

WOMEN IN THE EARLY MOUNTAIN CLUB

If you told someone today that the Mountain Club of Maryland was formed in 1934 by Baltimore folks who were members of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, they might assume that hiking at that time was predominantly a male activity. However, all the evidence contradicts that assumption. Our newly gained access to early club photo scrapbooks (which can be viewed at the Maryland State Archives at <https://speccol.msa.maryland.gov/pages/speccol/series.aspx?speccol=5171&series=18>) and our early newsletters (which can be read on the MCM web site by clicking NEWS and then HIKER HIGH POINTS) have given us more information about the club's early history. In addition, some of those early members later provided valuable insights in the Mountain Club's 50th Anniversary publication that was produced in 1984. All of these sources show that from the very beginning, women were full participants in MCM's outdoor programs.

In fact, one insight about the very first Gathland-to-Weverton hike in October 1934 was provided by Jack Mowll, who joined the Gathland-Weverton hike at age 18 after seeing an announcement on a library bulletin board. Jack later commented that women hikers played a significant role in organizing that first event, when he wrote that the first hike was organized with meticulous care: "He [Orville Crowder}, Os Heard, Harriet Caspari, and Florence Burner seemed to be the central cadre. They had apparently been active members of PATC."

I don't have a list of all the original founding members who helped found the club in December 1934, but we do have a copy of the MCM Members Directory for 1937. At that time the club was evenly split by gender: 40 men and 39 women. And the majority of those women members do not appear to have been wives of another member—only four, or possibly five, women share a last name and home address with a male club member in the directory. That suggests that the vast majority did not join MCM simply to accompany their husbands.

One obvious reaction to the photos from the early club scrapbooks is how different the hiking outfits were then—not surprisingly.

SMITHBURG TO PEN-MAR
ANOTHER OF THE "PRE-ORGANIZATION" TRIPS

NOV. 13, 1934



O.H.

THE CAMERA
GETS THEM
AT
LUNCHTIME



O.H.

But the photos also suggest that MCM's women hikers—or at least some of them—were fully engaged in the club activities, which included more than hiking at that time. Early club trips included skiing, rock climbing, and boating (as well as social activities such as monthly square dances), and as some of the photos included below show, MCM's women members were fully engaged.



OH

ALICE TAKES ANOTHER LOOK AT THE MOUNTAIN --



We don't know how many marriages occurred among club members, but there appear to have been quite a few. For example, according to the 50th Anniversary book, Grace (Wagner) Kennedy and her sister Vivian both joined MCM in 1938 and found husbands among the members. Grace was an artist who exhibited frequently. In the 50th Anniversary book she wrote fondly of her first Club hike in the Catoctins in a snowstorm. "The Club opened up new trails and a new world for many people."

From the beginning, MCM's woman members were part of the club leadership—although in early years they served in a specific set of roles. The club's Secretary and Assistant Secretary

positions were filled by an even split of men and women. In most years the three Councilor positions included at least one woman. On the other hand, the President and Vice-President roles were filled by men for the first two decades, until Mary Kamphaus became the club's Vice-President in 1953 and then President in 1954.

Estelle Wetzler joined MCM in the later 1930s. She served in the Navy and the Army, worked for government in Paris and later worked with the United Nations in Geneva. She later wrote, "Besides day hikes, we put on musicals, sprawled about living floors listening to classical music, biked from the west end to Greenspring Valley just for a jumbo ice cream, canoed nearby rivers, skied from farms in Western Maryland, and [biked on] the Eastern Shore." Estelle also described her first 1939 spelunking trip sponsored by PATC to Schoolhouse Cave in West Virginia, which was largely unexplored at the time. Already a rock climber, she described clinging with fingertips to crumbly walls, wriggling down narrow chimneys, crawling on stomachs through tunnels, and reaching for handholds that turned out to be bats. Clearly, these early members were not fainthearted.

Dorothea Watson worked for the Social Security program and joined MCM in 1941. She wrote that on her first trip to Calvert Cliffs, she slept on the ground a borrowed blanket, and woke up covered with chigger bites. She used the same bedroll on the next hike and once again work up with chigger bites. She also said that at one time she held the club record for taking more hikes (37) in a period of time than anyone else.

On the other hand, Vera Pennington offered another perspective on club activities: "...in the forties, we took a night hike to see the sunrise from Mary's Rock.;;Allen Burk hid until midnight. Why? Because the girls threatened to square dance with him." Vera also wrote, "I remember...the fun the boys had at Mooselake, New Hampshire, in 1955 teaching the girls to play Skoal. You had to be clever to win a kiss in those days."

To learn a lot more about the experiences of MCM's early women members, you might enjoy reading what they wrote in the 50th Anniversary booklet, which you can view here: [MCM-First-Person-50th-Anniversary.pdf \(mcomd.org\)](https://mcomd.org/MCM-First-Person-50th-Anniversary.pdf).