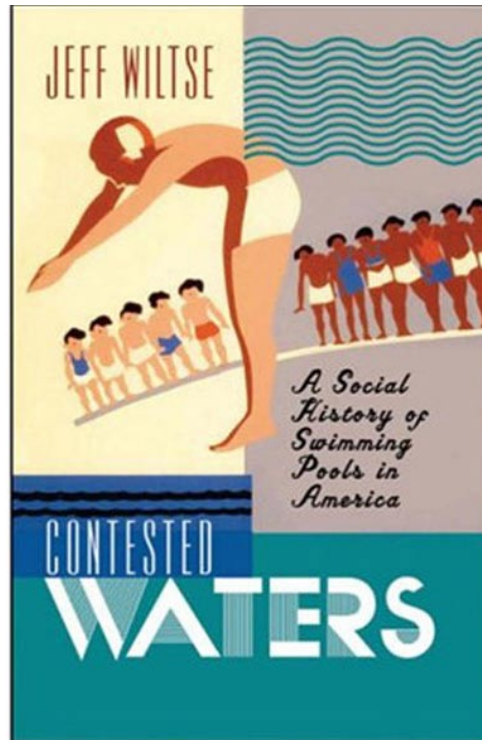


Jeff Wiltse

In “Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America” (University of North Carolina Press), University of Montana assistant history professor Jeff Wiltse posits that swimming pools are a provocative symbol of American society. Focusing his research on the East Coast and the northern United States, Wiltse traces the history of swimming pools in America, from their use as public baths for the poor in the late 19th century to the proliferation of backyard suburban pools in the 1960s and 1970s.



By examining swimming pools in relation to such themes as race, class, gender, sports, and leisure and recreation, Wiltse shows how the evolution of swimming pools mirrors the evolution of American society. Sadly, Wiltse notes that the recent decline in funding to build and maintain municipal pools has hurt the poorest segment of American society. Writes Wiltse: “Social segregation is the most persistent theme in the history of swimming pools.”

In a sense, the book echoes Robert Putnam’s groundbreaking study “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community” (Simon & Schuster). And, like Putnam’s work, the book has begun to crossover from academic circles to the general public. Wiltse earned

a rave review in the New York Times. The Fort Lauderdale-based International Swimming Hall of Fame recently awarded Wiltse with the William F. “Buck” Dawson Author’s Award.

According to ISHOF CEO Bruce Wigo, “In ‘Contested Waters’ professor Wiltse provides an entertaining, fascinating and at times disturbing look at the remarkably significant role swimming has played in shaping our modern social and cultural landscape. If you want to understand America, whether you are interested in swimming or not, you will want to read this book.”

SportsLetter interrupted Dr. Wiltse’s summer vacation to interview him by telephone.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: How did you get interested in the topic of swimming pools in America?

Jeff Wiltse: Quite literally, it came to me in a dream. I was at my future in-law’s home, and I woke up early in the morning having a dream about researching the history of the pool I swam at as a child. I grew up, much like many kids during the 1970s, going to a pool every day during the summer. It clearly made a significant impression, at least on my subconscious. When I woke up and was conscious, I thought about it some more. I knew from my own experience that pools were intimate spaces and that the nature of the interaction that occurred at pools — because they were intimate, both visually and physically — was unique. My first thought was, I bet there’s a lot of social conflict that characterized the history of municipal swimming pools. That was the germ of the idea for the dissertation and the book.

SL: Did you have many dreams about swimming pools?

JW: That was the only one I ever had. Given how well everything worked out, I’m fortunate that, when I woke up that morning, I actually remembered the dream.

SL: You were raised in a suburb of Seattle and swam at the Olympic View Pool. What are your memories of that experience?

JW: The most vivid memories I have are as an early teen, being there with friends and spending all day playing with them. The other thing I recall is that it was the one place where I had meaningful interactions with other adults. I'd play pickle-ball, or I'd just sit and talk with people. Clearly, my experience informed my own analysis of the history of swimming pools — that it was a space that allowed people to interact in a meaningful way across social boundaries that typically don't get transcended in other spaces. The pool brought us together and facilitated social contact.

SL: Were you a competitive swimmer?

JW: No. My use of pools was entirely recreational.

SL: You focused your research on the northern and northeast parts of the United States. Why did you decide to do that?

JW: Primarily, for two reasons. The main reason was to make the research for the book manageable. I recognized early on that the research that I was going to be doing was on the road, driving from town to town, from city to city, going to local public libraries and local municipal archives. Being based out of Boston for graduate school [in U.S. history at Brandeis University], it wasn't practical for me to travel to the South or to travel out to the West. So, that mandated that I focus it geographically on the North. The other reason was, I wanted to be able to tell a coherent story. I wanted this to be a book that would be read by general readers and not just other academic historians. To do that, it had to have some narrative elements to it. If I incorporated the South and the West, I'd have to constantly account for regional variations and interrupt the narrative flow with, "Well, it was a different thing in the South."

SL: If you had been able to research pools in the West and the South, do you think your research would have uncovered similar traits in these pools as in the north? J

JW: I think so because the trajectory was very similar. One example is the

Fleishhacker Pool in San Francisco. It's exemplary of the history of the rise and fall of municipal pools in the mid 20th century. It was built in 1925. It was an enormous pool: 1,000 feet long, 150 feet wide. It had a sandy beach, with a nice grassy hill for people to sit and lounge on. It exemplified the leisure ethos and culture that characterized pool construction and pool use during that period.

Now, skip forward. The city closed it down in 1973 because it was unwilling to devote money to maintain it. And, that's precisely the story that I tell about the pools in the northern United States. There's the dedication of considerable amounts of public money to building and maintaining these temples of leisure and recreation in the 1920s and 1930s, when the country as a whole prioritized public recreation and swimming pools in particular. And yet, in the present day, communities have been much less willing to devote money to build and maintain public swimming pools.

SL: To return to the beginning of your book, in the late 1800s, when American cities began building public swimming pools. What was the purpose of these original pools?

JW: I found that the first municipal pool opened in Boston in 1868. The first city to devote considerable money and attention to municipal pools was Philadelphia, which built a handful during the 1880s and 1890s. All of these were intended to function as public baths. They located them in the poorest urban slums, in neighborhoods populated primarily by immigrants.

The reason was twofold: the tenements in those neighborhoods didn't have bathing facilities in the homes, so there was no way for the people to bathe. The other was the perception that the poorest of urban residents were also the dirtiest and that the epidemic diseases that ravaged cities during the mid- to late-19th century emanated from these poor residential neighborhoods. One of the ways in which reformers and officials chose to combat the epidemic diseases of the time was to build these municipal pools that are best thought of as large public bathtubs. The dirty, poor, urban residents were expected to come down to the pools to plunge themselves into the water and scrub their bodies free of dirt and disease.

This was before the germ theory of disease transmission was commonly

understood. That became accepted in the mid-1890s. Within a short period of time, municipal pools as public baths became obsolete. It was at that time that reformers and city officials redefined municipal pools as sport, exercise and recreation institutions.

SL: When did they introduce showers at the pools — and why did they do so?

JW: That came in the mid-1890s. The idea was for people to cleanse themselves prior to entering the pool. The showers were the initial means of combating the spread of diseases in pools. Then, chlorine was introduced in 1911-1912, and that became the more permanent solution to sterilizing the pool water.

SL: These pools were for the working class. Where did middle- and upper-class people go to swim?

JW: The main answer is the YMCAs were building pools within the YMCA buildings beginning in 1885 and increasing thereafter. That was more for the middle-class. In cities such as New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, the elite swam at private clubs, like the New York Athletic Club and the Chicago Athletic Club.

SL: What was different at these clubs from the public pools?

JW: The design of municipal pools was very austere. They were relatively small, and they were often located in the basements of larger bathhouse buildings, surrounded by a narrow walkway and brick walls. Whereas the private club pools had Corinthian columns, marble and brass railing. Physically, they reflected the social class of the people who were using them.

SL: You write that the function of the municipal pools as baths changed in the 1890s. Why did this happen?

JW: Right after the germ theory of disease transmission was popularly accepted, people realized that pools were not suitable or healthy as baths. So, municipal pools were redefined as sport and fitness facilities. This was

also a matter of timing. There was a sport and fitness craze in America during the 1890s. A lot of people started taking up golf, weight-lifting and football. Bicycling was widely popular, and the modern Olympic Games were revived [in 1896]. So, it was natural that city officials would begin to make municipal pools more like private pools, for sport and exercise.

SL: How did the concept of “muscular Christianity” influence the advent of swimming pools as places of exercise?

JW: “Muscular Christianity” has become a hazy, catch-all term. It was really a phenomenon during the 1850s and 1860s. Its historical significance was that it gave rise to the very first private swimming pools. These were first built in the 1860s. From the start, these were intended to function as sport and fitness facilities.

SL: You write that public officials began to segregate pools by class and gender during the so-called Progressive Era. Why did this happen?

JW: The very earliest pools were already segregated along gender lines. When they redefined municipal pools as sports and fitness facilities during late 1890s, they were located much more centrally. They continued to be segregated along gender lines, but for a short window of time the working class and the middle class used them together.

What happened, though, is that the working class had its own distinctive swimming culture that developed in lakes and rivers, whereas the middle class and the upper class had a swimming culture that developed in private swimming pools. When these two swimming cultures collided at the municipal pools during the 1890s, public officials and middle-class residents very quickly realized that this wasn’t going to work. What I found in several instances is that cities began imposing admission fees. Those fees were effectively used to prevent the working class from swimming in these pools.

Beginning in 1903, progressive reformers again advocated building municipal pools in urban slums, this time as a means of attracting working-class youth. They were concerned that the youth were engaged in juvenile delinquency - drinking, playing craps in back alleys — and they wanted to

use the pools as a means of attracting them off the streets into this public space. Pools once again became class segregated and used primarily by young, working-class men.

SL: You write that the Fairgrounds Pool, which opened in 1913 in St. Louis, was the first “gender-integrated municipal pool in the northern United States” and the first to be “segregated along racial lines.” How was Fairgrounds a harbinger for municipal pools?

JW: Three things occurred simultaneously. The purpose of pools like the Fairgrounds changed. It was a circular pool, 400 feet in diameter, with one side bordered by a sandy beach. It was not well suited for races or athletic competition. It basically functioned as a leisure resort.

Once pools were intended to function as leisure resorts, then city officials decided that it was okay to permit men and women to swim together. They basically applied the social standard of the seashore to the pool, rather than the social standard of the bathhouse.

And, that’s the point in time at which blacks were segregated. That happened in two ways. On the southern tier of the northern cities — St. Louis, Washington, D.C., Baltimore — the segregation was official. Police officers and pool attendants explicitly and openly prevented black residents from using the pools. In the more northern tier — Chicago, Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Ohio - there was not an official policy against blacks and whites using the same pool. Rather, white swimmers beat up black swimmers who came to the pool. So, public officials essentially allowed white swimmers to physically intimidate blacks from using the pools.

SL: What factors drove pools to become segregated by race in the 1920s?

JW: The most direct and crucial cause was gender integration. Most whites throughout the north were unwilling to permit black men to interact with white women in such a visually and physically intimate space as a swimming pool. There was widespread, racist prejudice that black men were, at the least, sexually immoral and, at worse, had an uncontrollable

desire for white women.

Also, one of the longstanding bases of white supremacy was that white men were superior to black men, that they were more manly. During the early 20th century, notions of manliness and masculinity became increasingly attached to physical attributes. The reality was, at the swimming pools of the 1920s and 1930s, men were now shedding their tops and exposing their bodies. So, if you permitted black men to utilize these large resort pools, which have sun-decks and sand beaches, then many black men would show themselves to be the physical equal, if not the physical superior, of white men. This would implicitly challenge one of the pillars of white supremacy.

SL: Were you surprised to find segregation at municipal pools?

JW: I expected to find racial segregation in pools long before the 1920s and 1930s. My expectation was that pools would have been racially segregated during the late 19th century. In some ways, the surprise was not that cities imposed racial segregation during the 1920s and 1930s, but rather that blacks and whites swam together in relative harmony prior to that point. That makes the onset of segregation all the more poignant.

SL: With white men and women swimming together at municipal pools, how did this impact our perception of the body?

JW: When pools became gender integrated, initially cities tried to impose strict standards of swimwear modesty. Men wore tops. Women wore suits that covered much of their bodies and obscured their curves and bust-lines. What happens is, swimmers began to push the boundaries of beach and pool modesty and began to wear sleeker, more revealing swimsuits. Beginning in the mid-1920s and continuing to the late 1930s, the acceptable size of swimsuits shrank dramatically. Men and women began exposing much more of their bodies and began exposing the shapes of their bodies. So, this transformation in the standards of public decency — and how we view our bodies — began at swimming pools and beaches.

SL: Pool construction exploded in the 1920s and then again in the 1930s. Why did swimming become so popular during these decades?

JW: In part because participatory athletics and, more generally, outdoor recreation were becoming more popular throughout the country. The building of swimming pools and the popularization of swimming didn't occur in a vacuum. Of course, one builds upon another: after they built the swimming pools, there was an increased exposure of the sport. That only increased demand.

It's also tied up with cultural factors. For example, it was during the 1920s that sun-tanning became a cultural phenomenon. For many Americans, pools became the ideal place to go and suntan. The desire to tan one's body added to the popularity of swimming pools. There was also an increased attentiveness to physical appearance during the 1920s. An example of that is that young women began to diet. Women didn't diet before the 1920s.

SL: What was the difference between the construction boom of the 1920s and the 1930s?

JW: It was mostly in terms of where the financing came from. Much like in the 1920s, swimming pools built in the 1930s tended to be large, leisure resort pools. But during the 1920s, the pools were financed locally. This was a period of real prosperity, and local communities chose to use their local tax dollars to build municipal pools. During the 1930s, during the Great Depression, it was the federal government, through New Deal agencies like the Works Progress Administration, that was the engine of financing pools.

SL: During the 1920s and 1930s, did the Olympic victories of Johnny Weissmuller and Buster Crabbe among others boost the popularity of swimming?

JW: Absolutely. Also, Gertrude Ederle's crossing of the English Channel [in 1926]. This was a huge event, with a big parade afterwards in New York City. This is another example where swimming mirrors larger cultural developments. The 1920s were, in many ways, the first era of the sports celebrity. Babe Ruth is perhaps the best example, but Weissmuller and Ederle are also classic examples. As much as Babe Ruth helped baseball boom as a spectator sport, the Olympians played a critical role in boosting

swimming as a participatory sport. You particularly see that with women. It's during the 1920s that women's attendance at swimming pools — and their participation in swimming as a recreation and athletic activity — increased dramatically.

SL: Sammy Lee, the Olympic diver, has said that he experienced racism at a pool in Pasadena during the 1930s, when officials allowed non-whites to swim only on designated days. Did this type of exclusion happen all over the States?

JW: I ran across another example of this in Arizona. The pool water was changed once a week; the day before the water was changed was when non-whites were allowed to use the pool. Then, the water was changed, and whites used the pool for six days.

This is one of the ways in which what happened out West was different than what I found in the North. I didn't find this practice in the North. What I found in the North was racial segregation or racial exclusion. If a town had one pool, blacks didn't use it all. In larger cities, separate pools were provided for black swimmers.

What happened in Arizona and with Dr. Lee clearly points to the second of the primary reasons for the onset of racial segregation. The first was the gender integration of pools. The second occurred during the 1920s, as a result of larger societal changes that were occurring, when black Americans became stigmatized as being the most likely to be infected by a communicable disease among all social groups. So, whites feared that, if they swam in the same pools with blacks, they would be infected by their contact with blacks.

SL: Did desegregation in the 1950s, after several court challenges, change racial exclusion practices at pools?

JW: Pools throughout the North were racially desegregated in the ten years after the end of World War II. The main means for bringing that about were court cases, with local NAACP chapters taking the cities and city officials to court and with federal judges ordering the pools to be desegregated. What I found, in city after city after city, was that when a

swimming pool became racially desegregated and black residents started to use it, large numbers of whites abandoned those pools. What effectively happened was that the use of many of these pools transferred from white swimmers to black swimmers.

In some cases, cities closed down pools, or filled them in, rather than desegregate them. That was a more common story in the South. Mostly what happened in the North was that the pools would be desegregated, black swimmers would start using them, the majority of whites would abandon them, and then cities would de-prioritize public swimming facilities. They wouldn't spend the money to maintain them or upgrade them. They wouldn't spend the money to build new pools, if they were going to be used by non-whites. That was the beginning, I argue, for the long decline of municipal pools in the North.

SL: At around this time, in the 1950s, you write about the rise of private swimming pools. Why did this occur?

JW: The primary reason for the explosion of private club pools in the suburbs, beginning in the early 1950s, was because of the racial desegregation of public pools. Back then, it was still legal for members of a private club to exclude people they wanted to exclude. So, they could still legally exclude black Americans. They made the choice to build private club pools because they could control the membership.

SL: Does this also explain the rise of backyard swimming pools?

JW: That begins more slowly. I see the beginning of the explosion of private club pools during the early 1950s, whereas the huge proliferation of residential pools begins in the late 1950s. That has to do with a couple of factors. There's a new technique for building pools - called the "gunite" method - that makes it much less expensive. Also, by the late 1950s, there's a critical mass of upper middle-class Americans who can now afford to build backyard residential pools. And, it's at this point in time that out-doing your neighbor - keeping up with, and then getting ahead of, the Joneses - comes into play. So that building a backyard pool becomes one of the most conspicuous indicators of upward mobility.

SL: What have been the implications of this trend?

JW: What it points out is that millions of Americans — the middle class, the upper middle class, and well-to-do Americans — have chosen to use their prosperity to privatize their recreation. They're saying, "Rather than go to a public facility, where I'll have to interact with a wide array of people in the community, I'm gonna fence myself and my family in my backyard and invite a few friends over in an exclusive environment."

I interpret it as being exemplary of what [Harvard University political scientist and author of "Bowling Alone"] Robert Putnam described as "civic disengagement." Economic prosperity enabled American families to build private backyard pools, and they spent considerable amounts of money to be able to recreate in their backyards because they wanted to be able to control their social environment. This was profound because this wasn't a one-time act. People were reorienting their summer recreation away from the community to the home.

SL: In the 1960s, after race riots in urban areas, you note that cities built — scrambled to build — pools in poor neighborhoods. But you also note that the renaissance was short-lived and that cities have since closed many of these pools. What happened?

JW: It's a question of financial priorities. There's clearly enough money to fund municipal swimming pools. But cities have come to see public recreation facilities as being expendable. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that most Americans can afford to access recreation through private or commercial means. They can afford to join a private club pool or to go to a commercial aquatic park. That's part of a general trend toward the privatizing of recreation and leisure activities.

SL: What's the impact of this practice?

JW: The poorest members of communities now have restricted access to recreation. While the middle class can afford to access private swimming pools and aquatic parks, the poor and working classes cannot. The de-prioritizing of public recreation facilities has hit the poorest Americans the hardest. They have less access to recreation and leisure facilities than

have previous generations of Americans. The other consequence is that it has, once again, divided leisure and recreation activities along class lines. One of the virtues of the large resort pools that were built during the 1920s and 1930s and that continued to serve American communities into the 1960s was that they brought together a broad spectrum of Americans. Not necessarily blacks and whites, but pretty much everyone else: Working class and middle class, different ethnicities, males and females, children and adults. Now that leisure and recreation activities have become more privatized, social life in communities has become increasingly segmented and atomized.

SL: What was the most surprising thing that you found in your research?

JW: The social conflict didn't surprise me. What surprised me was how popular swimming pools were and how central and vital swimming pools were as public institutions. Beginning in the mid-1920s and continuing into the 1930s, tens of millions of Americans frequented municipal pools every year. Swimming was by far the most popular form of active recreation that Americans engaged in at the time. It was as popular as going to the movies during this period of time. So, swimming pools played a critical role in democratizing public play and in dissolving the social boundaries and social divisions that had characterized recreation and leisure previously.

SL: Dick Cavett, the former TV talk-show host, reviewed your book in the New York Times, and you've made several appearances on National Public Radio. Are you surprised by the amount of media attention you've received?

JW: Yes and no. I always knew that this book had the potential to appeal to a broad, general audience. I knew it had the potential to interest and intrigue people other than academic historians. But unless you're an established academic historian — like one of my mentors at Brandeis, David Hackett Fisher, who's written several excellent works that have transcended the boundaries between the academy and the general readership — you can't expect that to happen. This book started from a dream, and I think that most people would have considered it as a pipe dream.

SL: What is your next research topic and/or book?

JW: The project that I'm beginning now examines music and public spaces — both recorded music that is played, say, on a portable radio and music that is performed by musicians in public spaces.