
BOOK REVIEW**Contested Waters: A Social History of
Swimming Pools in America****Jeff Wiltse**

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In his book *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, Jeff Wiltse surveys the history of an all-American pastime and the cultural and societal impacts that swimming pools have had on the United States. Wiltse, a history professor at the University of Montana, shows readers how the atmosphere of municipal swimming pools, from their inception, have reflected class divisions and heated racial tensions. *Contested Waters* takes readers through the complicated transformation of municipal pools from gender segregated public baths of the nineteenth century to the racially segregated and violent municipal pools of the 1950s, and finally ending with the current state of private and municipal pools. Wiltse effectively, and often captivatingly, informs readers of just how much social history is in our swimming pools.

Wiltse begins with a detailed look at life before municipal pools and how city officials recognized the need for them. Working class men, boys, and “street urchins” of the northern U.S. swam naked in the natural waters available to them, joking, fighting, and frolicking. Anti-swimming laws and waterside police officers failed to control the ruckus. City officials sought to alleviate the problem by building municipal pools. Located in the slums, the pools provided residents a place to clean themselves, and instill some of the moral beliefs and values that were, according to the middle class, sorely needed. In 1884, Philadelphia opened one of the first municipal pools, but the strict rules enforced by the middle class did little to hinder the rambunctious culture of the working class. Wiltse showed that similar battles for respectability were fought in other American cities, including New York City, Milwaukee, and Boston.

According to Wiltse, swimming pools in the late nineteenth century were divided along two lines. Middle-class America saw swimming with the urban poor working class distasteful. In any case, the disease-trodden slums in inner cities of the north kept interactions between the two classes at a minimum. River baths and pools were opened to help tackle the physical squalor of the urban poor. Wiltse observed that racial tensions were muted in comparison to the hostel class conflict that plagued pools in the 1900s. A second division pertained to gender. Even with the modest “bathing suits” covering most of a female’s body, it was

deemed inappropriate for males and females to swim together. Gender integration at public swimming pools would begin in 1913, with the opening of Fairgrounds Park Pool in St. Louis.

Wiltse noted the social class divisions of the Progressive Era continued to heavily influence municipal pools. However, a major change occurred when swimming became socially acceptable to middle-class Americans. Physical exercise was recognized as a healthy pastime and with the opening of Douglas Park Pool and Gymnasium in Chicago in 1895, the first public swimming pools in America to be used for sport and recreation were built. Simultaneously, the era saw swimming becoming increasingly acceptable among women. They would frequent beach baths and beachside resorts that were popular among the upper middle class.

With nearly two thousand municipal pools built between 1920 and 1940, the "Swimming Pool Age" hit America with force. Wiltse uses the Fairgrounds Park Pool in St. Louis to illustrate the growing popularity of municipal pools. Fairgrounds Park Pool was built in the style of beachside resorts, with room to lounge on sandy poolside beaches and enough swimming space for thousands at one time. Pools like this popped up across the United States. For the first time, males and females could swim together freely, and pools became a social center of leisure and play for youth as well as adults. Strict social class divisions began to ebb, and a sense of community was gained at the Fairground Park Pool. This sparked the development of hundreds of gender-integrated pools in the 1920s. Suddenly, America's youths were able to flirt and interact with the opposite sex in an appropriate and exciting setting. The ever-shrinking swimming suits sparked "bathing beauty contests," allowing viewers to appreciate the figures of young girls in tight suits. Thousands came to bask in the sun with family and friends, creating stronger family ties.

These changes, however, kindled flagrant and often bloody discrimination against African Americans at municipal swimming pools, particularly in Northern cities. Wiltse cites three reasons as contributing factors to acute discrimination against Blacks. The first was the Great Black Migration. One and a half million southern Blacks migrated to the north, creating throngs of "Black belt" residences. The 1919 Chicago Riot characterizes the tension between Whites and Blacks. The riot entailed seven days of violence and started when African American teenagers visited a White beach. Enraged Whites abused Blacks physically and verbally when they attempted to use a public swimming beach. The second factor was race-based sanitation. According to Wiltse, Whites believed Black swimmers were diseased and swimming with them would put them at risk. Race-based sanitation was exemplified by the Highland Park Pool in Pittsburgh, where pool employees demanded a "health certificate" from would-be Black swimmers before they were allowed admittance. This pattern was repeated repeatedly throughout the "Swimming Pool Age." At the heart of the conflict was the third factor, gender-integrated swimming. Fairground Park Pool was the first racially segregated pool, which Wiltse believed was built as a consequence of gender integration. It was believed by Whites that Black men lusted after White women and would take advantage of them if given the opportunity. City officials deemed it unsafe to allow African American men to swim in close quarters to White women. Wiltse also noted that

White men did not want Black laborers with muscular physiques to undermine their supposed “superior” masculinity—this could open the door for tabooed interracial relationships with White women.

Riots ensued as African Americans made headway in the fight for civil rights. Municipal swimming pools were literally a battleground as Blacks’ struggled for equal access to public amenities. White policemen frequently encouraged Whites’ use of violence directed at African Americans swimmers. While some officials attempted to stop desegregation by locating Blacks-only pools in the “Black belts” of northern cities, it did little to deter the wildfire that was the civil right movement. Lawsuits filed over unequal access to municipal and community pools by Black Americans would eventually make equality a reality.

In the 1950s, White Americans realized they could no longer control Blacks’ access to the municipal swimming pools they frequented. According to Wiltse, this resulted in a huge increase in the building of private pools. Residential pools, once an unattainable luxury, became a material example of middle-class success in the booming postwar economy. Significantly, private pools allowed White Americans greater control over the people with whom they swam. Private swim clubs and residential pools also signaled the erosion of community support and funding for municipal pools. Many municipal pools became increasingly dilapidated and infected with crime and drugs.

Wiltse concludes with a summary of the problems that plagued America and its municipal pools. Swimming pools had the potential to contribute to the “vibrant community life” that was present in the 1920s. But the need for social segregation won out. By removing themselves from municipal swimming pools, White Americans protected their women from Black males, and insulated themselves from those felt to be “undesirable.” Consequently, crumbling municipal pools became a symbol of strained race relations, leaving the working-class Whites and minorities with second-hand recreation spaces that are forever in danger of closing.

Contested Waters emphasizes major themes of not only municipal pools, but American culture as well. Wiltse dedicated research took him all over the northern part of the United States, rifling through decades of history in America’s courthouses. His social history shows readers an ugly side of the United States. The accompanying photographs of White swimmers abusing Black swimmers help visualize the horrors of African Americans’ struggle for civil rights. *Contested Waters* also highlighted the changing views of liberated women in America, from modest bathing suits to the objectified bathing beauties in tight swimming suits. He speculated that sexuality was at the heart of social segregation and provided compelling evidence to support his claims. His evidence lay in the testimonies of both Blacks and Whites, during happy and tense times. One comes from Joseph Plechavy, who “reminisced to me about his childhood days at the town’s swimming pool, where this son of an immigrant laborer ‘yakked’ and played with children who lived on the other side of town. ‘It didn’t matter who you were,’ Plechavy recalled, ‘you swam at the pool’” (p. 208). Anecdotes like this showed how people felt connected to their community swimming pools. Wiltse also wrote about a White man in a violent mob of St. Louis in 1949 told youths to “Get bricks and smash their heads,” (pg. 171). Direct quotes such as these allow readers to be caught up

in the ease of community life at some municipal pools and then understand the magnitude of the racial tensions at others.

Another strength of *Contested Waters* is its clear documentation of central theme of social segregation of class, gender, and race. Wiltse spoke of women bathing on separate days in the late 1800s and early 1900s, of the urban poor being a problem for the middle and upper classes throughout the development of pools, and the decades-long battle of African Americans achieving equal rights. This gave readers a newfound appreciation for both the good and the bad shaping, who we are as a people.

Finally, Wiltse research has shown a need in the recreation field to rebuild a community mirroring the swimming culture of the 1920s, but with a nondiscriminatory approach. Informal social spaces, such as pools, town squares, and other recreation centers, have the potential to facilitate diversified relationships, ease social tensions, and break the bonds of discrimination. *Contested Waters* provides useful lessons to academics, students, and practitioners as they tackle the problems of community, making our cities more livable, and ensuring that public places are inviting and welcoming to all Americans.