

Communications

To the Editor of the *Journal of Sport History*:

The review of Mabel Lee's *A History of Physical Education and Sports in the U.S.A.* by Professor J. Thomas Jable in the Spring, 1984 issue of *Journal of Sport History* (Vol. 11, No. 1, pp 112-114) is vexing, indeed. Professor Jable's admiration of Miss Lee's longevity, professional accomplishments and "literary productivity," ignores a serious error, flaw and/or apparent bias in this volume that raises many questions from readers familiar with the emergence, development of American physical education in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's.

The obvious conservative, traditional, essentialist point of view of Miss Lee regarding the "Progressive Education Movement" (pp 168-172, 228) is acceptable, understandable. The blatant exclusion of Jessie Feiring Williams, dominant male leader of the physical education liberals, progressives, reformers from Miss Lee's select list of six "Leaders of Physical Education" and six "Other Leaders" of mid-twentieth century physical education seems, however, blatantly one-sided, unfair and smacks of a reactionary, revisionist attempt to rewrite physical education history that demeans a professional physical education leader of Miss Lee's stature.

A new physical education (the "natural program") was envisioned by Thomas Dennison Wood at Stanford University in the 1890's and later at Columbia University during the first two decades of the twentieth century. This new physical education, rooted in a program of sports, games, dance, play, athletics and natural exercise, developed as a protest against the formal, autocratic gymnastic and exercise systems of the nineteenth century. This new physical education represented a philosophic shift away from health objectives to broad educational goals and promulgated a program designed to prepare individuals for citizenship in American democracy.

From the time Thomas D. Wood hired Jessie Feiring Williams in 1911 as an instructor in the department of physical education at Columbia University until his retirement in 1941, much of Jessie Williams' intellect, energy, enthusiasm was directed initially into the evangelization of the "natural program" or *new physical education* of Thomas D. Wood. Later this was directed into a matured, expanded, enlarged *education through the physical*, a liberal, progressive, reform manifesto. Jessie Williams debated, wrote, influenced American physical education away from formalism, gymnastics, exercise toward a holistic, modern physical education aligned with the purpose of general education in a democratic society in the 1920's, 1930's, 1940's and 1950's.

The philosophic power struggle between the "education of" the physical

proponents (traditionalists, conservatives) led by Charles H. McCloy (University of Iowa) and the "education through" the physical advocates led by Jessie Feiring Williams (Columbia University) and Rosalind Cassidy (Mills College) was a knock down, drag out, bare knuckle brawl of sorts between two groups of powerful American physical education leaders deeply opposed to each other philosophically. This fight was waged in the professional literature of the field, at professional meetings throughout the country, in the American Academy of Physical Education and blatantly pointed at the Jackson's Mill Conference (1948) and Pere Marquette Conference in 1950.

Rosalind Cassidy, prime mover among American women physical educators espousing the "education through" position, characterized this conflict as a struggle between the "bone and muscle people," reactionaries calling for a return to the "muscle cult" ("education of" proponents) and the "human beings people," those concerned with the education of the total thinking, feeling, moving, person in a democratic society ("education through" proponents).

Although this philosophic struggle originated early in the twentieth century and expired in the 1950's, the obvious absence of Jessie Feiring Williams, probably the most influential, towering America liberal, progressive physical education leader from Miss Lee's list of twelve American mid-twentieth century physical education leaders is significant indeed and worthy of historic note, examination, explanation.

Even though Professor Jable takes to task Miss Lee's volume because it is descriptive history and merely "a necessary prerequisite for the subsequent stages of interpretive and analytical history" (p. 112), I find little in Professor Jable's review that is *interpretive* and *analytical*. It is, rather, descriptive and narrative.

I do not wish to be overly harsh in this commentary about Professor Jable's review of Mabel Lee's volume or in any way impugn the character, reputation or contributions of Mabel Lee to American physical education. However, as historian Page Smith has pointed out in *The Historian and History*, "Existential history commands the historian, sets limits to his free ranging imagination . . . and it imposes on the historian the obligation to be faithful to the authentic events."

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Editorial Note: Letters to the editor are published verbatim.