
Kim Beckwith
University of Texas – Austin

Race and Ethnicity in Turn of the Century Physical Culture Entrepreneurs

Turn of the century Americans found themselves exhilarated by the promises of the new century and its many discoveries waiting to be explored. The United States was testing its hegemonic wings in all comers of the globe while simultaneously opening its doors to the masses of foreigners hoping to find their dreams in the thriving country. Of particular interest to this paper is the value of physical culture in the lives and beliefs of these migrants. Physical culture and exercise were important to many of these new Americans. They were also increasingly important to native-born Americans who worried that the masses of new immigrants meant the fall of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. In response to these [and other] concerns a large number of private entrepreneurs appeared on the scene, establishing gyms and mail order courses. This paper explores the ethnic origins of a number of these private entrepreneurs and attempts to assess the impact of that ethnicity on the physical culture movement in America.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, the eugenics movement in Europe and the physical education movement in America helped fuel the drive for physical development. The European immigrants relied on their often-rich backgrounds in physical culture to enhance the lives of other Americans, but success was not always easy for many exercise entrepreneurs. Many were ostracized for their ethnicity. Some Americans began to mistrust foreign immigrants and often made life miserable for many of them. This paper will attempt to trace some of the turn of the century entrepreneurs and outline their contributions to American physical culture. Turn of the century journals, magazines, and newspapers will be used. The paper will also examine a number of black community newspapers and journals and attempt to assess the presence of similar physical culture advertising in the black press.
