Response from Warner and Ewing:

John McClendon’s story of his father’s rebellion against the overly modest bathing suit required in 1930s Minneapolis—this in an era when Olympic male swimmers in training had been going topless for at least two decades, and movie star Johnny Weissmuller appeared as a muscular bare-chested Tarzan—recalled to mind a Minneapolis law that still existed as late as the 1960s: Women were prohibited from appearing on city beaches with their legs uncovered. Needless to say, the law, which harkened back to the time of the ubiquitous black stockings of the women in bathing and gym suits at the Marine Biology Laboratory at Woods Hole, was not enforced too rigidly by the 1960s.

Jesse Francis McClendon probably wore the rayon top only for sunbathing, not swimming, since the rayon of that era would not only let the ultraviolet through but also shrivel in the water. As for the Dry Tortugas and Carnegie lab’s solution to protecting the privilege of male nudity, they were merely falling back on old British custom. At public beaches in England in the 19th century, while un­concerned men bathed nude (probably not even their feet were covered unless the beaches were stony), women wore an all­encompassing canvas gown, cut rather like a baggy, sleeved, flannel nightgown and entered the water through a “bathing machine,” a little hut on wheels that was rolled into the edge of the sea. It was positioned with its built-in steps leading down from a door so that the demure bather could enter the water without prying eyes watching. Indeed, yes, men’s costumes have changed too. But they didn’t have as far to go as women’s did.

Interestingly, we have learned that J. F. McClendon spent time at both the MBL and the Tortugas Lab (Cattell and Cattell 1938). Perhaps he was speaking of the contrast between the presence of women at the MBL and their absence at Tortugas early in the 20th century. What is particularly interesting is that, for several years before the Florida lab was established, the Carnegie Institution gave funds to the MBL in exchange for a number of tables there for investigators. In addition, A. E. Mayer, first director of the Dry Tortugas lab, became a trustee of the MBL in 1909 (Lillie 1944, Schmidt and Pikula 1997). There appears to have been a good deal of interaction among personnel at the two labs.

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References cited

