

A History of the Catalina Channel Swims

Since 1927

by  
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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the book is to develop a history of the swimming crossings of the Catalina Channel since the first swim was completed in 1927.

On January 15, 1927 George Young won the Wrigley Ocean Marathon swim across the Catalina Channel in 15 hours, 44 minutes, and 30 seconds. Within three months of the Wrigley Ocean Marathon, four swimmers successfully tackled the Catalina Channel.

Between 1927 and 1952 only two men conquered the Channel, but from 1952 to 1958 eleven swimmers crossed the Channel. Numerous attempts were made between 1958 and 1970 but none were successful. In the early 1970's and again in the late 1970's, the men's and women's speed records were rewritten. There were twenty-nine crossings by seventeen swimmers in the 1970's. From 1980 through 1989 there were thirty two individual crossings and twelve relay crossings. The book is further broken into the following sections from 1990 to 1999; 2000 to 2004; 2005 to 2007;2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; Around the Island swims and 2012.

In 2011 the overall relay record was broken and in 2012 the women's record and overall record from Catalina to the mainland was smashed. Numerous records were broken, especially that of the oldest person to swim the Catalina Channel (which was broken three times) and the relay record. From 1927 through the 2012 season there were two hundred and fifty-one (251) people who swam Catalina.

#### **The following conclusions were reached:**

1. The 1927 Wrigley Ocean Marathon swim began the long history of Channel swimming in the United States.
2. In the end of 2012 there had been eighty-five relay crossings and two hundred and fifty-one people swam the Catalina Channel.
3. Female swimmers have been as successful as male swimmers in crossing and setting records for the Catalina Channel.
4. Age is a determinant of speed in swimming the Catalina Channel.
5. The establishment of the Catalina Channel Swimming Federation has aided in the development and furtherance of the Catalina crossing and its history.
6. Pool swimming and the inception of the marathon team aided in development of marathon swimmers in the 1970's.
7. The Catalina Channel swim is comparable to the English Channel in conditions, difficulty, distance, and challenge to the swimmer.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**1927--1950: An Era of Firsts**  
**Other Aspirants in 1927**

On January 15, 1927, George Young became the first person to swim the Catalina Channel. Of the 102 entrants, he was the only one to finish. Within a week the glitter and gleam of the Wrigley Ocean Marathon dwindled, most of the aspirants had departed, the public and the press had gone home, yet a handful of swimmers remained behind.

The lure of crossing the Catalina Channel restricted these swimmers from returning home defeated. Of those in Wrigley's race Henry Sullivan had lasted eight and a half hours, Myrtle Huddleston seven hours, Peter Meyer seventeen hours, Charlotte Schoemmell six and one half hours, Martha Stager nineteen and one half hours, Kyle Leonard three hours, and Byron Summers lasted five and one half hours. Within the next three months each attempted the Channel again. Some were successful, others were not.

The first of these aspirants was Henry Sullivan. On January 30th, only fifteen days after the Wrigley marathon, Sullivan waded into the dark icy water at 8:00 a.m. just north of the Isthmus of Catalina. He did so in secrecy, however. His goal was to become the first American to swim Catalina and to become the first person to have swum both the English and Catalina Channels.<sup>1</sup>

In order to verify his crossing he was accompanied by two boats, various Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) officials, and numerous newspapermen. As the swim wore on Sullivan ran into problems; not only were the currents and the tides against him, but an adverse headwind restricted his progress. "The offshore breeze was pretty stiff. The men on the boat were sick. I was the only one who enjoyed the rough weather."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the crossing Sullivan varied from thirty-four to forty-two strokes a minute. This was breaststroke, not the crawl as George Young had used. For nourishment he drank chicken soup, orange juice, and milk. Nevertheless during the swim he lost seventeen-pounds.<sup>4</sup>

After 22 hours and 45 minutes Sullivan stepped ashore at Point Vicente at 11:53 p.m. His reward was the personal satisfaction of accomplishing his goal and a little more. He stated, however: "the Catalina Channel is a much easier stretch than the English Channel, where the tides and the currents are much worse!"<sup>5</sup>

Sullivan's success sparked some of the other swimmers into action. During the afternoon and the evening of February 5th four swimmers entered the water at the Isthmus. These included Myrtle Huddleston, Peter Meyer, Charlotte Schoemmell, and Martha Stager.<sup>6</sup> The women were driven by the desire to become the first woman to conquer the Catalina channel. There was even a possibility of Wrigley's \$15,000 being donated for the first woman, or so the three women hoped. Of these swimmers only Myrtle Huddleston finished. Charlotte Schoemmell was driven from the water when her support boat broke down. Peter Meyer retired within a few miles of completion when his support boat drifted into the breakwater at San Pedro; and exhaustion caused Martha Stager to withdraw.

Huddleston, a 30 year old widow from Long Beach, had only begun swimming during the preceding year to lose weight. She had been motivated to enter the Wrigley Ocean Marathon in order to pay for her son's education.<sup>7</sup>

Her swim was far from routine. Beginning at 2:30 p.m., Huddleston encountered one problem after another. Fog appeared after midnight and the lights on both support boats went out. Unable to see the boats, she drifted off and for three hours she was lost. During this time she was attacked by a barracuda. She received bites and cuts on the left side of her body. The fish kept returning and she had to beat them off with her hands.<sup>8</sup> Finally, as the fog lifted the support boats found her.

Huddleston did not eat or drink throughout most of the swim. As the hours wore on this took its toll. Then as she began faltering, she drank one-half pint of whiskey. Within minutes and approximately a half hour of completion, she became hysterical and was only semi-conscious. She was faltering quickly. The lack of eating, the whiskey, and the hours of exercise had the better of her so that she could not lift her left arm. Her son's shouts were the only thing which motivated her to begin again. "Come on, Mama, come on, Mama, don't give up."<sup>9</sup> Laboriously she inched forward and was caught by the surf, pushing her closer to shore. About twenty yards from the shore she stood up and immediately collapsed in the water. She had to be carried to the support boat. For 20 hours and 42 minutes she had struggled; it was finally over. She lost consciousness a few minutes on the support boat. As she awoke her son cried, "Oh, Mama' You did it, doggone it, you did it!"<sup>10</sup>

Huddleston spent a few days in the hospital recovering from her harrowing experience, she had lost seventeen pounds. She became the first woman to cross the Catalina Channel. Her swim, however, was disputed by some authorities because she drank alcohol and stopped before reaching the shore.<sup>11</sup> Few will argue, however, that it was not a amazing feat of perseverance. As the Catalina Islander noted, "she battled on when the brain mind was too tired to direct the heart mind that contained the motive to win!"<sup>12</sup> Two other swimmers are credited with swimming the Catalina Channel in 1927 but both are disputed. The first was by Kyle Leonard in March. His swim took 15 hours, 11 minutes, and 38 seconds, over thirty minutes under George Young's record. The exact date is not known. The first reference to this swim is in the 1950's, and is disputed because there is no proof available.<sup>14</sup>

The second swim of 1927 was completed by Byron Summers on April 24th. His time was a blistering 13 hours and 35 minutes, over two hours faster than George Young. Summers, a twenty-eight year old from Glendale California, began at 10:15 p.m. at the Isthmus. Similar to Young he used the crawl and maintained forty-six strokes a minute. Cramps hampered his swim at times but he was able to work them out.<sup>15</sup> He completed the swim at 11:50 a.m.. In order to verify his swim, he was accompanied by two boats: a skiff with his trainer, his brother, and an AAU official on it, and the second, a motor boat with newspapermen aboard.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, his swim was disputed in 1952 by Florence Chadwick for no apparent reason.<sup>17</sup>

No one else conquered the Catalina Channel in 1927. In January, Wrigley had prepared a Catalina Swim for women only in September of 1927 but this never came about.<sup>18</sup> Whether Huddleston's success or lack of interest cancelled this is not known.

### **The Thirties and Forties**

The end of a decade came and went without any other successful crossings. Between 1930 and 1952 only two men conquered the Channel, both had extremely

unique swims. The first swam to Santa Monica and the latter was blind.

What impels a violinist from a Paris Conservatory to leave his position to attempt the Catalina Channel? Then after five unsuccessful attempts over a two year period, how did he have the courage or desire, to attempt the swim again? It was simple, Paul Chotteau was not going to be defeated. He wanted to succeed in the longest ocean swim ever recorded, from Catalina Island to Santa Monica, thirty-eight miles. On July 26, 1936, he accomplished his goal. A swim that began 33 hours and 50 minutes earlier was over, or in actuality two years of struggling was over.<sup>19</sup>

In preparation for his sixth attempt, Chotteau swam five to six hours a day and ran one to two miles a day.<sup>20</sup> He also gained weight and weighed 224 pounds at the start. Further, Chotteau greased with petroleum jelly in order to prevent chafing. The water temperature was not expected to be a problem, and it turned out to be between 66 and 68 degrees throughout the swim.<sup>21</sup> Chotteau planned to feed every 1 1/2 hours and began with liquid mixture of glucose, milk, maltose, and fruit juice.<sup>22</sup> His swim was sponsored by Bert Rovere, the opera singer entrant in the 1927 swim. For the swim, he was accompanied by two boats, the Belfred and Irma. The Irma was a navigational vessel while the Belfred was in charge of direct support, officiating, and feeding. This division would later lead to severe problems.<sup>23</sup>

The swim began at 5:01 a.m. from north of the Isthmus.<sup>24</sup> Chotteau used the crawl stroke and maintained twenty-seven to thirty-one strokes a minute.<sup>25</sup> This was a rather slow turnover when compared with Byron Summers' forty-six strokes a minute. As the day drifted into night Chotteau almost had an encounter with dolphins but the lead boat chased them away. During the night the lights on the boat attracted a few sharks and one had to be gaffed.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these close calls, Chotteau swam on toward Santa Monica. In the early morning hours the Belfred left for a quick trip to warn the newspapermen of Chotteau's arrival in the mid-morning. Unfortunately a major mistake was made. Chotteau's food was not transferred to the other boat. A high fog blanketed the area and the Belfred could not find the Irma.<sup>27</sup>

In the meantime Chotteau needed his 1 1/2 hour break. The only thing available was milk. Chotteau would not swim very far on that, yet he never lost his optimism.<sup>28</sup> He began to falter physically. Because of cramps, stopping every few minutes, it did not seem like he would make it. At long last and just in time, the Belfred returned. Chotteau was replenished and set off for the last four miles. These four grueling miles took him three hours. Chotteau was blind from the salt water since he did not wear goggles. Throughout the swim he had been paced by numerous lifeguards. As the waves were breaking very hard and he could not see, he needed three pacers to escort him into shore. As soon as he struck the bottom he was pulled ashore. It was 2:45 p.m. on July 26th. He had lost fourteen pounds on the swim and spent the next day recovering in the hospital.<sup>29</sup>

Paul Chotteau had been successful in trial number six. As C. P. Nicholas, the AAU Chairman stated, "Chotteau put up a plucky battle every minute of the time he was in the water."<sup>30</sup> He became the first to swim from Catalina to Santa Monica and set a record for the longest ocean swim.

Another person did not brave the Catalina Channel until 1946. At forty-eight years of age, King Benny Nawahi, of Hawaii, set out to swim the Catalina Channel. His

age alone would make the accomplishment amazing. Yet added to this King Nawahi was blind. He did not let that hinder him. He was guided by "the tinkle of the bell on the pilot boat."<sup>31</sup> In addition, two lifeguards took turns swimming with him most of the crossing.

Nawahi began at 9:51 p.m. on September 1. Instead of starting at the Isthmus he became the first to swim from Avalon. This added three miles to the crossing. During the swim, Nawahi drank two quarts of soup. He was able to digest the soup but then he began swallowing salt water and developed cramps. Luckily these passed and he was able to continue.<sup>32</sup>

The boats were being guided by a large bonfire on the shore and over 150 people were waiting for his arrival. With the aid of two lifeguards, George Cole and John Olguin, he walked ashore at Point Fermin at 8:15 p.m. The crossing had taken 22 hours and 20 minutes. This is an amazing accomplishment considering the age and the physical handicap of Nawahi.

### **Summary**

From the Wrigley Marathon in 1927 to the end of the Forties a wide variety of swimmers tackled the Catalina Channel and numerous records and courses were established. Henry Sullivan became the first American and the first to have swum both the English and Catalina Channels. Myrtle Huddleston became the first and only woman up to 1952 to conquer the Catalina Channel. Kyle Leonard and then Byron Summers broke George Young's record and the latter held until 1954. Paul Chotteau established a course to Santa Monica and an endurance record. King Benny Nawahi established a course from Avalon to the mainland and became the oldest person to conquer the Catalina Channel.

This period of trials led to the early Fifties and a new breed of long distance swimmers emerged, the professional.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Swims Of The Fifties: 1952--1958

Swimming the Catalina Channel was the popular challenge of the 1950's. Between 1952 and 1958 eleven swimmers crossed the Channel, five more than once and one 3-times. The Fifties can be separated into two parts: the early years 1952--1954 and the later years 1955--1958. The former features Florence Chadwick; the latter Greta Andersen.

The top female marathon swimmers attempted the Catalina Channel in this period. After establishing themselves by setting records in the English Channel, these female swimmers sought Catalina, the American version of the English Channel. Their enthusiasm helped to establish Catalina as a recognizable challenge to marathon swimmers.

#### The Early Years: 1952--1954

After a six year period of unsuccessful attempts during the late 40's, Roy Carmassi, thirty-three, became the first swimmer of the 1950's to conquer Catalina. Carmassi, unlike the majority of the swimmers of the 1927 era, was a swimmer. For five years he had won San Francisco's two and a half mile Golden Gate ocean swim. In 1950, he entered the Marine Corps where he taught combat survival swimming. In January of 1952 he was discharged and immediately began training for the Catalina swim. Over the next seven months he swam five to ten miles a day.<sup>1</sup>

At 8:08 p.m. on August 28, 1952, he entered the water at Emerald Bay, north of the Isthmus. Carmassi had some physical problems on his swim which deserved medical attention. "The doctor gave me shots to kill the pain in my sore left shoulder. About noon the waves flipped me over and pulled that left arm muscle and I had very little use of that arm after that."<sup>2</sup>

At another stage in the swim as coach Mrs. Jean Van Der Zell stated, "a lamb's wool ear plug fell out of Carmassi's left ear, permitting salt water to enter the ear. But Dr. Robert Garrett gave him eardrops and fixed a new plug for Carmassi."<sup>3</sup>

Kelp, porpoises, and even a few sharks which the Coast Guard Auxiliary shot, joined Carmassi in his swim. At 2:30 p.m. he landed at Whites Point, where hundreds of people greeted him. His time was nowhere near the record, at 18 hours and 20 minutes. When asked if he would try again, he abruptly answered, "No that's enough!"<sup>4</sup>

Starting the morning after Carmassi was Jose Cortinas from Havana, Cuba. His crossing was extremely rough and throughout the swim seven foot swells, offshore winds and whitecaps hindered his attempt. His course was charted by John Olguin, one of the pacers on King Nawahi's swim. Tom Sheffield, eighty-six, was his pilot. As the conditions worsened Sheffield told Cortinas to quit. He could not fight the current and was drifting. Cortinas was determined and replied, "Well bring the band out to San Diego."<sup>5</sup>

Aboard the support vessel most of the people were seasick. With the rough swells the support boat found it impossible to get close enough to feed the swimmer.<sup>6</sup> Finally Cortinas was given hot coffee which unfortunately made him sick. Within close

succession he acquired a leg cramp and contemplated retiring. Instead, a rope was thrown to him which he tied around his leg and this numbed the pain.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-eight hours and 55 minutes after he had entered the water he stepped ashore at Point Fermin. His only request was "I want a big juicy steak."<sup>8</sup> Much to his surprise he was given \$1,000 for his courage.<sup>9</sup>

The next and most outstanding swimmer of this earlier period was Florence Chadwick. She was born on November 9, 1919, and began swimming at six. At fourteen she switched to backstroke.<sup>10</sup> She joined the Los Angeles Athletic Club and was second in the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) National in 1932 to Eleanor Holm. Nevertheless she was never better than third again and in 1936 missed qualifying for the United States Olympic team by placing fourth. Only the first three qualified for the team. Distressed she turned to the ocean and in 1945 became a professional by swimming in an Esther Williams film.<sup>11</sup>

Chadwick married a San Diego policeman but the marriage did not last. She worked at the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club but was not happy. She became a comptometer operator.<sup>12</sup> Then, without telling anyone, she signed a contract in 1948 with the American Arabian Oil Company and was sent to Saudi Arabia.<sup>13</sup> It had been Chadwick's life-long ambition to swim the English Channel which was what prompted her to drop everything. Daily she drove to the Persian Gulf to train. In 1950, her contract with the company expired and she flew to France to tackle the English Channel.<sup>14</sup> She swam from France to England on August 8, 1950, in 13 hours and 20 minutes, beating Gertrude Ederle's twenty-four year old record by over an hour.<sup>15</sup>

After a year in the United States, she returned to England and became the first woman to swim from England to France. Her time, however, was rather slow, 16 hours and 22-minutes.<sup>16</sup>

Chadwick was only the fifth out of 200 aspirants to successfully cross from England to France.

When Chadwick swam from England to France she was thirty-two years old, weighed one hundred and forty pounds, and was approximately five feet six inches tall.

I used to think that Chadwick and her channels were just freak stuff, good for some fast publicity and money. But now I know better. This is the greatest woman swimmer of all time--maybe of either sex--and it's time she got credit for it.<sup>18</sup>

Johnny Weissmuller, who made the above statement, not only met Chadwick but paced her on her first Catalina Channel swim in 1952. For just under sixteen hours, on July 4th, she battled the tides but to no avail. Within a mile of Point Vicente, she quit. "I can't go any more."<sup>19</sup> 15,000 to 20,000 people were waiting on the beach for her to finish and over 3,000 people were at the dock when she arrived. Despite shaking from the cold she stated, "I am sorry that I let you down."<sup>20</sup> Many people did not feel she had. An automobile dealer gave her a new 1952 Studebaker and numerous contributions were sent to her. She was offered \$5,000 in endorsements and guaranteed \$10,000 to try again. In addition Harry Maizlish, of KFWB and the Del Mar Beach Club agreed to sponsor another attempt.<sup>21</sup>

In the six weeks she had to train and prepare, she fired her trainer, Bert Rovere, a swimmer in the 1927 Catalina Channel Race, and her publicity agent. Then she established her goal. This was to break George Young's record of 15 hours, 4 minutes,



and 20 seconds. She did not acknowledge Byron Summers record.<sup>22</sup>

Her new trainer was Myron Cox, an old friend of the family. Chadwick trained seven miles daily for six weeks. <sup>23</sup> Then, to counteract the cold, a ten pound layer of grease was applied to her body.<sup>24</sup>

On the crossing she had trainer, Cox, and an assistant trainer, her brother Richard. Officials Fred Cady of the AAU and the starter in the 1927 swim and Jim McHugh were on board. In addition, Carl Jorgenson served as oarsman.<sup>25</sup>

Chadwick's swim was covered by KNBH television. A few million people watched this epic swim and there were an estimated seventy-five boats accompanying her.<sup>26</sup>

During the crossing she drank beef broth and ate sugar cubes every hour. Her stroke count ranged from sixty strokes a minute to twenty-eight.<sup>27</sup> According to Chadwick, "The first part of the swim was the roughest, I had a tummy ache for four hours and felt more like crying than swimming. But I worked it off. I was terribly cold the last three hours, just as cold as in my first swim, but it didn't last as long."<sup>28</sup>

She did not fail again. On September 22, 1952 she crossed Catalina and broke George Young's record by almost two hours. Her time was 13 hours, 45 minutes and 32 seconds.<sup>29</sup> An estimated 3,000 people lined the cliffs to watch her finish. One woman had a heart attack in all the excitement and another fell off a cliff.<sup>30</sup>

Not only did Chadwick set a record but she received over \$35,000 in personal interviews and television endorsements. One man gave her \$1,000, and another an expensive ring. In response to the adverse comments about it only being a publicity stunt for money, Chadwick stated, "Should I back away when a man hands me \$1,000 cash, and another a new car, and all kinds of companies want endorsements after I almost killed myself for 13 hours beating Catalina?"<sup>31</sup> Florence Chadwick swim schools emerged, and she was hired as a professional at the Del Mar Club with free room and board.<sup>32</sup>

Chadwick stated she would like to attempt to swim from Point Vicente to Catalina in 1953. This did not materialize however, and never again did Chadwick attempt the Catalina Channel.

Two swims took place in 1953. For Roy Sutter crawling ashore at White Cove was rewarding. This was not only his second attempt in 1953 but his fifth attempt since 1951. In 1951 after seven hours he had an attack of food poisoning. In 1952 he had a collision with a porpoise and was literally, "knocked three feet out of the water on his first attempt in the small hours of the morning."<sup>34</sup> Later that day, he attempted again but was too tired.

In 1953, he tried in early September and failed. Sutter, thirty-nine, and formerly a chicken rancher from Texas, entered the water at Emerald Bay at 10:55 on September 12. Within seven miles of the mainland he swam into strong currents and choppy water. This slowed him immensely. He also encountered heavy fog, but at least the fish left him alone, and no food affected him adversely. Sutter's swim took 16 hours and 38 minutes, well over Chadwick's record.<sup>35</sup>

Jose Cortinas decided to swim Catalina again; however, he chose to start on the mainland and swim to Catalina. He waited until early October to attempt the swim. He began at 5:35 p.m. on a Friday evening. For 32 hours and 10 minutes he plodded across

the Channel and landed early on Sunday morning.<sup>36</sup> He became the first to swim in this direction.

In 1954 another professional swimmer, Tom Park, decided to attempt the Catalina Channel. Originally from Hamilton, Ontario, Park at one time held every Canadian record from fifty yards to two miles. He swam on the professional marathon circuit and on July 26, 1954 won the twenty-six mile Atlantic City race.<sup>37</sup>

When not swimming, Park resided in Long Beach, with his wife and two children. He was both a professional wrestler and a service station attendant. He decided to swim Catalina because, "I got tired of seeing all these floaters trying to make it."<sup>38</sup>

The thirty-one year old swam well; he broke Chadwick's record by twenty-two minutes and Byron Summers' record by ten, swimming the Channel in 13 hours, 25 minutes and 41 seconds.<sup>39</sup> This returned the record not only to the male sex but to the Canadians as well.

The early Fifties ended with both new speed records for men and women and the first person swimming from the mainland to Catalina. The late Fifties would also have extraordinary records with Tom Park destroying Cortinas' mainland to Catalina record by twenty-two hours, and then the unimaginable double crossing by Greta Andersen in 1958.

### **The Late 1950's**

More women attempted to conquer Catalina in this period and in 1955 two women were successful. At 7:13 a.m. on September 23rd, Daisy Murchie of Long Beach set out from Avalon to swim the Channel. The thirty-eight year old woman had little problem in the swim until the last mile when she swam into an adverse current. Murchie crawled ashore at Abalone Cove at 12:17 a.m. after spending 17 hours and 4 minutes in the water.<sup>40</sup>

Murchie's preparation consisted of only three months of training. She was pleased with her accomplishment. "It was a good crossing, I'm very tired and very cold."<sup>41</sup> She became the third woman to swim the Channel. Amy Hiland, 31, also of Long Beach became the fourth. She swam from Catalina to the mainland in 20 hours, 7 minutes and 7 seconds. This turned out to be the first of two successful swims for her.<sup>42</sup>

The next year saw the return of Tom Park to the Catalina Channel when he decided to attempt the swim from the mainland to Catalina. He arranged to have Greta Andersen and George Wilhelm pace him at various times through the swim.<sup>43</sup> Leaving from the shore adjacent to the Marineland pier at 6:20 p.m. on June 17, Park raced across the Channel. According to his trainer, Jim Leishman, the water was ideal. This became evident as Park walked ashore 9 hours, 10 minutes, and 30 seconds after he began. A truly amazing swim, Park now held the overall record for each direction. The latter record was not broken for decades.<sup>44</sup>

Later in 1956, three Mexican swimmers attempted the Channel. Of the three, only Ramon Briseno Ocana was successful.<sup>45</sup> Lifeguard John Olguin stated that Ocana liked to sit on the beach and watch Areliano and Beltran train. Occasionally he would take a dip, yet he never trained very hard.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the twenty-seven year old worker tackled the Catalina Channel in 15 hours, 54 minutes and 22 seconds.<sup>47</sup>

Dr. Bill Slater, a plastic surgeon from Long Beach, also swam Catalina in 1956. According to the Los Angeles Times he had crossed in 1955 in 18 hours and 54

minutes.<sup>48</sup> The exact date of his first crossing has not been determined, however. Dr. Slater's 1956 crossing took 17 hours and 30 minutes. Slater encountered heavy swells and an adverse current which pushed him more than four and one-half miles off course and he landed north of Point Vicente, in an area where his support boats could not follow. Thus, once he had landed, he had to swim back to his boat.<sup>49</sup> The swim was almost 1 1/2 hours faster than his first swim.

Dr. Slater became the first person to cross the Channel three times when he completed the crossing on June 22, 1957. At forty-nine, he improved his previous time by almost two hours, swimming it in 15 hours and 38 minutes. As in the two previous swims, he swam from Catalina to the mainland and he was within 2 hours and 13 minutes of Tom Park's record.<sup>50</sup>

Another foreign professional swimmer attempted the Catalina Channel in 1957. This was Jason Zirganos, a 48 year old retired Army major. He greased his entire body, fearing the water to be too cold. Zirganos from Greece, had already swum the English Channel four times and had swum various professional races including the Capri to Naples, the Nile race, and the Atlantic City Marathon.<sup>51</sup> Setting out from the Island at night, on October 13, Zirganos was immediately beset with problems. Rain, swells, and the tide hindered his record attempt. Many times throughout the evening his support boats lost sight of him. Zirganos pushed onward. After twelve hours he was less than one mile from the shore, far ahead of Park's record. Unfortunately, severe currents restricted him from landing. For five hours he fought the currents until he was able to land. Despite all his hardships he wanted to attempt a return but was talked out of it.<sup>52</sup>

Surprisingly, the spring of 1958 brought Amy Hiland back to Catalina. The thirty-two year old housewife who had crossed in 1955, decided to swim from Catalina to Long Beach, twenty-six miles. She wanted to establish a record for the longest distance for a female. On April 26 she set out and exactly twenty-four hours later landed in Long Beach.<sup>53</sup>

Hiland's endurance record did not stand very long, however. One of the most outstanding female marathon swimmers of all times, Greta Andersen, decided to attempt Catalina. Yet unlike anyone else, she wanted to attempt a double crossing, over forty-four miles.

Greta Andersen was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1928. She began swimming at fifteen and within two years held every Danish freestyle record and a few international records. Representing Denmark in the 1948 Olympics, Andersen won a gold medal in the 100 meter freestyle and a silver in the 400 meter freestyle relay.<sup>54</sup>

Within a few years she moved to California and became a swim instructor. She needed money and finally in 1956 turned to professional marathon swimming with enormous success.<sup>55</sup>

In 1957 she married John Sonnichsen and he became her trainer. She trained three to five hours a day. Anderson who stood 5'10" tall and weighed between 142 and 170 pounds depending on the swim she was preparing for, drank a sugar mixture for nourishment on her swims.<sup>56</sup>

After making an unsuccessful bid at a double crossing of the English Channel in August of 1958, Anderson returned home to the United States. During this time she decided to attempt a double crossing of the Catalina Channel. She set out from Emerald

Bay on Catalina at 12:41 a.m. on October 5th. Almost immediately fog set in. Two support boats were used to guide her. One maintained constant contact with Anderson by covering her with a spotlight while the other took care of the navigation. This worked for some time and then a problem arose. Tony Azpeitia, swimming next to Andersen happened to look down and saw "there was a ten foot shark swimming along just beneath us."<sup>57</sup> Immediately the light was turned off without warning her of the danger.

Beyond this incident there were few problems encountered. Andersen reached Point Vicente after 10 hours, 49 minutes, and 41 seconds. This not only shattered Florence Chadwick's women's record but the men's record in that direction held by Tom Park, by over 2 1/2 hours.<sup>58</sup> Andersen sat in ankle deep water for almost thirty minutes. She had been knocked down by a wave as she tried to climb up the rocks at the landing and received numerous cuts and bruises. Tired and cold she clung to the shore. Her husband urged her to retire if she was too tired. At last she stood up determined to make it. All she said was "I'm going to make it."<sup>59</sup>

The flat water of the night lifted with the fog in midmorning. Hour after hour she struggled onward. She had to fight herself, the cold water, and the strong currents.<sup>60</sup> Then after 26 hours, 53 minutes and 28 seconds Andersen retouched the Island. Her second lap took her 15 hours, 36 minutes, and 38 seconds. This was well off the 9 hours and 10 minute record of Tom Park but she became the first woman to swim from the mainland to Catalina.<sup>61</sup>

As she returned to Alamitos Bay via the cabin cruiser Chubusco, she stated, "I'm tired, of course, and still a little cold but otherwise I feel great."<sup>62</sup> She later added, "If I had known what I was getting into, I wouldn't have done it."<sup>63</sup>

In one swim Andersen set a new world record from Catalina to the mainland, a new woman's record from the mainland to Catalina, and established a double record.

### **Summary**

As the 1950's came to a close the Catalina records had been rewritten. In the early Fifties new speed records for men and women were established and the first person swam from the mainland to Catalina. In the late Fifties Chadwick's women's record was improved upon by Greta Andersen as was Tom Park's Catalina to mainland record. Tom Park, in turn, destroyed Cortinas' mainland to Catalina record by twenty-two hours. Greta Andersen completed the first double crossing of Catalina in 1958. Many of these records stood until the mid-Seventies when another new breed of marathon swimmers emerged and rewrote the records one by one.

### **NEW SWIMMER FROM 1950's**

With greater research from many people and resources, five swimmers were discovered in recent years from earlier decades. They were Daisy Murchie, Leo Vigil, Stewart Evans, Greta Andersen and Isaac Papke.

Daisy Murchie was a 39 year old who swam on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1956. She swam from the mainland to Catalina becoming the first woman to do so. Her time was 15 hours and 40 minutes almost two hours faster than her 1955 Catalina to the mainland crossing.

Leo Vigil was a 24 year old Cuban. He swam on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1957. He swam from the mainland to Catalina. Leo's time was 17 hours, 14 minutes and 45 seconds. He was retroactively credited as the 17th swimmer to cross

Captain Stewart Evans was from Newton Massachusetts. On August 27, 1959 he swam from Catalina to the mainland. His time was 20 hours, 55 minutes. Among the list of solo swimmers, he became the 20th person to make the crossing

The fourth swim for Greta Andersen was on October 16, 1959. She swam from the mainland to Catalina in 11 hours 7 minutes and 30 seconds. She was already credited as the 19th Catalina swimmer, but now ties Tina Neill for the most swims for a woman—four.

Finally there was Isaac Papke who swam from Catalina to the mainland. Isaac swam on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1963. He landed at 8:38 am after swimming 12 hours and 45 minutes. He becomes the 22nd person on the list of solo swimmers.