

Dianne McDonald

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Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Dianne McDonald was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania August 5, 1930. She moved from Baltimore to St. Petersburg in July 1947 with her mother, who sought Florida's warmth to ease arthritis (Track 1). McDonald's grandmother lived in St. Petersburg. Other than a family visit the previous year, McDonald said she was unfamiliar with Florida: "I knew it was hot and sticky."

McDonald enrolled at St. Petersburg High School. Soon, a school notice circulated announcing tryouts for the Spa Pool ballet swimming team. About 10 people joined the group known as the Aquabelles, recalled McDonald, an experienced swimmer who raced on her high school team in Baltimore "I always wanted to do beautiful swimming," she recalled. "I was tired of that racing."

Coached by George Symon (who would also teach McDonald's granddaughter ((Track 8)), the Aquabelles performed at Bahama Shores, Spa Pool and beach hotels. Their shows lasted about an hour and, among other moves, featured Tango and Waltz strokes and leg lifts. McDonald also recalled performing with a male swimmer to the tunes of the Broadway musical Showboat; she said they were the only male/female duet in the state.

Soon, Newt Perry of Weeki Wachee Springs invited members of the Aquabelles to perform at his show. "When we drove up it looked like a big lake," recalled McDonald. "But when we went in the theater, we were just all awestruck ... I still am when I go up there. I think it's the most beautiful site," (Track 2). McDonald described the springs as "an upside down mountain (Track 13)."

McDonald thought she would perform top-water ballet swimming, but Perry wanted the performance underwater (Tracks 1 and 2). "We were shocked, but three of us got together and said we can do it," she recalled (Track 2). "We came back to St. Pete and we drew little stick figures of poses and different things we could do underwater." Two weeks later, they performed at the spring's opening. On weekends McDonald and her teammates would drive about three hours on back roads to Weeki Wachee to perform in about three shows with about eight other swimmers (Tracks 3, 5 and 9). A different group of girls auditioned as Mermaids who fed fish and demonstrated under water breathing techniques with an air hose or an air block, McDonald recalled (Track 2).

McDonald, 17 at the time, wasn't paid for performing, but lunch was free and she got to keep her costume: bathing suits by Catalina and Jansen (Tracks 2 and 3). They dawned swim caps during a few shows as well, but ditched them in favor of floating hair (Track 2). McDonald performed at depths of 35 to 40 feet, at times holding her breath for about one and a half minutes. She and a co-Aquabelle Mary Dwight Rose (a former Miss St. Petersburg ((Track 6 ))) ended the show by rising from the springs in a two-person pose

known as adagio; a technique she and Rose introduced to the performance, McDonald said (Track 3).

During the two years McDonald performed at Weeki Wachee, she was filmed on newsreels, appeared on the first color picture of Weeki Wachee and was featured in Look Magazine, she recalled (Tracks 3,4 and 7). She also met actress Ann Blyth (she has a photo with Blyth), who filmed the movie *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* at Weeki Wachee, survived an embarrassing moment when her swim suit fell off during a pose, and ended a performance early when a snake slithered into the springs (Tracks 4 and 9).

In August 1949, McDonald began nursing training at Mound Park Hospital in St. Petersburg and continued to perform at Weeki Wachee on weekends (Track 9). But by late 1949 or early 1950 she stopped performing: her time was committed to weekend nursing training and classes. She has since attended three reunions at the springs (Tracks 3,8, and 11).

McDonald's link to Florida tourism resurfaced through her husband, who owned Isle Varieties at Madeira Beach for about 20 years (Track 10). "Canned Sunshine," was their best selling item. "That was nothing but an empty can ... with a painting on it," she said, "but people went for it." About 1970, a fire destroyed their store. They hesitated to reopen, but projections that a new Orlando theme park would bring more tourists to the beaches influenced them otherwise (Track 12). However, the opening of Walt Disney World didn't boost business, she said.

McDonald talked about the condominium boom, as well, and how it blocked their beach view. At one time she and her husband could keep an eye on their store, the other on their children playing at the beach (Track 12). McDonald also recalled some of their famous customers: during spring training, Joe Dimaggio and a heavily disguised Marilyn Monroe were patrons, as was baseball manager Casey Stengel (Track 10).