A 1924 survey of Michigan’s early “co-eds” reveals what life was like for a generation of pioneers.
Women students rule the American college campus. They began to outnumber men a generation ago, in the 1970s. At Michigan, the sexes are now roughly equal in number, but nationwide, the women-to-men ratio is approaching 60-40.

These ratios are the culmination of a slow revolution. It began nearly a century and a half ago, when U-M and a handful of other schools launched what many men called a “dangerous experiment”—the “coeducation” of women and men.

At Michigan it began with one solitary woman, Madelon Stockwell, who was permitted to enroll in the fall of 1870. The following fall, 34 women joined her—a tiny cohort among a thousand men. Gradually, their numbers expanded, reshaping campus life and helping to change the expectations of millions of women.

What was life like for those early “co-eds”?

We know many answers to that question, because in 1924 the Alumnae Council of the U-M Alumni Association sent a questionnaire to every woman who had attended U-M to date. Some 3,000 replies were returned, and in the 1990s, staff members at the Bentley Historical Library combed every questionnaire to produce “Women’s Voices: Early Years at the University of Michigan,” a searchable database and book edited by Doris E. Attaway and Marjorie Rabe Barritt.

Along with basic factual questions, the survey asked women: “How would you characterize the influence of the University of Michigan on your life?” and “Won’t you add a few of the outstanding memories of your college days?”

The replies they wrote in 1924 make fascinating reading now, both for the sharp contrasts to the campus of today, and for the uncanny parallels.

RESOURCES
Search the “Women’s Voices” database at the Bentley Historical Library’s website:
http://bentley.umich.edu/research/um/voices/

Read and search the book online:
http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=womv;;idno=ate1974.0000.000

Download the “Women’s Voices” book in print format:
http://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/womv/images/WomensVoices.pdf
Michigan women of the late 1800s knew an Ann Arbor much different from the urbanized hot spot of today.

**Margaret Stewart** (1877; 1887, Grad. Sch.): “The Campus was then not much more than a big field, surrounded with a high board fence … To keep out the cattle and other livestock that freely roamed the streets in those days, this fence was quite essential… The diagonal walk was even then a prominent feature of the Campus, but the elm trees bordering it were young trees…”

**Flora Potter** (Moran) (1888; 1890, Grad.Sch.) described primitive conditions. “On entering college, I found no water works system in Ann Arbor and everyone was drinking filtered rain-water. Only an occasional home contained a bath-room…There was no gymnasium, no dean of women, no housing rules, very few chaperones and very seldom any large dance or ball. Student life was, I think, more serious and more studious than at present.”

**RESOURCES**
See an interactive map of the Diag’s development through time: http://www.umich.edu/~hist265/links/projects/2001b/mort/
Alice Lloyd, Dean of Women at U-M from 1930 to 1950, often spoke of the early women as models for those who followed, especially in their attitude to their studies.

“The early women students were here because they were fundamentally interested in obtaining an education.” Lloyd told students in the mid-1930s. “Now it is the social thing to come to college, and though we still have a serious group who are well adjusted to the idea of their purpose in being here, there are large numbers who are, shall we say, socially inclined and not only light-hearted but light-minded… We have not the interest that the pioneer women had.”

Julia Worthley (Underwood) (1890-92): “I spent most of my time in the library — reading. I had never seen a library before! … I ‘fibbed’ about my age to get in; in years I was only a high school girl. I almost literally read everything in the library — (in fiction & verse) — in German and French. The memory of it—just going up to a desk and getting books I could not buy for the asking — has been one of the Great Emotions of life! Here I read ‘Les Trois Mousquetaires,’ and after awhile, the long, gay verse-romances of old Italy. The thrill of delight has never wholly left me.”

Ella Kyes (1888, Homoeopathic Med. Sch.) wrote of her first quiz in physiology, given by Professor Henry Sewall: “He called my name—it seemed to me he shouted it — it boomed and echoed thru the amphitheatre — I leaned forward and hid my face in my hands; he called my name three times, yet I could not muster enough courage to answer, nor could I lift my face till several questions had been passed and answered. Those few moments helped me to understand shell shock in later years.” (Miss Kyes got over her nerves to become a successful physician.)

Selma Leopold (1914): “My Alma Mater gave… first an abiding faith in the ultimate beauty and meaning of life. Also the ability to interpret. Critical ability. The power to win and give friendship. An enduring love for [the] arts and music. Respect for scholarship and achievement. The desire to serve. A lessening of personal eccentricities. To summarize: a humanizing influence; a source of inspiration and enrichment; a permanent stimulus to mind and soul.”

RESOURCES
Read about Professor Henry Sewall:
http://um2017.org/faculty-history/faculty/henry-sewall
Women discovered that male students resented their presence more than male faculty, though few professors thought women students had a realistic shot at success in traditionally male careers. Medical professors were especially dubious. For many, coeducation was a grim test of endurance.

Julia Stannard (1892): “It comes to my mind now — as I read of all the many fine things being done for the women of the U of M, how little was done for them along the same lines thirty years ago. Indeed the presence of women studying medicine was still one of simple endurance. They were left pretty much alone to pursue their disgraceful course — and to meet their well deserved fate — failure.”

Sara Chase (1900): “It was impressed upon the women of our department that the U of M was a men’s school & often we had the feeling that we were trying to rob men of a livelihood. The girls had to study harder & make better records in order to ‘pass.’ No internships were offered women or found for them. … I have now a high esteem for the Univ. & also the Med. Dept. There has been great improvement but I’m giving my opinions of past years.”

Lilian Johnson (1891): “And at the Senior reception Prof. [Richard] Hudson said, ‘If you were only a man I’d ask you to come back as my assistant in History next year.’”

Ruth Wood (1921; 1922, Grad. Sch.) was not the only woman of the 1920s—an era when feminism was gaining steam—who criticized “Michigan’s sentimental and antiquated attitude towards women. Her students (women undergraduates, frequently; men, for the most part) and her officers, can conceive of no relationship between men and women other than that sentimentally devout or quasi-sexual. Her publications reek of it, the managing of class affairs, frat functions, is controlled by it… Officers as well as students are unable to recognize professional intellectualty in women. Discrimination made in the medical school, and discrimination made against women for the faculty are two examples, infuriating beyond words for mature women, seriously intent on a profession.”

RESOURCES
Read about Professor Richard Hudson:
http://um2017.org/faculty-history/faculty/richard-hudson
But many others believed that women and men on campus learned a great deal from each other, and so concluded that coeducation had value even beyond the fairer treatment of women.

Genevieve O’Neill (1901; 1904, Grad. Sch.): “I recall with pleasure: there were no dormitories and the students were taught self reliance by being thrown together in boarding houses—just as they are forced to live when they leave college. Boys and girls were put upon their honor who roomed in the same dwelling, and I never saw a girl ‘fall’ or knew a boy to demean himself by attempting to lead a college girl astray… The intermingling of boys and girls in the same home brought about a democratic and broadminded outlook upon life, as well as mutual understanding between the sexes.”

Alice Tryner (1887-88): “It was a broadening influence that reached me early in life — Even at that early age I was able to see the difference between education at Smith College [all women] and education in a big State University. I attended Smith after one year at the U. of M. — and the narrowness of the education at Smith was apparent to me then even as compared with the atmosphere at U. of M.”

Ruth Weeks (1913, Grad. Sch.) remembered “the absolute freedom of the Ann Arbor life — in informal social life of the students in which men & women of congenial interests met & mixed … this informal intercourse between men & women was to me almost the chief value of the university; & the recent tendency to formalize social life at Michigan… strikes me as undercutting the intellectual aspect of co-education… I have heard many a Michigan girl say, ‘The men I knew educated me.’”
When the Alumnae Council asked: “Won’t you add a few of the outstanding memories of your college days?” fond remembrances flooded the pages.

**Bonnie Reid** (1910): “… Our canoe parties up the Huron — clean parties with no stories of drinking and smoking attached to them. The contrast of my personal experiences with Michigan men and women fifteen years ago, and the restrictions of the present time — perhaps not restrictions, but the tendency of trying to ‘hold the students down’ — makes me very proud and happy to think I was a part of a student body which controlled itself.”

**Alice Schoff** (Millis) (1892, Grad. Sch.): “Coming from a small city college where there were no sororities I greatly enjoyed my association with some of those then established in Ann Arbor… The ideal conditions of simple living and high thinking in the Sororities of that day impressed me deeply…”

**Ethel Chase** (1903; 1915, Grad. Sch.): “Football games were played inside of a roped off area and if you had the price you drove a team or a single run-about to the game, backed your outfit against the field and everybody stood up to see what happened. There were a few bleachers on one side of the field and a few hundreds of people were all who went unless it was a big game. Real football at Michigan came with [Fielding] Yost although we had had some noteworthy teams before that.”

**Flora MacKenzie** (1913): “… and the most deeply impressed upon my memory is the ‘Last Sing’ of the June 1913 class, grouped in picturesque setting about Memorial Hall. I couldn’t sing the last verse of the ‘Yellow & the Blue,’ for there was a lump in my throat that wouldn’t down. Without a sound the group broke up and vanished into the shadows, not weeping — but just too overcome by emotion to speak.”
Michigan’s new women graduates entered a world where traditional expectations about gender roles still prevailed. Many women with excellent minds and fine training found themselves unable to pursue the work they had hoped to do.

One of these was Laura Rogers White, the first woman to earn a Bachelor of Science degree at Michigan. She was among the small cadre who entered U-M in the autumn of 1871, just after Madelon Stockwell broke the gender barrier. All the women in the class of 1874 attracted curiosity from the men, but in Laura’s case the attention was exaggerated and cruel. At nearly six feet two inches tall, she towered over nearly all the male students, and she soon had to endure the nickname “Alba Longa,” a reference to her height.

Of all the students, men and women, White was regarded as among the most gifted in mathematics. She hoped to teach mathematics or become an architect, and after U-M she received graduate training in both fields—at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and at a leading school of architecture in Paris.

But when her father died in 1875, domestic expectations intervened. While her older brother, also a Michigan graduate, went on to a professional career, Laura went home to Kentucky, taught students at home to earn her living, and looked after her mother and her younger sisters:

“I taught the year 1874-75 in Lexington until my father’s death made it necessary for me to come home. From then until my mother’s death in 1905, I usually taught a private school in our home.

“My sisters and their children are the only children that I have. At my father’s death in 1875, I was appointed, at my mother’s request, guardian of my two younger sisters, and together with my brother administered my father’s estate.

“I expected to be a teacher of mathematics, or possibly an architect, and prepared for that. My father’s death made that not best for the family, so to be with my mother and do best for my sisters, I relinquished those ambitions. But my college course has helped me to help others in many ways, and...has broadened my views and given me the power to enjoy the best in literature and art.”

She died at home in Kentucky in 1929, at the age of 76.
For other women, coeducation at Michigan opened the door to extraordinary achievements and contributions. There is no more inspiring example than Alice Hamilton, who became one of the greatest Michigan graduates, a fighter for public health who saved many lives in a field of medicine that she all but created by herself—industrial toxicology.

She arrived in Ann Arbor in 1892, a petite, “almost fragile” young woman from a prosperous family in Ford Wayne, Indiana. She wrote home that she felt herself to be “absolutely nobody, for the first time in my life.” Yet she was determined to record “some definite achievement, something really lasting…to make the world better.”

She did well enough in class that she earned her medical diploma in three semesters instead of the usual four. But she chose scientific investigation over treating patients. In Chicago, as a professor of pathology at the Woman’s Medical School of Northwestern University, she lived at Hull House, the famous settlement house founded by the social reformer Jane Addams, and she began to explore industrial Chicago for connections between disease and the industrial environment of workers. After she identified and exposed lethal conditions in the match industry, Illinois’s governor asked her to lead a survey of workplace diseases. Soon she was regarded as the nation’s leading expert in this new field, and she became the first woman appointed to the faculty at Harvard. Her work is now seen as the foundation of workplace reforms that culminated in the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, which became law three months after Alice Hamilton died at the age of 101.

Her answers to the Alumnae Council’s survey in 1924 are the clipped responses of a very busy woman. But she did take the time to say this: “The training I received in the University of Michigan Medical School gave me an understanding of what scientific inquiry really means, and an ideal of thoroughness, objectivity of outlook, accuracy and intellectual integrity which have been of inestimable service to me in my working life.”
In a staccato rush of words, Harriet Holman (Bishop) (1874) summed up the experience of the first generation of Michigan women: “A happier — more normal — busier — more earnest ‘bunch’ of girls never existed. We came to college to study, and we thoroughly enjoyed our work-and also our play! We had no dramatics — no Woman’s League — no gymnasium — no Dean! We suffered criticism — rudeness — opposition — We had also, and appreciated it—sympathy — admiration — co-operation — from many of the Professors — and their wives — tho some would have none of us! We were the rubble over which as a firm foundation — the smooth highway of the education of women has been laid.”

– James Tobin

This article was drawn chiefly from “Women’s Voices: Early Years at the University of Michigan,” a searchable database and book edited by Doris E. Attaway and Marjorie Rabe Barritt, and “Scientist and Crusader” [Alice Hamilton] Medicine at Michigan (Spring 2011).

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