

Lost At Sea

(original at <http://614columbus.com/article/5998/1380303188> but they already deleted the article.)

Grove City's Walter Poenisch achieved the unthinkable in 1978. The conniving of a 28-year-old Diana Nyad nearly ensured you wouldn't know.

By Lori Gum

Published [October 1, 2013](#)

before his swim, walter was already a world record holder for “Longest Distance Ocean Swim.”

Though the age difference may have upset her parents, 21-year-old Faye Vance found her soulmate in Walter, and the the 54-year-old gained a cheerleader, coach, publicist, manager, nurse, protector, and documentarian.

The poenisches presented castro with a scrapbook, and in turn, he surprised them with one he kept of walter's clippings.

A toast kicks off the swim.

Walter's homemade shark cage, made of \$400 worth of conduit pipe, chicken wire and bed sheets, IT was his only protection from sharks.

It took 34 hours and 21 of his pounds, but walter made the florida shore alive.

Between long, grasping, gasping strokes, the exhausted swimmer squinted his swollen eyes and caught a faint glimpse of the silent, empty shore, still some two miles away. Or was it two hundred?

He didn't know. Logic and reality were fluid as the tides now, rising and falling, battering his mind like the saline waves that had lashed his body for the previous 34 hours. For the last 128 miles. 21 pounds of weight had now been nibbled and gnawed away by dehydration, exertion and regurgitation. Hallucinations grew stronger as the venom from the cumulative stings of angry ocean animals continued to surge and climax, poisoning his body.

On. He swam. Suddenly, the shark cage snagged on a sand bar and remained steadfastly defiant against the desperate tugs of the boat. He could hear them yelling, screaming, his wife begging him to get out of the cage. He was close now. So very close.

Someone jumped off the boat and swam towards him. Incoherent, his body temperature now dangerously low, the urgent words gently but firmly directed him out of the crippled cage and set him free.

Together, they swam the last short distance to the shore.

The swimmer stumbled in the tide, his feet unaccustomed to the firmness, the sudden, stark unquestionable reality of land. He stood stooped and confused...his arms still trying to stroke, independently unaware that the journey was now at its end.

And then, in a flash of that particular divine clarity that graces only saints and madmen, the swimmer reached down and gathered a handful of sand...and realized just what he had done.

At 4:01 AM on July 13, 1978, just two days after his 65th birthday, Walter Poenisch from Grove City, Ohio had become the first person ever to swim from Cuba to the United States.

Walter had dubbed his fifteen-year dream the “Swim For Peace” in an attempt to encourage the two rival antagonistas, the US and Cuba, to share a moment of common benevolent purpose. Fidel Castro had seen Walter off from the Havana shore himself, after a pineapple juice toast and the gift of a birthday cake, his yacht accompanying the swimmer for the first couple miles of his dangerous journey.

But now, not a single member of the press was there to bear witness to the world upon his arrival on American shores. No boisterous, congratulatory crowd rushed to cheer his unyielding fortitude and faith. No helicopters hovered overhead.

The beach was dark and empty.

Where was everybody?

Against the Current

Faye Poenisch, Walter’s widow, will vigorously recount this story to anyone who will listen, as many times as the willing will hear it. Each telling of the 35-year-old tale bristles with the crack of immediacy and urgency, powerfully expressed as if it all happened only yesterday. Because this isn’t just Walter’s story. This is their story, though she alone is left to tell it.

Also sitting beside her is an unpublished manuscript and a thorough scrapbook that contains every headline, article, picture, letter, note, statement, documented phone call, and public record that she could need to present their story nationally.

To date, no one has asked.

The events of this past September 2nd may provide just such a rare moment. On that day, a 64-year-old Diana Nyad finally succeeded after 53 hours on her fifth try to traverse the same Cuban-US waters.

If you ask Faye Poenisch about Nyad’s recent successful swim, the plot starts to thicken. She didn’t watch it on TV. And she offers a weighty reason as to why.

“As far as I’m concerned, she helped destroy my husband’s life.”

A Cowboy in the Water

It is tempting to allow the treachery of this story to overshadow the account of Walter’s amazing life. But it would be a shame to let what was done to him to diminish, once again, what he accomplished. Walter’s story would be worth a good hearty telling even if Diana Nyad had never set foot in the big, ocean blue.

Born in 1913 to immigrant parents living in German Village, Walter lived in central Ohio for most of his life. A baker by trade, Walter took over the small family business, The White Star Cake Company, and wrestled it into a thriving commercial success, marrying and raising two sons. He built their Grove City home in 1954 with his own hands.

In his thirties, restless and with nothing more than a passion for horses, he hopped on the rodeo circuit as a novice bull rider and horse wrangler and wound up a rodeo star. His indefatigable determination and spirit of self-challenge earned Poenisch the title of “Cutting Horse Champion of

Ohio” three years in a row. He remained a star attraction on the traveling rodeo circuit for over 15 years, all the while still running the Columbus bakery and raising a family.

But it was purest serendipity in 1962 that first coaxed Walter into the water. After randomly wandering into the Ranch Restaurant in Jamestown, New York, the diner’s owner, Howie Fish, started razzing him for being a cowboy drinking milk with his steak dinner. Walter razzed back. Fightin’ words were soon exchanged and an impulsive bet was wagered as to which one of them was more physically fit.

It wasn’t until the next day, after Fish had called the local press and gathered a cheering crowd along the Lake Chautauqua shore, that Walter heard an announcer mention that that the diner owner and local hero was also a former Olympic swimmer. Realizing he’d been hustled only fired his determination to win.

He didn’t. But Walter finished just one body length behind the champion and Fish eagerly acknowledged his worthy competitor, refusing to collect the \$100 wager. Poenisch, it turned out, was a good swimmer. (After arriving back in Ohio, Walter sent him \$100 dollars’ worth of cookies, determined to not renege on his bet. He was also an honest man.)

Several months later, Fish sent Poenisch a newspaper clipping about The Jim Moran Lake Michigan Swim...a 60-mile race in open water which, at that time, was the longest such in the world. Eager for a new challenge and tiring of the rodeo, Walter took the bait, swam 30 of the 60 miles, and finished 9th out of 18 of the best swimmers in the world.

But Walter did not take well to the frigid cold of Lake Michigan waters. After the race, Big Jim Woods, himself a champion long-distance swimmer, invited Walter to come swim with him in Orlando where he lived and trained.

“You know, I bet a swim from Cuba to Florida would really be something,” Walter commented to Woods. “Really something.”

A dream was born. It was that simple.

Poenisch was 50 years old. He had never swum in the ocean.

In August of 1963, Walter began writing letters and sending cablegrams to Fidel Castro, American state and federal officials, senators, congressmen, and the White House in his quest for official authorization to pursue his newfound dream. The timing was rough: less than a year before, the Cuban Missile Crisis had threatened the entire world with nuclear war and established the U.S. and Cuba as mortal enemies.

In order to swim the warm waters that separated the two obstinate foes, Walter would also have to wade through a very Cold War. Thusly, he dedicated his dream as a “Swim For Peace.”

He trained every morning, usually at a nearby Columbus quarry. There he boosted his endurance and strength through the somewhat unusual exercise of towing a rowboat through the water – which contained at least one, and sometimes two, bakery employees drafted for the daily excursion. His afternoons were spent on the phone, at the typewriter, and the post office, firing out his pleas for permission to enter the forbidden waters and will his dream into being.

But he would need an equally determined and fierce accomplice to wrestle it into reality.

A Worthy Ally And A Lifelong Romance

Faye Vance could not remember when she hadn't known of Walter Poenisch. Her mother, a long-time employee at the White Star Cake Company had for years enlivened family dinners with tales of Poenisch's adventures and good-natured pranks. Faye herself went to work at the bakery when she was only 16. She took one first look at her handsome, 5-foot 11-inch, 210 pound, bigger-than-life boss in his cowboy hat, boots and Levis. She fell – hard. A year or so later, she swooned with delight when she was recruited as ballast one afternoon in the rowboat, Walter towing her endlessly around the quarry. But if the infatuation was mutual, he gave no such indication and her presence, in at least this phase of Poenisch's life, was soon to come to an abrupt halt.

The bakery could no longer weather Walter's long-endured absences. In 1966, at his family's urging, Walter sold the company against his better wishes. His wife had also tired of his inattention and left him.

He took it hard. Guilt-ridden and depressed over the end of his marriage and the sale of his business, he believed that all he had left was his Cuba dream. Poenisch soon packed up and left town in single-minded pursuit of it.

Faye said she never forgot about him, not for one moment.

A couple of years later, an officially divorced Poenisch was home for a visit and joined the Vance family for dinner. He told them he was now training fulltime in Orlando for his big swim.

After dinner, before saying goodbye, Walter kissed Faye and promised to stay in touch. She watched from her bedroom window as he got into his car and vanished once again from her life. She vowed then it would be the last time.

Two weeks later, against her parents' vehement objections, Faye drove to Orlando to profess her undying love to Walter once and for all. He was surprised and happy to see her but uneasy over her parents' disapproval and the difference in their ages. She persisted. She was adorable, he would admit; he had also never met anyone so like himself: so determined, so passionate, and game for an against-the-odds adventure.

In May 1968, they were married. Walter was 54. Faye Vance Poenisch was only 21. She would become his cheerleader, coach, publicist, manager, nurse, protector, documentarian, confessor, and above all, his soul mate and the love of his life. The "Swim For Peace" was now officially a joint venture.

Over the next decade, Poenisch would amass an astounding collected testament to his prowess in the water. Although his first try at an ocean swim from Nassau to Miami in 1968 ended after 50 miles when his homemade shark cage, made of conduit pipe, chicken wire and bed sheets, abruptly sank to the ocean floor. However, the national press started to take notice of the senior swimmer from Ohio; headlines regularly lauded his tenacity and determination.

Still, permission for the Cuba swim was stubbornly denied. Walter and Faye concluded that maybe they just needed something more spectacular to garner support. Walter's quarry training technique might be just the ticket to the spotlight.

In 1969, Walter was awarded the title of "World's Strongest Endurance Swimmer" by The World Professional Marathon Swimming Federation after towing two rowboats containing several people for 3 1/2 miles in Columbus. One year later, he towed a 28-ton, 47-foot yacht for 20 feet against the current of the Miami River, and, in 1971, he pulled a 15-ton steamboat a mile and a half in Gull Lake, Michigan. This generated even more headlines, as well as an appearance on the television show, To Tell The Truth.

GETTING IN THE CAGE

In 1972, Walter returned to the ocean and completed a 91-mile swim, dubbed the “Swim of the Century,” through the Florida Straits. The feat was sponsored by Borden Burger of Columbus and co-sponsored by the International Swimming Hall of Fame. In 1976, Poenisch completed his 122-mile “Bicentennial Swim” from Marathon to Duck Key, Florida. He and Faye had painted his shark cage red, white, and blue just for the occasion. His feat was entered into the Guinness Book of World Records as “The Longest Distance Ocean Swim” by a human being ever, and was officially recognized and sanctioned by ISHOF as the same.

Still, the “Swim For Peace” was officially denied. Nearly two more years slipped by before the tide began to turn in their favor.

Walter landed representation with Chuck Jones, a highly connected New York agent, who promised thousands of dollars in sponsorships and had garnered interest from NBC and CBS to cover the “Swim For Peace.” Jones told them to contact him the moment the authorization for the swim was officially granted.

On November 4, 1977, Faye and Walter met with Rene Mujica of the new office of the “Cuban Interest Section” in Washington, D.C. The Cuban diplomat said he saw no reason the swim couldn’t proceed as planned, though he would still need time to get official permission. The Poenisches sat speechless in their seats.

Five months later, on March 17, 1978 – after 15 years of endless waiting and a letter writing campaign whose recipients had included five U.S. presidents – Mujica called Walter.

“Mr. Poenisch,” he said, “I am pleased to inform you that your swim has won the approval of the Cuban government.”

Walter called Jones at once to tell him the good news. Oddly enough, Jones didn’t seem very excited and was interested only in obtaining Mujica’s number, that he might independently “verify it for the press.” Walter complied, thinking nothing more of it.

Five days later, buoyed and ecstatic, Walter and Faye picked up a copy of the Ft. Lauderdale News looking for any mention of Walter and stared at a headline in total disbelief.

“DIANA NYAD TO TRY CUBA TO KEY WEST RECORD SWIM.”

They didn’t even know who Nyad was. Panic set in – there must be some mistake. Walter phoned Mujica and asked him if anyone else had been granted approval for a Cuba swim.

“No,” replied Mujica. “But it’s funny you should ask...”

A man from New York named Chuck Jones had called and asked about a girl who wanted to make the same swim. He’d made no mention of Walter in any context. Mujica told him that only Poenisch had approval.

With shaking hands, Walter dialed Jones who, once on the phone, suddenly wasn’t so sure about his sponsorships anymore; he suggested that Walter might discontinue his plans to swim if none could be acquired. None could be acquired?! Walter angrily persisted. Did Jones know Nyad? Sure, said Jones. He’d handled a few things for her. He suggested again that Walter reconsider the swim. Walter slammed down the phone.

Another article appeared and solved the mystery:

“Miss Nyad’s manager, Chuck Jones, said they are keeping secret exactly how the swim is to be made. Obviously, we don’t want a lot of other swimmers trailing along. We don’t want the interference.” – The Star

The newspapers exploded with the announcement of Nyad’s daring new plan.

In an era of feminist icons, such as Billie Jean King, Janet Guthrie, Bella Abzug, and Gloria Steinem along with passage of Title IX, Nyad was an up-and-coming female sports superstar. In 1970, she set a women’s world record in her first 10-mile race in Lake Ontario, and gained national attention in 1975 when she swam 28 miles around the Island of Manhattan. Her first book, to be published by Random House, had already been announced. The attractive 28-year-old Ft. Lauderdale native was brash, boastful, and always quotable – undoubtedly the perfect candidate, the next big thing. From that angle, old man Poenisch from Ohio, with a little paunch around his waist, couldn’t begin to compete, regardless of his lifetime achievements.

Nyad herself would head up this spin on Walter’s narrative.

“With all due respect to the aged, a man who’s 64 years old and very overweight is not going to swim for two days nonstop,” Nyad said in a June 26 Miami Herald interview.

In the Atlanta Constitution, Marcie Rudel, a spokeswoman for Nyad, suggested that “Poenisch was trying to steal Ms. Nyad’s thunder.”

The fix was in. The nightmare had begun. Faye and Walter fought back as best they could but were no match for the PR momentum generated by the Nyad camp. Mostly, Faye tried to hold Walter together, keeping him on his training regimen and trying to replace the sponsorships stolen by Jones’ betrayal. She acquired one from Orbit Industries of Orlando for \$17,000. It was a start.

Then reporter Steve Sonsky from the Miami Herald informed them that, during an interview, Nyad herself had said horrible things about Walter, accusing him of hanging on the shark cage and using flotation, a wet suit and fins during his previous swims. Walter had always used fins. He made no secret of that. The rest was total fabrication. Sonsky told Faye that Nyad was “vicious” during the call.

Walter went almost out of his mind. In his fifteen years of competitive swimming, not once had anyone ever accused him of bending, let alone breaking the rules. He couldn’t bear being considered a cheat.

Faye convinced him to put it all behind him. There was little else that they could do. Finally, the “Swim For Peace” was set to begin on July 11, 1978. It was Walter’s Poenisch’s 65th birthday.

Unlikely Brotherhood

Three days before the swim, Walter, Faye and their crew arrived in Havana to much fanfare. The Cuban press, Cuban government officials, and members of the Institute of National Tourism and The Foreign Ministry greeted Poenisch as a hero, treating him with honor, appreciation, and respect. During the festivities, Foreign Minister Beinveindo Abierno informed Faye that Nyad had still not been granted official Cuban approval for her swim and that they were highly displeased with her treatment of Walter; they, too, had seen the headlines.

After retiring for the evening to their room, the Poenisches found a vase with Bird of Paradise flowers sent by Prime Minister Castro himself to welcome them. Walter and Faye began to feel a little bit better. The next couple of days were spent preparing for the swim, assembling the shark cage and readying the equipment.

On the morning of the swim, Walter and Faye awoke early on the boat and busied themselves with finishing up all of the last minute details. Then, without warning, they turned and saw Fidel Castro come through the door.

With the aid of a translator, Walter and Faye spent the next couple of hours talking with the Prime Minister. He was particularly concerned about Walter's safety and carefully scrutinized the proposed map of his journey, questioning them about currents and the danger from sharks.

When Faye handed him Walter's scrapbook to peruse, Castro surprised them by showing them his own collection of the newspaper clippings and pictures that Faye had sent him over the years. He had kept every one.

Walter and Castro hit it off like old friends. Castro recounted how he himself had been a swimmer and was quite the accomplished diver, until he discovered that someone had tried to poison his diving suit.

He also remarked that Walter reminded him of author and frequent visitor to the island, Ernest Hemingway.

Before departing, Castro asked Walter if he would autograph his copy of The Guinness Book of World Records containing the recognition of Walter's 1976 "Bicentennial Swim." Faye, in turn, asked Castro to sign Walter's birthday card, to which he eagerly complied. Then the Prime Minister apologized for taking so much of their time, excused himself and suggested that they might see him at the seaside restaurant beach where the swim would actually commence.

As Walter and Faye and the Crew arrived at the swim's point of departure, they were surrounded by over 50 clamoring members of the Cuban media. No American press was present. They also found a table full of exquisite appetizers and desserts. In the middle was a birthday cake decorated with Walter's "Swim For Peace" logo. Castro himself had seen to the cake, and soon reappeared to see Walter off on his journey.

He joined Walter and Faye in a pineapple juice toast, warmly embraced the swimmer and then boarded his own yacht, docked nearby. Castro would follow Walter for several miles as he began the swim, giving him an official and heart-felt send-off.

Faye rubbed down her husband for one final time. He kissed her, held her tight, and made her promise that the swim would not stop until he made it to the U.S. – no matter what happened. She agreed, kissed him again for good luck, and boarded the swim boat.

Then at 5:45 p.m. on July 11th, Walter entered the water. 128.8 miles, 34 hours and 15 minutes later, he would indeed reach the other side.

A Course Forever Altered

Originally, the swim was planned to conclude on the beaches of Marathon, Fla. But with the currents strong and with Walter in such dangerous physical and mental condition near the end of the swim, Capt. Bendt Lynge decided to change the course at the last minute and head towards Duck Key Florida, just some six miles east down the coast from Marathon. He had genuinely feared for Walter's life. Walter had said repeatedly that he didn't care where he came ashore as long as the sand was on an American beach.

After Walter's swim was completed, the boat remained at Duck Key for over five hours. Walter was in critical condition. His body temperature had fallen to 97 degrees and he tossed and turned, drifting in and out of consciousness. He heaved and shook uncontrollably and his digits were

shrunken and pruned, deformed by such a long time in salt water. The last thing Faye or anyone on the boat was concerned about in that moment was the press.

After Walter's condition had somewhat stabilized, the boat left Duck Key and soon docked at Marathon, some six hours after the end of the swim.

A small gaggle of reporters crowded around the boat immediately asking questions. Walter was incoherent and could not be interviewed. But that didn't stop reporters from trying to take pictures of his prostrate form through the peepholes of the cabin.

One reporter asked why there had been no press on the swim. Suddenly, the decision of the press not to cover the swim somehow became evidence that Walter had intentionally dodged the watchful eye of journalist observers. Why had they not ended the swim at Marathon? Why had they waited six hours after arriving at Duck Key? Faye tried to explain through the barrage. Jim Mims, the swim authenticator from the International Federation of Ocean Swimmers and Divers, tried to offer a chronological account of Walter's accomplishment but to no avail. He finished, but no one was listening.

A reporter pushed his way through the small crowd and asked whether they were aware of the fact that Dick Mullins of the International Swimming Hall of Fame had just called and said that the ISHOF would not recognize Walter's swim.

Mullins had another quote for them about Walter, too: "His swims always end in chaos, confusion and where no one can see them."

Mullins and the ISHOF were over 200 miles away. What could they possibly know about the details of the swim? Furthermore, The ISHOF had co-sponsored Walter's 1972 "Swim of The Century," officially sanctioned and recognized it, and Mullins himself had done the PR for the swim. ISHOF had also officially recognized Walter's 1976 "Bicentennial Swim" with a shiny gold plaque without one mention of anything untoward...until now.

But it would be soon revealed that Buck Dawson, the director of ISHOF, had been Nyad's original coach, introduced her to marathon swimming, and had long been her mentor. Walter had known Buck for years through the ISHOF and considered him a friend. He and Faye had known nothing of the connection to Nyad before Mullins' very public attacks.

Before even regaining consciousness, Walter's swim was being labeled a fraud and within 48 hours, his achievement became only a "claim" of such...the media machine quickly transforming mere stinging, unfounded accusation into indisputable "fact." It stuck.

Nyad publicly chimed in with her own opinion of Walter's swim.

"Not legal. He's not a legal marathon swimmer. He does not swim by the rules. He's a gimmick. He's a cheat. In the world of sports, he's a cheat." Nyad proclaimed to the world, via the New York Times.

For the record, Nyad had never met Poenisch. Further, she never would.

But the worst headline came from a reporter named Bernie Lincicome in the Fort Lauderdale News on July 14, 1978: "Was That You In Water All The Time, Walter?" Poenisch was now being accused of sleeping on the boat during his 1972 swim while letting another swimmer take over. Nyad would publicly repeat the claim herself.

Adding salt to the widening wound was a letter they received from Walter's only sponsor, Orbit Industries, revoking their \$17,000 sponsorship "due to references being made of you being called a cheat and a fraud."

It was a total and complete disaster.

The only relief from the nightmare came when Fidel Castro called after the swim to make sure that Walter was okay.

Nyad finally gained approval for her own swim, and on August 13 she dove into the Cuban waters. She stopped after only 32 miles, 80 miles short of her goal, but was profiled on The Today Show, Good Morning America, The Tonight Show, and featured in Newsweek, People, US and Sports Illustrated...lauded even in her failure.

Her sponsorships were legendary for a swimmer at that time, totaling close to \$150,000, and no one asked her for repayment when she failed to deliver what she'd promised.

'I'm A Hero—That's What I Wanted,' Nyad Proclaims. – Sun-Sentinel, August 17, 1978

Walter never recovered.

But the Poenisches did fight back. They sued Nyad and the International Swimming Hall of Fame for defamation.

It was now a legal saga that tested the Poenisch resilience and determination. They desperately wanted a trial so that Walter would have a public forum to clear his name, but with strategic delays from the defendants and their lawyers and the unearthing of a somewhat obscure Florida law that applied a statute of limitation for libel cases after the suit had already been in court for more than four years, the Poenisches were eventually forced to either settle out of court or get nothing.

On April 12, 1983, Nyad issued a full and complete retraction regarding all of the comments she made regarding Walter's "Swim For Peace" and his 1972 swim. Richard Mullins and The International Swimming Hall of Fame did the same. The Poenisches were awarded a small monetary compensation from each defendant; however, the total recompense didn't even cover their lawyer's fees.

Retractions don't make page one; when Nyad retracted her poisonous claims the press barely noticed. Walter's great swim was hardly rescued from its continually increasing obscurity. But they had won.

They had also succeeded during the defendants' depositions to get them to admit that they had no evidence to back up their previous accusations that Walter cheated. No evidence at all. Nyad mostly claimed that she couldn't remember any of the accusatory statements about Poenisch that she had made. But she did admit that Buck Dawson of ISHOF showed her the pictures of Walter sleeping in the cabin, along with the accusation that accompanied them.

It was further proven that those photos were indeed from 1972, but they were taken of Walter resting, after he had completed his swim. Jim Woods, the swimmer who was accused of taking Walter's place in the water, filed an affidavit stating unequivocally that he had not. He also threatened to file his own suit if the allegations against him continued. The accusations stopped.

Also worth noting, Walter had followed the swim rules of the authenticating organization, The International Federation of Ocean Swimmers and Divers, to a tee. He was allowed fins and a snorkel, allowed to get out of the water four times (for no longer than five minutes at a time) to

administer emergency medicine, receive critical nourishment, or for any reason that directly threatened the life of the swimmer. He was also allowed a shark cage.

During the swim, Walter left the water three times: twice for treatment of multiple Portuguese-Man-of-War stings and once during a shark attack on his cage after vomiting attracted a frenzy. The evacuations lasted less than four minutes each, and all of it was documented in the swim's log.

When Walter swam from Cuba, there were no official rules. No one had ever done it before. No one had even considered it. His shark cage cost all of \$400. Fins might speed you up and steady your course against the currents, but it takes enormous leg strength to kick with them for 34 hours, draining much-needed stamina – particularly the heavy, non-floating fins manufactured back in the mid-1970s.

After her failed attempt in 1978 – assisted by a shark cage herself – Nyad stated that “there were no rules” and even after her recent swim this past September, she stated that it was her understanding of the sport that the first person to make a crossing got to set the rules for that body of water.

That person would be Walter Poenisch.

It should therefore be said...unequivocally: Walter Poenisch was the first person to swim from Cuba to the United States on July 13, 1978. Period.

No asterisks needed.

Ebb Tide

Walter died on June 6th, 2000 in his Grove City home under the loving care of his devoted wife, Faye. He was born with arterial venous malformation of the brain, although the condition did not manifest itself until 1990, at the age of 78. The condition caused seizures that rendered his left side paralyzed. He wanted to swim, in a pool this time, but refused to be lifted in the water. With Faye's assistance and the now-evident Poenisch persistence, after several years, Walter was eventually able to walk down the steps into the pool. This time, he would swim for peace of body and mind.

Faye says that in his last years, by the strength of his deeply held faith, Walter forgave his accusers. Up for a challenge until the very end, he eventually granted them his own personal absolution.

Just this last summer, Faye Poenisch held a small party at her home in honor of what would have been Walter's 100th birthday. She sent a letter to the “Cuban Interests Section” in the hopes that it would reach Rene Mujica, the Cuban diplomat who obtained for them the permission to swim from Cuba, although Mujica had long been gone from his post. Nevertheless, Faye asked, if he would be kind enough to forward an invitation to Fidel Castro to Walter's party on her behalf. The Prime Minister had been so very kind to them during their time in Cuba.

She received, in part, this reply from Mujica:

Dear Faye Poenisch,

I have fond personal memories of working with Mr. Poenisch, and yourself, in order to complete the arrangements for the 1978 Cuba to US swim project. After so many years, it stands out in my memory that Walter took the latter not just as a new, unprecedented challenge in his life and career as a swimmer, but that he meant it also as a spur to the building of bridges over differences that separated our two nations at the time. Walter's dedication and faith in the project will not only continue to provide inspiration and hope in the strength of character but also an encouragement to

the growing number of people in both countries who feel that such bridges between them need to be built without further loss of time.

Although former president Fidel Castro is not able to attend the celebration of Mr. Poenisch's 100th birthday, your invitation is being forwarded to him with the utmost appreciation for your kindness. Please accept our best wishes for the success of the memorial event.

They remember him. So should we. •

Lori Gum is the program coordinator for Stonewall Columbus, and the owner of Periodisa Publishing. Her report on Walter Poenisch's amazing story was sourced from the extensive documentation of his wife, Faye Poenisch, as well as Faye's recollection. Faye Poenisch lives in Grove City; Walter is interred at the Greenlawn Cemetery. Diana Nyad completed the swim from Cuba to the Florida Keys on September 2, 2013, after 53 hours in the water. Neither she nor her representatives responded to requests to be interviewed for this story. She is currently battling skeptics in the swimming world who have cast doubt as to the authenticity of her claim.