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Pioneer Girls: Mid-Twentieth-Century American Evangelicalism’s Girl Scouts

Abstract

Founded in 1939, in the mid-twentieth century, Pioneer Girls was a vital Christian youth movement providing an explicitly evangelical alternative to Girl Scouts. Using David Bebbington’s classic four-point definition, this article will explore the evangelical identity of the organization, including its continuities and discontinuities with fundamentalism as part of the new evangelicalism of the post-World War II era. While 1950s America is well known for the ways in which this time and place was oppressive for girls and women, and the evangelical movement in general is often criticized for suppressing girls and women, a study of Pioneer Girls does not fall in line with these expectations. Instead, the organization consistently challenged girls to pursue a variety of tasks and vocations that were stereotypically male. Likewise, women found working for Pioneer Girls a fulfilling and liberating experience.

KEYWORDS: Pioneer Girls, Evangelicalism, Gender, Christian Youth Movements, Girl Scouts

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Pioneer Girls in mid-twentieth-century America would seem a particularly easy target for scholars today. After all, the whole of that place at that time has been poignantly exposed as oppressive to girls and women, for example, in Wini Breines’s insightful study, Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties (1992). This general context would only be compounded, one could assume, in a church club segregated by gender, given how we have since come to acknowledge that separate is inherently unequal—Radcliffe was not Harvard. Moreover, such a club would have predictably been committed to training girls to fulfill stereotypical gender roles. Finally, a distinctly evangelical version of such a reality presumably would be worst of all. Evangelicals, one can imagine, would have been markedly more restrictive and oppressive than the wider culture—bad as it was. Evangelicals would have forbidden women to pursue the Christian ministry, discouraged other careers, and instead attempted to channel girls into becoming submissive wives and stay-at-home mothers.

There is much in the records of Pioneer Girls that would be grist for the mill of criticisms along these lines. Pioneer Girls earned badges for learning skills in cooking, ‘household arts’, sewing, and a whole range of stereotypical ‘woman’s work’ activities. There was an emphasis on learning good etiquette that included such an unfortunate rule as: ‘A lady seeks to remain inconspicuous always.’ Achievements were even offered in the areas of ‘child care and family budgeting’. Another area claimed that it would cover what ‘every girl wants to know’ namely, the subjects of ‘daintiness, grooming, clothes, etiquette, and special problems’. The organization also had a disconcertingly fervent faith in the powers for moral uplift latent within a well laid table graced with a decorative centerpiece. Moreover, beyond issues regarding gender, mid-twentieth-century Pioneer Girls is also vulnerable to a variety of other critiques. Indeed, the whole metaphor the program was based on is eminently assailable. In the current context of postcolonial theory, an organization that had ‘Colonist’ as an official rank to which girls were invited to aspire is a rather obvious foil. With the Europeans who colonized North America setting the thematic structure, Native American communities did not come out well, being scripted into the story as ‘unfriendly Indians’ seeking to inflict ‘the most brutal kinds of attacks’ on the pioneers. To all this can be added the program’s blending of overt patriotism into Christian spiritual formation. Girls could even earn the ‘All-American Badge’ Under
this heading came a whole range of activities. It is staggering to discover how many different rules of ‘flag etiquette’ a 12-year-old was invited to learn. Another activity was writing on essay on ‘Why I’m Glad I’m an American’

Pioneer Girls are also susceptible to critiques made by thinkers from theologically liberal or mainline perspectives such as the Lutheran Jon Pahl. In his work, Youth Ministry in Modern America: 1930 to the Present, Pahl finds it regrettable that mid-twentieth-century Christian youth movements were preoccupied with issues of purity—that is, protecting youth from activities deemed inappropriate. Although Pioneer Girls are not mentioned in his study, if considered, they would certainly have been viewed as an example of this failing. Moreover, the evangelistic ethos of Pioneer Girls would have faired even worse. His dislike for a puritanical approach to social taboos notwithstanding, Pahl writes disdainfully of any group that did not kick that habit: “The most conservative Christian groups—Hutchison called them ‘oldstyle cultural and religious imperialists’—continued the tradition of ‘soul-winning.’” In short, there is much that was done fifty years ago by Pioneer Girls that many people today would condemn.

Before proceeding with an analysis of such critiques, however, it would be useful first to describe the history and nature of Pioneer Girls, situating it in the wider context of evangelicalism. The program was started by students at Wheaton College, American evangelicalism’s leading undergraduate institution. Wheaton College had then (and still has) a department entitled the Christian Service Council that organized ministry opportunities for student volunteers. In 1937, Wheaton student Joe Coughlin started a boy’s club in a local Methodist church. Coughlin was working in conjunction with the Christian Service Council and its name (although I seem to be the first one to make this connection) was transferred to his ministry to boys: it came to be called the Christian Service Brigade. Christian Service Brigade clubs soon spread across the nation, and the ministry still exists. Pioneer Girls has always delighted in making a twelve-year-old girl named Harriet Brehm its sort of honorary founder. Brehm was a sister of one of the boys in Coughlin’s club and she tenaciously insisted that a club be started for girls as well, even going so far as to phone the president of Wheaton College, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. The Wheaton student who took up this challenge was Betty Whitaker, who in 1939 founded what was initially called the Girls’ Guild, and thereby become the first director of the organization. In a letter written in July 1945, by which time Pioneer Girls was spreading fast across North America, Whitaker reflected, ‘As I look back I am amazed that as a Freshman I dared such a thing.’ The first summer camp happened already in 1940. Another Wheaton student, Viola Waterhouse, served as director for a period during 1940-41, and then still another ‘Wheatie’, Carol Erickson took charge in 1941. Erickson promptly rebranded the program as Pioneer Girls and reworked the materials
in line with the new theme. She wrote the first *Trail Book* while working night shifts at Carnegie Steel, Gary, Indiana. Erickson asked her mentor, Dr. Rebecca Price, whether she should feel guilty about doing this, to which the Wheaton professor reassuringly replied: ‘Oh, Carnegie was a great philanthropist. I don’t think he would have minded.’ In mid-twentieth century America, Pioneer Girls was a Christian organization that ran clubs and summer camps for girls aged 8-17.

A major breakthrough came in 1943 when Pioneer Girls made contact with Herbert J. Taylor. Taylor was a devout evangelical Methodist layman and a highly successful businessman. He was the president of the prosperous Club Aluminum Company. Taylor wrote the widely used Four-Way Test for ethical business behaviour. He was so well respected that he was elected president of Rotary International in its high-profile fiftieth anniversary year (1954-55) and he even made the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. In 1940, Taylor created the Christian Worker’s Foundation as a way to plough money into Christian youth movements, bankrolling it generously with a gift of 25% of Club Aluminum’s stock. Taylor provided vital advice, leadership, and funding for many of the key non-denominational evangelical ministries that sprang up in post-World War II America, including Fuller Seminary. He gave crucial backing to no less than six nascent evangelical Christian youth movements: Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (which had a longer history in Britain and Canada, but was new to America), Young Life, Youth for Christ, Child Evangelism Fellowship, Christian Service Brigade, and Pioneer Girls. When approached by Carol Erickson, Taylor responded with some funding, sound advice, free access to administrative support, and office space in Chicago’s Civic Opera Building. Under Taylor’s guidance, the first board of directors for Pioneer Girls was formed in 1943 and at the end of that year the ministry was officially incorporated. The organization also began to purchase camp sites. All Pioneer Girl camping grounds have always been called Camp Cherith, after the place of God’s provision for Elijah (1 Kings 17:2-6). In 1943, there were 800 girls in 64 clubs spread across 7 different states. In 1945, 3,300 girls in 226 clubs and the geographical reach had extended into Canada. By 1959, there were 48,000 girls in 2,060 clubs. In 1976, there were 59,396 girls, 1,765 clubs and 19 Camp Cheriths in the United States, and 30,281 girls, 671 clubs, and 6 Camp Cheriths in Canada. Moreover, although they naturally jettisoned the very North American name and theme of ‘pioneer’, sister organizations had been established in at least 16 countries around the globe ranging from France and Italy in Europe to Korea and Pakistan in Asia, but mainly located in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. In 1979, the organization made the decision to include boys and therefore, in 1981, the name was changed to Pioneer Clubs. The 2005 annual report includes the following statistics: in the United States and Canada there were 121,586 young
people in 8,419 clubs, 23 Camp Cheriths, and an organizational operating budget for the year of 2.5 million dollars.\textsuperscript{17}

The similarities with Girl Scouts are readily apparent: uniforms, achievements, badges, camping, mottos and slogans, nature and crafts, special moments around a camp fire, and much more right down to making smores and hunting snipe. Those who shaped Pioneer Girls have always claimed—perhaps a little defensively—that they did not copy anything from Girl Scouts, but those coming at the organization they created for the first time have often been struck by the resemblance. Jean Smith Neely, for example, who became Pioneer Girls New England Field Representative in 1944, recalls what she thought when she encountered the organization for the first time: “Boy, this is ‘Christianized’ Girl Scouts,” I said to myself. I had been an ardent Scout member from the age of fourteen to twenty-one.\textsuperscript{18} Likewise Doris Steele, who would go on to become the Washington-Baltimore Fort Captain, recalled when she had first heard of Pioneer Girls in 1952: “I had grown up in Girl Scouts, and this new program sounded right up my alley.”\textsuperscript{19} Interestingly, Dr. Rebecca Russell Price, a mentor to some of the other founding women, and the chair of the board from its inception in 1943 all the way until 1970, had spent eight or more summers in the late 1920s and the 1930s serving as the director of the Girl Scout camp in Blacksburg, Virginia.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, the founding women are no doubt right when they claim that they had not consciously set out to mimic Girl Scouts. Moreover, they are very open about having taken some ideas from Christian Service Brigade and therefore some of this influence might be once removed. More profoundly, however, Pioneer Girl leaders seem to chafe at the comparison with Girl Scouts because of their accurate appreciation of the thoroughly evangelical nature of their organization: they see the similarities as mere externals, while the real identity of Pioneer Girls lies elsewhere.

David Bebbington has taught us to think of evangelicalism in terms of four distinguishing marks: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrisism (that is, an emphasis upon salvation through the atoning work of Christ on the cross).\textsuperscript{21} Pioneer Girls, from its founding to the present, has pursued wholeheartedly and with a clearly focused mission, an evangelical identity and agenda. Conversionism is particularly strong. An early constitution of the organization declared unequivocally:

\begin{quote}
The purpose of this organization shall be to lead girls to a definite knowledge of Christ as personal Saviour and Lord, and to introduce them to a well-rounded Christian life demonstrating “Christ in every phase of a girl’s life.”\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Likewise the 1957 by-laws of the National Camp Council of Pioneer Girls state as the number one goal of their camping program: “To win girls to
Christ as Saviour, dealing with each girl personally and on an individual basis. The 1962 constitution reads:

The purpose of this organization shall be to lead unsaved girls to accept Christ as their personal Saviour; to train girls in good habits of Christian living, particularly in feeding on God’s Word and talking with our Lord; to encourage girls to develop well-rounded lives and gracious Christ-centered personalities, especially through the provision of interesting and worthwhile activities, and to train girls in effective Christian leadership and service.

All members of the board of Directors, administrative and field staff – whether professional or volunteer – and workers in any capacity shall be those who are new creatures in Christ, called into His service, having a love for Christ and His people and a passion for souls.

The aim of seeing girls converted to Christ did indeed shape much of the program. Moreover, in line with evangelical activism, converted girls were then encouraged to share the gospel with their friends and other personal contacts and to support foreign missions. The third rank of the Colonists (that is, girls around the ages of 12 and 13) was Harvester—a metaphor for reaping souls for Christ. One of the activities for this rank was: ‘Seek to lead at least one other person to receive Christ’ Telling mainline critics such as Pahl and Hutchinson all they need to know, the girls were prepared for this task by reading ‘the Harvester’s pamphlet on soul-winning’. Pioneer Girls from the very beginning to the present has emphasized in its internal literature how their clubs and camps serve not only the children of believers, but also reach unchurched girls and families and draw them into an active Christian faith and church life. The emphasis on foreign missions was also very pronounced. Instead of pay dues the girls would give ‘shares’ at their weekly meetings on a voluntary basis (a sort of evangelical free-will offering). The shares for the fourth week of every month, rather than giving vital income to the organization, were allotted to support foreign missions. Soon, this money was sufficient for the organization to sponsor individual missionaries in full—these being, as a rule, women who had been club members as girls or who had served the organization in some way before pursuing this calling. A January 1960 newsletter listed six missionaries serving in a wide variety of places including Nigeria, Thailand, and Mexico who were being supported in this way. Pioneer Girls had achievements in which the girls read stories of missionaries, wrote essays about their call to missions, sent packages to women missionaries—all partially aimed at helping the girls consider whether a missionary life might be the one for them. Moreover, key figures of the
movement led by example. Viola Waterhouse, the second director in the very early days, went on to serve with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Mexico; Lois Thiessen, the fourth director, later served with the Latin America Mission; Louise Troup a key leader along side Carol Erickson in the transition to the pioneer theme who eventually became director herself, served in Zululand with Evangelical Alliance Mission. Troup’s interest in missions began when, as a seven-year-old, she heard a woman missionary tell about how she had been captured and held hostage for seventeen days by Chinese bandits, and she had thought to herself—that’s the life for me. And so one could go on.

Evangelical biblicism is strongly reflected in Pioneer Girls as well. Bible study and memorization were key aspects of the requirements for advancing in the program. The weekly meeting always included a ‘Bible exploration’—a leader would expound upon the meaning of a passage of Scripture in a way that was deemed at the right level for that age group. Camp included not only daily Bible explorations as a group, but also daily individual spiritual exercises called ‘Morning Watch’ that included personal Bible study using manuals devised by the organization. Moreover, every single achievement was explicitly tied to Scripture—sometimes in ways that strike one as rather jarring. The theme verse for the learning-to-swim achievement was Psalm 119:117a, ‘Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe’, and its requirements included: ‘Read one Bible story in which water played an important part, and tell it to your guide.’

Barbara Peterson, the editor of the organization’s magazine, Trails, recalled that the fact that they were sometimes skating close to the ludicrous was not lost on staff members even at the time:

There were achievements being written that looked similar to Girl Scouts but the genius was that we were rethinking everything in terms of the phrase, “Christ in every phrase of a girl’s life.” The question became, for example, “What can we do to make archery Christian?” There was a lot of laughter about the artificial nature of the connections sometimes suggested. I believe the David and Jonathan story got into the archery achievement somehow.

More generally, evangelical piety is evident in the story of Pioneer Girls in ways that would generally strike those outside this tradition as strange. Carol Erickson testified about the first camping ground they used: ‘The Lord led us to Fish Lake in Volo, Illinois.’ Over fifty years later, Louise Troup recalled unselfconsciously her reaction in 1942 to the news that Erickson might have to return home to take care of her mother who was experiencing a difficult pregnancy: ‘I thought Satan was trying to get rid of Pioneer Girls.’ There is also a delightful story about how Pioneer Girls moved its headquarters to a new property in 1953. Joy Mackay, who was then the director, recalled that the
board’s executive committee ‘was skeptical at first, so Lois Thiessen suggested I share with them my story of how God had seemed to clearly lead me to this particular place. At once, the atmosphere changed from doubt to acceptance.’

In the post-war years the ‘new evangelicalism’ was emerging in America, a movement that retained a measure of continuity with fundamentalism while shedding some of its traits. Wheaton College tacked the whole process from embodying historic evangelicalism in the nineteenth century to being clearly aligned with the fundamentalist movement in the 1930s to being a center of the new evangelicalism in the second half of the twentieth century. Fuller Seminary, which was backed by Herbert J. Taylor and which stole Pioneer Girls’ chairwomen, Dr Rebecca Price, from Wheaton for its own faculty—was the quintessential institution of higher education founded to reflect the new evangelicalism, and Billy Graham, a graduate of Wheaton College, was the single individual most identified with the movement. Pioneer Girls also reflected the new evangelicalism. Those outside the movement might be apt to notice those aspects that retain continuity with fundamentalism while missing those that reflect a departure from that movement. As to the continuity, the new evangelicalism in mid-twentieth century America generally retained fundamentalist social taboos. Wheaton College forbade its students to attend the cinema until 1967, and still does not allow students to drink or smoke. Students may now dance off campus and on college grounds at official functions sponsored by the student union which are confined to approved styles such as swing, but social dancing on campus is otherwise forbidden, even in students’ own rented apartments or dormitories. Given such a context, comparing a Pioneer Girls Trail Book from the 1940s to a Girl Scout Handbook from the same period, one item that stands out is the latter’s achievement in social dancing. It would have been unthinkable for the Pioneer Girls Trail Book to include a passage such as this one from the Girl Scouts:

Dancing is one of the favorite pastimes when boys and girls get together in groups. Dance the waltz or fox trot. Be able to follow your partner with ease, and dance in the correct position. Find pictures of film actors who carry themselves especially well and arrange an exhibition of them at your troop meeting. Give a dance party, inviting the boys in your neighborhood who like to dance. Be sure you have at least as many boys as girls. Learn to dance the ballroom tango.

On the other hand, a new-evangelical sensibility was arguably reflected in Pioneer Girls embracing of the wider world of literature, art, and learning. The Trail Book is filled with wonderful reading lists that were obviously compiled on the basis of their literary merit and cultural significance rather
than the religious identity of the authors. In the 1940s, girls were invited to read the poetry of William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman; short stories by Edgar Allen Poe and John Ruskin; novels by Jack London and Mark Twain; even the Arabian Nights and the stories of Ulysses from Greek mythology. One of various other examples of this kind of liberal arts sensibility is this achievement: ‘Visit one art museum. Learn something about two of the artists whose work you saw and write out a description of one of the exhibits.’ There was even an achievement in the area of anthropology.

The decisive break with fundamentalism, however, came with Pioneer Girls’ rejection of sectarian separatism. This is brought home particularly clearly when one contrasts Pioneer Girls with the main alternative, Awana Clubs—an evangelical, Bible-focused, conversionist, church-based youth club organization founded in 1950, which also began and is headquartered in Illinois. Until 1995, Awana made it explicit in its charter that it would not allow a club to be based in a church affiliated with the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches (thus ruling out all mainline denominations) or any Pentecostal or charismatic church. Moreover, this policy continues to reflect the spirit and tendency of the organization, though exceptions are now made. Pioneer Girls have never pursued a separatist policy in regard to host churches. An analysis has been made of all the local churches that had Pioneer Girl clubs from the organization’s founding in 1939 through 1950. This reveals that the core support base for the organization was overwhelmingly Baptist. Nevertheless, the denominational range is wide including Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, Reformed Church in America, United Brethren, Evangelical Covenant, Mennonite Brethren, Reformed Episcopal, Advent Christian, Disciples of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Union churches, and Assemblies of God as well as other Pentecostal churches. Jean Neely tells a story about recruiting an Assemblies of God church in 1946 in which it is clear that the only issue was whether the church trusted Pioneer Girls rather than the other way around. Again, this is in marked contrast to Awana, which is still suspicious of Pentecostals.

Both the continuity and discontinuity with fundamentalism of the new evangelicalism was on display in Pioneer Girls’ attitude toward Roman Catholicism. On the one hand, the assumption was clearly that Roman Catholics were unsaved people who should be subjects of evangelistic approaches in the hopes of their conversion. One of numerous sources that make this clear is the biography of Joan Killilea published by Pioneer Girls with the delightful title, A Restless Redhead and God. Killilea was a very devout Irish Catholic who was drawn into the world of Pioneer Girls as a young adult through work colleagues who were active as a volunteers in the organization. Killilea joined them doing practical volunteer work at a Camp
Cherith and this led on to her having an evangelical conversion experience and joining a Baptist church. The biography is written as if ‘Christian’ and Catholic’ as mutually exclusive categories: ‘Ruth had heard of a Christian doctor formerly of Joan’s faith’ (i.e. once the doctor was a Roman Catholic but now he is ‘a Christian’). We are also told that ‘Joan’s biggest obstacle in coming to Christ was her devotion to Mary.’ When Killilea went to a Bible college dedicated to training missionaries, she started a prayer group focused on Roman Catholics to stand alongside the ones for Moslems, Hindus, and various other world religions. Having said all that, Pioneer Girls were much more accommodating in their approach to Catholicism than a fundamentalist organization would have been. It seems to have been standard practice to instruct Catholic girls who wanted to join a club to ask their priest for permission first. Moreover, Pioneer Girls dutifully submitted to whatever restrictions priests set—even cooperating with what seems to have been a fairly typical demand that Catholic girls not be allowed to read the Bible. As a possible acceptable alternative to this, local clubs with Catholic members were encouraged to make sure that these girls had a Confraternity or Douay version of the Bible, and even to consider using these Rome-approved versions for the Bible exploration. Pioneer Girls headquarters also instructed local clubs with Catholic girls to count going to mass for the church attendance badge, and not to do things that might be insensitive such as having ‘a meat cookout or a spaghetti supper on a Friday night’. At the New England camp Cherith, it was standard practice on Sundays to transport the Catholic girls to mass at a nearby monastery. Virginia Anderson tells a story from the early 1950s when, by mistake, she bundled the wrong camper named Linda off to mass. The ten-year-old Baptist girl meekly went along with the whole thing without every saying a word—even dutifully finding a hat to wear as instructed as was the Catholic but not Protestant expectation at that time.

It is time now to return to the possible critiques of Pioneer Girls catalogued at the start of this paper. The points made by figures such as Pahl and Hutchinson are criticisms of the nature and identity of evangelicalism as whole as evangelical Christianity includes missions and evangelistic efforts as indispensable components. We will therefore sidestep that discussion as we can only expect Pioneer Girls to reflect the religious tradition that it serves, and taking on that tradition as a whole would only serve to derail a case study such as this. The other critiques, at their worst, simply reflected American culture at that time. In other words, these negative traits were never exaggerated in Pioneer Girls and sometimes they were mitigated. Notably, far from reflecting the corrosive effects of evangelicalism in particular, they are all true of Girl Scouts as well. Indeed, the ‘Homemaking’ field of achievement had a much larger and more prominent place in the Girl Scouts program. Moreover, those fields were teaching valuable life skills: the real critique is not that Girl
Scouts had such achievements but rather that Boy Scouts did not. The closest Boy Scouts came was the ‘Camp Cooking’ achievement—arguably producing generations of American men who would only prepare food if it was on a barbeque. Admittedly, the internationalism of scouting did make its patriotism feel a little more muted, but scouting was even more devoted to flag etiquette than Pioneer Girls, and Pioneer Girl’s ‘All-American Badge’ is essentially a different name for Girl Scout’s ‘My Country Badge’. Already within a few years of its founding, Pioneer Girls moved north of the border and promptly added to the Trail Book the alternative of doing the ‘All-Canadian Badge’. The wording for this achievement was meticulously equivalent to that of the American one right down to writing an essay on ‘Why I’m Glad I’m a Canadian’ Moreover, the patriotism of Pioneer Girls was in no way heightened in comparison to American culture and Christianity generally. When American Pioneer Girls were invited to learn the lyrics of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ and ‘America, the Beautiful’, they were rightly told: ‘You will find the words to these two songs in almost any standard hymnal’

The white settlers who colonized America are also a motif running through the Girl Scout Handbook as well, and the word ‘pioneer’ recurs in it often, including a Pioneer Badge that had as one of its achievements: ‘Read at least one book about the early pioneers in any section of this country.’ Moreover, Pioneer Girls saw its theme as a mere outer wrapping that was in no way essential to the ministry. When Pioneer Girls was transplanted to places outside of North America, it was assumed as a matter of course that a new theme would be chosen. As a Pioneer Girl sponsored missionary to Thailand, Joan Killilea was determined to start a version of Pioneer Girls there. She revamped it as Friendship Club, choosing for its motto: ‘A friend loveth at all times’ Eventually the Pioneer Girls headquarters produced a generic Handbook for Girls that was devoid of the pioneer theme which was intended as a possible starter kit for ‘translation and adaptation’ to other nations and cultures.

The most obvious concern to address, however, is how mid-twentieth century Pioneer Girls relates to the question of traditional gender roles. Contrary to expectations, not only did being situated in evangelicalism not make Pioneer Girls more retrograde on this issue than American society in general, but the organization was actually clearly more open to wider possibilities for women than the culture as a whole. One of Wini Breines’s main objections to American culture in the 1950s is that it did not allow women to envision a life of singleness or a career outside of being a housewife and mother. Pioneer Girls strongly modeled these possibilities to girls in mid-twentieth century America. From its founding to the present, Pioneer Girls has had a tradition of having a single woman as its president. The
earliest preserved constitution of the organization has gendered language written into the job descriptions of every office holder from the national executive director to the national business manager: ‘She shall’ 51 The full-time regional field directors were also single women. In their own telling of their stories, one senses the joy that they had in being career women in the 1950s, right down to having a business wardrobe: ‘But in one respect all seemed to agree: a Pendleton jacket was a must for the well-dressed field representative.’32 Another staffer speaks of how empowering it was to buy their first headquarters building in 1953: ‘Most of us single women had never owned property and we felt pride in caring for our own place.’53 Many of these staff women went on to obtain advanced degrees from major universities. Being a single missionary was also a life of adventure that was held up to the girls as a possible and praiseworthy path to follow. This message was getting through. A girl named Bunny Eide, for example, sent a poem to the Pioneer Girl publication, Hitchin’ Post, in 1951, entitled ‘My Ambition’, which declared her desire to be a missionary ‘across the sea’ 54 So-called ‘secular’ vocations were also encouraged on the grounds that they also could be pursued unto the Lord. For Pioneer Girls in mid-twentieth century America, being ‘Career Girls’ was not a term of suspicion or disapproval, but rather an option in life to which girls were explicitly invited to aspire.55

The wider context for this is that it is a mistake to assume that historically evangelicalism has been more conservative on gender roles than other forms of Christianity or society in general.56 Oberlin, founded as an evangelical college in 1833, was the first American institution of higher education to accept women students. The first women to receive a bachelor’s degree in America were graduated from Oberlin in 1841. Oberlin could also boast that it had America’s greatest evangelist of his generation on its faculty, and later as its president. The evangelical Presbyterian minister Charles Finney (1792-1875) was an advocate for greater roles for women both in society and in public Christian ministry. When Jonathan Blanchard (1811-1882) founded Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, in 1860 it became the first college in America to have an entirely unisex curriculum with all courses and programs being open to the women students as well. By way of contrast, Harvard University did not admit women students on a co-educational basis until 1943, and only then due to pragmatic pressures caused by World War II. Wheaton also had women faculty members from the nineteenth century onwards, including women teaching Bible and theology. Again, Harvard University hired its first tenure-track woman faculty member in 1947 at the earliest—and that is to count someone whose main assignment was to women-only courses (a category that Wheaton has never had). Dr Rebecca Price, the chair of Pioneer Girls board from its founding in 1943 to 1970, therefore also modeled a very different kind of life path to which a girl could
aspire. When she joined the Wheaton faculty in 1936 she already had a PhD from New York University. Her master’s degree was from Biblical Seminary and she was serving on its faculty when Wheaton recruited her. She would go on to teach at Fuller, another evangelical seminary. Once again, this evangelical openness may be contrasted with the exclusion of women in theologically liberal and mainline contexts. Harvard Divinity School, for example, did not even admit women students until 1955, let alone women faculty members. It is important to emphasize that Dr Price was teaching men as well as women in a completely unisex curriculum. Dr Howard Hendricks, a distinguished professor at as theologically conservative a place as Dallas Theological Seminary, recalled unapologetically regarding Price’s teaching at Wheaton: ‘Her course in Mark’s Gospel changed the whole direction of my life.’\(^5\) This openness even moved into the area of ordained Christian ministry. When the Revd Jean Marjorie Smith Neely joined the Pioneer Girls full-time staff in 1944 as its first field representative, she had already been an ordained evangelical minister for over two decades.\(^8\) This may be contrasted with the first ordination of a woman priest in the Church of England happening in 1994. It was not uncommon for Pioneer Girl staffs to be asked to preach in local churches and the women missionaries sponsored by Pioneer Girls also preached and taught both at home and abroad. Joan Killilea spent a brief period in Britain on her way to the mission field. Her preaching in England include a sermon in Birmingham on Ezekiel 22:30, ‘And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it’ Working on her skills of cultural adaptation, she chose as the title for this sermon a phrase she had been hearing since she had arrived in the country: ‘Mind the Gap’.\(^5\)

Many women testify to the liberation that they found through Pioneer Girls.\(^6\) Alison Short contributed an article entitled, ‘Here’s What It Did for Us’, to the Pioneer Girl publication, Perspective, in 1976. It is ostensibly condensing thoughts from her journal, but this might be a literary conceit. Anyway, here is her summary for the year 1959:

In the first fifteen years of marriage, most of my women acquaintances seemed to be absorbed with the price of butter or the way to fold a diaper. I was starved for the society of thinking people. It seemed my church and my community expected me to be content with Kirchen-Kuchen-Kinder. I was discontent. Men seemed to be so much more interesting and to have room in their lives for unlimited growth. But by now I had met a large number of women with live, active, creative minds. Is there something about Pioneer Girls that draws such women?\(^6\)
Writing in 1969, Shirley McKay reminisced about what volunteering with Pioneer Girls meant to her in the late 1950s. She claimed in a pattern Wini Breines would recognize well: ‘I was newly married and frustrated because now I felt I could never go to school and study the things I should have studied.’ For McKay, however, Pioneer Girls provided an outlet and a sisterhood of stimulating relationships: ‘I began to hope that I had found a place where I might fit.’ Phyllis Acken, who had a degree in anthropology from Wheaton, and was on staff with Pioneer Girls 1948-50, remembered: ‘I was proud of the fact that it was a woman’s world where important work was being done.’ In fact, Pioneer Girl leaders have frequently argued that their organization has always reflected positive traits that are generally undermined when men set the tone. Marilyn Justus Schneider, in her analysis of the organization, articulated an assessment that is often made by Pioneer Girl leaders:

We see in this study that in Pioneer Girls’ first thirty years, the women who led the organization consciously chose a leadership structure that differed from the hierarchical structure of the similar boys program, Christian Service Brigade, which was led by men. The Pioneer Girls structure, in contrast, seemed more conducive to the development of egalitarian relationships among staff and a sense of belonging to a sisterhood.

Even Pioneer Clubs today—an organization for boys as well as girls—still has as one of the ‘unique features’ of its program that it is ‘noncompetitive’, emphasizing ‘cooperation rather than competition’ (a value that, in private conversation, Pioneer Club leaders tend to contrast with the nature of Awana clubs).

Sharpening a pro-women viewpoint, contrasts with men are sometimes made explicit. Barbara Peterson remarked in regards to working for Pioneer Girls: ‘for those of us who had worked in male-dominated situations, it was a gift to be able to think about the job to be done instead of how to please the assorted bosses who must not be threatened by too forceful a woman.’ In the biography of Killilea published by Pioneer Girls, we are told with relish this anecdote regarding her work for her local Baptist church: ‘She also helped to paint the parsonage and when the men hesitated to climb up to the peaked gable, Joan herself mounted the ladder to finish the job.’ In 1947, Virginia Aamodt, the West Coast Field Representative, came to Chicago to help out at the national headquarters during a staffing shortage. When she had trouble opening a stuck window, she went across the hall to the offices of the Christian Service Brigade and asked one of the men on their staff to help her. When the long-term Pioneer Girl staffers at headquarters heard of this
incident, they were outraged and rebuked her. From then on, she got the message: ‘We take care of ourselves.’

Indeed, Carol Erickson, the architect of the program, recalled that she chose the pioneer theme because she ‘wanted to focus on the development of girls into women with a sense of self-reliance’ Eunice Russell Schatz explained how Erickson herself embodied this:

The program Carol developed came out of her own vision and experience—that of a young woman who planned to become a doctor, who prided herself on learning to fly a plane during her last two years of college, who came alive in nature and in learning the skills necessary for survival and independence, and who loved life.

The working out of this commitment can be witnessed in the 1948 Trail Book. All the achievements regarding domestic tasks notwithstanding, it consistently goes out of its way to defy gender stereotypes. When the wild west wagon trains are discussed, the Trail Book pauses to observe in passing that we have historical records which reveal that women were also charioteers, that is wagon drivers. Even more explicit:

The pioneer women who helped to settle this country were successful because not only could they do all the homemaking tasks that were commonly expected of them but also they could do many of the heavy, outdoor jobs that required skill and strength.

The history of girls is written back into the drama of America: ‘Do you know who is said to be the first person to scamper out of the Mayflower when it landed on Plymouth Rock? It was a Pilgrim girl by the name of Mary Chilton.’ A whole range of women in Christian ministry are put up as examples for the girls ranging from Betty Stam, a missionary martyred in China, to Pandita Ramabai, an Indian social reformer who worked to improve the lives of girls and women. Beyond Christian ministry, girls were invited to see possibilities for how to live in the stories of a range of women including the scientist Marie Curie, the writer Louisa May Alcott, and the founder of the Red Cross, Clara Barton. While it is true that Boy Scouts were not learning all the domestic arts that Pioneer Girls were, the salient point for this study is that there is no Boy Scout activity that Pioneer Girls deemed inappropriately masculine. Here is the introduction to the woodcraft achievement:

The art of making useful and attractive things from wood is often thought to be the specialty of men, and so boys study woodworking in school. But girls can also learn to handle the hammer and saw, the chisel and plane and carving knife.
In order to help with the handy girl badge, the organization ‘highly recommended’ that the girls read an article on using tools from Boys Life Magazine. The nature badge included this activity: ‘Make an insect collection of at least 25 specimens’ It also gave the girls tips on the best way to kill them. The aeronautics badge was: ‘An achievement in which a girl learns the terms used in flying, the parts of a plane, and does some research in aeronautics.’ There were achievements in journalism, photography, radio, sports, and much more. At camp, activities for the girls included archery and even rifflery. A 1944 newsletter presents as a heroic model a girl who stood up to her father. This parent did not want her to go to her Pioneer Girl club and did not think she was capable of taking on the leadership position of being her club’s pilot: ‘And Helen dared to attend the meeting in spite of him. Perhaps this younger’s God-given courage will be the means of winning her father to the Lord.’ In 1959 appeared the Pioneer Girls Adventure Series. This was a Nancy Drew-style succession of mystery novels with two Pioneer Girls bravely confronting evil and danger at home and abroad. Titles included Pioneer Girls and the Mystery of Oak Ridge Manor, Pioneer Girls and the Secret of the Jungle, and Pioneer Girls and the Mysterious Bedouin Cave. In short, Pioneer Girls was a program that envisioned many possibilities for a woman’s life and construed a useful skill set for her in broad terms.

It would be amiss to discuss a Christian youth movement without hearing the voices of youth themselves. These are difficult to recover, however, as the ones that have survived are those that have made it into the records of the organization and therefore are approved and welcomed ones. It should be said first of all that the organization began as a Christian youth movement in two senses for the founders and leaders were also youth. The first director of the organization was a teenager. The early clubs and camps were staffed almost exclusively by Wheaton College students, that is, women aged 18–21. The voices that we have of the girls themselves are usually retrospective. Eunice Russell Schatz, for example, recalled how much her camp experience meant to her in her mid-teens in the 1940s: ‘when the camp director approached Nancy and me to ask us to stay on [for an additional week of camp] as junior kitchen aides, we were hysterical, crying and laughing and hugging each other and thanking God!’ Lorraine Mulligan recalled that as a teenager she appreciated camp Cherith as a place where she could take a break from the dynamics created by the presence of boys: ‘I could relax and be a friend to other girls instead of a competitor.’ A teenage girl wrote to the Hitchin’ Post in 1949 to testify that Pioneer Girls ‘has taught me leadership’.

Pioneer Clubs today is still as evangelical, evangelistic, and conversionist as it ever was, but the other possible lines of critique outlined at the start of this paper it would appear have otherwise been erased. Even the practice of setting aside money for missions and sponsoring missionaries is now gone. The
patriotism has all been removed as well, and the Trail Book is written to be equally appropriate for either a Canadian or an American without even special national subsections. The rank of ‘Colonists’ has been changed to the innocuous ‘Challengers’ The program is now for boys as well as girls, and the current Trail Book is completely gender neutral: every activity is written so as to address equally well a group entirely made up of boys or girls or a mixture of both. It is possible there have been losses as well as gains in all this progress.

It is fitting, however, to let a Pioneer Girl have the last word. In a stunning tribute to the impact that Pioneer Girls could have on a youth’s life, over fifty years after the fact Helen Becker recalled with undimmed enthusiasm what her time as a club member in the middle of the twentieth century meant to her:

I told my husband and children I was fortunate to have had exciting teenage times that most kids will never have—meeting all those Wheatonites and hearing their testimonies, and learning what Christianity is all about. Pioneer Girls was one of the richest experiences I ever had. I could never repay all those who helped me through my difficult teen years.82

Endnotes

1 Winni Breines, Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. I am grateful to students in my ‘History of Evangelicalism’ seminar for helping with the research for this project: Laura Powell, Mike Vazquez, and especially Sarah Jay and Derek Keefe (who, as my research assistants, did double duty). I am also grateful for the assistance of Paul Erickson, the director of the Archives of the Billy Graham Center.


4 This looms large in a Pioneer Girls novel written by a staffer, Alison Fowle Short, Pearls and a Pilgrim, Chicago: Moody Press, 1959. He is a sample of a series of such passages: ‘With sudden insight and tenderness she knew what the pretty table must mean to Helen—a glimpse into a better world.’ (p. 93)


7 Pioneer Girls have hitherto never been the subject of a scholarly publication. A whole string of academic theses, however, have been written on the organization (some of these are cited in subsequent notes).

8 Its website is www.csbministries.org (I accessed it on 28 December 2005).

in over in official Pioneer Girl publications, only without giving the girl’s name: see, for example, Pioneer Girls Trail Book, Chicago: Pioneer Girls, 1956, p. 26.

10 Betty Whitaker to Louis Tiessen, 31 July 1945, Pasadena, California. Box 1, Collection 265, Pioneer Ministries, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

11 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 43.


18 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 107.

19 Schatz, Slender Thread, pp. 101-02.


21 D. W. Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s, London: Unwin Hyman, pp. 2-17.

22 ‘Constitution of Pioneer Girls’ (handwritten note on it says ‘probably 1944 or 1945’). Box 1, Collection 265, Pioneer Ministries, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.


29 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 254.

30 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 22.

31 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 42.

32 Schatz, Slender Thread, pp. 175-6.

33 For a discussion of Fuller Seminary in particular and the new evangelicalism in general, see George Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and
the New Evangelicalism, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987


38 Their website is www.awana.org (accessed on 30 January 2006).


40 'Church Registration Book (original)' Folder 6, Box 1, Collection 264. Pioneer Ministries, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

41 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 108.


43 Anderson, A Restless Redhead, p. 47

44 Guiding Girls in the Pioneer Girls Program, Wheaton, Illinois: Pioneer Girls, 1960, p. 22. It is clear from numerous anecdotes that this had been the approach of clubs long before 1960, but this is a source where it is spelled out as policy. Folder 9, Box 3, Collection 264. Pioneer Ministries, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

45 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 145.


50 Handbook for Girls, Wheaton: Pioneer Girls. There is no date, but the text was clearly produced on a typewriter. Folder 30, Box 3, Collection 264. Pioneer Ministries, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

51 ‘Constitution of the Pioneer Girls’ A handwritten notation says that this is the earliest constitution and that it was from ‘probably 1944 or 1945’ It seems to me that they would have needed a constitution in order to incorporate, however. Box 1, Collection 264. Pioneer Ministries, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

52 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 160. The company website cites the 1949 Pendleton jacket, a sensation which became a classic, as a highlight in its long history: www.pendleton-usa.com (accessed on 3 February 2005).

53 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 176.


56 An influential study which has perpetuated the assumption that evangelicalism was particularly oppressive to women is Betty A. DeBerg, Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990; a general study which has not received the attention by other scholars it deserves and which reinforces the interpretation being offered in this article is Janette Hassey, No Time For Silence: Evangelical Women in Public Ministry around the Turn of the Century, Grand Rapids: Academie Books (Zondervan), 1986.


58 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 106. I have not been able to discover the denominational (or non-denominational) context of her ordination.


60 This theme has also been advanced in a master’s thesis which is more interpretative than its title would indicate: Marilyn Justus Schneider, ‘Pioneer Girls: A History of the First Thirty Years, 1939-1969’, MSEd, Northern Illinois University, 2002.

61 Alison Short, ‘Here’s What It Did for Us’, Perspective, Winter 1976, pp. 8-11

62 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 244.

63 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 127

64 Marilyn Justus Schneider, ‘Pioneer Girls: A History of the First Thirty Years, 1939-1969’, MSEd, Northern Illinois University, 2002, p. 137 Dr Zondra Lindblade, who has been involved in the organization from being a club member and camper as a girl to continuing on the board even in her retirement and who even served as acting executive director of Pioneer Girls for a while during the early 1960s, made this same point in an interview with me on 28 December 2005, Wheaton, Illinois.

65 www.pionerclubs.org (accessed on 3 February 2006).

66 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 259.


68 Schatz, Slender Thread, p.119.

69 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 24.

70 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 24.


78 I have to hand Bernard Palmer and Marjorie Palmer, Pioneer Girls and the Secret of the Jungle, Chicago: Moody Press, 1962. The back cover reassures potential readers that the series is ‘Approved by the Pioneer Girls National Headquarters’

79 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 62.


81 Hitchin’ Post, April 1949, Folder 17, Box 2, Collection 264. Pioneer Ministries, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

82 Schatz, Slender Thread, p. 66.