

“Drop Your Skirts”: Swimming and Progressive Girlhood in Early-Twentieth-Century Girl Scout Fiction

In the early twentieth century, the Girl Scouts exemplified how American girlhood was changing. Since its inception in 1912, the organization encouraged girls to develop both domestic skills and activities traditionally viewed as masculine, such as camping, marching like soldiers, and seeking careers. Most scholarship on early scouting discusses this dichotomy, and my essay adds to that conversation by focusing on swimming. A central part of the Girl Scouts’ vision of early-twentieth-century girlhood involved teaching girls to swim. The emphasis on swimming has received more limited scholarly attention, but it offers valuable insight into how the Girl Scouts shifted gender expectations for girls at this time.

In this essay, I examine how the Girl Scouts used swimming to expand and elevate girls’ abilities. Through a historicist methodology, I draw upon cultural artifacts from the 1910s and 1920s, such as the handbook *Scouting for Girls* (1920), newspaper articles, pictures, and a silent film produced by the Girl Scouts called *The Golden Eaglet* (1918). I consider these texts alongside series fiction written for girls specifically about Girl Scout troops. I focus on two books that show the value of swimming: Lillian Elizabeth Roy’s *Girl Scouts at Dandelion Camp* (1921) and Edith Lavell’s *The Girl Scouts’ Rivals* (1922).

As Sherrie Inness has argued, Girl Scout series books during this era were “actively engaged in convincing women that domesticity was the *sine qua non* for feminine happiness.” However, I argue that Roy and Lavell demonstrate how swimming offered early-twentieth-century girls a more subversive experience: not only could they improve their own physical and psychological health, but they could also improve American society. Indeed, the Girl Scouts equipped young women to rescue drowning victims. The novels thus imply that girls are not saviors through domestic or maternal efforts but through more masculine, athletic pursuits. In this way, the early Girl Scouts’ promotion of swimming made an important contribution to the women’s rights movement of the early twentieth century.