

MOVE OVER, ESTHER

The Harlem Honeys & Bears are making waves

By TOM O'NEILL

Retired nurse Emily Durham, a 73-year-old grandmother of five, didn't go near a pool until three years ago. This morning she appears to be dancing on water — her face positively beatific in the bright sunshine streaming from the skylight onto the pool's surface as it ripples with her graceful movements.

She's swimming with the Harlem Honeys & Bears, an aquatic arts group for the aged, in a sneak preview of the show they'll perform this Saturday at the New York State Senior Games in Cortland.

In the hour-long ballet, 25 women (Honeys) and two men (Bears), glide through the water, joining to form human flowers that blossom, wheels that rotate, and snowflakes that fall, then melt away.

"Blacks aren't supposed to be swimmers, you know," winks veteran Honey Lillian Atherton after the final number. "And we're a bunch of little old ladies!"

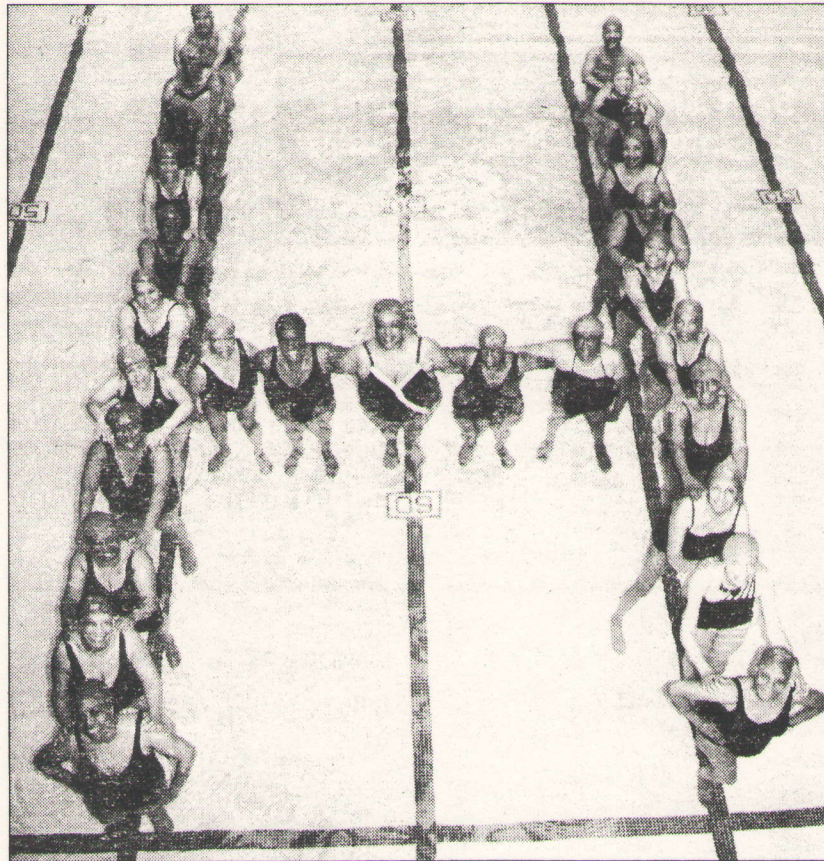
Organized in 1982 at the Hansborough Recreation Center on W. 135th St., the Harlem Honeys & Bears compete as a swimming and water ballet team three times a year in interborough meets, and for four days each June at the state Senior Games. They also give special exhibitions for hospitals and senior citizen groups. The only requirement for membership is that one be over 55 and have a doctor's approval.

Last month in interborough competition, the diminutive Atherton, 68, won a bronze medal in the backstroke. Like most of the Honeys & Bears, the retired insurance underwriter learned to swim at Hansborough, where the group convenes daily from 9 to noon for practice and instruction.

Coaching these ageless aquatics is Polish émigré Lili-Ann Jankowski, 26 and eight months' pregnant. "I love working with my ladies," says the coach, who invariably gets wet bear hugs from her charges.

One of her successes, 66-year-old Helen Pinkston, is now the core of the troupe's exquisite "Snowflake" number. "I patrol the center," she says proudly. Pinkston looks forward to the day she can venture into the pool's deep end as a part of the more elaborate "Pyramid" formation. "I'm not a great floater," she confides, "and you have to be to go out there."

This reporter makes the mistake of asking the Harlem Honey whether she plans on learning to float. "I can float, Mister!" she explodes. "I just don't feel secure enough to be dragging other people around by my ankles." This reporter makes the second mistake of uttering a word forbidden in the Honeys & Bears' lexicon.



WET BEYOND THEIR YEARS: Precision swimmers defy myths of age and race.

PAT CARROLL/DAILY NEWS

drown. "Don't say that word!" shouts Pinkston.

Trying to account for the discrepancy in the number of Honeys to Bears, Lillian Atherton shrugs, "A lot of the men just lap-swim — they're not too much into this show business."

While none of the Honeys remembers who came up with their name, Richard Kirby, 79, is credited with the men's moniker. "I was the

only male on the team back in '84," recalls the retired concert singer who was among the first blacks to perform at the Met, "and I didn't particularly like being referred to as a Honey. I thought, well, bears like honey so why not call me 'The Bear'?"

Kendell Barnes, the newest Bear, is a kidney transplant recipient of 10 years who is training for the transplant

Olympics in October. The strapping 6-footer cites the daily regimen as a large factor in his continued recovery.

Indeed, the doctors of all the Harlem Honeys & Bears have expressed extreme satisfaction with their patients' dedication to natatorial exercise.

As Emily Durham puts it, "I get up for the pool like I'm going to work everyday."

(Tom O'Neill swims laps.)

UNDISCOVERED MANHATTAN

By HOPE COOKE

Known variously as Fort Clinton, Castle Clinton, Castle Garden and even the "aquarium," a role the structure played from 1896 to 1941, the fort at Manhattan's southern tip has seen many lives. When completed in 1811, it stood on a rock in the Harbor connected to the Battery by a drawbridge. It was intended as a companion to an earlier fort on Governors Island.

The site has been a popular one: in 1835, Samuel Morse demonstrated the practicability of controlling electrical currents; in 1850, P.T. Barnum impresarioed singer Jenny Lind's first American performance to 8,000 paying customers (and hundreds more who



THOMAS THORSPECKEN

anchored in small boats offshore); before Ellis Island was built as an immigrant receiving station, more than 2.7 million foreigners were processed here.

The old fort, now restored and long since connected to the rest of Battery Park by landfill, serves as an information center and ticket bureau for Liberty Island ferries.

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TODAY



TRINE GUEVER/DAILY NEWS

Friendly fair

How about a nice, low-key, compact street festival in a quiet old neighborhood? More than 200 booths line the streets, from 14th St. to 20th, for Irving Place's ninth annual do. The food, antiques and collectibles arrive at 11 a.m. and depart at 6 p.m. Street performers do their stuff at each intersection.

The festivities, sponsored by the Tilden-Midtown Democratic Club, are a go — rain or shine.

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