

Oregon Open Water

A history of open water swimming and swimmers in the Beaver State.

Elaine K. Howley

On July 23, 1913, a small item dispatched from Portland appeared in the *Oakland Tribune*, a newspaper based in Oakland, California. The headline proclaimed a difficult-to-envision feat: “Girl swims river with hands and feet bound.”

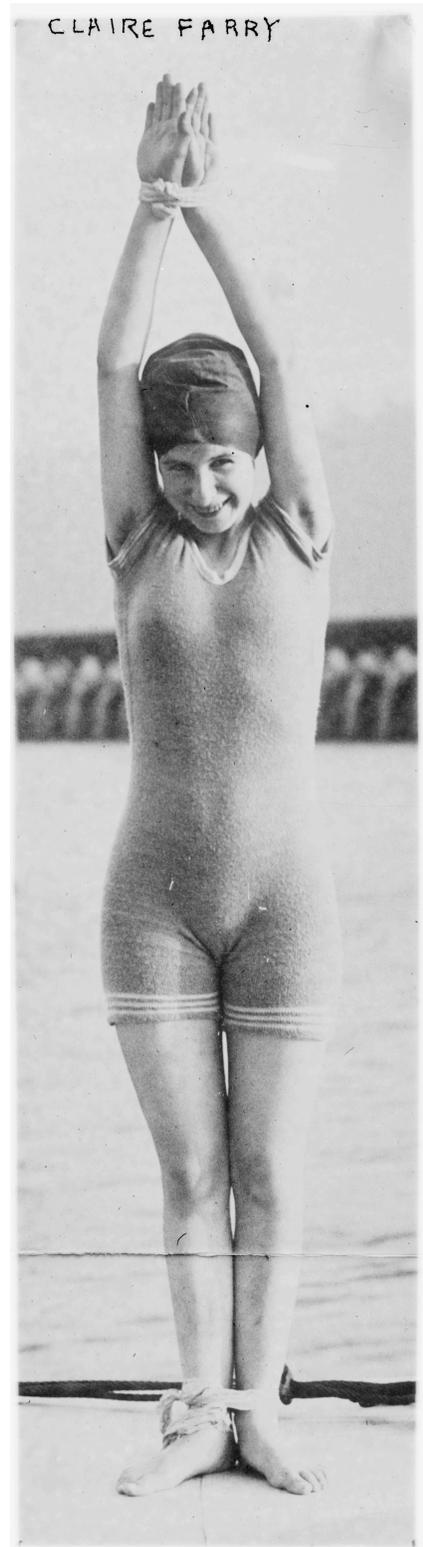
The story went on to describe that one Miss **Claire Farry**, a 15-year-old Portland girl, had swum a distance of about 600 yards in the Willamette River in just over 14 minutes. In the process, she “outdistanced experienced swimmers in her effort, which was the second in five days. The first attempt last week failed when she was almost across, the river being rough at that time.”

To add to the impressive news, the piece related that Farry had only learned to swim some 18 months prior to her big event. But that didn’t stop her from being successful in this challenging stunt, that saw her moving like a Chinook salmon. “With her two hands and arms tied together she uses them as the snout of a fish and her hobbled legs act as a fish’s tail as she darts through the water.”

Farry was a pint-sized competitor who drew attention to the pleasures of swimming and diving in the greater Portland area. Unlikely to be the first such vaudeville-era swimmer, Farry was nevertheless a unique early entrant to the history of open water swimming in the great state of Oregon.

Open Water Heyday

In 1926 when Gertrude Ederle edged out three other fabulous female swimmers to become the first woman to cross the English Channel, she sparked a golden era for marathon and open water swimming. Almost immediately after her swim, the deluge of media attention—complete with a million-person ticker tape parade in Manhattan—event organizers and swimmers began dreaming up new routes and ways to show off their skills to a public hungry for swimming stories.



Among these was William Wrigley, Jr., the chewing gum tycoon who owned controlling interest in the Catalina Island Company, effectively making him the owner of Catalina Island, a comma-shaped lump of rock situated about 20 miles off the Southern California coast. Hoping to drive more off-season business to the resort on the island, Wrigley dreamed up a marathon swimming race from the island to the mainland with an absurdly large prize purse.

Totaling \$40,000, (which today would be worth more than \$585,000) the prize money enticed more than 400 people to enter the race, many of whom were woefully underqualified to attempt such an arduous crossing. By start time, the field had winnowed to just over 100 competitors, among them an Oregon native who presented one of the strongest arguments for success.

Though **Norman Ross** is usually remembered as a Chicago resident, he actually grew up in Portland, Oregon. He swam at the Multnomah Athletic Club in Portland under legendary coach Jack Cody (who guided 15 swimmers to the Olympics) in the early 1900s, and earned three Gold medals at the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp. It was only after that event that he moved to the Windy City.

A distance freestyler, Ross, aka “Big Moose” naturally progressed into open water as the sport was gaining in popularity. Ever a showman, Ross—who would go on to become an acclaimed disc jockey and radio personality after his swimming career concluded—could always please a crowd.



According to the International Swimming Hall of Fame, to which he was inducted in 1967, one day while Ross was training for the Wrigley Marathon Swim in Lake Michigan, he “took a short training swim from the Lee Street Beach in neighboring Evanston to the first beach on Chicago's north side. Naturally, all sunbathers were watching the head bobbing in the waves way out on the lake. Norman Ross, never one to disappoint a crowd, swam into where he could stand in the water chest-deep. ‘Is this Milwaukee?’ he boomed. ‘No,’ said the sunbathers, ‘It’s Chicago.’ ‘Nuts!’ said Ross, slapping the water, ‘I must have missed my turn!’, after which he dove back in and began swimming north.”

Another Oregon swimmer who also took part in Wrigley’s Ocean Marathon was

Martha Stager, a 17-year-old Portland woman. Stager earned a lot of press attention for being one of two women (along with Margaret Hauser) who earned a

\$2,500 payout from the Wrigley Ocean Marathon for lasting longer than any of the other women who'd entered—more than 19 hours. Stager was within 1.5 or 3 miles from shore (depending on the reporting source) when she was pulled from the water. That prize would be worth more than \$35,000 today.

Stager returned to the Catalina Channel a couple weeks later to have another go at it on February 6, 1927, but was unsuccessful. She tried again in May. She never did achieve a solo crossing of the Catalina Channel.

Stager also took part in Wrigley's Lake Ontario swim race in Toronto, at the Canadian National Exhibition on August 31, 1927. During that swim, she again outlasted all comers and was awarded a \$1,500 prize. But Stager was reportedly unhappy with the prize because Lottie Schoemmell of New York who swam the greatest distance got a bigger, \$3,500 prize. Ethel Hertle also of New York got \$3,000 and Edith Hedin of Toronto got \$2,000 for her efforts. Both women had also swum farther than Stager. But according to an AP report, "Miss Stager claims that the contest was above all, one of endurance and as such she is of the opinion the money should be evenly divided."

Shortly after the Toronto swim, Stager announced plans to undertake a 1,000-mile swim down the Mississippi River. It's unclear whether she ever launched such an ambitious undertaking.

A Freshwater Swimmer's Paradise

For a coastal state, Oregon provides few ocean swimming locations—the wildly rocky shoreline and cold water temperatures make ocean swimming in Oregon a less common occurrence. Instead, the bulk of the open water swimming action takes place in the Beaver State's 1,400 lakes and nearly 250 rivers and creeks. And there are several groups that have sprung up around the state, often tied to Masters clubs, triathlon groups, or racing events, where many swimmers congregate to enjoy the water.

Bob Bruce, a swimmer, open water event organizer, and head coach of Central Oregon Masters Aquatics, moved to Oregon from the East Coast in 1995 and says those lakes and rivers offer some of the best open water swimming opportunities anywhere in the world.

"Oregon has always been a great place to go swimming because we have beautiful lakes, the Willamette River, and the Columbia," among many others, he says. The [Atlas of Oregon Lakes](#), an online database, has cataloged more than 300 excellent swimming locations across the state and should be a bookmarked page for any open water swimming enthusiast.

Clearly, locations suitable for swimming abound, but in terms of organized events, Bruce says there wasn't much open water swimming going on when he arrived in the state 25 years ago.

"The open water scene as we know it with sanctioned events really only started here in the late 1980s." One of the earliest organized events was created by the Rogue Valley Masters team, which was launched in 1984 in Ashland, Oregon.

The program soon drew a plethora of fast pool swimmers who were looking to open water for additional racing opportunities and challenges.

In 1985, **Greg Frownfelter** took over an established triathlon event at Howard Prairie Lake and transformed it into an open water race. This became the Southern Oregon Lake Swim, which has run every year since (except for 2000 and 2015) in various lakes in Southern Oregon.

In 2002, the group added a festival event at Applegate Lake, which is known as the “secret gem of Southern Oregon.” About 25 miles southwest of Medford, Applegate Lake is now home to the annual Applegate Lake Open Water Weekend hosted by Rogue Valley Masters. The event, directed by **Dan Gray**, features races from 200 meters to 10 kilometers and is often the site of U.S. Masters Swimming National Championship events.

In 2010, another premiere event arrived on the Oregon open water scene. It all started when **Marisa Frieder**, then a 40-year-old microbiologist, succeeded in her personal goal of swimming down the Willamette River under all 12 of Portland’s bridges. She swam 10.7 miles from Sellwood to the St. John’s Bridge in 5 hours, 18 minutes, a marathon swimming first.



The following year, Frieder, who Bruce calls “the hardest working event director that I work with” established the Portland Bridge Swim to bring that same joy of urban river swimming to other intrepid adventurers. Today, Frieder directs the annual event that features 80 to 100 swimmers and starts at Sellwood Riverfront Park and finishes at Cathedral Park.

Swimmers go with the flow of the river, gliding under 12 bridges and wending through downtown Portland and beyond. A destination event, it’s proven popular with Masters swimmers and marathon swimmers from across the country and around the world. “That one sells out on the first day registration opens,” Bruce says of how popular the PBS has become. “It’s a really fine event.”

But Portland isn’t the only place where open water swimming is occurring in Oregon. “There was also a group out of Eugene that started a series of swims in the early 1990s,” Bruce says. That group has mostly dissipated since **Steve Johnson**, who was a leading member, stepped back from swimming and organizing.

There’s also a third group in Central Oregon, the Central Oregon Masters Aquatics. **Matt Mercer** preceded Bruce as coach of that group, and “he started the Cascade Lakes swim series in 1994. That has turned out to be our flagship

event in Oregon,” he says. “It’s a five-swims-in-three-days event that I’ve been directing now for about 20 years.”

Masters swimming groups are a great feeder system for open water groups and events across the country, and this is true in Oregon, too, where USMS has a strong presence. Many speedy USMS swimmers have been making the leap between USMS pool meets and shorter open water races to longer marathon swims over the past several years, with **Jamie Proffitt**, a doctor from Bend, being among the most accomplished.



Proffitt won the Applegate Lake 10K Swim in 2010, and placed second in the 2012 Portland Bridge Swim. In 2016, he earned second place in the SCAR Swim Challenge in Arizona and in 2019, he won the 24-mile Tampa Bay Marathon Swim in Florida.

Other notable names on the Oregon Masters and open water scene include **Matt Miller, Karen Matson, Dave Radcliff, Craig Mather, Frank Phillips, Leo and Marianne van Dijk, Jon Clark, Tim Waud, Ben Karlin, Susie Young, Tim Cespedes, Ralph Mohr, Elizabeth Budd, and David Livengood.**

Oregonians on the World Open Water Stage

Farther afield, Oregon-based swimmers have also left their mark. **Michelle Macy** can be credited with being the first of a new generation of marathon swimmers to draw the world’s attention to Oregon as an open water swimming mecca and a place to train for some of the toughest challenges anywhere in the world.

The tall and powerful management consultant, now based in Portland, was the first American to complete the Oceans Seven, a challenge modeled on climbing’s Seven Summits that requires swimmers to rack up some serious frequent flyer miles in pursuit of some of the toughest channel swims in the world.



The challenge consists of solo crossings of:

- The 21-mile English Channel between England and France.
- The 20-mile Catalina Channel between Catalina Island and the California mainland.
- The 9-mile Strait of Gibraltar between Spain and Morocco.
- The 21.4-mile North Channel between Ireland and Scotland.
- The 26-mile Ka'iwi Channel between Moloka'i and O'ahu in Hawaii.
- The 14-mile Cook Strait between the North and South Island of New Zealand.
- The 12.1-mile Tsugaru Strait between Honshu and Hokkaido, Japan.

Macy started the challenge with a solo crossing of the English Channel on September 22, 2007. Six years later, on July 15, 2013, she successfully crossed the North Channel, becoming only the third person, second woman, and first American to complete the series. As of summer 2020, only 21 people have completed all seven swims.

Following a similar long-distance swimming pathway is **Jessica Kieras**, a psychologist based in Bend who blogs about her adventures "[lake bagging](#)" in Oregon and farther afield. Kieras grew up a swimmer and competed for Texas A&M University. She began open water swimming in Oregon with the Portland Bridge Swim in 2013, but it was only when she moved to central Oregon in 2017 that she really got into open water swimming.

Enthused to be able to swim to complete rather than to hit a specific time, she began training for longer events. She soon signed up for END-WET, a 36-mile swim down the Red River in North Dakota and the SCAR swim series in Arizona. She was named the overall winner of the 2019 SCAR swim.

In 2019, she also completed a solo crossing of the Catalina Channel and in 2020, she completed a solo crossing of Lake Tahoe. Kieras continues to expand her distance and cold horizons and is one to watch in ultra-marathon swimming.

The Adventure Swimmers

Of the many different types of open water swimmers out there, the intrepid aquatic enthusiasts who undertake multi-day staged swims down long rivers or across oceans are among the most imaginative. Oregon has drawn the attention of at least two of them down the ages.

Immersive conservationist **Christopher Swain**, then 35 of Portland, Oregon, undertook a lengthy staged swim the length of the Columbia River in 2002. Starting on June 4, 2002, Swain launched from the Columbia's Canadian headwaters and aimed for its termination in the Pacific Ocean, 1,243 miles later.

Swain's swim down the Columbia to raise awareness of pollution in the river took him over a year—he logged between 5 and 25 miles per day during the

adventure depending on the water temperature. When he wasn't swimming, Swain gave lectures about the need for environmental remediation, often visiting schools along the route to talk with thousands of kids about how they must become stewards of the river. He also met with tribal leaders, municipal authorities, farmers, factory owners and other stakeholders who rely on the river for various needs to help them understand how to better support the health of the river.



SETTING A RECORD: Christopher Swain swims the Columbia River below Oregon's Bonneville Dam in June. He became the first swimmer to conquer the river's entire 1,243 miles. Photographs by GREG WAHL-STEPHENS Associated Press

The adventure was self-funded and supported by a raft of volunteers. When Swain ran out of money, he'd pause the swimming to take a temporary job.

He finally swam into the Pacific Ocean on July 1, 2003, becoming the first person to swim the entirety of the Columbia River. During this 13 months of daily swimming, his wetsuit rubbed "yellow blisters the size of nickels" across his back, the Associated Press Reported in June 2003. He also developed rashes from various pollutants in the water and rinsed his mouth every 20 minutes with hydrogen peroxide to eliminate contaminants as best he could. He got several ear infections, colds, and a swollen lymph node during his escapade, which he said was caused by pesticides in the water.

Dean Hall is another long-distance adventure swimmer who's made waves in a wetsuit. The native Oregonian became the first person to swim the entire 184 miles of the Willamette River when he completed the swim in June 2014 at age 54.

At the time, Hall was in active treatment for leukemia and lymphoma, and had lost his wife to cancer four years prior. His goal on this adventure swim was to prove that cancer patients shouldn't give up their dreams because of a diagnosis.

Hall's "Swimming in Miracles" journey started in Eugene, Oregon on June 2, 2014. He completed the swim on June 27 in Portland after having swim about 9 to 12 miles each day. In July 2017, he followed up with a second big river accomplishment, when after swimming 6 to 10 hours per day for 25 days, Hall became the first person to swim the entire length of the River Shannon in Ireland.

Hall's cancer has been in remission since soon after his Willamette swim, and he continues to spread an inspirational message of hope and healing while raising funds for cancer research through his efforts.

The Community Builders

No sustainable swimming group can exist without the efforts of community builders, and Oregon has several of these. In addition to Bruce and the Masters swimmers who've created opportunities in open water, another marathon swimmer and community builder who now calls Oregon home is **Shannon Keegan**. Originally a top-level water polo player, Keegan got inspired to take up marathon swimming in 2009 when she was living in Newport, Vermont, another hotbed of open water swimming. She had signed up for a 1-mile open water swim in 2009 and got to the beach a little early on race day.



"I saw the finishers of the 10-mile swim, and Rondi Davies walks up on the shore. It literally took my breath away to even think about the hours and hours she had been swimming," Keegan says. Eager to reach for that prize herself, Keegan signed up for the 3-mile event in Newport the following year, and began climbing the ladder from there.

In 2013, she moved to Talent, Oregon, and got to work establishing not only a presence on the open water scene but also a business. [Intrepid Water](#) is an adventure swimming and coaching business aimed at supporting and educating budding open water swimmers as they, too, begin going farther across large bodies of water. Keegan also hosts the very popular Marathon Swim Stories podcast and interview sessions, launched in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic as a virtual social gathering of swimmers missing their daily fix of swimming and camaraderie.

Another community-minded marathon swimmer who calls Oregon home is **Cindy Werhane**. In 2011, the oncology nurse from Portland found her way onto the open water swimming scene via triathlon. She was swimming with a group that had a set route, but she soon wanted to shake up the routine. "I wanted to try to figure out other places to swim and find others who were swimming," Werhane says.

She found that there wasn't a lot of communication between the various groups



of open water swimmers and triathletes she came across, but as she traversed different groups and locations, she became connected to many more swimmers and triathletes, many of whom had questions. “I would get, like, 10 messages a day and I thought there’s got to be a way to get this information to people without me being the conduit all the time.” That was the impetus to found Oregon Wild Swimming, which started life as a Facebook group with more than 1,200 followers.

Not just an organizer, Werhane is also a superlative swimmer who has competed in a number of marathon open water races including the Portland Bridge Swim, the SCAR Swim Challenge, the Mercer Island Marathon Swim, and several swims in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont over the past 7 years. She’s also dabbled in winter and ice swimming, with year-round swims in the Willamette and as a regular competitor at the annual Memphremagog Winter Swimming Festival in Vermont.

Her longest ultra-marathon swimming effort came in July 2019, when she attempted to swim the 38 miles around Sauvie Island, the largest island in the Columbia River. Starting at 6 a.m. on July 10 near the northern tip of the island, she swam for 20 hours until hypothermia and exhaustion did their dirty work. Nevertheless, she returned later in the summer and completed the loop. Look for her to continue pushing boundaries in Oregon and abroad in the coming years.

Another 100 Years In the Making

Over the past 100-plus years, Oregonians have proven their mettle in cold, rough water time and again and have created a thriving, interconnected community of

A Brief History of the Cable Swim

In 2011, Bob Bruce, head coach of the Central Oregon Masters Aquatics, got himself involved with a unique event. “I built a cable course,” he says. “If I had known what I was going to have to go through to get that done, I might not have done it,” he says, adding with a laugh that “the story of how that happened is a three-beer story.”

But build it he did and the short version of the story is this: There’s only two such courses in the United States and they are the only open water events for which year-over-year course records can be kept. That’s because a cable is run under water that very clearly defines the course and keeps it consistent year over year, rather than the buoys other courses use that need to be reset each year and may drift no matter how accurate a GPS device is used to place them.

Since Bruce built the quarter-mile-long cable course on Foster Lake, he’s run five National Championship events, typically alternating with a nearly identical cable course in Lake Placid, New York, for that annual designation.

For those unfamiliar with this type of racing, understand that a cable swim is a “completely different animal” from other open water events, Bruce says. “If you like going long and doing solo swims with your own support boat and that sort of thing,” the cable swim is probably not for you.

The cable swim is a full-contact RACE. “You start in a wave of 10 or 12 people and they’re right there in your face. They’re seeded by speed, so these are all the people who would likely finish closest to you in any other race. In other races where competitors stretch out along the course, that doesn’t happen in the cable swim. It’s a unique animal.”

Love it or hate it, the cable swim is a very specific version of open water racing that’s firmly planted on the Oregon scene for the foreseeable future.

aquatic enthusiasts. The state's natural beauty and outdoorsy, adventure-loving vibe have attracted a host of talented and daring swimmers to ply her waters. Look for Oregon open water swimmers to continue to win races at home and abroad as they show off their natural aquatic abilities and fearless attitude over the next 100 years.