

## **Swimming Leads To ..... Adventures**

My swimming did not begin in a pool. Instead, I learned to swim at the Old Mill Pond, a marshy tidal basin in Westport, Connecticut. The Old Mill Pond was connected to Long Island Sound, with the water swiftly going in and out of the pond with the Sound's high and low tides. I have attached a picture of the pond, and I still remember learning to swim and being terrified about being swept out to sea under the bridge as the tide went out. Later, I spent many summers as a lifeguard at the town's three beaches, watching from my lifeguard chair for swimmers in trouble and, as the water became very warm in August, signs of sharks with their ominous fins.

Little did I know that my years of swimming and lifeguarding, and the accompanying swimming/water safety/first aid skills, would provide the foundation for years of adventures.

The first involved spending summers in small, isolated Alaskan villages along the Bering Sea. There, the villagers hunted and fished for subsistence – there were no Costco's, Safeways or other grocery stores. Summers required going out in boats in the dangerous waters of the Bering Sea or fishing from the shore for enough salmon to provide for the rest of the year. Falling into the icy waters often had deadly consequences since there were not any swimming pools in which to learn how to swim.

To address rural Alaska's high drowning rate, for several years, the State of Alaska funded a swimming, first aid and water safety program in villages in the Aleutian Chain and Bristol Bay and advertised for instructors on college campuses. So, over the course of two summers while I was in college, I travelled to and lived in 4 rural Aleut and Yupik Eskimo villages to teach swimming, water safety and first aid.

The travel itself was an adventure. I flew to Anchorage (3-1/2 hours from Seattle), and another college student and I would get on a small, 4-seater bush plane for 3-6 more hours, and would eventually get dropped off on a gravel airstrip with a month's worth of pilot bread, peanut butter, cornflakes, and evaporated milk and had to find a place to live and to teach swimming, first aid and water safety.

In each village, we would find a pond by the Bering Sea for the swim lessons. What quickly became clear was that water safety was the most important tool we could teach, together with the ability to tread water or swim a few strokes. Bottom line: if a person who fell overboard or waded too deeply could have the confidence to tread water or swim a few strokes while another person extended a jacket or pole, a person could be rescued.

The kids loved the program and the adults sometimes wanted to learn as well. As a result, I spent hours standing in cold ponds in my old red and white speedo lifeguard swim suit with the equally cold, Bering Sea wind whipping around me teaching how to float, tread water, swim a few strokes of freestyle, and how to extend a pole or jacket to save someone who had fallen in the water. And, in one village (Egegik), towards the end of my month there, I saw a young kid fall into a shallow pond in town. Before I could get to help him, I saw another kid extend his jacket and pull him to safety. I have never forgotten the significance of that.

As an aside, I was able to teach more than water safety. I taught how to splint broken bones by using walrus bones that had washed up on the beach. I taught how to treat burns by demonstrating the difference between first, second and third degree burns through roasting marshmallows.

Swimming opened the doors to many other adventures. In Good News Bay, I lived in the jail except on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July when a few villagers needed the jail cells more than I did. In Unalaska, I lived in a large barrel-like structure near a stream in which I caught salmon on a regular basis as an alternative to pilot bread and peanut butter.

The most remote village was on the island of Atka. At the time, it did not even have an airstrip. The only way to get there was to fly from Anchorage to Unalaska, and then get on a very small plane to Adak (a Navy base, at the time). I then had to wait for days to take a 9-hour tugboat ride to Atka. It is amazing I actually made it back to college on time because that year, due to needed repairs, the tug only made it to Atka and back 3 times and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final trip was the one that picked me up. Had the tug not made that 3<sup>rd</sup> trip, I would have been stranded on the island for nearly a year.

Other adventures are much more recent and while they were not rugged, are equally memorable and made possible by my swimming skills. For example, I was fortunate to race in the IRONMAN 70.3 World Championships in 2016 in Mooloolaba, Australia and the swim took place out in the Pacific Ocean, complete with the surf pushing us to the shore at the finish. Sweet! But, after the race, I asked the officials about what appeared to be crab pots just beyond the racecourse buoys – I knew they could not be crab pots because the water was too warm. I learned that they were the tops of shark nets designed to try and keep the sharks out of the swim area (glad I asked after the race).

I raced in the Atlantic Ocean in 2017 as part of IRONMAN 70.3 Maine. When my husband (Ken) and I arrived and had a dinner on a high pier overlooking the buoys designating the swim course, I admit to being a little intimidated because the buoys extended straight out from the beach directly into the Atlantic for what appeared to be infinity. I made myself get over my apprehension by getting into the water a day before the race and swimming along the buoys until I could easily see the turn buoy and I realized that there was no reason to be concerned.

In 2018, I raced in the International Triathlon Union's Multisport World Championships and the swim took place in a channel in Denmark off the island of Funen. The water was a comfortable temperature, and there were no surf, tide or shark risks whatsoever. Easy! When I reached the half-way point in the 1.2-mile swim and dove off the turn-around platform, I decided to change how I normally race the swim leg. Instead of swimming conservatively and saving my energy for the bike and/or run portions of the race, I decided to truly race the second half of the swim in appreciation of my Helena swimming buddies and coaches who had helped me get ready for the event (thank you, guys!). I ended up with the second fastest swim time for women in my age group, and it is due to the confidence and fitness achieved through the Helena Ridley swimmers and coaching.

All these experiences have flowed from my early years learning to swim in the Old Mill Pond in Connecticut. From those moments of swimming terror, I have enjoyed years of adventure, joy, challenges and friendships and the treasured camaraderie of the swimming community.

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