

Growing Up on Bald Hill Creek

by Harvey M. Sletten

The first warm days in May we would start to pester Mother to let us go swimming. She had an inflexible rule: when the leaves of the poplar reached the size of a silver dollar, it was time to go swimming — not before. This relationship was always a mystery to us, but we knew better than to argue. To impatient lads, those leaves took their own sweet time in growing. Lacking a silver dollar to use for comparing we would bring in carefully selected specimens for Mother to judge. A silver dollar in those days, the early 1920s, was a mighty big coin — no doubt about that. Finally Mother decided that an ample outer limit of leaf area had been reached. She had her next year's credibility to protect.

Our faded cotton bathing suits had long been ready. There had been the annual trying on for size, with a downward switching from oldest to youngest of the four boys. Last summer's tears had been mended and the seams reinforced. Bathing suits of that period were one piece and skirted over the

Bald Hill Creek at Spring flood. The creek is a tributary of the Sheyenne River that rises in Griggs County.

— Courtesy Iowa State University Press



attached pants. Cotton bathing suits had a tendency to cling when wet, but nonetheless were insisted upon by mothers. "Skinny-dipping," though frowned upon, was only indulged in in such out-of-the-way places as Ferris' slough.

Our swimming hole was a natural one, a beauty, on Bald Hill Creek. This happy little stream meandered just below the sleepy little town where we lived. The Nile River in Africa has been called the "Father of Egypt." To boys growing up in Hannaford, Bald Hill Creek was foster-mother, nursemaid and Dutch uncle, all rolled into one. Its crowing glory, without a doubt, was the swimming hole.

At just the right place below the town, the often shallow and narrow stream obligingly widened and deepened. On one side a six- or seven-foot-high bank provided a challenging takeoff for cannonball jumps and high dives into water perhaps eight or nine feet deep. The bottom dropped off quite abruptly. On the opposite side the depth tapered off to an exposed sandbar.

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**Hannaford —
shortly after
the turn of
the century.**

— Courtesy Iowa
State University
Press



Most boys in Hannaford had learned to swim by the time they were six or seven years old. There was no instructor and no lifeguard on duty. The neophyte swimmer dog-paddled around in the shallows with one foot on the bottom until ready for the initial attempt to negotiate deeper water. Then he took off for the sandbar, arms and legs churning. Never-to-be-forgotten elation was his when exploring toes felt the security of solid bottom. From then on progress was rapid. More sophisticated strokes were practiced and diving and underwater swimming were added to the repertoire.

I do not recall any drownings in Hannaford, though youngsters literally “grew up” along the creek. Hannaford mothers were a courageous lot, and I’m sure they prayed. Also, at that time there were few household conveniences to lighten the work load of busy mothers. Life was grim and hard, and in some respects the creek, with all its fascinations for growing boys, may have been a blessing. At least it kept the youngsters from underfoot.

Our family did have a profound scare on one occasion. My youngest brother, affectionately called “Bumpy,” had received Mother’s permission to go to the creek to swim. On his way to the swimming hole he was accosted by our Uncle Lefty and Bill Brown. Uncle Lefty had heard that my brothers and I had recently caught some fine northern pike somewhere along the creek. He asked Bumpy if he knew where. Bumpy explained that this particular fishing place was not easy to direct anyone to, but avowed that he was available and could take them there. “Jump in,” said Uncle Lefty and off the three chugged in the Model T.

This was early afternoon. Suppertime came — and no Bumpy. My father sent us out to search. We could find no trace of Bumpy. The swimming hole was deserted, and no one along the way had seen him. By now my parents were definitely worried. Father contacted our town marshal, who decided to organize a search. The fire bell at the village hall was sounded to summon searchers. As preparations were

being made to drag the swimming hole, Uncle Lefty, Bill Brown, and Bumpy drove into town. By now it was almost dark. They seemed surprised at the furor they had caused. With the fish biting and a “jug” to share, time was the least concern of Uncle Lefty and Bill Brown. It was some time before Uncle Lefty dared come to our house again.

Fishing the Bald Hill occupied almost as much of our time as swimming. Equipment was simple. A ten- or twelve-foot cane pole might cost from fifteen to thirty-five cents. A good-sized hank of heavy linen line took another dime. A single-shank hook and a medium-sized cork at a penny each generally completed the gear. A feathered spoon hook at twenty-five cents was a longed-for luxury and marked its proud owner as the “compleat” and sophisticated angler.

Stringing a cane pole properly was an art in itself. One end of the linen line was fastened securely several feet below the tip of the pole. This was a safety precaution in case the thin tip section of the bamboo pole should break while landing a heavy fish. A half hitch was then made just below each node, moving upward toward the tip. The line was secured firmly again at the tip and then measured out to extend a couple feet beyond the butt end of the pole. If the line was too much longer than the pole, the outfit became unwieldy and difficult to swing and drop the hook where wanted.

It was not much out of the way to go past the butcher shop on our way to the creek. We were usually able to con butcher “Stub” Johnson out of some beef scraps to use for bait. Sometimes these were retrieved from the sawdust-covered floor around his cutting block. If Stub was in a good mood from imbibing vanilla extract, we might even get a chunk of tough neck beef. A bit of that on the hook would keep “nibblers” from stealing the bait. An extra bargain might be struck with Stub if he needed an errand boy. Entrusting his young accomplice with a half a dollar, Stub would send him to the Mercantile store for a bottle of vanilla extract. “If they ask whom it is for, tell them, ‘my mother,’” Stub cautioned.

I quit going after a suspicious clerk inquired, "You're sure it isn't for Butch Johnson?" National prohibition, declared in effect in January 1920, had failed to alter the personal habits of the likes of Stub Johnson. A pocketful of cookies from a bulk bin was the customary reward from Stub for a mission completed. Such a snack on a fishing trip was a temptation hard to resist.

There was a practical side to our fishing expeditions. The fish we caught augmented Mother's limited food budget. Perhaps this was why we could occasionally wangle a quarter for a new pole or a dime for a new line. In a way, I suppose, it was a capital investment.

Father was a laboring man and worked hard six days a week. Sunday was his only day of rest. Nonetheless, if we coaxed hard enough, he would often forego his afternoon nap and walk with us along the creek as we fished. Sometimes the fishing hole we had in mind was a mile or more distant, arrived at by following devious paths known only to young adventurers. Father plodded doggedly along in the rear. Now and then, pausing for breath, he would hopefully suggest, "Boys, this looks like a good place. Why don't you try it here?"

Seldom, however, could we be dissuaded from our appointed destination. We didn't hold it against Father, however, for trying. As we neared our rendezvous, where the big ones lurked, the pace quickened. "C'mon, Pa, we're almost there! It's just around the bend."

"Uh huh, that's good. Go on ahead — I'll catch you."

Even before we stopped, lines were being unwound and the poles readied. Hooks were hurriedly baited, each of us vying to be the first to wet his line. Often, by the time Father arrived, the first fish was already flopping on the bank. Invariably Father's first concern was to find a shaded spot where he could stretch out. His snores did little to disturb the quiet hum of a summer afternoon on the Bald Hill. The red-winged blackbird swaying on bended cattail cocked its head in Father's direction but scarcely paused its melodious trill. Four intent boys, eyes glued to bobbing corks, themselves were strangely quiet — "all nature seemed in rhyme."

Only rarely did Mother succumb to our enticement and join us on a fishing safari. Part of her reluctance may have been because skirts were ill fitted to the tortuous paths we followed through bramble and thistle patch alike. One such memorable occasion stands out. Perhaps with the thought that Mother's resolute courage in accompanying us that day should be rewarded, Obie thrust his fishing pole into her hands. Shortly her cork bobbed a couple of times, then sank out of sight.

"Mother, you have a bite! Pull in! Pull in!"

As Mother lifted the line a squirming bullhead came into view. To the uninitiated, a bullhead presents a rather frightening appearance with its large head and gaping mouth adorned with tentaclelike appendages. Mother let out a shriek and threw bamboo pole and all into the water.

Thereafter we glumly decided that fishing probably wasn't her forte. But, oh how she could fry the fish! And that was pretty important, too. The bullhead incident merely con-

firmed her role and perhaps even enhanced her stature in our eyes.

Shiner fishing was a variation of our fishing pursuits. Shiners, chubs, and redfins or redhorses abounded in the shallower stretches of Bald Hill Creek. These minnowlike species do not reach any appreciable size, most running in a three- to perhaps seven-inch range. Occasionally a granddaddy chub or redhorse that had escaped being prey for larger fish might reach a magnificent nine or ten inches in length. These fish were edible, though their small size made cleaning them a tedious chore. They were also bony.

We fished them either to use for bait for larger fish or for the sheer sport of catching and releasing them. A five- or six-foot pole, a bit of line, and a tiny barbed hook was all that was needed for tackle. In a pinch, even a bent straight pin would serve as a hook. Often the tip end of a broken bamboo pole, or a willow shoot growing straight and slender and limber enough to offer a little play, made the perfect shiner pole. A small grasshopper impaled on the point of the wee hook offered a tempting mouthful to a voracious chub or shiner. The larger redhorse often lurked beneath the overhang of an exposed rock. It took a little maneuvering to float a grasshopper toward such a rock and have the current suck it down into the shadows. A slight tug, telegraphed through line and pole to eager arm, signaled that mister redhorse had inhaled the hopper. A triumphant grin split sunburned face as the plump little fish was lifted from his watery hideaway.

Shiner fishing often developed into a contest to see who could catch the most. Each contestant did his own tallying and it was not unusual to hear such scores called out: "I have forty-one."

"That's number fifty for me."

"Forty-seven comin' up!"

Most of the time the winner's count was accepted. Another day would be coming. Only "Baaba" Larson's claims were suspect. We learned that the only way Baaba could be bested was for one of us to delay his final tally until after Baaba had announced.

Wild berry picking along the Bald Hill seemed to go hand in hand with fishing. In our never-ending search for new fishing holes, we stumbled upon the berry troves. Juneberries were usually the first in season. These mouth-watering delights were not too plentiful, however. Some summers they weren't to be found at all. Late spring frosts may have had something to do with the unpredictable yields of juneberries. When we did find them in quantity, our family could look forward to a rare table treat. Mother would delve into her reserve coin jar and find fifteen cents to spend for cream.

Ordinarily the quart of whole milk we bought each day from the Willses was let stand overnight in a pan for the cream to rise. Mother would then skim off the cream as best she could with a large spoon. She garnered just enough cream from the quart of milk so that used sparingly, it was enough for her own and Father's coffee needs.

Knowing that juneberries in cream was to be our supper dessert, there was no dearth of volunteers to fetch the cream. Clutching the covered glass jar containing the precious nickel

and dime, one of us would speed his barefoot way to the Wills home. The Willses lived only about half a block down and across the street from us and they kept a few cows.

When juneberries were at their best, some were almost as big and blue and delicious as today's commercially grown blueberries. Mother sometimes ventured a juneberry pie, though usually any excess beyond the juneberry and cream treat was preserved as juneberry sauce. The jars were stored on the wooden shelves that lined our cool, earth-walled cellar.

Wild strawberries came about midsummer, but never abounded. Sweet and delicious, they were usually consumed as picked — on the spot. We searched for these tasty red morsels on hands and knees. The discoverers of a wild strawberry patch endeavored to keep its whereabouts secret as long as possible. My older brother, Obie, and his inseparable pal, Ole Thorseth, managed to keep their choice find a private preserve summer after summer. If interlopers attempted to follow, and goodness knows how many times we tried, Obie and Ole would lead us on a wild goose chase. We could only guess at the extent of their treasure. Judging by the small tin pail of surplus that Obie occasionally brought home to share, we imagined a meadowful. We knew the berries brought home to be overflow because Obie would generously decline his supper portion of wild strawberries and cream.

Chokecherries were usually ripe and ready to pick by late summer. Gathering them was a family enterprise. The best chokecherry spots were several miles distant and usually the family car was pressed into service. Our first and only family car was of pre-World War I vintage. It was an open model Chevrolet. The cloth top had been taken off and a wetting from a sudden summer rain shower was always a possibility. Since we had no shed for the car, it stood in the backyard quite exposed to both the elements and the assaults of young make-believe drivers. It took some readying if a trip were planned. In fact, preparing the car became a major undertaking for Father. Usually at least one flat tire had to be repaired. The engine had to be hand-cranked, and after standing for days unused, it invariably balked. Father spent a lot of time either peering under the hood or crawling underneath the car itself. We boys learned that it was discreet to view Father's shakedown operation from a remote vantage point.

On one such occasion, Father had worked all Sunday morning on the automobile. About noon he came into the house, covered with grease from head to foot, and triumphantly announced that the car was all set to go. A short time later, as we were eating our Sunday dinner — all keyed up with the exciting prospect of an afternoon automobile ride — we heard a loud "bang" in the backyard. No one said a word, but we covertly watched Father's neck redden, and he almost strangled on his soup. The bang was unmistakable. A tire had let go — blown out. Mother tried to save the day: "It's really too hot to go riding anyway."

The chokecherry expedition was planned for a day when Father did not have to work. Mother would prepare a picnic lunch and we'd try to get an early morning start. This was contingent, however, on Father's success with the car. Breakfast was scarcely eaten before we youngsters had piled into



Carl and Amelia Sletten. The wedding picture was taken in 1909.

— Courtesy Iowa State University Press

the back seat. Only after the engine sputtered into life would Mother condescend to clamber into the front seat. With an air of expectancy we watched Father make last minute adjustments of his cap and goggles. Fortunately, Father always announced our departure: "Everybody set? Hang on — here we go!"

We had learned to be wary of Father's lurching starts. He never did master that tricky clutch pedal.

Over deeply rutted, rocky trails we chugged and bumped along. Pasture gates had to be opened and closed, and Obie struggled manfully with those. Now and then we would jolt over a hidden badger hole and startled, Father would exclaim, "What was that?"

With exaggerated sweetness Mother might reply, "That? Oh that was only an abandoned well."

When an almost imperceptible trail ended or became impassable, we would pile out, take our lunch and pails, and continue our journey on foot. Often this meant crossing the creek by stepping from stone to stone. If anyone wet his feet, it was usually Father. Mother proved surprisingly nimble.

Soon we were all stripping the clusters of ripened chokecherries. Each picked his own apportioned level. Father could usually manage all but the very highest clusters, and sometimes even those branches could be bent into reach. While



Hannaford's first ski slide and jump was designed and built by Norwegian Peter Falsted.

— *Courtesy Iowa State University Press*

Bumpy's range was limited, he picked and ate until the tart chokecherries made his tongue too wooly to swallow more. Wild chokecherries were mostly pit, with only a thin fleshy layer between pit and skin. We would pop several into the mouth at once, then pits were spat out in staccato bursts. When pressed between thumb and forefinger, the moist and slippery pit became a stealthy projectile to launch at an unsuspecting cherry picker. By tacit understanding, Father was a forbidden target.

Once Bumpy reached the "wooly mouth" stage, his attention was easily diverted to other pastimes. A garter snake slithering its way through the grass would quicken its darting movements when stirred by an eager Bumpy in pursuit. Or a fat and lazy grasshopper might wind up a captured victim after a well-executed stalk. Bumpy had to learn that Mother was less than enthusiastic when the hapless insect spit "tobacco juice."

By late afternoon we usually had our quota of chokecherries. We had paused earlier to enjoy a leisurely picnic lunch. Father would swing the filled, hundred-pound flour sack of chokecherries to a broad shoulder and we would start the trek back to the car. One particular hurdle remained for Father — crossing the creek on the stones. The load on Father's shoulder made him even less agile. About halfway across, what we expected to happen invariably did. Father's exploring foot would light either on a wobbly rock or one that was wet, moss covered, and slippery. For a moment Father and load would teeter precariously, then, rocks abandoned, he would lunge the last several steps through often knee-deep water. We boys could scarce hide our amusement, while I know Mother let out a sigh of relief.

There was still the perilous ride home to anticipate, but at least we had negotiated the creek. Eventually we would arrive back home — tired but content.

For Mother, work with the chokecherries was only beginning. They were washed by dumping into a water-filled tub. Leaves, bugs, and other foreign material floated to the top and were removed. Next the chokecherries were cooked

in a large kettle. This process would release much of the juice. Then the remaining pulp, mostly pits and skins, was put into a cloth bag or enfolded in a flour sack dishtowel. Draining and no end of vigorous hand squeezing extracted most of the remaining juice. Mother's hands would bear the dark red stains for some days after.

Quarts and quarts of chokecherry juice were canned and stored on the bulging cellar shelves. Later, the juice would be converted into jelly or syrup as needed. Chokecherry syrup on pancakes was delicious, and we even poured it atop our steaming bowls of oatmeal. Mother may have overdone it. To this day I can scarcely look a bowl of oatmeal in the eye. If Mother didn't invent "back to nature" cereal, she certainly popularized it in our household.

A part of the bounteous chokecherry harvest became the makings for chokecherry wine. A batch was "set" in a five-gallon stone crock which occupied a niche beside the pantry cupboard. A dish towel was draped over the crock to keep out flies and partly to conceal the operation from curious eyes. A "revenooer" would only have needed to follow his nose to the cache. The fermenting chokecherries had a sour-mash odor all their own.

One day Mother had removed the cover — perhaps for wine tasting. Obie passed by, proudly bearing a small frosting-covered cake. Somehow his prized cake slipped off the plate and plopped into the open wine crock. For some time after, Delbert and I made the most of Obie's chagrin. We rubbed salt in his wound by joining in a nonsensical ditty, "Down went McGinty to the bottom of the sea."

Mother's chokecherry wine served a double purpose. I'm certain that she and Father enjoyed a wee nip of it on special occasions. Mother also served up a thimble-sized glass of it to any of us showing symptoms of a winter cold. We found it to be quite pleasant medicine. One year there were no chokecherries and Mother made dandelion wine instead. That winter, Obie opined that it was hardly worth getting sick anymore. . .

. . . It was inevitable that Bumpy should find favor with all

who came to know him, and that included almost everyone in Hannaford. His sunny disposition, unflagging energy, and oft-exhibited pluck endeared him to the hearts of grown-ups.

If Bumpy turned up missing at mealtime, Mother didn't worry too much. She knew he was having dinner or supper somewhere. Since we had no telephone, she was not often informed. Bumpy would ingratiate himself with older ladies who had no one to run their errands. He knew who baked the best cookies and whose apples were the sweetest. I think Mother understood that Bumpy's presence brought a touch of happiness to many a lonely home.

. . . It was Bumpy's prowess on the Hannaford ski jump that really put his brothers to shame.

Bald Hill Creek afforded year-round pleasure and challenge to the boys growing up in Hannaford. The frozen creek itself provided miles of adventuresome ice skating. Mink abounded along its banks and were sought by eager young trappers. The gently sloping hills were ideal for skiing, sledging, and tobogganing.

Ski jumping came into its own in Hannaford with the arrival of Norwegian-born Peter Falstad. Pete had begun his skiing in his native Norway. Arriving in the United States as a young man, Pete soon took his place among some of the best-known skiers in this country. Along with Alf Engen, Torger Tokle, and Casper Oimoen, Pete achieved fame as a ski jumper. He was a member of the United States Olympic skiing team in 1924.

While the hills along the Bald Hill must have appeared rather insignificant to this renowned ski jumper, he, nonetheless, was not to be denied participation in the sport he had grown up with. In short order Pete had designed and constructed a ski slide. This consisted of a steeply sloping surface suspended from a tall steel tower. This ski slide was perched at the brow of the steepest slope overlooking Bald Hill Creek. The natural valley slope had been carved (through excavation) into an even steeper landing surface beneath the jump.

The jumper, with skis carried on his shoulder, had to laboriously climb a set of narrow steps to the top of the slide. A single handrail along the outer edge of the steep slide provided precarious support to the climber. Once at the top he stepped onto his skis and adjusted the bindings. An experienced jumper would launch his body sharply over the edge in order to attain the utmost speed down the long and precipitous takeoff. To maintain his balance on this abrupt drop he would have to lean forward in a deep crouch. The takeoff leveled off for a few feet before ending suddenly high above the ground. As the end of the jump rushed forward to meet him, the skier would straighten his body and lift his arms to increase the distance of his jump.

Pete's jumps were something to behold! His lean, lithe figure hurtled down the slide and out into space. His control or style in the air and his landing were judged to be well-nigh perfect. Frequently he would almost overjump the limited landing, thus endangering both his life and limb. It was little wonder that people came from long distances to watch this great skier perform. Hannaford residents were

mighty proud of Pete and the Olympic team emblem emblazoned on his trim blue sweater and stocking cap.

During the mid-1920s, several jumping tournaments were held in Hannaford each winter and would ordinarily attract other well-known and capable skiers. Casper Oimoen made frequent appearances. Hannaford, too, had other hardy local ski enthusiasts who tried mightily to emulate Pete's jumping feats. Marcus Hakken was perhaps the oldest of the regular contestants and always provided the comic relief in a tourney. His portly figure coming off the jump bore a slight resemblance to an airborne elephant. His stocky arms flailed like the blades of twin windmills as he fought for distance and balance. Otto Polson — next to Ole Thorseth, Obie's best pal — was without question the most adept of the younger skiers.

Leave it to Bumpy to wiggle his way into this select group of performers. Bumpy, like the rest of us, learned to ski on Bald Hill Creek. We practiced on small jumps built by shoveling up a mound of snow a few feet high. In short order Bumpy graduated. He had secretly tried out the ski slide and discovered that he could negotiate it and wind up in one piece. I think poor Father almost swallowed his snuff when Bumpy announced that he was going to jump in an upcoming tournament. He had already signed up in the junior division.

When Father realized that Bumpy had been risking his neck on the slide by jumping without bindings on his skis, he had our local harnessmaker make some.

On the day of the tournament, Father, Mother, Obie,

Sliding was a favorite winter sport for kids in Hannaford.

— Courtesy Iowa State University Press



Del and I joined the throng of spectators below the ski slide to watch Bumpy make his debut. The huge number 12 fastened across Bumpy's chest and back hung like an apron almost to his knees. We watched apprehensively as the tiny figure made its way to the top of the slide. His head was barely visible over the top edge when he was announced.

An instant later Bumpy was on his way down. He squatted so low, it appeared that he was sitting on his skis. He went over the jump in the same crouched position and barely cleared the top of the landing. He probably sailed thirty feet through the air and hit the landing with skis wide spread. Momentarily he teetered precariously, and the crowd anticipated a spill. Miraculously he recovered his balance and scooted on down almost to the creek bed itself before coming to a stop. The crowd gave him a tremendous hand, and I must admit that we were all pretty proud of our Bumpy.

He made two more successful jumps that day, and although he did not place in the junior division, he did win the

hearts of everyone watching. In ensuing tournaments, Bumpy continued to be the darling of the crowds who came to watch. Though Bumpy received this adulation modestly enough, it was again that "oh, that was nuthin'" air that bothered Del and me. Obie accepted Bumpy's triumphs with considerably more grace.

Finally Del and I could no longer stand the ignominy of being outdone by our kid brother. Early one Saturday morning we took our skis, eluded both Bumpy and Obie, and covertly made our way to the ski slide. We knew that it had been readied for an upcoming tournament and would be in tiptop shape.

We determinedly made our way to the top of the slide and strapped on our skis. We were both perfectly willing to let the other go first. I would resolutely move to the edge and peer over. Cowed by the sight of that dizzying descent, I would back off and Del would take my place. Then it was his turn to "chicken out." This procrastination continued indeterminably until we were both shivering, partly from cold and partly, I suppose, from fright.

Del had yielded the starting position to me for the umpteenth time. Again I stood poised at the edge with only a halfhearted resolve to make the attempt. I must have inadvertently moved too close to the brink. I'm certain that I did not shove off by my own free will. I later accused Del of giving me a little nudge, but he vehemently denied this.

At any rate, I suddenly found myself plunging downward. Completely out of balance, I fell backward on my skis. Soon I was slithering and sliding sideways down the takeoff. Fortunately, the ends of my skis did not catch on the guard railing supports. My unscheduled journey down the face of the slide ended abruptly, when I slid off the end of the jump and plopped unceremoniously into the flax straw below. The straw cushioned my fall, and after a moment of initial shock I knew that nothing was hurt except my dignity.

From the top of the slide a frantic Del hollered, "Harvey! Harvey! Are you all right?" I had disappeared from his sight after my drop. I struggled to untangle myself and unbuckle my ski bindings. Then still spitting flax straw and dust, I staggered out to where Del could see that I was still in one piece. Without further ado, Del unfastened his ski bindings and made his way afoot down the steps — carrying his skis. Clearly, Del had decided that discretion was now the better part of valor.

We told no one about our fiasco until years later. At the time it would have been humiliation simply unbearable.

Our grudging admiration for Bumpy's indomitable spirit was growing. He was fast becoming a legend in Hannaford. Boyhood years passed all too quickly on the Bald Hill.



Bumpy, the youngest Sletten brother, models a two-piece bathing suit in 1925.

— Courtesy
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