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Progress and Patriarchy: Female Students at the University of Montana, 1918-1922

Natalie Mongeau

HSTA 471

Once upon a time a girl went to a ball. There is nothing remarkable about this story. Half a dozen fairy tales start this way; a girl, a ball, and a pretty dress. But this particular ball is set in 1919, and it was not about the pretty dresses. Guests were turned away for coming in anything fancier than “woods and outing costumes.”¹ Since 1916, the Forester’s Ball had been an annual tradition for students at the University of Montana.² It made its mark as a popular social event because of the way it challenged social expectations. Formal dress was actively discouraged, the dinner was “camp style,” and it was the only event when the female students were allowed out past curfew³- yet, it was still a ball.

In 1919, UM physical education student Lillian Christensen attended the Forester’s Ball. Like every other female student, she was issued a dance card for partners to claim dances with her. Thick cream cardstock with simple bronze print identified the details of “The Forest School Ball on February Fourteenth, 1919 in the University Gymnasium.”⁴ Inside the faded pencil dutifully lists Miss Christensen’s dance partners for the nineteen dances played throughout the night. The ball was a splendid event, according to the various newspaper clippings Christensen included in her scrapbook.⁵ The Forester’s Ball was a popular night for the students because of the magic of bringing the wild nature of the forest inside the gymnasium and the changes to the social rules that otherwise dictated behavior. Yet, the inclusion of formal dance cards and the meal provided by the Foresters’s wives indicate that, like with many parts of university life, there was a duality of standards.

Female students in the early twentieth century were under specific social requirements throughout their academic careers. Known as “co-eds,” women were expected to be more than just successful in academics. They were supposed to be physically fit and “vital” while

maintaining femininity. They were supposed to be socially active by participating in clubs and organizations. They were expected to find heterosexual relationships at formal dances. They were expected to be organizers of events and enforcers of tradition. They were expected to stay within fields acceptable to women, and get married right out of college. While they were being pressured to meet those expectations, women's education was only seen as a path to domesticity. Essentially, the ideal coed was expected to succeed at everything while their academic achievements were seen only as a path to their ultimate role of wife and mother.

These social expectations overwhelmed the attempts at progress. The twentieth century saw significant change for women's rights through national victories in education, suffrage, and career opportunities. However, for the individuals not actively involved in the drastic political movements, social expectations were the ultimate influencers of their daily life choices. Students were only able to challenge gender roles in certain parts of their lives when they looked the part everywhere else. This pressure is seen through the social lives of the individual students who existed within this reality.

Lillian Christensen embodied the struggle of every college woman of her time. Coed students in the 1920s were engaged in balancing ingrained social expectations and social progress. In many ways, Lillian Christensen reflected a forward progression of women's rights. She was an independent adventurer, a five-sport athlete, and a campus leader. However, she was able to push those limits because she also modeled acceptable social behavior. She participated in clubs, attended formal dances, and led campus traditions. Lillian Christensen's life at the University of Montana reflected the experiences of other ordinary women students who balanced progressive academic careers while also conforming to ubiquitous social expectations.

*** Why Coeds? ***

Female students, by their very existence, embodied another goal of feminism. Women struggled for generations for access to higher education institutions.⁶ However, female students still labored under social expectations even as their education challenged the status quo. As the existence of higher education for women redefined the boundaries of women's place, the patriarchal society pushed back by enforcing strict gender relationships in these institutions.⁷ Ultimately, there was a specific type of student that women were supposed to be, and "student" was not the primary identifier.

By the 1920s, women frequently attended college, but their primary identifier was "the coed."⁸ In the primary sources from the 1920s, female students were consistently referenced as "coeds", while male students were referred to as "students," or more often, by their names.⁹ Throughout universities, coed students had to meet specific sets of standards. For example, at the University of Montana there was a Women's Self Government Association that listed out the official rules for coed's conduct.¹⁰ Coeds were expected to actively participate in social events and festivities.¹¹ There were specific curfews for female students and rules about chaperones for certain times and places.¹² The Women's Self Government Association was an organization for women and run by women to outline the expected conduct of coeds at the University of Montana. Organizations like these indicate that traditional gender roles were enforced.

Further, coeds in the 1920s went to school for different reasons than their male colleagues and even their female predecessors. In the original struggle for women's education, activists linked education to their roles as wife and mother to justify the need for education. Early women's colleges had curriculum that was different than their male counterparts to specifically address those requirements.¹³ Those expectations made it possible for women to gain

admittance to higher education by playing the social expectations of their sphere. However, by the second and third generations of students those links had deepened and the reason women went to school in the first place had changed. Trends of “husband hunting,” the MRS degree, and female-specific degrees all indicate that women went to school with the express motivation to get married.¹⁴ A good coed did not go to school for herself, she went to be a better wife and mother.¹⁵

The home economics degree in particular depicts the role college had on women’s lives. Home economics started as a way to gain status for women and to professionalize housework.¹⁶ By the second and third generation it became one of the degrees available to women that streamlined them toward the coveted MRS degree. Of course, there were multiple degrees acceptable for women. Music, teaching, and literature were also popular.¹⁷ The pattern of women’s degrees is clear; they studied something that was interesting but distinctly feminine. The goal of an ideal “college girl” was not to make a career out of their degree, but to find a husband.¹⁸

Western coed colleges had different obstacles to women’s education than eastern all-women’s colleges. There was a shortage of students in the west, so admission was more open to women than in the traditional eastern schools.¹⁹ The coeds at these universities had to fight for their social inclusion by increasing their feminine role to gain acceptance.²⁰ Women successfully navigated their inclusion in higher education, but there was a resulting contradiction of a deeper separation of the genders in their course of study.²¹ Men went to school to further their careers. Women were expected to go to school to get married. The activities of women students while in college reflected those separated goals.

The University of Montana is a western, land grant, coed university that depicts these entrenched contradictions of the goals of education and the realities of social expectations. The University is the home institution of several prominent political figures. There were many students involved in social activism and even women's suffrage. In fact, the first woman to hold federal office, Jeannette Rankin, was a University of Montana alumna.²² This indicates that women at the University of Montana were active in the pursuit of women's rights and other social activism. However, Montana is also a conservative rural state. This is reflected in the expectations of upholding social traditions ingrained in campus life. The lives of coeds at the University of Montana were affected by the contradictions that made up the school, the city of Missoula, and the state of Montana.

***** Methodology *****

To study the specific impacts of the social traditions at the University of Montana, I used one student's scrapbook from the 1920s. Created by Lillian Christensen from 1918-1922, this scrapbook is a collection of mementos that she cherished from her time at UM. She filled it with pictures of friends, newspapers clippings, and dance cards. As someone looking for insight on the intricate lives of individuals, this scrapbook is a gold mine. It is a window into someone else's life from across time. This scrapbook is a strong source because it shows a lot about her personal life. She was a strong multi-sport athlete. She didn't have the best grades but had an active social life. She was voted into esteemed positions such as director of the May Fete and "Chief of Women Police" for Aber Day - popular campus traditions in the 1920s. She went on adventures with her friends and went to sorority dances. As a primary source, this scrapbook had a lot of advantages. Christensen's scrapbook referenced a variety of clubs and organizations that she participated in. Such as the physical education departments P.E.P club, the Women's Self

Government Association, and even the secret society Penetralia. Christensen offers insight into various layers of campus social life. Further, Christensen conveniently cut out and included an abundance of newspaper articles about herself. Other similar sources included more mementos about friends and family. Christensen's more self-centered approach her scrapbook is far more useful when piecing together her story.

However, there are challenges to scrapbooks. There are plenty of mementos whose significance has been lost over time. Christensen would have known who her friends were and must not have felt it was necessary to identify them in her photographs. Which means that one hundred years later, there are personal references that are unidentifiable to an outsider. While I had plenty of organizations to research around Christensen, it is harder for me to know other nuances of her life. I know she went on adventures with her friends because of silly-faced photographs of swimming at a lake, but I don't know what lake it is, with whom she was swimming, or even when they all went. Scrapbooks are limited because we can assume that the mementos are included for a reason, but at the end of the day we won't really know why they were important to the author without being able to ask her. Like with most primary resources, historians have to rely on inferences.

I learned more about how to use scrapbooks as primary sources from other examples. Sarah Sennette's "Anna Watson's Scrapbook: A Study of Historical Memory and Identity" in *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* explored the impacts of scrapbooks and how to understand their significance. Sennette's research was particularly instrumental to me because she exemplified how to use personal sources that are more visual than textual. I found inspiration in Sennette's research on how to approach the visual sources in the scrapbook. She identifies the historical struggle of this medium as scrapbooks being "a

difficult medium, at once public and private, idealized and confessional.”²³ She identifies that “The reader must infer a hierarchy of importance because there is no generally accepted scrapbook format.”²⁴ Therefore she gained insight from analyzing the choices of quotes and images in the book to compare the background information she discovered from researching around her subject. Similarly, in approaching Lillian Christensen’s scrapbook her choice of what to include or omit is just as important as the articles themselves. Akin to Sennette’s research, I assumed that everything included in the scrapbook was an active choice based on Christensen’s values and self-perception.

Therefore, in order to understand the choices that Christensen made throughout her scrapbook I used a “researching around” method inspired by Sherry Katz’s article "Researching Around Our Subjects: Excavating Radical Women" in the *Journal of Women's History*. Katz describes this method to researching in centric rings around your subject, “This process involved mining the small number of manuscript collections and oral histories of my subjects, and then working outward in concentric circles of related sources.”²⁵ I employed this method in my research of Lillian Christensen in two specific ways. First, I identified the broader historical themes that spanned the scrapbook. I was then able to compare the conclusions in secondary scholarship to Christensen’s experiences to identify where she supported or contradicted historical trends. I also used Katz’s researching around method to make sense of colloquial references Christensen made in her scrapbook. Here I used a combination of secondary and primary sources to find context for the events and organizations she talked about.

The brunt of my primary sources came directly from the scrapbook itself. For example, the Women’s Self Government Association Handbook was a valuable resource in understanding the code of conduct explicitly outlined for female students. Christensen included this handbook

in her scrapbook. She also included event programs, invitations, and newspaper articles that I reference throughout my research.

Nonetheless, I used several other primary sources to supplement my research when the scrapbook induced questions. Genealogical sources contextualized Christensen's life through census records, birth, marriage, and death certificates. I also used the *Sentinel Yearbook* and *Kaiman* articles to research more specific events, such as the Forester's Ball, that were less comprehensive in the scrapbook itself. By researching around Christensen's life I was able to understand where she stood in the context of the broader trends of the 1920s.

***** Historiography *****

Lillian Christensen's scrapbook contributes to the historical narratives of women during the 1920s, women's higher education, and women in sports. Her narrative indicates that women had rich and complicated social lives that were a ubiquitous part of their identity. Researching Lillian Christensen's story contributes to understanding the realities of women's experiences in the early twentieth century.

The 1920s are a particularly important time in women's history. Characterized by suffrage, flappers, and war time obligations, women appeared to be on track for rapid progress. First wave feminism reached a pinnacle point under the suffrage consensus. Decades of fighting for women's rights through higher education, labor unions, women's organizations, and political rights were consolidated under the singular goal of women's suffrage.²⁶ In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution gave women the right to vote nationally. Further, World War I challenged identity in the United States. While President Woodrow Wilson was changing international politics with dreams of self-determination,²⁷ women within the United States paralleled that concept by fighting for the right to determine their own identity. The war

contributed to this change as women took on new roles out of wartime necessity. Rising independence contributed to the role of flappers that gave the 1920s a sense of social freedom for women. By wearing shorter and looser skirts and bobbing their hair these progressive women were characterized by deviating from traditional moral and sexual values.²⁸ However, the pressures of beauty and the ultimate role of wife and mother remained prevalent.

Even while challenging the status quo, women continued to face overwhelming social expectations that created contradiction in their identity. Politically after the victory of suffrage, America was left wondering what would come next for women. Without the suffrage consensus, feminism struggled to find a common goal again, as exhibited by the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment.²⁹ The 1920s are a significant transition year for feminist history because of the contradictions between events like the 19th Amendment followed by years of divided attention as women continued to work within the social boundaries of wife and mother.

Lillian Christensen contributes to the national narrative of the 1920s because of the deliberate omission of these impacts in her scrapbook. This offered a unique contradiction between the goals of women's suffrage and the prevailing role of social tradition. My research shows the contradictions within personal identity that support the contradictions of women's roles shown in the patterns of history. The life of Lillian Christensen offers new insight into how students at the University of Montana actually lived during these transition periods of history. Her choice to omit the national news from her narrative highlights that even the years of considerable progress for women's rights were colored by the social obligations placed on students.

Lillian Christensen also contributes to study of the role of women's education. The trend of previous scholarship focused on two major parts of women's education. First, there has been

significant scholarship on the first generation of women students because the origins of women's education drastically changed the pattern of higher education in US history.³⁰ Specifically, the origins of women's educations instigated a new trajectory for feminist progress. Second, the decades of the 1950s and 1960s housewife exposed expectations of domesticity that suffused women's education.³¹ This was a shift from the previous decades of pushing for women's rights. Historians have written about these periods at length because they reflected anomalies from the trajectories of history. My research on Lillian Christensen contributes to the research on women's higher education by highlighting the second and third generations of female students. This research on the transition between these two shifts in education establishes that the path of feminist progress was continually affected by traditional gender norms that predicted the disruption of women's rights.

When researching the background to women's involvement in higher education there were several pertinent sources that I drew from. One source that was particularly instrumental to my research was *Bright Epoch: Women and Coeducation in the American West* (2008) by Andrea Radke-Moss. This book was especially useful because it focused on western coed institutions. There is a significant amount of research on the first women's colleges on the east coast,³² but my primary sources focus on a particular land grant, co-educational, western university: the University of Montana - Missoula. Though Radke-Moss does not research Montana herself, *Bright Epoch* is relevant because it provides background information on the unique situations created by coed universities. Radke-Moss explains how western universities were founded with a necessity for coed admissions but still struggled with how to maintain gender norms.³³ Radke-Moss explained in order for coeds to be accepted on these campuses, coeds had to create their own inclusion by adhering to the feminine identity.³⁴ Within women's

institutions, femininity was perceived as inevitable. In coed colleges, aggressive gender roles were required to differentiate between coeds and male students. Lillian Christensen supports Radke-Moss's argument because she actively participates in the strict social traditions that reinforce gender roles.

Another secondary source that was particularly instrumental to my work was Lynn Peril's *College Girls: Bluestockings, Sex Kittens, and Coeds, Then and Now* (2006). Peril's research focused on the social, and especially the sexual, obligations of female students in the first half of the twentieth century. Peril's book was useful because it presented arguments for the overwhelming pressure for women to experience college as simply a step to marriage. Peril particularly highlights the sexual obligations placed on coeds to conform to the role of wife and mother.³⁵ Coeds were expected to be increasingly focused on "husband hunting" throughout their tenure.³⁶ Peril argues that the social obligations placed on women created an environment where women's sole objective in college was to get married.³⁷ This resonated with my research questions on why the women I studied exhibited patterns of social obligations that overshadowed academic achievements. Further, Peril's research was useful to me because it covered a broad timeline that spanned from early women's colleges to the 1960s. Therefore, I used her research to contextualize my own on second and third generations of coed students. My research on Lillian Christensen is supported by Peril's arguments on the heteronormative role of the "college girl." Many of Christensen's social activities reflect an adherence to the broader expectations of marriage and motherhood. However, the way that she personalized those expectations shows that women existed outside of the gender rules.

Beyond research on the broader implication of higher education in the 20th century, I used secondary scholarship to understand specific aspects of social obligations. *From Front*

Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America (1988) by Beth Bailey offered insight on the role of relationships. By exploring how the social expectations, customs, and rules of relationships changed of the 20th century she is able to make arguments about how dating defined American culture.³⁸ She explains how dating was formal and always with the expectation of marriage; therefore, a significant portion of dating life revolved around finding a partner.³⁹ Her research helped me understand why my own discoveries about the relationships of students at the University of Montana. The emphasis of formal dances and other social events in Christensen's scrapbook support Bailey's explanation of formal dating culture in the twentieth century.

My understanding of heteronormative expectations was further supplemented by Lisa Lindquist Dorr's article "Fifty Percent Moonshine and Fifty Percent Moonshine: Social Life and College Youth Culture in Alabama, 1913-1933" in *Manners and Southern History* (2007). This study covered the same period as my own research. Dorr explored the competition for dates and standards for "nice girls" and "nice boys" in courtship.⁴⁰ Dorr's research contributes to my own by highlighting a specific type of image college girls were supposed to present. The continued emphasis on women's dating life is supported by the commitment to social relationships found in Lillian Christensen's scrapbook.

I also used Joan Jacobs Brumberg's book *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1997). This book studies the role of body image on women across history and how standards of beauty had physical and psychological impacts.⁴¹ Brumberg's research helped me contextualize the emphasis on appearance that emerged in Christensen's scrapbook. Brumberg focuses on the portrait of ideal beauty while Lillian Christensen's pictures of her and her friends are far more active. Even formal pictures show Christensen in pants and with her

dog.⁴² The implication that women were under constant pressure to look the part of traditional femininity contrasted the way Lillian Christensen portrayed herself in her own scrapbook.

Further, Linda Marie Fritschner's article "Women's Work and Women's Education: The Case of Home Economics, 1870-1920" in the journal *Sociology of Work and Occupations* was useful in understanding the concept of women's majors." The concept of woman-appropriate majors is a key point to understanding the pressures of women's educational experiences. Fritschner explains that the establishment of home economics and other women's majors effectively links women's education to the ultimatum of housewife.⁴³ Lillian Christensen deviates from the expectation of women's majors by studying Physical Education. This is a significant comparison because it demonstrates the contradiction of Christensen's life between social purpose of women's education and her own passions.

Another significant portion of my research revolved around women's athletics in the 1920s. I found Susan Cahn's book *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport* (2015) particularly helpful in highlighting how gender roles are emphasized in women's sports. Since the nineteenth century women had been slowly entering the world of sports alongside first wave feminism. By the flapper era, the image of a fashionable woman was taking on a more athletic angle.⁴⁴ This is demonstrated by the emergence of American women participating in the Olympics for the first time in the 1920s.⁴⁵ However, Cahn argues that although sports were socially acceptable for women during the 1920s, there was still a sense of traditional gender roles.⁴⁶ For example, she demonstrates how leisure sports such as tennis and swimming were highlighted as acceptable to women because of the level of femininity and fashion that could be maintained.⁴⁷ She explains that female athletes were supposed to look energetic, youthful, and pretty without showing too much exertion.⁴⁸ Essentially, women's athletics were acceptable as a

way to maintain physical health and beauty. Lillian Christensen actively contradicted this expectation through her dedication to sports.⁴⁹ Her level of commitment to inherently competitive and arduous team sports demonstrates a deviation from the he approved “country club” sports that Cahn emphasizes.

Overall, the 1920s were characterized by drastic national change. Nonetheless, social expectations for coeds remained consistent. Students during this period of feminist history exhibit the transitions of history. As both average students or leaders of political movements, women were embodying feminist history. Yet their social expectations were still all encompassing. Lillian Christensen’s life reflects the contradictions between social progress and gender traditions.

***** Lillian Christensen *****

While a student at the University of Montana between 1918-1922, Lillian Christensen balanced her responsibilities to both social progress and social traditions. She went to school during a period of immense national change. However, the scrapbook that she kept while in school did not mention World War I, reform organizations, or even women’s suffrage once. Admittedly, Montana legalized women’s suffrage on a state level in 1914.⁵⁰ However, suffrage was still relevant news to the University of Montana. This is clear from other active suffrage organizations in Missoula and most notably the role of Jeannette Rankin, who was an alumna of the university.⁵¹ National movements did reach Missoula in the 1920s, even if Christensen does not explicitly mention them in her scrapbook. Nonetheless, she was affected by the national shifts. In many ways Christensen exhibited a progressive lifestyle through her independent adventures, her dedication to five different sports, her unusual field of study, and her role in challenging gender standards in athletics. Yet, she was preoccupied with her social life. She was

praised as an ideal coed for her role as a leader of the Women's Self Government Association, participation in various clubs, being a staff member for Aber Day, attendance at formal dances, and directing the annual May Fete. Christensen's life simultaneously embodied and actively contradicted traditional gender roles of the 1920s.

*** "Censored" Swimming Adventures ***

Christensen was proud of her identity as an athletic and independent woman. Nearly every page of her scrapbook included articles about herself that praised her athletic achievements. The pages that did not have sports articles were filled with pictures of herself and her friends on adventures. In one set of photographs she was clearly on a road trip with a group of students. One photograph of the group showed the girls wearing trousers while posing at the Continental Divide sign. The next page showed pictures of the girls swimming at a lake. In her own scrapbook Christensen "censored" some of the pictures with paper "doors" taped over the pictures of the girl's legs exposed by the shorts of their swimsuits. She quipped, "always someone with a Kodiak" as her friends played in the lake and posed on tree stumps.⁵² Christensen portrayed herself and her friends as independent and adventurous; they frequently challenged the stereotypes of femininity in the early 1920s. She played every sport, took leadership positions, wore pants, and went on outdoor adventures with other women. The way she challenged femininity supported the path of feminist progress of the 1920s. However, even as Lillian Christensen was wearing pants for independent adventures she was still adhering to - and even enforcing - the gender roles expected of coeds.

*** A Five-Sport Athlete ***

In many ways Lillian Christensen rejected traditional gender roles by excelling at sports. Though she balanced this commitment with social traditions, excelling at athletics was a driving

force of her identity. It is clear throughout her scrapbook that sports were extraordinarily important to her. Pages and pages of her scrapbook were dedicated to newspaper clippings about her athletic prowess; team pictures from five different team sports; photographs of her and her friends in athletic uniforms and varsity sweaters; and photographs from various outdoor recreation activities.⁵³ Simply put, Christensen was a jock. The effort she put into sports indicated a deviation from the traditional use of athletics to maintain physical image.⁵⁴ Fifty years before Title IX would change the way women played sports, Christensen was tearing up five different sports fields. She won tennis matches.⁵⁵ She was the captain of the indoor baseball team.⁵⁶ She was even a multi-faceted track star: “Lillian Christensen took the greatest number of individual points, 21, with first place in the baseball throw, 50 yard dash, high hurdles, broad jump, and third place in shot put.”⁵⁷ She won first in 40-yard dash, 100-yard swim, and fancy diving at the “First Aquatic Contest at Local Pool.”⁵⁸ She even scored the third highest number of points on the basketball team.⁵⁹ Christensen did not just play sports, she excelled at them.

The University honored her athletic achievements with a coveted “M” sweater. These letterman sweaters were given to only eight women since 1916.⁶⁰ This was clearly a huge personal achievement, but it also indicated a shift in the University's acceptance of women in sports. The fact that she was one of the first women to excel at sports shows how she challenged the role of women athletes. Therefore, in her capacity as an athlete, Christensen opposed the traditional gender norms of the early 1900s, but contradictorily she was praised for it.

***** Academics *****

Another way Lillian Christensen opposed gender standards for coeds is through her physical education major. Women's education was connected to women's expected role of wife and mother through feminine majors such as home economics, literature, or teaching.⁶¹ Physical

education was an interesting contradiction. As a form of teaching, in some ways it is a major that was technically available to women. However, physical education included a level of athletic commitment and scientific contribution that deviated from the traditionally acceptable feminine version of athletics.⁶² Therefore, Christensen's choice to study physical education indicates that she valued her athletic identity more than prescribed female identities.

Unfortunately, Christensen's academic tract reflects a prevalent struggle for women students. Her report cards show that while she succeeded in sports, she struggled with her classes. On average, she earned Cs and Ds in most classes except the ones that directly related to physical education.⁶³ On one hand, this indicates that her passion and strengths were tied to athletics. However, it also reflected that academic success was often not the primary focus for coeds. The expectation that women's ultimate destination was as a housewife, not a career, meant coeds were supposed to put more effort into their social lives than their academics.⁶⁴ They did not have to excel academically because the ability to manage social obligations was a more useful skill in their role as wife and mother. Lillian Christensen's choice to major in physical education indicates her progressive dedication to athletics, yet her poor academic record reflects the value coeds placed on social obligations over academic success.

***** "The M is for Men" *****

Lillian Christensen's role on the women's basketball team particularly highlighted how women athletes at the University of Montana challenged social norms. An article pasted in Christensen's scrapbook explains that in a tournament between the men's and women's basketball teams "the coeds announced that they will appear in men's basketball suits, as unwieldy bloomers and middies seriously interfere with their form."⁶⁵ The quotes from the athletes are aggressively passionate about gender equality on the court: "The co-ed who will be

right forward announced coyly, 'I will do everything in my power to make those horrible men respect us in the future.'"⁶⁶ The language of the article indicated just how controversial this game was. By refusing to wear the traditional feminine uniforms because they were restrictive, the women actively opposed gender norms within the world of sports. The players quoted in the article were steadfast in their passion and demonstrated an active stance against traditional femininity for coed athletes.

The article does not name any of the female players quoted in the article, but tellingly it does name the captain of the men's basketball team.⁶⁷ This choice was significant because it illuminated the controversy of women athletics. Perhaps this choice was to protect the women who were vocalizing controversial opinions by keeping them anonymous. Though that is inherently ineffective because the newspaper still identified the players positions. More likely this reflected the women's contentious actions. The school was punishing their behavior by not crediting the women involved. This article was the only place in the entire scrapbook that Christensen specifically referred to feminist activism. Though it was unclear how much of a role she directly played without the players name, it is clear this was important to her. Under the main article she cut out a specific quote from another article that shows that even if she was adhering to tradition in most parts of her life, she was acutely aware that being a major athlete was progressive choice: "Equal rights for women don't mean anything to a basketball floor. Not when the 'M' stands for men."⁶⁸ This "M" likely refers to the "M sweaters" awarded to select University athletes. The fact that she deliberately cut this quote out of the greater article for her scrapbook indicated that Lillian Christensen was passionate about fighting for gender equality in sports.

***** “A Splendid Type of Montana Coed” *****

Contradictorily, while Lillian Christensen was actively involved in challenging the role of women through athletics, she was also praised for it. She was an ideal coed because she mastered the balancing act of looking the part socially while finding personal fulfillment through athletics. Christensen was the star of an article on the ideal coed and is pictured as “a splendid type of the Montana co-ed.”⁶⁹ The article explained that “in every aspect save height, the women students of the state university of Montana are above the average of their sex in American colleges.”⁷⁰ The study measured lung capacity, weight, height, and other indicators of “vitality” to “determine whether women can compete in various athletic activities and to what extent they may partake in them.”⁷¹ The study was not just about athletes; it was about all women students. This shows that coeds had particular standards of image and health they had to meet.⁷² Whether they were athletes or not, coeds were expected to look like athletes.⁷³ Lillian Christensen is specifically chosen to represent the female student body in this standard. Thus, her life demonstrated the balancing act of athletics where women were supposed to be active and “vital” but still meet specific social requirements.⁷⁴ Despite her level of commitment to athletics that challenged tradition, Christensen’s athletic success was championed because she also met the other social expectations for women.

Through the role of women in athletics was growing in the 1920s, Lillian Christensen’s intense dedication to sports indicates her commitment to progress. She deviates from the traditional gendered norms of playing “pretty” sports to maintain physical beauty standards. She excelled at every sport she played, which shows an intense commitment to the sports that defined how she saw herself. This demonstrated a natural ability for a multitude of competitive, physical

team sports, which subverted female stereotypes as too delicate to play intense sports.⁷⁵ Further, she involved herself in events that challenged gender roles in sports by participating in the basketball team's rejection of feminine uniforms. Therefore, as an athlete Lillian Christensen was an active participant in challenging gender roles. However, she was also praised as an athlete because she balanced her athletics with participating in clubs, leading events, and enforcing campus social traditions.

***** Women's Self Government Association *****

As a start athlete, Lillian Christensen further challenged female stereotypes as a leader within the athletic world. On a more localized level, she was often a captain or star player of her multiple sports teams.⁷⁶ More broadly speaking, she was the "Athletic Director" in the Women's Self Government Association.⁷⁷ This position was a cumulation of her athletic strength and her popularity as a student leader. As evident by the variety of events to which she was invited and newspaper articles that featured her, Christensen was well known among the student population. Her leadership would have extended her position as a local figure that other students looked to as a model of social behavior.

Lillian Christensen's role as Athletic Director is particularly significant because it exhibited her social position. Being a leader of any club would be significant because it displayed a commitment to club participation. She did not participate in the Women's Self Government Association just to be a part of any club; she was a leader of the club because it was something that was important to her. Therefore, her title of Athletic Director was a critical part of her character. As the Athletic Director, Christensen displayed her commitment to getting more women involved in athletics. "It is the aim of this committee to have every University girl participate in athletics."⁷⁸ Through the Women's Self Government Association's athletic

committee, Christensen was simultaneously meeting coed expectations while also participating in something she believed in. She was passionate about her own involvement in sports, but she was also passionate about women in sports in general. This displays a progressive mentality consistent with the feminist ideology of her time.

Yet, Christensen's activism in getting women involved in sports is further contradicted by the broader goals of the organization in which she holds office. Her specific position was Athletic Director, but the Women's Self Government Association as a larger organization was specifically designed to "regulate all matters pertaining to the student life of its members."⁷⁹ Therefore, Christensen's position in this association showed not just a compliance with social expectations, but an active dedication. As an elected position, she had to have worked hard to prove herself a capable, dedicated, and enthusiastic member of the Women's Self Government Association. As a leader of this organization, Christensen chose to be an active enforcer of the coed conduct.

***** Club Participation *****

The social traditions that entrenched coed's lives were actively upheld by the women of the University through the Women's Self Government Association. Lillian Christensen was an active member of the association and a role model for other coeds. One prevalent expectation for women was to participate in multiple women's organizations. The variety of clubs to choose from gave students autonomy over their identity while establishing campus communities. The handbook outlines that a goal of the association is "to increase the spirit of women of the University; to increase their sense of responsibility toward each other and to be a medium by which the social standards of the University can be made and kept high."⁸⁰ The expectation of participating in clubs is an explicit part of fulfilling that goal. Among the section detailing the

various campus traditions expected of women such as Women's Cheer-Leading, the Co-ed Formal, and the May Fete, is an entire section dedicated to "Women's Clubs and Organizations."⁸¹ This section details the various societies coeds could choose from. The language of the Women's Self Government Association Handbook indicated that participation in clubs wasn't just encouraged, it was a requirement for women students.

Christensen fulfilled this expectation through the various clubs she was a part of, on top of her role as Athletic Director. She continued to emphasize her athletic identity in her choice of clubs. She was a member of the physical education department's fraternity, Delta Psi Kappa. She also was a part of the P.E.P club which was the physical education departments athletic club.⁸² She was even accepted into the secret honors society, Penetralia. Her membership is confirmed by a small white card with a blue and gold seal that sets a meeting time: "please be in Main Hall Thursday at 5. Dress in white and remember that is absolutely secret."⁸³ This was the only club that was not sports related in Christensen's activities, and an honors society was surprising based off of her academic record. Overall, her extensive role in clubs at the University of Montana depicted how Christensen thrived within the reality of social expectations of coed institutions.

***** Aber Day *****

By 1922, Lillian Christensen was explicitly tasked with enforcing campus traditions when she was elected "Chief of Women Aber Day Police."⁸⁴ Aber Day was an annual University of Montana tradition where students were required to partake in a campus clean up event. Christensen and her police force were in charge of ensuring that the women students were doing their assigned jobs, including enforcing timeliness: "In case of tardiness or failure to report, the woman has her face painted and her ear puffs pinned back."⁸⁵ The "ear puffs" refers to the popular hairstyle of coeds with curls of hair fluffed over their ears.⁸⁶ Thus, the punishment for

not participating in Aber Day for women was messing up her face and hair. This revealed a standard of beauty for women that endured even on the day of community physical labor. The whole point of Aber Day was to clean up the campus after the winter through gardening, raking lawns, planting trees, and other manual labor.⁸⁷ Yet the women who were late were punished with blemishes to their physical appearance, while the men who were late were “paddled.”⁸⁸ This revealed that even on a day of community clean up, coeds were subjected to a double standard through the specific expectations about how they looked and acted.

***** Formal Dances *****

Formal dances were also an important part of coed social life. When she was not winning sporting events, Lillian Christensen was fulfilling another niche of social expectations. Throughout her scrapbook, her accounts of athletic feats and outdoor adventures were interrupted by multiple dance cards. It was clear from the number and style of the dance cards that formal events were a significant part of Christensen’s life. She included cards from the Military Ball, the Forester’s Ball, various Sigma Nu Formals, and the Co-ed Formals.⁸⁹ The themes of these cards were clever and witty, but nonetheless these formal balls were displays of tradition. For each dance, Christensen included each partner’s name, including her escort.⁹⁰ She respected the tradition of these balls by being escorted by a male partner, the men “claiming” dances on the dance cards, and attending all the dances outlined as important.⁹¹ The Women’s Self Government Association identifies the Co-ed Prom and the Co-ed Formal as explicitly significant while encouraging attendance at the other balls put on during the school year.⁹² Formal dances reflected the heteronormative standards for women in the 1920s. Christensen’s social activities indicate that she took seriously the expectation of getting married after college, and formal dances were one way romantic partners were encouraged.⁹³

Throughout her scrapbook, Christensen seemed more preoccupied with her athletic career than romantic attachments. Her scrapbook differentiates from other comparative sources because it focused on her achievements, not her romantic partners. At no point throughout the scrapbook did she mention any boyfriends, or spend time highlighting a single person besides herself. In fact, the only picture included that had vague romantic energy is one of four girls posed in front of the Continental Divide sign where they are sitting in each other's laps and embracing each other warmly.⁹⁴ Even then, it is unclear if one of the girls was Christensen herself or her friends, or what the relationship between the women was. Therefore, based on the majority of the scrapbook it seems that the goal of "husband hunting" was not an evident priority in Christensen's life. Yet, the fact that Christensen got married within a year after graduation indicated that she did understand that particular social expectation. Her marriage combined with the committed attendance at formal dances indicated that overall Christensen was subscribing to the social agenda of coeds. Even if her scrapbook shows a woman dedicated to her personal achievement and athletic career, she was still subjected to the sexist expectation that women's sole purpose in life was to get married.

***** The May Fete *****

Throughout her academic career Christensen earned positions of authority over maintaining campus traditions. One of those traditions was the May Fete. In 1921, Christensen was the director of this annual dance spectacle put on by "The Women of the State University."⁹⁵ The May Fete was a massive undertaking that was beloved by the community as "The women of the University reveal such devotion to this celebration of freshened life that the figures they weave and the pictures they present live in the fancy and charm and animate the spirit of the beholder."⁹⁶ Customs like the May Fete were especially emphasized in the 1920s in response to

the Progressive Era challenging traditions. Therefore, this was an enormous responsibility for Christensen, and one she apparently thrived at. Newspaper clippings applauded the success and beauty of that year's May Fete and even the Dean of Women praised her for the celebration: "You accomplished a difficult artistic effect with historic accuracy but without violating any sense of propriety."⁹⁷

The show itself offers interesting commentary on the role of women at the University. Supposedly put on by all the women of the University, the May Fete was a spectacle of women's role in higher education. The show wove its story through several numbers of Egyptian Dance, Grecian Dance, Minute, Highland Fling, Spanish Dance, Ballet, and the May Pole Dance.⁹⁸ The vast number of dances, costumes, and women involved proved that the May Fete was a major part of campus tradition. Christensen's success at directing this event indicates how deeply invested she was in participating campus traditions. Christensen's scrapbook indicated a very progressive and independent personality that contradicts her role in the May Fete. In the 1921 show, a vivacious, adventurous, athletic leader organized and directed a show called "Until the Prince Comes."⁹⁹ This allusion to Sleeping Beauty archetypes indicates a social belief that the women of the University are just waiting until their prince comes to start their story. Christensen contradicts her own independent achievements and highlights the irony of higher education by directing a story that alludes to coeds' lives being incomplete without men.

The majority of Lillian Christensen's scrapbook is dedicated to her athletic achievements. This indicated that her athletic success was the most important part of her personal identity. Nonetheless, she was involved in a multitude of other social events. Therefore, despite sports being one of the most important things in her life, she was beholden to social tradition.

Ultimately, her life reflects the balancing act expected of coeds; the line between personal fulfillment and social success. Lillian Christensen balanced the two by entwining sports to her club participation and organization of campus events. Lillian Christensen was a successful coed because she balanced her personal identity with prevailing social expectations.

***** Life After College *****

Lillian Christensen graduated with a degree in Physical Education in 1922.¹⁰⁰ On October 4, 1923 she married B. Edgar McLure, who was a veteran of World War I.¹⁰¹ On the 1930 census she was listed as working as a Physical Education Instructor while her husband was an accountant in Missoula.¹⁰² Though this fits with social expectations of getting married right out of college, Christensen continued to be contradictory by working after she was married. Her role as a working wife could have been a reflection of the Great Depression and a need for two incomes. Yet, she was working as Physical Education Instructor which fit her passion while in school. This indicated that she worked, at least in part, because she wanted to. By the 1940 census she was widowed, working as a typist, and living with her son, Timothy, and her parents in Missoula.¹⁰³ Lillian Christensen McLure died in Polson, Montana in 1966.¹⁰⁴

***** Conclusion *****

Coed students in the 1920s lived in a reality of paradoxical standards. Lillian Christensen exhibited how social standards prevailed despite the ongoing progress of women's rights and the climax of first wave feminism that happened while she was a student. There were national changes for women in the United States with the passing of the 19th Amendment; yet within the enclave of the University of Montana coeds' lives were being dictated by social expectations. The paradox was that Christensen clearly portrayed her own identity as adventurous, active and independent, but she was also subjected to and actively enforced the strict gender roles that coed

students embodied. Coeds were expected to participate in a variety of organizations. Christensen contrasted this requirement by continuously linking social participation to her passion for athletics. Yet, she still met, and even exceeded, this requirement through participating in the Women's Self Government Association, the P.E.P club, the physical education fraternal society, and the secret honors society. Coeds were supposed to stay within female-appropriate majors. As a physical education major Christensen deviated from appropriate commitment to athletics, but still met this requirement through the education concentration. Coeds were also expected to engage in formal dances and other campus traditions. Christensen frequently challenged stereotypes through independent and athletic endeavors but ultimately subscribed to traditional standards as a staff member during Aber Day, by attending all major dances, and by directing the May Fete. Christensen's participation in sports and her role as a leader indicate that she was on the path of progress, even if she did not talk about politics in her personal scrapbook. However, her community looked to her and so she also reflected the expectation of femininity. Ultimately, the contradictions of coeds' lives prove that even in periods of incredible social change and feminist victories like women's suffrage, women were still subjected to overwhelming social expectations.

The contradiction of Christensen's life was the result of the social battle between women's independence and a patriarchal society scared of change. She was an athlete and a path breaker, while also being a model example of the ideal coed. In fact, her scrapbook tells the scattered story of attending formal events; leading women's organizations and sports teams alike; and organizing and enforcing campus-wide traditions. She was a student and a leader during an incredibly volatile period of feminist history, yet her scrapbook does not tell that story. Christensen did not talk about women's suffrage, but she did talk about road trips with friends,

dances she attended, and the events she organized. She was not a frivolous, ignorant, complacent future housewife. She was a multidimensional, educated, athletic, out-spoken leader. As a leader, she had a responsibility to both progress and patriarchy.

The paradox of women's education as the setting for patriarchal traditions of women's place is seen through the lives of individual, real-life students who went to school at the University of Montana. Lillian Christensen is a reflection of all coed students who went to school to do their best within their twentieth century reality. The road blocks that women like Christensen encountered were not the result of being denied entry to higher education like their ancestors. Instead they faced an expectation of doing everything perfectly. They were students, but they also had to be club members, social organizers, dance partners, pretty pictures, athletic leaders, *and* wives and mothers. Students went to college for the opportunity to be anything. Women were being socialized to be everything.

*** Endnotes ***

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