Swimming In The Victorian Era
The Universality of Swimming

While it was the English who made swimming a sport during the Victorian Era, the people who spent their lives on the shores of rivers and lakes and in the waters of tropical Africa, the Americas, Polynesia and Asia, were typically taught to swim at the earliest age, the girls as well as boys, as their avocations and recreations required it.

Paul Boyton
American Paul Boyton was a swimmer, life-saver, chevalier in half a dozen languages, adventurer, inventor, scientist, super salesman, businessman and Disneyesque showman who was one of the most remarkable personalities of the era. After one daredevil stunt to promote his famous lifesaving suit in 1874, Queen Victoria was so impressed that she presented him with a gold chronometer, entertained him on the royal yacht at Cowes and ordered a full supply of the suits for the royal yachts, Victoria and Albert. His later endeavors earned him induction into the Amusement Park Hall of Fame, as the inventor of the Chute the Chutes, “The King of All Amusements,” and originator of the amusement park concept.

The Nile Expedition -
British Force Relied Upon Nubian Swimmers
In 1884, an Islamic revolt against British rule in the Sudan laid siege to the garrison at Khartoum, under the command of General Charles Gordon. The British organized a relief expedition to travel up the Nile River and rescue Gordon.

At Dongola, the British military force employed 1500 Nubians to assist them on their journey. During the course of the expedition several cataracts or rapids had to be crossed.

There are two fascinating points about these images and the expedition. First, all of the Nubians were all excellent swimmers and swam across the Nile to construct the hawser and pulley system that carried the soldiers to the other side.

Second, the stroke used by the Dongola men demonstrates perfect high elbow, double-over-arm crawl stroke technique later to become known as either the Trudgian or Australian crawl by Europeans. When one of the boats spilled the British soldiers into the water, the Nubians raced into the water to their rescue.

This journey turned out to be for naught. Two days before the relief force arrived the entire garrison was slaughtered, including General Gordon. His head was cut off and delivered to the leader of the revolt.
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Swimming In Japan
Japan has a rich swimming history. Swimming skills were required of Samurai warriors and annual inter-collegiate swimming competitions began in 1810. In this image, male swimmers tow a royal consort across a lake.

Hawaiian Surf Riders
“It was a sight to see, wrote William Morris Davis, in 1874,” Native men and women enjoying themselves on surfboards.

Pearls, the favored gem of European royalty as shown in the portrait of Maria Feodorovna, Empress of Russia in the 1880’s, were harvested by African, Native American Indian, Polynesian, East Indian and Asian swimmers throughout history - until the secret of cultured pearls were discovered in Japan at the beginning of the 20th Century.
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The Princess Alice Disaster
Named after Queen Victoria’s third child, the pleasure boat Princess Alice ferried people up and down the Thames until disaster struck on the 3rd of September, 1878. As the Alice was approaching its dock near London Bridge, she was sliced in half by the Bywell Castle, a ship four times her size. It was estimated that seven hundred men, women and children were on board. Of this number about five-hundred and fifty drowned. Tragic as this incident was, it stimulated a greater interest in swimming and the idea that Everyone Should Learn To Swim.

On August 24th, 1875, Captain Matthew Webb dove off Admiralty Pier in Dover, and started swimming to France. When he reached the Calais sands 22 hours later, his feat was an accomplishment of the impossible. A crowd of thousands massed on the French beach and back in England he became one of the greatest heroes that has ever arisen in peacetime.

Webb basked in the glory of national and international adulation fame. He licensed his name for merchandising such as commemorative pottery, and wrote a book called The Art of Swimming. A brand of matches was named after him. He participated in exhibition swimming matches and stunts such as floating in a tank of water for 128 hours.

He did, perhaps, more than any single person in history to popularize swimming, but 8 years later, it all came to an end when, at the age of 35, Captain Webb drowned while attempting to be the first to swim the rapids below Niagra Falls in North America.
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Water Polo
The modern game of water polo game originated as a form of rugby football played in rivers and lakes in England and Scotland, using a ball constructed of Indian rubber called a “pulu,” an Indian term for “ball.” By the 1880’s, the game evolved into one that stressed swimming, passing, and scoring by shooting into a goal net. In 1888, the London Water Polo League was founded and in 1890, the first international water polo game was played; Scotland defeated England, 4-0.

Bridge Jumping
Jumping and diving from bridges was a popular pastime for daredevils in the Victorian era. On May 19, 1885, Robert Odlum, a swimming teacher from Washington, D.C., became the first person to jump from the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City, New York. His motivations for doing so included the desire to demonstrate that people did not die simply from falling through the air, thus encouraging people to be willing to jump from a burning building into a net. He also desired fame and the fortune that came with it. Odlum’s pre-announced intention attracted ferryboat loads of spectators and gamblers. When he departed the bridge at 5:35 PM, a strong wind was blowing and it seemed to turn him slightly in the air. As a result, he struck the water at an angle, hitting the water slightly on his right side. The autopsy revealed spleen, liver and kidney’s had ruptured causing internal injuries and death. The next summer, Steve Brodie, an enterprising newsboy, survived and became world famous.
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The Ojibbeway Indians

In 1844, a Canadian promoter brought nine Ojibway Indians from Northwestern Ontario to London. Their appearance, wrote the promoter, “affords an opportunity, never before presented to the British public, of obtaining a personal acquaintance with the appearance, habits, manners and customs of these curious and fast-fading tribes.”

During the visit, two of the tribe were invited to give a swimming exhibition at the High Holborn Bath. The event was recorded for posterity in the Times of London.

There are many explanations as to why the Englishman, using the breaststroke, was able to defeat the two Ojibways. The Ojibway were British Allies during the time of Tecumseh’s War and the British-American War of 1812. They were driven from American into Canada where they occupied the shores of Lake’s Huron and Superior. While swimming was still a tradition, they probably hadn’t been in the water in months or even years and the tribe in general, was beginning to lose its aquatic skills as they no longer roamed into the more temperate climates that extended their swimming season. Nor were all Indians great swimmers. In London, they competed against England’s best and lost, proving to the English that the breaststroke was superior to the “uncivilized” Indian style. The double over-arm stroke would reappear after Englishman John Trudgeon imitated the Indian style after a trip to South America in the late 1870’s and broke all existing records.