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Geography is Destiny: Sport and Physical Education for Western Women — A Case Study of Southwestern University, the Oldest University in Texas

During the course of the nineteenth century, dozens of academies and universities opened their doors to women and many of them instituted physical education and sports for their female students. For the most part, these institutions were located in New England, the Midwest and along the Eastern Seaboard, and most were close to urban centers. We know a great deal about the history of the physical training programs in these institutions. They are documented in Jan Todd's recent *Physical Culture and Body Beautiful*, in Martha Verbrugge's *Able Bodies Womanhood*, in Patricia Vertinsky's *The Eternally Wounded Woman*, in a number of journal articles, and in several dissertations. However, all three books, and most of the other scholarship, largely ignore the fact that women's physical education and exercise also occurred west of the Mississippi River. And so, using Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, as a case study, this paper examines women's sports and physical education in a western setting. It asks whether geography and the cultural milieu of the West allowed women's sport and exercise to evolve in ways different from those of the eastern academies.

Southwestern University at Georgetown is the oldest University in the State of Texas; its roots can be traced back to 1840. In 1874, Southwestern University opened its doors at its present location in Georgetown, Texas, about twenty miles north of Austin. The first women students were admitted in 1878, however the institution was not truly co-educational until 1895. Records in the University archives reveal that men's intercollegiate baseball, basketball, football, tennis and track began being contested between 1900-1908 and the women's sport program began at approximately the same time.

The emergence of women's participation in sport at the turn of the century is related to changing socio-cultural norms. Between 1890 and 1920 the number of women

enrolled in college increased dramatically at the same time that the benefits of daily exercise became increasingly understood. Many women's physical educators feared the effects of athletic competition on women and so intramural athletics became an acceptable venue for women to participate in sport. While the environment in the Northeast is vastly different than that of the Southwest, this paper demonstrates that Western women were as quick to embrace participation in sport as their northeastern counterparts.

This project is primarily grounded in the Special Collections' Archives at the A. Frank Smith Library Center located at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas.

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