
**Reviewed by** Montana Chandler (Texas Tech University)

**Published on** H-Environment (May, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Jennifer Helgren’s *The Camp Fire Girls: Race, Gender, and American Girlhood, 1910-1980* is a vital and exciting contribution to environmental and children’s history. Centering her research on the youth organization Camp Fire Girls, its programming, and its membership reveals how the organization responded to the ever-changing landscape of gender scripts, civil rights, and the growing autonomy of girls. Using internal organization documents, oral histories, memoirs, and “girl created documents,” Helgren argues that the organization gave some girls the opportunity to practice model citizenship in their communities and the outdoors while also excluding racial minorities through an inaccurate image of universal girlhood and individual club’s adherence to local racist practices (p. 12).

*The Camp Fire Girls* includes an introduction, nine chapters, and an epilogue, yet what is perhaps most helpful in the organization of this book is Helgren’s breakdown of the organization into the following categories: before World War II, World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, and the 1960s and 1970s. The organization lends itself to Helgren’s argument as she is able to contextualize how the organization sought to advance middle-class white girls’ lives through their entrance into the world while also still maintaining the home within the first four chapters. Additionally, Helgren uses this section of the book to explore the racial tropes and middle-class lifestyle skills the Camp Fire Girls employed in their celebration of girlhood and community. The chapters that center on the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War serve as a transition into the last third of the book while also addressing topics that may not fit as nicely in the other sections, including religion and a patriotic effort to stop fascism. Finally, in her focus on the decades of the sixties and seventies, Helgren explores the efforts made by the Camp Fire Girls to become a more inclusive and diverse organization and their unfortunate failure to retain and recruit members.

Helgren’s writing on the evolution of the Camp Fire Girls is clear and concise, which makes the monograph accessible to a variety of readers.
within the academy as well as those interested in
the history of an organization that may have been
a part of their lives or the lives of their mothers
and grandmothers. Furthermore, Helgren’s ability
to bring her historical characters and narrative to
life speaks to her skill as a writer. Reading The
Camp Fire Girls was an absolute pleasure thanks
to her seamless blend of flowing narrative and in‐
triguing analysis. Having been a Camp Fire Girl
herself, Helgren exhibits passion for this topic
throughout the book. On one hand, the care with
which she approaches the girl created documents,
such as diary and journal entries, scrapbooks, and
health charts, speaks to her character as a histori‐
an. On the other hand, how she critically analyzes
such documents regardless of her affiliation with
the organization reveals her skill as a historian. As
a final note on sources, I have to say I am in‐
trigued by the term “girl created documents.” This
is the first time I have encountered the concept
and term, and I cannot think of a better way to
characterize such sources. “Girl created docu‐
ments” give ownership of such sources back to
their creators and highlight girls’ agency and
autonomy.

The Camp Fire Girls succeeds in a multitude
of ways beyond the central argument of the book.
While I was initially concerned about the long
periodization of the book, Helgren succeeds in
paying adequate attention to the three eras of the
Camp Fire Girls and highlighting their unique im‐
portance in the life of the organization. As
someone with no prior knowledge of the organiza‐
tion, I was impressed with her ability to zoom into
the personal histories of former Camp Fire Girls
and then smoothly zoom back out to the larger
narrative to create a well-rounded historical ana‐
lysis of girlhood. Additionally, Helgren’s writing on
the potential for same-sex coupling between girls
and the fear of leaders reveals the constant ten‐
sion found in homosocial spaces. There is a cer‐
tain element of protection of girls’ purity within
spaces like the Camp Fire Girls, but there is also a
point at which the line between platonic and ro‐
mantic or sexual become uncomfortably blurred
for Camp Fire leaders. I found this analysis to be
enlightening as well as integral in telling the story
of the organization. Additionally, this section of
the book gives way to a successful analysis of
change over time as the Camp Fire Girls would
later become leaders and advocates for the inclu‐
sion and support of their LGBTQIA+ members.

I have sung the praises of Helgren’s The Camp
Fire Girls, and to round out my review I only have
one critique of the book. As an oral historian my‐
self, I would have liked to see Helgren use more of
these personal histories and memories throughout
the book. Helgren makes incredible use of her
written documents, but I find her use of oral his‐
tories lacking. This does not necessarily take any‐
thing away from the book, but the inclusion of
more personal histories and memories of the or‐
ganization would have taken The Camp Fire Girls
to the next level.

The Camp Fire Girls is truly a pleasure to
read. From excellent analysis to captivating writ‐
ing, Helgren’s addition to the scholarship on youth
organizations, girlhood, and outdoor education
and programming is invaluable. Accessible to both
the academy and the general population, The
Camp Fire Girls is a fantastic piece of scholarship
that succeeds in a multitude of ways and is a signi‐
ficant contribution to the field.