



A HISTORY OF THE BIKINI

1 *"Hundreds of surfers mobbed a young girl who wore an abbreviated French swimsuit on Bondi Beach yesterday ... they pushed her over as they struggled to get a better view."* This is how a newspaper reported the arrival of the bikini on Australian beaches in 1946.

2 The bikini is the name given to the smallest possible two-piece swimsuit that could still be legally considered as clothing. The French fashion house of Heim created it. First worn on Riviera beaches, it was originally called "le minimum" or the atom. Its arrival coincided with atomic testing on Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Marshall Islands. "Le minimum" diverted people's minds from fears of atomic doom, and

was well named, for what could be smaller? The bikini opened a new chapter in the long, now amusing history of the development of the swimming costume in Australia.

3 In the nineteenth century, free settlers arrived in Australia, bringing with them their strict Victorian attitudes. However, on the goldfields, daring young women hauled up their skirts and plunged into rivers and billabongs to escape the heat of the new country.

4 In the early twentieth century, a government act forbade bathing "near or within the limits of any of the towns between the hours of six a.m. and eight p.m.". The penalty was one pound.

However, in 1902, the owner of a newspaper in Manly, NSW, published a statement that he intended to plunge into the ocean at noon. He challenged the police to arrest him. The next day, dressed in neck-to-knee underwear, he dived in. It was a Sunday. No one took him off to prison. However, sermons were preached in churches around the country against his "indecenty". From his pulpit, one minister declared, "Bathing in the home or bathhouse is accepted as proper and even healthful in the climate of this country ... But for any man to perform such offices in public! God help our women!"

5 Ladies, raising their skirts to paddle along the seashore, tried to beat the heat. However, they did not dare to swim in the ocean. Before long, "the modesty shedding box" or "bathing machine" came to their rescue. These boxes were pulled into the water where women were able to bathe in private.

6 The custom of surf bathing dates from about this time, when body-concealing suits were worn by both sexes. In order to bathe "decently", women wore dresses with short sleeves and short skirts over pantalets or bloomers and black stockings. The fabric was flannel, alpaca or plaid worsted, usually in dark colours with braid trim.

7 However, in 1908, neck-to-knee costumes came into fashion. Bathers, dressed in outsized (in case they shrank) knitted costumes, swam in separate areas according to their sex. Mixed bathing — ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls over the age of four — was banned. Even married couples were not allowed to

swim in the same area. Women also had to wear stockings with their swimwear.

8 At this time, Australian women such as Annette Kellerman and Fanny Durack were making headlines overseas as swimming champions. At 17, Kellerman swam 27 kilometres down the Thames River in London. However, her daring one-piece cotton swimsuit caused more comment than her brilliant swimming record. Her costume, also known as "the Annette Kellerman" was a sleeveless swimsuit, which ended two daring inches above her knee.

9 In America in 1920, Jantzen made the first rib-knit, elasticised wool swimsuit: a one-piece tank suit. From then on, it became smaller and smaller. Sunbathing also became a craze. All the old cover-up ideas about bathing and the beach began to go. By the end of the decade, one-piece swimsuits had become briefer. They often had pieces scooped out of them at the sides and were completely backless.

10 These new bathing costumes gained popularity in Australia in the mid 1920s. This is when Beryl Mills of Western Australia, modelling in her one-piece costume, won the first Miss Australia beauty quest.

By the 1930s, fashion photography became popular and photographic models posed in the latest two-piece swimsuits. In September 1946, bikinis went on display in city stores. They were labelled "brazen" "impudent" and "too abbreviated altogether".

11 "There will be plenty of rescues next season if girls intend wearing those suits," a member

