

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2216

Kellermann, Annette Marie Sarah

(1886 - 1975)

Born 6 July, 1886, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Died 6 November, 1975, Southport Queensland Australia

Occupation Actor, Aquatic performer, Author, Diver, Swimmer

Summary

Born in 1886 in Marrickville, Sydney, Annette Kellerman was a New South Wales swimming champion who left for England aged 18 to help her cash-strapped family. In Europe, she built a name for herself in long distance swimming and exotic swimming and diving demonstrations. By 1906 she had moved to vaudeville theatre in America as 'Australia's Mermaid' and quickly progressed to the big screen. Kellerman enjoyed tremendous success as a silent movie star in mythological underwater films, including Neptune's Daughter.

Details

The daughter of musical parents, Frederick William Kellermann and Alice Ellen (née Charbonnet), Annette's swimming career began at the age of six. Compelled to wear steel braces due to a weakness in the legs, she learned to swim as a way of gaining strength. By her early teens her legs were functioning normally, and she began to swim competitively. She won the 100 yards and mile championships of New South Wales in 1902 with record times of 1 minute, 22 seconds and 33 minutes, 49 seconds respectively.

When the family moved to Melbourne, Kellermann combined her passion for swimming with her theatrical ability, performing a mermaid act at Princes Court entertainment centre and appearing twice a day with fish in a glass tank at the Exhibition Aquarium. She completed a long-distance swim in the Yarra and several exhibitions throughout Australia, acclaimed as the holder of all world records for ladies' swimming. In 1905 she visited England with her father, swimming the Thames from Putney bridge to Blackwall pier in 3 hours, 54 minutes. Sponsored by the *Daily Mirror* she attempted to swim the English Channel but was unsuccessful. In France, she was placed third in a seven-mile race down the Seine. The following year she completed a twenty-two mile race down the Danube, and made a second unsuccessful attempt to swim the Channel.

According to G.P. Walsh (*Australian Dictionary of Biography*), Kellerman's one-piece swimsuit made by stitching black stockings into a boy's costume caused somewhat of a sensation in her early career. She was arrested on a Boston beach for wearing a brief one-piece swimsuit in 1907. Ironically, the publicity 'helped to relax laws relating to women's swimwear' and Kellermann 'regarded her part in emancipating women from the neck-to-knee costume as her greatest achievement'.

Kellermann gave up her swimming career to take up acting in earnest. She performed at leading theatres in Europe, the U.S.A., the U.K. and Australia. Many of her performances incorporated diving stunts which she did herself. In 1912 she married her manager, American-born James Raymond Louis Sullivan. During World War II she lived in Queensland, working for the Red Cross and entertaining troops. She and her husband came to live in Australia permanently in 1970. Kellermann had no children of her own, but produced a book of children's stories, *Fairy Tales of the South Seas*, in 1926.

Events

2001 - 2001

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

Published resources

Book

Fairy Tales of the South Seas and other stories, Kellermann, Annette, 1926

The Complete Book of Great Australian Women: Thirty-six women who changed the course of Australia, De Vries, Susanna, 2003

Edited Book

200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988

Site Exhibition

She's Game: Women Making Australian Sporting History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2007,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/sg/sport-home.html>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Resource Section

Kellermann, Annette Marie Sarah (1886 - 1975), Walsh, G.P., 2006,
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A090547b.htm>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

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