

# Dipping into Dolphin History

By Jeff Sauve



1961 Double Dolphins. Karen and Mike Dismer are the pair on the right.

LAST SUMMER I received a phone call from a church quilting club member who had found a large blue curtain with white stars and a yellow moon pinned on it at a garage sale. The person holding the sale said this blue curtain might have been used as a backdrop for a long-ago St. Olaf Christmas Festival concert. Although I could not confirm the story, it intrigued me enough to investigate further. As it turned out, the blue cloth was indeed from St. Olaf College and was first used as a scenery backdrop for the St. Olaf Dolphin Swim Club’s 1946 water pageant, “Ten Little Indians.”

Historically, synchronized swimming pageants were promoted by the American Red Cross under Commodore W. E. Longfellow. His crusade to “entertain the public hugely while educating them gently” about water safety made a great impact, evidenced by the declining number of drownings over the years. Many college and universities, including Colorado State, Berkeley, and Michigan State formed women’s swim clubs during



A synchronized Christmas program.

that time. In 1952 Carleton College followed suit, also naming their club “The Dolphins.”

The St. Olaf Dolphin Swim Club, founded in 1939, was an extension of the Women’s Athletic Association, which first presented its annual spring water pageant in 1931. Synchronized, carefully choreographed swimming, staged with costumes and accompanying music, the pageants ranged from “A Fishy Tale” and “The Sultan’s Pearl” (the Dolphin’s debut pageant in 1939) to “Toyland” (1957) and “From Jungle to Jazz” (1957).

The programs, better known at St. Olaf as “water ballet,” showcased the aquatic talents of more than twenty young women who practiced every Thursday in the pool, which then was located in the basement of the old gymnasium.

One Dolphin member, Marian Sattre Kark ’45, remembers, “We had to run to our classes after practice — there were no hair dryers in those days. We put on scarves over our wet hair, but our hair was frozen around our faces by the time we reached our

class. It was miserable, but we enjoyed it spite of everything.”

For St. Olaf women, the Dolphins offered an opportunity to participate in a sport when few existed on campus. The swim club encouraged its members to meet other students and express their creative abilities.

“We interpreted the music into swimming movements and learned it through our bodies — a kind of wet version of dance, so it was intellectual, physical, emotional — a true liberal arts project,” says former Dolphin Mary Wee Maxwell ’57.

Although dancing on the ground was not permitted at St. Olaf until 1961, performing in the water was encouraged. In addition to the annual pageant, every other year two members of the St. Olaf men’s swim team were asked to swim in a number

with two Dolphins. Karen Strand Dismer ’63 met her future husband, Mike Dismer ’63, in the pool when



they were partnered to do a “double dolphin” for the program. Karen shared this memory of her Dolphin days: “While floating on our backs, Mike hooked

A highlight of the 1950 “Toyland” pageant.

his feet around my neck and did a back summersault pulling me along behind, under water, and back up again. It wasn’t much fun, and I got a lot of water up my nose.”

The early modest green swimsuits were ill-fitting and borrowed, as there was no money to purchase any. Clad with white caps, Sindy Lier Tellekson ’57 recalls how her straps broke during one of the acts. She finished the routine, she says, with one arm holding the suit up and the other arm doing the strokes.

For many Dolphins, the memories are like a patchwork quilt filled with memories of a camaraderie shared both in and out of the water. Some members continued performing in water shows after graduation, while others became Red Cross water safety instructors. The Dolphins finally disbanded following the 1969–70 academic year. Four years later, the St. Olaf women’s swim team took the place of the swim club.

Dolphin alumnae Betty Andersen Stromseth ’49 and Mickey Matzke Mosen ’49 have this favorite memory from the 1946 pageant “Ten Little Indians”: “To this day,” says Stromseth, “whenever we hear ‘Song of India,’ our arms want to reach the beginning strokes of the routine.” 🐬

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The Dolphins made a big splash in 1950, even appearing on the cover of the Dec. 17 Sunday edition of the St. Paul Pioneer Press.