

Swim club has long history in water



Olympic bronze medallist Irene MacDonald (top) gives a diving demonstration July 19, 1964.

Photo courtesy White Rock Museum & Archives

By [Lorraine & Hugh Ellenwood - Peace Arch News](#)

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White Rock Amateur Swim Association (WRASA), British Columbia's oldest summer swimming association, began informally as a summer swim club on White Rock beach in 1919. Edith (Granny) Vidal and Mrs. Burton MacKenzie organized the club with recreation and safety in mind – their motto was, “Teach a child to swim and save a life.”

In 1921, the first annual inter-beach aquatic sports gala was held at the pier in White Rock, initiating a fiercely competitive annual affair between the White Rock and Crescent Beach clubs. White Rock won the challenge cup that year, and held it for the next decade.

For the first fifty or so years, WRASA's activities were conducted on the beach and in a large wooden tank moored to the pier. Younger children were taught on the beach until they graduated to the tank. In the 1950s, a nearby fixture was the 'Umbrella Man', Cecil Berry, who handled the annual registrations under the shelter of his famous black and yellow umbrella.

During the lean years of the 1930s, the club almost folded. It recovered, however, to become the largest summer swim club in Canada, with membership ranging from 700 to 1,000 in the late 1960s.

Lynne Sinclair remembers her initiation into WRASA.

"Before you could take lessons in the swim tank, you had to swim the length of the tank on your own. This was quite a challenge to those who didn't like dark and cold water," she said.

"It took my dad pushing me in for me to swim the tank successfully, with coach Lois Holt swimming beside me. The six youngest to swim the tank were awarded the Kidd medal.

"Needless to say, I wasn't one of them."

Later, as a teenage instructor, Sinclair faced a challenge of another sort.

"Avarie Suprun and I taught swimming on the beach in front of the station. In those days the trains still stopped. Sometimes they would be there for a while, and the kids due for a swimming lesson would be stuck on the other side. Eventually, three or even four classes of kids would arrive all at once! If we were lucky, the tide wasn't all the way out."

An annual fundraising event was launched in 1951 by WRASA president and legendary swim instructor Meryl Barge McGrath. Contestants for the Queen of the Sea title accumulated points on the basis of club memberships sold. Open to all girls between the ages of 11 and 18, the contest closed June 30, and the winner honoured July 1st.

Traditionally, Granny Vidal crowned the queen, and together they presented cups and trophies at the club gala at the end of the season.

"Every year, the big rival swim gala was held between White Rock and Crescent Beach. They had a lot of 'winter swimmers' as most were summertime residents who came from New West where they had an indoor pool. Still, White Rock was a force to be reckoned with, and we held our own," Sinclair recalled.

In 1975, activities moved to the newly built Sunnyside Pool. Since that time, the club's focus has been on its competitive swim program. Today's WRASA swimmers are carrying on the tradition and heart of B.C.'s oldest summer swim club.

The Peninsula's best-known mother-and-son historians, Lorraine and Hugh Ellenwood, are

dedicated to preserving history through the White Rock Museum & Archives. Call 604-541-2222, or email whiterockarchives@telus.net

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