Leroy Colombo: The Deaf Lifeguard of Galveston Island Part II: The Later Years (1943-1974)

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Part II: The Later Years (1943 – 1974)

By Jean F. Andrews

Leroy Colombo had a distinguished career as a lifeguard, a salt-water sea racer, diver, and surfer on Galveston beaches from 1915 until his death in 1974. In Part I, I introduced Leroy Colombo, born into an Italian-American immigrant family who became deaf at age seven from spinal meningitis, an epidemic that spread through Texas and Louisiana in 1912. He tried to succeed at the Sam Houston Elementary School, but during this time there were no special services such as sign language interpreters, certified teachers of the deaf, speech-language pathologists or audiologists. Nor were there assistive devices such as digital hearing aids, cochlear implants, classroom FM systems, pagers, text cell phones, or videophones. When he was ten, he attended school at the Texas School for the deaf in Austin. Here he learned American Sign Language (ASL), became immersed in the Deaf culture, and made many deaf friends who were to sustain him throughout his lifetime. In 1917, he saved his first life on the beaches of Galveston when he was only twelve years-old. He joined the prestigious Surf Tobaggan Club with his two brothers, Cinto and Nick. Colombo excelled in sea-water racing, a sport that was popular during the 1920s and 1930s.

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Besides saving lives, Colombo was a champion salt water racer clocking records for long-distance swimming in the Gulf. Galveston's *Splash Days* was a popular, one-week long event signaling the opening of the beaches and the beginning of the summer. Thousands of tourists and locals escaping Texas' heat lined the beaches to watch salt-water sea races in which Colombo excelled, joined the parades with floats, sponsored beauty bathing suit contests, and enjoyed the nightlife entertainment at the hotels, restaurants and casinos. About fifteen thousand people or more would line the seawall to watch Colombo and other swimmers compete in the five-mile races. In the Gulf background were yacht and small boat owners who were invited by the city to parade along the water adding to the festive, picturesque scene.¹

Now in Part II, I further show how Colombo's lifesaving skills and athletic prowess as a salt-water sea racer were further honed as he entered young adulthood and middle age. In this section, I explain how he became more involved with the Deaf community by meeting and competing with deaf friends in Houston and Dallas, his joining of deaf clubs such as the Houston chapter for the FRAT, and numerous reports of visits to Galveston beaches by deaf friends. From the 1920s onward, Colombo was frequently featured in deaf periodicals.

Tragically, like the celebrity fading rock star, the aging athlete, or the politician spiraling downward in defeat, during his later life Colombo suffered from bouts of declining physical health, and loneliness. He became puffy and overweight, grew depressed, engaged in excessive drinking, and inherited from his father a heart condition. Colombo's illnesses occurred during an era when he had no access to the medicine and education that would have helped alleviate his conditions or extended his life. Services specifically directed toward the deaf also either did not exist or were minimal, which also contributed to his decline. Today there are many services related to physical, mental, and social health for deaf people that are accessible with interpreters and with professionals who know sign language and know about
the Deaf culture. But despite such major health issues that none of us are immune to, Colombo had a distinguished career as a lifeguard and athlete.

In Part II, I review his athletic accomplishments in long-distance salt-water sea racing, a sport that is not practiced today in Galveston due to the dangers it poses for swimmers such as debris brought in by the tides, swirling deadly currents that pull swimmers under, uneven sea-floors caused by shifting sandbars, stinging jellyfish and unpredictable storms bringing down lightning and thunder.

It would be a thrill for any 18-year-old to be in the spotlight, to be young, handsome, and athletic, the winner of swimming races who stands in front of thousands of cheering fans. Even if you could not hear them he could see their smiling faces of adulation.

In 1923, Colombo swam a five-mile race in Galveston and won. Reporters noted:

Local swimmer makes remarkable time to finish 19 minutes ahead of his nearest competitor. While thousands cheered, he swam to the red buoy near 21st Street pier... after the race he jumped into the water to rescue a woman's purse... then swam alongside his brother Cinto to give him encouragement as he finished in fifth place. He won $1,000.²

In 1924, at age 19, Colombo won first place beating Herbert Brenan, the amateur Athletic Union National Endurance title.³ A report noted, "...Mr. Brenan could swim longer than anyone else without stopping. But Leroy beat him."⁴

The following year in 1925, he beat Brenan again, winning a ten-mile race and also set a new record for finishing in 6 hours and 55 minutes. Gordon B. Allen described this race.

Labor Day, September 5, 1925, when the first annual 10-mile race was held, was the crowning event of the
season and the big chance for Colombo to show them his stuff. There were 14 persons who started from the groin at 7 o’clock that morning, but only two crossed the finishing line—Colombo and Brenan. Colombo crossed the buck 45 minutes, or nearly a mile ahead of Brenan, after making the race in the record time of 6 hours and 55 minutes, a new record for Galveston. The feat of Colombo competing against the best distance swimmers in and around Galveston was the most remarkable ever seen there...5

The judge of the race, George (Dutch) Murdoch had this to say about Colombo, “Give that boy an experienced instructor, and he will make an enviable record in the swimming world.”6 A Galveston Daily News reporter recounted the event.

After the swimmers passed the fishing pier at 21st Street, the result was never in doubt, for Colombo went far into the lead and was never passed. The three boats detailed to stay with the swimmers gave up trying to keep up with him, and stayed with the others in the party. He reached the jetties and immediately started back half an hour ahead of Brenan. Unlike other swimmers, his course never wavered as he followed a beeline down the beach just outside the breakers. He kept a uniform speed, so fast that when others joined him at 6th street, they were hardly able to keep up with him, and he never changed his pace until he reached the groin. There he sprinted and again fresh swimmers were forced to trail him. Until he climbed on the raft; after crossing the line, he was smiling and seemingly fresh as at the start.

Colombo’s swimming records were tied primarily to the City of Galveston, but he also swam races in Houston, San Antonio, Biloxi, and St. Louis. The Chamber Commerce talked of sending Colombo to England to train for the U.S. Olympics, but
the city could never secure sufficient travel funds even though there were fund raising events such as dramatic performances at the community theater. The city also approached steamship companies and individuals for donations, but never could accumulate the necessary funds.\textsuperscript{7}

In 1926, Colombo swam a race in St. Louis, Missouri in the Mississippi River. He beat Johnny Weissmuller of Tarzan fame. A reporter from The Silent Worker, a popular deaf periodical wrote this:

\textit{Leroy Colombo, of Galveston, the deaf king of the Gulf Coast ten mile swimming record, made a trip to St. Louis, Missouri, and competed in the First Annual National A.A.U. ten-mile swim race, August 21\textsuperscript{st}. Though Colombo had never experienced river water before he won the eighth place...Colombo's time was 1:46:40.}

Into his twenties, the young Colombo was still winning races. In 1927, he won first place in the Southern Long Distance Swimming Championship, a 15-mile race in the Gulf. One can imagine how proud the young man was when he was awarded a trophy by the Hollywood Diner's Club, a famous restaurant and night club run by the Maceo family. He completed the race in eleven and one-half hours. Behind him in second place was his brother Cinto, finishing three and one-half hours later.\textsuperscript{8}

Colombo had a glorious youth, winning races in the Gulf and frequently being featured on the front page of the Galveston Daily News. For a young man growing into manhood this must have been an ultimate high to receive so much recognition for his athletic abilities. In fact, Colombo had won the Splash Day races five times and during the past twenty years from 1927 to 1947 he won more than thirty-five victories in swim races, most of them in the Gulf.

To celebrate his fame, in 1952 when Colombo worked at a tavern, there was on the wall hung a sign entitled, "Colombo's Records." They included all the record times for his races
ranging from one mile to thirty miles. Also, included on the wall was information that he had saved 835 people from drowning, as well as one dog.  

While Colombo was mostly well-known for his endurance and speed in long-distance swimming, he was also a graceful diver, surfer, and surfboard acrobat. One former friend related that he would often “thrill the crowds with his fancy stunt diving from a board 75 feet from the water.”  

Colombo was reputed to have brought the sport of surfing to Galveston, and he is featured in the Texas Surf Museum in Corpus Christi as one of Texas’ first surfers. “Colombo was a pioneering surfer and was among the first to ride surfboards on Galveston beach, “reported Vic Maceo and Sidney Steffens, former heads of Galveston’s Beach Patrol.”  

When he was twelve years old, the Galveston born physician, Dr. Dorian “Doc” Paskowitz reported that he surfed with Colombo during the 1930s. Paskowitz and many of his children went on to become surfing champions. Eventually he set up a surfing school in Los Angeles with his grown children. He credits Colombo with teaching him how to surf. Paskowitz would often observe Colombo using surfboards to save swimmers, as well as use them for sport.  

Paskowitz reports: “The first time I surfed it was under a very strange surfboard under the tutelage of a deaf-mute lifeguard, Leroy.” In a telephone interview, Paskowitz elaborated:

Early in the afternoon, in a small coastal town, because the sun was hot, though he spotted no swimmer in distress, the lifeguard Leroy Colombo threw his white canvas surfboard in the water, jumping on his knees, head first, he paddled his arms into the white water waves. Farther out the white water waves increasing, and the bending of the board caused by white water, catapulting him forward to a standing position, standing momentarily, his tan muscular body like an Adonis, his arms straight up in diving position, he leaps up into the
air and rolling forward, tucking his head into his curled body, spinning up, up, up, then curving his body down into a one-and-a-half somersault, he lands on his feet.\textsuperscript{14}

While lifeguarding, racing, competing in sports with the S.T.C., or relaxing and pitching horseshoes on the beach occupied much of Colombo's time, he also held odd jobs throughout his life to support himself. From the 1920s to the 1950s, since Galveston was a fashionable summer resort, "the Rivera of the South," there were plenty of jobs for Colombo in the tourist and restaurant business.

Gary Cartwright lyrically described Galveston of the era thusly: "Seawall Boulevard has to be one of the most impressive marine drives anywhere. In its halcyon days, from the 1920s to the mid 1950s, the Boulevard was a glittering strip of casinos, nightclubs, and pleasure piers."\textsuperscript{15}

And according to my interviews, Colombo was right "dab-smack-in-the-middle" of this action, on the beach during day and in the clubs at night.

Colombo spent much of his lifeguard life around, in, and under Murdoch's Bathhouse either saving lives as a lifeguard rescuing swimmers, renting floats, umbrellas and chairs to tourists, or eating hamburgers in one of the restaurants on the pier. Pleasure piers, like Murdoch's, were shopping malls on stilts over the water at the edge of the beach made up of souvenir shops, restaurants and gambling casinos.

The pleasure piers provided a life for Colombo. Relishing the beachcomber's style, he lived the gypsy life never having a permanent address after he moved out of his parents' home. From 1960 to 1974 and in intermittent years prior to 1960, Colombo was not listed in the Galveston City Directory.\textsuperscript{16} During the summer, he lived on the beach sleeping on a cot in the concession stand storage building. He slept in his car during winter, or with friends or at his family's homes. During off hours, he was often seen pitching horseshoes at Termini Beach where he worked as a lifeguard. A newspaper reporter noted:
"Colombo once wrote a note about how he’d been able to live on the beach all his life. While he couldn’t hear the roar of the surf, he’d seen the sun and water, and felt the sand between his toes every day." 17

Colombo’s cousin, Priscilla Garbade, a young girl during the 1930s presented a picture of the activities around Murdock’s Bathhouse.

I remember Murdoch’s Bathhouse. It was a fun place. In the upstairs there was lots of room. The kids played games up there. On the second floor was a restaurant. There were benches along the back. As a young girl I spent hours watching the phosphorescent fish in the water. At Murdock’s, you could rent bathing suits and floats, change your clothes and take showers. It was a family business, the Wesloes. I wore a bathing suit as a child made of gray wool. It had a scoop neck. It was scratchy. My mother loved to swim with me. We swam in the morning, changed later but then put back on that cold, scratchy swim suit to swim again in the afternoon. As a child, I remember Leroy. He was nice to me. But I sensed he was at loose ends some of the time. He had a lot of trophies.18

During this era, lifeguards also rented umbrellas, canvass floats and chairs, and sold food at a concession stand in addition to their lifeguard duties. Colombo rented beach umbrellas and chairs with his Aunt Emma (Nick’s wife) for many years. They also sold hot dogs, hamburgers and cokes at the concession stand, and with a hundred yards of beach available to them, also rented umbrellas, chairs, and canvass floats to tourists and locals. 19

At night the short, but burly and muscled Colombo worked as a bouncer and night watchman at the Balinese Room, a racy restaurant and club for entertainers, movie stars, and Galveston’s wealthy located at the 21st Street fishing pier that was also an infamous illegal gambling spot.
In 1942, the Balinese Room was opened by the Maceo family and decorated in a South Seas motif with fishnets, clamshells, and fabric-covered walls painted to look like tropical beaches. A window display at the Rosenberg Library calls it the “Nightclub of the Century” and provides quotes about it from *Texas Monthly*’s special edition, “The Best of the Texas Century.”

From 1947 until the Texas Rangers smashed it to kindling in 1957, Galveston’s Balinese Room was the swankiest and most famous nightspot on the Texas coast. The crown jewel of the Maceo syndicate, the Balinese, with its South Sea décor, booked the top names in show business and attracted the highest of Texas’ high rollers. The casino was strategically situated at the end of a two-hundred-foot-long-pier so that, in the event of a raid, there was time to fold slot machines into the walls, and convert crap tables to bridge tables. On one occasion a raiding party was greeted by the band playing, “The Eyes of Texas” and the announcement, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we give you in person, the Texas Rangers!”

Before the Texas Rangers closed it in 1960, the Balinese Room had a colorful history. It was raided sixty-four consecutive nights without a single bust, it was destroyed by fire in 1953, its gaming rooms were closed in 1956, and it was demolished by Carla in 1961. Rebuilt in 2002 with its original chalkboard ledgers used for baseball betting, restored South Sea décor, and equipped with a piano purportedly used by Duke Ellington, entrepreneurs attempted to recapture its former grandeur. In 2006, the Balinese Room was added to the National Register of Historical Places, only to be completely demolished in 2008 by Hurricane Ike. Investors, though, are reconsidering rebuilding the Balinese Room to “be faithful to the original décor.”

But during Colombo’s time when he worked as a bouncer, the Balinese Room had gaming rooms that predated gambling in Las Vegas and hosted entertainers such as Frank Sinatra, Bob
Hope, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Peggy Lee, and Jayne Mansfield. Fred Astaire and Arthur Murray gave free dance lessons.  

Colombo also worked the Hollywood Diners Club and the West Beach Club. According to his colleague and friend, Vic Maceo, “He liked to party and he loved Pearl beer.”  

Colombo participated in lifeguarding, sea racing, diving, surfing and working on the beach and in clubs as a bouncer and night watchman during an elevated time of Galveston’s history. The city attracted thousands of tourists who came in the summer to escape the heat. The city sponsored races, parades, beauty pageants, festivals, carnivals, had water parks, restaurants and concession stands all of which contributed to the city’s economy. The city also had a harbor and port that supported the country’s cotton commerce.

Such activity and influx of population created a need for a lifeguard patrol—of which Colombo played an important role. As I mentioned in Part I and in the beginning of Part II, I contend that there was a symbiotic relationship between Colombo and the city of Galveston. The city needed a “protector of the beaches,” and Colombo gladly welcomed and cherished this role, dedicating his whole life to providing safety on the beach to local and tourist swimmers.

But there was another community—the Deaf community—which played even more of a pivotal role in Colombo’s life in Galveston, Austin, Houston and Dallas.

I interviewed deaf people who knew Colombo. From the interviews, all conducted in American Sign Language (ASL), a different picture of the man emerged, a man who was more human, personal, and friendly, much like the neighborhood boy or girl who lived next door. While he was gently chided by some for braggadocio, flirting with women, showing off his trophies and scrapbooks at the local tavern, he was remembered by the Deaf community as a friend, a buddy, someone to make a trip to Galveston to visit. His name sign was the finger spelled letter, “C” on the forehead which was a sign of respect. He was cherished
by the Deaf community not only for his accomplishments but because he was loyal to the Deaf community. For example, he obtained life-guard jobs for two of his deaf friends, the Kleberg boys. He also enjoyed seeing Deaf visitors at the beach and would stop and chat with them in ASL.

The late Jerry Hassell, beloved teacher from the Texas School for the Deaf, graduate of TSD from the class of 1959, and tireless advocate for the deaf community in Austin remembers Colombo. When Jerry was a teenager, he would travel by car with his mother and father from Houston to go to Galveston’s Beach.

When I was a teenager about age 14 in 1942, my parents took me to Galveston in the summer to swim. I was surprised to find a lifeguard at Galveston who used sign language. When I learned that he was a deaf person, I was absolutely astounded. Even more than that, I was flabbergasted when he told me that he attended TSD at one time. For the next 8 summers, I continued to see Leroy often while he was on duty and had the chance to talk to him many times. I knew that two of my friends, Robert Kleberg (TSD, class of 1942) and his brother Marcellus Kleberg (TSD, class of 1943) worked at the same beach renting our beach umbrellas and chairs. I even remembered that Malcolm Pace, my classmate was actually saved from drowning by Leroy. 24

Jerry Hassell reported more memories.

Colombo had an “eye for the ladies,” he was always flirting. He liked to be the center of attention. From 1935 to 1945, he drank a lot and got fat and puffy in his old age. Colombo also bragged a lot and was not very well liked by the younger deaf crowd. But he was admired by the older deaf crowd because of his racing and lifesaving skills. 25
Another deaf man, Early McVey shared memories of Colombo. I knew Colombo when I was a younger man as I graduated from Gallaudet University in 1942. My friends and I would drive to Galveston and visit with Colombo at Steward’s beach during the summer. We would often stop and chat with him. Colombo’s name sign was the letter “C” on the forehead, which was a name sign of respect. Leroy on his face. He was a nice looking man. Very friendly to other deaf.26

And still another member of the deaf community, Allan Bubeck, a retired deaf engineer from Beaumont, Texas had these memories of Colombo.

Colombo once saved six deaf men from drowning. They were out in the surf chatting in sign language and Colombo was on shore chatting with this friends. From the corner of his eye, he saw that the deaf men were caught in a rip tide. The undertow pulled them out to the Gulf. Colombo saved them. One was Marcellus Kleberg. The other one was named Pace.27

Marcellus Kleberg a former deaf lifeguard at Galveston remembers Colombo very well as they were not only friends but they also worked together from 1944 to 1945.

I’ve known him since I was a little boy. I was a lifeguard for two to three summers from 1944 to 1945. I became one of the first lifeguards with Leroy under the Galveston Beach Patrol. Leroy was complaining once about his job. The captain warned him not to drink liquor while he worked. Finally, we both had a real job as a lifeguard and got paid. He saved a lot of people, more than 500.28

Another deaf friend (TSD class of 1942) Early McVey was a youth when he lived in Houston and remembers this about
Colombo.

I would drive to Galveston from Houston with a group of deaf friends for the day to have a picnic and to swim at the beach. We would often visit Leroy during the summer. We saw him patrolling the beach. We also saw him during swimming races in the Gulf. We would often stop and chat with him because he knew sign language.

In adulthood, Early McVey became president of a deaf organization called the Fraternal Society of the Deaf (FRAT), which provided insurance to its members since most other insurance companies denied deaf people coverage. Established in 1901 by deaf people frustrated with exorbitant rates they had to pay to insurance companies that considered deaf people to be higher risks, in 1907 the name changed to the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD) and continued to grow. Today the NFSD has millions of dollars in assets and insurance with sixty-eight divisions throughout the U.S.

The FRAT had both state chapters and city chapters. For example in the Deaf periodical, *The Modern Silents*, Colombo and another deaf swimmer, Murphy Bourque were listed as members of the Houston Division No. 81, N.F.S.D. (FRAT).

The Deaf community, much like the African American and Italian communities in the U.S. generally and in Galveston specifically, created support groups, clubs societies, newspapers, and organizations that provided opportunities for respect, personal value, common identity, spreading history and identity to the youth, as well as advocacy. These societies were in many ways “extended families.” Italians in Texas formed numerous benevolent-fraternal organizations, and published Italian-language as well as Italian-English bilingual newsletters. African Americans too formed separate social and fraternal groups such as the Negro Masonic Lodge. Geographer Susan Wiley Hardwick noted that, “the first organization for African Americans in Galveston, was established in 1875.” African Americans also merged with immigrants in labor unions to
protest the dominance of the white-ruling class. In 1879, a group of African-Americans formed the Cotton Jammer’s Association, which was the first all-black labor union in Galveston. Later, the Screwman’s Benevolent Association 2, another African American union, was formed in order to prevent whites from having a monopoly on the docks. While white prejudice and bigotry toward African American and Italian American Galvestonians was the result of Jim Crow era social segregation, Deaf Americans also suffered from perceptions of inequality during the era.

Like Italian Americans African Americans, the Deaf community formed a minority group within a majority hearing society and banded together for support. They already had their own school—the Texas School for the Deaf. In addition, the Deaf community formed sports clubs, baseball teams, and swimming meets in cities with larger populations such as Dallas and Houston. There exist reports and photographs in deaf periodicals such as the Silent Worker and the Modern Silents prove that Colombo belonged to such deaf sports clubs, and would often travel to larger cities to participate in swim meets and baseball games.

In addition to the FRAT, the Deaf community had other national organizations such as the National Association for the Deaf (NAD), with state chapters in Texas and other states. The NAD was established in 1880 as a response to schools forbidding the use of American Sign Language (ASL), and today has more than forty chapters throughout the U.S. They host a national convention each year and state conventions every two years.

According to historian, Dr. Steve Baldwin, Deaf Texans formed an association called the Blue Bonnet Association of the Deaf in 1886, and held conventions in different cities around the state. The Blue Bonnet Association of the Deaf became the Texas Deaf Mutes Association, then the Lone Star Association of the Deaf. Dr. Baldwin further pointed out that in 1932 the Texas Association of the Deaf was chartered under the laws of Texas as a corporate body. According to Baldwin, “Though it
may not have been the first association of the deaf in Texas, its basic concepts and founding ideals do date back to 1886 and its history of advocacy on behalf of the rights of the deaf has resulted in some secular accomplishments which have helped the deaf in Texas become better recognized and appreciated as useful and productive citizens.”

In his later years, Colombo faced some hard economic times. He lapsed in his FRAT dues. When he developed a stomach ulcer in later years, he asked his FRAT buddies for help with medical expenses. In an interview, McVey stated: “Leroy contacted me when he was ill and he asked for help with his lapsed insurance dues. So I got together with some FRAT members who contributed and paid his dues so he could get health insurance benefits.”

Like other fraternal-benevolent societies, the Deaf Americans of the FRAT banded together to provide financial aid to Colombo—he was one of them, part of the extended family.

On the day of his death, April 13, 1974, the members of the Texas Senate stood for a moment of silence in his honor and passed a resolution, “In Memory of Leroy Colombo,” in the Senate. The City of Galveston also passed a Resolution praising his accomplishments. The Optimist Club dedicated and installed a concrete and bronze marker on the Seawall and 51st Street. It reads the following: “In memory of Leroy Colombo, a deaf-mute who risked his own life repeatedly to save more than a thousand lives from drowning in the waters surrounding Galveston Island.”

Colombo’s story is documented in numerous newspaper articles archived in the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, and in Deaf periodicals at the Gallaudet University Archives. Even today his name is honored in an annual 5K Leroy Colombo race held each summer in Galveston. His name is frequently brought up among Deaf Texans at homecomings at the Texas School for the Deaf, at Deaf reunions, sports events and at meetings of the Texas Association for the Deaf. In 2002, Leroy was inducted into the Texas School for the Deaf Athletic Hall
of Fame. On June 10, 2006, during the Texas School for the Deaf's one hundred fiftieth birthday celebration, by virtue of a 2005 Texas legislature act, there was an unveiling ceremony to name the campus swimming center, *The Leroy Colombo Swim Center.*" And in 2008, a Texas historical marker highlighting his lifesaving accomplishments and honoring him was installed in front of the Galveston Island Convention Center, and the street in front of the beach where Colombo patrolled was renamed "Leroy Colombo's View."42

In today's world, Colombo would have qualified for a swimming scholarship to a Texas university or Gallaudet University. He may have even qualified for the Olympics. He certainly would have been asked to help train future lifeguards as he did on the beaches of Galveston. But during Colombo's era, the lack of national standards and formalized training in lifesaving made it possible for individuals to develop into heroes. And they did. While Colombo was written about the most, there were other equally "remarkable" men, Galveston's "aquatic stars:" Red Decker, Leon Weber, Cornelius Curry, Bill Curry, H. Bermeau, Jr., Max Leman, Cinto Colombo, Ducky Prendergast, Marcellus Kleburg, Captain Henry deVries, Charles Bertolino, Vic Maceo—all of whom saved hundreds of people from drowning deaths in the Gulf are heroes in the same capacity as Leroy Colombo was.43

When the media makes persons into a celebrity, superhuman figures, this can mask what in reality made these men "great." Colombo and his marine lifeguard colleagues were competent. They know what they were doing. They were exceptionally strong swimmers, had an intimate marine knowledge of the Gulf—its currents, its appearances, its changes, its weather—and were public servants working for many years as unpaid, volunteer lifeguards before lifeguarding became an established profession under the police department.

Since the 1920s, journalists have pumped up stories about Colombo with hyperbolic prose. His many monikers would even compete with a Greek mythology text:
the deaf and dumb eagle-eyed swimming marvel, Tarzan of the Sea, the deaf-mute ace swimmer, the Champion Swimmer of the South, strong, sinewy and burnt to a nut brown, suntanned deaf-mute, crack local distance swimmer, deaf-mute guard of the Beach patrol, aquatic star, best-liked character on the beach, bronzed isle swimming star, and swam like a porpoise.

But depicting him as a celebrity on the entertainment circuit or as a heroic-action cartoon figure—all of this can mask the realities that also characterized Colombo’s life: poverty, loneliness, reported failed marriages, isolation, stomach ulcers, a bleeding esophagus brought on by heavy drinking and heart disease. One reporter noted, “Even in the 1960s, he was working for $1.00 an hour during the tourist season and was making ash trays out of seashells to get through the winter.” During Colombo’s time there were no videophones that could connect him to his deaf friends in Houston or Austin. Sign language interpreter services, as they exist today, were non-existent during his time. Typically a family member would learn sign language and become the deaf person’s interpreter. But no one in his family learned sign language, which was not uncommon during this time since most did not recognize sign language as a distinct, unique language.

Colombo the hero, so exaggeratedly depicted by the media as such a superhuman figure he could have been a character in a Charles Dickens novel, is certainly romantic; Colombo the real person is unknown. Colombo’s Hollywood persona, the high-spirited quipster with the tan-muscular physique, the cigar-smoking, whiskey-toting, babe-holding, trophy-collecting, glamour boy was rapaciously reported and voraciously devoured by the Galveston Daily News readership. After all, everyone loves a handsome hero.

But what was Colombo’s life like after the sun went down and the casinos and clubs closed? Who did he spend time with? What was his life like when the spotlight was not on him? It is my contention that Colombo’s personal, more human side
was best known in the Deaf community, a community that is isolated by the very nature of the fact that few people know sign language.

When Colombo arrived at the Texas School for the Deaf, he was immediately accepted into the often clannish but protective community of persons with similar experiences living in a largely, auditory hearing-speaking world. Photos from the Texas School for the Deaf, and those shown in deaf periodicals, show Colombo with a smiling face alongside those of his deaf classmates. Other photos show him leisurely posing with groups of his deaf friends linked arm in arm, with reports of attending sporting and social events with the Houston chapter of the FRAT. There are also pictures of Colombo with his buddy, Fred "Dummy" Mahan, who was a boxing champion who fought at Galveston and was also a former student at the Texas School for the Deaf. Captions and writing in the deaf periodicals contain language like, "A crowd of Deaf folks on the Beach at Galveston," or terms referring to Colombo and Dummy Mahan as, "Two Silent Lads well up the Ladder of Fame," or referring to a meeting that Colombo attended, "The Houston Silent Club." A deaf writer reports:

They are still coming too, one by one, and Houston’s population of deafies is growing gradually, and the first thing you know Houston will be in the rank of all other cities that deserve recognition of being the place for prosperity for the coming generation of Deafdom.

More affectionate words emote from the writings of deaf journalists about Colombo. In another edition of the Deaf periodical The Silent Worker, a deaf writer reports that Colombo had "a brown and tanned face, big red sinewy hands, and the smoothness of his signs indicated he was a perfect athlete." In a caption under a picture of Colombo holding the large trophy is written, "Leroy Colombo and his half-acre smile of victory." And still another caption reads, "After the Victory, Leroy Colombo
is being carried from the water by his brother clubmen." The periodical even prints a poem written by Colombo's sister Mabel, a selective portion reported here:

...But only one could win you know, And this honor went to the champ Colombo The crowd yelled praise to their aquatic brother, But none meant so much as the praise of his mother Who was patiently waiting for him to come in, For he told her on leaving, "I'm going to win."

In contrast to these warm, family-like albums of pictures and articles that read like the family newsletter found in the Deaf periodicals, newspaper journalists and his hearing relatives emphasized his greatness as a racer and lifesaver or at the opposite end of the spectrum discussed his "affliction," "of being deaf and dumb since seven," "a man who strains a great deal to make his broken language understood," his "muttering speech." Reporters repeatedly described him as the deaf-mute. Such negative images were not found in the Deaf community's writings about Colombo.

Instead, for Colombo's deaf friends, he had no affliction, no broken language. He was Deaf like them and he had American Sign Language. Colombo's lack of speech and hearing simply did not matter at all. His friends remembered him fondly and affectionately as a friend they would meet up with, chat and picnic with on the beach, meet at FRAT meetings or deaf clubs. The deaf community was very proud of him for his achievements in showing the "hearing world" what he could do, and even beat the "hearing swimmers."

Was deafness Colombo's greatest obstacle or was deafness his greatest asset? What and who would have Colombo become and achieved if he had access to more education, vocational training, and higher education? Even if Colombo were alive today, he may have been fired just as deaf lifeguards Stacey Bradley and David Schultz were even though they passed the YMCA Red
Cross certification lifeguarding tests. While Colombo did not have the scanning training provided by the Red Cross and the legal protections of disability laws, nor did not have text cell phones or videophones or any of the visual alerting devices available to the deaf community today, he still had a life where he was a major contributor.

What he did have was a profound knowledge and a passion for the sea. He also was a great humanitarian. He loved “saving” people. He also loved Galveston, his hometown. As a youthful swimming racer, when he was pulled out of the water in Biloxi, Mississippi during a swimming race where he represented his city, a reporter quoted Colombo: “...I had to do my best for Galveston. I did my best. I never want to give up that race. I didn’t know anything about it. I fainted and they pulled me out of the water.”

And his love for Galveston was reciprocated. Handsome in his beach tan, heroic in his lifeguarding, swift in his sea-racing, affable in his demeanor, he succeeded in a lifetime in drawing to himself the adoration of the Deaf community, the accolades of Galvestonians and Texans, and the applause of visiting tourists.

As stated in Part I, I concluded that there existed a symbiotic relationship between Leroy Colombo and the city of Galveston’s leaders. Galveston’s economic need for a “safe beach environment” to draw the summertime crowds to this small, sleepy, coastal barrier island in the South whose shipping channel was slowly slipping behind Houston’s, was a reason for the city’s leaders to find an athlete like Colombo. If they could “pump him up” in the press with hyperbole to hero status then they could generate more tourists and contribute to the island’s economy. Furthermore, there is nothing that unites a city more than a handsome, athletic man who wins races and saves men, women, and children from the treacherous waters in the Gulf, so it’s no wonder that his exploits reached mythic proportions in some of the write-ups in the Galveston Daily News.

But to be fair to Galveston’s leaders, they did give Colombo a respected identity as a professional lifeguard. Colombo was
a much loved and admired lifeguard who spent his life on the beach saving lives, finding lost children, selling cokes and sandwiches to thirsty and hungry tourists, and winning of saltwater sea races. So the gift-giving between Colombo and the city was reciprocal. And to witness the memorial marker on Seawall Boulevard, the marker in front of the Conventions Center and the Street sign, “Leroy Colombo’s View,” the city leaders did not want its citizens to forget Colombo. Thoughtful acts that ensure future Galvestonians will continue to think of him.

But most importantly, were the gifts given to Colombo by the Deaf community. The Deaf community gave him American Sign Language, a language that was fully accessible to him because it was visual after spinal meningitis cruelly robbed Colombo of his hearing. The Deaf community also gave him an education at the Texas School for the Deaf, however short it was. The Deaf community also gave Colombo a lifetime membership in a community that valued his personhood and were not concerned at all if he could speak or hear. The Deaf community provided Colombo with his identity as a person not just an idol.

And Colombo gave the deaf community a gift as well. He gave the deaf community a Texas hero who was Deaf just like them.

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Endnotes


3 Gordon Allen, Silent Worker, 38 (9), June 1926, 419.

4 Dorothy Cable Holmes, Rushmore Beacon, 5.


7 Author interview with Russ Colombo, August 9, 2009.


10 The Silent Worker, 38(9), June 1926, 418; A.B. (Babe Swartz) refuted this account. He said he never saw Colombo dive off of a canvass surfboard.

The archaic term deaf-mute, considered by today’s multicultural standards to be insensitive and politically incorrect is rarely used in today’s parlance. The terms deaf-mute, deaf and dumb were used during Colombo's era to describe a person who could not talk. Colombo could talk and most deaf people do speak even though their speech may be unintelligible to hearing people. Colombo was often called "Dummy Colombo," by his deaf friends and hearing reporters. There are other deaf athletes who also were given the nickname Dummy by the deaf community and hearing community: the skilled and talented professional baseball player, William “Dummy” Hoy (1862-1961), and the professional boxer, Frederico Mesa “Dummy” Mahan (1907-1930).


Paskowitz interview


E-mail message to author from Don Mize, April 10, 2007. Information provided from Galveston City Directory, History Center, Rosenberg Library.


Author Interview with Priscilla Garbadne, September 15, 2003.

Author Interview with Russ Colombo.

“Lost Treasure: Balinese Room,” Window display at the Rosenberg Library, April 28, 2009.


“Lost Treasure: Balinese Room.”
23 Author Interview with Vic Maceo.


26 Videophone Interview with Early McVey on May 7, 2007.

27 Author Interview with Allan Bubeck, October 4, 2004.

28 Author TTY Interview with Marcellus Kleberg, October 8, 2003.

29 Author Videophone Interview with Early McVey, May 7, 2007.


33 Susan Wiley Hardwick, Mythic Galveston: Reinventing America's Third Coast, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 82-84.

34 Mythic Galveston, 88.


36 Interview with McVey, May 2, 2007.

37 Interview with McVey.


39 “Resolution In Memory of Leroy Colombo,” City of Galveston,

40 Interview with Hassell.


42 Author email from Don Mize, February 28, 2009.


51 Michael Fleeman, "Deaf Lifeguard Makes Her Case: YMCA Firing Challenged in Lawsuit," Los Angeles Daily News, March 1, 1998; David Schulz's certification was cancelled by the YMCA after he served as a lifeguard and coach at a swimming pool for 16 years. Similarly, Stacey Bradley after one year of working as a lifeguard in California pool has been fired by the YMCA fired because of a "policy banning hearing-impaired and sight-impaired lifeguards. Being deaf, the YMCA contends, impedes a lifeguard's ability to hear a swimmer shout for help." Bradley was quoted by a reporter to say this about her deafness and lifeguarding which sounds exactly like what Colombo did on Galveston beaches. Bradley contended,
"With any life-threatening situation, you're most likely not going to hear that, she said, noting the pool is always noisy with kids Screaming in fun. One of the things you're taught as a lifeguard is scanning. You never take your eyes away from the area that you are supposed to be watching. You're always watching the pool. They don't teach you anything about relying on your hearing. They teach you to use your eyes."

32 "Local Swimming Ace Faints Before Giving Up in 14-mile Swim Held at Biloxi, MI," Galveston Daily News,