring as Pauline for Pathé serials. Mack Sennett’s bathing beauties even make an appearance in the background, following around silent star Wallace Beery, who is dressed as a lifeguard.²

¹ Eve Golden, *Golden Images: 41 Essays on Silent Films Stars* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 18–19; and Anthony Slide, *Silent Players: A Biographical and Autobiographical Study of 100 Silent Film Actors and Actresses* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 89–90.

² “Flickerville’s Big Annual Bathing Convention,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, July 1917, pp. 34–37; June Caprice, IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0135645/>, accessed 7 September 2018; Anita Stewart, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0829171/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm, accessed 7 September 2018; Pearl White, Women and Film Pioneers Project, Columbia University Libraries, <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-pearl-white/>, accessed 7 September 2018; Grace Cunard, Women Film Pioneers Project, Columbia University Libraries; “Lillian Walker, 88, Silent-Movie Star,” *New York Times*, 8 November 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/11/08/archives/lillian-walker-88-silentmovie-star.html>, accessed 7 September 2018; and “Wallace Beery, Veteran Film Actor, Dies,” *Los*



Fig. 1. "Flickerville's Big Annual Bathing Convention," *Motion Picture Magazine*, July 1917, 34-35.

It's a fun scene. All the actresses are wearing different bathing costumes to suit their distinct film personalities. Daniels looks vampy, while Pearl White wears a sportier, shorter costume, complementing her adventuresome Pauline character. The bathing beauties congregate in the background to fawn over a preening Beery. Although the beach is the perfect location of the photograph, it offers the only stage for this scene to occur in the 1910s. The beach offered the only public leisure space where men and women could interact in such a state of undress without social backlash and where the display of bodies was anticipated and expected. The social mores that governed other

Angles Times, 17 April 1949, <http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-wallace-beery-19490417-story.html>, 7 September 2018.

public and private spaces loosened at the beach, and as described in the previous chapter, allowed for women to show their bodies in new, often radical, ways.

Two new cultural phenomena emerged from this context. First, the bathing beauties arrived. Mack Sennett's brigade of bathing suit-clad actresses appeared in his comedy shorts from the 1910s through the 1920s. This idea of the bathing suit-wearing and beachgoing starlet went beyond Sennett's films, and young actresses, such as Bebe Daniels, donned their bathing costumes for magazines as a way to stimulate their rising profiles. The second phenomenon was the bathing suit parade or bathing suit pageant. Local beaches all over the United States held these events, which featured young women parading along the sand in bathing suits with the most beautiful girl or most creative swimsuit winning top prizes. The most famous of these bathing suit pageants, Miss America, still exists. The bathing beauties of Mack Sennett and the bathing suit pageants displayed an "assembly-line femininity" where the women were portrayed as individuals but became part of a uniform vision of American womanhood.³ As explained in the previous chapter, women had spent the first part of the twentieth century fighting for an individual right to wear more-practical, and therefore more-revealing bathing costumes for the purposes of swimming. Although beaches still kicked women off the sand for wearing abbreviated bathing costumes, the officially sanctioned displays of women's bodies on beach boardwalks and in film were more popular than ever. Many Americans found these films and pageants acceptable forms of family entertainment. In this context, the beach continued to develop as a site for cultural debates and criticism. These bathing

³ Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 62, 63; and Kristen Anderson Walker, *Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 79.

beauty events also help explain how the bathing suit became such a symbol of female sexual expression and personal freedom.

Granted, neither the films of Mack Sennett nor the bathing beauty pageants remained uncontested in America. During the 1920s, as censorship boards rose across the United States to combat Hollywood's "sex problem," Sennett's bathing beauties landed on the cutting-room floor as did reels taken of bathing suit-pageant contestants.⁴ In fact, a newsreel featuring pageant contestants sparked a heated debate in newspapers and in courtrooms over the right of filmmakers to bypass state censorship boards. Women's clubs and church organizations protested bathing suit pageants as well, arguing that women should not be so quick to show their bodies and forego modesty. The protests did not stop women from participating. In fact, they kept on competing in such pageants even after the bathing suit left the beach behind.

Sennett's Bathing Girls

On his twentieth-eighth birthday in 1908, Sennett became an actor with the Biograph Company in New York. He starred in some comedies directed by D. W. Griffith but began writing and directing his own comedies for Biograph by 1911. In 1912 Sennett started his own comedy brand called Keystone starring his own group of actors, including a starlet and comedian named Mabel Normand.⁵ Sennett cast Normand in

⁴ Hilary Hallet details the "sex problem" in her chapter "The Movie Menace," in *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 154–179.

⁵ Mack Sennett was born Michael Sinnott. Brent E. Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory: A History and Filmography of His Studio and His Keystone and Mack Sennett Comedies, with Biographies of Players and Personnel* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2010), 9–10; and Kalton C. Lahue, *Mack Sennett's Keystone: The Man, the Myth, and the Comedies* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1971), 44–45, 46.



Figs. 2-3. Stills from *The Diving Girl* (1912), *The Diving Girl* photo gallery, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0001584/mediaindex?ref_=tt_mv_close.

one of the first Keystone Comedy releases titled *The Water Nymph* in 1912. In the movie, filmed on an unknown East Coast beach, Normand plays a woman who flirts with a father and son, played respectively by Mack Sennett and another Keystone star, Ford Sterling. Generally successful, the film gained notoriety because Normand spent part of the film wearing a black one-piece bathing suit, diving in and out of the water and “vamping” for the camera. She became known as “the girl in the black tights” due to her Annette Kellerman-style bathing suit. It did not hurt that Normand was also a beautiful woman. Graceful, and athletic, she had modeled for illustrator Dana Gibson. In the movie, she does several dives from a board into the ocean.⁶ Normand was also very funny. In another film, *Mabel’s Lovers*, she shows off her figure and comedic talents at the beach. According to an advertisement from 1912,

Mabel arrives at the summer resort and has many lovers. Possessed of a beautiful figure, she decides to put them to the test, and when donning her bathing suit fills her stockings with numerous bumps. When she discards her coat at the beach all the men beat a hasty retreat with the exception of one who ‘peeped’ when Mabel was fixing up. Her next appearance in a bathing suit, minus the ungainly protuberances causes consternation among the men who have been fooled.⁷

Although Normand would go on to a successful, if short, career as a comedian (often compared to her contemporary Charlie Chaplin), at this point Sennett realized he could use her and other beautiful women in bathing suits to draw crowds to his movies.⁸

⁶ *The Water Nymph*, directed by Mack Sennett (New York: Keystone Comedies, 23 September 1912), film, 8 minutes, .5 reel. Normand had previously showcased her swimming and diving abilities in *The Diving Girl* by Biograph films, of which *The Water Nymph* was a remake. Timothy Dean Lefler, *Mabel Normand: The Life and Times of a Hollywood Madcap* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2016), 5, 18.

⁷ Advertisement quoted in Lahue, *Mack Sennett’s Keystone*, 30.

⁸ Normand met Sennett while they worked at Biograph, and she left with him when he started Keystone Comedies. They had a romantic relationship for about five years, but Sennett was abusive and beat her up at least one time when he had been drinking. She left Sennett to work for Samuel Goldwyn in 1918. Her career seemed to be going well until she became wrapped up in the murder of William Desmond Taylor, a well-known film director. She was the last person to see him alive. Normand died in 1930 at the age of thirty-seven after suffering a relapse of tuberculosis. Mark Lynn Anderson, “Reading Mabel Normand’s Library,” *Film History* 18, no. 2, Women and the Silent Screen: Cultural and Historical Practices (2006): 209, 214; Lahue, *Mack Sennett’s Keystone*, 47–54. For more on the importance of Normand’s career, see



Fig. 4. "Mabel's Lovers: The Surprised Suitor," Keystone Film Company advertisement, 1912, C-DIG-pmssc-03643, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

After the initial success of Normand's movies, Sennett began recruiting more women to appear in his films. He wanted, as described by scholar Kristen Anderson Walker, to present the bathing beauties as a passive contrast to the active and fast-moving slapstick characteristic of Sennett's comedies. In 1913, while Sennett was living at the Los Angeles Athletic Club (LAAC), he recruited two swimmers, Vera Steadman and Ivy Crosthwaite, who participated in diving and swimming at the LAAC. Initially recruited

the special issue Women and the Silent Screen: Cultural and Historical Practices, *Film History* 18, no. 2 (2006).

because of their swimming talents, both would become actresses as well.⁹ By 1915, when *Miss Fatty's Seaside Lovers* and *Those College Girls* premiered, Sennett had been populating his movies with pretty female extras wearing bathing suits, flowing nightgowns, and pajamas.

The bathing beauties did not develop as a film concept and practice until Sennett created the photo-still department. While making movies under the name Keystone Comedies, Sennett hired photographer Paul Grendel to head the new department. Grendel photographed almost every girl on the lot regardless of whether she was part of the Bathing Beauty troupe or not. For example, Gloria Swanson, who became famous after joining Paramount Studios, was photographed in a bathing suit, and the picture was then used for publicity. She is considered the most famous Bathing Beauty alumna, but she appeared in none of the original movies. Her photograph, along with those of many other women, were reproduced as arcade cards and postcards and sent around the country to advertise Mack Sennett comedies.¹⁰ Beyond the bathing beauties, Sennett's movies propelled actors such as Fatty Arbuckle, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Swanson to stardom. He worked alongside two of the greatest silent-film producers of the time, Thomas Ince and D. W. Griffith, while at Triangle Films. Although his films received no critical acclaim, audiences could not get enough of Sennett-style slapstick and the beautiful women.¹¹

⁹ Anderson Walker, *Comic Venus*, 77; and Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 36.

¹⁰ Lahue, *Mack Sennett's Keystone*, 181; Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 89; and John Douglas Eames, *The Paramount Story* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985), 13, 88.

¹¹ Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 9; Lisa Trahair, *Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 129–130; According to Trahair, Sennett's comedies were known for their reliance on caricature and stereotypes, violent slapstick, and overt sexuality. Critics at the time found them vulgar and tasteless.

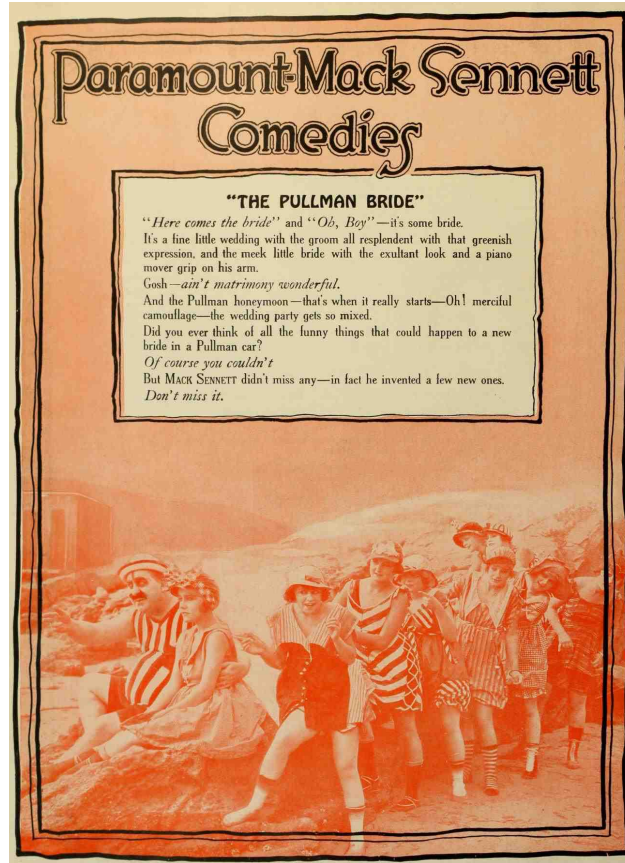


Fig. 5. Paramount-Mack Sennett Comedies advertisement. *Moving Picture World*, December 1917.

At the height of Sennett's popularity, Adolph Zukor, the founder and president of Paramount, acquired Sennett as part of Paramount productions. Released in 1917, *A Bedroom Blunder* was the first movie to establish the bathing beauties as part of the Paramount-Mack Sennett productions and began a popular run of bathing beauty movies and publicity. Every Paramount-Mack Sennett movie after *A Bedroom Blunder* had several uninterrupted minutes of the bathing beauties engaging in a "teasing beach frolic." The bathing beauties usually appeared in the second half of a two-reel comedy short. Invariably, one of the main characters needs to get away, maybe to escape a nagging family or to see some friends. In all cases, they end up at a beach or swimming pool, where the bathing beauties happen to be. At this point in the movie, the slapstick

ends, the pace slows, and the action becomes gentle. The bathing beauties play a game or goof around on the beach or poolside, all while wearing bathing suits. These interludes are silly and over the top. In one film, *The Summer Girls* (1918), Vera Steadman chases a sea lion around a swimming pool. The sea lion wears a submarine periscope and can fire a gun on command.¹²

Regardless of these antics, the bathing beauties and their movies were remarkably popular. Judson D. Stuart, in *Picture Play Magazine*, wrote: “Not many years ago, a director snapping a water scene sent out a call for pretty girls to fill in as bathing-resort extras. The film, when finished, had an unprecedented run, and the director followed it around to the picture houses to find out why. It was invariably the beach scene that made the big hit. Then and there he began to recruit girls, girls, and still more girls from the comedies and roof shows for his new type of screen play.”¹³

Sennett was not just catering to male audiences, even if it was understood in Hollywood that slapstick comedies, such as those of Normand, Fatty Arbuckle, and the Keystone Cops, appealed mostly to audiences of men and children. Women were a major part the expanding movie audience and filmmakers would have been remiss if they failed to appeal directly to female audience members. Normand, and later Gloria Swanson, offered this appeal for Sennett in his comedies. Normand, with her radically practical bathing costume, her flirtatious and independent characters, and her off-screen support of socialism and women’s suffrage, invited female audiences to identify with her characters, protagonists living life without customary restraint. Sennett’s bathing beauty movies, however popular they were for men, also illustrated the socially emancipated and leisure

¹² Walker, *Mack Sennett’s Fun Factory*, 89.

¹³ Judson D. Stuart, “The Dumb Chorus Girls,” *Picture Play Magazine*, October 1918.

lifestyles young female moviegoers experienced and liked to see on screen. As Shelley Stamp explains, women's interest in movies did not extend only to romances and dramas but was built in part on the popularity of movies about vice, action-adventure, and feminist agitation.¹⁴

Zukor set up Sennett, along with Griffith and Ince, with the production company Paramount-Artcraft, which Paramount labeled the "ultimate in motion picture art."¹⁵ Sennett signed a 3 year contract with Paramount Studios in 1917 to produce 26 two-reel comedies a year, for a total of 76 comedies. Sennett struck a great deal that capitalized on Paramount's distribution and promotional power. In 1919 75 percent of the 17,130 movie theaters in the country featured a Paramount-Artcraft movie at least part of the time. A small number of those movie theaters showed Paramount-Artcraft pictures exclusively. In a single week, the distribution centers of Paramount-Artcraft shipped 23,920 products on average. With his twenty-six acres of studios, four sound stages, laboratories, and property rooms, Sennett had at least two films a month distributed in this manner.¹⁶ Additionally, Paramount-Artcraft supported a large advertising department. Called the "Exploitation Department," it sought to create advertising for the individual film exhibitors, or theater owners, by "telling the truth about it [the movie] directly to the public as often and in as many ways as human ingenuity can devise." For instance, in

¹⁴ Hilary Hallett, *Go West, Young Women*, 9, 12, 13; Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6, 9; and Lefler, *Mabel Normand*, 43. Shelley Stamp uses three types of movies to explain women's growing interest in going to the cinema: white slavery movies; action serials with female protagonists; and women's suffrage movies.

¹⁵ A two-reel comedy was approximately twenty minutes long. Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 36, 87; and *The Story of the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation* (New York: Paramount-Artcraft Motion Pictures, 1919), 5.

¹⁶ *The Story of the Famous Player-Lasky Corporation*, 18–19, 27, 34. See also, "Part II: Struggles for Control, 1908–1930," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tina Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 118.

1918 the company sold 100 million movie posters, 1 million sets of still photographs, and a half million announcement slides to theaters exhibiting Paramount-Artcraft movies.¹⁷

Sennett's strategy, and the strategies of his distribution partners, for selling movies seemed to hinge on the bathing beauties. Certainly, by the time that Sennett signed with Paramount in 1917, the "Bathing Girls" or "Bathing Beauties" had become a huge source of publicity for his movies. For instance, in *Motion Picture News*, Keystone Comedies advertised its three new movies by showing a picture of a chorus line of pretty girls in matching black and white bathing suits. That same year, when Sennett took his comedy productions to Paramount Studios, the Paramount-Mack Sennett Comedies were advertised in the same way—with beautiful women in extravagant bathing costumes.¹⁸ To film distributors, Paramount said of *The Pullman Bride* (1917), "The cast includes Miss Gloria Swanson, Mack Swaine, Chester Conklin—aided and abetted by a flock of beauties." His advertising strategy required using images of the bathing beauties even if they did not appear in the film.¹⁹

The advertising that exploited the bathing beauties' bodies became even more intense when Sennett moved distributors from Paramount-Artcraft to Pathé Exchange in 1923. Pathé Exchange was a good fit for Sennett. The company only made short films employing independent producers, and Sennett brought his comedy properties with him. Pathé announced to its exhibitors: "Mack Sennett, creator of the Bathing Girls, the

¹⁷ *The Story of the Famous Player-Lasky Corporation*, 51–52, 57. Paramount-Artcraft was also the production vehicle for America's sweetheart, Mary Pickford. See Tina Balio, "Stars in Business: The Founding of United Artists," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Balio, 160.

¹⁸ Keystone Comedies ad, *Motion Picture News*, 7 July 1927, 27; and Paramount-Mack Sennett Comedies ad for *The Pullman Bride*, *Moving Picture World*, December 1917.

¹⁹ Hilde d'Haeyere, "Splashes of Fun and Beauty: Mack Sennett's Bathing Beauties," in *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King (New York: Routledge, 2010), 208; and Paramount-Mack Sennett Comedies, in *Motion Picture News*, September/October 1917.

Keystone Cops, and the discoverer of more stars than any other producer, has set a new milestone in short subject production. . . . If you don't play the Sennett brand, you won't be playing what your public demands.”

At Pathé, Sennett worked with the largest budget he had ever had and, according to one scholar, created the most beautiful two-reelers of his career.²⁰ These films included a series of “Sennett Girl” comedies with a new cast of bathing beauties. They acted as the main characters of the movies instead of as an interlude. Carole Lombard and Daphne Pollard starred. The movies also included starlets Kathryn Stanley, Leota Winters, Anita Barnes, Marie Pergain, Nancy Cornelius, Lucille Miller, Carmelita Gerahty, and Patsy O’Leary.²¹ Except for the first two Sennett Pathé releases, the Bathing Girl films were college themed. This allowed for the settings of the movies to be in dorm rooms and sorority houses with the actresses dressed in “negligee, night-gowns, and dishabille of various kinds of degrees” and, according to production documents, “showing as much skin as is practical.”²²

In many of these movies, the Bathing Girls are, predictably, wearing bathing suits. In *The Swim Princess* (1928) Pollard and Lombard are members of an all-girls college swim team. Lombard, the fun-loving flapper swim star, disappears, and Pollard has to find her. Sennett filmed some of the bathing girl scenes in the swimming pool with an early technicolor process, developed by photographer Edwin Bower Hesser, so costuming

²⁰ Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 128, 174; and Richard Lewis Ward, *When the Cock Crows: A History of the Pathé Exchange* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 80–82. Technically Mack Sennett Comedy Productions produced the films, while Pathé Exchange was just the distributor. The Pathé company made the most money, though, by producing weekly newsreels in the United States, Italy, Russia, Japan, France, and Great Britain. Ward, *When the Cock Crows*, 8–10.

²¹ Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 174.

²² Sennett All Star troupe, story no. 301, folder 85, *The Campus Carmen*, Mack Sennett Collection, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California [hereafter, MSC, MHL]; and Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 176.

was essential. Hesser wrote on 30 September 1927, “The girls practicing in gymnasium are not all in the same uniform, various bright colored bathing suitsx [*sic*] are essential!” Describing the cinematography, he also wrote: “Shot from above of girls . . . in bright sunlight, this will be a beautiful shot against the green bottom of the tank. Suits of the two girls should be pink – with very narrow black trim to avoid appearance of nudity, and light orange.” The actresses needed to wear specially mixed waterproof makeup made by Hesser; the type depended on whether the actresses would be shooting in color or black and white.²³ For *The Beach Club*, filmed at Santa Monica Beach, central casting needed “4 good looking bathing girls [in] plain knit bathing suits—must swim.” The male actor’s beach attire was more important in this picture. According to production documents, “the Beach in front of the club house, Dent, Madeline, and Baron are all in bathing suits. Dent’s costume consists of a bathing upper cut high at the back of the neck and V shaped in the front. Across the front of the upper is some kind of distinctive design. . . (A costume of this kind is here specified for a gag to come later.”

Still it was all about the women and their suits. The documents recommended some possible subtitles for *The Beach Club*: “The Seymour Beach club, where the girls go to dip in the waves and the men go dippy”; “The Beach. California Bathing Girls, who others might equal but never outstrip”; “At the Blue Point Beach Club where a bathing

²³ Edwin Bower Hesser, 30 September 1927, folder 635, *The Swim Princess*, MSC, MHL, pp. 1–2. According to production documents in this folder, Hesser indicated which scenes should be filmed in color and which scenes would be in black and white. A color print of the *The Swim Princess* doesn’t seem to exist anymore. There is an incomplete black and white copy of the film copy housed in the University of California, Los Angeles, Film and Television Archive. *The Swim Princess*, presented by Mack Sennett, Directed by Alf Goulding (Los Angeles: Pathé Exchange, 1927) film, 1 reel, inventory no. M52708, Stanford Theater Foundation Collection, Motion Picture Collection, UCLA Library, University of California, Los Angeles. For more on Edwin Bower Hesser, see David S. Shields, “Edwin Bower Hesser’s Strange and Arty Journey,” *Photography and the American Stage*, accessed 21 July 2017, broadway.cas.sc.edu; and David H. Shields, *Still: American Silent Motion Picture Photography* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

girl once got her suit wet—by upsetting a glass of lemonade”; and “The Blue Point Beach Club, where the ocean wears a smile—and the girls not much more.”²⁴ These comedies had less violent slapstick than his earlier films, a way that Sennett tried to appeal to a female moviegoing public. Women would identify with the college-educated flappers, while Sennett could keep reaping the monetary benefits of advertising his films with the bathing beauties.

By the mid-twenties, the bathing beauties began losing their appeal. The average bathing suit had shrunk in size considerably since the bathing beauties debuted, and posing starlets for pictures in bathing suits was no longer a novel idea. Just before moving to Pathé, Mack Sennett Comedy Productions tried to capitalize once again on bathing beauty images. Sennett made an exclusive deal with the Max B. Sheffer Card Company out of Chicago to put photographs of the bathing beauties in candy boxes “and other receptacles” (most likely cigarette cartons).²⁵ Sennett’s production company made some money the first couple of years during which it had the deal with the card company: \$95.00 in August 1922, \$150.00 in September and October 1922, \$82.00 in January 1923. But by the spring of 1924, the sale of the Bathing Beauty photographs had slowed considerably. The president of the company, Max B. Sheffer, wrote to Mack Sennett Comedy Productions, “The falling off in sales of the Mack Sennett Bathing Girl Picture Inserts had been a big disappointment to us and is due to the fact that all of the pictures

²⁴ Central Casting Corporation, Movie Narrative of *The Beach Club*, and *The Beach Club*—suggested subtitles, item 5, folder 26, The Beach Club, MSC, MHL; and Titles #284, item 17, Mack Sennett Inc, prod. no. 284, item 22, and Mack Sennett Inc, prod. no. 284, item 23, folder 27, The Beach Club, MSC, MHL.

²⁵ E. M. Asher to John Waldron of Sennett Studios, New York, 31 July 1922, folder 1558, MSC, MHL. The Max B. Sheffer Card Company was an “affiliated concern” of Midland Playing Card Company. Their executive offices and production were located in Chicago where they produced two lines of pictures, Stars of Baseball and Stars of the Movies. “New Plant for the Midland Playing Card Co.,” *Modern Stationer and Book-Seller*, 10 March 1922, 40.

which we have [on hand] have been on this market for a number of years and consequently their appeal has diminished to a point where there is practically no demand for same [*sic*].” He argued that the bathing girl pictures had all been seen before. Customers demanded new pictures, not the same old photos that had been used in advertisements for years. He continued, “We believe it would be possible to revive the interest in this series of pictures, providing we could secure some new, up-to-date Bathing Girl Pictures in new and modern bathing girl costumes.”²⁶

Over the summer of 1924, the Sheffer Card Company kept asking Sennett Productions for images of the Sennett bathing beauties that would “have the drawing power necessary for a series of inserts which are to be packed with tobacco products.”²⁷ Mack Sennett Comedies finally agreed to produce a new series of sixty pictures to be placed in cigarette boxes, with the possibility of producing sixty more if the first set sold well. The Max B. Sheffer Card Company wanted not just more variety but pictures of the Sennett girls more “daring in character.” For instance, the card company cited that it had “secured a fair collection of what might be termed semi-nudes and they are selling very well.”²⁸ “The chief criticism which we have had on the Mack Sennett Bathing Girls,” the card company wrote in July 1924, “is that they are all of the same general type as to costume and subject. We believe our biggest outlet for these pictures in the future is going to be for export purposes, and you are undoubtedly aware of the type of pictures

²⁶ Max B. Sheffer to Mack Sennett Comedy Productions, New York, attention Irene Daman, 21 May 1921, folder 1558, MSC, MHL.

²⁷ Max B. Sheffer to Mack Sennett Comedies, Los Angeles, 9 July 1924, folder 1558, MSC, MHL.

²⁸ Max B. Sheffer to Irene Daman, Mack Sennett Comedy Productions, New York, 27 May 1925, folder 1558, MSC, MHL.

which would appeal to the Latin American countries.”²⁹ In short, the bathing beauties needed to show more skin.

The sources do not say whether or not Sennett Comedies agreed to take seminude photos of the bathing beauties. The Max B. Sheffer Card Company went bankrupt shortly after the studio agreed to produce more pictures, so if the Sennett company did produce seminudes they were unsuccessful in generating a profit.³⁰ More risqué photographs also did not seem to go well with Sennett’s overall theme for the Bathing Girls as fun-loving and modern, yet wholesome American women. Sennett wrote in the titles of *Why Beaches Are Popular* (1919) that “aside from entertainment they [the bathing beauties] afford, they will convey to the world more directly, the important truth that clean living, exercise, and fresh air --- being the prelude to good health, become also the prelude to that possession, coveted by all women, and admired by all men---BEAUTY OF FACE and SYMMETRY OF FORM.”³¹ According to *Exhibitors Trade Review*, it was the “typical American womanhood” that should be exploited in the advertising for the Mack Sennett movies. “Every beauty parlor, every dealer of cosmetics, every woman’s shop that deals in stockings, footwear, ‘undies,’ every national manufacturer that deals with these shops,” should be convinced to use portraits of the bathing beauties to sell their wares and sell the movies. For example, the *Trade Review* would help exhibitors create a tie-in advertisement for the Jantzen bathing suit being modeled in the Mack Sennett

²⁹ Max B. Sheffer to Mack Sennett Comedies, attention Mr. Charles Simpson, Los Angeles, 25 July 1924, folder 1558, MSC, MHL.

³⁰ Letty Berlieve to Mr. Charles Simpson, Mack Sennett Inc, 15 November 1927, folder 1558, MSC, MHL.

³¹ *Why Beaches Are Popular*, Bathing girl titles, 1919, folder 701, MSC, MHL.

comedies of 1925, style 47-A. Sennett also moved away from the bathing beauty trope at the end of the 1920s, opting for “cleaner” stories to attract a larger audience.³²



Figure 4 Fig. 6. "Actress Marie Prevost with arms behind her back from Mack Sennett Archade Series." 1915–1930, Jefferson R. Burdick Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

As individual starlets, the bathing beauties made quite the splash themselves. Phyllis Haver, Marie Prevost, Harriet Hammond, Marvel Rea, Virginia Fox, Kathryn McGuire, Sybil Seely, Lois Boyd, and Mildred June were all bathing beauty alumna who would become known in their own right as actresses.³³ When Haver moved on from the bathing beauties to work as a dramatic actress, Adela Rogers St. Johns, writing for *Photoplay*, likened it to blue laws and prohibition. St. Johns wrote: “Anything more delightful than to watch Phyllis at the beach in the water, I don’t know. I have seen her ride a board tied to the end of a motor launch going sixty miles an hour out in the ocean— I have seen her tumbled off again and again only to come up as graceful and undisturbed as a mermaid. I have watched her diving the big, rough breakers of the Pacific, her laughing face breaking through like a sunbeam in the clouds.”³⁴ Prevost reminisced in 1925: “My ability to swim, dive, and ride a surf-board eventually led to the golden opportunity. I was called upon to double for another girl in the long shots in the water. No doubt I was a much better bathing girl than actress, but at any rate my skills as a mermaid finally led to the hanging of the bathing suit on the line for good.”³⁵

Even as the Bathing Beauty actresses moved on to other opportunities in Hollywood, the idea of the Bathing Beauty persisted. Starlets posing in bathing suits at the beach became fodder for Hollywood gossip and industry magazines. Silent film star and Universal actress Mary MacLaren posed for *Motion Picture Classic* in February of 1920. She was photographed with her unbobbed hair down, without stockings, in a two-

³² “Don’t Discount Beauty,” *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 22 August 1925, 42, 43; and D’Haeyere, “Splashes of Fun and Beauty,” 220.

³³ Walker, *Mack Sennett’s Fun Factory*, 89.

³⁴ Adela Rogers St. Johns, “Goodbye, Bathing Girl,” *Photoplay*, January 21, 33.

³⁵ “Stories about the Old Times,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, February–July 1925, 128.

piece bathing suit (a sleeveless tunic and mid-thigh shorts with white piping). The pictures came out at the same month her new picture with Universal, *Rouge and Riches*, debuted.³⁶ Bebe Daniels had a beach party at her house in Santa Monica covered by *Screenland* in 1927. She rushed out to greet her guests wearing a sensible one-piece bathing suit and a colored beach cape around her shoulders. Mr. and Mrs. Goldwyn (Metro Goldwyn Meyer) even stopped by to say hello.³⁷ In July 1930 Clara Bow and Joan Crawford modeled summer swimsuits for *Screenland* magazine. Crawford wore her favorite beach pajama outfit of bright printed silk, and Bow modeled a white, lace-up, one-piece suit with matching beach shoes. The magazine claimed, “Not since the Mack Sennett days have we seen so many bathing beauties and diving divas!”³⁸

Many spreads included fashion tie-ins, which marketed the swimsuit or beauty product that the starlet wore in the photograph. Actress Alice White marketed her new movie, *Play Around*, by working as “The Jantzen Girl,” modeling a Jantzen swimsuit in her movie stills. In December 1930, *Screenland* ran “Stars in the Sun,” which detailed how Hollywood stars could be glamorous on the beach all year long in Southern California. In this spread, Anita Page was said to “like to wear these backless coveralls on the beach—and the beach, of course, like[s] to see Anita wear them. Splashy red and blue flowers for the pattern. With her big floppy hat Anita salutes the sun.”³⁹ In 1931 *New Movie Magazine* announced, “What the Well Dressed Mermaid Will Wear This

³⁶ “Mary at the Beach,” *Motion Picture Classic*, February 1920; Nancy Skelton, “Silent Screen Actress Mary MacLaren Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 November 1985, http://articles.latimes.com/1985-11-11/local/me-3885_1_mary-maclaren, accessed 1 September 2018; and *Rouge and Riches*, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0011646/?ref_=nm_fmg_act_152, accessed 1 September 2018

³⁷ Grace Kingsley, “One Bebe’s Beach,” *Screenland*, December 1927, 46–47, 94.

³⁸ “Bathing Beauties and Beach Fashions,” *Screenland*, July 1930, 35–50.

³⁹ Advertisement for *Playing Around*, *Exhibitors Herald World*, 15 March 1930; and “Stars in the Sun,” *Screenland*, December 1930, 78–79.

Summer.”⁴⁰ The fashion and movie industries were very much intertwined. Starlets, and the studios they worked for, exploited this lucrative connection between beauty and bathing suits, but the beach remained the primary backdrop. The beach became the glamorous location where regular women, wearing the swimsuits marketed to them by film magazines, could participate in the starlet lifestyle.⁴¹

From Bathing Beauties to Pageant Queens

In 1918, Juanita Hansen and Marie Prevost came in first and second place, respectively, in the Venice Bathing Suit Parade contest held at Venice Beach, California. Hansen, described as a “blonde beauty,” won the competition by wearing a white-silk costume and a hat of the same color and fabric. Prevost wore a black-silk costume. One hundred and twenty-one women participated in front of an audience of sixty thousand people. “There were girls of every size and every conceivable type and figure,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. The contestants showed bare or stockinged legs, powdered and tanned knees. On the fashions of the day, the newspaper continued: “Of costumes there were as many styles as there were girls. Many showed a distinct tendency to Hooverize [conserve] in the breadth and length of their garments, while there was a plentiful sprinkling of those [who] went the limit in the amount of cloth used.”⁴² Most

⁴⁰ “What the Well Dressed Mermaid Will Wear This Summer,” *New Movie Magazine*, June 1931, 54.

⁴¹ Carolina Young, *Classic Hollywood Style* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2012), 7; and Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood*, Commerce and Mass Culture series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 11, 22.

⁴² “Form-al Glimpses of Venice’s Bathing Suit Parade,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 June 1918. The Venice Bathing Suit Parade began in 1912 as a newspaper promotional stunt. The annual parade put on by the city became one of the most popular seaside events in Los Angeles and attract thousands of spectators each year. Carolyn Elayne Alexander, *Venice*, Images of America (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing), 45.

interestingly, Hansen and Prevost were not just amateur beauty queens. Both had careers in Sennett comedies as bathing beauties.

Born as Marie Bickford Dunn in Ontario, Canada, Prevost joined Sennett's productions in early 1915 as bathing girl. Her excellent swimming skills made her a premier candidate as a possible body double for Gloria Swanson in diving scenes. Hansen began her career with Keystone Comedies near the same time. Both women used the Sennett movies as jumping off points for their film careers, and both actresses left Sennett productions in the late teens and early twenties to join other studios. Prevost signed with Universal in 1921 and starred as a flapper in feature films including *The Parisian Scandal* (1921) and *The Midnight Flapper* (1922). Hansen became a popular serial star and reigning queen of cliff-hanger serial dramas.⁴³ They seemed to have entered the Venice Bathing Suit Parade as a way of gaining attention as an actress in the competitive Hollywood market or to make some extra money. The first-place winners won cash prizes. In the early years of bathing beauty pageants, actresses made up a substantial number of participants.

Bathing suit parades have various historical antecedents. Kimberly H. Hamlin argues that prior to the first Miss America pageant in 1921, most people recognized pageants as theatrical events put on by women's groups and suffragists. Pageants like these became a popular form of civil engagements. Others credit P.T. Barnum with creating the first pageant in which women were judged for their beauty and the winner

⁴³ Walker, *Mack Sennett's Fun Factory*, 511, 538. Unfortunately, neither Marie Prevost's or Juanita Hansen's careers had any longevity. Prevost managed to transition to talkies, but said that a weight gain stopped her from getting more parts. She died in 1937 from malnutrition and alcoholism after trying a crash diet. Hansen's career ended due to a cocaine and morphine addiction. Her addiction became public after it was revealed that she was a patient of the notorious doctor who prescribed the morphine to silent-film star Wallace Reid. Reid died from an overdose.

was declared the most beautiful. In 1854, the first pageant Barnum held with young women parading themselves in public horrified spectators. The next year, he held a picture campaign instead. Young women sent their photographs to a committee, and a winner was chosen from them. Women in small towns sometimes participated in beauty pageants during festivals and carnivals, crowned as queens for the day.⁴⁴

Yet bathing suit parades were a different iteration of these events. For one, as the name suggests, contestants wore bathing suits, a notoriously scandalous garment. The parade participants walked or rode in cars in the streets of beach and resort towns, down to the boardwalks or piers, where judges declared the most beautiful. City boosters, hotel owners, and professional associations used these parades and pageants to draw crowds to their beaches, marking the opening or closing of the summer seasons. Promoters put on these spectacles of beautiful women to draw crowds to the beach during the offseason as well. The most famous of these, the Atlantic City Fall Frolic, eventually evolved into the most famous pageant in the United States, Miss America.⁴⁵

These spectacles only existed at the beach. Bathing suit parades and pageants became socially sanctioned spaces where women could and would display their bodies for public consumption and, sometimes, monetary compensation. Although the pageants existed for the economic gain of the beach businesses, civic entities, and the entertainment of the beach visitors, many participants gained a sense of power and agency from this new beauty competition.⁴⁶ Others did so to advance their acting careers.

⁴⁴ Lantham, *Posing a Threat*, 89; Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash," 27–30.

⁴⁵ "Form-al Glimpses of Venice's Bathing Suit Parade," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 June 1918; "Chic Suits to Appear in Parade: One Hundred Girls Enroll for Pageant of Seashore Styles at Venice," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 1922; "Bathing Girls Preparing for Annual Classic," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 May 1927; and Elwood Watson and Darcy, ed., introduction, *There She Is, Miss America": The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant*, Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.

⁴⁶ For more on beauty and power, see Sarah Banat-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 3–5.

Some women may have just participated in the pageants for fun, to feel beautiful, and to bask in the sun of the audience's gaze. Because of these bathing suit parades, in particular the popularity of Miss America, women's beauty would forever be connected to bathing suits and sandy beaches.

Southern California in the 1910s was awash in bathing suit parades. The first annual parade took place in Ocean Park, California, a small community adjacent to Venice Beach in 1911 or 1912. By 1914 the bathing suit parade was a popular event. That year, multiple silent-film actresses contended for first place, with Margaret Gibson, an actress contracted to Vitagraph, taking first place. She won fifty dollars wearing a homemade purple- and white-silk bathing costume. Her win brought her much publicity, with features in *Motion Picture Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Whether this directly contributed to her long movie career cannot be determined, but the publicity probably did not hurt.⁴⁷ Another actress, Fay Tincher, won the next Venice Bathing Suit Parade. On 9 May 1915, seventy-five thousand people came to see her win fifty dollars wearing a suit based on the dress she wore in her movies. She played Ethel, a stenographer who wears a loud black and white striped dress. The role had made her famous. Of Tincher's suit, critics griped "Ms. Tincher's suit was in the 1915 style, a little too large to go into a vanity case, and just large enough to escape the wrath of the women's reform league"⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "Margaret Gibson Wins First Prize for Having the Prettiest Bathing Suit," *Motion Picture Magazine*, September 1914, 128; "Margaret Gibson Wins the Prize," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 1914; and "Patricia Palmer," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed 11 August 2017, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0317098/?ref_=fn_al_nm_2. Margaret Gibson was born as Ella Margaret Gibson, and acted under Margaret Gibson for a short time before changing her stage name to Patricia Palmer.

⁴⁸ "Fay Tincher Proud Winner: Thousands Flock to Bathing Suit Parade," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 1915; "Fay Tincher," Women Film Pioneers Project, Columbia University Libraries, <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-fay-tincher/>, accessed 14 February 2018; "Ethel Gets Consent,"

Over the next several years, many participants in the Southern California bathing beauty parades were actresses. Bebe Daniels, as mentioned before, acted with Pathé Exchange; she came in third place out of one hundred participants in the Venice Bathing Beauty Parade of 1916. Fifty thousand spectators watched that year. In the parade of 1919, Dorothy Devore and Margaret Passine of Christie Comedies, won first and second place, respectively. In 1920 Helen Darling, also of Christie Film Company, won first place at the Venice parade. A spectator writing for the magazine *Moving Picture World* remarked on the winning bathing suit: “I would like to describe the prize-winning outfit of the parade at length, but it is difficult to write a piece about a one-piece bathing suit, there is so little length on it. It starts so quick and ends so soon, one really gets finished before one fairly gets started. It was blue, however, and of silk—armless, limbless, backless.” Beth Darlington of the Hamilton-White company and Mermaid Comedies won first place in 1921 with “a blue satin suit trimmed with sequins and a hat that bore a large blue plume. Second place went to her co-worker Melba Browning.” About three hundred women competed in the parade that year, representing most of the major Hollywood studios, but “the twenty girls from the Hamilton-White studio proved by far the most popular.”⁴⁹

From Venice Beach, the idea of bathing beauty parades and pageants spread widely. Newport Beach in Orange County, California, held its first “Parade of Surf

Reel Life, 6 February 1915, 20; and “Fay Tincher Wins Bathing Suit Parade Prize,” *Motion Picture News*, June 1915, 62.

⁴⁹ “Bountiful in Beauty Is Parade at Venice,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1916; Eve Golden, *Golden Image: 41 Essays on Silent Film Stars* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001), 18; “Coast Brevities,” *Wid’s Daily*, 24 May 1919; “Rubbernecking in Filmland,” *Moving Picture World*, 5 June 1920, 1315; and “Mermaid Girls Win Bathing Girls’ Parade,” *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 10 September 1921, 1033. For more on Mermaid Comedies and the Hamilton-White Studio, see Anthony Balducci, *Lloyd Hamilton: Poor Boy Comedian of the Silent Cinema* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2009), 83–89.



Figure 5. “Bathing Girl Revue Long Beach Cal.,” nd. California Postcard Collection, box ten, University of California, Los Angeles

Beauties” in 1920. Thirty thousand people watched forty bathing girls compete on Balboa Island in 1921. For this competition, the women jumped into the ocean and “proved the utility of their costume.” San Diego had a bathing suit parade in 1920 as well. Amy Ford won in her “extremely simple and material-saving costume.”⁵⁰

Miami, Florida, premiered a bathing beauty parade during a civic celebration called Palm Fete in December of 1920. The bathing revue was part of a larger aquatic day featuring swim racing for girls, boys, and seniors, and lifesaving demonstrations. Twenty-five thousand people attended the parade held on the sidewalk between the men’s and women’s bathhouses. Marian Gillette took the top prize of \$100, wearing a “green

⁵⁰ “Thousands See Bathing Girls: Newport Beach Second Annual Parade of Surf Beauties,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 June 1921; “Miss Amy Ford,” *New York Tribune*, 11 July 1920.

and gold hula-hula bathing suit revealing a goddess-like form.” The original parade was so successful that organizers restaged the event several days later during the “Moon Dance” which was attended by a thousand people. Gillette won first prize again.⁵¹ Other Florida cities began staging similar events in the years to come: Tampa held a bathing beauty parade for its Labor Day celebration in 1923; Daytona Beach held its own competition for a “Summer Frolics” over Fourth of July in 1924; and St. Augustine sponsored a bathing beauty parade as part of a celebration put on by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Their celebration included other events such as swimming contests, water sports, car racing, baseball games, stunt flying, and a yacht regatta.⁵²

The Bathing Girl Revue began in 1920 in Galveston, Texas, as part of their summer-season opening celebration called Splash Day. The Galveston Commercial Organization had sponsored the celebration since 1916 with parades, dances, and fireworks.⁵³ In 1921 fifty girls from Galveston, Houston, and the surrounding area competed for a \$500 diamond ring. “Mack Sennett will have to look to his laurels if the predictions of the Beach Association are correct,” reported the *Galveston Daily News*, “for Galvestonians are promised the prettiest array of bathing beauties and costumes ever witnessed in the second annual bathing girl revue.” For the small resort city, the bathing revue brought in thousands of new visitors each year. In 1926, 60,000 people reportedly

⁵¹Palm Fete Shifted to the Beach for a Day: Bathing Beauties to Be Seen in a Parade This Afternoon,” *Miami (Florida) Daily Metropolis*, 10 December 1920; “Absorbing was the Interest in that Bathing Suit Parade on Miami Beach,” *Miami (Fla.) Daily Metropolis*, 11 December 1920; “Bathing Beauties to Be Seen Tonight, End of Palm Fete,” *Miami (Fla.) Daily Metropolis*, 13 December 1920; and “Marian Gillette, Bathing Beauty, Wins Two Prizes,” *Miami (Fla.) Daily Metropolis*, 14 December 1920.

⁵² “Thousands of Tampans Flock to Sunset to See Labor Day Bathing Girl Contest,” *Tampa (Fla.) Daily Times*, 4 September 1923; “Daytona Opens Summer Frolic: Bathing Beauty Parade Feature of Opening Day,” *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*, 4 July 1924; and “St. Augustine Jaycees Sponsor Bathing Beauty Parade July 4,” *Orlando (Fla.) Evening Star*, 3 July 1928.

⁵³ David G McComb, “Galveston as a Tourist City,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (January 1997): 345, 347.

watched Catherine Moylan of Dallas win “beauty queen of the universe.” Newspapers reported that in 1927, 250,000 people attended the affair, and two years later 100,000 people watched the bathing beauties.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, the momentum dropped sharply, and economic difficulties during the Great Depression ended the pageant in 1931.⁵⁵

African American women participated in bathing suit pageants of their own. In March of 1926, the owners of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem opened its doors. Management of the social club found that displaying women in their bathing suits was good for business and held a bathing beauty contest for local women. Although the contest did not occur at the beach—beaches were still segregated in many places and black women were not allowed to participate in white beauty pageants—the first prize for winning the contest was an all-expense-paid trip to Atlantic City. More than two thousand spectators attended. Pelican Roof Garden Club held a similar pageant in New Orleans. More than thirty women participated in a hall that was decorated as Atlantic City with sand, beach umbrellas, and lounge chairs.⁵⁶ In the 1930s and early 1940s even the famous African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, and the NAACP held bathing beauty pageants at black beaches, away from the prying and judgmental eyes of white

⁵⁴ “Bathing Beauties Will Parade on Beach Front in Annual Revue Today,” *Galveston (Tex.) Daily News*, 15 May 1921; “Miss Dallas Wins Revue” and “Check of Carriers Show over 60,000 Arrived Here Yesterday and the Day Before,” *Galveston (Tex.) Daily News*, 17 May 1926; “New Pageant Record Set,” *Galveston (Tex.) Daily News*, 23 May 1927, and “100,000 Ogle 43 Bathing Girls at Galveston,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 June 1928.

⁵⁵ McComb, “Galveston as a Tourist City,” 348.

⁵⁶ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 200–204; and “Bathing Beauty Contest,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 August 1926.

ON THE BEACH AT ATLANTIC CITY



Not only did The Chicago Defender prize winners visit the spots of interest in Atlantic City, but they also found time to take a dip in the Atlantic at the famous million-dollar pier beach. Shown in the group here, from left to right, are: Misses Mabel Sanford Lewis, Julma Brown, Edna Smith, Thelma Summers, Evelyn Harris, Eleanor Archer and Margaret Luckey.

Fig. 6. "On the Beach at Atlantic City," *Chicago Defender*, 26 August 1933.

spectators. In 1933 the *Chicago Defender* prize winners went altogether to Atlantic City and swam at the Million Dollar Pier beach, where they took a group picture that was published back home in Chicago.⁵⁷ It was not a coincidence that the prizes for black women participants almost always took them to Atlantic City. Sending the winners there was a clear protest against the most-famous bathing suit pageant, Miss America, which did not allow African American women to compete.

The Miss America pageant would become the most famous and longest running beauty pageant in the United States. Yet Miss America began as civic entertainment, as a

⁵⁷"On the Beach at Atlantic City," *Chicago Defender*, 26 August 1933; and "Beauty Queen," *Chicago Defender*, 9 September 1933. For more on black beauty pageants, see Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. chap. 3.

bathing beauty pageant put on by the Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce to lengthen the beach-going season past Labor Day.⁵⁸ In 1920 the Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce staged an “experimental pageant” with a rolling chair parade and a carnival ball. The next year, it added a pageant that would crown the winner “the most beautiful Bathing Girl in America.” The chamber of commerce took its inspiration directly from bathing beauty pageants then held at other beaches in the United States. “Many cities,” wrote chamber member W. B. Dill, “on the Pacific Coast particularly, have held bathing parades, but nothing to approach in magnitude or novelty the Bathers’ Revue which it is proposed to stage on the beachfront between the Steel and Garden Piers on the Morning of September 8 [1921].” As early as 1916, the *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger* printed a photograph of the women participating in the Venice Bathing Suit Parade and asked, “Why not one of the kind on the Jersey Shore?”⁵⁹

There were two distinct parts to the Atlantic City pageant’s bathing suit parade. First was the Inter-City Beauty Contest in which women representing various cities and towns along the East Coast participated in a more formal competition. The organizers asked local newspapers in various towns to sponsor the pageant participants and choose them from photographs sent to the newspapers as nominations.⁶⁰ They called these women the “Civic Beauties.”⁶¹ The second part of the pageant was the Bathers’ Revue.

⁵⁸ Kimberly H. Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash: The First Miss America Pageants, 1921–1927,” in *There She is*, ed. Watson and Martin, 33.

⁵⁹ W. B. Dill, “Atlantic City Prepares for the Great Fall Pageant,” *Atlantic City Monthly*, April 1921, Sinclair New Jersey Collection, Special Collections, Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey [hereafter Sinclair NJ SPCOL]; and “Why Not One of the Kind of the Jersey Shore,” *Philadelphia (Pa.) Evening Public Ledger*, 16 May 1916.

⁶⁰ Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash,” 33.

⁶¹ “Pageant Eclipsed Hopes of Most Optimistic and Won the Plaudits of Every Beholder,” *Atlantic City Monthly*, September 1921, Sinclair NJ SPCOL; and Dill, “Atlantic City Prepares for Great Fall Pageant,” April 1921, Sinclair NJ SPCOL.

Anyone could participate as long as they wore a bathing suit and registered for any of the five separate divisions. Division one was for organizations, such as “firemen in their bathing suits” (the example given in *Atlantic City Monthly*). Division two featured children from walking age to twelve years old. Men participated in division three and could would win awards for best physical appearance. Division four was the comic division and the funniest and most-unique bathing suits would win. The main section of the Bathers’ Revue was for women, and it was divided into two categories: professional and amateur. Organizers considered actresses, motion picture players, and professional swimmers as part of the professional category, and everyone else was an amateur. The winner from each category would be judged by a committee, and the most beautiful would win the “Golden Mermaid,” a gold statue valued at \$5,000. None other than Annette Kellerman donated some of the prizes that the bathing beauties could win.⁶²

The September 8 pageant was considered a “tremendous success.” “Not only were thousands tempted to remain after the usual time of the post–Labor Day exodus,” reported the chamber of commerce, “but other great throngs came from inland cities and from other points along the coast to witness the beautiful features which filled the days and evenings of the pageant times.”⁶³ King Neptune formally opened the pageant, escorted by his court of civic beauties (with representatives from Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Camden, Newark, and Ocean City, New Jersey; Washington D.C.; and New York City) and his guard of slaves (the only African

⁶² Dill, “Atlantic City Prepares for Great Fall Pageant,” April 1921, and “Atlantic City Pageant Directors Are Make Extensive Preparations for Big Fall Event,” *Atlantic City Monthly*, July 1922, both in Sinclair NJ SPCOL.

⁶³ “Pageant Eclipsed Hopes of Most Optimistic and Won the Plaudits of Every Beholder,” *Atlantic City Monthly*, September 1921, 1, Sinclair NJ SPCOL.

Americans in the pageant). At noon the same day the Inter-City beauties, wearing sashes labeled with their respective cities, were judged by a panel of male artists and actors. Actress Virginia Lee won the professional category. Miss Washington, Margaret Gorman, won the amateur category and would go on to win the Golden Mermaid in the Bather's Revue, beating out 1,000 other women.⁶⁴

Margaret Gorman was only fifteen years old and attending high school when the *Washington Herald* (Washington, D.C.) chose her to be Miss Washington at the Atlantic City pageant. From forty-one contestants to twelve and then finally to six, Gorman was chosen because of her “physical beauty, charm of manner, poise and culture.”⁶⁵ The *Herald* judges paid her a “unique compliment” when they announced her as the winner: “Although she is extremely young—not quite seventeen—we found her to possess to the highest degree those qualifications which are required for the representative of Washington. She possesses remarkable physical beauty. Her features are practically perfect, her hair and complexion are natural and of rare color. In addition to this she possesses a sweet, pleasing manner and intellect that would do credit to one of more mature years.” Gorman represented the traditional virtues of American womanhood. She was young, pretty, seemingly sweet and virtuous. Her hair was unbobbed, a clear signal to judges and spectators that she was not a flirtatious or disreputable flapper. She wore a black taffeta suit cut into a sleeveless tunic that fell to mid-thigh with bloomer-like

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2–3.

⁶⁵ “Miss Margaret Gorman Now Miss Washington,” *Washington Herald* (Washington, D.C.), 29 August 1921.



Fig. 7. Margaret Gorman, the first winner of the Miss America Pageant, 13 September 1921. Library of Congress prints and photographs division. [//hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b25772](https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b25772).

Bermuda shorts and a white girdle. She also wore black stockings rolled down her knees.⁶⁶ Now technically wearing stockings rolled down to the knees was illegal on Atlantic City beaches. Gorman won the bathing beauty contest the same week that Louise Rosine was arrested at Atlantic City for having her stockings rolled down below her knees.⁶⁷ Interestingly enough, the judges of the pageant also served as its Board of Censors, who reserved “the right to reject any entry that they deem objectionable for any

⁶⁶ Watson and Martin, “*There She is, Miss America*”, 3, 32, 34; and Marian Ann J. Matweijczyk-Montgomery, “Concepts of Fashion, 1921–1987: A Study of Garments Worn by Selected Winners of the Miss America Pageant” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1993), appendix A, 517.

⁶⁷ Angela J. Latham does a complete analysis of Rosine’s arrest in *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 90.

reason.” Participating in the pageant and being previously chosen as a respectable representative of Washington, D.C., made of presence of Gorman’s uncovered knees acceptable in a way they were not on the actual beach. Putting women on display for judgement was more acceptable than women deciding to display their own bodies on the beach.

Yet the inconsistencies between the bathing suit ordinances women had to follow on the beach and the bathing costumes worn during the Fall Frolic pageants did not bother the founders of the pageant. To them, the weekend had been a complete success and they began planning for a larger event the next year. Instead of just eight women representatives, there would be seventy-five women representing cities in both the United States and Canada. They would be chosen for their beauty and wear swimsuits in the competition.⁶⁸ The pageant was now three days long with an evening gown competition. By 1924 the pageant had become a national sensation and eclipsed all other Fall Frolic events.⁶⁹

Censors on and off the Beach

Although the bathing beauty parades attracted thousands of spectators all around the country, some observers were disturbed by the display. In 1916 the association of Santa Monica Ministers attempted to stop the Venice Bathing Beauty Parade with a court injunction, but they were unsuccessful. They tried again in 1917 by lodging a complaint with the Board of Trustees, arguing that the parade should be canceled based on moral

⁶⁸ “Atlantic City Pageant Directors Are Making Extensive Preparations for Big Fall Event,” *Atlantic City*, July 1922, 3–4, Sinclair NJ, SPCOL. According to Kimberly H. Hamlin only fifty-seven women eventually participated in the pageant of 1922. See Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash,” 37.

⁶⁹ Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash,” 38–42.

and economic grounds. In 1927, Mrs. Nelly Hall Root declared, “It has been decided to have the churches conduct mourning services and citizens raise their flags as for death on the day if it [the parade] takes place.”⁷⁰ Church organizations, the Young Women’s Christian Association, the local PTA, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union all protested the Miss Universe Pageant in Galveston, Texas. The president of the Los Angeles Young Women’s Christian Association, Mrs. Chester A. Ashley, complained that the bathing suits the girls wore were fine, but parading in them made the events immoral. Ashley said to a YMCA convention, “Many of the girls who participate are girls who spend half their waking hours in their bathing togs, and so long as they are used for swimming the one-piece suit is perfectly all right, but so many of them never get wet.” “The girls who live in the resort towns think nothing of their scanty attire, and it is difficult to show them that the loss of their modesty through parading in such clothing is a vicious thing,” she explained.⁷¹

Miss America had its detractors too. The Inter-City Beauty Pageant technically ended in 1928 due to economic concerns caused by Great Depression. But it was revived in the 1930s and envisioned as an event that celebrated young women as part of national pride and power, and American modernity. Although the contestants still wore bathing suits, it was their behavior as well as their bodies that were policed. The new executive director, Lenora Slaughter, created the hostess system, which kept the contestants on a

⁷⁰ “Bountiful in Beauty is Parade at Venice,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1916; “Hope to Prevent Parade at Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 1917; and “To Cast Gloom on Parade,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 1927.

⁷¹ McComb, “Galveston as a Tourist City,” 345; and “No Fear of Anything Less than the One-Piece,” *New Castle Herald* (New Castle, Pa.), 2 May 1924

tight curfew, forbade alcohol, and banned contact with men during the pageant.

Contestants could get in trouble if they talked to their own fathers without a chaperone.⁷²

In the beginning of the 1920s, Hollywood too was unsure of how to handle bathing beauties. Sennett had made himself famous in part through the display of bathing girls in his movies, but newly minted Hollywood censors were wary of the bathing beauties' appropriateness for consumption by the general public. While Sennett was making his first batch of bathing beauty films but before the beginning of the Miss American Pageant in Atlantic City, Hollywood was rocked by a series of scandals that solidified its reputation as an immoral place. One of Mack Sennett's long-time stars, Fatty Arbuckle, was at the center of one of these scandals after he was tried, but acquitted, for the death of starlet Virginia Rappe in September of 1921.⁷³ To curb Hollywood's degrading influence and combat its "sex problem," eight states and dozens of cities established movie-censorship boards to reestablish proper moral standards. Although Hollywood studios voluntarily sent their movies through censorship czar William Hays, local and state censorship boards were much tougher on them. The Censorship Board of New York state could censor a movie if it was "obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, sacrilegious, or is of such a character that its exhibition would tend to corrupt morals or incite to crime." The Pennsylvania state board required censoring of moves that showed women in any compromising situation: drinking; smoking; "sensual kissing and lovemaking"; "lewd and immodest dancing"; and "unduly exposed bodies."⁷⁴

⁷² Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 39.

⁷³ Anne Helen Peterson, *Scandals of Classic Hollywood: Sex, Deviance, and Drama from the Golden Age of American Cinema* (New York: Plume, 2014), 18, 21, 22.

⁷⁴ John D. Stevens, "What Made Grandpa Blush? Media Censorship in the Twenties," *Studies in Popular Culture* 11, no. 2 (1988): 40–48; and *Pathé Exchange v Cobb*. For more on censorship in early Hollywood, see Matthew Bernstein, *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Lee Grievson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship*

Bathing girl movies became one of the many targets of the censorship boards. In the most publicized case, Pathé Exchange, a newsreel company, sued the New York Motion Picture Commission over its censorship of a newsreel. The commission had found the exhibition of a “beauty carnival” to be objectionable. The newsreel showed women wearing one-piece bathing suits.⁷⁵ In the lawsuit, Pathé Exchange argued against censorship in general, saying that newsreels fell into the same category as newspapers and could not be censored under the First Amendment and the equal protection clause of the New York state constitution. Pathé argued that newsreels were not fictional motion pictures but reported “truthful pictures of actual events and actual things taken on the ground as they exist or occur with motion picture cameras and made by the usual processes of photographs.” Pathé Exchange lost the suit. The courts ruled that a newsreel was not the same as a newspaper, for a newsreel reproduced the world as it is: “Nothing is left to the imagination, as with the printed page.” Some things are so “evil and voluptuous” that they should not be shown on screen.⁷⁶

The cutting of the bathing girls out of the newsreel worried Hollywood. “The elimination of the bathing girls caused something of stir,” reported the *New York Times*,

in *Early Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Daniel Czitrom, “The Politics of Performance,” in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis G. Couvares (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); and Hallett, *Go West Young Women*, 166–67.

⁷⁵ Jennifer Petersen, “Can Moving Pictures Speak? Film, Speech, and Social Science in Early Twentieth-Century Law,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 89. It is a little unclear whether the bathing beauties being filmed were competing in Galveston or Dallas, Texas, or in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Richard Lewis Ward, *When the Cocke Crows: A History of Pathé Exchange* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016) writes that the newsreel was taken in Dallas. Other sources from the time vary between Texas and Atlantic City. See “Making Movies Be Good: State’s New Censors Want to be Fair, They Say, Even on Bathing Girls,” *New York Times*, 4 September 1921; and “Pathé Suit Fights News Reel Censor: Motion Picture Commission’s Right to Edit Films Questioned,” *New York Times*, 10 February 1922.

⁷⁶ “Pathé Suit Fights News Reel Censor: Motion Picture Commission’s Rights to Edit Films Questioned,” *New York Times*, 10 February 1922; *Pathé Exchange v Cobb et al.*, 6 July 1922; and *Pathé Exchange v Cobb*, New York Appeals Court, 10 February 1922.

“Producers have been asking each other if this ruling meant that all bathers would be eliminated from the screen in New York, and, if that was true, would girls in the short dress be the next to go?” Reporter Adela Rogers St. Johns, writing for *Photoplay*, blamed censors for bathing girl movies going out of fashion.⁷⁷ It is interesting that Mack Sennett’s bathing beauty movies were so popular during the 1910s, but once bathing beauty competitions started becoming nationally known, the bathing girls suddenly became a faux pas. In the early twenties, there was a cultural dissonance between what women were doing at the beach and whether Hollywood was allowed to reproduce those behaviors on the screen.

Hollywood had reconciled its relationship with bathing beauties by 1925. It turned out that local and state censors mostly cared about depictions of crime, thinking that if crime looked glamorous, children would be drawn to it. During the twenties, less than one-third of all censored scenes were about sex.⁷⁸ So in 1925 Hollywood came calling to Atlantic City. That year all contestants had to sign a contract stating that they would appear in a Famous Players-Lasky film if they should win the pageant. Although actresses and models had always participated in bathing suit pageants for publicity, this was the first time that a Hollywood Studio and the pageant runners made a deal to directly profit off the Miss America winner. Universal Studios had attempted to do the same thing in 1922 and made screen tests of all the participants. Hollywood was embroiled in so much scandal at the time that the pageant directors decided against any sort of partnership. The Famous Players-Lasky partnership with Miss America in 1925

⁷⁷ “Making Movies Be Good,” *New York Times*, 4 September 1921; and Adela Rogers St. Johns, “Goodbye Bathing Girl!” *Photoplay*, January 1921, 33.

⁷⁸ Stevens, “What Made Grandpa Blush?” 40–48.

was not successful either. Fay Lanphier won the Miss American title that year and immediately began filming *American Venus*, a movie advertised as having “Fun. Beauty. Girls. Glamor.” But it flopped and the studio terminated Lanphier’s contract.⁷⁹ Lanphier did not enjoy her time in the spotlight either. Looking back at her time as Miss America, she said: “I worried about getting a picture contract, and then worried about making good when I did. I flopped. And found out that I did not want to be a picture star and that no one else wanted me to be one either.” “They didn’t want Fay Lanphier in that picture,” she said. “They wanted ‘Miss America.’ It was the first time I ran into that.”⁸⁰

Miss America has outlasted all other bathing beauty pageants. Most ended in the early 1930s. Lenora Slaughter, the executive director who helped revive the pageant, also changed the nature of the pageant. It was not just about bathing suits but about the overall quality and character of the contestant. She added the talent competition and the interview section. Slowly but surely, Miss America moved away from its roots as a spectacle at the beach, and the contestants all became professional beauties, instead of a mix of actresses and everyday women. The pageant kept up its relationship with Hollywood, and in 1938, five years after its revival, the crowning of that year’s Miss America, Marilyn Meseke, was watched by 112 million people on the newsreel Movietone News. Censors did not touch it.⁸¹ In the summer of 2018, after almost one hundred years, the Miss America pageant eliminated the bathing suit portion of the

⁷⁹ “Miss America Chose ‘the American Venus,’” *Moving Picture World*, 2 October 1925, 363; and Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash,” 42.

⁸⁰ George Chapin, “The Penalty of Beauty,” *New Movie Magazine*, July 1930.

⁸¹ A. R. Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After, and in Spite of Television* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 40; and Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 40.

contest, the event that made the pageant famous in the 1920s and brought so many people to the beach.

Chapter 4: Dangerous Waters

The ocean is a dangerous place. Everyone can agree on that. The waves, the riptides, the currents, and the cold can all kill a person easily. Even from the shore, the ocean is a dangerous place. For people going to the beach, today and in the past, the leisure time is punctuated with drownings and near-death experiences. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as beachgoing and ocean swimming became popular activities, beach communities contended with the fact that increased attendance meant increased accidents and drownings. The most popular of beach resorts, including Atlantic City, New York, and parts of Southern California, began beach patrols and lifesaving crews to rescue distressed swimmers whose bodies had given out while struggling against the waves and currents.

But not all bodies were created equal. Women were much less likely to know how to swim. Up until the late nineteenth century, swimming was the purview of young men and boys in urban rivers, lakes, and country swimming holes. A young woman who wanted to learn to swim had to pay for private lessons. Even if they could swim, the heavy wool skirts and stockings of their bathing costumes caught in the riptides and prevented them from effectively protecting themselves.¹ African Americans too faced increased dangers when going to the beach. The safest beaches were off limits to them, and white communities pushed black beachgoers to dangerous areas that lacked the safety measures of white beaches. On many segregated beaches there were no lights, no

¹ “Women Life Savers Getting Ready for Work,” *The Sun*, 26 May 1912. The Women’s Life Saving League began offering free swimming lessons to women specifically because most women could not afford private lessons. In an interview he gave, lifesaver Captain Sam Dunn detailed that a woman was hardest to save “on account of her dress, and she is inclined to sink despite her struggles.” See Bier, *Fighting the Current*, 51.

lifelines, and no lifeguards. Historian Andrew Kahrl, writing about black beaches in the American South, writes, “the drowning deaths of friends, family, and neighbors became, for many African Americans, a cruel companion of rising temperatures and a fundamental aspect of living—and dying—in a Jim Crow city.”² The beach presented both physical and social dangers, mitigated by gender and race. But because of these dangers, organizations emerged to combat the lack of swimming knowledge, to stop the ubiquitous drownings during the summer season and to calm the dangerous waters.

By the time American beaches began to hire lifeguards at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were combatting a problem that had plagued the United States for some time. Seaborne trade and immigration played a huge part in the U.S. economy during the nineteenth century and hundreds died due to shipwrecks. In 1848 Congress passed an appropriation that funded small lifesaving stations on the coast of New Jersey between Sandy Hook and Little Egg Harbor. The stations were serviced by volunteers who used surf boats and rocket carronades (another name for line throwing mortars) to stage short range rescues of people and cargo from ships that wrecked close to shore.³ This project began with eight stations and had saved 201 people by 1850. In 1874 the lifesaving stations expanded to the coast of Maine and to ten locations south of Cape Henry, Virginia, including parts of the outer banks of North Carolina. In 1875, stations were built on the coast of Delaware, Maryland, the Virginia Peninsula, the Great Lakes,

² Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 116.

³ Dennis L. Noble, *That Others Might Live: The U.S. Life-Saving Service, 1878–1915* (Annapolis, M.D.: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 15, 16, 20; and Chris Brewster, “History of Beach Lifeguarding,” in *The Science of Beach Lifeguarding*, ed. Mike Tipton and Adam Wooler (Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press, 2016), 4. See also, T. F. Rose, “History of the New Jersey Coast Life-Saving Service,” in *Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Woolman and Rose, 1878), 56. This historical atlas is a facsimile of the original and can be found in the Historic Maps Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

and the coast of Florida. Congress expanded the project in 1878 and created the U.S. Life-Saving Service, which eventually built 278 lifesaving stations and saved the lives of 150,000 people before becoming the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915.⁴

The patrols worked during the coldest months, November until May, when shipwrecks were most common. At the Manhattan Beach, New York, station, the beach was patrolled by “surf-men” every night. Each patrolman carried a lantern and a red Coston flare. When a patrolman saw a shipwreck, he would light his red flare by striking it against his knee, signaling the other members of the Life Saving Service that they were needed and alerting the shipwrecked crew that help was on the way. An 1879 pamphlet about visiting Manhattan Beach recommended the lifesaving station as “well worth inspection.”⁵

The Life-Saving Service was very good at what it did, saving sailors and cargo from sinking ships, but the service did not patrol individual beaches. Towns and counties had to create their own safety services and they were desperately needed. For instance, in 1898, 1,500 people drowned in New York state alone. In 1909, from May to September only, 886 people died in water related accidents. Of that number, 284 were children. In 1914 6,332 people drowned in the United States and that figure had not decreased by 1930.⁶ Some beaches made things worse. At Coney Island the manmade elements increased the danger of the currents. The U.S. Life Saving Corps reported that “Coney Island is blessed with a beach and at most times a fine surf for bathing. . . . It was, when

⁴ Noble, *That Others Might Live*, 32; and Brewster, “History of Beach Lifeguarding,” 5.

⁵ *The Story of Manhattan Beach* (New York: Francis Hart and Company, 1879), 40. Available to view at the Brooklyn Historical Society.

⁶ “Thousands Die Yearly in Surf,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 July 1928; and *Annual Report, American National Red Cross*, 13 December 1916, 55.

left alone, a comparatively safe beach, but when scores of jetties of spiles [piling] driven closely together ‘to save the beach from washing away’ were built, extending far out into the surf, some very dangerous currents were caused close to spots where thousands of bathers congregate.” The tide would sweep along the beach in either direction, following the contour of the shoreline until it struck a double wall of concrete, then sweeping out toward deep water. A swimmer, slightly out of their depth, could be caught by this water and carried out into the ocean. The report continued, “As soon as he succumbs and sinks before help reaches him and his body is carried in the swift current along the ends of the jetties for miles, and a man may not show up for days.”⁷ Long Beach, California, experienced the same problem. The original pier in Long Beach sank into the ocean in disrepair in 1900. Long Beach did not remove the leftover pier pilings and allowed people to swim near them, leading to more than a few rescues of drowning swimmers.⁸ For instance, a “lusty young man” saved three women from drowning when they entered the surf near the torn-down pier. Most likely caught in a rip current, the women had to cling to the old pilings until rescue. Two years later a young woman, Grace Simpson, died after drowning near the submerged pier and two men had to be rescued from the same area.⁹

⁷ *Annual Report of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps of the State of New York for the Year Ending October 31, 1909* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon Company, 1910), 27.

⁸ Piers, jetties, and groins (structures built from the shore into the ocean that prevent beach erosion and create swimming areas) can create rip currents. A rip current is a strong, narrow seaward flowing current that begins in the surf zone and extends past the line of breaking waves. Currents traveling along the shore that hit structures such as jetties or groins are forced offshore and can become rip currents. Rip currents can drag swimmers out to sea, not under the water. Most swimmers drown due to fatigue or an inability to keep themselves afloat, rather than being dragged underneath the surface of the ocean. See, “Rip Current Characteristics,” University of Delaware Sea Grant College Program, University of Delaware, <https://www.ceoe.udel.edu/ripcurrents/characteristics/index.html>; and “Rip Currents,” United States Lifesaving Association, <https://www.usla.org/page/ripcurrents>.

⁹ “Long Beach Tide-Rip Carries Girl Away,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 1912; and “Lifeguard Saves Drowning Man from Surf,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 October 1912.

Hotels and beaches sold safety as a way to draw visitors to their areas. Atlantic City marketed itself as “possessed of the finest and safest bathing beach along the eastern seaboard” and a “safe and delightful summer resort for children.” One pamphlet for Atlantic City said, “For their [bathers] protection, a beach patrol of 100 trained men is equipped with boats and other apparatus, and directed by an experienced surgeon. Their assistance is little needed for the beach shelves off gradually without dangerous holes or cross currents. Life lines are unnecessary.” The Broadway bathhouse in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, promoted itself as having modern improvements for the comfort and safety of the swimmer: an “experienced bath-master is in constant attendance, giving instruction and guidance, as well as acting as protector in case of accident. A life-boat and life-preservers are also kept in readiness.” At Manhattan Beach, visitors could find a beach that was firm and clean with gentle waves. Belmont Beach, California, marketed itself as “The safest beach in the world.” One beach in California claimed it was so calm that it was the “Bath-Tub of the Pacific.” At Brigantine Beach, New Jersey, children could “romp or wade to their heart’s content for ever so many yards out, without fear or danger. . . . No tricks or treachery, no undertow nor holes, nor sudden small descents, which must seem awful to dear baby bathers as pits or caverns to their stumbling little feet.”¹⁰

¹⁰ *Atlantic City: The Year Round*, 1920, and *Atlantic City*, 1900, pamphlets, *Atlantic City: The Playground of the World* (Atlantic City Publicity Bureau, 1919), in Special Collections, University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick, New Jersey; T. F. Rose, *Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Woolman and Rose, 1878); *The Story of Manhattan Beach*, 24; “Belmont Beach, Long Beach, Calif.” Box 10, Claifornia Postcard Collection, UCLA; “Year-Around Recreation in Great Out-of-Doors An Asset of Cash Value Which Makes for Satisfied and Efficient Labor,” *Great Southwest*, 18, item 12, box 2, Long Beach Ephemera, Special Collections, University Library, California State University Long Beach; and *Brigantine Beach from the Inlet to Atlantic City: Season of 1895* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Sunshine Publishing Company, 1895).



Fig. 1. "Bathing at Fourth Avenue Beach." Male Beachgoers are shown posing with life lines, while a lifeguard watches on from his seat. Monmouth County, Allenhurst-Asbury Park, box 21, Postcards New Jersey, Pictorial Collection, Rutgers University.

Some of the first safety innovations beaches developed were lifelines, ropes strung between poles for swimmers to hang on to.¹¹ Cape May, New Jersey, hung ropes off the side of its bathhouse in 1845. In 1865, after thirteen people drowned at its beach, Atlantic City installed lifelines into the water. Residents of Venice Beach, California, asked for more lifelines in August of 1911. In 1916, two life lines broke at Venice Beach when people attempted to save two others from drowning. One died because of the accident. The next summer Venice Beach chief of police Bert Reynolds asked for four hundred feet of rope and thirteen new posts for lifelines between the Venice Bathhouse and Ocean Avenue. Although lifeguards could literally sit on top of the lifeline poles and watch bathers swim, the lifelines were largely ineffective at stemming the drownings. In

¹¹ Michael Fowlers, Bernard A. Olsen, and Edward Olsen, *Lifeguards of the Jersey Shore: A Story of Ocean Rescue in New Jersey* (Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing, 2010), 40; and Arthur C. Verge, *Los Angeles County Lifeguards* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 11.



Fig. 2. "Lifeguard on the Beach." A photograph showing members of the Atlantic City Beach Patrol along with one of their boats. *Atlantic City* (Philadelphia, Pa.: J. Murray Jordan, 1897).

1903, Long Beach began instituting some safety measures. The Seaside Water Company constructed life lines from the beach into the water. They also supplied a life boat along with two men who rowed back and forth along the waves. If the life boat and employees were not there, beachgoers could get lifesaving equipment from two booths erected on the beach. Additionally, beach communities began funding beach patrols and lifesaving services.¹²

The first official lifeguarding service was the Atlantic City Beach Patrol established around 1855. That year the city council hired two men as "Constables of the

¹² "The Pike on the Silver Strand," 11; Fowler, *Lifeguards of the Jersey Shore*, 62; Brewster, "History of Beach Lifeguarding," 6; "Venice: Safety Appliances," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 February 1916; and Bert Reynolds, Chief of Police, to the Venice Board of Trustees, 29 July 1917, folder 34-2, July 1915-December 1918, box CC-01-513, Police Chief Reports to the Board of Trustees, Venice Collection, Los Angeles City Archives, California.

Surf’ to work on the beach under the control the police department. By 1884 there were twenty-five constables of the surf and in 1892 Atlantic City created a separate paid lifeguard service called the Atlantic City Beach Patrol.¹³ In San Diego, California, lifeguarding services began officially in 1918, but volunteer lifeguards had been patrolling the beaches since the Hotel Coronado hired lifeguards to protect the beach. On the beaches just north of San Diego, Hawaiian surfer and swimmer George Freeth successfully organized the Venice Life Saving Corps and the Redondo Beach Life Saving Corps in 1909. At Rockaway Beach in Queens, New York, 155 lifeguards were hired to patrol from the beach from the beginning of the summer until September. Their main task was to tell bathers not to be “too frisky” in the water.¹⁴

Many early lifeguarding crews began under the umbrella of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps, which was founded in 1894 in New York City. The all-volunteer organization set up lifeguarding stations throughout state, trained crews in rescue and resuscitation methods, taught swimming, and patrolled beaches for swimmers in danger. The organization worked specially to combat “rowdyism,” the splashing or dunking of new swimmers, since it created a fear of swimming in people instead of allowing them to learn. The Life Saving Corps wanted swimmers to “gain that confidence that will enable them to sustain themselves in the open sea.” By 1897, 581 local corps existed with almost 6,000 members.¹⁵ Between 1905 and 1918, the Life Saving Corp revived 4,570 people and administered first aid to 39, 536 people. But it

¹³ Fowler, *Lifeguards of the Jersey Shore*, 42-44.

¹⁴ Michael T. Martino, *Lifeguards of San Diego County* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 8, 35; Verge, *Los Angeles County Lifeguards*, 14; and *The White Sandy Beaches of Rockaway* (New York: Chamber of Commerce of the Rockaways, n.d., Queens Pamphlets, vol. 5, Long Island Historical Society.

¹⁵ Lisa Bier, *Fighting the Current: The Rise of American Women’s Swimming, 1870–1926* (Jefferson, N.C.: Macfarland and Company, 2011), 56–58; *Annual Report of the Volunteer Life Saving Corps of the State of New York 1898* (New York: Wnykoop Hallenbeck and Crawford, 1899), 7



Fig. 3. "Yorkville Station at the Moth of Hell Gate." *Annual Report of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps of the State of New York* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon Company, 1910), 36–37.

also recovered 84 bodies from the ocean.¹⁶ Sometimes there was nothing a well-trained lifeguard could do to help a drowning person. Los Angeles lifeguard Paul Nelson wrote: "I shall never forget the mother standing on the shore looking out to sea, where her son and two of his pals had just disappeared. There was no sign of emotion on her face, just a stunned, blank look. Everything possible was done to locate the bodies, but the rip[tide] being so strong swimming was dangerous, even to a [life]guard."¹⁷ Although the Life

¹⁶ *Annual Report of the United State Volunteer Life Saving Corps, 1917–1919* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon Company, 1920), 269.

¹⁷ "Rip Tides are Menace to Bathers," *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 22 August 1926. Riptides is a misnomer for phenomenon of rip currents. Rip currents can occur when water is concentrated into a current as it pulls back from the shore after a wave. Rip currents can be very difficult to escape once someone is swimming in chest deep water. These strong currents pull people past the breaking waves and into deep water. Moderate

Saving Corps continued to grow in membership, it was fighting an uphill battle of continuously high numbers of drowning deaths.¹⁸

By the 1920s, the American Red Cross was training the majority of lifeguards in the United States. Launched in 1914, the Life Saving Corps of the American Red Cross would be an organization devoted to “water first aid.” According to the *American Red Cross Magazine* in April 1914, the large number of deaths in the water convinced the War Relief Board that that there was a gap the Red Cross could fill. “It is believed,” said the magazine, “that men and boys who frequent the water front of our cities may be gathered into organized groups and instructed in methods of rescuing those in danger of drowning, with the result that many lives may be saved annually.”¹⁹ Their objectives were to prevent drowning through teaching swimming and boat handling, holding swimming and lifesaving exhibitions, and training people in applying artificial respiration. Wilbert E. Longfellow, who had previously been part of the Volunteer Life Saving Corps, was appointed to head the organization. He traveled around the country to organize chartered Red Cross lifesaving groups and train local policemen and firemen in resuscitation and swimming. At one year old, the Life Saving Corps of the American Red Cross had active groups in Rhode Island, New Jersey, Maryland, Florida, Ohio,

waves, such as those found at popular beaches, appeal to swimmers but can also cause strong rip currents. Most people confuse rip currents with the gentler undertow. Undertow is what causes swimmers to feel like they are being sucked under the water when a wave breaks over their head, but it only pulls swimmers to the next wave and not out to sea. For information on rip currents and undertow, see Stephen P. Leatherman, “Undertow, Rip Current, and Riptide,” *Journal of Coastal Research* 28, no. 4 (July 2012), iii–v; and A. Brad Murray, Michael LeBars, and Cyril Guillon, “Test of New Hypothesis for Non-Bathymetrically Driven Rip Currents,” *Journal of Coastal Research* 19, no.2 (Spring 2003), 269–77.

¹⁸ *Annual Report of the Volunteer Life Saving Corps of the State of New York* (New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck, and Crawford, 1898), 5, 6; and *Annual Report of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps of the State of New York for the Year Ending October 31, 1909* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon Company, 1910), 7, 9–10.

¹⁹ “Red Cross Life Saving Corps,” *American Red Cross Magazine*, April 1914, 70; “First Aid Department,” *American Red Cross Magazine*, April 1915, 115.

Michigan, New York, and Maine. There were seven thousand members in all.²⁰ In its annual report of 1922, the Red Cross reported that many cities had implemented the Red Cross lifesaving tests and trainings as the standard for new lifeguards.²¹

The Red Cross and the U.S. Volunteer Life Saving Corps also taught people how to resuscitate victims of drowning who had a chance of survival. Lifeguards were to get the victim out of the water and immediately begin artificial respiration. From 1904 through the 1930s, the go-to method for resuscitation was the Schafer Method, proposed and popularized by British doctor Edward Schafer. Lifesavers laid the victim on their stomach with arms out at right angles and the head turned to one side with mouth open. The lifesaver knelt to one side of the body, or astride it, placed their hands flat on the victim's lower back, pushing gently, yet firmly, up and down. This motion would contract and expand the victim's chest and abdomen, allowing air to flow into the lungs. Rescuers were to work on a victim in this way for twelve to fifteen minutes at a time.²² Before beginning the Schafer Method for victims of drowning, lifeguards were to loosen the victim's clothing and check the airway. Then, with the body on its stomach, the lifesaver would lean forward, grasp the body by the waist, lift it slightly off the ground, and shake it to try and get as much water out of the lungs as possible.²³ In the 1930s, another method of resuscitation, the Holger Nielson Technique, became popular. The drowning victim was laid on their stomach but with their head laying on their folded

²⁰ "First Aid Department," *American Red Cross Magazine*, April 1914, 115; Robert U. Patterson, "First Aid and Life Saving," *American Red Cross Magazine*, July 1914, 186; and W. E. Longfellow, "Making Life-Savers of Waterfront Policemen," *American Red Cross Magazine*, February 1915, 94–95.

²¹ The American National Red Cross, *Annual Report*, 30 June 1922, 29.

²² Chris Bunker, "A Brief History of Resuscitation and Beyond: As Easy as ABCDE," *British Journal of Neuroscience Nursing* 6, no. 5 (June/July 2010): 233; and George E. Goss, *Life Saving* (New York: Association Press, 1916), 67–69.

²³ Goss, *Life Saving*, 68–69.

arms. The rescuer would then compress the chest while sitting at the head of the victim, and then lift the victim's body by grasping their folded arms and pulling them toward the head. Lifting the body like this helped to expand the chest.²⁴

One lifesaver who worked in New York City, Captain Sam Dunn, said that women and children were more difficult to save than men. In an interview with *The Republic* in 1903, he said: "Women and children are the hardest to save. You see, a woman can't do much on the account of her dress, and she is inclined to sink in despite struggles. Then it takes a lot of strength to keep her afloat. When you try to pull a kid out of the water he'll grab you around the neck every time."²⁵ According to other newspapers, lifeguards also had to look out for the women and girls who faked drowning in order to attract the attention of handsome lifeguards. Young female summer vacationers had increasingly been portrayed as obsessed with male attention. One satirical poem published in the *New York Times* said: "Some maddened girls where I am flirt with waiters/ Or smile at lifeguards, so sore are the driven./ The only female creature at the seaside/ Who are happy are the mermaids."²⁶ The *Los Angeles Times* published the remarkable story of a woman pretending to drown in 1933:

A young lady walked out to the end of the pier, fired a revolver at her head, made a clean miss of it and dived into the sea, screaming frantically for help. A guard from the near-by station hastened to her rescue and found her floating

²⁴ Bunker, "A Brief History of Resuscitation," 233. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR, was not introduced as a resuscitation technique until the late 1950s. In 1961, Dr. P. Safar and his medical team showed that external chest compressions along with mouth to mouth breathing created the right steps for resuscitation. He coined ABC for airway, breath, and compressions as a helpful guide for the public. Rewarming of the body after it has been taken out of cold water is also a critical part of saving a drowning victim. See Bunker, "A Brief History of Resuscitation," 233; Mark Harris, "ABC of Resuscitation: Near Drowning," *British Medical Journal* 327, no. 7427 (December 2003), 1336; and Mark Harris, "ABC of Resuscitation: Drowning and Near Drowning," *British Medical Journal* 293, no. 6539 (July 1986): 122–124.

²⁵ "Woman in Brave Life-Saving Band," *The Republic*, 14 June 1903, quoted in Bier, *Fighting the Current*, 55.

²⁶ "The Summer Girl's Soliloquy," *New York Times*, 3 September 1899.

comfortably, supported by an unusually voluminous skirt. As he approached, the girl regarded him coldly and snapped; 'I don't want you, I want Dave!' This placed both the girl and the guard in the most embarrassing position for it happened to be Dave's day off. The guard explained, but the disgruntled lady would accept no substitute and insisted on swimming ashore unaided.²⁷

True or not, the story illustrated the public's idea of what a lifeguard did at the beach all day: "sit around on the beach all day long with nothing to do but make dates with girls! And he gets paid for it!" In 1915, Atlantic City refused to hire college-aged and unmarried men as lifeguards because "the city rulers believe that their attention has been taken in former years by the attractive bathing maids."²⁸

The Waikiki Beachboys, lifeguards and swimming instructors, who worked at Waikiki Beach, Honolulu, were known for their attractiveness to white female tourists. In 1915, the surfers of the Hui Nalu (surf club) opened a concession business in Waikiki. The men found regular work as swimming and surfing instructors, tour guides, and lifeguards. By the 1920s and 1930s, these men, now widely known as the Waikiki Beachboys, catered to high-paying tourists. They escorted tourists and customers around Waikiki, including driving wives and daughters around the island. The Beachboys were most famous for giving surf lessons to women while riding tandem behind them, lifting women on their shoulder, and throwing them into the water. The Beachboys were also responsible for making sure their clients did not get sunburned and routinely massaged women's backs with oil to prevent sunburn. According to surfing historian Isaiah Helekunihi Walker, "through such interaction, Waikiki Beachboys violated social rules of

²⁷ Bradford Gardner, "The Wild Waves Are Saying 'Don't Be a Boob,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July 1933.

²⁸ "Who Said the Life Guard Had It Soft," *Washington Post*, 7 July 1935; and "College Boys Can't Be Life Guards; Flirt Too Much with Bathing Maids," *Washington Post*, 6 June 1915.

an American society governed by anti-miscegenation laws.”²⁹ Their business flourished until the early 1930s, when racist rumors targeting Hawaiian men and the Beachboys as sexual predators spread. One Beachboy, Joe Kahahawai, was even murdered after he was cleared of a rape allegation. While white lifeguards might have found women and girls nuisances, white women’s relationships with Hawaiian lifeguards were far more dangerous than their jobs.³⁰

Women at the Helm

Women participated in both the Volunteer Life Saving Corps and the Life Saving Corps of the American Red Cross, but the individual crews decided whether they wanted a woman as an official crewmember. Whether women who wanted to join these services had to pass the same tests as men did is unclear. According to the annual reports of the Volunteer Life Saving Corps the tests and requirements to join were designed for men, eighteen years old or older, and in good health. To pass the test, prospective members had to first showcase their abilities: swim thirty-five feet underwater; swim sixty feet doing the backstroke, side stroke with one arm only, and breast stroke; swim sixty feet dressed in pants, shoes, and a coat; and lastly dive from the surface of the water to the bottom, bring up a weight of ten pounds, and then swim ten feet. They had to showcase their strength by carrying a man of the same size back and forth on the beach. Then they had to

²⁹ Isaiah Helekunihi Walker, *Waves of Resistance: Surfing and History in Twentieth-Century Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 70–72.

³⁰ Five Beachboys were accused of raping Thalia Massie in 1931. Their trial ended in a hung jury, but Massie’s husband, mother, and two soldiers kidnapped and murdered Beachboy Kahahawai. The trial and the murder effectively ended the Beachboy business. Lifeguard William Mullahey was hired by hotel interests to purchase the Beachboy business and start a formal lifeguarding service. See Walker, *Waves of Resistance*, 79–80.

prove they knew resuscitation and lifesaving techniques, such as accurately throwing a nineteenth-inch life ring.³¹

But women and girls certainly joined. In 1901 thirteen-year-old Julia Timpany swam the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island to become a member of the Brooklyn crew. She completed the four-mile swim, in open water, in an hour and a half.³² When the men's Volunteer Life-Saving Corps crew disbanded at Savin Hill Beach in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in 1904 several young women stepped up to replace them. Savin Hill Beach had been very popular in the last two years and a men's volunteer lifesaving crew served the area. But in the summer of 1901, the crew disbanded, leaving the beach without lifeguards. One afternoon in June that year, Agnes Kersey, age nineteen, notice a boy swimming beyond the lifelines in distress. She jumped into the water and brought the boy to shore. The rescue by Kersey convinced the residents of Dorchester that they needed a beach patrol. No men wanted to do the job, so six young women, all accomplished swimmers, began their own crew and joined the U.S. Volunteer Life-Saving Corps. They were the first women to organize and maintain their own independent crew. Like women before them, they had to follow the rules and regulations of the service and meet all the requirements. The service came to Dorchester to train them in handling the lifeboats and in resuscitation methods for victims. The six young women

³¹ The corps explicitly said that the requirements "are for males, 18 years or over, in sound health." "Proficiency Test of the New York City Department of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps," *Annual Report of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps, 1917-1919* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon Company, 1920), 141-146.

³² Women began gaining notoriety for open-water and endurance swimming in the 1870s when several women made headlines for swimming distances of five miles. The Life Saving Crews eventually offered the greatest source of organized swimming competition for women. Every summer, women competed in the endurance races organized by the lifesaving crews. These races, in the early twentieth century are where women and girls began demonstrating their superior skills in long-distance open-water swimming. Bier, *Fighting the Current*, 46, 61.

created quite a stir, and people began coming to the beach to watch the women practice their drills.³³

By 1911 some active members of the Volunteer Life-Saving Service wanted to start a women's swimming association and run it as a women's auxiliary to the service. The corps was not interested. Five expert swimmers, Florence A. West, Adeline Trapp, Mary B. Mehrtens, Sarah L. Marrin, and Theresa F. Daily, left the organization to begin the National Women's Life-Saving League, an organization dedicated to teaching women and children how to swim and how to save themselves and others from drowning. By 1912 the membership had jumped from just 20 women to 612, and 100 of those women were capable of lifesaving. Katherine Mehrtens, a founding member and the organization's president, said in an interview, "If our object was anything less than to make a life saver out of every member we should not need to plan so carefully."³⁴

To do so, the officers of the organization divided the members into three classes: active, allied, and auxiliary. The first class, active, was for swimmers familiar with the skills of lifesaving and resuscitation of drowning victims. The second class, allied, was for swimmers who possessed a Red Cross certificate but were beginners at swimming. The third class, auxiliary, was for the ultimate beginners. They wanted to learn to swim and to save lives but needed to be taught both. Teaching fell to the most advanced members in the active class of swimmers. They taught lifesaving classes once a month in the evening, making sure that the young women could have the swimming pools all to themselves. They also organized a morning class for married women who most likely had

³³ "Women Banded to Save Lives: Girls' Corps Welcomed by Government," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 September 1904.

³⁴ "Women Life Savers Getting Ready for Work," *The Sun*, 26 May 1912.



Fig. 4. Members of the National Women's Life Saving League Preparing for a Race, 16 July 1914. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ggbain-16601.

Women's Life-Saving League was not to make women into professional lifeguards but to “help save life whenever we can, wherever we are, and there are plenty of chances on every sheet of water in the country every summer.”³⁵

The league self-promoted through various public activities. It staged lifesaving games and rescue exhibitions. For instance, at one exhibition at Long Beach, New York, organizers dropped a crate of oranges into the water and whoever could “rescue” the most oranges won. They dropped live ducks into the water and had the women lifesavers rescue them. They held swim meets to showcase the abilities of their members, including

³⁵ Ibid. Annie Gilbert Coleman documented similar efforts in teaching women how to ski. See Annie Gilbert Coleman, “From Snow Bunnies to Shred Betties: Gender, Consumption, and the Skiing Landscape,” in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. Virginia J. Scharff (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2003), 169–93.

events such as rescue competitions, “fancy diving,” sprints, and middle-distance and long-distance swims. “These girls are not the type that hangs on to the rope and screams every time she is embraced by a wave,” wrote one observer. “Oh, no! They’re the kind of girls who go out and meet the wave half way, jump on top of it, dive under it and swim through it. They can swim and dive and do lots of things in water.” In fact, women’s competitive swimming became so popular that in 1916 the league established an athletic department to supervise athletics for women and advocate for women in competitive sporting events created and run by men.³⁶ Women in the league were fighting for equal treatment for women more generally, advocating for simpler bathing costumes on the one hand and suffrage on the other. In July of 1915, the league staged a rescue exhibition in which they rescued a dummy called “Aunty Anti-Suffrage.” The exhibition had a two-fold message: lifesaving matters and anti-suffragists might one day find themselves being rescued by a female lifesaver. The *New York Times* reported that the “water women are all good suffragists.”³⁷

The league also received publicity because of its famous members. One of the founders, Adeline Trapp, had made the news first in 1910 when she became the first woman to swim Hell Gate, a narrow tidal straight in the East River in New York. The next year, Trapp, a Brooklyn school teacher, made national news when she broke the local record for distance swimming in New York. She swam 22.5 miles in 5 hours 6 minutes and 30 seconds from North Beach through Hell Gate again and on to Robbins

³⁶ “Kid M’Coy’s Rainbow Bath Suit Outshines Girl Life Savers, Who Drag Ducks and Fruit from Sea,” *New York Tribune*, 15 August 1915; “Not Much Needed for This Rule Out at Waikiki,” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 19 August 1915; “Aquatic Nymphs to Ride the Wave in Big Carnival,” *The Evening World*, 14 July 1915; and “The Winter Crusade to Win Women Swimmers,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 November 1916.
³⁷ “Brave Suffragists Save ‘Anti’ from the Sea,” *New York Times*, 18 July 1915; and “Not Much Needed for this Rule Out at Waikiki,” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 19 August 1915.

Reef. She was able to make the swim when four of the strongest male swimmers in the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps could not. One journalist witnessing her historic swim wrote: “All five started at the same signal, swam along the same course until forced to withdraw, and Miss Trapp was the only one to finish. . . . At no time during the long swim was Miss Trapp in any way fatigued, and at the conclusion of her record performance she seemed as strong as if she made only an ordinary swim.”³⁸

At least one publication chalked up the new proliferation of female endurance swimmers, such as Trapp, to a fluke of biology rather than hard work and strength. Women’s bones were lighter. Their bodies fatter and their flesh less dense. Women “need to expend little or no power to keep afloat, but can use their whole strength as propulsion.” One author, G. Elliot Flint, compared a woman’s ability in endurance swimming to standing on her feet all during a busy day of shopping and skipping lunch.³⁹ On her twenty-two-mile swim, Trapp showed no sign of a lack of seriousness. Before the swim she covered her body with olive oil and then a coating of petroleum for warmth, after downing three raw eggs and a glass of milk.⁴⁰ Later, Trapp was photographed teaching students how to break a drowning person’s “death grip,” when a drowning victim grabs hold of the lifesaver around the neck, by forcing the head of the victim upward while still holding onto their abdomen. A skill learned from strength and practice, not biology.⁴¹

³⁸ “Life Savers Get Medals,” *New York Times*, 9 January 1910; “In the Public Eye, More or Less, at the Present Moment,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 September 1911; and “Girl Swimmer Makes New Record,” *New York Times*, 4 September 1911.

³⁹ “Mother, May I Go and Swim?” *Salt Lake City Tribune*, 10 September 1911; and G. Elliot Flint, “Modern Woman is Making Rapid Progress in the Water as well as on Land,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 12 November 1911.

⁴⁰ “In the Public Eye More or Less at the Present Moment,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 September 1911; and “Girl Swimmer Makes New Records,” *New York Times*, 4 September 1911.

⁴¹ “Breaking the Death Grip of a Drowning Person,” *The (Chicago) Day Book*, 8 August 1913.



Miss Josephine Bartlett, Champion "Fancy Diver" of New York.

The Winter Crusade to Win Women Swimmers

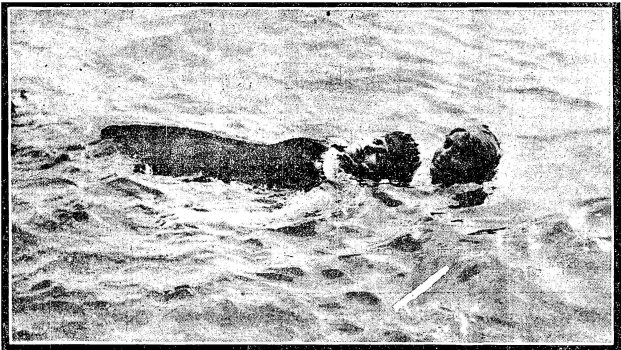
Vigorous Campaign of the National Women's Life Saving League, and How Its Plans for Multiplying Self-Reliant Feminine Swimmers Are Being Advanced in Many States-- Teaching Rescue and Developing Water Sport.



Practice in the Proper Method of Breaking the Hold of a Drowning Person. The Rescuer Forces One Hand Upward Under the Other's Chin and Vigorously Lifts One Knee.

By L. deB. Handley

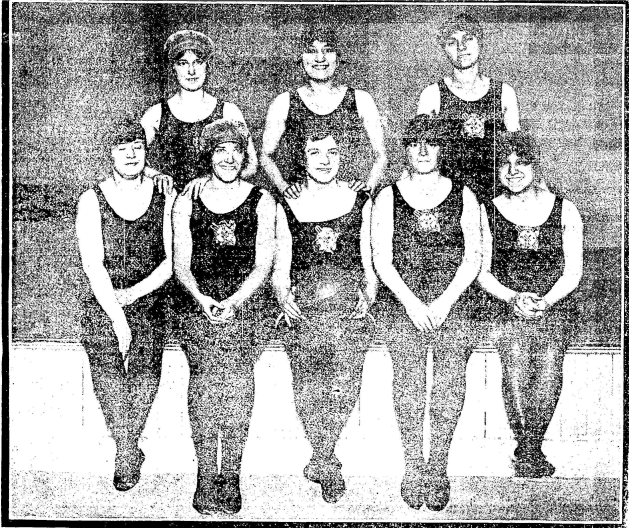
To most of us the summer is the season for swimming and aquatic activities, but not to the fair members of the National Women's Life Saving League. Experience has taught them that their self-imposed task of spreading knowledge of the art of salvation, and particularly the branch of it which includes self-protection and the rescue of others from drowning, is far more successfully performed in quiet seclusion of a crowded bathing beach, so it is just with little fanfare that they start their annual campaign. More than 1500 strong, this year, they are taking advantage of the winter months to carry on the good work. In their own private natatoriums; in club pools; in the open municipal baths now open to the public; wherever, in fact, women and girls congregate for indoor bathing, the league members are generally



Practice in the "Correct Way to Rescue a Drowning Person."

to be found, ready to encounter the study of watermanship and other free purpose of arousing interest in swimming and life saving among their women's life saving league. Miss Sedgwick, in her effort toward worthy achievement, has woman swimmer's more noble cause. By our States Volunteer Life Saving Corps, president, and Miss Adeline Trapp, league renders invaluable service to body, while thoroughly in sympathy with the proposed plan, expressed start operations the new league themselves enable at the time to see found its scope very limited at first. But not for long. By attending respectively the women's days at the various cities, the fair applicants decided one city baths, offering to all corners their services as instructors, and

First Water Polo Team of the National Women's Life Saving League, New York Division.



Miss Claire Talligan, Who Holds Several Records.

making their purpose generally known, the girl propagandists soon gained a following. They rapidly gathered recruits, and before a year had elapsed the organization was strong enough to seek recognition, and was incorporated under the laws of the state of New York. It is to this day the only incorporated body of women devoted entirely to swimming and life saving. Women Life Savers. But it has grown apace since its birth. Branches have now been established in New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and California. Women in other

states are preparing to join in the long distance races held encourage membership has already increased through personal instruction and public exhibitions; to advocate the universal adoption of up-to-date methods of rescue and resuscitation; fifth, on endeavor to bring about the introduction of compulsory courses in swimming and life saving at all schools and colleges for girls. This program was later added to however. The great interest displayed by girls and women in water sports, and the appearance in competitive form of an undisciplined element, suggested the advisability of devoting attention to this new development. An athletic department was thereby started, its object clearly defined in the official bulletin, as follows:

To supervise athletics for women by women, in order to raise the dignity of outdoor sports for the sex, and that all may participate in the healthful exercise of competitive practices without being subjected to the embarrassing conditions which frequently arise when men only are in charge of arrangements.

Improving the Sport. The heads of the athletic department began by forming a swimming team, gave it a competent coach in the person of Lionel Mackenzie, in the city College, arranged for frequent water carnivals in the home pool, then took steps to assume control of aquatic for women, with the avowed purpose of eliminating the undesirable element, drawing a sharp line between amateurs and professionals, standardizing competition, and placing the sport on a sound foundation. Last summer there was every indication that the league authorities would attain their object, for men promoters of meets gladly consented to have their fixtures run off under the able supervision of the life saving committee.

Cool in Danger. Nine of the league members competed last September in a five-mile swim for women in which the field was started through an error against a rushing four-mile tide. For nearly an hour and one-half hours the plucky girls fought their current tooth and nail, before it was decided to call off the race and not one of them showed a sign of fatigue when the referee, after much argument, persuaded them to abandon the contest. No fear that such powerful swimmers would be unable to take care of themselves in case of accident. It is the same when it comes to rescuing those in danger. The girls are so well trained for the work that they consider the rescue of a drowning person a mere incident in their daily lives, hardly worthy of mention.

One of them expressed the attitude of the majority last summer, after helping someone through very rough water an exhausted swimmer. The rescue was an unusually difficult and brave one, but when those who witnessed it tried to make the young heroine apply for a life saving medal she laughed at them. "Nonsense," she said, "the poor fellow hadn't enough strength left even to struggle; a child could have

Fig. 5. L. deB. Handley, "The Winter Crusade to Win Women Swimmers," Atlanta Constitution, 19 November 1916.

By 1916, the membership of the league had swelled to fifteen hundred members, and branches had popped up in New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and California. Although its program included knowledge of first aid and resuscitation to help save others, the point of the league was always self-reliance. Women should be able

to save themselves if need be. “A long list of rescues stands to the credit of the fair life savers,” an article in the *Atlanta Constitution* reported, “but far greater, no doubt, is the number of girls and women who were able to escape death through their own efforts.”⁴² It seemed like the league had really started movement, and slowly but surely women became lifeguards. Ruth E. MacNeely was the first lifeguard hired at Asbury Park, New Jersey, in 1917. She was hired after saving two school friends from drowning while on vacation in Saint Petersburg, Florida. She faced some problems though: young men would pretend to drown just to be saved by a young woman. Eventually she was told to only rescue women and children. A male lifeguard could deal with the silly boys.⁴³ Several years later, the Red Cross reported that six thousand women had passed the entrance exam for the Red Cross Life Saving Corps. The field representative for the Red Cross, Cecilia P. Deubig, reported, “This mobilizing under the Red Cross banner an army of women swimmers has put into effect in girls’ camps, playground swimming pools, girls’ schools, women’s colleges and institutions regulations and safeguards to protect swimmers and make the water accident proof.” The Red Cross acknowledged “the great present and future value of the woman lifesaver.”⁴⁴ It still took a while for women to be hired as official lifeguards in other places. Helen “Skippy” Raymond was the first professional woman lifeguard in Los Angeles beginning in 1930. She taught swimming

⁴² “The Winter Crusade to Win Women Swimmers,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 November 1916.

⁴³ “Women Life Guard Busy,” *New York Times*, 29 July 1917.

⁴⁴ “6,000 Women Pass Entrance Test for Red Cross Life Saving Corps,” *Washington Post*, 22 April 1923. For more on the history of the Red Cross, see Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Marian Moser Jones, *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

and first aid in addition to conducting her rescue work. It was not until the 1970s that women had any sort of equal footing in lifesaving at the beach.⁴⁵

Drowning in Racism

African Americans faced increased dangers at the beach as well. It was not only lack of swimming and safety education that made black beachgoers more likely to drown, although it was a problem, but the fact that white communities pushed black beachgoers onto more dangerous beaches in the first place. Although the Volunteer Life Saving Corps and the National Women's Life-Saving League filled the gap in swimming education and safety, their organizations were exclusively for white men, women, and children. African American activism concerning beaches was less about learning how to swim, although, again, that was important, and more about access to safe whites-only beaches and funding of basic services on black beaches. They worked for those two goals in tandem by protesting and suing for the right to go to public beaches designated for white people and also making the so-called "colored beaches" safe and vibrant communities for themselves and their families. As historian Andrew Kahrl writes, they needed "rest from white folks as well as labor."⁴⁶

Segregation at American beaches increased as beach vacations became popular for both white and black families. Whites did not want African Americans vacationing on the same beaches and pushed them to either dangerous segregated beaches or privately owned black resorts. For instance, in the 1920s, when the gulf states of Louisiana and

⁴⁵ "Girl Lifeguard Instructs Others in Gentle Art of Staying above Water," *Santa Monica (Calif.) Sunday Morning Outlook*, 11 May 1930.

⁴⁶ Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours*, 13–14.

Mississippi began marketing their shores as the American Riviera, pushing African Americans away from the beach became part of the process of their “fashionable” growth. In the 1930s, white leaders in Miami envisioned a “colored” beach on the island of Virginia Key specifically to remove black beachgoers from the “fashionable” beaches of downtown Miami.⁴⁷ The same went for Atlantic City, African Americans were barred from the famous boardwalk. White visitors wanted their resorts to be “exclusive.”⁴⁸

Some wealthier African Americans could afford to go to privately owned black resorts, such the one owned by Charles Douglass on the Chesapeake Bay, but others could only access local black beaches.⁴⁹ These beaches were generally unsafe and located in undesirable, polluted, and dangerous areas. For instance, Seabrooke on Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans, the designated black beach, was the site of several drownings. The beach and lakebed eroded quickly on the African American side, causing dangerous sinkholes that threatened swimmers just offshore. The city withheld lifelines, lights, concessions, and lifeguard service. The same conditions endangered swimmers at Ocean Breeze Beach in Norfolk, Virginia. It was a black resort, owned, and operated by a white businessman. The shore was known for unpredictable currents, shifting depths, sinkholes, and undertow, but the white proprietor refused to staff the beach with lifeguards and equip the beach with safety equipment. African Americans boycotted Buzzard’s Beach in Washington, D.C. after the water became infested with alligators.

⁴⁷ Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours*, 57; and Gregory W. Bush, *White Sand, Black Beach: Civil Rights, Public Space, and Miami’s Virginia Key* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 6-7.

⁴⁸ Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13, 69.

⁴⁹ For more on privately owned black beach resorts, see Kahrl, “Building Black Privatopias,” in *The Land was Ours*, chap. 3.

Thirty-first Street Beach in Chicago was basically a rock quarry. In Savannah Beach, George, African Americans



Fig. 6. African Americans Holding onto a Life Line at Asbury Park, New Jersey. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ggbain-02019.

Could not use the beach until after 11pm at night, not a great time to be swimming. The *Chicago Defender* reported African Americans were “not permitted to go to the beach.” Unless they worked as domestics then they could take “their employer’s dogs out to bathe – and even in that case the [black] servant must not touch the water.”⁵⁰

Historian Andrew Karhl, in his chapter “Surviving the Summer,” explains that the death of young black children became devastatingly routine events during the summer

⁵⁰ Karhl, *The Land Was Ours*, 130, 145; “Alligators Play in Jim Crow Beach,” *Chicago Defender*, 5 June 1926; “More about Beaches,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 August 1929; “Race Barred from Beach until 11 p.m.,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 September 1938.

due to the restriction of African Americans to dangerous beaches. In one example of the many available, two black boys, aged twenty and fifteen, were refused admission to a beach on Chippewa Lake in Ohio. They were told that they could rent suits but had to bathe on the other side of the lake away from white patrons. The older boy, Thurman Jackson, drowned. The other side of the lake had no lifeguard to protect him.⁵¹

Even when lifeguards were stationed at beaches with black visitors, instead of protecting black beachgoers they were more likely to police them. For instance, in Atlantic City, a place that had segregated beaches until the 1930s, Marta Waller, a black woman, was swimming when a lifeguard waded out into the water and told her to leave. The lifeguard said the mayor had published a “Jim Crow” order barring African Americans from the beach. Whether or not it was part of his job description, the lifeguard took it upon himself to police the beach for more than drowning patrons. The same thing occurred at Asbury Park, New Jersey, when a lifeguard forced three black men off the beach “because they went to a part of the beach where the guard thought they should not have gone.” In August of 1915, a lifeguard from Jackson Park Beach in Chicago was arraigned in court after assaulting a black swimmer. The swimmer, Macon Higgins, said that the lifeguard and several others dunked him into the water until he almost drowned. They said that Higgins would pollute the water.⁵²

In all these types of events, the NAACP took legal action against beach segregation and mistreatment of black beachgoers and tourists. In the NAACP monthly magazine of August 1912, *The Crisis*, the organization asked for its readers to think about

⁵¹ “Youth Drowns While Bathing in Part Set Aside for Colored,” *Chicago Broad Axe*, 14 August 1926.

⁵² “Ordered from Beach,” *Cleveland (Ohio) Gazette*, 27 August 1904; “Asbury Park Negroes Demand that Board of Commissioners End Discrimination,” *Topeka (Kans.) Plaindealer*, 2 August 1929; and “Color Line Drawn at Bathing Beach,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 August 1915.

their experiences on summer vacations: “How are you welcomed when visiting picnic grounds and parks?’ we have asked. ‘You are tolerated if you are very careful,’ is one answer to that question, and it seems to cover a large number of cities. You may go to the beach, but may not hire a bathing suit. . . . These are some of the ways that in which you are ‘tolerated.’” In places where black patrons were not “tolerated,” the NAACP asked African Americans to contact their local NAACP chapter.⁵³ For instance, the NAACP became involved in the case of the lifeguard that ejected three black men from the beach in Asbury Park. They complained to the board of commissioners that they will “peacefully submit to arrest in order to have the courts inform you what are our rights; but rest assured that we are going to use our beach as other people use it.”⁵⁴

The NAACP became involved in a very interesting case of beach segregation in Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1939. Dixon’s Beach, the only beach in Long Branch opened to African Americans, closed when the city passed an ordinance abolishing the leasing of city-owned beaches to individuals. Mrs. C. C. Dixon had run the beach and a bathhouse for fourteen years. It had an average weekend attendance of four thousand people. But the large crowds of happy African Americans began to bother white beachgoers. They asked the city to close the beach and move it to a more isolated, and probably less desirable, area. The city then implemented a fee system for out-of-town visitors and a badge system.⁵⁵ Local beachgoers had to visit the City Clerk’s Office, register with the city, and receive a badge or a permit for one of the four local beaches

⁵³ “Vacation Days,” *The Crisis*, August 1912, 186; “Open All Long Branch Beaches to Negroes: Dixon Beach Results in Decrees Beneficial to Race,” *Pittsburgh (Penn.) Courier*, 9 July 1938.

⁵⁴ “Asbury Park Negroes Demand that Board of Commissioners End Discrimination,” *Topeka (Kans.) Plaindealer*, 2 August 1929.

⁵⁵ “Open all Long Branch Beaches to Negroes,” *Pittsburgh (Penn.) Courier*, 9 July 1938; “Bathing Badges for All Sought,” *Pittsburgh (Penn.) Courier*, 20 August 1938; and J. C. Mckelvie, “Long Branch Beaches,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 June 1938.



Fig. 7. *The Golden*, Cranford High School Yearbook. Yearbooks, Cranford Public Library, Cranford, New Jersey, accessed 2 August 2018, <http://www.digifind-it.com/cranford/yearbooks.php>.

after paying a fee. The badges would be allocated based on “congestion” at each beach. Allie Bullock, a black woman, went to the City Clerk’s Office and requested a badge to go to bathing beach number one, but she was told she could only go to bathing beach number three. The NAACP believed that the city clerk had implemented a policy of giving African Americans badges only to bathing beach number three, which happened to be the same one once run by Mrs. C. C. Dixon. The NAACP secured the service of three young women, one named Virginia Flowers, who were black but could pass as white to go the City Clerk’s Office and buy tickets for the white beaches. Flower’s testimony was apparently critical to the court, which decided that Long Branch had to desegregate its beaches. The court wrote, “It is clear that the agreed and determined policy or plan of regulation is based upon the admitted premise that the governing

authorities did not want members of the black race to intermingle with members of the white race while using the beach and bathing facilities of the city of Long Branch.”⁵⁶

Another young woman tested the segregation of Bruce’s Beach, an early African American beach in Southern California, in 1927. After the city Board of Trustees condemned Bruce’s Beach for a public park, it leased the property to a private individual, who made the beach whites only. When the young black woman tested the ban, she was arrested and jailed while still wearing her bathing suit. To protest, the local NAACP held a swim in with a dozen people. The police arrived and arrested everyone. The head of the local chapter of the NAACP responded: “If they mean to arrest colored folk for frequenting any part of the beaches or bathing in any part of the ocean, then every colored person in Los Angeles should get himself and herself arrested.”⁵⁷

Manhattan Beach, California, where Bruce’s Beach was located, eventually revoked the private lease and opened the beach to everybody. After the victory at Manhattan Beach, the racial restrictions at Southern California beaches began to disappear. But like all racial laws, Southern California’s segregation laws were unpredictable and contradictory. Three years prior, open swimming pools in Los Angeles had been segregated, and now segregated beaches were open.⁵⁸ Unfortunately today, African Americans are significantly still more likely to drown than whites. And just as described in Karhl’s work, the drowned are almost always black children. Unlike in the

⁵⁶ Bullock v. Wooding, New Jersey Supreme Court, 8 A.2d 273, 123 N.J.L. 176, 1939, NJ 40103, 11 September 1939; and “N.J. Beach Segregation Heroine Wed Year Ago,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 21 December 1940.

⁵⁷ Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 274.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

past, most drownings now occur in private swimming pools where there are no lifeguards.⁵⁹

Going to the beach, on the other hand, has become one of the safest pastimes for Americans during the summer. According to the most recent data compiled by the United States Lifesaving Association of the over 300 million people who visited American beaches last year only seventeen people drowned on beaches patrolled by lifeguards.⁶⁰ The campaigns run by the National Women's Lifesaving League and the NAACP to make beaches safe and open to all were somewhat successful. Although accessing the beach or taking a beach vacation depends entirely on economic status, for people visiting the beach the waters pose less danger than they once did.

⁵⁹ According to the Centers for Disease Control African American children five to nineteen are 5.5 times more likely than whites to drown in swimming pools. African American children aged eleven to twelve are ten times more likely to drown than white children. Unintentional Drowning, Home and Recreational Safety, Centers for Disease Control, accessed 9 March 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/water-safety/waterinjuries-factsheet.html>.

⁶⁰ "2017 National Lifesaving Statistics," American Lifeguard Rescue and Drowning Statistic for Beaches, United States Lifesaving Association, accessed 9 March 2019, <https://www.usla.org/page/STATISTICS>.

Conclusion

Hundreds of postcards and letters laying in archives across the country illustrate the fun men and women experienced visiting the beach in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From swimming to fishing, meeting friends, getting sunburned, the sources show an evident delight in beach vacations. Through this pleasure, the beach transformed into more than just a leisure space. It became a space of social and cultural debate and critique, where the visitors participated, knowingly or not, in socially transformative activities. The popularity and accessibility of the beach made beachgoing, and therefore the cultural debate, a national experience. The dressing, undressing, and movement of bodies at the beach created a sense of intimacy and vulnerability. This led to discussions of safety, sexuality, and beauty that transcended the beach and influenced public and popular discourse.

Beach amusements attracted huge amounts of people. On the boardwalks, amusements parks, and the beach itself, class distinctions were muffled by the wearing of bathing costumes and visitors' Sunday best. Vacationers could disappear within the crowds of similarly dressed pleasure seekers, and some resorts even capitalized on their lack of a "fashionable crowd."¹ There was also a loosening of gender restrictions during this time period. Women could participate in activities not normally open to them outside of the beach resorts such as bowling, billiards, flirting, and going to dance halls. Though their behavior was sometimes regulated, leisure allowed young women to engaged in modern life away from their families and conservative communities. African Americans

¹ Narragansett Pier was one of those places known for "the absence of tedious and often cold and repelling formalities." See *Traintor's Guide Books: Seaside Resorts from the St. Lawrence River to the Gulf of Mexico* (New York: Traintor Brothers and Co., 1892), 65.

also found solace and pleasure at resorts, although they were barred from many beaches due to segregation. African American bathhouses and beach resorts offered respite from the multitudes of white vacationers constantly forcing African Americans off the beach. The popularity of swimming also changed the way people experienced the beach. “Sea bathing,” the five to ten minutes spent plunging into ocean water for health, had once dominated seaside resorts and beach slowly went out of fashion. Swimming, the more athletic propelling of one’s body through water, replaced it. Once only the purview of young men and boys, more and more people learned to swim, or at least to brave the ocean water.

Bathing suits created a problem as swimming became a popular beach pastime. Women began wearing modified bathing costumes. Bathing suits with short sleeves and without long skirts that clung closer to the body made swimming easier, safer, and more comfortable for women, but angered conservative beach communities that felt a lack of clothing would lead to a lack of morals on their beaches. Beach communities and resorts passed laws limiting what women, and sometimes, men could wear on the beach. In response, women advocated for their right to wear comfortable and safe bathing suits that might sometimes be more revealing. These fights were not just about clothing, but about women’s autonomy over their own bodies and actions. The new bathing suits did not appeal to all women. As the modified bathing suits changed from practical to fashionable garments, women felt the added pressure to modify their bodies to fit the new suits.

At the time women were being arrested for the swimsuits on American beaches, a different set of women were showing them off. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, beach communities held bathing suit pageants to bring business to the beach in

the off season. During these pageants, young women paraded on beach boardwalks in the most fashionable bathing suits and judges chose the most beautiful. This commodification and spectacle of women's bodies contrasted starkly with the demonizing of women's bodies through the bathing suit modesty laws, especially when the first winner of the Miss America pageant was held up as the epitome of American women's virtue. Hollywood also exploited the trend of bathing beauties. Producer and director Mack Sennett padded his comedies with beautiful women, eventually known as the Sennett Bathing Beauties or Bathing Girls. The bathing beauties appealed not only to men, but also to young women who identified with the modern women on screen, traveling on beach vacations, flirting with young men, and having a fun. Yet when the bathing beauty left the beach and found herself in movies and newsreels they caused controversy. Movie censors found the focus on women's bodies objectionable and left their scenes on the cutting room floor, letting the public know that the new culture of bodies at the beach would not be accepted elsewhere.

The problems of race and gender at the beach could have deadly consequences. Drowning in natural waters was an epidemic. Beach resorts, looking to capitalize off of the promotion of their safe beaches, installed safety equipment and hired professional lifeguards. Yet women and people of color faced added dangers at the beach. Swimming had always been the venue of young men and boys, playing and roughhousing naked in local rivers and lakes. Women could not learn to swim that way. Women swimming nude in public was socially and morally unacceptable. If they wanted to learn to swim, women need appropriate bathing costumes, which, until the turn of the twentieth century, were generally difficult to find. These circumstances meant that women were less likely to

know how to swim. If they did know how to swim, those appropriate bathing costumes they needed to wear, with their stockings and wool skirts, tangled in women's legs and dragged them under. African Americans, even if they did know how to swim, were segregated to the most dangerous beaches. Publicly-owned, segregated beaches lacked the safety infrastructure available at white beaches. African American beaches did not have lifeguards, line lines, lights, or other types of safety personnel or equipment. Whites also pushed African Americans to the most dangerous portions of the beach, where dangerous rip currents and pollution tainted the pleasures of swimming. White women and African Americans organized to try and make beaches safer for those they thought were the most vulnerable. A group of female swimmers living the New York founded the National Women's Life Saving League to teach young women and girls how to swim, teach them resuscitation and lifesaving techniques, and advocate for a practical bathing costume. African American beachgoers, using the power and political clout of the NAACP, sued for the right to access safer white public beaches. In many cases, the NAACP won black beachgoers the right to visit public beaches after exposing blatant and illegal segregation schemes. In many cases beaches desegregated before lunch counters, movie theaters, and swimming pools.

Although this dissertation ends in 1940, the story of the beach doesn't end with it. Historian Kirse Granat May already argued in her book *Golden State, Golden Youth* how the primacy of California culture, including that of the Beach Boys and Gidget, effected the promise and practice of the American dream in the 1950s and 1960s.² There is still room though, for further investigations into the changing conceptions of the beach in the

² Kirse Granat May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: the California Image in Popular Culture, 1955–1966* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

mid- to late twentieth century, particularly any negative imagery arising from World War II. Thousands of American troops died on the beaches of Normandy, the Armed Forces fortified the beaches of Waikiki, and numerous American shores feared the invasion of Japanese and German forces on their once pleasurable beaches. Did Americans lose their love of beachgoing once the specter of these dangers appeared on their shores? There are also so many possibilities studying the environmental history of the beach. Much of the infrastructure described in this dissertation created and perpetuated environmental hazards. Threats of pollution, fire, erosion, and storms swirled around wooden piers and boardwalks built alongside beaches dealing with the disposal of sewage and refuse.

Three-hundred million people visited American beaches in 2017. The past events laid out in this dissertation are not so different from the modern discourse surrounding beachgoing. Particularly for women, the need for a “beach body” or “summer bod” produces constant anxiety, even at a time when clothing brands are profiting off of size inclusivity and the body positive movement. A recent incident on a French beach illustrates the still-existent practice of policing women’s bodies on the beach. In 2016 police in the French seaside town of Nice forced a woman to remove her headscarf and tunic, part of the ban on the “burkini.” The burkini is a full-coverage bathing suit with leggings, a tunic, and sometimes a waterproof head covering. Developed by an Australian Muslim woman, Aheda Zanetti, for her niece who needed “something that would adapt to the Australian lifestyle and western clothing but at the same time fulfil the needs of a Muslim girl.”³ The burkini came under fire after a series of terrorist attacks credited to

³ Aheda Zanetti, “I created the burkini to give women freedom, not to take it away,” *The Guardian*, 24 August 2016, accessed 18 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/i-created-the-burkini-to-give-women-freedom-not-to-take-it-away>.

the Islamic State rocked France. Politicians felt that women wearing the burkini supported radical Islam and flew in the face of French secular traditions. Yet the debate grew into more than a discussion about secularism and religion, but one focused on the rights of women to wear what they want when they want. The French prime minister called full-body swimwear “the enslavement of women” and supported beach bans of the swimsuit.⁴ Supporters of the burkini said that it symbolized “leisure and happiness and fitness and health”; an argument that echoes the one made by early American female swimmers and beachgoers fighting for their own autonomous leisure. In this case, and in the case of American women in the 1910s and 1920s, the bathing suit is more than something women wear to swim, and the beach is more than just a leisure space. The beach is a place where women are supposed to wear their values and morals on their bodies, and will be criticized and policed if their bodies are found wanting. Since the beach does not seem to be waning in popularity, it seems these kinds of conversations will continue for the foreseeable future and we will keep asking the same questions: what is a beach body? Who deserves to be seen at the beach? And why do we keep going back?

⁴ Angelique Chrisafis, “France’s burkini ban row divides government as court mull legality,” *The Guardian*,

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