

# Bundy's Baths and Windemuth Portland Swimming Holes

*By Doug Decker*

From 1898 to 1924, the Willamette River near Ross Island, south of downtown Portland, was a popular place to swim, dive, canoe, and play in the water. Two popular and celebrated venues, Bundy's Baths and Windemuth, provided fenced access to the river during the summer months, offering a measure of privacy for bathers and swim classes. The private swimming holes were used by tens of thousands of Portlanders until the 1920s, when waste and residue from sewage, pulp mills, and food packing plants overwhelmed the Willamette River and closed the river to swimming. The demise of Bundy's and Windemuth signaled the end of that era's love affair with the river.

Bundy's Baths—where Portlanders met the river Bundy's Baths was a collection of changing rooms, a snack bar, and gathering spaces built on floats and pilings anchored to the east bank of the Willamette River at the foot of today's Ross Island Bridge. The structure was opened in summer 1898 by Captain Thomas Bundy, a British-born boat builder, swimming advocate, and part-time real estate speculator who came to Portland in 1893. Bundy built fencing along the bank and into the river to provide some privacy for swimmers, particularly for young women. Members of the Multnomah Athletic Club first frequented the "swimming hole," and it soon took off with the general public.

During its peak of operation in August 1915, Bundy's Baths rented out 1,300 swimming suits a day and served more than 40,000 people. In 1908, the *Oregonian* reported: "'Have a swim at Bundy's' soon became a summer salutation among Portland's society folks.... At times, the place was so crowded that the captain was forced to reserve certain hours for 'particular patrons.'" Bundy died in 1908, but his baths continued to be popular until the late 1910s under the management of Joe Valentine, a longtime employee whom Bundy called his "adopted son." The cleanliness of the river and competition from the nearby Windemuth swimming hole led to the baths' closure in 1920.

Windemuth: "The most popular resort in the city" Windemuth operated from 1911-1924 as a giant floating platform off the northern tip of Ross Island and featured a pool, dance pavilion, and an open-air gymnasium. The swimming resort took its name from a small subdivision of lots platted along SE Woodward Street where the Ross Island Bridge is today. Boasting "open river and tank swimming," Windemuth marketed its location as healthier than shore-based bathing sites because of the free-flowing, cleaner water in the river's mid-channel.

Getting to Windemuth was part of the adventure. Because the giant wooden platform was afloat, its operators provided a free launch service from the foot of Woodward Street on the east riverbank—conveniently accessed from the Brooklyn Streetcar—and from Favorites Boathouse, a popular place to rent and launch canoes at the west end of the old Morrison Bridge. Patrons could also paddle their own craft to the resort.

Competitive open-water swimming and professional diving were popular pastimes during the early 1900s, and well-known water athletes from across the country visited Windemuth to race, dive, and perform as crowds watched and cheered. "Fancy diving" competitions and other swimming events particularly appealed to young Portlanders, but swimmers of all ages frequented Windemuth.

On summer evenings, Windemuth became a popular dance venue featuring live music and a wooden dance floor made of maple. An advertisement from June 1920 referred to the events as "Dance[s] of Delight: If you haven't experienced the exhilarating thrill and novelty of dancing to the strains of a wonderful orchestra out on the gentle rolling Willamette—you still have much to live and long for."

The end of river swimming In August 1923, the Lents Trunk Sewer—a five-mile long, 4-foot by 5-foot tunnel—began draining raw sewage from 30,000 homes as far east as Foster Road and emptying it into the river at Harney Street, just upstream from Windemuth. Sewage was already being discharged by city sewers upstream on the west side of the river, along with waste from industrial operations. In 1923, Portland had 23 outfall sewers that drained the city's raw sewage

directly into the Willamette River.

In the summer of 1924, public concern was on the rise about water quality and the safety of swimming at Windemuth. That June, when owner John Jennings applied to relicense his swimming resort for its 10th year, Portland City Council balked and took more time to analyze water tests. By mid-July, the results showed the highest levels of fecal coliform bacteria that had ever been recorded for the Willamette River.

On Sunday, July 27, 1924, Windemuth voluntarily closed, never to reopen. The owners had hopes of reopening in 1925 or relocating onto dry land at the north end of Ross Island with a giant tank filled with well water; but by then, construction of the Ross Island Bridge was underway, and the damage had been done to Portlanders' sense of confidence in swimming in the Willamette. Jennings died in 1927, and the vision for a renewed Windemuth died with him.

Portland's raw sewage continued to be discharged into the Willamette River and Columbia Slough until 1952, when the city established a primary sewage treatment plant. Industrialization and the passage of time have since erased all traces of both venues, both physically and from living memory. But their popularity as well-loved summer attractions is documented in hundreds of news stories, photographs, and advertisements that convey the role they played in Portlanders' relationship with the Willamette during the 1910s and 1920s.

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