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When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear

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Part One: The Influence of Fashion. Chapter 4, Bathing and Swimming: Seeking a "Sensible Costume"

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CHAPTER FOUR

BATHING AND *Swimming*

Seeking a "Sensible Costume"

THE OUTDOOR LAWN GAMES OF CROQUET AND TENNIS NUDGED WOMEN INTO a new awareness of the need for more suitable clothing for sport. In spite of this, sporting dress for both activities remained firmly within the boundaries of the conventional. Other kinds of leisure activity enjoyed at the same time, however, forced thinking—and clothing—in new directions. Even more influential in bringing about change was the popularity of swimming and bathing. And the clothing for bathing had much further to go. James Laver, the keen-eyed and witty observer of clothing and its role in society, once wrote that "the only sensible costume for bathing in is no costume at all."[1] However much one might agree with him, rigid standards of modesty and the mid-nineteenth-century introduction of mixed bathing got in the way. The trouble was that when the body got wet, no matter how voluminous the drapery around it, it had a tendency to reveal itself under the sodden and clinging layers that were meant to hide it. Thus for decades the goal was to offer unfailing coverage, thereby retaining appropriate modesty while also allowing necessary freedom of movement. Clearly, this was not an easy assignment.[2]

The history of bathing and swimming dress reflects that uneasiness, that ambivalence. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, swimming had largely been the activity of men, while bathing—that is, dipping into the water, often in the name of healthful duty—was regarded as quite a different pastime, often a feminine one. The water cures of earlier decades

had generated spas, which very properly kept the sexes apart even as they probably increased sexual interest by the very act of doing so. (We have seen how gleefully both men and women came together to play croquet.) The spa's water activities inevitably led women to seek the greater freedom of bathing in the ocean and lakes. Early on this too was controlled. Seaside resorts used red and white flags to carefully designate and limit the times when men and women could swim. Often each sex had its own separate section of the beach until, again inevitably, they recognized the pleasures of joining together in mixed bathing. People quickly realized that this activity too—just like croquet—encouraged flirting and courting.[3] Americans embraced this notion much earlier than their English counterparts. In an age of dubious acceptance of exercise in any form and rigorous adherence to role behavior, climate must have played a critical part. Relief from summer heat is rarely a factor in England. In 1833 a British visitor to the United States commented on the mixed bathing he saw, but added that since the parties always went into the water fully dressed, he could see no great violation of modesty. In any event, "even though they were completely clothed, few females dared to go into water where one had to be accompanied by a man."[4] In spite of these restrictions, by 1846 mixed bathing had become "the fashion all along the Atlantic coast."[5]

Until that time, men frequently bathed or swam nude, while women covered themselves in long, loose, and flowing dresses of a canvas-like material. Essentially heavy chemises or tent-like cloaks, when wet these ballooned out from the body, allowing freedom of movement for the arms and legs. Women entered the water from the privacy of small "bathing machines," which were little changing huts on wheels that could be pulled down to the edge of the water. Often brawny female attendants were on hand to help them paddle away from the steps of the changing houses, supporting them as they went through the motions of "swimming" and keeping them safely away from prying eyes. Swimming per se came very slowly to women, possibly because, until the second decade of the twentieth century, the clothing they had to wear would have pulled them to the bottom like a stone. Even after the reform in bathing suits, American women remained timid swimmers. Nevertheless, as early as September 1873 *Godey's* described a "swimming belt of bootstrapping ornamented with embroidery . . . used by children and grown-up people in learning to swim."[6] This sounds like some

"The worst of wearing one's back hair down is that it makes the young men stare so!" Segregated bathing, complete with changing houses or "bathing machines" that were rolled to the edge of the water. *Harper's Weekly*, September 18, 1858. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Special Collections and Archive.

"Oh! Aunty dear, do come and duck under the wave. You've no idea how delicious it is!" Simple covered dresses of the 1850s, cut off above the knee, worn with straight-legged but loose trousers, in the bloomer style. *Harper's Weekly*, September 4, 1858. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Special Collections and Archive.

sort of harness for the attendant to clutch, and it sounds heavy besides. But from this we may assume that at least a small number of women were actually learning to swim rather than just paddling or playing in the water.

Swimming pools were being built throughout the country during these years, and colleges, even women's colleges, followed the trend. Goucher had one of the first, in 1888. By 1916, more than 32,000 women (out of a total U.S. population of 101,961,000, slightly fewer than half of whom were women) entered swimming programs offered by the YWCA. Clearly, the swimming population was not large; but it would seem that those who did swim were enthusiastic, because the following year the Women's Swimming Association of New York was officially organized to promote national and international competition for women.[7] In the next chapter I look more closely at this group and its success three years later at the 1920 Olympic Games. But first it is important to realize what went before, and how far those women had to come to achieve their international triumph.

According to the argument I have presented so far, we should find that the clothing for water activities in these years was fashion-oriented because it was worn when men and women interacted together out-of-doors. Such simplicity when speaking of swimming and bathing is merely a fond hope. The reality is much more complicated. The requirements of clothing for going into the water are unlike any other, and called for a very different development from all the other sporting wear discussed in this book. Certainly male influence played its part, pushing the early separation of bathing dress into a fashion-conscious mode while functional dress for swimming struggled for existence as late as the 1920s. The ambivalence I noted earlier is clear as we look at the clothes.

Obviously, the clothing for bathing and swimming is unique in that its function is to protect the body while allowing movement in the water. When wet, it becomes heavy and therefore sharply counterproductive to the purpose for which it is designed. Even worse, wet fabric often becomes translucent or even transparent. It clings to the surface underneath and reveals the form supporting it. In an age of militant modesty, these characteristics could and did present embarrassing problems for bathers. The solution in the late 1850s was to cover the body in several layers of loosely fitting but sturdy clothing, modeled on the bloomer costume of the time.

This outfit became the prototype for all women's bathing suits for the next half century.[8] Briefly, it consisted of a baggy, blouse-topped dress, "short" for its time, cut to the mid-calf and worn with a belt to gather in the fullness. With it, a pair of matching Turkish trousers was gathered at the ankle and finished with a ruffle. Often a short cape or "talma" was included to throw over the shoulders after emerging from the dip.[9] The cape's purpose was twofold: it would provide warmth if needed and, of equal importance, a modest covering should the "figure" suddenly be revealed too prominently. In other words, the outfit was cut similarly to the housedresses of the period, but modified with a shorter and narrower skirt to be worn over a pair of trousers rather than the customary petticoat. In this it was exactly like the reform bloomer or the exercise suit. Though modified over the next decades, it basically stayed within those boundaries.

Even—or perhaps especially—fashion magazines had grave difficulties in finding complimentary things to say about such costumes. In 1854 *Frank Leslie's Ladies Gazette of Fashion* started out encouragingly, but gave up in frustration, blurted out the truth, then turned finally to a straightforward description:

> [No. 7] is one of those bathing dresses so necessary to a seaside excursion or residence. If the invigorating sea-bath is to be enjoyed as it should be. The material is common Scotch plaid, green and red, in alternate checks. It is cut short in the bloomer fashion, which though very convenient when half veiled in snowy surf ought to astonish the sharks themselves on dry land. But a bathing dress is only intended for convenience, and the least idea of making it elegant would be preposterous. The dress is made with a loose skirt set into an old-fashioned tight yoke and gathered around the waist with a plaid belt; it is cut short, leaving the feet and ankles free. Long bishop-sleeves fastened around the wrist with a band protect the arm. The pantalettes are made loose and fastened around the ankles with narrow bands.[10]

Peterson's Magazine had to agree two years later that it was not a great-looking outfit, though at least *Peterson's* thought that with a little embellishing it might possibly be improved: "Bathing-dresses, although generally

"The Bathe at Newport." Winslow Homer caught the delights of mixed bathing even as he recorded the encompassing clothing for the activity. *Harper's Weekly,* September 4, 1858. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Special Collections and Archive.

very unbecoming can be made to look very prettily with a little taste. If the dress is of a plain color, such as grey, blue or brown, a trimming of the talma, collar, yoke, ruffles, etc. . . . of crimson, green or scarlet, is a great addition."[11] That it was discussed in the *Gazette of Fashion* and *Peterson's* at all is in some measure an indication that women were beginning to need such a costume. And of course, the dress was just the beginning. To complete the outfit, the wearer needed an oil cap to protect her hair from the water, a straw hat and lisle gloves to protect her face and hands from the sun, and gum shoes to protect her feet from whatever lurked on the bottom. One can only marvel at women's determination to partake in the activity at all when the entire body was swathed so completely.

Historians and fashion magazines notwithstanding, Winslow Homer recorded the bathing scene at the popular seaside resort at Newport for *Harper's Weekly* in 1858. He gives us a different picture from the ones we have seen so far. There is no doubt that the separation of the sexes was maintained with all the devices known to man, but how effective they were is another matter. Human nature has a tendency to find its own level. Such

seems to be the case here. Men and women in Homer's scene gambol together in the waves, a few men supporting women to help them "swim." An occasional bare female foot and calf kicking into the air show below the billowing skirts. At least one woman's sleeves reach only to her elbow. Many women wear caps on their heads, but none in the water wears a straw bonnet, although several watching from the beach do. Claudia Kidwell has argued that Homer fell victim to youthful artistic license in depicting these swimmers so, and she may be right. A counterargument can be made, however, that although fashion magazines have always dictated a certain mode of dress, complete in every detail, many women stubbornly refuse to follow a slavish interpretation of the rules. And, given the "summer girl at the seashore" nature of the activity and the forward-thinking type of woman partaking of it in the 1850s, it seems quite probable that Homer did indeed record what he saw. He certainly had a precise eye for detail, in clothing and everything else, as his croquet prints, paintings, and other works attest. I would argue that his is likely a truer representation of the clothing worn at the time than the fashion prints, formalized as they were. In that era before rotogravure, artists like Homer were hired to record, not reinterpret.

The ladies' magazines kept their eye on developments in bathing costumes. They supported the Turkish trouser or pantaloon suit, but sometimes even they despaired, particularly when it came to fabrics. In 1864 *Godey's* sighed,

> There is no dress so easy of accomplishment as a neat, tasteful and comfortable bathing dress; and yet, sometimes, when watching bathers at the sea-side, one is tempted to believe such an achievement impossible.
>
> Instead of the usual flannel, Mme. Demorest is making bathing dresses of moreen, and considers this material better adapted to the purpose. It is of a strong, firm texture; not too heavy, does not cling to the person after being in the water, as it immediately drains off.[12]

This article not only illustrated these suits but instructed about decoration and construction. The suits "should of course be lined, except the skirt," in, the editors suggested, a very thin muslin with "just sufficient texture to

make it smooth." They even proposed that some enterprising fashion leader at Newport or Cape May add a havelock (a cloth extension that would cover the back of the neck) to a lady's bathing hat, for "it is so disagreeable to have the sun beating down on one's neck, which it will do, in spite of the wide-brimmed hats."[13]

Englishwomen tended to be more relaxed in their swimming dress than Americans. They found it perfectly acceptable, for example, to wear a suit of pantaloons and bloused top, skirtless, while Americans clung to the more modest additional layer of a skirt. One reason was that as a rule, Englishwomen actually swam more than American women. American women who did adopt the English style were regarded as "masculine" and "fast," though by 1869 the costume was grudgingly permitted for "expert swimmers who do not wish to be encumbered with bulky clothing."[14] Probably this greater freedom in dress also had to do with the English segregation of men and women at the seaside until the end of the century. Women might well reason that since men could not see them anyway, they would not need to cover their pant legs with a skirt. This too is most likely why Englishwomen early on abandoned the long black stockings that Americans wore well into the twentieth century to complete their bathing outfits—a distinguishing characteristic in telling English images from American.

This bare-legged look in the fashion plates can be confusing. American publications showed illustrations of young women at the shore with their skirted suits and bare legs throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century. But magazines of the period were notorious for "borrowing" (sometimes over and over again, for many years) the fashion plates, or indeed any illustrations, from any source they could lay their hands on.[15] Thus European publications provided many images, however illegally copied, both for one another and for the American press. Many of the styles that were fashionable abroad were not necessarily either in fashion or acceptable in the more puritanical United States. Genuinely American sources—Charles Dana Gibson comes to mind—invariably clothed bathers from head (or, latterly, neck) to toe, always including those ubiquitous long black stockings as an inevitable part of the ensemble.

It is easy to see that bathing costumes, in their outer layers at least, by this time followed the dictates of fashion even though they included shortened skirts and the trousers that were prohibited for women anywhere else but in

Left and center: Bathing dresses. These two outfits have moved beyond the unfashionable bloomer costume of the 1850s and 1860s to incorporate dressmaker details of the 1870s, including the suggestion of corsetry and bustles, even as they keep the trousers that scandalized the generation before. *Peterson's Magazine*, July 1870. *Right:* Bathing dress. Echoing the fad for classical motifs enjoying a revival, this outfit is daring for its time, with cap sleeves and a blouse top that barely covers the baggy pants below. *Peterson's Magazine*, July 1870.

sex-segregated exercise. In 1870 *Peterson's* showed that year's version of the bloomer as bathing dress, made out of black serge (a woollen material), fully covering with long sleeves, matching wool "leglets" that stopped at the ankle, and a leather belt. Even a bustle is suggested in the line of the back.[16] Along with this, however, were two other, rather more daring bathing dresses, both with short sleeves and draperies instead of complete skirts. One, made out of white flannel, was Greek-inspired, with a Greek key border around the tunic's scooped neckline and at the cuffs of both the sleeves and the baggy knee-length pants. The other, in black merino (also wool), has an almost military look, with a blue cashmere stripe down the side seam of the baggy mid-calf trousers and the half-skirt buttoned back at the hip, revealing a matching blue cashmere facing.[17] Rarely does one see so much attention to the trousers in the United States at this time; usually they were carefully covered by a skirt. These styles were obviously more English in tone than American; probably the plates were taken directly from European sources.

In July of the following year, 1871, *Godey's* introduced a new swimming outfit. An article titled "Ladies' Bathing Dresses" declared: "Great reforms have been made within the past few years in the bathing dresses worn by ladies." And "great reform was needed," they added, "for the preservation of modesty as well as of health and comfort." Swimming in the old long, loose gown, "apt to dab wet and flabby against the bather as she left the water," the writer recalled, "was very nearly something miraculous. Even in dipping in and out of the water, it would cling around the legs and impede freedom of motion. The very greatest objection of all was, that occasionally the air filled it, or the wind caught it, as the bather rose above the surface of the waves, and bore it up above the crest of the water like a balloon."[18]

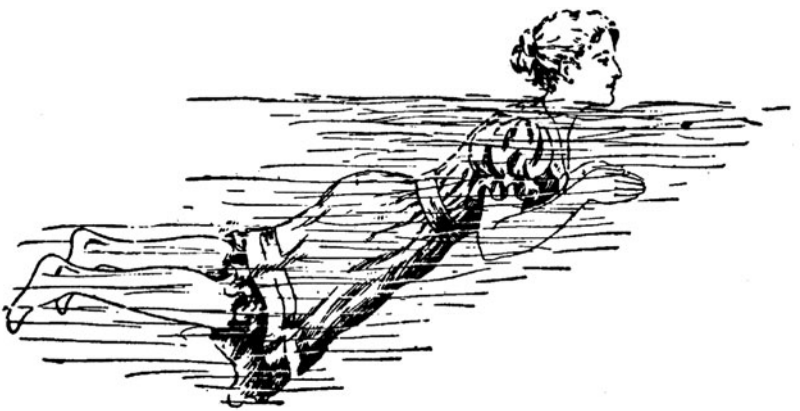
The new outfit, appearing, it would seem, none too soon, was French in origin. In its description we can see the new thinking—and, it would follow, greater acceptance—not just for specially designed, lighter bathing clothing but for bathing itself. Its trim design prevented the embarrassment caused by the old dress. It had a short blouse, with or without sleeves, another innovation that had been introduced, as we have seen, the year before, and it was worn belted. The "trowsers" were to be no fuller than was "absolutely necessary, for the less material used the better; the more there is employed, the heavier the gown will be when saturated with water. . . . A costume will take about five yards." Colored flannel—undoubtedly wool—was recommended, but serge, of dark blue or brown, was even better. Fabrics of wool and cotton mixed puckered in water, so were unsuitable, and linen (specifically brown Holland) was not suitable either. Wool, obviously, was preferred. So was the natural, corsetless body, *Godey's* declared, for the sake of health and beauty.[19]

The 1880s suit, essentially similar to the earlier ones but pared down even further, kept the general line of 1880s fashion wear, which tended to be leaner and narrower. By this time the suit had modified to combine the bodice and trousers into a neat one-piece garment, very much like the English one but with the American addition of a separate skirt, falling just below the knee to conceal "the figure." Combination underwear had been introduced in the previous decade, and this, in addition to the English version, may have had its influence. The short sleeves, introduced at the beginning of the 1870s, came into their own in the 1890s, when short puffed sleeves were the height of fashion. The trousers, now knee-length bloomers

Left: New, reformed, French-style bathing dress: simpler, cleaner, shorter in top, trousers, and sleeves. *Godey's Lady's Book*, July 1871, 43. *Right:* "New Style Bathing Dresses." The child's (on the left) is bloused below the waist in the fashion of children's dress in the 1880s. It has a hint of bustle gathered at the back, but foreshadows the sailor collar that will characterize women's bathing dresses for over a quarter of a century. Note the sleeves and the trousers on both have shortened. *Peterson's Magazine*, August 1882, 68.

or knickerbockers the same length as the overskirt, used the new elastic to gather the fabric at the knee and waist. Sailor collars, decorative stripes, and nautical designs gave a jaunty, sportive look for the first time. Gone were the dressmaker details of earlier styles; instead a new, sleeker type of dress specifically for sport had taken their place. By now, a woman had the choice of wearing the overskirt or leaving it off while in the water if she really wanted to swim rather than paddle. Hats of oiled silk or waxed linen, often with wire to hold the brims stiff, held the masses of piled-high hair in check, and bathing sandals, oxfords, or slippers protected the feet. Except for these and the overskirt usually worn in the United States, the outfit

Peterson's offered readers options in their choice of bathing dresses. Here, the basic design with or without a skirt, long sleeves, or gathered pants. *Peterson's Magazine*, 1890s.



"The Breast Stroke . . . being the easiest, is usually taught first." Not all women chose the sleeker, skirtless swimming dress. *Peterson's Magazine*, August 1895, 222.

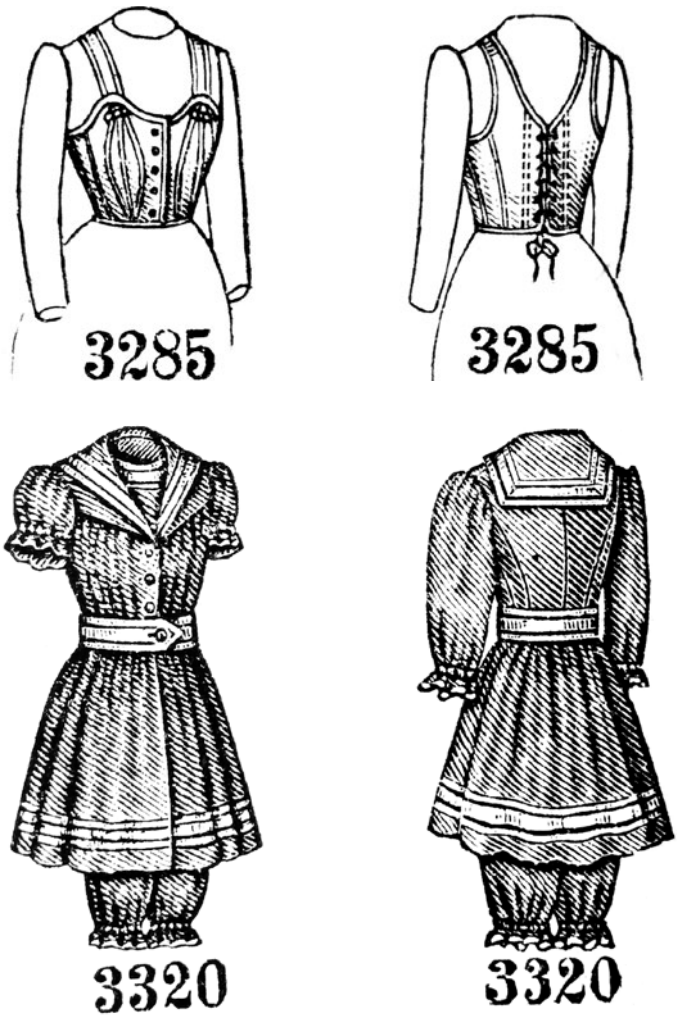
looked just like the gymnastic suit that had emerged at the same time. In fact, patterns of the entire period, from as early as the 1860s advertised the same suit as either a gym suit or a bathing costume.

In June 1896 *Harper's Bazar* pointed out how far bathing dress had come, but in the telling indirectly suggested that an acceptable solution had

finally been attained and no further innovation was needed. The dresses "vary very little from year to year," the writer remarked; describing the old costume in order to demonstrate how modern and exceptionally fine the new one was:

> There will be no danger of a change in fashion before [the summer months] . . . since the great change from the so-considered modest costume of the most hideous gray flannel which used to be considered the correct thing. These were made, it will be remembered, with long full trousers reaching to the ankle and finished with a frill, and a full blouse to which was attached an exceedingly scanty skirt. The sleeves were made to the wrist, and a big straw hat completely hid all identity of the wearer. The present style of bathing dress, which has been in fashion for the last few years, is a very full skirt which reaches just far enough below the knee to cover the full knickerbockers or tights which are worn. The upper part of the costume consists of a blouse waist, sometimes made with a deep yoke back and front, and three box-pleats from yoke to belt; a high turn-over collar under which is worn a bright silk neck-tie is the finish, and the big puffed sleeves reach half-way down the arm. Such a dress as this, made of black serge or mohair, is considered the most correct model; but there are a great many dresses made with the sailor blouse instead, and broad sailor collar of some bright material, like turkey red.

The magazine justified its preference for serge and mohair (both firm wools) as being "wiry materials [that] shed the water more quickly than does the flannel." It assured readers that the only acceptable sleeves were the "big puffs," which allowed "full play to the arms while swimming," and that "well-fitting stockings are a very important part of the costume." Prospective swimmers were advised to buy them a size smaller than usual so they would not stretch out too much and get baggy when wet. High necks prevented "burning by the sun." The final piece of advice concerned corsets. Here, we become aware of the power of the women's magazines. In spite of the earlier admonition to abandon corsets while bathing, *Harper's Bazar* left little room for discussion: "Unless a woman is very slender, bathing



Pattern for a bathing corset: "a want that has long been experienced by fastidious bathers." Lighter in weight and boning, the corset was believed to be a necessity under outfits for swimming. *The Delineator*, July 1890, 65.

corsets should be worn. If they are not laced tightly they are a help instead of a hindrance in swimming, and some support is needed for a figure that is accustomed to wearing stays."[20]

It is important to remember at this juncture that corsets were as much a part of women's dress in the nineteenth century as brassieres are today. And anyone who might be tempted to gasp and giggle at the notion of wearing

a corset while swimming should perhaps be reminded that twenty-first-century swimwear is often a marvel of both the pattern maker's and the engineer's art. Even today, when high-fashion swimwear is minimal and revealing in ways never before even imagined, much of it is still designed to support, mold, hold, and hide "unless a woman is very slender." Technology has advanced to the point where elastic fibers built in to the fabric of the suits do the work that individual garments had to do in the past. Even so, many swimsuits, especially for the not-so-perfect woman—a category that includes almost everyone over the age of twenty—have internal panels that control and smooth and bras that shape and support. How many women would dare to wear one that lacked these improvements? A Speedo leaves little to either the imagination or the ego.

Few women—the very young, some of the outdoor-oriented, the dress reformers—refused to wear corsets, or, to be more specific, considered leaving them off. Ladies wore corsets. Nineteenth-century society drew a sharp line between the acceptability of wearing corsets and the dubious practice of tight lacing, a distinction often lost to later generations. The former was a routine part of women's clothing, the latter a focus of crusading reformers. The ambivalence towards corsets may be seen in *The Perfect Woman*, a house, family, and beauty care book of 1901, which featured an article on "Sallow Faces and Deformed Figures." In it was a list of "Madame Yale's . . . corset crimes against beauty." This list included everything from red noses and general feebleness to stupidity, wrinkles, and clumsiness, all brought on by the damnable corset. But eight pages later an inserted photo of a "Brunette—A Type of Beauty" depicted a soulful but sturdy young woman dressed in the height of the period's fashion, with prominent bosom and voluptuous hips separated by an amazingly delicate waist, narrow and curved as only a corset could make it.[21] So much for the list.

In short, there is no doubt that swimming corsets were worn. Indeed, *The Delineator*, as early as 1890, in describing its new pattern for a bathing corset, informs readers that this item fills a "a want that had long been experienced by fastidious bathers." The magazine suggests a variety of suitable cotton fabrics, "drilling, coutille, jean, sateen," and adds, "[the corset] is adjusted by gores and stiffened by whalebones."[22] Lighter in weight and less rigidly shaped than ordinary corsets, they were often advertised in the back of women's magazines of the time.

The bathing suit by century's end had begun to follow the lead of the English model, similar to the American one in every respect but without a skirt. The same jersey fabric used in tennis dresses at the time was also applied to swimwear. Its advantages of flexibility and stretch were obvious for use in sport clothing. By 1886 it was being used in "bathing jerseys," or form-fitting tunic tops, worn belted, which fell to cover the hips. These were paired with knee-length trunks and stockings.[23] Little change seems to have occurred in the popular swimming clothing for the next thirty or more years. *The Perfect Woman* illustrated one suit in a natty sailor-collar style. But even though this book was published in the Midwest, the illustration is in all likelihood English,[24] first because the subject's suit has no skirt (even though the swimmer is about to be swathed completely in a vast blanket, and so will maintain her proper decorum) but also, even more important, because she wears no stockings. Most American women, even children, always did. The clincher, though, is that all the background figures are women. By this time in the United States, as we have seen, men and women mingled at the beach. A second woman, looking every inch the perfect servant, complete with her encompassing apron and her tidy little bonnet, helps her poised mistress as she emerges from the water. Although the "servant" may simply be an attendant at a resort, somehow the image just *looks* British.

Borrowed images notwithstanding, *Harper's Bazar* stated with its customary authority in July 1897 that "American women certainly can take the lead in their designs for bathing suits, and they do not depend in any degree upon foreign fashion plates." Following up on their advice of a year earlier, the editors spent considerable time assessing the merits of various materials, stating that "flannel possesses many of the qualities that make serge desirable, but does not keep its color so well, and looks heavy and coarser." As to the question of stockings, they allowed no possible discussion. "It is not necessary on most beaches in this country," they said, "to wear bathing shoes." As a result, "bathing stockings are consequently universally worn." Apparently, since stockings stretched and spread, many women tried to put a sole inside. But, the magazine decreed, "this makes them clumsy." Once again, *Harper's* advised its readers to buy a "size too small and not elastic. Of course," the writer admitted, "they soon wear out, but the expense is one of the points to be faced if one wishes to be well turned out. It is a great mistake to buy cheap thin stockings. Heavy ribbed

silk, or silk and wool, is the best, as they keep their shape longer and prevent the foot from spreading. Black stockings are always worn in preference to any others. They are most becoming and least conspicuous. They must be long enough to garter well above the knees, and ribbed are better than plain."[25] So once again, even with clothing for bathing, we see the acknowledgment that "being well turned out" was the primary consideration.

By the 1890s, though, more women were actually swimming, and therefore looking for more practical clothing to wear while doing it. J. Parmly Paret makes this perfectly clear in his 1901 *Woman's Book of Sports*. "Nothing tight should be worn for swimming, no matter how fashionable a dress may be for bathing," he declared. "The exercise requires the greatest freedom, and a swimming costume should never include corsets, tight sleeves, or a skirt below the knees. The freedom of the shoulders is the most important of all, but anything tight around the body interferes with the breathing and the muscles of the back, while a long skirt—even one a few inches below the knees—binds the legs constantly in making their strokes."[26] How far to have come, in the case of the corset at least, in five years. But notice that even Paret did not advise leaving the skirt off altogether. On the contrary, and surprisingly, he recommended a heavy knee-length sailor dress over tights. The differences between requirement and recommendation are often startling, and indicate perhaps more graphically than anything else just where the divide lay between common sense and custom. Perhaps the function of the clothing had diverged between swimming and bathing, but the look and weight of the outfits remained the same. In America, both were skirted.

A picture of Coney Island bathing beauties from 1897 indicates where the cutting edge of fashion was headed: all five beauties are dressed in short (mid-thigh) sleeveless or capped-sleeve dresses with bloomers of the same length, frilled and matching the dress. Their stockings are long and of various colors, and they wear different styles of shoes, from boots to slippers with criss-cross-tied ribbons climbing the calf to the knee. Clearly, these young women are "fast," "racy," not entirely genteel, perched as they were in a chorus-line pose, bent from the waist and holding their skirts up in the back to reveal their bloomers like so many cancan girls. One can assert with little fear of contradiction that they had no intention of leaving the beach for the more athletic adventures the water offered.

Annette Kellerman in her gymnasium-inspired swimsuit.
Ladies' Home Journal, August 1910.

Men, meanwhile, wore a one-piece knitted suit with a short sleeve or none at all, and short legs that stopped just above the knee. Englishwomen now wore something like this costume for swimming, but such a garment was still considered shocking in America. When the Australian Annette Kellerman, "the most famous diver and swimmer in the world," visited the United States in 1910, she wore a daring interpretation of this suit, one that actually bore a stronger resemblance to men's gym wear of the time than to men's bathing suits, since it borrowed the footed tights, small sleeves, modest scooped neck, and form-fitting torso typical of men's gymnastic.[27] Kellerman appeared in this costume (in the same pose as the Coney Island girls, it must be admitted) in her article "Why and How Girls Should Swim," featured in the *Ladies' Home Journal* for August 1910. Her dress may have been slightly scandalous, but her comments are of interest. "It is . . . timidity that keeps so many women in this country from learning to swim," she observed, "and so it has been considered a sport rather for boys than for girls."[28] Years later, in 1918, Kellerman wrote: "I am certain there isn't a single reason under the sun why everybody should not wear light-

weight suits. Anyone who persuades you to wear the heavy skirty kind is endangering your life."[29]

Nevertheless, the "heavy skirty kind" continued to be worn well into the 1920s. Of course, by that time it had been updated with the flapper's dropped waist, but it still called for stockings and gaitered boots. Not everybody went all the way, however. My mother recalled her own experience, fixed in her memory to the year the family purchased a summer cottage, 1922, but continuing over the next couple of years while she was in high school. She and her best friend

> made our own bathing suits. They were navy blue, sort of a mercerized material, smooth, but not like sateen. They had yellow appliques; I'm sure they were sateen. My, we were pleased with ourselves.
>
> Mine had a sort of long top with a belt, cap sleeves, a modest boat neck, no fastenings. The bloomers had elastic around the waist and elastic around the knees. They were separate from the tunic. In our modesty we wore them below our knees. No, I don't think we wore stockings. We felt no embarrassment—there were no people around.[30]

In 1925 she was photographed wearing a two-piece black wool knit bathing suit with a long tunic over fitted pants covering the thighs, both hitting just above the knees. It was V-necked and sleeveless, buttoned at the shoulder, and trimmed with an edging of a different color, probably matching the wide double stripe across the bosom. She stands in the water with two men, one her father. Both wear essentially the male version of her suit, but notably the legs on their suits are considerably shorter than hers, cropped at upper mid-thigh. My mother mentioned an interesting offshoot of this new, more body-baring style. For the first time, she said, she and many other women of the period had to worry about shaving their underarms and legs. "It was a problem," she admitted. "Creams—in the ads they were perfection, and in reality, they weren't." She solved it by borrowing her father's razor, perhaps an early daughter to do so but certainly not the last.

Probably the single factor that most affected swimwear after the 1920s was the one thing that had nothing to do with swimming: the increased acceptance, indeed the rage, for tanned skin. Coco Chanel is said to have

been among the first to introduce the look, but American expatriates of the Jazz Age, such as the splendidly elegant socialites Sarah and Gerald Murphy, who lived in the south of France, also helped the fashion along. Until the 1920s, women had worked assiduously to maintain their pale, freckle-free complexions. But the combination of a new awareness of leisure time, the much wider availability of motor cars after the introduction of Henry Ford's model T in 1908, easier access to beaches, the growth of Florida as a resort destination, the California boom in general and Hollywood movies in particular, and the daring increase in individual freedom after World War I all worked together to encourage people to uncover in the warmth of the postwar sunshine. Thus, clothing for resort wear, so closely related to swimwear, bared the skin for the first time outside of a competitive sport venue. It ushered in the fashion for bare arms, bare backs, and décolletage. For the first time, evening wear followed sport wear.

Perhaps the last element to catch up with the trend, more relevant to swimming than to bathing, was fabric. The same problems women faced when they first chose to dip themselves in water in public still remained. Although by 1928 the suits had more or less merged into a shorts/tunic style, evolving by the very early 1930s into a one-piece version with briefs instead of distinct legs, the material was still usually wool knit, often very heavy. Every now and then a heavy cotton knit was an alternative, but generally the suits were made of wool.[31] Cotton would soak up the water and drag down. If anything, wool shrank. This led to a frequent problem: the wool tended to felt, or become thick and matted, making the suit even stiffer and less comfortable than before. One woman recalled that these suits were attractive when dry but were "stretchy, saggy, itchy, and smelled of wet wool" when wet. At the beach, wool had the additional disadvantage of attracting and holding sand, making it even more uncomfortable.[32] A competitive swimmer in the 1920s and 1930s, the daughter of a well-known swim coach, remembered:

> In 1930 we still trained in that old smelly wool suit. But we competed in a black cotton suit that was lighter weight, but didn't give at all in the water. Then, in 1936, I got my first black chiffon suit. It was the fastest suit made then and I remember how expensive it was—$28, and in those days, you could feed a whole family for $15 a week.

> It was terrible, that suit. People always asked me why I never went in for competitive swimming and I've always told them it was *because* of that awful black suit. It was the most unattractive thing; it hung like a chemise with no fit at all. If you had boobies, the suit flattened them down like two peas on an ironing board. At the widest point of your hips, about four inches down from the navel, it had this six-inch skirt attached. Just where you didn't need a line. And wet? It was the most revealing and clinging suit—you could see everything! The swimmers had people around them to bring them towels when they climbed out of the pool. Towels to hide in, not to dry with.[33]

But the hated, revealing silk shaved precious seconds from competition time, and so it was worn through the 1930s. Throughout the decade designers and swimmers made various attempts to create suits that were both fashionable and functional, including an all-rubber model demonstrated by leading swimmers, including Esther Williams, at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Alas, that one "split right down the front from the water pressure" at the first dive into the pool.[34] The designers, though momentarily dismayed, sensed they were on the right track, and eventually they got it right. In 1934 *Harper's Bazaar* advertised swimming suits made from a new thread, Lastex, which consisted of an elastic rubber core covered by cotton, rayon, or some other fiber—certainly a much more practical use of rubber than the sheet variety.[35] The post–World War II combination of Lastex yarn and nylon, perfected through the war effort, led the world into the era of fashionable, speed-enhancing swimwear for women. It fit better, it looked better, and it made smaller and closer-fitting suits possible even for women who didn't want to swim at all but just wanted to lie on the beach, get a suntan, and look good, as their grandmothers had done at the turn of the century in their modest bathing dresses.

The evolution has continued since then. Speedo introduced its revolutionary suits at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, providing respite for a few years until the East German team wore a new "skirtless, second-skin" Lycra suit at the world championship games in Belgrade in the early 1970s. With each upgrade in design (usually tied to innovations in textiles and fibers), world speed records are smashed. In the 1970s, female competitors suggested that they be allowed to compete nude: the East German team, for

example, formally requested permission for the 1976 Olympics. Both coaches and swimmers agreed that the competitors would swim faster if they were allowed to do so: "Girls with flat chests can make better times naked, no question about it," commented an Olympic coach. Although their very request tells us how far the world had come by then, at least some traditions of history held sway. The women were turned down because of "the spectator problem."[36] The next best thing to nudity, the suits of today have little drag, clinging so close to the body as to cover only the characteristics of sex while leaving everything else bare. It has been said that the social mores of America may be traced in the development of bathing suit styles—that they show the complete emancipation of women. Or, as the swimmer Joan Ryan says, echoing James Laver: "Almost, but not quite. Not until we swim in our birthday suits will the emancipation be complete."[37]

It seems the uneasy alliance between practicality and modesty is still with us. The swimsuits of today are the most revealing in history, baring pubic and buttock areas as never before. Yet women in America may still be arrested for baring their breasts on public beaches, and indeed, most would not want to, even if our European sisters might regard us as prudes for preferring to keep covered. The issue of the definition of freedom arises at this point. It is true that the body has complete mobility in these suits, since the idea of confinement in such wisps of fabric verges on the ridiculous. But though modesty no longer plays the role it once did, embarrassment now finds its outlet in the problem of body hair. Current designs force women to shave portions of their anatomy as never before, in places they might not have dreamed of a generation ago. A young woman emerging from sleeves for the first time in the early 1920s borrowed her father's razor to shave her underarms. Now there are creams and devices of astonishing array just to get the bikini line under control, and even to reduce hip and thigh cellulite, whatever that may be. Although fashions change, and in the past decade men too have begun to shave portions of their below-the-chin anatomy (their chests as much as anything, but backs are certainly part of the general anti-hair cleanup), men are regarded as attractive with hairy bodies. Women are not. It would seem that women are still slaves to beauty. And until women feel comfortable appearing in public with bodies that are free and natural, with hair and all, they will never experience the freedom men claim unthinkingly as their right.[38]

The development of clothing for water activities over the past 150 years has been intimately connected to modesty standards for women, and hence, broadly speaking, to gender expectations and the mores of each subsequent generation. Because of "the spectator problem" and the nature of wet fabric clinging to the human body, particular care has been taken in the design of the garments to provide opaque and often figure-concealing solutions. (Even today, the older you become, the more pressing the awareness of these problems.) Once again, we see that the gender context changed the nature of the clothing, for if women participated in the activities in a private, single-sex environment, their clothing allowed greater freedom from restraint, in terms of both prudery and movement. But the guidelines become hazy here because of the overlapping uses of the clothing—for bathing and sunbathing on the one hand and for active swimming on the other. When the strict separation of private and public is in place, represented by competitive swimming as opposed to sunbathing and dipping, the distinction is much clearer, at least during the years I concentrate on in this book. Only after the Second World War did the two functions successfully merge into a widely used, effective, and fashionable suit.

Women's interest first in swimming and bathing, then in water sports, grew slowly over a long period of time. Even so, what probably had the greatest impact was the acceptance of women's swimming and diving competitions in the Olympic Games. This too took a long time to gain ground, and it is to that story that we now turn. It represents in microcosm the struggles women faced in being accepted in competitive sports in general.