

Katerina Nehua: endurance swimmer

VICKI CURTIS

In Australia during the Depression endurance swimming was a fad recently arrived from the United States. Its principles were similar to those of the endurance dances of the 1950s—swim until exhaustion overtakes you. The endurance swims were advertised in a way which would attract large numbers of spectators as well as entrants, and were an inexpensive form of income and promotion for the baths' owners who had only to provide venue and advertising, which was sometimes reimbursed.

Contestants were not required to swim lengths or distances, merely to stay afloat; it was forbidden to touch the sides or bottom of the pool. Audiences were large and the prize money sufficient to entice many would-be endurance champions into the water. Some swims were sponsored and attracted well-known swimmers, including some from overseas—English Channel swimmer Mercedes Gleitze, American Charles Zimmy, and Tom O'Neill, world long-distance backstroke record holder.

A twenty-eight year old Maori woman, Katherine Darley, under the name Katerina Nehua,¹ was to make her mark in this field. A small collection of papers in the Turnbull Library² gives some insight into a social phenomenon which for her was a means of supporting an unemployed husband and four children. It is difficult to glean from the press clippings in the collection exactly how many endurance swimming events Katerina Nehua entered, but from January to August 1931 she was involved in at least thirteen. Some were outright contests for prize money and one was a solo attempt to better her own world record.

On 30 and 31 January 1931 Katerina Nehua had entered an endurance contest at Manly Baths, Sydney, at which there were separate contests for men and women. The Darleys spent their last pence on a tram trip to the baths from their Collaroy home to save Katerina's energy for the contest, and as they had not eaten for some time officials gave them beef tea and chocolate. They could not afford special grease so 'scrounged a mixture of glycerine, olive oil and black axle grease'.³ Katerina Nehua did not win that contest, leaving the water after 47 hours 50 minutes, but the winner, English Channel swimmer Miss Mercedes Gleitze (Mrs Pat Carey), gave