



## **WOMEN SWIMMIN': ONE BOATER'S REFLECTION**

By Fred Bonn

There's no getting around the fact that Women's Swimmin' makes for a very early start to the day. For boaters escorting the swimmers it starts before 6:00 am with headlights and headlamps, paddles, spare life jackets, a water bottle and the required safety whistle.

Ideally the lake is calm on the morning of the swim, covered with a light blanket of mist that will disappear with another yawn or two. Pushing off from the Western shore you join the flotilla of kayaks and canoes, dories, Rushton guide boats, rowboats, paddleboats, peddle boats, dinghies, and rowing shells. Chances are if it's a muscle powered watercraft you're likely to cross its path, or rather its wake.

Keep paddling. In another ten minutes, with the far side in reach, you begin to raft up with the other boaters already assembled and waiting for the swimmers to be ferried across the lake. While seeking out the "pod" of boats you've been assigned, you navigate through a casual chaos, greeting a friend, waving at a neighbor, sharing a story or an orange.

Word spreads quickly as someone shouts, "First group of swimmers just leaving the Yacht Club!" Attempts to line up in an orderly fashion are thwarted with the slightest of breezes. Anticipation and adrenaline mix as the MV Columbia steams toward all manner of craft now assembled.

You feel the presence of the swimmers before they arrive. It is palpable, it precedes them and it reminds you that their journey is not an easy one, physically or mentally. The swim is over a mile in length across open water that, at times, is hundreds and hundreds of feet deep. The best they can carry with them is the memory of a loved one and the support of friends and family. It's an individual effort made achievable with the guidance of all the boaters.

In no time the call goes out for the first group of boaters to prepare as the Columbia's captain brings her bow about. Cheering erupts as the first swimmer wraps her toe over the edge.

Paddlers clap and whistle while fellow swimmers shout encouragement. With a tug on the suit, a slight adjustment of the goggles the first woman steps away, falling clear of the deck and into the water. The roar of support she receives can cause you to shed a tear. And so it continues as dozens more take the plunge.

Quickly you rally with your specific group of swimmers. Once greetings, introductions and assurances are exchanged the swim toward the western shore begins. Swimmers start stroking, quickly finding their rhythm, and boaters begin to lead and follow accordingly. It is a slow and deliberate pace lacking the competitive urgency of a race. Along with the other boaters you provide a steady stream of encouragement reminding them how strong they are, and instilling confidence in them. Periodically there's the necessary adjustment in heading to keep everyone between the buoys that mark the way. Sometimes a swimmer takes hold of your bow for a brief rest.

Soon enough the flagpole at the Ithaca Yacht Club comes into view. Taking your eyes off your charge for a single moment you look around. Swimmers and boaters have spread out. The lake's magnitude leaves you speechless. Whatever you do, don't let the swimmers know how small you feel right now.

All boaters hang back as the swimmers take their last few strokes to reach the dock. You watch as they are welcomed with open arms and are bundled and warmed with gratitude. Congratulations are extended with high-fives and hugs. Quickly they join fellow swimmers who have already found their partner, husband or friend. The broad lawn at the Yacht Club becomes the perfect setting for sharing stories and memories.

Pulling your boat onto shore you pause and shake loose the stiffness that comes with any paddling trip. But this one is markedly different. The journey was theirs not yours. You were the guide. It is their accomplishment, their crossing. You are simply honored to have been part of it.

*Fred Bonn lives in Trumansburg with his wife, Nancy Fuhr Bonn, who along with her sister Amy Fuhr, has successfully completed all of the Women Swimmint' swims. Lucky enough to accompany them every year, Fred is often joined by sons Mason and Logan. His father, Tom Bonn, can be found chewing gum and giving guidance to boaters from the comfort of the pontoon boat designating the start of the swim.*