



Great Queensland Women From Our Past

Annette Kellerman (1887 - 1975)

Audio transcript

Now every time you put on a swimming costume, I want you to remember Annette Kellerman. She is important in women's battle to get the right to wear suitable clothing for sport. Now remember, women were banned from the Olympics. Annette Kellerman, a brilliant swimmer, is banned from the Olympics due to her gender, and so she takes up long distance swimming. She also becomes a star of silent movies. She was told to take up swimming by her doctor to strengthen her muscles, as she'd had an attack of polio as a child. She was a brilliant swimmer, she broke many records, she swam down the Danube, she swam down the Thames. She discovered that newspapers would give her quite a lot of money for doing this.

Her parents are often out of work. Her father's a professional musician, who comes from Germany, and her mother's also a singer, but takes up teaching the piano. Though she's got quite a large family, Annette becomes the support of her family.

She goes to Boston to try and break a swimming record off Boston Beach. It's very rough, and swimming costumes at that time went from neck to knee, and they had a skirt round the knee to be modest, and Annette feels she can't break the record with this heavy skirt weighing her down, so she cuts the skirt off her bathing costume, and she cuts the arm off. Shock horror! You can see her knees and her elbows! They send in the Boston Police, and they take her away to jail. She spends the night in jail. She hasn't got the money for a barrister, and the judge listens to her sympathetically. I think her good looks help. She says "Your honour, you know, it's like trying to break a record wearing a ball gown", and he takes this all in, and he says "Case dismissed", and the flash bulbs pop, she's on the front page of many American newspapers, the phones go, "Please come to Hollywood". She takes a screen test, and she becomes a star.

They star her in a movie called *Neptune's Daughter*. In order to get the money to pay off her parent's house, she takes a film role in which she dives into a tank of alligators. She has nightmares for six months afterwards. She does two more films, and she marries her publicist, Jimmy O'Sullivan. They open a health food shop in California, and when he dies, she comes to live in Queensland. She moves there with an unmarried sister. She has a little fibro house in what is called Angler's Paradise, now Raby Bay. The house is still there. She's no longer wealthy, she lives quite quietly, but she swims laps every day, and she still gives lectures on health.

When she dies, she leaves instructions that her ashes are to be thrown into the sea off the Barrier Reef, and so *Neptune's Daughter* returns to the sea.