"Do Not Neglect Exercise Nor Recreation": Rural New Englanders, Sport and Health Concerns

Linda J. Borish

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
“Do Not Neglect Exercise Nor Recreation”: Rural New Englanders, Sport and Health Concerns

By LINDA J. BORISH

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AGRICULTURALISTS widely commented on New England farm life, and their writings provide a valuable source for exploring rural history, an underexplored area of social history in general and sport history in particular. Timothy Bunker, Connecticut farm columnist on “Yankee Farming” for the American Agriculturist, wrote an essay on New England farming in 1868 about a young farm boy who left his Hookertown, Connecticut, farm at age sixteen to seek his fortune as a clerk in a dry goods store in New York City. Merchant Jeremiah Sparrowgrass, according to Bunker, returned to his rural community five years later to “visit his country cousins at Hookertown, and to regale himself a little with country sports.” For Sparrowgrass, however, “his whole memory of country life had become exceedingly impaired by his city residence.” Like the farm boy who left the homestead, historians generally have been located in a “city residence,” intellectually, that is; they convey little knowledge of sport and health concerns in country life, a subject of earnest cultural attention by nineteenth-century rural New Englanders.

In fact, an urban paradigm of sport, health, and physical culture dominates historical scholarship on sport in nineteenth-century American culture known as the “take-off” period of organized, institutionalized sports. The early historians of the growth of sport emphasized the role of the city. Frederic Paxson argued in “The Rise of Sport” in 1917 that sport served as “a new safety valve” in the urban environment, a substitute for the rugged outdoor physical action of pioneer life. John R. Betts also viewed the city as a key catalyst to the growth of sport. He wrote that “while athletics and outdoor recreation were sought as a release from the confinements of city life, industrialization and the urban movement were the basic causes for the rise

1. This research was supported by funding from the Old Sturbridge Village Research Fellowship, Sturbridge, Mass. I deeply thank colleagues in the Department of Research, Collections, and Library for their generous assistance during my research in the summer of 1993. At Western Michigan University, funding from the Department of History through a Burnham-Macmillan History Grant advanced this project, and I appreciate Chair Ronald Davis and colleagues’ awarding me this grant. I thank J. Thomas Jable and Stephen Hardy for their critical comments on an earlier version of the paper, and Stephen Hardy also gave me suggestions and encouragement for my work in rural sport history. Many agricultural periodicals cited in the essay are housed in the National Agricultural Library, Special Collections, Beltsville, Md., and the staff provided valuable assistance with materials. Richard Moss offered helpful editorial comments on this article.

of organized sport." Historian Stephen Hardy reviewed the literature on sport in his 1981 essay, "The City and the Rise of American Sport: 1820-1920." The notions of sport as a product of the nineteenth-century urban, industrial culture and an antidote to the negative influences of modern city life shaped the sport history literature. Hardy discussed four kinds of studies dealing with the growth of sport and the city in nineteenth-century American culture. These studies focused on escapism and sport, voluntary associations, sport and urban symbolism, and sport, reform, and power. In his recent article on urbanism and sport history, Stephen Hardy again asserted that current scholarship on the rise of American sport concentrates on this dominant "urban-industrial paradigm"; the theme of sport being interrelated to the nineteenth-century urban, industrial culture and offsetting the health hazards of modern city life certainly persists in sport history scholarship. "In broad brush, the urban paradigm continues to rest on the effects of sweeping 'forces' such as immigration, industrialization, urban 'malaise', pent-up emotions, the 'civilizing' process, or boredom," Hardy explains. "While some scholars have accentuated older themes such as escapism, 'community' building, or social control," Hardy remarks, "others have entered the expanding literature on consumption and mass culture, with a special eye on the links between games and gender, between recreation and race." The urban context, however, continues to form the primary focus of research on American sport and health.

Few historical works on sport integrate the history of rural America in the examination of nineteenth-century American culture. The "emphasis on towns and cities dominated the 'new social history' of America up to the late 1970s and beyond," commented rural historian Christopher Clark, and, likewise, sport history has basically concentrated on city life. The studies lack analysis of rural women as well as men, although "certainly American rural


farm women, who until well into the twentieth century constituted a majority of the female population,” historian John Mack Faragher explains, “are among the most underrepresented of all Americans in the standard histories.” Moreover, residents in rural areas surpassed those in urban areas during the “era of rural dominance” persisting until 1880, with some regions remaining primarily rural into the early twentieth century.6

Amidst the danger, disease, and disorder of cities, in contrast to the countryside, some historians have alleged that sport provided a wholesome activity for urban youth and a means to restore physical vigor for urbanites. For example, James Whorton in Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers has explored “the hygienic hazards of industrial civilization” and how white middle-class urbanites desired to improve their poor health through exercise and sport programs. Similarly, another sport and health historian wrote, “Weakened by their urban lives, spared the rigors of the farm or frontier, vaguely defined illnesses—dyspepsia, neurasthenia . . .—seemed to doom Americans.”7 Women’s historians, likewise, typically cite the urban environment as fostering decline in women’s health. In her study of women’s health in nineteenth-century Boston, Martha Verbrugge stated, “For many, women’s ailments, and sickness in general, demonstrated the precariousness of urban life.”8

An urban bias exists in the historical research on sport and health with rural life often idealized as a locale of health-building qualities for farm inhabitants. Sport and health historians might explore why the bucolic myth of rosy farm life and communion with nature persisted in the perceptions of urban health reformers. The republican, Jeffersonian view of the yeoman farmer working outdoors in productive and healthful labor seems to shape the visions of rural life espoused by antebellum urban health critics. The idealized depiction of men and women pursuing agricultural tasks in farm families, following the rhythms of nature instead of following the rhythms of the

clock in factories in the city, suggested a more salubrious way of life in the reform-minded outlook of urban, sedentary, advice givers. Historian Sarah Burns has vividly demonstrated in her cultural analysis of art and culture the persistence of nineteenth-century pastoral iconography. "As gloom over the city deepened and its infernal forces rumbled in menacing crescendo," Burns explains, "the ideal of the country by contrast could only appear more paradisiacal; its inhabitants, if not angels, at least untainted." In short, the country "was heaven to the hell of the city, therapy to mend frazzled urban nerves." Generally historians tend to consider urban life as antithetical to agricultural life in assessing the well-being of nineteenth-century Americans.

Nineteenth-century agriculturists, male and female rural advice givers, and farm journalists, however, expressed assorted beliefs about sport and health concerns of rural New Englanders. For instance, prominent farm commentator and columnist for the nationally circulated American Agriculturist, Solon Robinson exhorted rural inhabitants in 1865 in his Facts for Farmers; Also for the Family Circle, "Do not neglect exercise nor recreation." But American sport historians have often overlooked rich sources about the history of the rural majority in the study of sport and fitness.

Yet the myth of the healthy countryside, when approached from the lens of vision of rural people themselves in everyday life, reveals experiences contrary to the model of robust health articulated from the urban perspective. Manuscript collections about New England farm families, for example, yield important data on health and sport in the everyday life of farm men and women. The Bullard Family Papers convey the experiences of a Massachusetts farm family and their family network, communicating information on farm work, domestic life, education, health and sporting interests, with strong sources in the nineteenth century. Farmer Henry Bullard (1815-1906) of Holliston, Massachusetts, moved in 1848 to the family farm of 150 acres, valued at $6310, with his wife Bethia Scammell Wheeler (1815-1890), daughter of a neighboring farmer; Henry grew up on the family farm, previously the residence of his father Titus Bullard and wife Esther Whiting Bullard, along with Henry's four siblings. Perhaps Henry Bullard heeded the advice of Solon Robinson on bettering his farmstead and family's well-being. Indeed, a progressive middle-class farmer, Henry Bullard subscribed to American Agriculturist, where he might read the essays by Robinson and other journalists in New England farm periodicals like Massachusetts Ploughman and Boston Cultivator; farmer Henry Bullard purchased for his


farmer’s library for “$9.75” on July 24, 1868 “Facts for Farmers 2 Vols Solon Robinson,” listed in his Cash Book.\(^\text{11}\)

The farm experiences of Henry Bullard and his siblings as revealed in family correspondence suggest that he and his farm family consulted the farm advice manuals on health matters. In a letter to his parents at the Holliston farm while on a business trip to Cincinnati in July 1838, Henry worried about the burden of farm work on his parents’ health. “Father and Mother you must not work to hard and wear your selves all up before I come home,” Henry remarked. But he was especially alarmed at the toll of domestic chores on his mother, noting, “I suppose you are working away as usual.” Then he urged in another letter to her, “I hope you will have your health which is the greatest blessing that we can enjoy,” and advised, “you must be careful & not work to hard.”\(^\text{12}\) Farm daughter Rebecca Bullard, Henry’s sister, worried too about her mother’s physical weakness. In corresponding with sister Adeline in the Midwest, Rebecca divulged that their mother “has had a great many poor days.” Again Rebecca expressed anxiety about her mother’s depleted vitality, writing in 1836 that Mother had “work to hard.”\(^\text{13}\)

Additional private writings of the Bullard farm family in the manuscript collections express the reality of farm toil rather than the idealized view of farm work from an urban perspective as healthful and cheerful for farm folks. Betsey Wheeler, sister of Bethia Wheeler, knew firsthand the rigors of domestic chores at the family’s East Medway, Massachusetts, farm. In her correspondence she revealed deep concern about her own mother’s health. Mrs. Betsey Richardson Wheeler, married to farmer Lewis Wheeler, had ten children and needed her daughters’ help with the farm labors. Betsey specifically cited that her mother, age 53, was overburdened and stated to her brother Abijah, “I hope Mother will not work to hard she must take her work gradually and not think of doing more than she is able.” Betsey wanted to attend school rather than undertake the rigorous routine of farm chores. But she learned from her brother Abijah in a letter on July 29, 1826 that her father “says if you stay any longer he must hire a maid for mother has work to hard.”\(^\text{14}\) So much for the images of the buxom and buoyant farm women vigorously fulfilling myriad domestic tasks and enjoying robustness.

The skewed picture of the presumed dichotomy in the ideology of rural and urban health proves to be inaccurate when the beliefs of rural Americans

\(^{11}\) Henry Bullard, Receipts, $1.00 paid for the *Massachusetts Ploughman*, July 6, 1842; $2.00 paid on April 20, 1843 and subsequent years; Henry Bullard, Cash Book, January 1858, entry for his subscription to *American Agriculturist*; July 24, 1868, entry in Cash Book for purchase of *Facts for Farmers* (2 Vols), Bullard Family Papers, Series 9, Old Sturbridge Village Research Library, Sturbridge, Mass. (hereafter OVRL); Henry Bullard, Town of Holliston, *Seventh Census of the United States. Original Returns of the Assistant Marshals in Massachusetts for 1850, Fourth Series, Agricultural Productions*, microfilm, OVRL.

\(^{12}\) Henry Bullard to Titus Bullard, July 13, 1838, January 15, 1839; ca. January 17, 1839, Bullard Family Papers, Correspondence, Series 6, OVRL.

\(^{13}\) Rebecca Bullard to Adeline Bullard Whiting, ca. February 28, 1834, Bullard Family Papers, Correspondence, Series 7, OVRL; Rebecca Bullard to Henry Bullard, September 10, 1856, Bullard Family Papers, Correspondence, Series 9, OVRL.

\(^{14}\) Betsey Wheeler to Abijah Richardson Wheeler, May 20, 1826; Abijah Richardson Wheeler to Betsey Wheeler, July 29, 1826, Bullard Family Papers, Correspondence, Series 24, OVRL.
are integrated into health and sport history. The antebellum New England rural reform movement focused on health as one strategy for improving rural life and stemming the tide of farm boys and girls leaving home. Rural commentators especially perceived women’s arduous work load in the division of labor within the farm family to be a reason why daughters wanted to quit the farm. New England agriculturalists launched their own campaign to promote health on the homestead and recommended appropriate sporting activities for farm folks. Thus, the quest for vigorous health did not stem solely from an urban locus.

By the antebellum period, the farm press and farm publications disseminated various beliefs about rural well-being and physical exercise. The nineteenth-century New England rural ideology on physical health, circulated in farm periodicals such as *American Agriculturist, New England Farmer, Maine Farmer,* and *Massachusetts Ploughman,* revealed a class and gender perspective. The editors and columnists represented a diverse lot. Some middle-rank editors claimed farming experience, while others were urban gentlemen seeking to promote agriculture. Farmers and nonfarmers alike contributed to the agricultural press. While “the progressive farm families of the rural middle-class” sought agricultural journals for “book farming,” the advice of reformers promoting scientific farming and profit making in their farm activities, the agricultural journals also “aimed for an audience of practical farmers,” explains rural historian Sally McMurry. For male and female readers of the farm press, topics like domestic economy, education, and health appeared along with farm topics reflecting the imperative for reform, often articulated in a rural-urban conflict in farm journals.

Urbanites, however, held no monopoly on sanitation problems, poor diets, inadequate ventilation, burdensome work regimens, or lack of health-building sporting activities, and rural New Englanders identified their health problems in agricultural publications. For example, in “On Health and Cleanliness” in the 1840 *Maine Farmer,* a rural health critic urged farm...

readers to be mindful that “[t]he chief requisite for health are exercise, tranquility of mind, good air, wholesome diet, good water and temperance in all things.” Yet some rural New Englanders violated the rules of health. Contrary to rosy images of tidiness, order, and cleanliness in wholesome farm life, farm accounts manifested quite a different image. “Some farmers’ barn yards, cellars, hog pens, back houses, & c. are suffered to remain, during the summer months in such a state,” the journalist asserted, that “if they do not generate cholera or typhus fever,” he concluded, “they at least cause a degree of languor and debility.” A letter to Ezekiel Holmes, editor of the *Maine Farmer* in 1840, written by a rural resident, expressed alarm at the “Physical Degeneracy” of his rural neighbors compared to 70 years ago when “the congregation came of the meeting house, and both the males and the females were then larger and evidently much more robust, and their countenances told to a beholder that, they were healthier than a congregation in a country town now appear.” As to a possible cause of decline in health, the *Yankee Farmer* noted that dietary habits of farm people might be to blame. While urban antebellum health writers, as well as historians, have mentioned “dyspepsia,” a stomach disorder, as a peculiarly urban middle-class ailment, the “Health” column of this farm magazine warned about the hazards of poor eating in its own piece “Dyspepsia.” The principle cause of dyspepsia “is the eating of hot bread, hot cakes, crust which is dough in consistency, butter, and the use of tea.” Moreover, the “habit of eating so fast, bolting down provisions half-masticated, and forcing the stomach to a labor which nature never intended,” only added to the health distress. Not surprisingly, in the “General Maxims for Health” in this column appeared the advice, “Eat simple food.”

The exploration of the health and sporting pursuits of rural people illustrates the need to rethink urban-based concepts of American sport and fitness. Rather than exhibiting hale and hearty health, several male rural commentators believed farmers needed to renovate their fitness. For instance, as one farm correspondent urged in *American Agriculturist*, “For the Benefit of Farmers and Others,” readers ought to maintain a healthy regimen of appropriate exercise and cold-water bathing. This rural writer believed farmers ignored the laws of health and claimed farm folks ought to discover “the principal advantages derived from cold-water bathing, besides cleanliness and salutary exercise, are either the reduction of excessive bodily heat, or the producing of a healthy reaction of the system.” Furthermore, “it is also serviceable in the treatment of several nervous diseases, as well as gouty and rheumatic complaints.” Likewise, the *New England Farmer* “Health” col-

---


umn in September 1849 warned farm families of the consequences when "[m]any persons in our country have not experienced a thorough washing for months, and some for years; yet they fear disease." Still another contributor to the New England Farmer declared farm people needed to heed that "Heaven never granted a richer boon than health"; yet, he admonished, it "is often lightly esteemed and carelessly thrown away."\(^2^1\)

In addition to concerns about the health of rural New Englanders in particular, research centering on the health of New England farm women indicates a distinctly different view from the idealized urban one. Some male rural commentators—agricultural reform journalists and doctors—sided with female agricultrists who perceived farm life as jeopardizing female fitness. Rural correspondents constructed a battle of images on farm women's health in the popular farm press. Farm boosters perceived that women exhibited vitality in their defense of farm life, but farm women themselves, and their male reform allies, perceived that women exhibited debility. An article in the Massachusetts Ploughman countered the popular myth of energetic farm women. The author observed, "Females in New England, are worse off than the other sex in the deprivation of out-of-door relaxation" so that they make "feeble mothers—look thin, sallow, lank, and die by thousands, prematurely." In fact, farm women often articulated reasons for their poor physical condition, citing the arduous work expected of them by men in the farm family. Writing from experience in "Farmers' Wives," printed in the Massachusetts Ploughman, a farm woman contended, "it is sad as well as amusing, to look over the various agricultural periodicals and mark how multifarious the labors which a farmer's wife is bound in duty to perform"; she cited gender tensions as a factor in the hard work of baking, cooking, washing, ironing, sweeping, dusting, churning, sewing, sausage-making, scouring, cleaning, and the like; "when the farmer takes to himself a wife, he considers that he is only securing another beast of burden, to rank in point of utility with his horse and ox," she pronounced.\(^2^2\)

In the mid-nineteenth-century agricultural press, men and women engaged in the social discourse on the physical vigor of the female gender. In the nationally circulated American Agriculturist in 1856, Professor J. B. Nash explained women's lack of exercise in fresh air because they spent enormous amounts of time on domestic chores indoors. "What signifies this having so many pale, sickly women? It is the bane of American women—worst of all in the rural districts—that they are always shut up." Echoing

---

these sentiments, health reformer J. Reynolds, M. D., contributing to New England Farmer, proclaimed women thus needed to cultivate flowers to improve their vitality with exercise in the open air. But among “our fair country-women, such instances are but rarely seen” and, instead, women devoted little time and care to the invigorating activity of gardening, “a pursuit full of beauty and health for the body.” He exhorted farm husbands and fathers to be mindful of females’ being cooped up indoors. Farmers ought to fulfill the male gender role to “see to it that they never discourage a taste for the cultivation of flowers” by undertaking the labor to prepare a patch for the garden.23

Many farm daughters, too, deplored their lack of time for outdoor health-building recreation. In 1853 one farm girl explained the gruelling work routine to Jane G. Swisshelm, author of Letters to Country Girls and contributor to New England Farmer. Madge complained, “How do you suppose I can find time to wander off into the ‘grand old wood,’ or take a stroll through the meadows in search of wild flowers?” She described for Mrs. Swisshelm the consequences of seeking such leisure time. “Suppose I start off, and leave the work any day of the week; what is the consequence? Why, father will come in and find mother alone at the work, tired out and perhaps suffering with that vile sick headache.” When her father “finds I have gone hunting flowers,” Madge feared that “probably the idea of the cupping operation to ease a belabored brain, in connection with my poor cranium, is floating through his mind.” Nonetheless, Swisshelm ardently urged young female readers to seek outdoor exercise for the benefit of their bodily health. Country girls, Swisshelm exhorted, “do not scrub, and cook, and scour, until you have no time left to plant a tree, or vine, and flower!” And for girls to renovate their health, “a little hoe, as a companion in a morning walk, is decidedly preferable to a full-grown beau,” she recommended.24

Rather than the icon of the rosy-cheeked farm lass, reform-minded rural advisors like Swisshelm identified the need for farm females to secure health-giving exercise. In Facts for Farmers; Also for the Family Circle, Solon Robinson proposed a strategy to renovate women’s physical stamina: “Wear strong shoes, and take long walks,” and, he observed, “You will never die on horseback.” On the topic of “Physical Recreation” for the New England Farmer a journalist noted, “It is quite a mistake to consider the labor of the day as equivalent to exercise,” and specifically reported, “Athletic sports and out of door exercises, of every description, are no less

conducive to the morals, and happiness, than they are necessary to the perfect health of the young of both sexes."  

Not only did farmers assess the impact of tiresome chores on women’s well-being, but they also wrote about the impact of laborious activities on men’s well-being. On the Bullard family farm in Holliston, Massachusetts, James Hovey Bullard, the son of Henry Bullard, recalled some of his hard farm tasks. James Hovey wrote of his boyhood days on the farm when his brother Lewis used to say that haying was “the most trying to body, soul, and temper.” After the heavy labor one year in the hayfield, James Hovey described the toll of the work on his constitution. He used the “loafers rake” four feet wide with long teeth to gather the hay into rows when the horse rake proved to be too large for the task:

I pulled that loafers rake over the knolls of the Fisk pasture all the afternoon, I was so tired that night that I could not sleep. Lying in bed with eyelids that would not close I was pulling that rake over those sandy knolls. I could hardly get awake for breakfast... A veritable hang-over, but not from carousing.

A columnist for the Yankee Farmer delineated the health risks incurred from wearisome farm labors. While explaining that exercise gives strength to the body, he warned that “exercise like most good practices and habits may be carried to excess. Extreme toil not only shortens life but brings less to pass than steady but moderate labor.” He believed it was not, therefore, “advisable for farmers to undertake to perform what are ‘great days works;’ for one day of over exertion may cause weeks of debility, if not months of sickness.”

The nature of manliness and connections between work and leisure in rural life surfaces in farm literature. Farm correspondent Timothy Bunker offered his thoughts on manhood for rural readers in his series of essays on “Yankee Farming” in the 1860s. “It takes something more than a strong body and a sound mind to make a successful tiller of the soil. Manhood is as much an element of prosperity in this as in any other calling.” In Bunker’s words, for a farmer, “Manhood is the most precious product of his farm, and whatever else suffers, that ought to be kept strong and vigorous.” The ways farmers achieved manhood and the role of physical culture in their lives has yet to be sufficiently explored in historical literature. Probing the rural scene as a locus of culturally constructed concepts of gender may contribute to a more adequate understanding of the role of sport in shaping beliefs about manhood in the past.

---

29. Essays in J. A. Mangat and James Walvin, eds., Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987) address themes related to manliness but omit a
The rural view of baseball might provide historians with a better understanding of the agrarian lure of the game posited by city folks in the nineteenth century. Some agriculturists, however, expressed dislike of the national pastime when played by farmers in their own agricultural community. Instead of being a health-enhancing form of exercise and a moral pastime, some farm reporters thought baseball detracted from farm productivity. For example, in an essay on “Base Ball Clubs” in 1867 in the American Agriculturist, Timothy Bunker asked rural readers, “What do people want of it whose lives are already full of labor? It can only add to their weariness.” Bunker asserted, and “detract from the interest and pleasure that every man should take in his daily toil.” Rather than a sport suited to farm men, Bunker charged that baseball depleted the physical vigor necessary for fulfilling the male gender role on the farm. So after “a man has spent three or four hours in a game, he is pretty well used up for the day, and is in rather poor trim for work next morning.” In other words, “Base ball, as it is played now, is getting to be a great nuisance,” and Bunker claimed that “[i]t makes good ball players, but bad farmers and mechanics, bad husbands and fathers. I am not ready,” he concluded, “to have the plow beams whittled into ball clubs just yet.”

Baseball seemingly threatened the labor regimen of farm workers. As antebellum New England historian Jack Larkin noted, for adult farm workers “there was only the discipline of the labor market.” At times, younger farm workers slighted their farm tasks. “One of the ‘boys’ would turn up missing, having taken an afternoon off ‘at play,’ or ‘playing ball.’” Archival documents of farm life offer views of sporting behaviors of rural men. In Boylston, Massachusetts, at the farmstead of Avery and Mary Avery White, farm son Francis Adams White wrote to his brother, Samuel Charles White, who lived in Boston while working at a general store and attending school. Francis related the activities at the farm in his letter of June 9, 1839, giving “an account of my creatures” and observed, “I have eight hens and sixteen chicks. . . . We have six cows all have had calves but Old Hastings the Oxen are pretty fat and large.” But besides farm work, Francis enthusiastically shared with his brother that “Old Election I spent as usual excapping thirst” and then revealed how he “kept tally for the men who played ball on the common.” Francis portrayed the amusement on the ball field: “They had an alley down to the mills and a drunken frolick.”

The White Family Papers indicate other sports of interest to members of focus on rural culture. See E. Anthony Rotundo, “Boy Culture: Middle-Class Boyhood in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 18-19, 27, for a brief discussion of rural boys’ culture.

32. Francis Adams White to Samuel Charles White, June 9, 1839, White Family Collection, Correspondence, OSVRL.
the White farm family in antebellum Massachusetts. Francis White appeared to be an avid wintertime sportsman, preferring physical exercise distinct from farm chores. A letter to Samuel Charles White from his sister Caroline at the family farmhouse on January 17, 1838 in Boylston communicated the delight of brother Francis who “in his hurry for skates (he had disposed of his old ones) bought a pair before D’s arrived, though not as good”; Caroline then explained when Francis “saw the present D sent, he seemed for a while turned upside down, and we were some afraid he would go off skating on his head, instead of his heels.” Apparently, Francis recovered from the elation of his new skates; “Soon he calmed down at the thought of having two pairs of skates,” Caroline assured her brother Samuel.33

The outlook of rural New Englanders on sports differs somewhat from the widely held urban belief that sporting pursuits were the way to health. Baseball, thought in the rhetoric of urban boosters to be a healthful and a proper pastime for young men, did not necessarily possess the positive cultural meaning and endorsement of agriculturalists. For example, Yankee farmer Timothy Bunker expressed his wife’s critical view of baseball in rural New England: “When we were young, Timothy, it used to be an honor for a young man to lay a straight furrow, or to mow a wide swath. But now they’ve beat their plowshares into ball clubs, and the loafers that can play ball best carry off the honors.” Mrs. Bunker worried, “When grown up men exchange plowed fields and orchards for the ball ground, and make a bat stick their coat of arms, I think they are progressing the wrong way.” This “base ball business” alarmed some New England agriculturists. Bunker himself concluded, “the tendency of the game, as now managed, is towards idleness, gambling, and dissipation.” He argued that being a fine ball player “is rather a low aim in life.”34 Sport historians should consider such beliefs of rural residents in the evolution of organized, competitive sports in nineteenth-century American culture. The relationship between work and bodily exercise in the physical health of farm men is a topic for further examination.

Researching the rural past will facilitate our gaining a deeper understanding of American sport. Historian Hal Barron has explained, “if the United States was born in the country and has moved to the city, it is imperative to understand the agrarian bases of our modern urban society—from the background and experiences of the farm children who actually migrated to the city to the more general cultural and political legacies of country life that continue to shape American values and sensibilities.”35 The opinions about

33. Caroline White to Samuel Charles White, January 17, 1838, White Family Collection, Correspondence, OSVRL; in the letter the reference to “D” appears to be to brother Isaac Davis, a sibling of Caroline and Francis White.
34. Bunker, The Tim Bunker Papers, or Yankee Farming, 303-04.
sport and health concerns held by rural people migrating from the farm to the city remain little-known in the historical research on American sport and leisure. Historians ought to consider the persistence of the presumed dichotomy in rural and urban life in the sports and health pursuits portrayed in historical works on nineteenth-century America. Exploring the voices of rural Americans, historians can assess the idealization of rural life and examine the mythic aspects of the healthful and bucolic countryside. The accounts of sport and physical health will be rendered more complete by historical research that includes the experiences of farm men and women who actually participated in agrarian life, rather than the views of ideology makers constructing bright images of life on the farm.

The research findings on farm men and women suggest the need to challenge the dominant urban, industrial conceptual model of the rise of sports in the mid-nineteenth century. By learning about the attitudes and behaviors of farm folks in relationship to sport and health, then historians can more readily discern what they think seems to make sports especially linked to urbanism in the paradigm of sports and the city going hand in hand. Furthermore, the sports and recreations of agriculturists who stayed in farming communities in the late nineteenth century require additional research. What sports and recreations gained prominence in various farming communities? How did ethnic and class variations contour sports and physical activities? How did farm residents integrate sport and leisure into their traditional work patterns? In what ways did new technology and the use of physical space on farmsteads in rural communities shape the participation of agriculturists in sports and recreation?

Focusing on the sporting experiences and perceptions of health of rural New Englanders provides valuable material in analyzing the reality and myth of sport and health in the nineteenth century. Delving into primary sources like the agricultural press and farm handbooks, archival documents and the evidence of material culture for rural New England, as well as the social history of everyday life on the farm, yields data about rural culture, sport, and health useful to historians of sport. Therefore, historians should heed the advice of rural counselors and “not neglect [the] exercise nor recreation” of farm men and women in seeking to convey thoroughly the significance of sport and fitness in the historical context. In turn, agriculturists, as well as urbanites, will then be represented in the historical record of the complex and dynamic sporting past in American culture.