

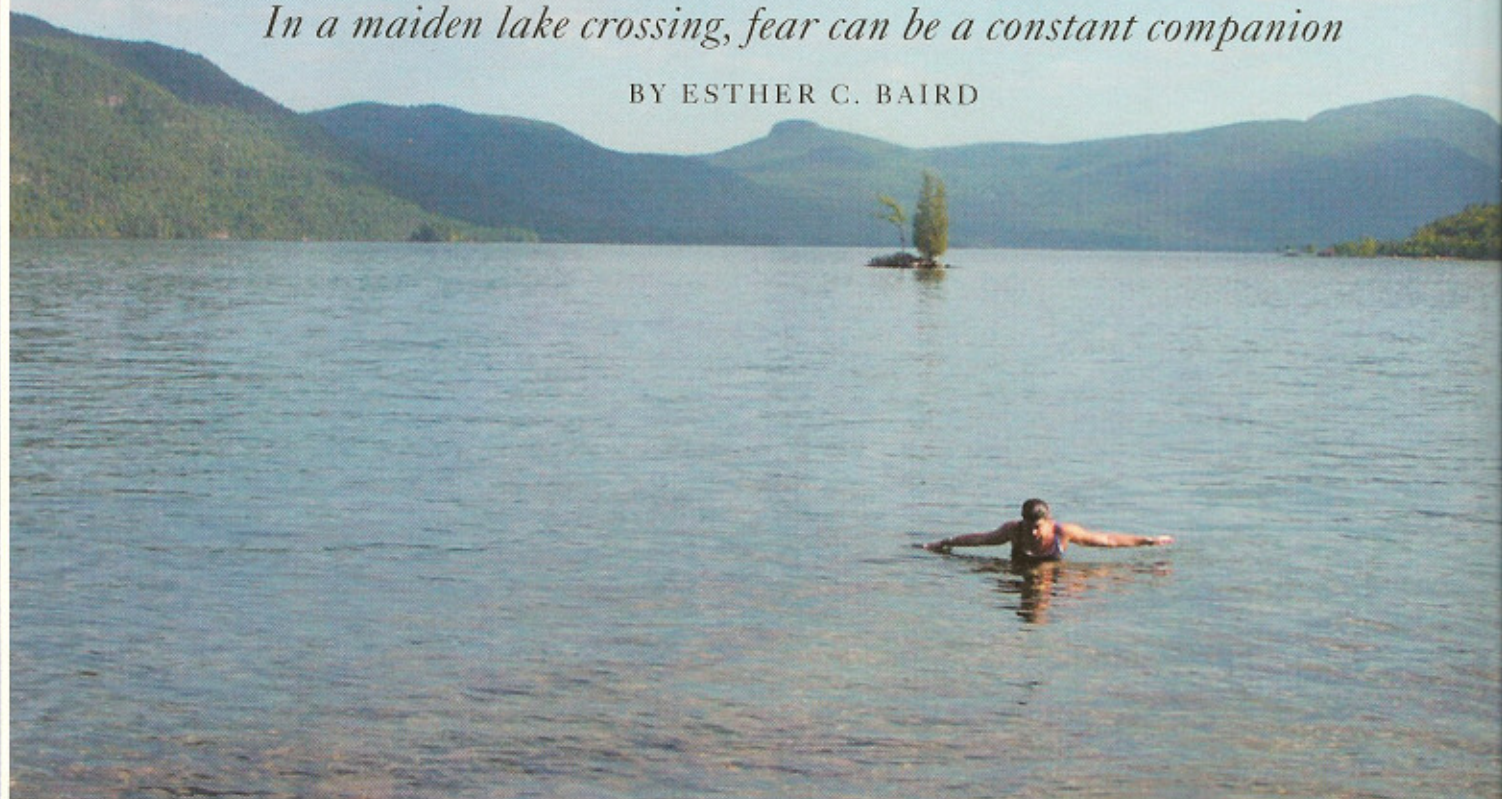
SWIMMING

GREAT OUTDOORS

GEORGE THE FIRST

In a maiden lake crossing, fear can be a constant companion

BY ESTHER C. BAIRD



MY OBSESSION WITH SWIMMING across Lake George had been years in the making. Patiently I waited for just the right conditions to swim the cool, clear waters. Many factors contribute to the perfect lake crossing: Certainly it helps to have a calm day. It's best to go at

dusk or dawn, when boat traffic is light. And most important, it is critical to have practiced, practiced, practiced. Long swims along the shore and out a quarter-mile to Skippers Jib Island have been the foundation of every lake-crossing attempt in our family, which has owned a camp north of Silver Bay for four generations.

Yet the day I chose for the mile-and-a-quarter journey was breezy, the water somewhere between choppy and wavy; it seemed fussy and agitated, never quite smooth. Furthermore, I hadn't practiced a lick, or for that matter exercised at all for two months due to a misunderstanding

with a wakeboard that resulted in a stage-three concussion, of which I'd only just managed to be free.

Every condition was wrong, but I was ready. There was no one reason to choose this day, other than I was tired of waking up each morning and realizing I hadn't accomplished my goal. Ever since I decided at age twelve that I was going to join the ranks of other family members who had swum the lake, I'd found reasons not to. It was my mental Goliath, and I never could find the right three

stones. I spent hours upon hours in the lake and always managed to find an excuse not to cross it. I realized that if no day qualified as perfect, then any day would do.

My gear included a bathing suit, latex swimming cap and wax earplugs. I decided not to swim with goggles because I find foggy lenses more annoying than water in my eyes. My mother and my husband volunteered as spotters. Their job was to ferry me to the other side, then to cruise beside me in the boat and ensure I swam in a mostly straight line. Since my body would be a mere speck to speedboats, they would keep me from being run over by other watercraft.

And so we set off. On the ride over I was a bundle of nerves. This shouldn't be terribly hard, I told myself. Before my two-month hiatus I was a reasonably fit person: I ran a few times a week, was a member of

THE AUTHOR NEARS THE WEST SHORE OF LAKE GEORGE.

PHOTOGRAPH BY *Les Baird*

my local YMCA and even did yoga when I was so inspired. Plus, it was Lake George. I had grown up with these waters. Nothing was more soothing to me than my first dive into the lake each spring, and nothing broke my heart quite like my last swim of the season—often as late as October. The temperature only invigorated me; usually I could outlast any family member or friend in the chilled pre- and post-season waters.

That said, there was something about the lake, out there in the middle, that didn't sit right with me. I felt a litany of excuses rising in my mind, persuading me to stop the boat right there and return to our shore.

Lake George is deep—187 feet at its deepest—and fed by springs left behind by glaciers when those massive fingers of the polar North withdrew ten thousand years ago. Its bottom is dotted with sunken ships from the French and Indian and Revolutionary Wars, ships that surely hold dark secrets. Visions of primordial fish not yet discovered, or believed extinct, had always lurked in the back of my mind. I couldn't help but think of the coelacanth, that strange, mysterious fish from the time of dinosaurs, long assumed extinct but found again . . . not extinct, just lurking deep in the ocean off South Africa. I had thoughts of a freshwater-loving coelacanth floating in and out of the ragged hulls of sunken battleships.

Closer to home, Lake Champlain was just a short portage or dash down the falls north of Lake George. What exactly does everyone think that Loch Ness-like creature of Lake Champlain, fondly called Champ, is if not some leftover deep-lake dinosaur? Might it have relatives in Lake George? Visions of plesiosaurs danced in my head.

But by then I was on the east side of the lake, faced with jumping out of the boat and stroking ten yards east in order to start from land. If I were going to do this, at least it should be legitimate, according to family tradition. Putting the monsters aside for



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the moment, I adjusted my swim cap, stuck in my earplugs, dove overboard and made the short dash to shore.

I took a few deep breaths. Then I shouted to my mom, "When I start swimming, you start the stopwatch, okay?" But somehow she must have heard, "I'm starting this very second so rev the engines and race across the lake without me," because off the boat went in a dramatic display of wake, leaving me to be pounded against the rocks.

Once the confusion cleared and our signals were established, including my repeated warnings to "stay away from me with the motorboat so I don't get ripped to pieces by the propeller" but "not so far away that I get run over and ripped to pieces by other boats' propellers," I was off.

The clock started. I was swimming. I could still see the bottom and was giddy with excitement and energy. This was going to be a blast—fun, easy, exhilarating!

Then I looked up. The other side was easily a hundred miles away, and the bottom had vanished from sight, replaced by a greenish, murky glow. I stopped swimming and began treading water. I had just started and was suddenly certain this was a horrendous mistake. I was never going to make it. I hadn't practiced. It was choppy. I didn't have enough energy to focus on swimming and not being hit by boats—and keep an eye out for suspicious deep-water shadows.

My husband looked at me with a bored expression, but with some reserve for an even higher level of boredom, knowing that he was in for a long ride. "C'mon!" he yelled. "You aren't even swimming, you just started—there's no stopping!" He was like a drill sergeant, but it was what I needed to break out of my panic.

I smiled and started again, this time feeling assured that these were the waters that I'd known my whole life. They would carry me across. I'd do my part, and I'd make it.

I'd make it with half the lake inside me. Swimming freestyle in the



DEAR JOHNNY,

IN OUR HAZY, OPTIMISTIC DAYS OF YOUTH, WE ALWAYS SAID
WHEN WE GREW UP AND HAD SOME MONEY, WE'D DO THE RIGHT THING.
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chop caused me to inhale water rather than air—an increasingly annoying situation. I also had no sense of where I was since the crawl stroke requires that you face down into the water. After choking and sputtering across a quarter of the lake, I flipped over onto my back, which was much better. I could breathe more easily, focus on a point on the horizon I'd just left and maintain a more consistent line. This was important because my mother had been yelling at me to "veer right, veer right." I'd apparently been high-tailing it to the left as if to swim twenty-five miles south to Lake George village.

On my back, I could sing while I swam, and nothing perks me up like belting out a few gospel hymns. With the rhythmic *swack, swack, swack* of my arms I was able to keep a remarkably good beat, if not perhaps tune, so I sang as I exhaled.

My husband, sitting in the boat swatting at flies (I wasn't moving fast enough to keep the bugs away), watched as I pumped my arms and legs to "I'll Fly Away." He and my mother clearly wanted to fly away, but they kept prodding, "C'mon—keep swimming, just keep moving!" I did.

All was well until the halfway point. Halfway points can be encouraging or incredibly discouraging. You can say, "Wow! We're half the way there? That went fast!" Or you can say, "What? I'm only half the way there? At this rate I will turn into a human raisin and sink to the depths of the lake, never to be seen again."

I chose the latter view and flopped onto my stomach to do some simple breaststrokes to regain composure and strength. Unfortunately, this only reminded me that I was suspended more than a hundred feet above the ground by water—only water. Has anyone considered the notion that the laws of physics could change and you might not be able to float in water, but instead drop suddenly like a stone from a cliff and plummet to your death on the lake bed below? Face-down, I was increasingly sure that I

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CEPT
LOG HOMES

SWIMMING

could see shadows moving below. This was the darkest part of the lake, and if ever a coelacanth or plesiosaur was going to rise from the depths, it would be here.

I was horrified and tired. While my imagination had produced silly thoughts before, I was now feeling concrete dread. I was in the middle of the lake, exhausted and hoarse from singing gospel songs to stave off monsters—creatures that, in my waterlogged panic, I was really beginning to believe in.

Then I saw it. At first just a flash of white, but then, oh yes . . . it was! It was the Eagle. Not a bird, but the simple, whitewashed cabin that belongs to my great-aunt and sits on the tip of our point. For years it has served as a beacon to signal we were almost home. The sight gave me a burst of energy, and I was able to flip over and continue my backstroke to shore.

I began to think again about why I was doing this. I am part of a family that has been coming here for decades. I am one of seventy-two first, second and third cousins in my generation. My mother is one of twenty-one cousins who are all the children of four siblings—one of whom was my grandfather, whose mother and twin sister purchased our land.

In one of the family cabins, written with marker on an old rafter, is a list that chronicles a dozen family members who have swum across the lake. It includes my grandfather, my second and third cousins, my uncles, my father and soon, if all went well, me.

When someone swims the lake, it's a tradition that whoever in the family happens to be at camp that day comes down to the water to cheer the person in to the sloping rock below the Eagle—the landing point. As I drew closer and could make out my aunts and cousins, I dug the plugs out of my ears. I wanted to hear this.

It was faint at first, but soon their cheers and claps carried me in. My mother and husband turned the motor off and glided toward shore, clapping also.


SWIMMING

My arms felt like lead, my throat and eyes burned, and yet I'd never felt better in my life than when I reached shore. It took fifty-two minutes and fifty-two seconds—certainly not a record. I had barely any strength to walk, but standing on the rock with my family I knew that the coelacanths could do their worst, the plesiosaurs could dance all they wanted, but I had crossed the lake.

Swimmer's Itch

Big Adirondack lakes attract distance swimmers, but they also lure fast boats. Sally Friedman, author of *Swimming the Channel* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996) and a Paradox Lake distance swimmer, says, "I swim with a Velcro strap around my ankle, tied to which is the biggest, brightest beach ball I can find. I think it works really well—as long as the people driving boats are looking where they are going. I only swim in the morning, when it's mostly calm and I'm clearly visible. The beach ball can be a problem on windy days when I have to tie it in close or it thwacks me in the head." No one should swim alone, without a boat escort, she warns. "Lake George and Schroon Lake are scary even with a boat," Friedman says.

"I always swim freestyle, or Australian crawl, because I'm in it for speed as well as distance. People who swim in a more relaxing way might prefer breaststroke. I went along on my neighbor's swim of the length of Schroon Lake which she did entirely breaststroke. Jerry Ferris, of Ballston Spa, swam Lake George trudgeon crawl, a combination of crawl with a sidestroke kick. I did switch to backstroke when I swam under the George Washington Bridge [to Manhattan], but that's about it.

"As for training," she continues, "I work out in a pool for speed and outdoors for distance. Some people do weights and cross-training, but I don't have the time or the inclination. I love to swim, so that's what I do." 

—Elizabeth Folwell