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“Staunch and Rugged”: Challenging Traditional Gender Definitions in a Wilderness Setting

Between 1925 and 1942, the Margaret Eaton School provided camp counselors in training a two-month camp experience at Camp Tanamakoon on White’s Lake (renamed Tanamakoon Lake), in Algonquin Park and the Ontario Commission Camp on Lake Couchiching. Wilderness canoeing, land and water sports, camp craft, and survival training were among the skills which were designed to prepare graduates to enter prospective employment as future camp counselors in addition to careers with YWCA’s, settlement houses, and recreation programs such as those run by the T. Eaton Company (Eaton Girls’ Club). These outdoor experiences conveyed gender and class values designed to prepare middle-class women for “community living and unselfish leadership.” Within the context of twentieth century social and moral reform movements, the camp, as well as the school, provided mind and body training designed to forward a conservative social agenda. Despite this intent, however, the physical training which taught young women to be “staunch and rugged and unwilling to acknowledge defeat by weather or circumstance.” Their training also challenged traditional constructions of gender and served to forward pioneering efforts in the history of women and camping in Ontario. This paper examines these uneven developments within the context of wilderness training for women in higher education.
