

Tahoe distance swimmer relives historic event

Publisher's note: *Erline Christopherson, the first woman to complete a length-wise swim of Lake Tahoe, will talk about her experience Aug. 20 at 6pm at the South Lake Tahoe Library.*

By Erline Christopherson

As a young child, I always wanted to be in the water and by age 4 I could swim. As soon as possible, mom had me in swimming lessons. Around age 10, I was race swimming at Robbie's Olympic Club. I did pretty well, but my love was distance swimming.

Mr. and Mrs. Harold Thurman lived across the street from us in Lodi and we sort of considered them our grandparents. They took my sister, Francine, and me to their cabin at Lake Tahoe when we were ages 8 and 9. The first time I saw the Lake, I told Mr. Thurman I would someday swim across it. He laughed and said, "OK." When we came home, I told my father what a beautiful lake it was and my dream. He laughed and said, "OK. When you're ready, just tell me."

Little did they realize I was serious.



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

When I was 14, I told dad I was ready to start training for distance instead of racing. I read any book I could find on distance swimming, but nothing told what to eat or grease with, or how to train. I was pretty frustrated, but determined. I started swimming laps for hours at a time at the pool, then going to the Mokelumne River and swimming against the current. It was so strong I stayed in one spot for hours.

Mom came up with broth and sugar water. She would cook a roast for hours and then pour off the pure broth. We decided on a Honey Bear squeeze bottle as my drink dispenser.

About a month before each swim, the Thurmans would let Fran, my friend Mary DeMartini and me stay at the cabin. This way I could adjust to the altitude and practice in the lake. I would swim to the mouth of Emerald Bay and then go around the island and back down each morning. Fran and Mary would row the little boat beside me. At that time, there was no traffic on the lake like today.

Dad did not tell me the exact day I was going to swim because he was afraid I wouldn't sleep. I knew, sort of, because I would swim the width a few days before trying the length to see if I was ready. Dad had decided that we could use the grease he used on the wheel hubs of his hay baler, so that was that. Now, getting it off was another story.

Walt Little, editor of *Lake Tahoe News* (which was a print publication with no affiliation to the online *LTN*), interviewed me for his column Little Quotes and KHVR-FM radio (located with the newspaper office). He was very nice to us, as was everyone. We went to the Coast Guard station to ask permission to swim, as we didn't know if there were rules against it. The people there were very kind, saying they couldn't give us permission, but the lake is so big they wouldn't look for me.

My first attempt was Aug. 30, 1961 at age 15. We started at

Bijou Beach straight up the state line to Cal-Neva Lodge. Just one mile from shore the Coast Guard came out to get me. We had been fighting storms for five hours and dad's boat was swamped. They were bailing water. I had been in the water 18 hours, being pushed backward with waves hitting me in the face and over my head. There were times I was down in the slough of a wave so high dad couldn't see me. It was getting dangerous for everyone. Dad said, "This great lake really gave us a beating."

So, at age 16 we did all the same practices, but decided to go north to south and come in at Tahoe Keys, which was just being built. We hit storms again. About 3 miles out I was battling waves and swimming straight up and down. Colette, my sister, dived in and coaxed me out. I had been swimming 16 hours and mom was seasick.

Three weeks later, dad decided he had the answer – we would start earlier. It was now or never. On July 29, 1962, we started at 2am to beat the storms. It was scary to swim in the dark all alone. Dad tried to keep a spotlight on me. We were all anxious for dawn to break. Fran sang songs, making up words that were about me. Her voice was so beautiful, echoing over the lake in the stillness of the morning. She gave me comfort in the darkness of the night.

Wes Stetson, Thurmans' neighbor at Tahoe, had a seaplane and gave tours over the lake to tourists. His daughter, Sierra and I were friends. He flew over and landed, telling dad he was following the shoreline and I was swimming farther than I had to, also telling us when I was in a current and going backward so I could change my stroke.

This time our goal was North Shore. The storms started rolling in around 3pm, so we headed for Dollar Point. The water was so clear I could see the bottom; 30 feet down. Finally, after 13 hours, 37 minutes, I was on the shore. The waves were so rough dad had to bring the boat in a quarter mile down shore. I

walked to the boat with everyone beside me. It was a wonderful feeling.

Sacramento sportscaster Stu Nahan came a few days earlier and took pictures of us playing and training in Lake Tahoe. After the swim, he interviewed me. It aired on the 11pm news so I never got to see it – it was past my bedtime and I was not allowed to stay up. I was treated no differently than my sisters – there were chores to do on the ranch and mine were still mine.

I love Lake Tahoe – the most beautiful lake in the world, in my opinion. Its waters comfort me, like being covered in silk. I love to stand and just look at its beauty.