

SWIMMING HISTORY

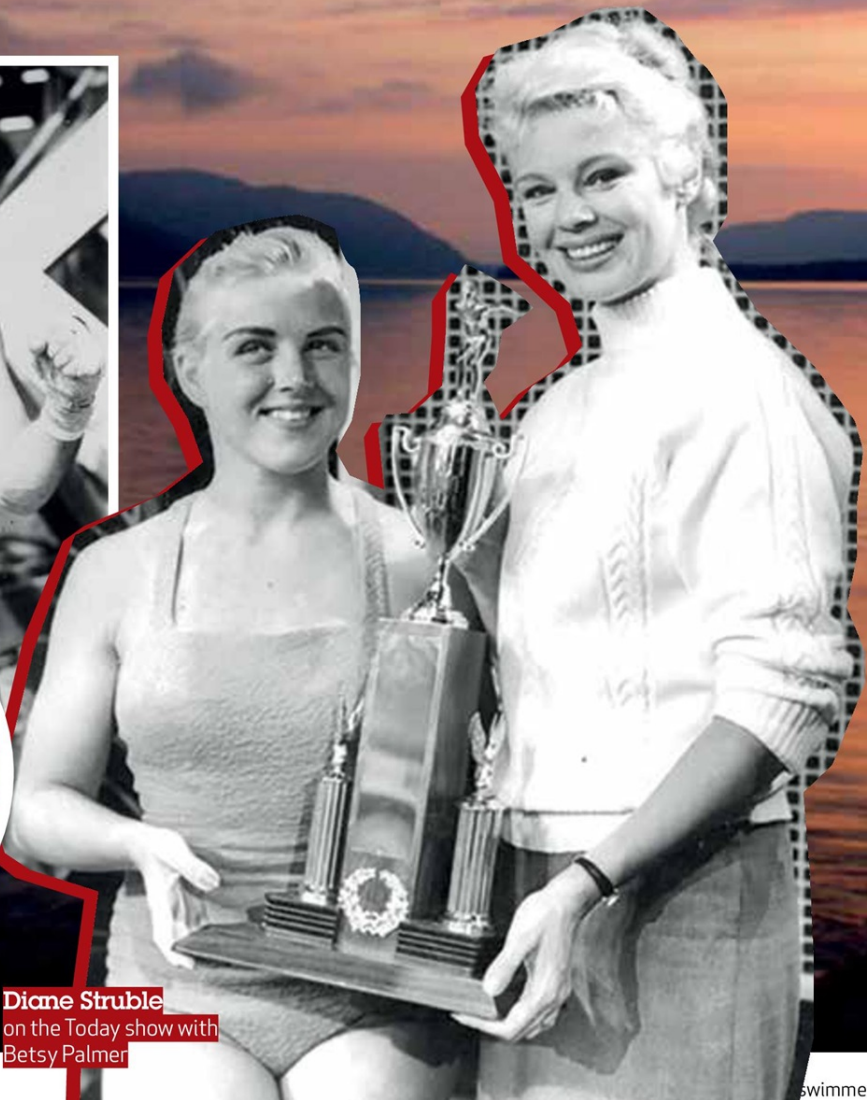
# BLONDE AMBITION

Lake George posed a challenge that Diane Struble was keen to best. By Elaine K Howley

**Jack Dempsey**  
World-famous  
heavyweight  
champion boxer



SWIMMERS  
BEGANEYEING  
LAKE GEORGE AS A  
POTENTIAL  
TOPPRIZE



**Diane Struble**  
on the Today show with  
Betsy Palmer

## SWIMMING HISTORY

**W**hen America's third president, Thomas Jefferson, first arrived in Ticonderoga, New York, in 1791, it was his first experience setting eyes on Lake George. Of the narrow, 32-mile-long, glacially-formed waterway, Jefferson wrote: "Lake George is without comparison, the most beautiful water I ever saw; formed by a contour of mountains into a basin... finely interspersed with islands, its water limpid as crystal, and the mountain sides covered with rich groves... down to the water-edge: here and there precipices of rock to checker the scene and save it from monotony."

There's certainly nothing monotonous about the "Queen of American Lakes." The upstate New York mere has been one of America's most beloved resort locations for more than 150 years. Nestled at the base of the Adirondack mountains, rustic Lake George drains into larger Lake Champlain and the St Lawrence River basin. It lies far enough away from the buzz of big cities – roughly halfway between New York City and Montreal – to feel remote, but close enough to be a reasonable retreat for residents of both cities. Well-to-do New Yorkers in the 19th and 20th centuries flocked to the lake in summer; the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers were regular visitors.

As marathon swimming's appeal grew in the early 20th century, swimmers began eyeing Lake George as a potential top prize. In July 1927, a year after Gertrude Ederle became the first woman to swim the English Channel, a mass event not dissimilar from the deep-sea derby held in the Catalina Channel in January of that year, was staged in Lake George.

The spectacle drew thousands of people to the Lake, as much to witness the 110 swimmers' struggles as to see the ceremonial starter – world-famous heavyweight champion boxer, Jack Dempsey, the most popular athlete of the era. So many people flocked to the dock to see the start of the race that the wharf collapsed, "ducking" Dempsey into the drink, reported the New York Daily News. "Jack Dempsey still seems to be heavyweight champion of the world. At an early hour this morning, he stepped from a speed boat to a wharfing here and the entire

A LARGE ROCK AT THE NORTHERN END OF THE LAKE WAS NAMED "DIANE'S ROCK" AND STANDS AS A MEMORIAL TO STRUBLE'S SWIM



# SWIMMING HISTORY

← structure collapsed throwing more than 100 people into the lake. ... Everybody screamed, including your correspondent, whose typewriter was faster getting to the bottom of the lake than Mister Dempsey.” Mercifully, no one was hurt in the incident, and ever the showman, Dempsey climbed out, shook himself off, and motored to another dock where he fired the pistol to launch the race.

The race continued on until the wee hours of 13 July. Despite the dark and absurdly early hour, the roar of the 20,000-strong throng of spectators must have been deafening when 24-year-old New York City resident Edward Keating staggered up the ladder at a dock in Lake George Village at 4.30am after nearly 19 hours in the water. He'd swum from the Hague town beach 25 miles (42 kilometres) away and made himself \$5,000 richer (roughly \$72,000 today) by outlasting all other swimmers. (The remaining \$5,000 in posted prize money went unclaimed because no other swimmers finished.)

The International News Service reported that “Keating’s victory was complete. One by one, the other contestants had dropped out and his nearest rival, Miss Lucy Diamond, of Brooklyn, was taken from the water shortly after two o’clock, five miles from the finish. By virtue of his victory, Keating becomes the fresh water champion of the world.”

With his strong performance, Keating had earned a place in the record books. But he hadn’t swum the entirety of the lake. It would take another 31 years and the efforts of a gutsy young woman to connect Ticonderoga to Lake George Village the hard way.

## DIANE DOES IT

On 23 August 1958, Diane Struble became the first swimmer to complete a lengthwise crossing of Lake George. The 25-year-old mother of three swam the 51.8 kilometres (32.2 miles) from Ticonderoga to Lake George Village in 35 hours, 30 minutes. She was reportedly greeted by 10,000 cheering spectators when she arrived.

Struble’s success had been hard earned. She had first attempted to swim the length of Lake George in August 1950 at the tender age of 17, covering about 19 miles in 18 hours, according to an Associated Press report. The report, which described Struble as “an attractive blonde high school senior from Scotia,” indicated she’d swum through a storm for four hours and terminated the swim near Hatchett Island. It’s unclear why her looks figured so prominently as to be the second item noted in the report – a common feature of all subsequent reports about the swimmer’s adventures – but Struble told the reporter that she’d failed because she wasn’t prepared enough. “I’ll never try anything like this again without more training,” she said.

The following summer, Struble attempted a 30-mile swim the length of Lake Sacandaga, one of New York State’s famous finger lakes. That swim was also unsuccessful, as was a second attempt at Lake George she made in 1951.

Struble hit pause on her swimming career for the next several years as she married her high school sweetheart and bore three children. But by 1958, she was separated from her husband and living with her three small daughters at her mother’s house in Scotia. That’s when, assisted by



**Struble hit pause on her swimming career to raise her three children**

manager Paul Lukaris (whom she married in the 1970s), she struck a deal with the F & M Schaefer Brewing Company, a New York City-based beer manufacturer, to complete several marathon swims in the area. (Schaefer was bought by the Stroh Brewery Company in 1981. A subsequent sale to the Pabst Brewing Company took place in 1999. Pabst still makes Schaefer’s traditional German lager, sold under the brand name Schaefer Beer.)

Perhaps it was her sex appeal, or the slightly scandalous fact that she was a single mother making her way in the world in the 1950s that earned her extra attention. Maybe it was Lukaris’s efforts to build a media darling in the talented swimmer he represented. Whatever it was, Struble became a star seemingly overnight. A 2015 Glens Falls Chronicle article noted that Struble’s daughter, Gwenne Rippon said “it helped that she was young, blonde, beautiful, personally ambitious, witty, and kind.” The combination was dynamite; after successfully swimming into the record books in Lake George (and earning a \$2,500 bonus from the Schaefer Brewing Company), she appeared on several TV shows, including a swim-suit clad spot on the Today show alongside actress Betsy Palmer.

**STRUBLE WAS REPORTEDLY GREETED BY 10,000 CHEERING SPECTATORS WHEN SHE ARRIVED**

# SUCCESSFUL SOLO SWIMS ACROSS LAKE GEORGE

Ticonderoga to Lake George Village (North to South)



**1958:**  
Diane Struble  
35:30:00

**1962:**  
Bill Stevens  
31:27:00

**1967:**  
George Dempsey  
32:15:00

**1977:**  
Stella Taylor  
26:51:00

**1981:**  
John Freihofer  
21:26:00



SWIMMING HISTORY

**CHAMPLAIN DREAMS AND MANHATTAN WISHES**

The following summer, again sponsored by the Schaefer Brewing Company, Struble completed a solo 32.7-kilometre (20.3-mile) swim across Lake Champlain from Burlington, Vermont, to Plattsburgh, New York, in 16 hours, 40 minutes. Struble's crowning glory came less than a month later when she completed a 45.9-kilometre (28.5-mile) circumnavigation of Manhattan Island. Again sponsored by Schaefer, the swim was one event in a year-long celebration of the 350th anniversary of Dutch exploration of the Hudson River. Struble was the sixth woman and eighth person to complete that swim, taking 11 hours and 59 minutes to tour the island. She apparently asked to go around a second time, but was told that ferry boat captains who'd delayed or altered their routes for her first pass wouldn't allow it.

Those three swims represent the sum total of Struble's successful swims. An April 1960 feature in the Fort Lauderdale News reported that Struble was in town preparing for a double Manhattan Island swim. It also noted that Struble had previously completed a 25-mile swim in Boston Harbor. Details of that swim remain scant.

An Associated Press report from 20 August 1963 noted that Struble was among the 20 swimmers (three of whom were women) to start a 60-mile swim across Lake Michigan from Chicago to St Joseph/Benton Harbor alongside powerhouse marathoners Greta Andersen and Ted Erickson. The report noted that the 30-year-old Struble had five children at the time.

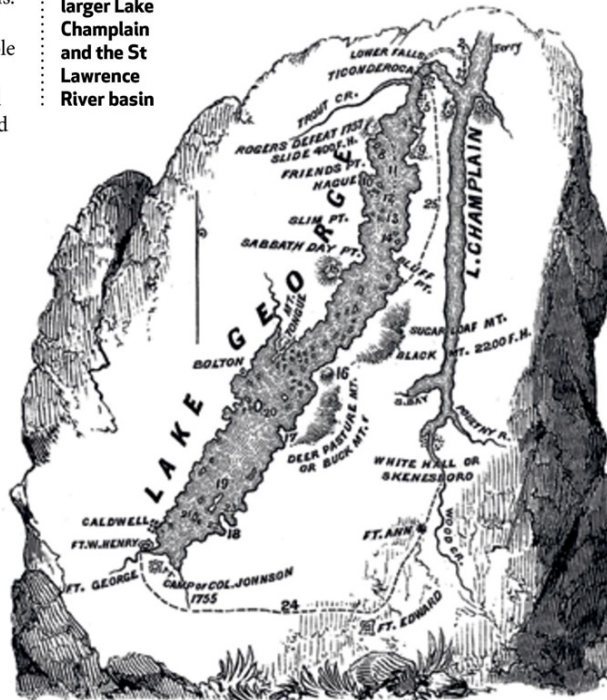
The following day, the Associated Press reported that only two swimmers remained in the 60-mile quest for a \$15,000 prize purse: Ted Erickson and Abdel-Latif Abo-Heif, a legendary Egyptian swimmer who was a fixture on the

professional marathon swimming circuit in the 1960s. The report said that Struble had lasted until the early morning, but was pulled from the 14.4 degree Celsius water more than 20 miles from her final destination.

After that swim, it appears Struble faded from the marathon swimming world. A 2015 Glens Falls Chronicle article reported that Struble lived at Animal Land, a zoo-like theme park just south of Lake Sacandaga in the summers. (The park was owned by Paul Lukaris, her manager-turned husband.) Struble worked "as a celebrity animal handler who wrestled alligators, among other attractions."

A large rock at the northern end of the lake where it meets Ticonderoga Creek was named "Diane's Rock" and stands as a memorial to her swim. A placard on the rock marks her achievement and the scrub-covered rock also indicates the starting or ending point of modern swims on the lake. Struble died of cancer in 2006 at the age of 73.

Lake George drains into larger Lake Champlain and the St Lawrence River basin



LAKE GEORGE AND PART OF LAKE CHAMPLAIN.<sup>1</sup>

**IN HER WAKE**

Since Struble first got across, 10 other solo swimmers have completed lengthwise swims of the Lake. Bill Stevens, a 31-year-old ex-Marine from Little Ferry, New Jersey, became the first man to swim the length of Lake George. He swam from Diane's Rock southward in 31 hours 27 minutes on 9-10 September 1962. George Dempsey, Stella Taylor, John Freihofer, and Jerry Ferris all got across between 1967 and 1983. Then, the lake went quiet to long-distance swimming.

But interest in swimming across Lake George began reviving in 2007, when a local group sponsored a professional race from Lake George Village to Hague Beach to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the last large race on the lake. Strong winds delayed the field of 10 swimmers and only two swimmers reached the beach before the event was called for darkness. Nevertheless, event organisers were so impressed with the swimmers' grit they paid out the prize purse to participants based on where they were on the course when the 12-hour time limit was reached.

In 2016, another mass event was planned to traverse the entire length of the lake. Fourteen solo swimmers and 14 relay teams were entered. Again, heavy winds scuttled the event, which was cancelled after four hours amid chaos that likely mirrored that of the 1927 event.

These days, a solo swim takes place a couple times per year. David Dammerman currently holds the men's record for his 19 June 2016 crossing, completed in 18:49:22. Caroline Block is the fastest female across the course so far, having swum the lake on 11 June 2017 in 19:21:00. The water is still as beautiful as when Thomas Jefferson first spied it. But if you want to swim this scenic waterway, wait for a calm day ☺

**1983:**  
Jerry Ferris  
29:15:00

**2016:**  
David Dammerman  
18:49:22

Lake George Village to Ticonderoga (South to North)

**2016:**  
Jaimie Monahan  
21:13:00

**2016:**  
Jennifer Dutton  
22:51:00

**2017:**  
Caroline Block  
19:21:00

**2017:**  
Bridget Simpson  
28:02:00

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