



SLSA History Fact Sheet #2

The origins of surf lifesaving in Australia

In October 1907, the Surf Bathing Association of New South Wales (SBANSW) was formed at a meeting of representatives from a number of Sydney surf lifesaving clubs,¹ the Royal Life Saving Society, and the NSW Amateur Swimming Association. Its initial mission was to 'regulate and promote matters of surf bathing.'² The organisation of this Association was celebrated by Sydney's local surf bathing community, many of whom had been working for many years for the ability to govern affairs concerning surf bathing at their local beaches.

While some Sydney residents had almost always swum at their local surf beaches, the legislation which banned bathing in public between the hours of 6am and 8pm restricted such pursuits to early mornings, or unpopular beaches, during the nineteenth century. In the closing years of the century, many regular bathers who were becoming increasingly frustrated with the restrictive by-laws began to lobby the state government and local councils to lift the bans. The exact influence these groups had on the authorities is unclear, but by the opening years of the twentieth century, Sydney's codes of morality had shifted enough that police officers refused to arrest or prosecute a number daylight bathers who were dressed in what was deemed to be appropriate costume. Between 1902 and 1905 all of Sydney's seaside councils lifted their bans restricting daylight bathing, although the practice continued to be opposed by moral groups for some years.

As a consequence of the lifting of these bans, the popularity of what was then called 'surf-bathing' increased rapidly. Unfortunately, so did the number of

¹ Representatives from Manly Surf Club, Bondi Surf Bathers Life Saving Club, Coogee Life Saving Brigade, Bronte Surf Brigade, Bondi Surf and Social Club (later North Bondi SLSC), Tamarama Surf Club, Maroubra Surf Club, United Wanderers SC and Woollahra SC were at the meeting. Frank Donovan, from Manly Surf Club chaired the meeting, and was elected President of the new body.

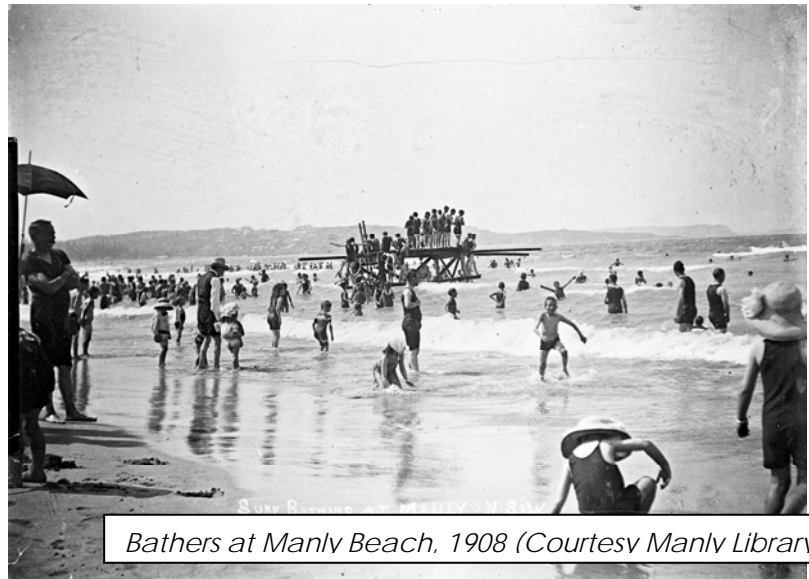
² Minutes of SBANSW Meeting, 18 October 1907. SLSA Archives.

bathers who got into difficulty in the surf. Many early bathers had no experience of surf conditions, let alone swimming abilities. As a consequence, some beach locals who had been surfing for many years and understood the surf frequently found themselves rescuing swimmers who were caught in rips, or who panicked when they drifted out of their depth. These locals, many of whom had petitioned for all day bathing only a few years before, now lobbied the state government and local councils for funding for improved rescue equipment on all the popular beaches. They also formed clubs in an attempt to provide organisation to local rescue efforts, and assert their authority over beach issues.

The surf lifesavers who founded the SBANSW in 1907, however, were not governed by altruistic motivations. Rather, the foundation meeting was held in response to fears by local male bathers that they would soon be forced to wear an extra 'skirt' over their already cumbersome neck-to-knee costumes. Local lifesaving clubs, as representatives of the bathers, wanted power to influence matters affecting surf bathing generally, and it was for this reason that the SBANSW was formed. The recognition, though, that the safety of beaches was vital to the successful future of surf bathing, meant that lifesaving issues became a primary concern of the organisation.

In 1908, the following objects were agreed for the young Association:

- a) to obtain improved facilities for surf bathing
- b) to assist in enforcing the laws governing the conduct of surf bathers
- c) to effect such purposes as may be necessary in the interests of the sport
- d) to promote technical education in Life Saving and resuscitation (sic) of the apparently drowned
- e) to promote the uniformity of rules for the control and regulation of Surf Bathing, and the management of all galas and competitions
- f) to enforce the observance of the laws and rules of the Association and to deal with any infringement thereof, and to adjudicate upon all disputes or difficulties between affiliated clubs or individual members of the affiliated clubs



As swimming in the surf increased in popularity during the following years, many more surf clubs along the NSW coast were formed, and joined the SBANSW. The Bronze Medallion was introduced in 1910 as the basic

qualification required to perform rescues, and as the organisation expanded to become the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia (SLSAA) in 1923, this became the national surf lifesaving requirement for clubs affiliated with the SLSAA.