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Mountain Vista, Geographical Signifier, and the Meaning of Distinction: The Emergence of Physical Recreation and Outdoor Pursuits Culture in Calgary, 1884-1930

From almost all of the prominent ridges that form the suburban landscape of Calgary, Alberta, the Rocky Mountains provide a powerful and alluring visual image. Unquestionably, the image (and even idea) of mountains holds many different meanings for many different people. In spite of this, one need reside in Calgary only a short while before realizing that the nearby mountains factor prominently into the physical leisure culture of the city. This seems confirmed by the billboards on all major routes in and out of the city that advertise the mountain resorts of Banff, Lake Louise, Lake O'Hara, *et cetera*. These same thoroughways are littered with ski, canoe, and snow board rental stores. Even the prominence of the Mountain Equipment Co-op logo in Calgary is nothing short of a phenomenon. But most apparent are the mountains themselves, juxtaposed as they are with the jutting skyline of the downtown business core and the suburbs that sprawl in all directions. For Calgarians, in summer and winter, the mountains signify the divisions between city life and wilderness, urbanism and naturalism, work time and leisure time, week and weekend, and the ordinary and the extraordinary. For those with an active interest in outdoor recreation and the means to equip themselves and travel to the mountains, the familiar urban view of the Rockies must re-enforce the advantages of class, gender, and age. For those without that interest, and perhaps even more so for those without the means to indulge it, the familiar urban mountain vista must represent something quite different.

The purpose of this paper is to study the geographical relationship between the city of Calgary and the Rocky Mountains in the evolution of a physical leisure and outdoor pursuits' culture in the city. The paper attempts to build on the theories of scholars who have examined the division of physical space and time in relation to sport and other cultural pastimes, specifically the work of John Bale, Karl Raitz, Henning Eichberg, Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes. The study focuses on the period between 1884, the year that Calgary first formed a city council, and 1930. The main primary sources include newspapers, popular culture periodicals, local tourist information publications, and archival records of Calgary-based outing clubs.

I argue that geographically the mountains themselves were a discursive element in the social construction of physical recreation and outdoor pursuits in this period. This function increased as innovations in technology, transportation and mass media grew along with the city itself. I also argue that the relationship between sport, physical recreation and outdoor pursuits is inextricably linked to the division of 'modern' space and time by

geographical signifiers. In this case the geographical signifier was the mountain vista that was and is so vital to the experience of living in Calgary. The paper contributes to our historical understanding of the social factors that contributed to the emergence and organization of outdoors recreation culture in Western Canada and offers an alternative interpretive tool for sport historians seeking to draw meaning from and contextualize physical recreation, leisure and sport.