

Tahlequah-Point Defiance Swim

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

1926 was a notable year for competitive open water swims. Perhaps the most famous open water swim is across the English Channel. It was first crossed by a swimmer in 1875, but on August 6, 1926 Gertrude Ederle, pictured here, was the first woman to swim the Channel, and she set the record by beating the previous best time of a male swimmer by nearly two hours. When she stepped ashore in England, greased up and in her swimming gear, a customs official asked to see her passport.



Gertrude Ederle, 1926 - Courtesy wikipedia

A month later, on September 26, 1926, the first Tahlequah to Point Defiance competitive open water swim was held following the ferry route from Tahlequah to Point Defiance. There were thirteen swimmers entered in this first swim, and 15-year-old Stadium High School student Alexina Slater, pictured in this 1926 Tacoma Public Library photograph dancing the Charleston at the finish line, came in fourth with a time of one-hour and twenty-minutes. She was the only female swimmer in this first event and finished 18 minutes behind the winner Gerhard Bahr. The crowd attending the event, estimated at 10,000, heartily cheered Alexina when she finished the race. Alexina later married Floyd Austin, had a son Joseph, and lived in Tacoma until her death in 2001 at age 91.



Alexina Slater, 1926 - Courtesy Tacoma Public Library

This September, the 3 kilometer Tahlequah-Point Defiance Swim was recreated, for the first time since 1926, by AuqaRun Tacoma with an optional 5 kilometer open water loop course from Owens Beach. The swim from just southwest of the Tahlequah Ferry Dock to Owens Beach at Point Defiance had 40 swimmers who registered at Owens Beach, walked on the Point Defiance-Tahlequah Ferry, and then walked to the starting point on the beach next to the ferry dock. There were three Vashon Island swimmers entered in the race this year, Heidi Skrzpek, Wendy VanDeSompele, and Stuart Putnam. Mary Robinson was the Vashon-side safety coordinator. Heidi Skrzpek and Wendy VanDeSompele, pictured in the Terry Donnelly photograph, unlike Gertrude Ederle, were not asked for their papers when they walked ashore at Owens Beach. We don't need passports to get off of The Rock ... yet.



Heidi Skrzpek and Wendy VanDeSompele, 2014 - Terry Donnelly

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