

“The Navy Swimming Pool in Balboa Park”

We would rather sacrifice every fish and lily pond in the city than to know that some young man had lost his life in the service of our country, because of insufficient training . . . as a swimmer.

--Merchants Association of San Diego, Feb. 5, 1918

With America's late entry into the fighting of World War I, patriotic San Diegans rushed to offer proper training facilities for the U.S. military. In Balboa Park, vacant exposition buildings were transferred to the Navy, which quickly remodeled the structures east of the Plaza de Panama for military use. By the early 1918, over 4,000 Navy recruits were stationed in the Park's newly created Naval Training Camp.

Stretching over 500 acres of park land, the camp had ample room in a beautiful environment. But the three mile distance from the waterfront limited the opportunity for “nautical instruction afloat.” Costlier still was the Navy's discovery that forty percent of the “embryonic sailors” could not swim. In a city that lacked a single municipal swimming pool, the service had a problem.

But a makeshift solution appeared. Eyeing the murky, dirt-bottom lily pond in front of the wood lath Botanical Building, the Navy suggested using the 195 x 43 foot basin for swimming and boating lessons. Balboa Park's governing Board of Park Commissioners--eager to please their military guests--“hastened to comply.” Unfortunately, the Commissioners got cold feet when news of the request “got abroad.”

As a Navy report would explain, “An element of esthetic nature-lovers made loud protest against the destruction of the water-lilies with which the pool was liberally bestrewn.” Pressured from “city beautiful” advocates, the Commissioners regretfully announced they could “not approve the destruction of one of the Park's most attractive settings” without informing the taxpayers of the city of the numerous problems the proposal presented.

The lily pond was too shallow for swimming lessons, the Commissioners decided, and the water was too cold. The cost of the fresh water was also a problem—“an enormous drain upon the city's water supply”—they reported. Instead, the Commissioners suggested waiting for a salt-water bathhouse, currently being constructed on San Diego Bay at the foot of Date Street by the city's Playgrounds Department.

The camp commandant, Commodore S. W. Wallace, decided to make a quick public relations campaign to “put the matter in its right light.” Speaking to women's clubs, business associations, and the press, the Commodore called attention “to the relative values of the lives of water-lilies and the lives of American sailors.”

The plea from Commodore Wallace was quickly endorsed by San Diego civic clubs and the newspapers. “Give the Boys a Chance” the *Union* editorialized. “Swimming is a very essential part of naval training. A sailor who cannot swim is a sailor whose life is constantly in extra danger.”

On February 8, 1918, the chastised Park Commissioners unanimously voted to turn the lily pond over to the Naval Camp for use as a swimming pool. A Navy officer announced that instruction for the sailors would begin as soon as the plants were removed from the pool and the gold fish placed in another pond. The four and half foot deep pool was “just right for the first steps in swimming.”

Reconstructing a lagoon into a swimming pool turned out to be more complicated than first thought. After draining the pond the Navy decided to slightly deepen the basin and add a concrete lining. Pipes were connected so the water—450,000 gallons of it--could be changed each day.

By May, the swimming lessons were finally under way for up to forty men at one time. 1st class boatswain’s mate Alfonso Racicot taught the men the breast stroke and the “double over hand stroke.” The sailors took instruction for thirty minutes each day until they could swim unassisted for five minutes. Additional strokes were taught as the men progressed.

With less success, the Navy also attempted lessons in boat handling. In the pool barely large enough for swimming, the boat had to be moored in place by the bow and stern while the sailors pulled the oars on the stationary vessel.

After the war’s end in November, the Navy Training Camp closed. The sailor’s swimming pool became a lily pond once again. Remarkably, the pool experiment was repeated in World War II, as convalescent patients from the U.S. Naval Hospital enjoyed their “swimmin’ hole” in the pond temporarily emptied of lily pads and gold fish.



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