

1958: Triumph and Tragedy

In the wake of tragic drownings, the people of Clatskanie banded together to build a swimming pool

By Deborah Steele Hazen

The summer of 1958 began early with a mid-May heat wave that sent the young people of the Clatskanie and Rainier communities heading for the rivers, streams and ponds to cool off. The tragedies began on May 18, when Curtis Lee "Corky" Wasser, age 16, drowned while swimming in the Columbia River near Rainier. He had many friends and relatives in Clatskanie as well as Rainier.

A little more than two weeks later, on June 4, 1958, the Sams brothers - Clifford, age 12, and Sylvester, age 13 - drowned while playing on a raft in a pond at their family farm in the Delena area.

Clatskanie volunteer firemen were called out again on June 16, when 15-year-old LeRoy Jacobson, who was fishing off the railroad tracks along a slough just west of Clatskanie, fell into the water and drowned.

In the June 20, 1958 edition of *The Clatskanie Chief*, members of the Clatskanie Fire Department published a letter to the editor which read in part: "Tragedy has again hit our community with the drowning of another young boy... For years there have been many abortive attempts to build a community swimming pool, which have failed for lack of interest. Some say the cost is too high. What price would you say the lives of these boys are? What is the value of your son or daughter? We in the Fire Department are making more drag hooks to locate bodies, but we would a thousand times rather be helping to build a swimming pool." The letter called on all individuals and organizations in the Clatskanie area to join with them to raise funds, volunteer labor, and materials to build a pool.

On June 22, 1958, 13-year-old Diane Philbrook of Rainier, and 18-year-old Robert Wayne Watson of Delena were drowned in Beaver Creek.

The June 27, 1958 issue of *The Chief* carried a second letter from the Clatskanie firemen: "It is with the deepest sorrow that we again feel moved to speak on the subject of a community swimming pool. The tragedy which has overtaken two more young people could possibly have been avoided if a supervised swimming pool had been available. We shed tears of grief for them and their families but they are also tears of shame and guilt because we have been standing back wishing for a pool and hoping someone would build one. The time for talk is past. The time for action is now. We will have a pool built this year. If the men of the community won't help to build it, I am sure the mothers will. Let not the death of these young people have been in vain. Let us build with a dedication to them. By the time this letter is printed, we will have a committee formed to do the planning of the pool construction."

On June 25, about 50 people attended a meeting to discuss the building of a swimming pool. The Clatskanie Area Recreational Endeavor (CARE) was formed, and committees were

appointed to study various aspects of constructing a pool.

Eleven-year-old Raymond Arthur Phillips, of Rainier, drowned in the Columbia River on July 2, 1958.

That same evening, over 75 people attended a meeting of the newly-organized CARE. It was decided to build the pool at the north end of the city park. Construction costs were estimated at \$30,000.

On the evening of July 10, excavation was started for the new swimming pool with bulldozers and trucks furnished by Edvard Evenson, who, along with Fire Chief Oliver Mellinger, worked through the night excavating the pool site.

Design for the pool, a 75 by 56 foot gunite wedge, was supplied by John Laurila, a Salem engineer who had graduated from Clatskanie High School nine years before. He donated his fee back to the cause.

For the next 50 days, an average of 30 men per night volunteered their labor, working under floodlights when the sun went down. The women of the community supplied meals for the workers and went house-to-house for donations. A number of organizations held fundraising events - rummage and bake sales, dances and horse shows. By July 25, over \$11,000 had been collected, and an estimated \$3,000 had been saved by volunteer labor and materials.

The project captured statewide interest. *The Oregonian* ran a large front page story with pictures. The project was also covered by Portland TV stations and other regional media.

By the second week in August, CARE leaders announced that grand opening ceremonies

for the swimming pool would be held on Labor Day, Sept. 1, with a barbecue, professional water ballet performance, softball game, and public swimming in the new pool. The celebration came off on schedule, even though the locker rooms and filtration systems were not yet completed, with an estimated 2500 persons (Clatskanie had a population of just over 900 at the time) attending the ceremonies, and approximately 1500 eating the barbecue of beef, salmon, trout, and "all the trimmings." By the end of that triumphant Labor Day, an additional \$20,000 had been raised to complete the facility.

The pool remained open for swimming for six more days that September, and then shut down for the winter, while local carpenter Claire Fogel headed up the construction of the building to house the dressing rooms, office and filtration system. The Clatskanie swimming pool opened again in June 1959. That year, 6000 swimmers enjoyed the



After working all summer on the swimming pool project, the Sandstorm twins, Bob and Dick, donned old-fashioned swimming suits and continued to collect donations during the grand opening celebration.

pool - many of them taking lessons from a volunteer crew of certified lifeguards.

The Clatskanie swimming pool, owned and operated by the Clatskanie Park and Recreation District since the mid-1960s, has provided a safe place for local residents of all ages to exercise, cool off, and have fun. The tragic drownings of that summer of 1958 were transformed into a triumph of volunteerism that continues to benefit the community over a half century later.