

Water Sports and Social Class in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Look at the St. Lawrence Skiff in the Thousand Islands of the St. Lawrence River

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At the end of the nineteenth century, thousands of members of the upper classes of northeastern society flocked to wilderness and coastal resort areas in a quest for escape from the increasingly urban and industrialized population centers. This trend in vacation and leisure time activity directly increased interest in the sports of fishing, rowing, and sailing small boats. The interesting fact is that the patterns of these activities follow a division between “old” and “new” money, that is families whose fortunes were made before and after the Civil War.

“Old” money families used the Thousand Islands as a retreat, and their boating patterns reflected their desire for privacy and exclusivity. Sporting literature of the day indicates that some of these families also attempted to model their recreational activities after behavior patterns of the British gentry. These families hired full time retainers to be their fishing guides and boatmen, assuring absolute privacy. They commissioned skiffs with detailed specifications for the purpose of family sailing contests which took place on private courses. In addition, they made up games using the boats for which only family members and close friends would know the rules or have an opportunity to develop the necessary skills. “Skiff tag” is an example.

In contrast, “new” money families demonstrated a need to use boating as a means for enhancing social status. Their boating activities involved formation of rowing and sailing clubs whose competitions meant trophies and publicity. Membership in these organizations provided prestige as did the ability to purchase competitive skiffs and excel at rowing, sailing, or both. Clubs and sponsored races grew in number and popularity throughout the 1880’s and 1890’s attracting increasing numbers of competitors and spectators.

The above activities generated interest in water sports among a third group of people—members of the upper middle classes who wished to emulate the wealthy. These people traveled to the Thousand Islands in large numbers, stayed in hotels in lieu of second homes, and rented skiffs from hotel liveries. They generally rowed, not having an opportunity to develop the specialized sailing skills needed for handling a St. Lawrence Skiff, or hired guides with skiffs for fishing and sailing.

Because of the expense and specialized skills, recreational boating has always been a sport closely tied to social class. After interviewing families of both skiff owners and builders, examining museum and private skiff collections, and reading contemporary accounts of sporting activities throughout the Thousand Islands, it has become clear that investigation of the St. Lawrence Skiff and its variations in use and construction has been a productive method for gaining an understanding of the nature of the relationship between social class and water sports for this region.