

# A WOMAN'S PLACE

THE

*Said the boys of Colby College*

*"Oh, dear! What shall we do?"*

HIGHS

*The girls will come to Colby*

*Though we try to make them rue*

AND

*"The day co-ords were ever born*

*And, oh! we sadly fear*

LOWS

*It makes us, too, effeminate*

*To have the dear things here."*

OF

*So the boys of Colby College,*

*They called a meeting then,*

125

*And asked, "What can we do, old chaps*

*To show that we are men?"*

YEARS

*And the Oracle responded:*

*"We must drive the girls away,*

OF

*We shall be wearing petticoats*

*The next thing if they stay."*

COEDUCATION

*Excerpt from poem in the Echo, 1899*

BY J. KEVIN COOL

The legacy of Colby's first woman graduate, Mary Low, is the spirit of adventurousness demonstrated by today's female students.

The history of women at Colby does not follow a straight line. Put it on a map and it looks like a coastal Maine road—curvy, hilly, full of switchbacks, occasionally disorienting. The scenic route.

It is characterized by a gradual and sometimes painful stripping away of a patriarchal culture that kept women on the periphery or denied them full citizenship. As late as 1984, when fraternities were abolished in part because of their gender exclusivity, the affirmation of women as equal owners of Colby's community was in question. This might strike an outsider as contradictory; Colby was the first previously all-male college to admit women. But the advancement of women at Colby has been as relentless as it has been circuitous. Talk to women who have studied, worked and lived here, and they point to Colby's spirit of justice—its seemingly innate evenhandedness—as a defining characteristic.

"It seems to me Colby has always been very good about giving serious attention and serious authority to women," said Marilyn Mavrinac, emerita associate professor of education and human development and an early leader in developing a women's studies program. Mavrinac and others who have observed the College's maturation believe that Colby's long history of coeducation—now in its 125th year—has produced a climate that values differences. They say the result of women's struggles against the conventions that excluded them is a college deeply committed to inclusiveness.

It began with an experiment. A gifted young scholar who happened also to be female, Mary Low, was permitted to enroll at Colby in 1871, thus breaking the gender barrier that had prevailed at the country's all-male colleges since

Harvard opened in the 1600s. Although surrounded by skeptics, Mary Low was treated with respect and deference and there is no evidence that male students resented her being there. But when she finished first in the Class of 1875 the honor of giving the valedictory address went to the second-ranked student, a man.



Two years after Low's enrollment, a second woman, Louise Helen Coburn, who later became a trustee and one of Maine's most respected citizens, joined Colby. This trickle became a flow and the flow became a flood. By the turn of the century the worst fears of the men who originally had opposed coeducation had come true—female students not only outnumbered men but were outperforming them in the classroom. In 1890, to end "the undesirable competition between young men and women," the all-

male Board of Trustees voted to split the College into separate men's and women's divisions. The result was a system of "coordinate education" that persisted until the 1960s.

During this period the barriers separating male and female students at Colby were literal. Women could not compete for class standing or academic prizes alongside men. Access to faculty was equal, but facilities were not, and men dominated

student government and other leadership positions and were privileged with many more extracurricular opportunities.

Fran Thayer '30 recalls Colby as a "very conservative" place in which the Women's Division was "a poor stepchild" to the men's college. "We didn't have a lot of the things the men had, but at the time we didn't think too much about it," she said. "Most of us were just thrilled to have the chance to go to college."

*"To say that women cannot reason well, cannot analyze, cannot think through to right conclusions is to say what is sheer nonsense. That theory is but a relic of the time of man's claim to superiority and to woman's supineness."*

**Colby Alumnus, 1930**

Inequities aside, Colby was offering quality educations to women and producing a cadre of female professionals who would become mentors and influential leaders of the Colby community. One of those was Dean of Women Ninetta Runnals '08, who Mavrinac says is “a heroine” to many women of that era. “Dean Runnals put the Women’s Division on the map,” said Thayer, who returned to Colby eight years after her graduation to serve as Runnals’s secretary. For 29 years until her retirement in 1949, Runnals’s persistent, quietly effective campaign brought greater recognition and respect to the Women’s Division. Her progressive leadership won such esteem from Colby men as well as women that when she departed, the College had become coeducational *de facto* if not officially. Even so, vestiges of a paternalistic view of women lingered. Women had curfews, men did not. Student handbooks for women described “appropriate” dress for different occasions and spelled out rules that applied only to women. For example, female students were required to submit written authorization from their parents before leaving campus in an automobile.

The coordinate system was scrapped in 1968, a fact demonstrated most visibly by the merger of the offices of Dean of Men and Dean of Women. President Robert Strider ushered in the new era by appointing a woman, Frances Seaman, as Colby’s first dean of students.

Female administrators in those days found that Colby’s culture had retained some of its patriarchal origins, unconsciously keeping women at arm’s length. In the early 1970s, Associate Dean of Students Doris Downing began taking coffee in a third-floor room in Eustis normally reserved for men. Some male administrators boycotted the room for several weeks in protest.

When Dean of Students Janice Kassman joined the College as assistant dean in 1974, what differences remained in educational opportunities for men and women were confined, she says, to extracurricular—particularly athletic—

*“Being closely associated with the town, the College has certain standards which it expects Colby women to maintain. Appearance is important. Blue jeans, slacks and Bermuda shorts are not appropriate for an evening at the movies or a tour through downtown department stores.”*

**Colbiana Comes to College, 1949**

activities. The establishment of a women’s hockey program (see sidebar) and the advocacy of Marjorie Bither, head of women’s athletics, were catalysts for an explosion of women’s sports. Along with it came a campus-wide recognition that the educational benefits and leadership opportunities afforded by non-classroom activities were necessary to make women’s College experiences equitable.

The addition of several active female faculty members, among them Associate Professor of English Phyllis Mannocchi, brought increased consciousness about women’s issues. Mannocchi, who arrived in 1977 as a “vehement feminist,” she says, spearheaded, along with Kassman, a Women’s Week program that celebrated and encouraged female scholarship. The impetus for that program and

Exactly 100 years after Mary Low upset convention by enrolling at Colby, a plucky sophomore from Montreal, Canada, tumbled another gender barrier. Like Mary Low, her motivation was not political. Sue Yovic Hoeller '73 just wanted to play ice hockey.

Now senior counsel in the legal department at Texas Instruments in Dallas, Hoeller says she came to Colby expecting to participate in the same activities she had enjoyed growing up in Canada. She was

shocked to learn that hockey would not be among them. Hoeller tried to play on a men’s intramural team but was asked to quit because the College physician was worried about her safety. “I think it was a legitimate concern; I didn’t have any argument with that,” Hoeller said. “Unfortunately, I didn’t have any other options. It was either play with the men or not play at all.”

So Hoeller created a team of her own. She slapped posters up around campus to re-

cruit other players, most of whom were ice skaters who knew little about hockey. She pressed administrators for equipment and practice time, and with the help of Dean of Students Doris Downing and Associate Director of Development Frank Stephenson '62—a former All-American goalie for Colby’s men’s team in the early '60s—Hoeller organized a fledgling club team.

“We were pretty ragtag,” Hoeller recalled. The players were forced to improvise uni-

forms and equipment. Some wore shin pads over gray sweat pants. Their practices—scheduled around the men’s ice time—were held twice a week at 6:30 a.m. and 11 p.m. But the enthusiasm was evident, Hoeller says.

Community reaction was curious but not antagonistic. “We didn’t really run into any opposition once we got it started,” Hoeller said. “The hard thing was getting it going.”

Hoeller finally realized her dream of playing an intercolle-

## Can I Play, Too?

Aided by research funds specifically for female students, women like Sara Charnecki '95 engage in serious science study at Colby and often advance to leading graduate school programs.

subsequent efforts that eventually led to a formal women's studies track, Kassman says, was a perceived lack of confidence among women students. "Don't get me wrong, there were a lot of terrific female students, but there seemed to be an attitude that women weren't as intellectually driven as the men. There was still this idea that women were at college 'to find a husband' rather than to develop themselves," she said.

But just as it had in 1871, Colby listened and changed. When President William Cotter arrived in 1979 he noticed that the school song included the words "thy sons from far and near." Prior to his inauguration, he had the phrase changed to read "thy people from far and near" and in his inaugural address spoke about women's issues.

"One of the most satisfying and poignant experiences for me has been watching men change," Mannocchi said. "I've been able to witness the effects of mothers on sons and how that has changed family relationships. And I've also seen the depth of friendships that develop at Colby; it's quite common now to find male allies."

Colby has not been a battleground for militant feminism if by militant one means strident, fist-waving protests. Mannocchi says she has assimilated some characteristics of Colby's culture. "My politics have changed," she said. "Colby women do things quietly and persistently; they are quiet, they are careful, but they are very studious about what goes on around them."



"If there is one thing that I can identify as having changed in the last twenty years or so—as a result of this more inclusive education—it is that women have gotten more support to be adventurous. My women students do incredible things."

Mannocchi says she has been impressed with the College's willingness to encourage and affirm women. "Attitudes about feminism and what it means have changed," she said. "When I first got here, feminism was defined in a certain way and the people who were associated with it were defined in a certain way. It was very unusual to see a male student in a women's studies course back then. But now it's very commonplace. It's much more common now for women to accept the fact that men are going to accept them."

Kassman believes this attitudinal change occurred because of Colby's openness to inclusivity. The fraternity decision is a good example, she says. "Even though women were equal to men in the classroom, they were falling behind a little in leadership opportunities," she said. After the removal of fraternities, the College worked hard to ensure that the new student governance structure encouraged women to take leadership roles alongside men. Women came to be seen as full partners in all aspects of campus life, Kassman says.

The inclusive and egalitarian climate that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s has improved male-female relationships on several levels, according to Kassman. Rather than meeting only in dating situations, male and female students now

giate match during her senior year when Colby traveled to Providence to take on Brown. Nobody remembers the score of that game, but its significance went far beyond goals scored. In 1975, just four years after Hoeller's club team was formed, women's hockey was elevated to varsity status, making it the second oldest such program in the country. The Captain's Cup is named in Hoeller's honor.

Energized and inspired by Hoeller's efforts to make

hockey available to women, students began to push for equity in all sports. Women's lacrosse, softball and cross country were added in 1977, followed by soccer and indoor track and field in 1978 and squash in 1979. Later, volleyball, skiing and crew teams were added to bring women's varsity sports offerings to 16, one more than the number available to men.

Perhaps most important, according to Hoeller, the establishment of a broader range of

women's athletics created new leadership opportunities for female students. "It certainly did that for me," she said.

She says the experience also prepared her for future challenges, including work at several all-male law firms. When she applied for a job at a Montreal law firm she was told, "Women can't be lawyers, it's too hard." She proceeded to tell the partner with whom she was interviewing that she had played hockey in college. She got the job. ■



develop genuine friendships and seek each other's counsel when they have problems, she says.

"There has been a rounding out of men's educations as a result of the healthier coeducational environment," Kassman said. She recalled an episode from several years ago when a woman was watching a tennis tournament in a lounge when several male students walked in and attempted to turn the channel to a football game. The female student insisted that the channel remain on the tennis program and persuaded the men to join her to watch.

"The guys really got into the match and realized that these women tennis players were very good," Kassman said. "They grew a little in their own perspective that day."

Colby has come so far in advancing educational opportunities for women that persons interviewed for this article struggled to think of an area in which women still trailed male students. Perhaps the greatest legacy from Mary Low Carver to today's Colby women is their belief in themselves, says Kassman. "Colby women believe they can do anything."

Women's aspirations are no different from men's, says Director of Career Services Cindy Yasinski, who notes that female students are just as likely to pursue careers in law, medicine, banking and other traditionally male fields as are male students.

"I don't see any gender difference at all" in terms of career choices, Yasinski says. "Women are equally concerned about where they will be in ten years. Frankly, I wish they would give more thought to how families will affect what they wish to do and the kinds of choices they may have to make to have a family."

Mavrinac agrees that what once was an issue—matching women's abilities with appropriate career choices—is no longer relevant. "Women's accomplishments are not really a question anymore," she said. "It's more a matter of deciding how they will live their lives; what their priorities will be."

*"Permission should be obtained from the Head Resident to allow men of the student's immediate family to visit a girl's room. The "all" bell shall be rung three times to give warning of their appearance. Girls do not, under any circumstances, visit a man's dormitory or fraternity house except for special functions. . ."*

**Women's Handbook, 1955**

Kassman sees the proliferation of women faculty as well as mentors in the faculty residence program as important influences on today's female students. "Because we have role models on campus, our women students have a chance to see how married working women live, how single mothers live, how gay women live. There is more than one model now; there used to be just one model," she said.

Colby's long-term coeducation also has provided a cadre of women alumni who counsel and support female students, Kassman says. Involvement of alumnae in internship programs and leadership positions and on the Board of Trustees reinforce current students' attitudes that women at Colby are taken seriously.

When Christine Brown '97 (Cumberland, Maine) showed up last January in Salt Lake City to begin an internship at the University of Utah Medical School she knew she wanted a career in medicine. It hadn't occurred to her that she might want a life to go along with it.

Her education began when she met Sherrie Perkins '77, a hematopathologist who agreed to be Brown's mentor during Jan Plan.

"Sherrie spent a lot of time

talking about what decisions I would have to make in the next few years," Brown said. "She gave me a lot of guidance and made me realize that when I choose my specialty it won't necessarily be based on the favorite thing I did in medical school. I will have to make that decision according to how I want to manage my lifestyle."

Brown, who lived with Perkins's family during the Jan Plan, worked with Perkins conducting research on osteoporosis. The experience

reinforced Brown's desire for a medical career and struck a blow against naiveté. "Thanks to Sherrie, when I go to med school it will be with my eyes open," Brown said.

Pamela Harris Holden '66 has been a regular mentor for interns at the JBSpeed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky. One of her recent protégées, Kim Kessler '94, built upon her experience with Holden to land a job at Christie's in New York. "I take great pride in her accomplishments," Holden said.

Alumnae mentors develop students' understanding about the world of work, Director of Career Services Cindy Yasinski says. "A lot of the women I see haven't confronted the issues of work and family," she said. "It often doesn't occur to them that they're going to have to sacrifice in one area or the other."

Linda Cotter, associate director of academic affairs and off-campus study, says the involvement of alumnae broadens the interests and strength-

## Working Out in the Field

Inclusiveness in College activities extends to extracurricular programs like the woodsmen's team, popular with women as well as men.

The long span of educated women is at least partially responsible for the breadth of Colby's popular and effective off-campus programs. Linda Cotter, associate director of academic affairs and off-campus study, points out that one-on-one internships between Colby students and alumnae mentors often lead to permanent positions and successful careers (see sidebar). "They serve as role models and inspirations," Cotter said of Colby alumnae.

Further mobilizing alumnae is one of the goals of the Women's Leadership Task Force, a panel of 10 Colby graduates chaired by trustee Ellen Haweeli '69. "We hope to develop several new ideas for the College and ways in which we can engage more productively the talents and interests of our alumnae," Haweeli said. "We want to refocus attention on how vital the contribution of time and skills is to the College and what expanded role our alumnae might play as volunteers."

"Colby has a great story to tell about its strong institutional commitment, past and present, to women's equity," Haweeli said. "We can point to its one hundred twenty-five-year tradition of coeducation, strong commitment to diversity, gender-blind admission policy, gender equity in sports, female leadership in senior administration and faculty positions, and a rising percentage of women—up to thirty-three percent—on the Board of Trustees."

The task force plans to survey a sample of Colby alumnae in the next few months to gauge how well the College has met and is meeting their expectations, says Haweeli, who praised President Cotter's support of the effort. "We welcome the comments and suggestions of all Colby alumni," she said.

Mannocchi said Colby's administration must remain vigilant about issues of inclusiveness, which are important to women but not confined to women. "One of the best things about Colby is that it nurtures this strong sense of responsibility," she said. "Many of my best women students are concerned about racism, poverty, children's welfare, and on and on." She points to recent graduates like Margaret "Gretchen" Schwarze '90, a former Rhodes finalist and Harvard Medical School student who took a year off to get a master's in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government because, according to Mannocchi, "she wanted to understand the problems facing poor people who don't have access to health care." Schwarze currently is a surgical resident at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

"I am so proud of the women at Colby," Mannocchi said. "They don't restrict themselves. They are thoughtful and articulate, and confront lots of issues. They are going to do fabulous things."



ens the confidence of current female students. "We have been especially fortunate at Colby that so many of our graduates are interested in helping current students, through providing informational interviews, returning to campus to talk about their fields or, most importantly, taking an intern 'under their wing' for the month of January or for the summer," she said. "This is particularly useful for women who choose to enter fields that have not been open to them traditionally, for

example the sciences or finance, banking and investments."

Lenia Ascenso '95 can attest to Cotter's contention that traditionally male fields seem more accessible with the help of an alumnae mentor. Ascenso had not considered a career in the insurance field seriously until she worked for Kathryn Soderberg '84 during a Jan Plan last year. The people at Soderberg's company, ISU/Soderberg & Co., an insurance and financial services agency in Lynnfield, Mass., were

so impressed with Ascenso that they offered her a full-time job last spring. Ascenso not only loves the work, she thinks she has found a career.

"Kathryn has been a great role model, showing how women can succeed in this field and what the options are for a new person coming in," Ascenso said.

Soderberg's guidance made Ascenso more confident in a profession dominated by men, Ascenso says. "It's pretty uncommon to hear a woman's voice

when you are on the phone with underwriters. I think Kathryn goes out of her way to introduce me to women in the field to show me that women can make it."

Soderberg, who five years ago served as a mentor to another Colby student, sees her role as complementing Career Services and Off-Campus Study. "I want to help Colby students whatever way I can. It's especially gratifying when you work with one like Lenia who is encouraged by the experience." ■