

The Steel-Engraving Lady and the Gibson Girl: The American Sportswoman in Transition

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(Seward Staley Lecture)

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth the role of the American woman was undergoing marked changes. The educated, athletic woman with a profession of her own had not yet replaced the delicate, wasp-waisted female whose home and husband were her prime purpose for existence. Yet, as early as mid-nineteenth century the seeds for change had been sown as women began to challenge the assumptions that had served to “keep them in their place” for so long. Of particular significance in the changing lives of women was not only opportunity for education, but the changing nature of that education. No longer were women schooled only in the proper behavior for ladies and the ideal of domesticity. Professional schools began to open their doors, and opportunities once available only to men began to be available for women.

The turn-of-the-century woman was also beginning to make inroads in the formerly male world of public policy and politics, and her legal status, though far from equitable with that of men, had seen considerable improvement. And for the transitional woman who opted for an athletic life, a wide array of sporting choices was available to her. Ambivalent attitudes about women’s involvement in sport still existed, but such attitudes failed to deter the many women who participated in more than a dozen different sports from archery to yachting.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth were marked with contrasts for women. It was a period of transition - a break from the limited domestic role of the mid-nineteenth century which resulted in changes in many aspects of their lives, not the least of which was participation in sport. The transition from Steel-Engraving Lady to Gibson Girl was far from complete, and the reasons for such changes in the lives of women were varied. There is, however, strong evidence to support the idea that the “Cult of True Womanhood” of the mid-nineteenth century was being threatened by the “New Woman” at the turn of the century.



Mary Lou Remley discussed the development of women's sport in her Seward Staley Lecture.