“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.
Roderic 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 air of mountains—those are some of the aims of the Out-O’Doors Club. We want every man on the campus to know Lake Champlain and Mansfield and Camel’s Hump and Lincoln Association ventured.

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. One of the UVM OC’s early trips into the wilds of Vermont was a joint excursion with the Dartmouth lads. 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:

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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 endeavor 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 Outing 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 the office of Mary Jean Simpson, the dean of women, to explain why the girls did not get back to campus 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 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 six 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: $5 per night for non-members, $1.50 for those who paid the $5 lodge membership. For a variety of reasons, 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.”

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 Outdoor Bound School and the International Mountain Climbing School in North Conway, New Hampshire. Andrews brought a new level of professionalism and the Outdoor 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 Droge ’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.

John 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.

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: uvmaaoutingclubgroup@gmail.com or facebook.com/UVMAAOCG.