

MARILYN GRACE BELL-DI LASCIO



“FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE”

Marilyn Bell’s swimming experience as a child was limited to the oceanfront near the port of Halifax. After the war, her parents moved to Toronto where she began her swimming career at the Lakeshore Swim Club under the coaching of Gus Ryder. As an amateur she won the Baker Bread Trophy for winning the one mile race. In the summer of 1954 she took first place honours for women in the Atlantic City Marathon.

Marilyn Bell became the first person to cross *Lake Ontario* on 8-9th September 1954 at the age of 16 years. Her swim took 20 hours 55 minutes, started from Youngstown, New York state, at the mouth of the Niagara River, and ended at the breakwater just to the west of the Canadian National Exhibition. A truly defining moment in Canadian sports history. A park dedicated in Marilyn's name was opened on August 16, 1984. An Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque was commemorated on July 27, 2008. Plaque Text:

*“On the evening of September 9, 1954, 16-year-old marathon swimmer Marilyn Bell became the first person to swim across Lake Ontario. Racing unofficially against the heavily favoured American swimmer Florence Chadwick, Bell endured eels, high winds and frigid waters for almost 21 hours to complete her world-record-breaking 51.5 kilometer swim here. Her courageous achievement won unprecedented attention both at home and abroad for the sport of marathon swimming in Canada. Bell’s swim demonstrated that women could compete in even the most grueling sports and fostered immense national pride.”*

Marilyn had conquered Lake Ontario in an era that both doubted and trivialized women’s ability in competitive sport while setting a new standard for others to follow. She continued her swimming career in 1955 as the youngest person to swim across the English Channel and in 1956 as the first woman to conquer the Straits of Juan de Fuca.