

Daughters of the Middle Border: Iowa Women in Physical Education/Sport, 1860- 1900

JANICE A. BERAN

Iowa State University

Iowa women students in both private and public institutions of higher learning, as in other parts of the country had physical culture/education in the late 1800's. In several of these schools women were offered, in addition to the ubiquitous gymnastics and marching, sports and dance as classwork in physical education or were directed in these activities outside of class by their physical education instructors.

In a state where there were few traditions to be honored in education, changes accommodating young women came rather quickly. Iowans paid scant attention to the prevailing philosophy that suggested women were too frail to survive the rigors of intellectual endeavor and physical exertion.

Building upon the efforts of Catherine Beecher, Amelia Bloomer, Jessie Bancroft and Carrie Chapman Catt, Iowan women in the late 1880's welcomed opportunities to ride bicycles recreationally and for some, competitively. They rode in horse races in all these

positions. At farm and school field days they tested their abilities in nail driving contests and foot races. They played baseball and basketball at school. At Iowa Agricultural College and in town schools around the state girls organized their own military drill, dance and gymnastic groups. Enthusiasm was high for all types of recreation and physical activity.

Immigrants rushing into the state in the late 1800's brought with them their particular activities, the Germans established **turner** societies in several towns, the Czechs organized **Sokols**, the British brought their love for sports and groups such as the Scots, Dutch, Irish, and Negroes all initiated their particular ethnic activities. The Woodland Indian group, Mesquakie, permanently settled in Iowa also had a long tradition of recreational and work related physical activities for females.

The very physical demands of frontier life, the strong drive within Iowa for equality in education and public life, the tendency for ethnic groups settled in Iowa to encourage females in physical activities, as well as the strong leadership of notable women led women to identify and articulate their perceived need and desire for physical activity during college life. Education decision makers were thus cognizant of women students' wish for physical activity and lent their support, albeit at times, very meager. They chose to provide opportunities for women in gymnastics, sport and dance as a means of improving the health and welfare of the women under their tutelage. They must have listened to the student journalist who wrote, "the time has at last arrived when a well developed, healthy woman is an honor to her country . . .".



Catriona Beaton Parrott of the University of Windsor won the NASSH Scholarship for graduate students.