

WOMEN MOVE  
*Out-of-Doors*

Croquet and Skating

A WIDELY ADMIRED FASHION THEORY STATES THAT MANY SOCIETAL SHIFTS are introduced by the upper classes and “trickle down” to those lesser mortals striving to rise to their level. To complete the cycle, when the fashion leaders see what they have wrought they hastily abandon it and move on to the next great enthusiasm.<sup>1</sup> Time and again, writers have claimed the truth of this when speaking of croquet, tennis, bicycling, even baseball. By and large, they claim, these pastimes were borrowed from English games and played, as no one would question, by the British upper classes. But a look at the introduction of games and sports into the United States reveals an American twist to the story which reflects the singularly independent character of the American people. Here, the “common” people enjoyed their games and amusements perhaps even more than their social superiors did. Mid-century visitors to the United States reported that the Americans they met took little or no exercise of any kind. Significantly, those Americans were mainly members of the leisured class, not the average working man, who, it would seem, never crossed paths with the observant visitors.

What we would now call spectator sports also emerged in the nineteenth century—everything from upper-class sailing regattas to much more democratic activities ranging from horse racing to cockfights and shell games. As one visitor commented in his diary however, although “there were a great many people here, male and female, . . . in my opinion [there were]

few respectable ones.”<sup>2</sup> It was the working class, not the elite, who actually participated in “the boisterous fun and rough sports” that Olmsted tried so hard to keep out of Central Park. In addition, immigrants had brought their masculine gymnastics and sports with them from their native countries. The Germans, for example, organized the first *Turnverein*, or gymnastic society, in the United States, in Cincinnati in 1848. By the outbreak of the Civil War, there were 157 societies in 27 states.<sup>3</sup> The Caledonian Games of the Scots, forerunners of the track-and-field competitions of a later date, met first in Boston in 1853, then Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1857.<sup>4</sup> In a nice reversal of the trickle-down theory, native-born Americans had played pickup games such as “town ball” or rounders (English children’s games, it must be admitted) since the eighteenth century. It was these that provided the basis for baseball, whose rules were changed and formalized by New York’s Knickerbocker Base Ball Club in the mid-century years following the first meeting of the Knickerbockers and the New York Nines at Elysian Fields in Hoboken on June 19, 1846.<sup>5</sup>

One might say, then, that the Anglo-Saxon love of games and sports formed a distinct part of the American character. This devotion was carried on the shoulders of the common man into the nineteenth century, when it was reinforced by the first waves of immigrants to this country. But because genteel society—the rapidly expanding middle class—of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s regarded it as unfashionable (not to say uncouth) to play sports, it took a societal revolution of sorts to make them acceptable on a nationwide basis. And perhaps the opening shots of the revolution were fired on that selfsame field in Hoboken by the upper-class Knickerbockers, with their code of “base ball.” By the 1850s, other more democratic clubs had appeared, clubs of workers (shipwrights, mechanics, truckmen), forcing the Knickerbockers to accept the fact that “the great mass, who are in a subordinate capacity can participate in this health giving and noble pastime.” After all, the only necessities of the game were a bat, a ball, and a place to play.<sup>6</sup>

Although the United States immediately prior to the Civil War was on the brink of the sports explosion that still engulfs American society today, the phenomenon was single-sexed. It took a gentler, more refined pastime, one more reflective of the idealized woman of mid-century America, to encourage women to participate in any outdoor activity. That pastime was croquet.

It has been said that croquet brought women outdoors. In truth, two activities accomplished that. The other, as we shall see, was skating. Croquet, though, was the first game that lured young women out to play with men. Before that, according to an 1865 croquet rule book, women's opportunities had been scant indeed: "Hitherto, while men and boys have had their healthful means of recreation in the open air, the women and girls have been restricted to the less exhilarating sports of indoor life; or, if they adventure out, all the participation in the healthful outdoor amusement and exercise they could indulge in was the tame and unsatisfactory position of mere lookers-on."<sup>7</sup>

Croquet's history is murky. It is thought to have come from a medieval French peasant game called *paille maille* that was brought to the English court of Charles II in the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> Its later rebirth in England came sometime around 1852 or 1853 in an 1830s Irish game called crooky. Croquet, as it became more genteelly known, began as an aristocratic pastime played on the wide, well-groomed lawns of the rich. That soon changed. As a possible explanation, its appearance at the same time as the invention and manufacture of the reel lawn mower is a coincidence too great to ignore. A Gloucestershire man, Edwin Beard Budding, produced the first lawn mower in the 1830s, but after his patents ran out in the mid-1850s, many versions of the machine were available. At about that time, croquet as a game democratized.<sup>9</sup>

Within the first year or so after its introduction into England, an English toy maker, John Jaques, began to mass-produce the equipment. Even though he used expensive basswood in order to charge high prices, he found a booming and eager market. America followed hard behind, copying the Jaques designs. Very quickly croquet adapted to smaller, rougher lawns and public parks, undoubtedly by now being mowed by machine rather than by animal.

The most widely recognized contemporary representations of croquet players are Winslow Homer's, dating from 1865 to 1869, just as the game's popularity was peaking. His paintings show middle-class Americans, one of them a first cousin of Homer's, playing on wide, long-shadowed, green late-afternoon lawns during the time of day preferred by most players. Women dominate all five of the paintings. In this, Homer reflected the reality of the game. The writers and reporters of the time repeatedly commented that croquet was the first sport to allow women to participate in a

## WOMEN MOVE OUT-OF-DOORS



"The Game of Croquet," about 1867. The social setting, party atmosphere, elegant dresses with hiked skirts that display decorative petticoats, and concentration on the game are evident. Collection of the author.

physical activity in the company of men. Because of this, croquet parties were incorporated into other social activities that women organized during the summer season—weekend parties, lavish champagne suppers, dinner parties, and dances. A colored fashion plate from *Peterson's Magazine* in July 1870 portrays "a lawn party, with croquet players, etc., etc. These parties are going to be very fashionable, this summer, in the country," declares the commentary. "They are given in the daytime, and out-of-doors, though, sometimes, they finish with a dance, in-doors, after sunset."<sup>10</sup>

As croquet's appeal spread, and with the publication of a spate of books that gave not only the rules of the game but rules of gracious conduct as well, women seemed to have taken over. At that point, a new woman emerged. The game's critical moment came with "the croquet," when the player who has the advantage over her opponent lines up her ball with his, places her foot on her own ball, swings her mallet, and smacks his ball "off to China"—not a gentle, submissive, feminine play by any means. Women were enjoined to be both graceful and ladylike during the game, but they were illustrated over and over performing precisely this aggressive—and

aggravating—croquet move, and appearing to enjoy themselves as they did. Clearly, croquet opened new worlds for women, including the newly visible outlets of sexuality and competitiveness.

As they seemingly ponder their next moves, Homer's thoughtful croquet players are dressed in the height of fashion. They wear hoops and crinolines, their outer skirts hitched up with an "elevator" device to display the intricate detailing of the underskirts.<sup>11</sup> With any luck for the opponents or spectators, this might allow a glimpse of an alluring foot and ankle during the dreaded "croquet" play. Their tiny waists are emphasized with belts, their white sleeves crisp and full, enhanced by shawls or a trim sleeveless bolero. Pert hats, beribboned and befeathered, tilt over their brows, shading their eyes, and their hands are protected in elegant leather gloves as they clutch or swing their mallets. This might be garden party attire; indeed, it probably was. It certainly looks like the clothing of attraction.

The croquet lawn became famous as a meeting ground for young eligibles, as a socially acceptable place to carry on flirtations. Indeed, so well understood was this benefit of the game that authors referred to it again and again. Sexual innuendo peppered contemporary accounts, and croquet became synonymous with man-hunting. One popular witticism archly declared, "She, whom he came to croquet, croquets him," while another, even bolder, claimed that "croquet may to Hymen's Alter lead." Perhaps this, more than anything else, explains its wild popularity in the 1860s and 1870s. An English advocate of the game, clearly aware of the proliferation of gambling that was a part of almost all male sports and pastimes of the era, stated, "Perhaps the finest argument in favor of croquet. . . is its morality. It has no taint attached to it, and never will. It is too refined. . . ever to become a gambler's game."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps so, since it had rapidly become identified as a female-oriented pastime. But the problem lay, rather, in the "contact and competition between the sexes. . . sublimated into an elegant, highly formalized ritual, occurring in a deceptively wholesome garden setting, amidst a display of finery and manners. . . . Fashion set the tone for gentle titillation." In seeming support of this, in 1868 *Harper's Bazar* called croquet "an exquisite game, at which the stakes are soft glances and wreathing smiles, and where hearts are lost and won."<sup>13</sup>

Here, the proper clothing certainly played its role. The hoop skirt, especially one hiked up for the game, directed attention to the foot, positioned

to “croquet” the ball.<sup>14</sup> Tiny feet were the hallmark of beauty. Feet and ankles became erotic areas of the female body during this period, possibly because they were visible for the first time in generations. “Now that the decree has gone forth in favor of short dresses,” declared *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1867, “we must look to our boots. As harmony of color prevails to a great extent in dress, boots and shoes should also accord.”<sup>15</sup> This edict presented a problem in playing croquet. Women were warned against wearing white shoes as being impractical even though perfect for summer wear, and indeed one can imagine the chagrin on discovering one’s best white shoes all grass-stained for the duration of the season. But players eventually found solutions for the difficulty, thanks to the vulcanization of rubber, a process developed earlier in the century. Waterproof boots were invented in the United States as early as the 1820s, and Wait Webster of New York registered a patent for attaching india-rubber soles in 1832.<sup>16</sup> It took another thirty-five years and the immense popularity of croquet to create the demand for the first kind of sneaker—indeed, the first shoe specifically designed for sport—in the form of a laced canvas upper with a rubber sole. It was American by manufacture and was called a “croquet sandal.”<sup>17</sup> Later improvements in rubber processing spawned rubbers that slipped over the shoes. By 1886, Bloomingdale’s was advertising a slip-on pump called “Ladies Croquets,” with a pair of rubbers available in the same style, made out of “extra light weight gossamer” rubber.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, though, dressing appropriately for the active and lively outdoor game of croquet was a minor consideration. Devotees preferred to dress attractively. A rule book from 1865 scolded: “With all deference, we suggest to all ladies that, where it is possible, they should dress with some regard to the requirements of the game; it is hardly conducive to elegance to behold a half dozen officious gentlemen hovering about a lady as train-bearers and flycatchers whenever she wishes to perform the croquet, and we protest against those sweeping skirts that whisk the balls about and change the whole feature of the field.”

Those sweeping skirts posed other problems as well. The stroke called “spooning” was a pendulum swing of the mallet, executed between the legs. Ladies could not perform it but had to side-swing across in front of them instead. “We agree that spooning is perfectly fair in a match of gentlemen, but it is decidedly ungenerous when played with ladies, unless

those ladies are bloomers,” declared *The Nation* in the mid-1860s.<sup>19</sup> As we will see in Part Two, only an intrepid, not to say scandalous, few were “bloomers” in the 1860s.

In spite of the difficulties the clothing of the day presented to the gentle players of the challenging and exciting, even sexual game of croquet, they wore it without question. They offered their most appealing toilette, calculated as carefully as their next croquet move. Their futures depended on it. And besides, there was no other acceptable alternative to wear in genteel mixed company.

What croquet was to summertime, skating was to winter. It had become an increasingly alluring pastime during the late 1850s and 1860s but took a little while to catch on for women. Magazines of the time played their role in popularizing it. Once again, we turn to Winslow Homer and the double-page wood engraving “centerfold” in *Harper’s Weekly* of January 28, 1860. His view of the frozen pond in the newly created Central Park, still raw and relatively treeless, is crowded with men and women together, enjoying the activity, showing off their pleasure and grace in the cold winter weather.

Some years later *Godey’s* ran a three-page article, “Skating for Ladies,” subtitled, “Why Ladies Ought to Skate, And Why They Do Not.”<sup>20</sup> This article, written by a man, “J.L.M.,” gives us a vivid sense of thoughts of the time concerning women’s participation in outdoor activities. I quote it at length to show the attitudes women faced, the pervasiveness of those attitudes, and the distance women had to travel to overcome the limits of “women’s sphere.” Somewhat surprisingly, and probably unbeknownst to him, J.L.M.’s words also clearly defined issues of class and social expectations.

The writer allowed that he had skated since he was a schoolboy, but “personally speaking, I have always regretted that more ladies do not skate. . . . In cold Christmas weather, when a merry party was gathered in my father’s house, it would have been so much pleasanter not to have had to leave the young ladies at home while we were at the pool.” He admitted that once they arrived at “the pool,” the men found “the lads from the village and not a few girls too.” Meanwhile, back at home, what were the ladies doing? (Notice his inadvertent distinction between the outgoing, carefree “girls” of the village and the “young ladies” who stayed at home.) “They cannot ride; it would be cruel to the ‘poor feet’ of the horses, to say nothing of the danger of slippery

roads.” So they sat “around the fire and indulge in ‘small talk’—I beg pardon—or they knit, crochet or embroider. . . . (I may remark *en passant*, that therein ladies have a great advantage, being able to make nimble and good use of their fingers while carrying on the most animated conversation, whereas the most gentlemen can, or, at least, the most they *do* do, under similar circumstances, is to smoke.)” So rather than sit, he urged them to try skating, as his sisters did, becoming his “happiest skating companions.”

If the ladies did venture outside, it was to deliver sandwiches to the male skaters at the pool, pausing to watch them briefly (in a sharp enactment of my earlier observation that women just watched) before it became “painful, and they hurried back to the fireside for the remainder of the bright day.” At best, they allowed themselves to be pushed around the ice on a converted “superannuated rocking-chair from the nursery.” It was after such a day, the author added, that he undertook the task of teaching his sisters to skate, a skill much easier than most people believed, so long as they had confidence. He argued that skating is healthy, “as delightful an amusement as dancing,” and one that women could do very well, just as gracefully. “If I can. . . induce ladies generally to follow the excellent example set by a few of their number,” he wrote, “I am confident they will be thankful for the addition to their somewhat limited number of amusements, one of the purest and best sports practised by men.”

All this notwithstanding, in his experience ladies did not skate, and he considered the reasons why. Here we are privy to a generation gap evident well over a hundred years ago. The author rails against an argument that would have teeth for the next three-quarters of a century:

I shall first of all deal with the weakest objection raised against it; but it is one, though puerile and paltry, which I feel to be very general. Paterfamilias objects to his daughter’s skating, because he thinks it is unfeminine. This is one of those deplorable notions with regard to ‘proprieties’. . . . It is unfeminine for ladies to be healthy, good walkers, with an upright gait, and a frame that is physically able to endure as much watching and working, if need be, as they are willing to undergo? Nothing I know is more conducive to these qualities than skating. Yet, say how many fathers, it is “unladylike.”





"Skating Costumes," 1869. Boys and girls enjoy the ice together. The one non-skater, perhaps a pre-learner, is pushed in a chair with runners. All are fashionably dressed, the girls in "short" skirts, modified to prevent tripping on their skates. Collection of the author.

Another difficulty he encountered was that of finding "a sufficiently private place for learning." Here we discover the circumstances under which a young woman might participate in any new sporting activity, not just skating. We shall see these conditions reiterated again and again over the years, whether with swimming and bathing, bicycling, or any other sport. The author insists that women must learn away from the eyes of strangers, and if under the tutelage of a man, it must be a brother or close friend: "It is, for obvious reasons, very desirable that a lady's first day on the ice should be only in the company of some few friends upon a pond not frequented by others. . . . A brother or a friend, used to the ice" might accompany her. "Another reason why skating is not general among women," he asserts. "is a natural objection each one feels towards taking the first step. That is, the first step among her own circle of friends. A few, a very few, ladies do skate, and have done so now for many years." His exhortation concludes, "It is a great folly, to say nothing of the positive wrong, to narrow the straitened limit of out-door amusements in which ladies are privileged to indulge."

His parting shot, a particularly American one, is to predict that the many ponds and rivers frozen during the wintertime, when “riding is generally impracticable,” will create a greater attraction for skating, which will “be productive of more good than it ever has been in England.”

Two months later, in *Godey's* February 1864 issue, “Rules For Skating” appeared under the heading “Hints About Health,” taken from “Hall’s Journal of Health.” The seven hints range from avoiding strapping on the skate too tightly for fear of cutting off circulation (“a young lady at Boston lost a foot in this way”) to wearing a veil over the face to prevent “fatal inflammation of the lungs.” Skaters were not to sit down to rest “a single half minute” or stand still, or even to “stop a moment after the skates are taken off,” to prevent becoming chilled. Walking home rather than riding was forbidden, since it would “almost certainly give a cold.” And in light of the previous warnings, which make one wonder why anyone would ever want to skate at all, children and ladies were to limit their skating time to a mere hour. The seventh rule, though, really startles, if only because it makes us aware of the birth of another sport that did not take off until the next century: “The grace, exercise, and healthfulness of skating on the ice can be had, without any of its dangers, by the use of skates with rollers attached, on common floors; better, if covered with oil-cloth.”<sup>21</sup> And, in case readers had missed it the first time around, *Godey's* repeated this last piece of advice in March, adding, “Little girls should learn skating this way; it is pleasant and safe exercise.”<sup>22</sup>

*Godey's* seems to have been aware of the fashion trends, at least in certain circles, for that May it declared in its regular column “Letter From Paris” that “the thaw has put a stop to the pleasures of skating—and exercise which has been pursued by many of our leaders; the favorite lake in the Bois was the Suresne, because the Empress selected it, and was frequently seen upon it.”<sup>23</sup> (This was the period of devotion to the empress Eugénie’s fashion leadership, a period mourned at its passing by the *beau monde* because of the distressing vacuum it left in the fashion world.) Whatever the influences, skating became a regular pastime, one referred to several times in *Godey's* over the course of the next decade or more. As early as January 1868, just four years after the “J.L.M.” article, the editor declared with nonchalance, “Until the last few years. . .[skating] was almost confined to [boys]; but now everybody skates, and ladies are especially renowned for their grace

and agility.”<sup>24</sup> By the 1870s, descriptions of skating costumes appeared along with those of other fashionable dresses as a matter of course.

If *Godey's* incorporated clothing for outdoor sporting activities into its standard reportage, it can be stated with unflinching authority that those outfits were attractive, meant to be seen, and bound firmly within current fashion standards. A short story in *Peterson's Magazine*, “The First Skating-Lesson,” bears this out, and confirms that just as the clothing for croquet was chosen to attract, so was the clothing for skating. This story, written by a man, revolves around the pairing of a young couple at the end of a week-long Christmas party. It begins with the young woman's first attempt at skating, accompanied by the young man, of course. Tellingly, a complete description of their appearance virtually begins the tale:

Amy Forsyth almost always looked pretty, but never prettier than she did standing there in her coquettish short dress, with its loosely-fitting velvet jacket, ermine-edged, a jaunty hat, with a floating feather, and her beautiful hair allowed to fall in loose, heavy waves about her shoulders. The rose-tints in her cheeks were deeper, and her eyes brighter than usual, from excitement and the fear which was not too strong to be pleasurable, enough to make her hold fast to Fred's two hands, so that he was inclined to think the nervousness was nicer than any Amazonian display of courage and skill.

Fred, in his stunning winter array, made a very charming cavalier. He was only twenty-two, bright, witty, and highly cultivated—in every respect an agreeable companion.

The entire story, complete with all the flirtation, coyness, misunderstanding, and drama of the usual boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl plot, revolves around skating and the dramatic possibilities it afforded (including crashing through the ice into the frigid water). Who could resist trying it out, especially when the romantic outcome was so inevitable?

Just as *Peterson's* reported the latest fads in its stories, *Godey's* kept up with the prevailing fashions from France. The orientation of the time was The Crinoline, synonymous with the Second Empire. Indeed, the label still

sticks: the 1850s and 1860s are known to costume historians and others alike as the “Crinoline Era.” François Boucher claims that at least part of the reason it stormed the fashion world was that, after the bourgeois reign of Louis-Philippe and the Revolution of 1848, women were “avid for luxury, for pleasure, and for *la toilette*,” just as their grandmothers had been during the Empire Period. It was an era that “had money in abundance.” It was a time to see and be seen at receptions, balls, spectacles, and fantasies; it called for experimentation and participation in new social pastimes of all sorts.<sup>25</sup> Sport was simply one of these.

Since both croquet and skating first appeared in the 1850s, the costumes naturally consisted of the wide, bell-shaped skirts supported by crinolines that characterized the era. This was also the triumph of “*la couture mécanique*,” as Boucher put it, consecrated by the Universal Exposition of 1855. Dressmakers, intoxicated by the speed of the sewing machine, had finally found relatively inexpensive ways to adorn the huge skirts, all in a reasonable amount of time. Out of their enthusiasm came the excess that the Crinoline Era is famous for.<sup>26</sup> The designer Charles Frederick Worth, couturier to Eugénie, “Empress Crinoline,” was an advocate of the fashion, and was abetted by the court painter extraordinaire, F. X. Winterhalter, who recorded it for posterity.

The crinoline itself was an underskirt made of horsehair and cotton or linen, starched and stiffened to support the wide skirts. As these broadened ever further, the additional weight of the yards of material led to the invention of the steel-banded cage, known as the cage crinoline. Although it seems hard to believe now because it made possible an ever-greater expanse of skirt, it was for its time a remarkable example of reform dress. Patented first in France in 1856, and easily manufactured by the new sewing machine, it eliminated the need for the heavy burden of multilayered crinolines proper, substituting instead a single steel-hooped petticoat.<sup>27</sup> In spite of this innovation, it took another two years for the skirt to reach its widest span, and two more years to refine the cage enough to respond to the movement of the body with a suppleness that hadn’t existed in the earlier versions.<sup>28</sup> The timing was perfect for croquet and skating. Interestingly, although, according to *Godey’s*, the empress skated on her “favorite lake in the Bois. . . the Suresne,” the same article reveals that Eugénie “never” wore a cage. *Godey’s* mused somewhat slyly that it was a



“Safety Skating Frame, for Beginners.” Note the hoop shaping the shortened elevated overskirt. Despite the voluminous layering, the lower body seems to be vulnerable to winter’s chill. *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, December 1863, 505.

“matter of curiosity to know how the Empress contrives always to appear with such well-setting skirts.” Her “well-starched flounces,” the writer sniffed, were “a costly contrivance, and. . .not suitable for those who take much walking exercise.”<sup>29</sup> Or skating exercise either, it would appear, in spite of her alleged fondness for the Suresne.

Perhaps the reason why Eugénie shunned the cage in favor of the earlier and heavier versions of the crinoline had to do with the drawback that wearers and cartoonists alike dealt with. The cage had a tendency to dip and bob, to maintain a life of its own when circling a moving body. A good gust of wind could lift it high, even turn it inside out, much like an umbrella in a windstorm. Its bounce could not only dislodge “well-setting skirts” but also reveal all beneath. Thus feet, shoes and boots, legs and stockings, even pantalettes and petticoats became newly important articles of apparel and objects of erotic interest in the Crinoline Era. Women had been wearing drawers under their skirts for two or three decades by the 1850s, but the sudden and unplanned tilting of the covering skirts persuaded them to adopt

WOMEN MOVE OUT-OF-DOORS



"On the Wissahickon," 1867. The skater's hiked skirt, held in place by an elevator, reveals the hoop underneath. Collection of the author.

pantalettes as a matter of course. And the more visible they were, the more decorative they became. Petticoats, too, lent themselves to a new and eye-catching display. Usually one petticoat would be worn over the cage to soften the line, and since it showed frequently, it became an object of exploitation

(and here we begin to appreciate the scope of opportunities for lavish decoration that the sewing machine provided). It should come as no surprise that inveterate English walkers were the first to hitch up their skirts to allow easier movement. It was Eugénie, though, who popularized the look after she saw it on a visit to England, took it home to France, and inspired the fashion world. By 1862, French fashion plates, those models for American copies, showed the newly hiked skirts. This in turn led to a wider use of mechanical devices to lift skirts (such as the “elevator” used by Winslow Homer’s croquet players), first introduced in the late 1850s, but brought more into popular use in the 1860s. Mme. Demorest, the New Yorker whose emporium *Godey’s* frequently touted, who published the *Mirror of Fashion* in 1862 and teamed with Ebenezer Butterick to publish the first paper sewing patterns in the United States, invented a “superior” device for the purpose.<sup>50</sup>

The English also led the way in the matter of stouter boots and stockings made in bright colors or stripes. Interestingly, the popularity of skating at this time not only led to a new awareness of smart boots for women, but in return, encouraged even more women to take up skating. Without the sturdier shoes for women, the blades that strapped over them could never have held as well as they did or led ultimately to the skate still used today, with the blade attached directly to the boot sole.

*Godey’s*, as usual, tells us all about the “new,” yet cautions the reader in the telling. Here we see the interaction between the innovations for sport, certain accommodations for the weather, and the acceptable fashion of the period:

The fashion for colored stockings has certainly extended since the skating mania. Naturally the ankles are visible during this exercise, and white stockings have a miserable effect with a colored petticoat. Never, therefore, have colored stockings appeared to such an advantage; plaid looked especially well. They are worn in silk, spun silk, and fine wool, and they are always selected to match the dress. The white silk stockings, which were abandoned last winter, are the only ones admitted during the present season for full evening dress.

Boots are also made fantastically; with the present style of looping up the dresses, both in fine and wet weather, the feet are seen very

plainly. On fine days the dress is not drawn up so high as when the streets are muddy, but in all weathers the feet of pedestrians are, now-a-days, visible. Unless the precaution of drawing up the skirts was taken, considering their present length, even when made of the richest materials, they would not last more than a couple of days.<sup>51</sup>

That *Godey's* was something other than consistent is apparent in the "Fashions" article by Mrs. Hale in February 1864, just two months after J.L.M.'s plea to encourage skating among women. "Skating," declared *Godey's* rather surprisingly, "is now so universally recognized as an institution among ladies, as well as gentlemen, that not a little taste and ingenuity are exercised in getting up costumes, which will be at the same time warm, comfortable, convenient, and picturesque."<sup>52</sup> But what follows is a tribute to *Godey's* forward-looking, unfettered spirit, and a rare societal impress on the reform dress of the mid-century. For what Mrs. Hale goes on to describe is nothing less than the Turkish costume known by then as the bloomer, and the outfit that, modified, would become the standard exercise costume of the next couple of decades (a development discussed at length in Part Two).

"Most ladies," she writes, "content themselves with drawing up their soft woollen and merino dresses over gaily striped and ornamented underskirts." For the daring few, though, Mrs. Hale suggested that "the most suitable and admired of these [skating] costumes are made in French flannel, and consist of a Garibaldi, Turkish pants and a short skirt, which leaves the limbs free for exercise." Outfits she describes are elaborate, richly decorated, and made from expensive materials. "All these were made by Madame Demorest, although with patterns and a little ingenuity, they could be readily made at home." With this, Mrs. Hale was no doubt reminding her readers that patterns were available for order from Mme. Demorest, through both *Godey's* and, from 1862 on, Demorest's own magazine. It should be pointed out that the word "costume" was used exclusively here to label the reform Bloomer outfit, as in this passage:

The pants should be pretty wide, and drawn with an elastic band. Where it is not convenient to procure a costume, an ordinary walking dress, drawn up over a Balmoral skirt with one of Mme Demorest's excellent elevators, of which we gave our readers a description last





"Skating Carnival in Brooklyn, February 10, 1862." Note the woman of the central couple wearing bloomers under her skirt. Of all the people on the ice, she alone wears the "costume." *Harper's Weekly*, February 22, 1862, 125. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Special Collections and Archive.

month, answers just the same purpose. The only advantage of the regular costume is, that there is less weight to carry, and it is certainly more effective. A long skirt is, of course, worn over a skating dress in going to and from the place of rendezvous.<sup>53</sup>

This last sentence is surely the earliest admonition of its kind, but one that would appear over and over throughout the next several generations of clothing for sport and exercise. Indeed, the prohibition lasted well into the 1960s, when college women were expected to wear raincoats over their gym suits on the way to class.<sup>54</sup> As to "the only advantage of the regular costume," one would agree that weight reduction was a primary consideration, though perhaps additional warmth, particularly in the nether regions, would have run a close second. Still another, though again not acknowledged here, would be the ability to see one's feet clearly on the ice instead of having to peer over the hoopskirt, which would constantly be hiding the skates—and cracks and bumps in the ice—from view (not to mention the exposure should she fall). A final advantage might be to allow the skater to strap on her own skates

when sitting down, since she would be able to see her own feet. Otherwise, someone else would have had to put her skates on for her.

As to the success of “the costume,” it seems to have vanished without a trace, if indeed it was ever much worn at all. I have been able to find no other mention of pants for skating in any other source from that time on. We must wait until the 1930s to see them worn again for skating. From this earlier point on, then, clothing for skating, like clothing for croquet, was very much standard fashion fare, what “most ladies content themselves with.” In fact, this suggests that women preferred to follow fashion rather than fly in the face of convention, no matter how sensible the innovation might be.

Skating and croquet, as we have seen, were both introduced at the same time, during the 1850s. Skating, a winter sport, required certain modifications in dress, if only to protect the wearer from the cold. By the 1860s, the skirt elevator was introduced to manipulate the huge crinolined skirts and was used not just for skating and croquet but for general purposes as well, such as rainy-day walking. Contemporary illustrations of skaters show that, when the outer skirt was lifted with such a device, the hooped petticoat underneath fell only to the mid-calf, leaving the lower calf, ankle, and foot clearly visible. Children’s clothing for skating from the same decade shows outer skirts falling to the same length as the adults’ underskirts. Such a length for women elsewhere was unthinkable at the time. *Godey’s* did comment in 1867 that “short dresses, which have caused so much perturbation in the feminine world, have now become almost indispensable. They grow shorter and shorter; but do not be frightened, dear readers, we are not coming out as ballet dancers; though the upper skirt is short, the petticoat is of a suitable length.”<sup>55</sup>

The shortened petticoat, used here to avoid the blades of skates, represented the first of decades of similar—and in most cases only—modification of clothing for sport. Safety in general must have been a factor, since it would have been impossible for the wearer of a cage to see her feet unless she bent far enough forward to allow the hoop to swing backwards. Surely this would have been, at the very least, an inconvenience, especially in the learning process. Indeed, it was for safety’s sake (and not just on the ice) that the cage changed shape in the 1860s from bell to oval, flattening the skirt in front.

## CHAPTER TWO

Skating, then, was a significant outdoor exercise, not only because it represents a beginning for women's participation in sports but also, like bathing and swimming, it was very much an inexpensive and democratic pastime. Unlike croquet, with its more aristocratic origins, skating was accessible to anybody who could afford a pair of blades to strap onto his or her boots and who had a frozen body of water nearby. In spite of the awkward and unavoidable clothing they wore for it, women took up skating by the thousands. Indeed, no matter how great the struggle, how restrictive the patriarch, how hampering the clothing, how difficult the journey, women wanted to leave the "warm fireside on a bright day," get outdoors, and, in the words of sports promotion in our own time, "just do it." And they did.