

ject. The most interesting president the Republic has yet produced is revealed here as a man who knew both the subtleties and the seductions of an ancient drink, and was afraid of neither.

—James Conaway

## Wading Into Trouble

AT PUBLIC SWIMMING pools, we're naked but for whatever patches of fabric we select to do the job of fig leaves. Stripped of the usual social cues—cars, McMansions, Manolo Blahniks or scuffed Nikes—we're less likely to make

the same nice distinctions about one another that we would at the pizza parlor or shopping mall. This potential for fluid intimacy is one attraction of public pools. And as University of Montana historian Jeff Wiltse shows in *Contested Waters*, it's also the reason they've been social battlegrounds in America for the past century and a half.

Initially, swimming pools were bathtubs for the great unwashed. In 1868, Boston opened the first municipal pool in the United States, an "austere wooden structure" in working-class Roxbury. Though Americans soon realized that disease-bearing germs were easily transmitted through shared waters, a national fitness craze kept cities building pools—with showers and explicit instructions about foot washing. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, disputes about admission fees and where to locate pools revealed class tensions, but throughout the northern United States—to which Wiltse largely confines his examination—classes and races mingled at municipal pools. But men and women, and, in far greater numbers, boys and girls, took to the water at different hours or at separate facilities altogether.

In 1913, St. Louis opened a large circular pool in Fairgrounds Park replete with a sandy beach, and promoted it as a resort destination. It was the first pool in the northern United States where men and women splashed together, ushering in an era of stares and leers. Aside from women's very presence,

### CONTESTED WATERS:

A Social History of Swimming Pools in America.

By Jeff Wiltse. Univ. of North Carolina Press. 276 pp. \$29.95

their swimsuit styles helped redefine pools as eroticized zones. As late as the 1910s, women waded into the water in a puffy skirt, a high-neck blouse, and stockings, but suits shrank during the next couple of decades. (It was the one-piece that was scandalous then; the fashion police couldn't imagine the sartorially diminutive bikini to come.)

Though a pool that had opened earlier in St. Louis admitted blacks, they were not invited to the Fairgrounds Park facility. That policy of exclusion proliferated as the genders integrated at pools nationwide. During the 1920s and '30s, whole families swam together as Americans basked in leisure. But the widely held yet rarely articulated feeling among whites, Wiltse contends, was that they didn't want black men near white women in this intimate setting. Blacks who attempted to swim where segregation policies weren't stated outright often endured threats and physical violence. A 1949 effort to integrate St. Louis's pools caused a riot. In upholding the segregation of Baltimore's city pools a month after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, a judge observed that swimming pools were "more sensitive than schools."

The tide turned soon after, and when it did, many middle-class whites stopped swimming altogether, or else retreated to private swim clubs or their own pools. At the same time, residential swimming pools became a new sign of suburban social arrival. George Vanderbilt commissioned what was perhaps the first residential pool in 1895, but as late as 1950 only 2,500 of America's richest families owned private in-ground pools. Fifty years later, four million homes had a blue patch in the backyard.

Despite his subject, Wiltse's dutiful history has some dry stretches. Nonetheless, the struggle to desegregate public pools, recounted in the latter half of the book, makes for compelling reading. The stakes in integrating America's classrooms may have been higher, but it is something to behold the moral contortions of city officials as they fought to keep black children from cannonballing into the water on a blistering summer day.

—Sarah L. Courteau