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American Genesis: The Archeology of Women's Swimming at the 1920 Olympic Games*

David Barney

One week to the day following the American Congressional ratification of the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote, Ethelda Bleibtry won her nation's first-ever women's Olympic medal, a swimming gold, as it turned out to be, in the 100 meter Freestyle at the Games of the VII Olympiad in Antwerp, Belgium. Bleibtry's victory initiated an American sweep of all the swimming medals,[1] as well as a gold in the only relay event for women. Complementing Bleibtry's performance was Aileen Riggin, whose gold medal in the Olympics' first ever springboard diving event for women led an American sweep of the 3 meter diving medals as well. The glamour and the glory of their exploits in Belgium would take some time to diminish in the eyes of an adoring American public, but beyond the glow of all that, there lay in the rear view mirror of their epic performance at Antwerp a long and arduous journey fraught with angst and argument and all the animus that a largely male sporting public could muster.

Archive Barney

Charlotte Epstein (left) and Louis de Breda Handley (right).

Tracing the early history of American women's swimming, a beginning culminated, at least internationally, by their domination of the competition at Antwerp in 1920, is to explore the life and times of New York court reporter Charlotte Epstein, the founder and manager of the Women's Swim Association (WSA), and her volunteer coach from the New York Athletic Club, Louis de Breda Handley. In all likelihood, if it were not for this duo, there would not have been a single American woman competing at Antwerp. Although neither linked by either rib or romance, this unlikely twosome became a platonic Adam and Eve of sorts in an aquatic genesis of their own making, a beginning landscape, if you will, that resembled more wilderness than anything suggesting a garden, but a wilderness, nonetheless, that eventually flowered to produce America's remarkable performance at Antwerp, a performance that, in part, helped to usher in the Golden Age of American Sport.

In addition, and footnoting all this is the thought, that when we peel the veneer from the stunning success of the American women at those first games of the post World War I Era, we are brought face to face with the extent to which their achievements in Antwerp engendered the status and image of women in American society in the succeeding decade and beyond. It is from this echoic point, perhaps, that "American Genesis" resonates most strongly.

Charlotte Epstein and Louis de Breda Handley

Charlotte Epstein or "Eppy," as her women swimmers affectionately called her, toiled as a New York court stenographer by profession, but her heart belonged to the women's movement, which existed more in shadow than in sunshine during the early part of the 20th Century. Whereas her professional presence was spent speed-typing testimony, her life away from the courtroom was devoted to promoting her hobby, swimming. Avocation aside, however, her philosophical lean was focused on achieving equal rights for women and within that frame, ultimately, to press for their right to compete in swimming and diving. To the latter, she devoted herself and her energies for the better part of three decades.

That longevity aside, I think it would be a stretch to say that she was one of the guiding lights, so to speak, of the women's movement. It might be fairer to say that she remained relatively faceless and even nameless in the mainstream of the crusade, especially when one compares her relatively narrow role with the celebrated national profiles of Carrie Chapman Catt, Maud Wood Park, Lucy Burns, or, of more earlier vintage, Susan B. Anthony,[2] perhaps the brightest luminary of them all, but visibility was of little concern to Epstein.

It was her voice she wanted heard, a voice that trumpeted loud and clear the tenets of the "Declaration of Sentiments,"[3] a document, created in the infancy of the women's rights movement that called for equal rights for women in education, possession of property, and voting, as well as in "other matters."[4] It was the inclusion "other matters" that drew Epstein's attention to promoting swimming for women.

In the beginning, her focus concentrated on swimming as solely a means to improve women's health and fitness and safety.[5] In this regard, she campaigned vigorously for their right to swim at public venues and for their eligibility for publicly funded instructional programs. Later, in the second decade of the century, she turned her attention to promoting competition for women, and, in this endeavor she quickly became the standard bearer for women's competitive swimming in the early part of the century.

Toward that end, she was repeatedly called upon not only to confront the gender orientation of a male-dominated society but to oppose the downright revulsion that characterized a sporting establishment's negative regard for women's competitive swimming. The most influential and outspoken voice of that establishment belonged to one of the most formidable personalities in American sport, James E. Sullivan, the guardian of American amateur athletics. Chauvinistic to the core, Sullivan subscribed to the Victorian principle of "biblical modesty,"[6] when it came to addressing the issue of women's bathing apparel in general and their competitive attire in particular. He thought it abhorrent that women should be allowed to appear in public in what was considered in that day and age as not only scanty but scandalous swim attire.[7] Indeed, Sullivan believed that "*sport* [in general] *was a morally questionable experience for women.*"[8]

It was against this darkness of thought that Charlotte Epstein, initially, and then a short time later, Lou Handley, railed. Later, the voices of hundreds then thousands of "suffragette swimmers"[9] from the Women's Swimming Association (WSA) would join this chorus of dissent. In a very short time, the chorus would become a national one.

If Charlotte Epstein could stand as the "mother of U.S. Women's swimming," Lou de B. Handley could certainly qualify as its father. The organizational and management skills of Epstein aside, it was the volunteer coaching presence of Lou de B. Handley that resonated most loudly with the WSA swimmers.

That aside, however, and from purely a political point of view, there's no doubt that Handley's reputation and standing with the AAU itself helped Epstein enormously to navigate the treacherous currents of the largely chauvinistic and narrow-minded hierarchy of American swimming's establishment. The end result of this dynamic union was that, together, Epstein and Handley presented a formidable foe, so far as their numerous confrontations with the AAU were concerned.

Putting politics aside for the moment, much can be said about the WSA "girls" domination of American swimming in the years before and following the Antwerp Games, where more than half the American women's team was comprised of WSA swimmers and divers.

But his genius did not rest with coaching expertise alone. First and foremost, he was a writer of considerable magnitude. Besides being simultaneously by-lined in both the *NY Times Tribune* and the *World and American*, he wrote five books on swimming as well as the swimming section for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He also wrote numerous articles on swimming technique especially on the kicking phase of the American freestyle stroke.[10]

His résumé as an American sportsman is perhaps unrivaled in the history of American sport, at least in the eyes of this writer: Born in Rome in 1874, he came to the United States at the age of twelve and immediately joined the Knickerbocker Athletic Club, and then, shortly after that, the New York A.C., where he competed in football, rowing, water polo, yachting, cycling, and swimming. He would go on to win gold medals in the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis in water polo and as a member of the 200 Freestyle Relay team from the NYAC.[11]

He retired from the barbaric game of American "Tarzan" water polo[12] in 1911 to take up a newly acquired

passion for field dog training. His reputation as a pentathlete is on record at the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF), where a tarnished, engraved silver cup notes his then world record for the "medley race." His time of 16:27.80 reflects continuous quarter miles of walking, running, horseback riding, cycling, rowing, and swimming in that order.[13] Handley was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1967 as were, over time, several of his women competitors.

Two of them, Ethelda Bleibtry and Aileen Riggin, or as I fondly refer to them, "the pixie and the porpoise," are profiled in this presentation, but before I do so, I'd like to say a word or two about the first-ever all women's swim club in America.

The Women's Swim Association

Charlotte Epstein founded the National Women's Lifesaving League in 1914, which later evolved to become, in 1917, the New York Women's Swimming Association, more commonly known as the WSA. Epstein was the architect of the organization, providing both the energy and the tenacity to perpetuate its goal of providing a platform for women's swimming in the United States. From the very beginning, she demanded and received from "her girls" a keen commitment to gracious manners, team spirit and good sportsmanship, as well as a dedication to volunteerism and especially volunteerism to the WSA.

Young women and girls in great numbers were drawn to its membership, not only by the appeal of its nominal yearly dues of $3.00, but, more importantly, to become connected to something that had previously been denied them: fitness and an opportunity to learn water safety, but some eventually found their way to Handley and his coaching genius. Many of those girls, including Ethelda Bleibtry and Aileen Riggin, and then later, Gertrude Ederle, became the signature stars in the galaxy of WSA swimmers and divers over the next decade.

Within a few months of the WSA's founding, Epstein and Handley persuaded the national Amateur Athletic Union to register women swimmers, and shortly after that convinced the AAU to sponsor local and national championship meets for women. In this regard, they had to argue their case, not only to the AAU but to the specter of its recently deceased president, James E. Sullivan, who had habitually stonewalled Eptein's efforts, especially, to promote equality in women's sport.[14]

It was a monumental victory for Epstein and Handley and their women swimmers, and, eventually, as it turned out, for thousands of women athletes in other sports as well. Athletic clubs like the WSA began to emerge all over the United States. As more and more women found their way to the work place during WWI, increasing numbers of them began to cast aside many social constraints imposed upon them before the war, including various bans on their participation in activities traditionally denied them. Ethelda Bleibtry and Aileen Riggin were two of those women.

The Pixie and the Porpoise

When one pauses to review the actual competition in Antwerp in 1920, one's attention is drawn to two women particularly, who would be remembered for generations to come: Ethelda Bleibtry for her sheer dominance of the competition, and her charming teammate, the spunky Eileen Riggin for her pixie-like, daredevil presence among grown women. Bleibtry and Riggin would not only become the "darlings" of the American Olympic sweep, but would both go on to lead lengthy and in Riggin's case, a glamorous life. Let's take a closer look at these so-called "darlings." First, the "porpoise":

Ethelda Bleibtry

Ethelda Bleibtry was born in Waterford, N.Y. in 1902 but grew up in Brooklyn and New Rochelle. She arrived at the doorstep of the WSA fourteen years later seeking therapy for a severe curvature of the spine caused by an acute case of polio suffered at a young age. I am reminded here, as well, of two among many other women who came to the sport of swimming seeking therapy from disease, including polio and rickets, two of the more dreaded of all childhood diseases of that generation: the first is Annette Kellerman, "the first lady" of swimming in the early part of the century;[15] Another is Shelley Mann, the winner of the gold medal in the first-ever butterfly event for women at the 1956 Games in Melbourne, Australia.[16] Despite her modest swimming ability, it did not take Handley long to recognize that Bleibtry possessed both the talent and the drive to become a national level swimmer. By the time the Olympics were contested in 1920, she was the best freestyler in the world at several distances, as well as the holder of the world record in the 100 backstroke.

Granted, there are far more swimming events for women competing in the Olympic Games today than there were in 1920,[17] or even half a century ago, for that matter, but the fact remains that Ethelda Beleibtry was and will surely remain the only woman in Olympic history to have won all the swimming events in a singular Olympic competition. It could have been an even more dominating performance if there had been a backstroke event for women at Antwerp.

Surely, Bleibtry, the reigning world champion of that era in the 100 Backstroke, would have won that event as well. But as it was, she had to content herself with three gold medals and three world records. The first was in the 100 meter Freestyle in the record time of 1:13.6, breaking the inimitable Fanny Durack's record in the event by almost three seconds.[18] The second, the 300 meter Freestyle, which became a 400 meter Freestyle event in perpetuity four years later in Paris, became a "walk-in the-park" victory for Bleibtry, as she swam 4:34.0 to break the existing world record by almost nine seconds. The third was her swim in the 4x100 Freestyle Relay. The American girls, Margaret Woodbridge, Frances Schroth, Irene Guest, and Bleibtry at the anchor, out-distanced a runner-up German team by almost a length of the course, swimming 5:11.6, more than forty seconds faster than the existing record set

Left: Margaret Woodbridge (left), Aileen Riggin (center), Ethelda Bleibtry (right); Right: Ethelda Bleibtry on the medal stand. *Archive Barney*

by a British team in 1912 at Stockholm. Comparatively speaking, Bleibtry would receive only a small measure of the acclaim that would be accorded Mark Spitz, for instance, half a century later following his seven golds and seven world records at the Games of the XX Olympiad in Munich, Germany.[19]

In becoming America's first ever women's Olympic gold medal swimmer, Bleibtry also emerged as a poster girl of sorts for the American Women's Movement, as would many sports personalities, including the WSA's Gertrude Ederle following her successful English Channel swim six years later. Following an undefeated amateur career,[20] Bleibtry turned professional in 1922, then, after that, became a successful coach and swim teacher of handicapped children. Ultimately, she became a much respected and beloved nurse in Florida. In 1967, she was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Her induction remarks paid tribute to Charlotte Epstein and her swimming coach L. de B. Handley, "*who coached* [her] *to the top.*"[21]

An interesting footnote to her competitive career includes numerous confrontations with the AOC, active participation in a Belgium Beach sit-in following the Games at Antwerp, as well as two "brushes" with New York City's "finest." The first of those involved charges of "nude swimming" at Manhattan Beach. The term "nude" needs qualification here: what really happened was that Bleibtry had the audacity to remove her bathing stockings in public before going in for a swim at the Manhattan Beach Club. That kind of behavior was considered nudity in 1919. In any event, she was arrested and kept overnight in jail. Public opinion, especially from feminists, quickly rallied to her cause, resulting not only in her immediate release from confinement but the eventual emancipation for women from bathing stockings as well.

The second citation involved "a put-up-job" of sorts. Nine years later, in 1928, the *New York Daily News* campaigned vigorously for the City of New York to open the Central Park reservoir for public swimming. To enhance their case, they solicited the services of the popular Bleibtry, paying her $1000 for a well-publicized dive into the seemingly sacred reservoir. She, of course, was immediately arrested and paddy-waggoned off to a New York police precinct to spend yet another night in jail. The incident received a big play in the *Daily News*, resulting in Mayor Jimmy Walker's intervention and the subsequent decree that the Central Park reservoir be declared open for public swimming, and for both men and women at that.

In concert and well within the long reach of Bleibtry's long shadow stood Eileen Riggin, the fourteen year-old "pixie princess" of the springboard. In retrospect, pixie might be an overstatement, since "Little Aileen," as she was known to the press, stood only 4 feet 7 inches tall and weighed a mere 65 pounds at the time of her Olympic debut in Antwerp. Commensurately, her heart was much larger than her physicality.

Ethelda Bleibtry (second from right). *Archive Barney*

The Pixie Princess

Aileen Riggin was born in Newport, Rhode Island in May 1906, the daughter of a naval officer and spent most of her early years in the Philippines, where she was stricken with Spanish influenza and nearly died.[22] Returning to New York, and on the recommendation of a doctor who was treating her for severe anemia, she took up dance at the Metropolitan Opera School of Ballet then joined a fledgling swim team, ultimately catching the eye of Lou de B. Handley. In this regard, her blood disorder brought her to the WSA for many of the same reasons that it did Bleibtry, whom, you will recall, suffered from polio as a youngster.

Initially, Riggin was a swimmer of only modest ability, but she quickly became a particular favorite of Handley, who coached her to national backstroke titles as well as to high-point woman titles (combined swimming and diving) at three National AAU Championships. She was also part of two WSA national championship freestyle relays (400 and 800 meter). But those successes came later in her career. When she first started swimming at age eleven, her diminutive stature put her at a distinct disadvantage when it came to competing against fully grown girls, ultimately turning her talents toward diving, which brings us to Antwerp, and August 29th, 1920, and the first ever springboard diving event in Olympic history.[23]

Still of diminutive stature at age fourteen, Riggin quickly became a crowd favorite at Antwerp's Stade Nautique. The Europeans were fascinated by her tiny, fearless figure plummeting through the driving rain, and especially so from the high tower. The 10 meter platform diving event was held on the 28th of August, the day before springboard diving. It was a competition limited only to a variety of front dives called swan dives then. The medals were swept by the Europeans. The American divers, Riggin and Betty Grimes, neither of whom had ever had much "high diving" experience, finished at the rear of the field.[24] They competed as sort of a lark, but the venture turned out to be a good warm-up for the springboard diving event the following day.[25]

Riggin's gold medal was won under circumstances that would be unmanageable today. The difficulty of the venue aside, as well as the driving rain storms so typical of the weather in the Low Countries at that time of year, her performance was, for the most part, an impromptu one. Indeed, her program included dives drawn out of a hat at the last moment, some of which were totally unknown to her. That was the tarnished side of the coin; the silver side was luck. It was lucky, for instance, that she drew the last position in the order of divers. That vantage point allowed her to gain some sort of idea about the unfamiliar dives and observe the other divers' commensurate errors. A forward running somersault in the layout position was especially tricky for her, since it required a foot-first entry, a position she was unfamiliar with, and another, she recalled seventy-six years later, "*was some kind of gainer*,"[26] or what we would call today a reverse dive. Following her lead, Riggin's

Left: Aileen Riggin (left), Margaret Wainwright (right); Right: Aileen Riggin, masters swimmer in Hawaii at age 90. *Archive Barney*

fourteen year-old teammate, Helen Wainwright, won the silver medal while Thelma Payne won the bronze, completing an American sweep and ending the women's competition in the Games.

Following her Olympic appearances at Antwerp in 1920 and then again at Paris in 1924, a singular competition in which she became the first and only woman[27] in Olympic history to win individual medals in both diving and swimming (silver in 3 meter diving and bronze in the 100 meter Backstroke), Riggin turned professional and immediately launched an aquatic exhibition career, that included playing the Hippodrome[28] and touring the world with Gertrude Ederle, following her celebrated Channel swim in 1926. On the heels of all this, she settled into a show career in Hollywood pictures, before signing on to interview, organize, coach, and star in Billy Rose's first Aquacade.[29] Later the likes of Olympians Eleanor Holm and Johnny Weismuller along with film star Esther Williams would star in Rose's Aquacade, but Riggin was its first headliner.[30]

Aileen Riggin married a physician, Dr. Howard Soule, in 1934 and later moved to Hawaii, where she swam daily in the ocean and set numerous Masters' records well into her nineties. She passed away in October of 2002 at the age of 96. I still count my blessing for having had the opportunity to meet and chat with her in 1995 in Long Beach, where she was being feted by NASSH as the oldest living American Olympic gold medalist. She was eighty-nine years old then and just as charming and captivating as I imagined she was in 1920, when she captured the hearts of the Europeans as well as a nation in need of heroes, or in her case, a gender in need of heroines. There on the fan-tail of the Queen Mary in Long Beach, and then later before a NASSH gathering, she recounted her Olympic experience as "*a grand adventure*," and included a postscript of sorts about its not-so-grand prelude,[31] which brings me to an odd juxtaposition: moonlight and mutiny.

Moonlight and Mutiny on the Matoika

The American swim team's voyage to Antwerp and war-torn Europe in August of 1920 began and ended dismally. What should have been a glorious departure turned out to be a send-off fraught with the tragic echoes of the Great War, while their arrival in Antwerp found many of the male athletes contemplating charges of gross inefficiency and negligence against the American Olympic Committee. The interim between embarking and debarking is worth at least a short examination.

First, the departure. Clad in navy blue trousers with matching jackets, and waving straw hats banded with red, white, and blue ribbon, the American team marched down NYC's 34th Street from the Manhattan Opera House to the Downtown Ferry. Martial music, flag waving, and even a mild sifting of confetti streamers marked their progress. The scene would prove to be a microcosm of what Gertrude Ederle and Lindbergh would experience on a much grander level later in the decade. But "The

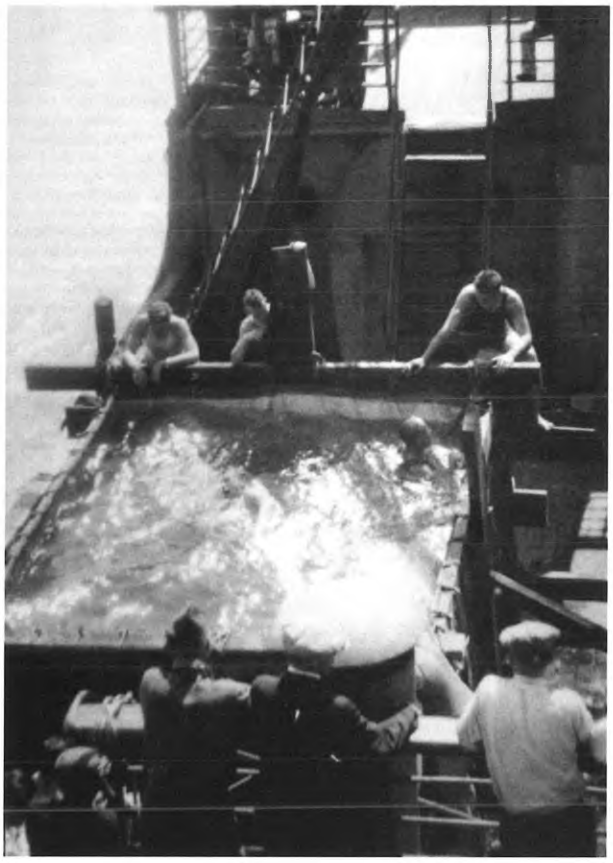
American WWI war dead in caskets at the Hoboken Pier. ***Archive Barney***

Lone Eagle"[32] and the first woman to swim the English Channel aside, what followed was anything but celebratory. As the team crowded onto the ferry to the Jersey shore, their faces were flushed with the anticipation of hope and glory in Belgium. Their mood changed abruptly upon their arrival at the piers in Hoboken, where they came face to face with the horror of not only the carnage of war, but their first glimpse of their ocean transport, an antiquated, twenty-year-old rusting hulk of a steamship called the *Princess Matoika.*

German-built and commissioned the *Princess Alice* in 1900, she had spent more than a decade serving Germany's steamship trade in the Far East. In 1917, however, she was seized in the Philippines and claimed as a war prize by the American navy. Recommissioned by the navy and rechristened the *Princess Matoika* by President Wilson's wife, Edith, she was assigned to convoy duty in the North Atlantic. During the latter part of this service, she transported soldiers home from Europe, some of them wounded, many of them ravaged by an influenza epidemic, and some of them in coffins. By the time she arrived in Hoboken to transport the American team to Antwerp, she literally reeked of death, disablement, and disease. As the young athletes waited to board, they could not help but see her recently off-loaded cargo: row on row of coffins covered with flags and containing just a signature few of the more than 50,000 American soldiers killed in the so-called "War to End All Wars." Those were the dead. The survivors: the armless and legless, and those riddled with shot and shrapnel, were mustered on the pier awaiting transport home.

In the pall of all this, the athletes filed onto the filthy *Matoika.* It would not be a pleasant voyage, especially for the men who had to endure the rat-infested confines of their sleeping quarters in a hold beneath the *Matoika*'s waterline. What should have been an eight day voyage to Antwerp lengthened into a nearly two-week ordeal, as the *Matoika* was forced to take a southern route to avoid the danger of ice bergs. As the weather warmed, conditions on the ship worsened. Commensurately, so did the mood of the athletes and especially the male athletes, many of whom who had been quasi-knighted with a bloated sense of their own importance by the echoes of Sullivan's rhetoric about the 1912 "invincible" American Olympic team.

Sullivan's hyperbole was reprinted late in 1919 by the New York Times, and proclaimed the 1920 team to be a "*galaxy of stars and the greatest team* [ever assembled] *under the colors of Uncle Sam.*"[33] Led by swimmer Norman Ross and sprinter Charley Paddock, the men's team launched a protest of the conditions on the *Matoika.* The crux of their argument was contained in a statement to the AOC's executive committee, charging them with "*laxity, gross negligence and gross inefficiency.*"[34] There was little if no complaint from the women swimmers; their very presence on the ship, they reasoned, was not a given; they were well aware of how lucky they were to be there in the first place, and they were even more aware of



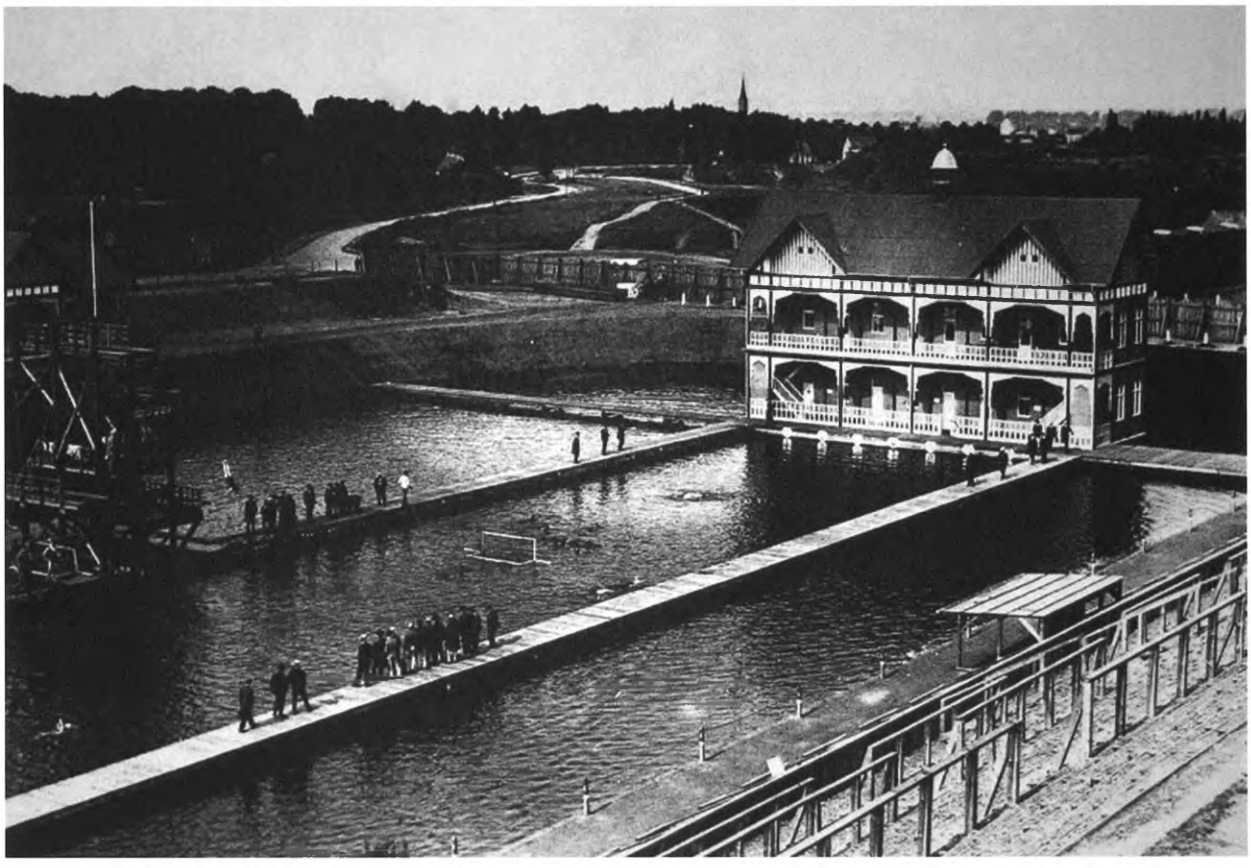
Left: Canvas training pool aboard the the American team's ocean transport Princess Matoika; Right: Duke Kahanamoku. *Archive Barney*

all the obstacles that Epstein and Handley and others had to overcome to ensure their participation in the Games. But following the Games, Ross would lead an athlete's sit-in on the beach in Belgium, a protest supported by several of the American women swimmers, including Ethlelda Bleibtry, which demanded that the AOC send better accommodations for their voyage home. While the protest produced no immediate results, it did serve to alert the AOC to its indiscretions, prompting them to improve planning and, subsequently, conditions for future Olympic voyages and especially the next two: to Paris aboard the *USS America* in 1924 and to Amsterdam on the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* in 1928.

Not everything was unpleasant, however. Both Bleibtry and Riggin remembered "*their delight in watching Robert Ripley* (Ripley's Believe It or Not) *sketching caricatures of teammates*,"[35] as well as dancing and group singing on deck in the moonlight accompanied on ukuleles by Hawaiians Pua Kela Kealoha and Duke Paoa Kahanamoku, the crown prince of American men's swimming at that time. And Ethelda Bleitry remembered swimming tethered in a specially contrived canvas swimming tank installed on the deck of the *Matoika* and looking for all the world like some sort of pre-historic flume of sorts.[36] In retrospect and with tongue in cheek, the canvas tank on the deck of the *Matoika*, having been filled with the warm waters of the Gulf Stream, might have been a valid alternative to the venue the American team would encounter a few days later. If nothing else, and the critical factor of temperature aside, swimmers would have been able, at the very least, to find their bearings in the cramped quarters of the canvas, something that several swimmers and divers could not do in the icy cold and darker-than-black waters of the Stade Nautique in Antwerp.

The Stade Nautique

From a distance, Antwerp's Stade Nautique appeared as an orderly, well laid-out venue for the aquatic events. Easily accessible by road and rail with ample space for spectators along a broad bank and substantial boardwalk, it certainly seemed to be a significant improvement over the aquatic venue provided by the Swedes at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm.[37] Indeed, the Belgians had ballyhooed the venue as a model for modern pool design. The venue consisted of three parallel pools dominated at one end by a stylish, three storied Belgian bath and clubhouse. The main pool featured a 50 meter swimming course with seven starting positions located on an apron of dock fronting the lower veranda of the clubhouse. A spacious water polo course was located at center pool in the shadow of an impressive, wooden diving tower. Two adjacent pools were used for practice and warm-up. It looked like a perfect set-up for swimming diving, and water polo, above water at least.



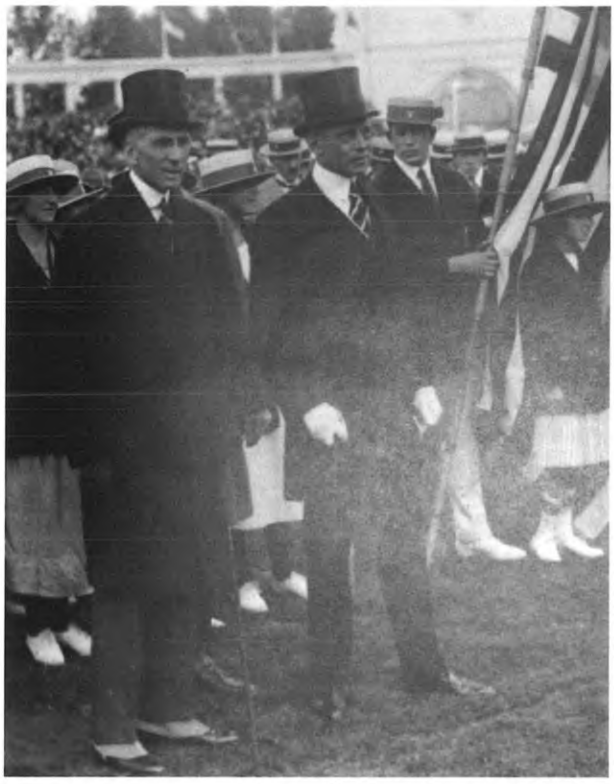
The Stade Nautique: Antwerp's aquatic venue for the 1920 Olympics. ***Archive Barney***

American and Australian swimmers and divers, however, had a different opinion of the facility, labeling [the venue] for what it was: "*'a ditch' or in kinder words, a cordoned-off section of water located along a stretch of the city's moat.*"[38] The water was not only frigid but "*more mud than water*,"[39] in the opinion of Charlotte Epstein. Many swimmers and especially water polo players suffered from extreme hypothermia, while others lost their sense of direction in the murky water and driving rain, often swimming far off course or, in some cases, even around in circles. Divers, too, became disoriented in the depths of the water, described by Riggin in her memoirs as "*frigid and entirely black, dark, dark black.*"[40]

Echoes

That's the archeology of the competition and the people and the place and the times, if you will, of the first-ever Olympic competition for American women. The sense we are left with in recalling these Games of the VII Olympiad is a collage of images depicting, not only the plight of war-torn Belgium, but the attempt by the modern Olympic movement to repair, for the first time in its brief history, a rupture in both the rhythm and the choreography of the modern Games. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, so far as this "American Genesis" is concerned, was the impetus that women's swimming at the 1920 Games provided other women's sports, where and whenever they were staged, including, of course, future Olympic competitions. And, perhaps, more importantly even than that, and in a more national and social sense at least, was the sense of pride and passion that their performance in Antwerp bestowed on American women everywhere, many of whom, for the very first time, began to see themselves in a different light, an illumination, that changed not only their view of themselves and their role in 20th Century American society but of the way in which the American male perceived them as well.

That's the big picture, the sociological one. More graphic, perhaps, might be a collection of smaller ones, a collage of sentimental snapshots from the Olympic album, if you will. People mostly: a lanky Jewish lady of purposeful stride and determined voice, whose iron will cleared the way for other women to shed their biblical modesty and stand proud on a hundred starting docks over time, but one in particular, a salt-stained, wooden apron reclining in the shadow of an ornate bathhouse on the watery edge of a nation crisscrossed by trench and town torn asunder by shell and the shock of a terrible war; then the genius of a legendary swim master whose presence in the ear, in the eye of girls he coached would never die, would live on forever in the ear and eye of memory passing by; and how could we forget those who made the supreme sacrifice, doughboys curled in coffins



Both Archive Barney

Left: Aileen Riggin off the tower at the Stade Nautique in Antwerp; Right: Ethelda Bleibtry (far left), Aileen Riggin (far right), opening ceremonies.

clad in red and white and blue, who had, perhaps, much more to complain about than did athletes clad also in red and white and blue; and oh say can you see an old, rusting, tub of a steamship, reeking of death and disease, wallowing eastward toward the horizon taking with her the aura of promise from a new world to an old world, scarred eternally by something called ironically "The Great Adventure." Smaller snapshots: the magic of a porpoise girl swimming quick in the nick of time through more mud than water, a plucky, pixie princess plummeting like a falling star through gray sky and slanting rain, and, lastly, ocean moonlight and ukuleles tinkling the impossibility of an Hawaiian hyphen American crown prince crooning the question, "Honolulu Baby, where'd you get those eyes, that dark complexion I idolize?"[41] This, all this, was just a part of the Games of the VII Olympiad of the modern era, the dawn of the Golden Age of American Sport. ■

* The original paper has been published in: BARNEY, Robert K./ HEINE, Michael K./WAMSLEY, Kevin B. & MacDONALD, Gordon H. (Eds.): *Pathway: Critiques and Discourse in Olympic Research. Ninth International Symposium for Olympic Research*. International Centre for Olympic Studies 2008, 210 – 222.

Notes and References

1 The phrase "all the swimming medals" and especially the word "all" is a bit misleading. In fact, there were only three swimming events for women (100 and 300 meter Freestyle and the 400 Freestyle relay) at the Antwerp Games. Progressively speaking, it marked an increase of only one event (the 300 meter Freestyle) from the Stockholm Games in 1912.

2 Susan Brownell Anthony was one of the leaders of the women's rights movement in the United States in the 19th Century. Precocious to the core, she learned to read and write at the age of three. Her awareness of gender discrepancies began in 1826 at the age of six, when her grammar school teacher refused to teach her long division on the basis that she was a girl. As a young woman, she was an attendee, with her mother, at the famous Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 (see end note #3), and four years later affixed her signature to the amended Declaration of Sentiments document that evolved from the American Women's Rights Convention in Syracuse, NY. Prior to the Civil War, the emphasis of her advocacy focused on issues of anti-slavery and temperance. In the twilight of over half a century of service devoted to improving the lot of American women everywhere, she worked tirelessly for women's suffrage as well as equal opportunities in education and labor, including equal pay, for women. Anthony died in 1906, fourteen years before passage of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. In 1979, Susan B Anthony became the first non-allegorical American woman to be honored on circulating U.S. coinage. Her prim and proper and stalwart profile on the Susan B Anthony dollar coin was minted for only four years (1979, 1980, 1981, 1999). There is a wealth of materials concerning Susan B Anthony and the women's movement in the United States. Here are three good ones: BARRY, Kathleen: Susan B. Anthony: *A Biography of a Singular Feminist.* Authorhouse 2000. BAKER, Jean H.: *The Lives of America's Suffragists*. Boston 2005, and for music lovers, Virgil THOMSON´S and Gertrude STEIN`S opera, *The Mother of Us All*.

3 Evolving from one of the first printed public appeals for women's suffrage, the Declaration of Sentiments grew out of a women's rights convention held in Seneca Falls, N.Y. in 1848. Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments stated, "*We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men* and

Start of Women's 100 Freestyle preliminary heat. ***Archive Barney***

women *are created equal*." Suffrage quickly became the foremost goal of the women's rights movement, espousing the belief that if women could gain the right to vote, they could use that right to gain other rights. For a more in-depth understanding of the Declaration of Sentiments and the Seneca Falls Convention, see "The History of Women's Suffrage" and accompanying illustrations at the Library of Congress or at www.lwvnet.org.

4 Jewish Women's Archives, Jewish Women in the Olympics, http://www.jwa.org/discover/throughtheyear/august/epstein02.html

5 The importance of safety and survival or self preservation in water became a central issue in the women's movement, when in 1904, a church-chartered picnic excursion boat, the General Slocum, caught fire on the East River and was abandoned by the crew. Forced to choose between fire and water, most of the nearly 1300 passengers, almost all of whom were women and girls who were non-swimmers, jumped into the river. Over 1000 perished. From the ashes of this disaster rose a phoenix of protest "*that would shake the foundations of Western Civilization.*" ISHOF Archives: http://www.ishof.org/ Pursuit of the right of self-preservation, then, including the right to learn to swim, became a central issue in the women's movement. Charlotte Epstein was one of the leading standard bearers of this initiative. For a detailed account of this tragedy, see O'DONNELL, Edward T.: *Ship Ablaze: the Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum.* New York 2004.

6 In the late 1800's, bathing apparel for women subscribed to a standard know as "biblical modesty." The traditional costume of that era covered women bathers from head to toe. As the popularity of seaside bathing increased, and as female bathing costumes began to show suggestions or even glimpses of the female form, Victorian moralists began to envision a moral danger in allowing the two genders to swim together in a common area. In short, the moralists "*warned that mixed bathing would undermine the moral fabric of society.*" (See end note reference #6) There's a contemporary relevancy here, especially when we review the restrictions placed on Islamic women's dress by fundamentalist clerics. Beyond the issue of bathing dress, there are other restraints that wed restrictions placed on American women before the 1900's to those imposed on Islamic women today, including, of course, their participation in sport.

7 For one of the very best chronologies of the evolution of women's swim attire in the early 20th Century, see "From Bloomers to Bikinis: How the Sport of Swimming Changed Western Culture in the 20th Century," on exhibit at the International Swimming Hall of Fame, or available in print at ISHOF Archives: http://www.ishof.org/. Brackets mine.

8 LUCAS, John A. & JOBLING, Ian: "Troubled Waters", in: *Olympika* IV(1995), p. 96. Brackets mine.

9 DOUP, Lou: "Suffragette Swimmers", *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* (November 7, 2007).

10 Indeed, it was Louis de B. Handley's renovation of the old Australian crawl into a much faster stroke, called the American crawl, that gave his women swimmers at the WSA a distinct competitive edge over their opponents in other parts of the country as well as the world. The basic difference, and thus advantage, involved the kicking phase of the stroke. Handley discarded the unwieldy trudgeon kick, widely used in the Australian crawl, replacing it with what we know today as a vertical flutter kick. He experimented with various beat-kicks over a variety of distances, resulting in the use of faster tempo kicks (8, 10, or 12 beats) for shorter distances and slower tempo kicks (4 and 6 beats) for longer distances.

11 For a more thorough account of L. deB. Handley's participation in the Games of the III Olympiad, see BARNEY, David E. & BARNEY, Robert K.: "Angst, Argument & Antiquity: A Centennial View of Aquatics at the 1904 St. Louis Olympics", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 12(2004) 3, pp. 14-23.

12 For a detailed account of the abbreviated water polo competition at the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis, see BARNEY, David E.: "Street Brawl in a Flooded Alley: Joseph 'Roughhouse' Ruddy and Tarzan Water Polo in the Old-New World", in: *NASSH Proceedings 2007*, Texas Tech University, NASSH, May 2007, Lubbock, Texas.

13 DAWSON, William "Buck": *An Era to Remember: Weissmuller to Spitz*. Fort Lauderdale, Florida, pp. 117, 129, 139.

14 LUCAS & JOBLING: "Waters". Indeed, Sullivan continued his "morally questionable" case against the WSA right up to the time of his death in September of 1914. His final act of defiance threatened the expulsion of the Rye Beach Swimming Club (a member of the WSA) from the AAU, if they allowed a single female to swim in its pool. Labeled a "*narrow-minded bigot out of the Victorian nineteenth century*" by Ida Schnall, writing in the *New York Times*, Sullivan was, without doubt, the most formidable obstacle to the emancipation of women swimmers in the United States.

15 LUCAS & JOBLING: "From Bloomers to Bikinis". Annette Kellerman was born in Sydney, Australia in 1886, the daughter of a music professor. She was crippled at the age of two by what was initially misdiagnosed as polio but what was later correctly diagnosed as an acute case of rickets. She wore leg braces until she was seven. She took up swimming to strengthen her legs and by the time she was sixteen she was the world record holder in the 100 meter Freestyle. Ultimately, she moved to long-distance swimming and set records at distances never before attempted by women. Although she failed in three attempts, she was the first woman ever to try to swim the English Channel. Like Aileen Riggin, Kellerman eventually found her way to show business. Billed as the "Diving Venus" and the "Australian Mermaid," and clad in a skin-tight, form-fitting, one-piece bathing suit, she performed swimming and diving feats in a glass tank at both the London and New York Hippodromes. She also conceived a new aquatic art form, underwater ballet, the precursor to synchronized swimming. Kellerman's life was marked by confrontations with convention so far as women's bathing dress was concerned in that day and age. Long before Madonna became a commercial sensation, and long before Nicole Kidman became the "Queen of the Screen," and long before fitness guru Jane Fonda showed middle aged women how to keep fit and beautiful, Annette Kellerman had been there and done that a long time ago. It would not be a rhetorical stretch to posit that Kellerman was one the most significant cultural influence of the early 20th Century.

16 For a more in-depth view of Shelley Mann, the genesis of the butterfly stroke, and her "winning of the gold" in the first-ever butterfly event for women in Olympic history, see BARNEY, David E. & BARNEY, Robert K: "A Long Night's Journey into Day: the Odyssey of Butterfly", in: CROWTHER, Nigel B., BRANEY, Robert K., HEINE, Michael K. (EDS.): *Cultural Imperialism in Action*, Eighth International Symposium for Olympic Research, October 2006, pp. 65-85.

17 Women's swimming debuted at Stockholm in 1912. There were two swimming events for women (the 100 Freestyle and the 4x100 Freestyle Relay) and one diving event (Platform). At Antwerp in 1920, there were three swimming events for women (the addition of the 300 meter Freestyle, which later evolved to the 400 Freestyle) and two diving events (the addition of 3 meter Springboard Diving). The 100 Backstroke and 200 Breaststroke events were added in 1924 at the Paris Olympics. That slate of events would remain static until 1956, when the 100 Butterfly was added at the Melbourne Games. The 400 Medley Relay was added at the Rome Olympics in 1960, and the 400 Individual Medley was added at the next Olympiad in Tokyo. The program of events blossomed in 1968 to include several new events (for both men and women) at the Mexico City Olympics: Added to the women's program were the 200 Freestyle, the 800 Freestyle, the 200 Backstroke, the 100 Breaststroke, the 200 Butterfly, and the 200 Individual Medley. The 50 Freestyle was added in 1988, and the 4x200 Freestyle Relay was added at the Atlanta Games in 1996. The debut of a 10K Open Water event for both men and women in Beijing at the Games of the XXIX Olympiad will bring the total number of swimming events for women to 17. Of interest is the fact that, currently, the total number of events for men is also 17, and that the women's events now mirror the men's with only one exception: the 800 meter Freestyle as opposed to the men's 1500 meter Freestyle.

18 If Annette Kellerman was the "first lady" of Australian swimming, Fanny Durack certainly could be considered the second. Like many other women swimmers of the early 20th Century, Durack had to overcome a considerable measure of gender bias in her own country before she was allowed to accompany the Australian male swimmers to Stockholm in 1912, where she won the first-ever women's swimming event in Olympic history, the 100 meter Freestyle. Following her Olympic victory, her competitive career loomed even larger in the middle of the second decade, and at one point in time, she held every women's world swimming record from 50 yards to the mile. Her efforts to defend her 100 meter Olympic title at Antwerp in 1920 were aborted by an appendectomy, followed shortly by a bout with typhoid fever. The typhoid morphed into an acute case of pneumonia; the end result of all this terminated her swimming career. For an examination of Fanny Durack's career and the effect of her presence on worldwide women's swimming, see LUCAS & JOBLING: "Troubled Waters",p. 96.

19 For the record: Mark Spitz, after failing dismally to back up his boasts of four years earlier in Mexico City, where he publicly predicted that he would win at least six gold medals, "soft-pedaled" his aspirations for the Munich Games.* Perhaps he shouldn't have, as he went on to perform the greatest swimming fete in Olympic history, seven gold medals and seven world records: 100 Freestyle (WR 51.22), 200 Freestyle (WR 1:52.78), 100 Butterfly (WR 54.27), 200 Butterfly (WR 2:00.70)*, 400 Freestyle Relay (WR 3:26.42, Spitz swimming anchor leg), 800 Freestyle Relay (WR 7:35.78, Spitz swimming anchor leg), 400 Medley Relay (WR 3:48.16, Spitz swimming butterfly leg). *Ironically, the one boast that Spitz did make before the '72 Games was that he would break the magic 2:00 barrier in the 200 Butterfly; he did not, barely missing that epic moment by .70 of a second.

20 Ibid. The claim that Bleibtry was undefeated as an amateur appears in Buck DAWSON's book, *An Era to Remember: Weissmuller to Spitz*. While it is true that Bleibtry was undefeated as an amateur from 1920 until the time of her retirement in 1922, one might question the validity of the totality of being undefeated as an amateur, since the results of many of her early races, when she was only developing as a competitive swimmer, were never recorded.

21 International Swimming Hall of Fame Archives: http://www.ishof.org/

22 Honolulu Advertiser Online, www.honoluluadvertiser.com

23 An abbreviated diving event for women was held at the Stockholm Games in 1912. It was staged as a platform event and was dominated by the Swedes who provided seven of the eight entries. Both springboard (3 meter) and platform diving (10 meter) were held at Antwerp.

24 An interesting footnote to Aileen Riggin's recollections of her limited tower diving training included the memory of an hour's commute to the outdoor lagoon at the Manhattan Beach Club. Practice could only be conducted at high tide, (either at 6 am or at 6 pm), when the water depth was sufficiently deep for high diving. Her indoor training was conducted once a week in an indoor pool in New Jersey after a three hour commute. There the water depth was only six feet. Riggin learned early on to cut short her entries and position her forearms to help ward off the shock of hitting the bottom, which she did on almost every dive. RIGGIN SOULE, Aileen: "A Wonderful Life in Her Own Words," International Swimming Hall of Fame Audio Archives: http://www.ishof.org/

25 RIGGIN SOULE: "A Wonderful Life".

26 RIGGIN SOULE: "A Wonderful Life".

27 For the record: Katherine Rawls of the United states won a bronze medal as a member of the 400 meter Freestyle Relay team and a silver medal in springboard diving at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. She and Aileen Riggen remain the only two women in Olympic history to medal in both swimming and diving in a singular Olympics.

28 For a capsule view of the NYC's famous Hippodrome: the Glory Years, Decline and Fall, and Legacy, consult http://wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Hippodrome. The one feature of the original Hippodrome, which enabled both Aileen Riggin and Annette

Kellerman to showcase their diving and swimming talents, was a glass water tank, which they had to share from time to time with aquatic animal acts, some of which featuring diving horses and acrobatic seals. The tank held 8000 gallons of water and could be raised from below the stage by hydraulic pistons. With the onset of the Depression, the Hippodrome became a "faded-lady" theater and eventually became dark until 1935, when Billy Rose, America's premier theatrical impresario, leased it to stage the spectacular Rodgers & Hart circus musical, *Jumbo*. Sharing top billing with the elephant was Jimmy Durante. Faced with infrequent bookings near the end of the decade, the Hippodrome was finally closed for good and demolished to make way for a combination office building and parking garage, known today as The Hippodrome Center.

29 Billy Rose's life is well-chronicled in the literature of show-biz. He was born William Rosenberg to a Jewish family in NYC in 1899. An interesting juxtaposition of achievement regarding his early life was the fact that he was a public school (#44) 50 yard dash champion as well as a world champion in the use of the Gregg System for shorthand notation, being able to take over 200 words of dictation per minute while writing both forwards and backwards and with either hand. In this respect, Rose had the ideal tutor, John Robert Gregg, the creator of the Gregg System of Shorthand, the most widely used system of pen stenography in the world at that time. Billy Rose launched a career as a stenographic clerk in the employ of Bernard Baruch and the War Industries Board during WWI. Later he became somewhat of an extemporaneous lyricist, collaborating (to whatever extent) on such melodies as "Me and My Shadow," "Does the Spearmint Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight," and "It's Only a Paper Moon." Rose went on to become, perhaps, the best known of Broadway show producers and theater/nightclub owners. Among his creations in this regard were the Billy Rose Musical Hall and Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe. His first wife was Broadway comedian Fanny Brice; his second was Olympian Eleanor Holm. He died in 1966 at the age of 66 and left a fortune valued at 42 million dollars entirely to a foundation named after himself.

30 Eleanor Holm not only starred in Billy Rose's Aquacade but became his second wife as well. After winning the 100 meter Backstroke at the 1932 Games in Los Angeles, and being the reigning world and Olympic record holder in the 100 Backstroke by 1936, Holm became the "shoo-in" favorite to win Olympic gold at the Berlin Games. However, the "shoo-in" became the "shut-out" before the Games could even begin. Charged with drunk and disorderly conduct both aboard the S.S Manhattan and at a stop-over in Cherbourg, France, she was dismissed from the team by the AOC. Charge and counter charge ensued. In short, it was an ugly mess from beginning to end. In that respect, at least, it mirrored the choreography of her divorce from Billy Rose in 1954, a marital skirmish labeled by the press as "the War of the Roses." If this footnote were to document the entire scenario and resulting choreography of the so-called "Holm Affair," there would be little room left for the paper's text. However, for a more detailed account of Holm's feud with the AOC in 1936, see WALLECHINSKY, David: *The Complete Book of the Olympics* (1896-1984), pp. 474-476. Also see WALLECHINSKY (pp. 225-226) for further anecdotal information on the much celebrated Johnny "Tarzan" Weismuller.

31 My apologies for this first person intrusion at this point in the narrative text. My, along with my brother Robert's moments with Aileen Riggin on the Queen Mary in 1995 were magical, albeit far too abbreviated. She was so lucid, at times even lyrical in her descriptions at NASSH of Antwerp and the 1920 Games. There might have been many who knew more about the social implications of the Games, at least in total, than perhaps she did, but her commentary was so colorful and heartfelt and personal that it overshadowed anything we could have said to her about that moment in history. In retrospect, it was her moment and not ours, no matter how we might like to think about it in the greater scheme of things. One final observation: at eighty-nine she was still a tiny wisp of a woman, if you will, maybe only slightly larger than she was in 1920, but it was plain to see that the intervening three quarters of a century had seemingly only grayed her hair; time had done little to dull her memory and her charm and her zest for living. We will not soon forget Aileen Riggin. Another final note: in 1995, the Queen Mary was celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the end of WWII and, in that vein, the liner's role as a troop ship during the war. Nicknamed "The Grey Ghost" by transported troops during that period, it occurs to me that sobriquet might have been even more apt for the *Princess Matoika*. Had I known all that then, I think the "pixie princess" and I would have enjoyed the irony together.

32 Lindbergh gathered several nicknames following his solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. "The Lone Eagle" was the one he cherished most; he especially liked the emblematic imagery of it. Another, and perhaps the nickname he liked least, in fact he didn't like it at all, was "Lucky Lindy." There was nothing lucky about it {the flight} or the pilot, he often reminded people and especially the press. Success, he espoused, depended on meticulous planning and attention to detail. Despite Lindbergh's dismay about the tag, a phenomenon emerged from the nickname. It was called the "Lindy Hop," and it became one of the most popular and original steps in swing dancing. The "Lindy Hop" evolved from the popular jazz dance steps of that era, much like the "Charleston" had, and featured patterns of fancy footwork called "shine steps" and acrobatic hops and mid-air turns called "air steps." "Dancing the Lindy" made its debut at the Savoy Ballroom in NYC in 1928. "Shorty George" Snowden, a popular big band leader of that day, is widely credited with naming the dance, early in the year following Lindbergh's "hop" from New York to Paris in May of 1927.

33 The Olympic Century Series, Book IV, *The Olympic Record of the VII Olympiad*, p.10, general reference from *The New York Times*, 1919. Brackets mine.

34 The Olympic Century Series Book IV, p.14.

35 The Olympic Century Series Book IV, pp.13-14

36 *Report of the American Olympic Committee: Seventh Olympic Games,* Antwerp, Belgium 1920, p. 250. Otto Wahle, manager and coach of the American swimming team, reported that "*training on board the ship was accomplished by the same means as in 1912 on the trip to Stockholm. A canvas tank 12 feet long and 9 feet wide was constructed, which did wonderful service, except for the bursting of a seam, an accident quickly repaired.*" In addition, it was Wahle's view that "*Margaret Woodbridge from Detroit, whose stroke was very unfinished in the beginning was transformed into one of the most promising lady swimmers in the United States after barely making the team in the try-outs at Manhattan Beach.*"

37 "*In 1912 at Stockholm, Sweden, the Games of Duke Kahanamoku and the first appearance of women in swimming and diving events, the venue was a narrow 100 meter course laid out in a river basin that was actually an arm of the Baltic. The water was dark and salty and freezing cold.*" Excerpt from BARNEY, David E. & BARNEY, Robert K.: "Beyond Clotworthy and the Way We Were: A Look in the Rear View Mirror at Early Olympic Aquatic Venues", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 12(2004)3, pp. 14-23.

38 The Olympic Century Series Book IV.

39 The Olympic Century Series Book IV, p. 68. In her gracious remarks to King Albert, thanking him for Belgium's hospitality, Charlotte Epstein reflected that her girls had had a very good time, but later she remarked to the king that the actual swimming "was more like swimming in mud than water."

40 RIGGIN SOULE: "A Wonderful Life"

41 This reference, of course, has to be an embellishment of the writer's imagination, as "Honolulu Baby" was written by T. Marvin Hatley in 1933 for the Laurel & Hardy feature film, Sons of the Desert.