

Village Hall Hours of Operation | Monday-Thursday, 8am-4pm; Friday, 8am-Noon

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MAX NOHL

Deep Water Diving Pioneer

Mary was not the only famous Nohl. Mary's older brother Max was a world renowned deepwater diver, shipwreck explorer, and diving apparatus inventor and manufacturer.

Max Nohl was born in 1910 to a family of prominent local attorneys. He became fascinated with the underwater world and determined diving was going to be his profession. In the late 1920s, before attending MIT, Max teamed up with high schooler Jack Browne (a Fox Point resident) to tinker with and test homemade diving equipment from a swimming raft anchored off the Nohl Beach Drive home. The first helmet was primitive: an upside-down paint can with a faceplate.

Over time Max participated in shipwreck expeditions all over the world—including a 1934 investigation of a sunken steamship off Fox Point.

In the early 1930s, no equipment or reliable techniques were available for deep water dives. Max, with his MIT degree, was well suited to study the physiological and diving equipment design aspects of the problem. In 1937 Nohl and Edgar End, M.D. (a professor at Marquette School of Medicine) experimented with a helium oxygen breathing mixture—fed from portable tanks on the diver's back—and an associated decompression schedule. This arrangement was one of the earliest applications of a self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA).



The trials were successful, and on December 1, 1937, Max set a deep dive record—420 feet off Port Washington. The dive was broadcast live on NBC radio.

Max and Jack formed the Diving Equipment & Supply Company (DESCO). Located in Milwaukee, DESCO won many military contracts and was a major contributor to the war effort. Soon DESCO was the largest manufacturer of diving equipment in the world. The company, now in New Berlin, still operates.

Max could not sit still. He left the company early on and participated in projects involving underwater filming, multi-person diving bells, salvage contracts for sunken ships, and the Florida sponge market. He became a celebrity, appearing in product ads for Blatz beer and Imperial whiskey, and on the TV show *What's My Line?*

In 1954 the cargo ship *Prins Willem V* sank in shallow water off Milwaukee Harbor. Max won the contract to clear the obstruction. He found a gang plank floating up, cut it away—and voilà, the ship was now just below the 41-foot depth requirement. The Army Corps of Engineers felt \$50,000 was not justified for the five minutes of work. Litigation ensued. Max ended up settling the case for roughly \$47,000 plus rights to salvage the ship and its cargo.

On February 6, 1960, while returning from a Mexican vacation, Max and his wife Eleanor were killed in an automobile collision near Hope, Arkansas. Max's younger sister Mary was suddenly the sole family member to lay claim to the Beach Drive property. Mary's legacy on that property is remembered. Max's should be too.

*Douglas H. Frazer is a resident of Fox Point.