

Fleishhacker Pool: An Extravagant History



San Francisco Zoo Public Relations Department

> “The Largest Outdoor Saltwater Swimming Pool in the United States.” From 1924 to 1971, San Francisco’s Fleishhacker Pool reveled in this distinction.

“It was 1,000 feet long—think of swimming 10 laps for a workout,” says Michael Moore, at-large director for the Oceana Zone on the USMS board of directors. A lifeguard at the pool from 1968 until its closing three years later, Moore remembers making \$3.16 an hour.

Fleishhacker Pool was born from the philanthropy of Herbert Fleishhacker. A successful entrepreneur, Fleishhacker also invested (rather flamboyantly) in his community. A 1938 *Time* magazine article had this to say about the self-made man: “In San Francisco, a municipal swimming pool, zoo and park all bear the name of Fleishhacker—not only because banker Herbert Fleishhacker was a big contributor to them, but because when serving a brief term as a park commissioner, he named almost everything but the city sidewalks after himself.”

The article goes on to report the ruin of Fleishhacker’s banking career that year, amid accusations of shady business deals.

Yet Fleishhacker Pool thrived—at least in the 1920s and '30s—at its location near the Pacific Ocean along the city’s Great Highway (near the current location of San Francisco Zoo). Approximately 60,000 swimmers enjoyed the salt water of the pool the first two months after its April 23, 1925, official opening. As the years wore on, however, the high maintenance costs, coupled with people leaving San Francisco for warmer climates (the pool water itself was only 70 F), meant that the attraction struggled to turn a profit.

“As I recall,” Moore notes, “the price (in the '60s) for a kid to enter the pool was 10 cents, and an adult was 50 cents. The pool did not make money on a normal day.” Moore clarifies that a normal day during his time at the pool included “six swimmers in the water.”

In January 1971, a storm damaged the pool’s outflow pipe to the Pacific Ocean. The

water became contaminated, and when city officials endeavored to solve the problem by filling the pool with fresh water for the first time, algae developed. The pool closed.

During its heyday, Fleishhacker Pool hosted celebrities such as Johnny Weissmuller (winner of five Olympic gold medals and the sixth—and arguably best-known—actor to star as Tarzan), Esther Williams (another competitive swimmer/movie star, a la “Million Dollar Mermaid”) and Ann Curtis, the first woman and swimmer to win the James E. Sullivan Award.

A lifeguard who opposed Fleishhacker Pool’s closing in 1971 asked Fleishhacker why he had built such a big pool. Fleishhacker told the lifeguard to swim the entire length and back. When the lifeguard returned, Fleishhacker asked, “Did anyone get in your way?” The answer was no; Fleishhacker replied, “That’s why.”

In summer 2002, the pool was transformed into a parking lot. Despite its demise, the legacy of Fleishhacker Pool remains. <<<

FLEISHHACKER FACTS

>>> For 47 years, Fleishhacker Pool was located next to the San Francisco Zoo.

>>> At 1,000 feet long and 150 feet wide, the pool loomed so large that lifeguards had to use kayaks to get across it. The pool had a capacity for 6 million gallons of salt water, three times the amount of the world’s largest indoor pool complex, nearby Sutro Baths. Fleishhacker could comfortably accommodate 10,000 swimmers.

>>> Michael Moore remembers the pool was one of the first to have a solar heating system.

>>> About every six to eight weeks, operators had to empty the water, and then all the sand and salt was swept out of the pool. There easily could be two to three feet of sand in the deep end of the pool. Refilling the pool took four to five days.

>>> According to an article in *San Francisco* magazine, Herbert Fleishhacker lamented, nine years before his death, “Why isn’t this pool praised as a great civic asset?”

>>> Other large pools have had claims to fame in the first half of the 20th century. Located in Garden City, Ka., the Big Pool measures 220 feet by 330 feet (about half a city block), and can accommodate 2.5 million gallons of water. Dug by hand in 1922, it once was known as The World’s Largest Concrete Municipal Swimming Pool.

>>> The 23,000-square-foot, 700,000-gallon swimming pool at the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, Fla., is the largest hotel pool in the United States (before his Tarzan days, Johnny Weissmuller broke a world record there).