

## Bikini arrests on Bondi Beach: 1940s-1960s

N. S. W. BEACH INSPECTORS'  
DINNER  
HOTEL BONDJ FRIDAY, 22nd APRIL, 1955



*The Local Government Act, Ordinance No. 52 (1935)* set exact dimensions for swimming costumes which remained in force until 1961. An example of this is that men's and women's costumes must have legs at least 3" long, must completely cover the front of the body from a line at the level of the armpits to the waist, have shoulder straps or other means of keeping the costume in position.

It is impossible to say who was the first woman to wear a bikini on Bondi Beach, what is known are some of the arrests which took place for breaches of the *Local Government Act* relating to swimming costumes.

### **1940s & 1950s: the first arrests**

In 1945 an unnamed woman braved the Bondi promenade wearing a bikini in and according to a *Sunday Telegraph* report in 1946 'caused a near riot'. Waverley Council Lifeguard (then known as Beach Inspectors) Aub Laidlaw told her she was indecently attired and ordered her to changing sheds at Bondi Pavilion with instructions to put on some more clothes.

She was later charged with offensive behaviour. Another newspaper report recounts this same story but with this first bikini girl appearing on the beach in September 1946, yet another newspaper report claims October that year with the girl in the bikini being mobbed by 'hundreds of young surfers'

Aub Laidlaw is remembered that event in an interview with the *Daily Mirror* 19 April 1984:

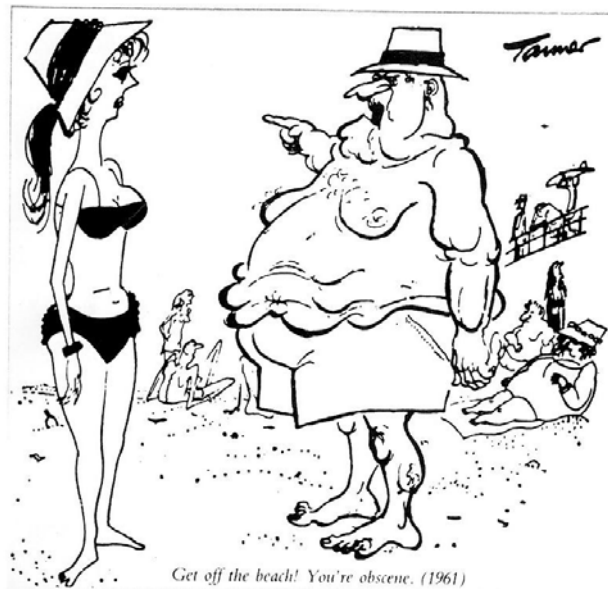
*"I remember the first girl I ordered off was a medium sized brunette from Darren St, Lidcombe. The beach telegraph had got around before I caught up to her and the mob was round her. We had to escort her out the back door of the pavilion [Bondi Pavilion] to a tram."*

In 1951 Yvonne Freedman was arrested for wearing a bikini as was Hollywood film starlet Jean Parker. In an interview about his work in 1956 Lifeguard Bill Willis said that the Lifeguards resented having to act as dress censor, however it was the responsibility to enforce the *Local Government Act* on the beach. He said that it was demeaning to them as they were emergency service workers, not fashion police.

The early bikini girls do not seem to have endeared themselves to him. Later in the interview he says:

*"Most girls who come to the beach in bikinis seem to be feather-brained exhibitionists. Perhaps they grow out of it in time. I have talked to hundreds of girls and I have noticed that girls who wear sensible one-piece costumes are full of sound sense. I have never seen a girl in a bikini put more than her toe in the water."*

Maybe sensing that they were fighting a losing battle Waverley Council had a debate on the wearing of bikinis at the Council meeting of 15 December, 1951. However the Council voted against its acceptance on the beaches in the Waverley Local Government Area. A rather more novel proposal to Council, however, was to come ten years later.



Cartoon by Les Tanner. *The Bulletin*, October 1961

### **1960s: the bikini war**

Over the October long weekend in 1961 more than 50 unnamed women, some reports claim as many as 75 were ordered from Bondi Beach because their swimsuits did not conform to regulations. These arrests were given extensive coverage by the media, who often staged the news stories themselves by 'planting' bikini clad models on the beach and then reporting the subsequent response by the Lifeguards. During this time the media coined the catchphrase 'the bikini war'.

In October 1961 Joan Mary Barry, 25, a dancer and actress, was fined 3 pounds at Paddington Court of Petty Sessions for wearing an offensive swimming costume on Bondi Beach. The costume was described as being 'at least five inches below the navel'; she was fined for 'refusing to resume ordinary dress' and calling apprehending Lifeguard Aub Laidlaw 'a fool'.

A report of the case in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1961, mentions the costume being confiscated by the police and that 'the exhibit' i.e. the bikini, was available for viewing at Paddington Police Station.

The Mayor of Waverley Alderman Ray O'Keefe (father of legendary Australian singer Johnny O'Keefe) said that he had instructed the Council's Beach Inspectors to make sure male swimmers did also not offend against decency He is reported in the *Sun Herald*, 29 October 1961 as having said, "We are taking a good look at the men as well, and many of them have been sent off the beach for wearing exaggerated jockey shorts."

Later that year a rather novel solution to the bikini problem was proposed by Waverley Council Alderman J. Einfield. His suggestion was that women wearing two-piece swimsuits parade before members of Waverley Council and that "Aldermen could then judge if the bikinis were decent". In reporting the (unsuccessful) proposal *The Daily Telegraph* quipped, 'The Eyes Have It'.

By the end of 1961 the old *Local Government Act, Ordinance No. 52* was abandoned and a new ordinance introduced which simply required bathers be 'clad in a proper and adequate bathing costume' - without defining exactly what this was. The bikini 'war' had been won – by the bikini wearers!

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