

HUMOR WRITING

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THE WOOLEN BATHING SUIT

By Jim Marquardt

Fifty or sixty years ago, we eagerly looked forward to summer just as you do now, but our memories of those carefree days is tempered by recollections of the miseries we suffered, believe it or not, from our bathing suits. In those primitive times bathing attire was made out of thick, heavy wool, always black. Romping on the beach was not an unalloyed pleasure because when wet, woolen suits lost all elasticity and hung loosely from our bodies like a layer of sagging flab. And when we sat on the hot beach to warm up after a swim, the bathing suit became coated with sand, creating woolen sandpaper that chafed our thighs.

Historians say that in ancient times, citizens wore toga-like outfits into the baths (except for those saucy Greek discus throwers) which were made of wool and probably doubled the weight of the bather. They could only have rolled in the water like hippos because it would be impossible to swim towing such a sea anchor. Bathing was frowned on in the Middle Ages, but made a come-back in Europe in the 18th century. It became popular in the United States in the nineteen-hundreds but our puritan hangover forced women into full-body, woolen suits that, hard as you tried, you couldn't see through even when wet.

The aquatic costumes of that day for women consisted of knee-length, puffed sleeve woolen dresses, sometimes with a sailor collar, worn over bloomers trimmed with ribbons and bows. Accessories included long black stockings, lace-up bathing slippers and caps. Somewhere in the attic I have black-and-white snapshots of my female ancestors wearing these somber outfits. That they all look unhappy is certainly understandable. Obviously women couldn't swim when so weighed down but jumped through the waves while holding onto a rope attached to an offshore buoy. Suits became a little more abbreviated over the years but wool remained the fabric of choice until after WWII.

One summer, in the age of the woolen suit, I worked in a bath house on Long Island where people who came out on the train from the city could rent a locker to change their clothes for a swim. Many of them brought their own bathing suits and when they returned from the beach, I'd offer to rinse out the sand and salt and wrap the sodden mass for the trip home on the train. Usually they agreed, and I'd dash off, wash the suit under a tap and crank it through a big mangle to squeeze out the water. It would come out of the mangle squished into the size of a manhole cover. I'd fold it over a couple of times and roll it tightly into a sausage shape. Wrapped in waxed paper and tied with a string, it made a neat billet that earned me at least a quarter. Many times my excellence in packaging was wasted because between the bathhouse and the train station were several bars where the men would stop for a beer and invariably forget their woolen sausages. Perhaps they were happy to be rid of them.

Other down-for-the-day bathers who didn't bring a suit could rent one at the bathhouse, a dollar for the black woolen brief, a towel and a brass tag inscribed with the

number of an assigned locker. The bathhouse stocked rental suits for men up to 72 inches in the waist, a marvel I never got to see.

But I witnessed a watershed event in the history of bathing suits -- the shift from wool to cotton, or more accurately, to stiff canvass. After so many years of discomfort and chafe, the men of that time welcomed the arrival of boxer shorts, though one fellow found the mechanics somewhat puzzling. Inside the new trunk was a built-in athletic supporter, generally referred to as a jock strap. It was a rudimentary creation, just two elastic strips from the rear of the waistband leading down between the wearer's legs to one end of a rectangular patch of cloth, the other end of which was sewn to the front of the suit.

Soon after introduction of this fashion breakthrough, an old fellow coming out of the changing area was walking in a crouch. He had mistaken the innovative athletic supporter for suspenders and had stretched the elastic strips over his shoulders, while the rectangular piece of cloth was pulled up on his chest like an abbreviated butcher's apron. With delicate gestures and carefully chosen words we squared him away before he exited to the beach, at which point a mighty guffaw erupted from the bathhouse boys and we rolled on the deck in a state of high glee.

The old wooden bathhouse burned down years after I went on to more sophisticated employment. I don't know what happened to the retired woolen bathing suits, whether they were sent off earlier to a thrift shop to be claimed by bargain hunters who hadn't heard of the upheaval in the bathing suit world, or went up in flames with the bathhouse, a classical end to their historic reign.

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