

COVER STORY

weekender.



WELL DONE: A Bendigo woman is crowned Queen of the Pool for her fundraising efforts.

SIGNED: Kay MacGregor and Vivien Newton hold aloft the original petition from Golden Square residents. **Picture:** MARK KEARNEY

PRICELESS: Faith Leech's dressing gown is among other belongings from the Olympic champion to go on show. **Picture:** MARK KEARNEY



Her dressing gown, bathers and Olympic torch are all displayed, as is recently discovered footage of her in the pool.

Her son, Adam Tuohy, said the paraphernalia represented his mother's "determination to be the best she could be".

"To see mum when she was 15, like it was yesterday, wearing the blazer, it's amazing," Mr Tuohy said.

In fact, Ms MacGregor and Ms Newton credit the 1956 games with inspiring a newfound passion for swimming and pools.

"In the mid-1950s, you've got a push to build an Olympic-size pool with clean water and the latest filtration available," Ms Newton said.

COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION

The transformation of the Bendigo Municipal Pool on Barnard Street bears a strong resemblance to how Bendigo went about acquiring funds for the Gurri Wanyarra Wellbeing Centre in Kangaroo Flat.

Government grants became available for pool-building, but it was fundraising from residents themselves that pushed the project towards fruition. They contributed £17,500

towards the pool build, a sizable chunk of the total cost of construction.

Competing to be the highest contributor to the cause was just as competitive as the races the pool would eventually host. A photograph collected by curators shows one woman crowned "fundraising queen" for her collection efforts.

Well before the City of Greater Bendigo decided not to bestow Faith Leech's name on the Kangaroo Flat pool, the city's municipal governments were at the centre of swimming controversies.

As early as the 1880s, Golden Square residents began lobbying local government to construct a pool in their suburb, believing too much attention was focussed on the centre of town.

A replica of the petition they signed – a four-metre chain of paper sheets glued together – is at the library.

When they finally got their pool in 1918, Golden Square became the first spot in Bendigo to allow men and women to swim together.

It was only at its re-opening in the late 1950s that the Bendigo Municipal pool gave

the green light to mixed bathing.

Ms Newton said it became a "spectator sport" to watch the two sexes – once separated into different pools or different bathing times – cavort together in the water.

Even as late as the 1920s, school headmistresses had to beg council for a women's-only afternoon and evening so students could be taught competition swimming.

But learning to swim was always an important, life-saving skill for people living in and around the goldfields. The historians said the public record is littered with examples of children who drowned in mining dams during the early years of colonial settlement.

Ms Newton's mother even recounted following articles in the local newspaper teaching readers how to swim.

It is these memories organisers will next month invite visitors to record, recollections that will then be shared at February celebration 'Stories from the Pool'. *In the Swim: A History of Bendigo's Swimming Pools* is open until March 10.

Visit www.ncgrl.vic.gov.au/exhibition-sanddisplays for more.