

Swimmer relives historic crossing of Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

While Erline Christopherson doesn't remember every stroke, she does remember much of the 13 hours, 37 minutes she spent in Lake Tahoe.

Fifty-one years ago this month the then-16-year-old made history by becoming the first female to swim the length of Lake Tahoe.

This week the Lake Tahoe Museum in South Lake Tahoe debuts an exhibit about Christopherson. She was in town briefly Monday to view it. The 67-year-old now lives in Florida.

"I wanted to do something no one else had done," Christopherson told *Lake Tahoe News*. It took her three tries, but she did it. The first was at age 15 when she came 3 miles shy of shore, the second time she was 1 mile short. All three swims entailed dealing with afternoon storms. The second and third attempts were three weeks apart.



Erline Christopherson, right, with her mother, Elizabeth. Photo/Provided

She swam from Cascade Properties to Dollar Point. It was so

windy, the chaperone boat had to dock elsewhere.

Christopherson tried reading books about how best to prepare, but in 1962 that type of material didn't exist. Her dad applied grease he used on the bailer to her body so it would not become water logged.

Her mom boiled beef and kept the water as protein water for her to consume during the swim. She also drank brown sugar water. Energy drinks as we know them today didn't exist then.

Her sister sang to her to pass the hours.

Wes Stetson was in the air in his seaplane monitoring the progress. He landed and told Christopherson's dad, who was in a boat, how to stay on course.

"All my dad had (as a point of reference) was a bald spot on the other side of the lake," Christopherson said.



Erline Christopherson with the museum display, which includes the suit she wore. Photo/Denise Haerr

Christopherson was 7 or 8 when she first declared she was going to swim the 22 miles of Lake Tahoe.

"I did something that was my own. They can't take that away from me," Christopherson said.

She started swimming when she was 4, and was competing by age 10 in AAU meets. Her specialties were breaststroke and butterfly. At one point she was on the Junior Olympics.

Each attempt the family would come from their ranch in Lodi a few days early to acclimate to the Sierra. She swam the 15-mile width of the lake each of those three times as practice. Going from about Baldwin Beach to Emerald Bay, around Fannette Island and back were other training swims.

At home she would jump into the Mokelumne River and swim upstream against the current. Her swim coach allowed her train in one of the lanes.

She wore a blue one-piece swimsuit that is on display at the museum.

“A wetsuit gives you buoyancy. That is cheating,” Christopherson said.



Remembering what it's like to be in Lake Tahoe – Erline Christopherson. Photo/Denise Haerr

After she made history, the old Outdoorsman store allowed her to pick out any suit she wanted. What she wanted was not something she would compete in, but a bit more feminine. A poster of her was in the store as an advertising marquee.

Christopherson continues to swim. Four years ago, she won the series championship in an ocean race in Clearwater, Fla. – the only time she competed in it. She swims at least a mile when she gets in the pool; longer if she has the time.

“I love this lake. It’s the most beautiful lake in the world. I can’t come to California without coming up here,” Christopherson said. This time, though, there was no time for a swim.

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Notes: Museum volunteer Denise Haerr discovered a box full of memorabilia donated by Erlene Christopherson. She started corresponding with the swimmer, which led to the visit on July 8. Haerr hopes Christopherson will give a talk about the July 25, 1962, feat and that a video would be created from old photographs and newspaper clippings.

The museum at 3058 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe is open Wednesday-Sunday from 11am-3pm. Donations are accepted.