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## ***Paddling Their Own Canoe:*** **Wilderness as Contested and Gendered Terrain**

This paper explores life at Northway Lodge, the first private girls' camp in Canada. Founded in 1906, Northway was an experiment in alternative forms of education, away from the regimentation of regular classrooms. First established at Dr. Howard A. Kelly's camp on the Magnetawa River, Northway Lodge was moved to a permanent site in the "wilder, unbroken country of Algonquin Park." The move to Algonquin reflected people's changing consciousness about wilderness. By the turn of the century, wilderness was seen as a place of spiritual rejuvenation. Northway's founding also coincided with the "Fresh Air" and "back to nature" movement prevalent in the early part of this century. Wilderness was becoming an antidote for urban living. People were not giving up city living for a true return to wilderness. Rather, their outings were designed to steel them for such a life. Excursions for children, by extension, were designed to prepare and temper them for an urban existence. Summer camps were the ideal location for such experiences.

The early private summer camps were predominantly school camps established by teachers or directors of private academies and schools in the United States. The choice of location, the layout and philosophy of these camps all reflect the "back to nature movement." Northway reinforced the wilderness motif through its then isolated location on Cache Lake in Algonquin Park. As well, the main activity provided was canoe tripping and campers slept in tents. As liberating, and liberal, as this "wilderness" experience was, it also served to highlight the contradictions in girls' and women's lives. Traditionally, "wilderness" experiences were predicated on masculinist notions of physicality. Closer examinations of Northway camp life reveal that Case and her colleagues modified activities in keeping with societal prescriptions of female physicality. In addition, skills taught tended to be those deemed beneficial later in life. Critical exploration of the early years at Northway Lodge girls' camp embodies the notion of "wilderness as contested and gendered terrain" as campers, counsellors, and directors attempted to negotiate a new female expression of physicality within social and masculine perceptions of outdoor experiences.

Material for this study is drawn from archives as well as diaries of campers and interviews with individuals long associated with Northway Lodge girls' camp. This research furthers our historical understanding of female physicality and gender tensions by exploring them in a "non-traditional" context, beyond the realm of "sports". Furthermore, it sheds light on the challenges and triumphs of woman-initiated wilderness experiences.