

Lou Henry Hoover in Context

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It is important to see Lou Henry Hoover and the two organizations to which she devoted much of her energy, the Woman's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation and the Girl Scouts of America, within the context of American women's history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hoover's personal story reflects many aspects of the "New Woman" emerging among the upper middle class in the late nineteenth century, and the Woman's Division and Girl Scouts can be seen as transitional organizations embodying both nineteenth- and twentieth-century characteristics.

Hoover's university education, "professional" volunteer work, interest in physical activity, and companionate marriage put her into the category of "New Woman." Hoover was among the first generations of women to experience co-educational higher education, an experience which tended to challenge the notion of innate sexual difference. She grew to young womanhood when women were just beginning to be admitted to previously male professions, were creating professions such as nursing and social work out of traditional women's work, and were professionalizing domesticity and motherhood in the domestic science and kindergarten movements. Hoover, like other educated women who married, participated in this professional trend by volunteering her expertise and time to various causes. Her interest in physical activity was also characteristic of her time and class; late nineteenth-century women initiated and participated in physical education in universities, debated the issue of woman's "natural" weakness, were active in country-club sports and bicycling, and re-defined notions of female beauty to include health and vigor. Finally, Hoover reflected the "New Woman" image in her companionate marriage, a relationship stressing mutuality and downplaying fertility and motherhood.

Hoover was active in the Woman's Division and the Girl Scouts, organizations following the nineteenth-century pattern of women's voluntary associations in that they were women's organizations, dependent on volunteers and a network of women, created to benefit women (and girls), and emphasizing sexual difference as their *raison d'être*. However, by the first quarter of the twentieth century, the idea of a unique "woman's nature" had negative as well as positive consequences for organizations working on women's causes. The Woman's Division argued successfully that women should be in charge of girls' and women's sports, but also challenged women's participation in competitive games-based on the assumption of difference; and the Girl Scouts offered girls the opportunity to work on citizenship skills and outdoor activities under strong, well-trained female role models, but ended up stressing domesticity and homemaking as something all girls should master. These organizations may have been started and led by "New Women" such as Hoover, but the assumptions of the 1890s led to different conclusions in the 1920s. Both Hoover and these organizations were products of their time.