

What Boating Meant to Women, What Women Meant to Boating

By Anthony F. Hall

Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi was among the first to base an argument for women's political equality upon physical fitness; there is nothing inherently, naturally delicate about us, she said after treating women for decades.

It's quite possible that she repeated those arguments to herself while rowing on Lake George, where she and her husband, Dr. Abraham Jacobi, spent every summer after their marriage in 1873.

"Sometimes there were squalls that could capsize all but the most skillfully handled craft," one of Jacobi's biographers writes.

Once Jacobi's ideas about women's physical and athletic prowess became conventional wisdom, boating in America was transformed.

That's what historian Hallie Bond suggested last week at Reuben Smith's Tumblehome Boatshop, where she presented, "Canoes Seem Made for Girls: A Century of Women in Boats."

"The new woman needed a new kind of boat," said Bond, the former boat curator at the Adirondack Museum and the author of "Boats and Boating in the Adirondacks."

Boating not only grew in popularity as



women asserted their independence, but on occasion, fostered that independence, said Bond.

Until the Civil War, "women were depicted as fragile and weak; they needed to be helped into boats," said Bond.

After the publication of W.H. H. Murray's *Adventures in the Wilderness* in 1869, the Adirondack region became a popular

destination, and not just for sportsmen; women were among those mocked as "Murray's hordes."

"Going to the Adirondacks was considered a good thing for women; the balsamic breezes were thought to be healthy, and women were said to have a duty to keep fit in order to be fruitful. Fresh air and exercise were considered important," said Bond.

In the Adirondacks, women weren't required to tramp through the mountains to reach their destination. They could travel by boat, and boating was considered "the right kind of exercise," according to Bond.

"The right kind of exercise, however, required the right kind of boat," said Bond.

J.H. Rushton, for example, designed and built a boat similar to the St. Lawrence skiff that was intended for the use of women.

On Lake George, hotels like the Sagamore needed stable, seaworthy boats that their guests, many of them women, could use without the assistance of a guide. F.R. Smith's Lake George rowboats answered those needs.

John Boulton Simpson, one of the Sagamore's owners, commissioned two deluxe models of the rowboat from Smith's, said Bond. One of them, the Helen, is in the Adirondack Museum's boat collection.

Women also participated in the American Canoe Association meets on Lake George in

the 1880s, although they were segregated in "squaw camps" and were not allowed to race competitively with men until 1943.

According to Bond, the craft that truly freed women was the canvas-covered canoe from Maine, which was easier to manage than the decked sailing boats favored by the founders of the American Canoe Association.

Bond quoted Charlotte Hough's praise for the canoe in a 1915 article for 'Ladies' Home Journal' titled, "Canoeing Seems Made for Girls."

Wrote Hough, "Everything about the canoe is light, compact, graceful, delicate, dainty, serviceable."

According to Bond, "Hough liked the sport because it compelled women 'to get into the game' and acquire an honest tan. She urged women to paddle in style. She wrote, 'Indeed, this is the most pictorial of all sports, as any wise women will not be slow to realize.'"

And in truth, the relaxation of restrictions on women's clothes and manners were perfectly suited to the canoe, Bond said.

"Women could be part of the fun in culturally acceptable ways" said Bond. "'Paddle your own canoe' entered the American vernacular; women were now able to pull their own weight as well as the weight of men."



Clockwise top left: Girls' camps used canoes to teach co-operation and strengthen character, as well as provide exercise. By 1925, according to Bond, there were 54 childrens' camps in the Adirondacks, including 13 on Lake George. Sailing on Lake George. A woman competing in a Rob Roy race at an American Canoe Association meet on Lake George. Women take the oars on Lake George. A racing team wins a cup in the Thousand Islands, circa 1930. But who is the woman? Any thoughts, let us know.

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