Acknowledgements

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Swimming as a sport, recreation or for exercise is a distinctly 20th-Century invention. In the 19th Century, people wore “bathing” suits because that is what they were doing. They weren’t in the water for leisure, sports, or even exercise. They might be enjoying the water, but for women especially it could be uncomfortable. By staying as modest as possible, women’s suits included corsets, hose, bathing shoes, caps, long-sleeved tunics, or dresses and bloomers.

Men and women bathed separately in the early 19th Century and men often bathed nude. It was only around the 1880–1890s that public pools and lakes began seeing more mixed-use and it became necessary for men to wear bathing suits. The popular choice was a one-piece tank, some had short sleeves and perhaps a belt. As time moved on, the amount of skin shown varied by taste as well as class; a working girl could wear suits with shorter skirts showing off more of her legs, but that would not be seen as appropriate attire for a respectable middle-class woman.

There is a shift after WWI in attitudes about body exposure. More young people were athletically inclined, and outdoor sports were becoming very popular—golf, biking, and swimming. Australian Annette Kellerman was a huge influence on women’s swim wear, advocating that women needed freedom of movement to enjoy the water. Her arrest for indecent exposure at a beach near Boston in 1907 helped spread the word on that score. Carl Jantzen is credited with coining the phrase “swim suit” in 1915.

Sun bathing also shifted attitudes; in the 19th Century you wanted very pale skin to show that you weren’t blue collar working class. By the 1920s having a suntan was a status symbol because it proved you had the leisure time to go on vacation and lay about. Tanning also was an influence on the creation of two-piece bathing suits, which were being worn in Europe in the 1930s and slowly became acceptable in the U.S. by the end of that decade. But the skimpier they got, the more uproar it caused. On July 5, 1946, French designer Louis Reard unveiled the “bikini” swimsuit, he coined the name after the news-making U.S. atomic test that took place off the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean earlier that week. The bikini was considered taboo in prudish America until the early 1960s.

Men fought their own battles, namely to go topless, with many places led by Coney Island in New York mandating that men could not wear suits that conform too closely to their physique. Some even required short skirts worn over trunks, and no bare chests. Swimsuit fabric and style quickly evolved in the 1920s, introducing tighter two-pieces as well as belted and elastic waist briefs, which some men wore without a shirt or tank. Shifts in attitude started to ease by the end of the 1930s – Hollywood had a little bit to do with this with men in trunks seen in more advertising. Surfing arrived in North America in 1907, and over the years, the creation of the board short, epitomized by the “Gidget” movies of the 1960s, became the overwhelming choice of men in swimwear.
“Ayvads Water Wings”

- Made from cotton canvas with a metal air spout, fitting across the chest and under arms; c. 1904

Hachig Ayvad patented these water wings as an “inexpensive air tight bag to be used for buoying up without obstructing the movement of the body when swimming or floating.”

Woman’s Bathing Suit

- Navy blue cotton knit bloomers and dress, black silk hose, navy blue canvas shoes with rubber soles, cap (reproduction); c. 1904

Swimming attire in the early 20th Century constricted freedom of movement unlike modern suits. A buoy device would have been appreciated by the wearer of this bathing suit, Mabel Sweeney.

- “Bathing Beach at Fairmount Park” postcard; c. 1900

Fairmount Park opened in Sugar Creek in 1891. The 50-acre family recreation attraction was created by Arthur Stilwell to promote ridership on his railroad. It offered a variety of entertainment: live band music and theater, a zoo, a nine-hole golf course, and eight-acre lake complete with a bathing beach.
Woman's Bathing Suits

- BLACK WOOL AND BLACK CAP WITH TAN CROCHET MESH, NETTING AND VELVET BOW; LABEL: WINNER; MADE BY MYERS MFG. CO. INC., LOS ANGELES, CA; c. 1912
  This suit was purchased by Elizabeth Barr Simpson on her honeymoon in California. Wool was the natural choice for bathing suits in the 19th and early 20th Centuries; it repelled water, was durable, and inexpensive. Wool also dried faster than cotton or linen. To retain modesty, bathing attire was loose and long, which had the added benefit of sun protection for the skin. This suit style was considered risqué in 1912, and Elizabeth stated that she “felt so daring” wearing the suit.

- GREEN WOOL (FADED TO GRAY) WITH LIGHT PINK STRIPES; MADE BY PACIFIC KNITTING MILLS, INC., LOS ANGELES, CA; SOLD BY JOHN TAYLOR DRY GOODS, KANSAS CITY, MO; c. 1915

- “BATH HOUSE AND WADING POOL, THE GROVES” POSTCARD; c. 1915
  The Groves, along Benton Boulevard south of Truman Road, became the site of the second bath house in the City’s park system in 1913. The “Roman Bath,” next to the wading pool, was the most elaborate such structure in Kansas City. Bath houses were segregated back then — The Groves was “Whites Only.”
The 1920s brought a dramatic shift in women’s fashion. Long skirts and heavy corsets were replaced with brassieres and short dresses. Movement and activity were considered vital to health, and female swimmers advocated for suits with more freedom of movement. One-piece, knit wool, form-fitting, with a long tunic over shorts became the social norm. Showing more skin was also the trend as sunbathing became fashionable.

Fairyland Park opened in 1923 at 7501 Prospect; one of its biggest attractions was the Crystal Pool (pictured). Claiming to be double Olympic size, the pool was part of summer fun in Kansas City until it closed in the late 1950s. The park itself closed in the late 1970s. The park was segregated, allowing blacks access one day per year. Civil rights protests began in 1961 and park management bowed to the pressure and opened the park to all in 1964.

**Woman’s Bathing Suits**
- BLACK WOOL KNIT, ATTACHED SKIRT; WORN BY ANNA GERSMAN, c. 1929
- BLACK WOOL KNIT, ATTACHED SKIRT; LABEL: SCHMELZER’S SPORTING GOODS, KANSAS CITY, MO; c. 1920–1929

**Men’s Bathing Suits**
- BLUE AND BLACK WOOL KNIT, ATTACHED SKIRT; LABEL: JANTZEN; WORN BY JOHN MEYER, c. 1922
- BLACK COTTON KNIT JERSEY WITH BLUE TRIM; c. 1915–1925
- TWO-PIECE, NAVY BLUE WOOL, TANK TOP WITH BUILT-UP STRAPS, TRUNKS HAVE DRAWSTRING WAIST AND BELT LOOPS; LABEL: T&M KNITTING MILLS, NEW YORK; WORN BY WILLIAM TROELLER, c. 1928
In the 1930s, women began to wear pants in public settings. A popular fashion was a jumpsuit-style garment—one-piece, top and pants—worn sometimes with a coordinating jacket. Many jumpsuits became known as Beach Pajamas because of their prevalence at resorts and beaches. The floral example seen here is a unique three-piece set. Local producer Nelly Don used “piecework”, an assembly-line, cost-saving production method to create this set in which the top and bottoms are stitched separately and then passed along for assembly.

- **Three-Piece (Sleeveless Top, Palazzo Pant, and Bell-Sleeve Jacket), Black with Multicolored Floral Print Rayon, Red and Peach Silk Trim; Label: Nelly Don Dresses; c. 1930-1940**

- **Peach Silk with Blue Velvet Collar, Coordinating Blue Velvet Jacket with Bell Sleeves and Pockets; c. 1930-1940**

- **Green and Black Crepe, Coordinating Black Velvet Jacket with Gored Sleeve Head; Worn by Miss Carol White; c. 1933**

- **“The Atlantic City of the West” Postcard; c. 1930**

Winnwood Beach was an amusement park built along the side of a small lake in Clay County. It was the brainchild of Frank Winn, a developer who dreamed of luring Kansas Citians northward—and once the ASB Bridge was completed in 1911 that’s exactly what he did. Winnwood Beach opened in 1912 and offered a zoo, roller-coaster, water slide, boat launch rentals, a dance pavilion, and a “Museum of Monstrosities.” By the time of Winn’s death in 1947, most of the park rides were gone but the beach lived on as a destination until the late 1970s.
In the early 1960s, the patio dress was still popular, a trend that started in the American Southwest in the 1940s. The dresses were colorful and trimmed with rickrack. The hemlines sometimes copied Native American basket designs.

The Sixties saw many families move to the suburbs for the ideal three-bedroom home with a big yard and a swimming pool out back. For summer vacations, they loaded up the kids and drove down to the Lake of the Ozarks for boating, skiing, and fishing.

Patio Dress Ensemble

- CREAM COTTON, SLEEVELESS TOP, TIERED SKIRT, FACED AND HEMMED WITH TEAL COTTON, TRIMMED WITH SILVER AND TEAL RICKRACK AND RIBBON, TOPPED OFF WITH A MATCHING BELT; WORN BY DESAIK EVANS GERNES, c. 1955–1965

Summer Camp Fashion

- GREEN COTTON JACKET WITH ZIPPER, TWO FRONT POCKETS, CUFFED SLEEVES, WHITE PRINTED “MUNICIPAL CAMPS” LOGO ON LEFT FRONT

- THREE-PIECE SWIM SET (COTTON DENIM TOP AND SKIRT, RED AND WHITE GINGHAM BOTTOM); LABEL: BEACH PARTY; PURCHASED AT MACY’S

- MEN’S BLUE TYVEK SWIM TRUNKS; LABEL: MARATHON; c. 1960–1970 (ORIGINAL PACKAGE)

- WOODEN WATER SKIS WITH PINK FLAMINGO DECAL; c. 1960–1980
Woman's Bathing Suits

- **TEAL ONE-PIECE WITH ATTACHED SKIRT; LABEL: JO REA; MADE BY FRIED-SIEGEL COMPANY, KANSAS CITY, MO; c. 1970–1979**

- **GREEN SPANDEX ONE-PIECE; LABEL: JANTZEN; WORN BY JANE WILLIAMS, c. 1990–1999**

- **TEAL SPANDEX ONE-PIECE WITH RUCHING, PIPING AND BELT; LABEL: ROXANNE; WORN BY JANE WILLIAMS, c. 1993–2003**

The last half of the 20th Century swimsuit fashion saw saturated colors, deep cuts, and applied trim. New, improved fabrics, dyes, and manufacturing techniques made suits smaller, more form fitting, and available in a myriad of “technicolors.” Kansas City garment manufacturers even tried their hand at bathing suit fashion, as seen here with this Fried-Siegel piece from the 1970s.

Kansas City was playing outside like never before! Longview Lake, a 930-acre freshwater reservoir was completed in 1985. The lake was named after Longview Farm in Lee’s Summit, a portion of the farmland was bought by the U.S. Corps of Engineers to complete the project. The surrounding Longview Lake Park opened a year later and presents opportunities for swimming, camping, golf, softball, volleyball, picnicking, hiking, and biking. Photos: JACkSON COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION
Children’s Bathing Suits

- Boy’s gray and teal striped knit wool suit, “S.D. Heckert #91” sewn into front underskirt; label: California Speed Model; worn by Stephen Heckert, c. 1925

- Girl’s one-piece, blue and white knit fabric with white halter ties; worn by Gayla Siy, c. 1943–1945

- Boy’s red nylon cargo-style trunks, black and tan stripe down leg; label: Extreme Limit; worn by Ian Deselle, c. 2003

- Child’s purple plastic sunglasses, silver linear and rhinestone ornamentation on upper corners; worn by Lucinda “Cindy” Heinz, c. 1950

- Kansas Cityan Selma Walker with her younger sister and a friend at Winnwood Beach, 1935
Barbie was “born” in 1959 and became an instant star of the Mattel toy empire. Ken came along to keep Barbie company in 1961. Barbie was created by Ruth Handler, co-founder of Mattel. Watching her daughter Barbara play with paper dolls for hours sparked Ruth’s vision to create a 3-D doll. The first Barbie doll — named after her daughter — made its debut at the New York Toy Fair.

The dolls and clothing came to the Kansas City Museum from Jean Scurlock. Her daughter JoAnn received them as gifts but rarely played with them, leaving the collection in pristine condition. The Dream Pool set belonged to Anna Marie Tutera.

“Basic Barbie” in Swimsuit
- ACCESSORIES: BLACK HIGH HEEL SANDALS, WHITE SUNGLASSES, PEARL EARRINGS, BLACK WIRE STAND; 1960

“Basic Ken” in Swim Trunks
- ACCESSORIES: CORK SANDALS, YELLOW TERRY CLOTH TOWEL, BLACK WIRE STAND; 1961

Barbie Picnic Set
- ACCESSORIES: DENIM JEANS, RED GINGHAM SHIRT, WEDGE SANDALS, STRAW TOTE, STRAW HAT, FISHING POLE WITH LINE AND FISH; 1960
- BARBIE CLOSET CASE; 1960
- BARBIE DREAM POOL WITH SLIDE AND PATIO FURNITURE; 1980
Hawaiian-themed shirts, prints, and beach attire made their way to the Mainland in the early 1940s, either as souvenirs or as imported merchandise—bringing a little bit of paradise to America.

The tropical paradise of Hawaii, not yet a state in the 1940s, became a popular vacation destination thanks to returning GIs from the Pacific theater in World War II and affordable, accessible air travel.

**Man’s Silk Kings and Queens of Hawaii Shirt**
- **Label**: MALIKINI, MADE IN HAWAII; c. 1950

**Woman’s Bathing Suit with Beach Jacket**
- **One-Piece, Blue Printed Cotton, Matching Beach Jacket; Label**: NANI OF HAWAII; c. 1948

**Wooden Flexiclogs**
- **Red Plastic Straps; Label**: FLEXICLOGS; c. 1948–1952; (ON LOAN FROM PRIVATE COLLECTION)
As part of the Progressive Era concepts of public health reform, Kansas City’s Park and Boulevard System included an increasing number of bath houses. The purpose of these original bath houses, such as The Parade and The Grove (pictured above, Roman Bath at The Grove), was to provide the working-class public who had little indoor plumbing at home with places to clean themselves and enjoy recreational water activities in season. These facilities were segregated by race. In 1919, the City used the separate-but-equal standard whereby The Grove, which originally opened as a “White Only” bath house, would stay the same; but they changed over The Parade to “African American Only.”

The Parade, the first bath house in Kansas City, opened in 1904 and served as a bathing facility for 35 years. In 1939, construction crews tore it down to build the first Gregg Community Center on the site at 17th Terrace just east of The Paseo. In the 1990s, the Depression-era building gave way to yet another, larger community facility (now Gregg-Klice). All of the facilities built on the site included indoor swimming and shower stalls, but as the years went by the City added other recreational, exercise and community meeting spaces. These transitions-in-use reflect the changing times and needs that affect the Park and Boulevard System as a whole.

The Swope Park Swimming Pool was built in 1941–1942 as a project of the Works Progress Administration using WPA labor, sponsored by the City of Kansas City, Missouri. In 1951, the pool became a battleground for Civil Rights when the NAACP brought a lawsuit on behalf of three African Americans who were fighting for the right to use the pool. Their lawyer was Thurgood Marshall; this is the case he took before Brown vs. Board of Education. The City fought the suit using the argument of separate but equal, claiming that African Americans had their own pool at Parade Park. The City closed the pool until the legal battle ended with the City losing the case, and in 1954 the pool reopened to all.
A Kansas City civil rights case was significant in the struggle for racial equality both locally and nationally. It was first filed in 1951 and aimed to desegregate Swope Park swimming pool. The case eventually overturned the “separate but equal” unwritten law for the city’s public pools.

The local NAACP helped three young African-Americans sue the city, claiming they were denied their 14th Amendment rights to equal protection under the law when they were denied tickets to swim in the city’s public pool at Swope Park.

The case was important enough that Thurgood Marshall, then chief attorney for the NAACP, came in to try the case. Lawyers for the City, however, filed a motion to have Marshall removed from the case citing the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and its claim that some of Marshall’s legal affiliations were “fronts for the Communist Party.” The judge overruled the motion.
The City argued that they were preserving a long-observed custom in the Swope Park case. “The policy of operating separate swimming pools for the two races,” read court documents, “is reinforced by a recognized natural aversion to physical intimacy inherent in the use of swimming pools by members of races that do not mingle socially.”

Judge Albert Ridge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in 1952. The City appealed. Swope Park pool was shut down during the appeal process. When the Supreme Court denied the appeal, Judge Ridge ruled in June 1954 that the City’s arguments against opening the pool to all races were not good enough. He wrote that to deny plaintiffs’ entry to Swope Park pool was “a deprivation of rights, privileges, and the equal protection of the laws secured by the 14th Amendment.”

The Swope Park case is arguably considered the real start of the Civil Rights movement. Thurgood Marshall, who had such a hand in the case, went on to argue Brown v. Board of Education before the Supreme Court. A decision that struck down the separate-but-equal doctrine in public education.
The City’s primary claim in the civil rights case of the early 1950s was that everything about the Parade Park pool, located at 17th and The Paseo, was as spacious, well-maintained and serviceable – basically equal – to the pool at Swope Park.

But photographs from the City archives, administered by George Fuller Green, tell a different story. These photos are now part of the Kansas City Museum archives; they mostly document the African-American pools and surrounding areas. There are a small number of photos documenting the Swope Park boathouse and lagoon, and two of the Swope Park pool dressing rooms. Significantly there are no photos of the Swope Park pool itself. It’s possible these photos were used in the civil rights court case; many have handwritten notations which suggest they were “exhibits.” The dressing room images are the only side-by-side views we have showing the disparity of “separate but equal.”