

WOMEN'S SPORT AND THE CAMPING EXPERIENCE

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“Variation on a Theme”: A Comparison of Early Twentieth Century Girls’ and Boys’ Summer Camps

Two of the earliest girls’ camps, Glen Bernard and Northway Lodge, reflected adherence and challenges to early twentieth century gender roles. Many of the early private summer camps were predominantly school camps established by reform agencies such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and teachers or directors of private academies and schools in Canada and the United States. The choice of location, the layout and philosophy of these camps frequently reflected the “back to nature movement” and a move to utilize wilderness experiences for social and moral rejuvenation. Glen Bernard and Northway Lodge were no different. From the outset, both camps were situated in isolated locations in central Ontario. As well, the main activity provided was canoe tripping.

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 examination of Northway and Glen Bernard camp life reveals that many activities were modified in keeping with societal prescriptions of female physicality. As well, skills taught tended to be those deemed beneficial later in life. Critical exploration of the early years at Glen Bernard and Northway Lodge, in comparison to boys’ camps, demonstrates that “wilderness was contested and gendered terrain” as campers, counselors 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 archival material from the Ontario Association Fonds, Trent University, as well as diaries of campers and interviews with individual 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.
