“Strap an Axe to Your Belt”: Camp Counselor Training and the Socialization of Women at the Margaret Eaton School (1925–1941)

Anna H. Lathrop

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the camping experience, with its emphasis on character formation and public responsibility, became increasingly recognized as a powerful educational context for the socialization of young boys and girls in Canada. The social gospel and moral reform movements of the nineteenth century found a new vehicle for healthy and “appropriate” forms of leisure activity to counteract the impact of urbanization and the deleterious influence of commercial amusements. Popularized by the educational and psychological theories of John Dewey and Edward Thorndike, the camping environment was viewed as a powerful crucible that could shape Christian moral character and convey democratic community values. These ideals, of course, reflected the constructions of class, race, religion, and gender of the agencies and individuals that sponsored them.

The Margaret Eaton School was a female academy of higher learning in Toronto, Ontario. It was one of the first schools in Canada to prepare young women for careers in either dramatic art or physical education. Originally established in 1907 by Emma Scott Raff, in its early history, the school offered courses in literature, rhetoric, drama, and physical culture. In its later organization, it boasted the country’s most intensive program in physical education, with a two-year course of study that included athletics, modern dance, and wilderness education. Canoeing, land and water sports,
and outdoor education skills were activities designed to prepare the graduates of the school for employment at Young Women's Christian Associations (YWCA's) private girls' schools, settlement houses, girls' recreation programs, and girls' camps. Initiated by the second principal of the school, Mary G. Hamilton, these outdoor experiences prepared middle class women for "community living and unselfish leadership." Under the auspices of the paternalistic benevolence of the T. Eaton Company, this school provided mind and body training that forwarded a maternal and social feminist agenda. Despite this intent, however, the physical training that taught these graduates to be "staunch and rugged and unwilling to acknowledge defeat by weather or circumstance" also challenged traditional constructions of gender, and contributed to the early history of women and camping in Ontario.

The Margaret Eaton School was the first Canadian women's academy to incorporate camp counselor training as part of its curriculum. This paper examines the impact of the training on the socialization of the young women with respect to educational values, professional preparation, and future employment. At a time when girls' participation in camping and wilderness activities were beginning to take on new meaning, camp counselor training at the Margaret Eaton School presents an interesting case study for the examination of the construction of gender within the context of outdoor education.

**Christian Reform, Rugged Individualism, and the Educational Value of Camping for Boys**

Similar to other provinces in Canada, the history of organized camping in Ontario was largely characterized by the development of agency, private, and church camps for boys. The first organized camps in Ontario began under the auspices of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and were designed for boys over the age of thirteen. What began informally as summer camping excursions for boys under canvas—a church camp outing or a club canoe trip—eventually became formalized with the establishment of permanent camps. In keeping with the philosophy of muscular Christianity, boys' wilderness experiences were believed to build physical and moral character, prevent delinquency, and socialize boys into the values of Christian citizenship. In 1893, Camp On-Da-Da-Waks was established on Marshall's Bay on the Ottawa River. By 1905, there were thirteen YMCA camps in Ontario and Quebec.

In addition to agency camps, private educators also explored the northern wilderness of Ontario. These rugged individualists came from both the United States and Canada, and established private camps that were summer extensions of boarding schools and military academies. In 1903, the first private camp in Canada was established on Lake Temagami by A.L. Cochrane, from Manchester, England, then the physical education