Local Legend

Let's swim!

Local Legends Sig Paulazzo: La Dolce Vita

Crystal Plunge: SF Swim Culture & WW II Efforts

As a child, I spent time playing in the water, though I didn't do much actual swimming. I grew up in San Francisco, just two blocks from the Crystal Plunge on Lombard Street. You might not have heard of it since it was torn down in the late '50s, but it boasted three diving platforms and a massive 50-meter pool. My parents both swam there. My father was a lifeguard at Santa Barbara Beach.

Editor's Note: The Crystal Plunge, originally known as the Crystal Palace Salt Water Baths, was a public indoor swimming pool located in San Francisco at 775 Lombard Street. Opened in 1924 by Edward Cerruti Jr., an Italian immigrant, it was a notable landmark in the city's recreational landscape. Crystal Plunge also played a role in supporting the war effort.

During World War II, Crystal Plunge was utilized by the city's Recreation Department for swimming lessons for children and as a ballroom for dances for Army and Coast Guard personnel and local women. Between January 1942 and July 1943 alone, almost 30,000 service members and women attended dances there. Despite its popularity, the Crystal Plunge, like Sutro Baths, faced challenges with profitability. It was eventually demolished in 1958, and replaced with apartment buildings.

Dating at Sutro Baths in San Francisco

Do you remember Sutro Baths?

I loved taking my dates there! It was an incredible place with a large pool that featured a slide and a rope swing, situated right on the beach next to the Cliff House. The baths had five pools: one really hot pool, a freshwater pool that was ice cold and never heated, and a regular pool. We would jump into the hot pool, then plunge into the freezing one, followed by the regular pool, before heading over to the swings.

Capisce?

My dad emigrated from Italy at the age of sixteen, and we predominantly spoke Italian at home. When I started school, I struggled with English. The kindergarten teacher, a nun, informed my mother, “You need to start speaking English. He doesn’t understand what I’m saying.” North Beach was a close-knit Italian community. In the 1940’s about a third of San Francisco’s population were immigrants. My situation was not unique. My wife, Barbara, is not Italian; she’s Irish.

My uncle owned The Venetian Baking Company, where he specialized in baking French bread. At around twelve years old, I worked there, putting bread into bags by hand and counting buns for local restaurants. Friday nights were special; I would spend the night at my uncle’s house with my cousins. He’d wake us at 3 a.m. to help with the baking. I enjoyed the work, but I always wished for more sleep! Nowadays, I don’t make bread anymore—but I still can’t resist eating the whole loaf!

Every Kid Was A Day Laborer

I began picking fruit at the age of eight. We had a ranch in the Santa Cruz Mountains on Summit Road, where we would spend weekends and the entire summer during World War II. You know about Radonich Ranch? To earn money, we picked fruit all summer, apples, pears and prunes. The old owners would curse at us in Croatian, and I’d turn to his sons, asking, “What did he say?” Their response was always, “You don’t want to know!” We earned 20 to 25 cents a box—quite a task for all those pears! I didn’t enjoy picking prunes; they had to be gathered from the ground.

Editor’s Note: Radonich Ranch, nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California, boasts a rich history dating back to its establishment in 1910 by three Croatian immigrants, Petar, Billy, and John Radonich. The 128-acre ranch focused on growing apples, pears, and prunes. The Ranch still exists; it is operated by Feel Good Foods, an organic catering company, providing farm-to-table menus for events hosted there. They also grow grapes for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Tim’s triathlon team, Team Sheeper, used to do an annual 4 day bike tour from Menlo Park to Santa Barbara. I would drive the support vehicle because I liked being with Tim and it was a fun road trip away from home. On the first day of one of the tours, I found myself back on Summit Road and thought, “This is my old neighborhood!” I decided to detour and visit the old Radonich Ranch. Bill Radonich was there, at the age of ninety-something. He surprised me by saying, “Your folks owned the Poison Oak Ranch.”

I was taken aback, replying, “What do you mean ‘Poison Oak Ranch’? We had thirteen acres of vineyards and fruit trees. Every Italian immigrant planted grapes, fruit trees and had a huge vegetable garden. It was paradise!” Unfortunately, over the years, the next owners let the property go to ruin, allowing poison oak to take over. Everything was gone—the vineyards, the trees, even the house and garage that my dad had built.

Hail Marys: The Jesuits Vs Christian Brothers

Coming from an Italian Catholic family, of course I attended Catholic School. We attended mass at St. Peter's and Paul's Cathedral. St. Ignatius College Preparatory and Sacred Heart High School were the two main rival schools, both founded in the 1850's. St. Ignatius is a Jesuit school and Sacred Heart, established by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, had Christian Brother teachers. I attended Sacred Heart. In those days, it was all boys. We wore school uniforms and went to daily mass. There was a lot of emphasis placed on moral integrity, faith, and academics.

There was also a huge sports focus. I mean, a **crazy** focus on sports, though it was always pitched as integrating physical, mental, and spiritual growth. The rivalry between the two schools led to intense matchups and strong school pride. I played football there. When I was a student, Sacred Heart didn't have a pool or a swim team. We didn't even have a gym! After I graduated, they built a gym! In 1950 they started building it. "Wait! Where was the gym for us?" Now they have beautiful sports facilities…of course, promoting spiritual growth!

Sometimes, we would skip school and head down to Aquatic Park, the same place where people swim to Alcatraz. No, I never swam to Alcatraz! I recall one day when we were swimming; we came up on the beach, and my friend exclaimed, "What's that?" To our horror, there was human waste everywhere! We looked at each other and thought, "We're not swimming here anymore!" Later, in the '50s, they installed a sewage system, but back then, there was raw sewage flowing into the Bay.

Editor's Note: Sig is right, raw sewage did flow to the bay from the time the City from the 1850's onward. In the 1950's treatment plants were established at North Point and Phelps and Jerrold for human and industrial waste of parts of the City. Even with these efforts, raw or minimally treated sewage continued to flow into the Bay from various points. It was the passage of California's Porter-Cologne Water Quality Control Act in 1969 and the federal Clean Water Act in 1972 that provided a major impetus for a more comprehensive cleanup of San Francisco Bay.

Hazing, Navy Style

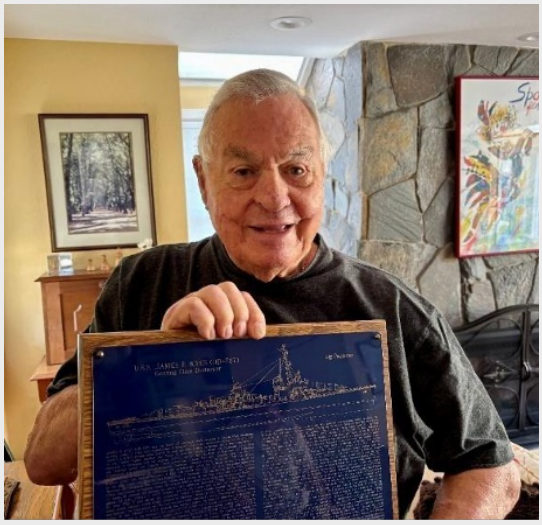
After high school, I joined the Navy Reserves, where I was faced with a daunting swim test designed to prepare us in case a ship ever sank. As part of the test, we had to jump from a 15-foot platform on Treasure Island, completely naked. There we stood, feeling exposed and vulnerable, each of us covering one hand over our eyes and the other shielding our privates. My heart raced, trembling with fear—I didn't know how to swim!

Forced to navigate the length of the pool, I was terrified. The sergeants wielded long poles, pushing us away from the walls. I kept getting jabbed. Each prod intensified my anxiety, and I thought, "Oh my God, if the ship sinks, I'll be dead in the middle of the ocean!" Those feelings of panic and inadequacy haunted me; I was just a kid thrust into a world that demanded courage I wasn't sure I possessed.

During the Korean War, my ship was deployed to Wonsan Harbor, a natural harbor on North Korea's eastern coast. The moment I arrived, I was ordered below deck. Suddenly, the deafening sound of gunfire erupted above me, and I heard someone shout, "Fire in Mount Three. We've been hit!" In disbelief, I thought, "You've got to be kidding me! It's my first day!"

The chaos unfolded quickly, and when it ended, four sailors were shot, one of them severely. As I processed the situation, I felt a surge of adrenaline mixed with fear. If the shell had hit just four feet closer to the rear of the ship, it could have struck our magazine, potentially blowing the ship in half. We were lucky to make it out alive.

A Trade And A Craft



After the war, I went into the hardwood floor trade. Our neighbor was a hardwood floor contractor, so I asked him, “Can I come to work for you?” Sure!” he said, “You can come do man’s work!” So that was it. I fell in love with hardwood floors and was satisfied seeing the finished product. I started earning only a dollar an hour as an apprentice. After two years as an apprentice, I became a hardwood floor journeyman.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a hardwood floor journeyman's daily work was very hands-on, encompassing the entire flooring process. You start by laying new strips of red or white oak. Installation involved laying boards by hand, securing them with nails, and ensuring precise alignment with tools like hammers, pry bars, and strings. After installation, we would prepare the surface through scraping and sanding, using machines and hand scrapers to achieve a smooth finish. The next step involved applying filler compound and carefully staining the wood to get the right tones and enhance the grain. Finally, we'd apply a finishing topcoat, such as wax, to seal and protect the wood. I’ve installed many floors on the peninsula over the years and I enjoyed going back to refinish them decades later for the next generation of owners.

The Day My World Stopped

When I was 25 years old, I went with my friend Joe over to his in-law’s house to pick something up. When we arrived, he honked his horn, and a young, beautiful girl came out of the house and leaned over the railing. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. When my friend Joe got back into the car, I asked, “Who was that beautiful girl? Oh, that’s my sister-in-law, Barbara.” I then asked him “Can you get me a date with her?”

Two weeks later, we had a double date and went to Searsville Lake for a picnic and a swim. I fell in love with her immediately. When I was driving Barbara home, I asked, “Do you want to go out with me next Friday night?” And she said, “Yes!”

After our first date, I was lying in bed staring at the ceiling and prayed to God, “God, if you ever give me anything, give me Barbara.” After that first date, I dated her every weekend and spent my whole paycheck on her! By Monday, I was broke, but the weekend was worth it. We went to jazz clubs and danced at the Fairmont Hotel. We got married in Reno and then honeymooned for three weeks in Canada.

I have been so fortunate to have been married to Barbara nearly 67 years this November. Today we still live in Redwood City where we purchased our first home in 1960. We have four adult children, 7 grandchildren, and 5 great grandchildren.

Learning To Swim At Age 60

When I was 60 years old, I learned how to swim because I wanted to do some research scuba diving with UC Berkeley. The school would not accept my current scuba diver certification. They wanted me to pass a timed swimming test in a pool. That is when I reached out to Tim Sheeper and

asked him to teach me how to swim.

Tim first said to me “Sig, you already know how to swim!” and I said, “Tim, I just put on fins and a snorkel, and I go up and down the pool! I don’t know the strokes.” He said, “Do a lap for me.” After I did, he said, “Yes, you do need lessons! Let me give you eight lessons.” But after eight lessons, I still wasn’t ready. Then he said, “Okay, nine lessons—but the ninth lesson is free!”

I then passed the stringent swimming test so I could participate as a certified research diver for marine excursions. I worked with many marine biologists who were working on their thesis. The side benefit to me was that I did a lot of abalone diving. We would dive in Sonoma and Mendocino County. Italians love abalone.

Editor’s Note: Sadly, Abalone diving in the Bay Area, particularly around San Francisco, is currently banned due to declining abalone populations. Environmental factors like warming ocean temperatures and competition from sea urchins have severely impacted the species. Abalone diving is actually a risky sport, with divers facing dangers like entanglement in kelp, and injuries from rocks.

One February, I participated in a Masters swimming contest and won the most miles swam during the month of February. I swam 212 miles and won the national award for my age group. While at Menlo Masters, I signed up for a national swim meet without really knowing what I was getting into. When my race was up, I was told I had to dive into the pool and when I did, I almost hit the bottom. After that, I decided not to participate in nationals again.

Editor’s Note: As Menlo Masters know, February is Can Do Month, where we swim as many yards as possible to beat the winter doldrums. For every 2,000 yards swum, we donate a can of food that is donated to the Menlo Park Senior Center for lunch meals.

Here are some quick states on Can Do that Menlo Masters is VERY proud of from 2025

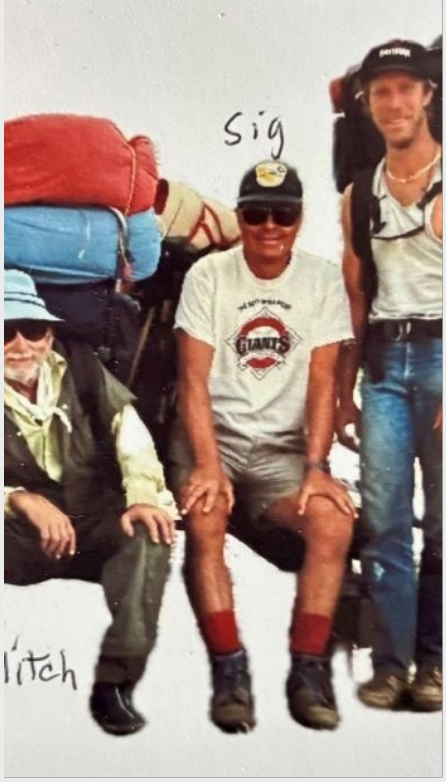
- 5,500,000 yards total by 106 swimmers who recorded their yards
- 2,740 total cans donated
- 57 swimmers swam over 50K yards
- 13 swimmers swam over 100K yards, including 5 swimmers 120-155K yards.
- Sig’s 212 miles, not done in 2025, (373,000 yards) is off the charts!

The only other competitive swimming contest I participated in was an open water swim in the Cayman Islands, where I had gone scuba diving. The dive master says, “Next weekend is going to be an open water race.” To prepare, we practiced every afternoon in the open water, but I never felt comfortable. I know it’s weird. When I was scuba diving I’d see sharks, and poisonous fish and eels, but when swimming on the surface, I couldn’t see anything. That would make me very nervous. Well, I did the race and won my age group, because I was the only one in it! While swimming, other people’s feet were hitting my head and I was thinking, “I don’t like this.” And that was my last race.

Friendship and Adventures With Coach Tim

Tim Sheeper is not just an excellent swim coach; he’s a true friend. He always seemed to know when to push me and never hesitated to encourage me to keep going, even in tough times.

I found great enjoyment in driving the Support

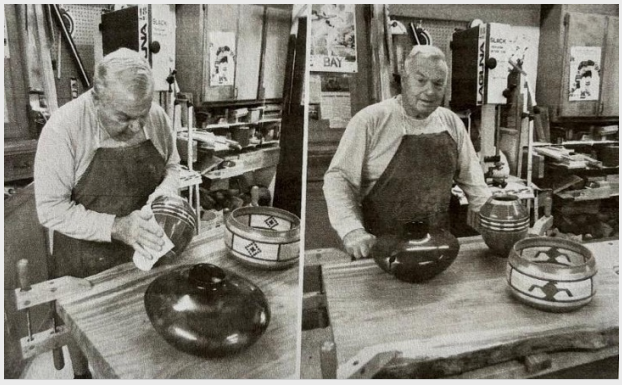


And Gear van (called ‘SAGging’) for Tim’s triathlon team bike tours. There would usually be a group of 20 to 25 riders on those 3-6 day rides. My job was to drive the van, make sure the team had plenty of water and snacks, and take care of their luggage. We’d stay in hotels and the riders would put in 75-110 miles per day. We had our fair share of trips in Mendocino, Sonoma and even the Sierra, including several memorable 4 day bike tours from the Menlo pool to Santa Barbara.

One particular trip stands out: a 6 day tour from Menlo Park to San Diego. I thought, “Holy smokes! Are you all really going to ride a bike all that way, over 600 miles?” I had a grand time listening to the stories from the cyclists at the end of each day. It was something I truly enjoyed. I would have followed them anywhere —even if they had decided to cycle to the moon, I’d have been right there with them!

Biking has always been a passion of mine. My wife and I joined the Western Wheelers, a cycling club from Menlo Park, when our kids were quite young. Our family of six rode together every weekend, making memories on those outings. I also relished working out with the Menlo triathlete team, cycling on Canada Road or tackling the loop in Portola Valley. Those experiences fostered a spirit of camaraderie and adventure that has stayed with me throughout my life.

Bowl Turning, Gardening, and Swimming



My woodworking craft changed from floors to making turned bowls. Wooden bowls are made on a machine called a woodturning lathe. I’d collected many beautiful hardwood blocks. As the lathe spins the wood at a high speed, I use gouges and scrapers to shape the outside and inside of the bowl.. Finally, I sand and finish the piece to enhance its beauty, just like floors. The main skill needed is tool control, along with the judging the wood's grain and shape it gracefully.

My daughter lives in Pennsylvania, in a charming little tourist town with a delightful gift shop that features various artworks. She took a couple of my bowls there—I've made over 200 of them! She's been selling them quite successfully, and as it turns out, she’s sold out of all my bowls. I wish I could still make them. I have a spacious woodshop in the back, and while I still tinker around out there, I don’t do any major projects anymore since I can’t stand at the lathe for too long.

I introduced Jeff Starr to turning, and he asked me what kind of lathe to buy. Jeff used to make "Swimmer of the Year" bowls. I’ve never received that honor myself. Jeff’s bowls are beautiful.

Nowadays, I spend my time working in my yard, tending to my garden and my bonsais. Bonsai is the art of training miniature trees to have the shape and scale of mature trees in nature by careful pruning and wiring the trunks and branches. I guess I really like working with trees and wood.

I have a home in Sonoma, where I also have a lovely garden. My son lives just two blocks away from my home and he comes by every day to lend a hand.

My goal is to swim three times a week. I used to swim daily. Currently, I swim on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday. I can’t stand sitting around for too long, even at 92 years old.

This narrative was collected and transcribed by Frances Reneau. It was edited by Kim Freitas.

About Local Legends

Menlo Masters is gathering and sharing stories of extraordinary individuals on the team. We hope these narratives will connect us with each other and inspire us to swim often.

If you know a swimmer who has some stories, please send an email to Tasha Capen, Menlo Master Team Manager **tasha@menlomasters.com**

Menlo Swim & Sport menloswim.com