



# “Out into the free open country...”

*100 years with the UVM Outing Club*

*by Madison Gilmore '12  
illustrations by Ross MacDonald*

In the spring of 2012, as the UVM Outing Club approached its centennial anniversary, Madison Gilmore '12 delved into the OC's rich history for a college honors project, working with English Professor Greg Bottoms. "I became so immersed in the world I entered each time I cracked open a dusty edition of the *Ariel* yearbook or turned the browning pages of a student manual that, one night, I dreamt that I was riding to the mountain in the used hearse that the club purchased in the 1950s to meet its transportation needs," Gilmore writes in her introduction. The following pages draw from her compendium to offer glimpses of that history and reminders of the fun, glory, and life lessons experienced by all who have hiked, climbed, paddled, skied, or driven the hearse with the University of Vermont Outing Club.

**R**oderic Marble Olzendam, founder of the UVM Outing Club, was a flatlander, a New York City boy even, but he had a strong taste for fresh air and wild places. After traveling to Vermont in the spring of 1911 to work for the state's fish hatchery, Olzendam soon made his way to UVM when the school began offering courses in forestry for the first time. In the spring of 1913, he founded The Out-O'-Doors Club for students.

Clearly, young Roderic didn't lack initiative or a Romantic streak:

*"If you are one of those people who love the great out-of-doors; if you like to get away now and then from the gods of the valleys and come in touch with the gods of the hills; if you like to feel the freedom that comes when canoe cuts the waters of lake and river; if you enjoy the keen exhilarating pleasure that is born of the ski and snow-shoe trail, you will begin to understand the motives which lie behind the Out-O'-Doors Club of the University of Vermont.*

*"This organization came into being in the spring of 1913 to stimulate an interest in those sports which can build up the mind and body of the ordinary everyday man, who cannot play varsity baseball or football; to make Mansfield's heart beat in unison with the heart of every red-blooded Vermont man; to draw men away from the fireside and the 'movies' out into the free open country, and to bind faculties and students into a closer and more companionable relationship—these are some of the aims of the Out-O'-Doors Club.*

*"We want to be, as were the men in olden times, 'Green Mountain Boys.' We want to deserve to be called Universitatis Viridimontanae—The University of the Green Mountains. We want every man on the campus to know Lake Champlain and Mansfield and Camel's Hump and Lincoln Mountain."*

✎ The Dartmouth Outing Club, established just a few years prior to UVM's, offered inspiration and a model. One of the UVM OC's early trips into the wilds of Vermont was a joint excursion with the Dartmouth lads. In early February 1915, four men from UVM and five from Dartmouth met at Smuggler's Notch and made the ascent of Mt. Mansfield. The *Cynic* reported that the trip up took five hours, "the summit was in clouds and snow was falling." The descent was a good deal quicker—"one ski man from Vermont made the trip down the mountain in thirty-two minutes."

✎ After quieting during World War I, the group now formally known as the UVM Outing Club began to find solid ground as a student organization. The 1921 *Ariel*: "Without the Outing Club the majority of the students in college would have passed the coldest months of the year in the usual method of hibernation. Until this winter, the university has been wont to bask itself in the glow of its own fireside and to forego the brisk sally into the invigorating, refreshing cold outside. As an antidote for the accustomed afternoon or evening course in movies the Outing Club has been extremely efficient. For miles around the Hill whereon is situated the Campus and the little college world, the snowshoe has left its oblong checkered impress and the ski its endless parallel tracks."

✎ Alain Liberty St. Cyr is one of the great names in Outing Club lore. He won the ski obstacle race held on the campus Green at the Interscholastic Carnival in 1922. The *Ariel* called him "a real out-of-door man" who "can be depended upon to help give Vermont her proper place as a leader in winter sports."

✎ In the mid-1920s women began to become more deeply involved in the Outing Club. As one might expect, given the era, there's a bit of condescension in the *Ariel* accounts, noting that the "co-eds" showed "marked pep in this direction not only by hiking but by providing lunch for the crowd of snowshoers and ski-runners." There was a Winter Carnival for women, which featured events such as a "snowshoe, umbrella, suitcase" race in 1926. "The men will have to do some hustling to keep up with the girls in winter sports," the Women's Athletic Association ventured.

✎ The Great Depression slowed Outing Club activities and growth, but by 1932 the club resumed the tradition of Mountain Day. OC students called Mansfield "Vermont's Back Campus," given the university's ownership of the summit ridge. The annual Mountain Day endeavored to get all students to set aside time to "leave College Row and explore the beauties of Mount Mansfield." Students were transported to the mountain in cars and buses, then had a day on the trails that included coffee and lunch at Taft Lodge and the erstwhile summit hotel.

✎ Though Louise Bull '39 would become the Out-



ing Club's first female chair in 1936, the wider university didn't have quite as progressive a vision for the level of freedom to explore that female students should enjoy. Daan Zwick '43 shared this story from a hike on Mansfield: "...we came upon an incipient forest fire... some hunter had left a fire burning, and it was spreading to nearby brush. It took us over two hours to extinguish it, carrying small amounts of water from a nearby brook in our hats and boots. Because of that delay, we did not get back to campus until after 10 that evening. The university had very strict rules governing when women were allowed off campus. As the trip leader I got called the next morning to the office of Mary Jean Simpson, the dean of women, to explain why the girls did not get back to their housing by the Sunday night curfew hour. I had thought it was a pretty reasonable thing to stop to put out such a fire, but it took a lot of explaining before I got off the hook for that infraction."

✎ World War II brought another slow in Outing Club activities with gas rationing and bans on travel among the impacts. Still, students found ways to get out. Daan Zwick would recruit OC friends to come along with him on his weekend work monitoring maple sap production at Botany Department test plots in the mountains. His pals helped him make quick work of his duties, then they all hit the trails.

✎ As WWII created a dramatic shift in the gender balance on college campuses across America, that change was reflected in the 1943–44 Outing Club's entirely female membership. With Vermont farms strapped by a labor force that had gone off to war, the OC stepped in to lend a hand. *Ariel*: "Apples and more apples, with no one to pick them. UVM students came to the rescue at several orchards around Burlington. Sponsored by the Outing Club, three truckloads of girls, dressed in blue jeans and old plaid shirts, set out for an afternoon of apple picking."



During the 1952–53 school year the Outing Club members bought a used hearse, a proto-SUV of sorts, to help carry students and their gear into the wilds. The vehicle came to be known as “Brunhilde” or “Habeas Corpus.”

The sixties saw tremendous interest in the Outing Club, membership growing to more than a thousand students in the middle of the decade. The OC took a big step in building a ski lodge in Jeffersonville—a log cabin structure, with eating areas, kitchen, bunk rooms with baths and showers, activities room, conference room, and a full basement.” The price was tough to beat: \$3 per night for non-members, \$1.50 for those who paid the \$5 lodge membership. For a variety of reasons, the cabin was an OC outpost for only a few years. The original structure, now Three Mountain Lodge, still stands along Rt. 108.

William “Toby” Dills G’73 was behind the Great Winooski River Raft Race, an OC initiative that grew into a wildly popular event over its eight-year run. Participants manned self-built rafts on the river from

Bolton Falls to Jonesville. It’s a scenario to give a college administrator nightmares, which likely had something to do with the race’s demise. (Ironically, Dills went on to become a chemistry professor and chancellor at UMass-Dartmouth.) But, fortunately, the UVM river race ran its course without serious mishap. “To sum it up, a total of six hundred home built rafts (over the eight-year period), with an average crew of six or more (some drunk or stoned), negotiated the six-mile course of ice cold water with a real rapid at the start of the course,” Dills wrote. “Think of 21,600 passenger miles without a casualty, outside of numerous cases of hypothermia, a few stitches, and a couple of broken bones.”

Fall semester 1979, the Outing Club worked with the university to introduce TREK, a new wilderness orientation program for incoming first-year students. Still going strong more than thirty years later, TREK has been thousands of UVM students’ introduction to college life, their classmates, and the Vermont landscape. The program has expanded beyond backpacking to also include canoeing, kayaking, cycling, rock

climbing, community service, and student leadership focused weeks.

In the early 1980s Rosie Andrews took the reins as the outdoor program staff specialist helping to guide the Outing Club. An accomplished climber, Andrews had been an instructor at the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School and the International Mountain Climbing School in North Conway, New Hampshire. Andrews brought a new level of professionalism and the Outward Bound philosophy to the OC. She launched WILD, the Wilderness Instructor Leadership Development course to train students for leading OC trips. And climbing opportunities grew with the bouldering hallway in Patrick Gym, a popular spot for students in WACO (Wednesday Afternoon Climbing Organization.) It’s a good thing sanctioned climbing sites were established; Jean Hubbell ’84 remembers joining fellow UVM rock rats to climb the stone face of Billings Hall.

In the early 1990s the Outing Club realized the dream of building their own cabin in the woods. Mary Droege ’84 remembers, “Dartmouth had theirs and we longed for a place like that, too.” OC members dedicated the cabin to Sangwook Ahn, an Outing Club member who died in a rock climbing accident on June 14, 1992. A plaque in his honor in the cabin reads: “It is sometimes hard to remember that no one is immortal. Not even your best friend. Please remember our friend and take care of the cabin. The future of the Outing Club lays in your hands. Play hard and take care.”

John Abbott joined the UVM Student Life staff in 1996 as assistant director for Outdoor Programs. He brought deep skills and experience in outdoor leadership to his work with the Outing Club students and would continue to find his own adventure through trips such as a voyage from Newfoundland to Greenland on a replica Viking ship. This latest era in the Outing Club’s development has seen the creation of a large climbing wall in the university’s fitness center and a ropes course at the edge of campus. The WILD program produces a corps of leaders nearly one hundred strong, many with specialized certification in areas such as avalanche safety. TREK is going stronger than ever, semester break trips travel to exotic locales, and generations of students still discover the glories of the Green Mountains that Roderic Marble Olzendam wanted to share with all.

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## OC Today

Sitting in his Davis Center office, surrounded by photos and odd bits of gear that suggest his role

guiding UVM’s student outdoor programs, John Abbott reads aloud from Roderic Marble Olzendam’s grand early twentieth-century prose urging UVM students of the era to take to the outdoors: “...if you like to get away now and then from the gods of the valleys and come in touch with the gods of the hills; if you like to feel the freedom that comes when canoe cuts the waters of lake and river; if you enjoy the keen exhilarating pleasure that is born of the ski and snow-shoe trail, you will begin to understand the motives which lie behind the Out-O’-Doors Club of the University of Vermont.”

That sentiment is still alive and well, Abbott says. “You go out for a long expedition on the Long Trail, and you come back and feel that you’re ten-feet tall and bullet proof. There’s a great sense of worth, and well-being, and self-efficacy that people experience when they go outdoors.” But there’s a good deal more than self in the ethic of the Outing Club these days, Abbott adds. The students are just as likely to plan an outing with the Boys & Girls Club in Burlington as venture into the woods solo.

Abbott ties it back to Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound, who taught that wilderness leadership isn’t meant to end when those leaders leave the wilderness. The intention is “to create people who are going to become socially engaged leaders in whatever they do with their lives.” So while Abbott is helping today’s students make their way through the demanding technical skills to earn certification to teach rock climbing or sea-kayaking, he’s also helping them with the “meta” skills that will serve them well indoors, say, in a boardroom, classroom, or courtroom, to name a few.

## OC Alumni Unite

Bonds forged in the great outdoors are like mighty oaks or

rock-ribbed peaks... OK, let’s just say they’re enduring. No surprise that former Outing Club enthusiasts have banded together to create one of the most active alumni affinity groups (UVMers connecting via a shared interest or geographical region). To join the fun:

[uvmaoutingclubgroup@gmail.com](mailto:uvmaoutingclubgroup@gmail.com) or  
[facebook.com/UVMAOCCG](https://www.facebook.com/UVMAOCCG).