School in the winter. Their performances featured themes ranging from patriotism to circus acts and even celebrated holidays such as Halloween, with the children’s parents making all of the props and costumes for the shows. By the 1960s, The Toyland Wedding seems to have become their most popular show.

The wedding consisted of two young swimmers playing the bride and groom accompanied by the bridal party, while children ranging from age three to 18 performed different parts of the celebration. Some of the youngest children played the wedding party and the “contingent from Candyland,” while older children slayed the dragon and performed the more difficult synchronized routines. The performance lasted for more than an hour and ended with a dragon-slaying competition for the hand of King Neptune’s daughter, Laughing Water.

Pittsburgh Water Babies

Lula “Lou” Stilley won the Allegheny Mountain Association’s high and low board diving championships in the 1930s and competed in the 1932 Olympic trials before her dreams of Olympic glory were ended by an auto accident. Afterwards, she channeled her love of swimming into the children in her community, including her niece Helen Lou Stilley, who was featured in a 1935 Pittsburgh Press article titled, “This Little Lady is A Baby Mermaid.” That same year Lula started the Pittsburgh Water Babies, an unsponsored synchronized swimming team that performed at Pittsburgh area pools and country clubs for 30 years. As many of the original members aged, and eventually some of their children joined, Lou changed the name to the “Pittsburgh Water Babies and Their Big Sisters and Brothers.”

Passionate about the education of children, Lou became convinced that early instruction kept children safe and gave them a lifelong love of the water. Her Water Babies practiced at the Mount Oliver pool in the summer and Knoxville Junior High
One of the early Water Babies, Laurine Schuler eventually competed in the Senior Olympics. She recalled her time with Coach Lou when she was eight years old in 1938: “She threw us to a big dragon from a stage at a water pageant at North Park County Pool that was over 100 meters long and 50 meters wide. Being swallowed by a dragon was the beginning of my swimming career.” But she also had an appreciation for Coach Lou, who taught them that the enjoyment of swimming mattered more than winning.

Lou passed away in 1978, four years after being inducted into the Pennsylvania Swimming Hall of Fame. Many remembered her years of dedication to children both through her career as a swim teacher and as a religious educator at several area churches. Shortly before Lou’s death she published *The Fun Way To Learn To Swim*, so generations of children could continue to be inspired by her love of swimming.

The History Center recently accepted a donation of props and signs from the Water Babies and two photographs, but we would love to learn more from locals who grew up watching or performing with the Water Babies. Contact us at ELRuby@heinzhistorycenter.org to share your story.