Mountains, Men and Women: The Role of Gender in Middlebury College’s Outing Clubs

Outdoor recreation and ideas about gender inexorably wove together throughout the history of the outing clubs of Middlebury College. In 1916, students founded the Middlebury Outing Club, which focused on competition and ideas of manliness. The club experienced only short-lived success, as this focus failed to sustain the interest of the men and women of the college. In 1931, the new Middlebury Mountain Club replaced the Middlebury Outing Club. The MMC framed the outdoors as a place for men and women to recreate and socialize together and also dedicated itself to providing on campus co-ed social opportunities for members. Consequently, it enjoyed immense and lasting popularity with students, especially in this period when the college administration discouraged such socialization and even opposed co-education. Eventually, though, the college administration adopted the MMC’s vision for the college as Middlebury’s identity. Starting in the late 1940s, the college defined itself as a proudly co-ed school with beneficial access to outdoor recreation. As the MMC challenged the college’s views on gender, it also challenged predominant American views on outdoor recreation. American attitudes, as typified by national outdoor recreation organizations like the Sierra Club, government promotion organizations and period scholars, primarily saw the outdoors as a place to experience the “masculine sublime.” The conventions of the masculine sublime portrayed nature as a place of challenge or danger, to be met with masculine physical strength and self-control, that then would yield new understanding of self and nature. Although the MMC rejected these conventions from 1931 until 1968, it then embraced them from 1969 until around 2000, following its choice to cease its social function on campus. The MMC’s masculine sublime often de-emphasized conquest and emphasized environmental enlightenment, leading to widespread environmentalism in the club. The MMC launched Environmental Quality, Middlebury’s first environmental activist organization, again helping to form a defining part of the Middlebury identity. Views on gender exerted a continuing influence on outdoor recreation at the college, as in the wider world. The MMC, shaped by the influence of gender, in turn very occasionally but significantly influenced the history of the college.

Sources Include:
The Middlebury Campus. n.d. https://middleburycampus.com