

TWENTIETH CENTURY LOCAL HISTORY

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Amazons on the Trail: Women and the Dipsea Hikes, 1918-1922

For five consecutive years beginning in 1918 the *San Francisco Call* newspaper sponsored a cross-country road race for women known as the Dipsea “hikes.” In an effort to elude the Amateur Athletic Union ban on female road races, event organizers avoided the phrase “road race” using instead the seemingly innocent descriptor “hike.” Although the Dipsea race for men began in 1905 under the auspices of the San Francisco Olympic Club, women were excluded from an event over the Dipsea trail until the Call organized the activity for women in 1919. However, despite the events’ general popularity among spectators and racers, the women’s Dipsea was discontinued after the 1922 race.

Utilizing newspaper accounts, this paper seeks to examine local narratives surrounding the women’s Dipsea given the broader debates around female athleticism. I argue that Dipsea hikes provide a location to better understand and explore the tensions encircling multiple and often competing notions of womanhood. Many in the community viewed the participants in the female-only “hikes” as clear examples of the modern woman: strong, capable, and independent. This vision of womanhood seemed desirable to many as hundreds of women entered the race each year, with thousands of spectators making the journey from various parts of the San Francisco Bay area to watch the competition.

Conversely, others in the Bay area were much less enamored with women’s expanding place in sport and in the larger society as they voiced their unease towards female involvement in rigorous athletic activities such as the Dipsea. The Dipsea course covers approximately seven miles of rugged terrain, marked by a 1200 foot elevation change over Mt. Tamalpais from Mill Valley to Stinson Beach in Marin County, California. The intense physical effort needed to run the course unsettled those who viewed such involvement as incompatible with womanhood and injurious to those women who competed.

In *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport* Susan Cahn notes that a “new type of athletic girl” emerged in the post World War I period as connections with Victorian conceptualizations of womanhood grounded in frailty and submissiveness became less secure. This process, however, was far from linear. The myriad of voices around women’s place in the Dipsea represents a single point of contestation, illuminating how a community positioned itself in relation to those larger tensions and issues concerning female physicality and sporting participation. Furthermore, the event symbolizes local resistance and reaffirmation to dominant gender ideologies, making it a potentially valuable site of inquiry.
