

***From Greatcoats to Gym Tunics:
Reading History through Images of Women Playing Netball***

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Abstract

Visual representations of women playing sport have always struggled to gain a consistent foothold in the visual history of sport. The most significant period of visual scarcity was in the pre-television era when few had the funds or the ability to record and distribute moving images. Cinema newsreels and locally produced and distributed films which showcase women in action are therefore historical, cultural and ideological treasure troves which offer different points of entry through which to explore women's sporting 'herstory'. This paper explores the significance of two pieces of early film capturing women playing netball in very culturally different circumstances and recorded with very different intent. The earliest, produced by the British Ministry of Information in 1918, is of WAACs stationed at the Western Front celebrating their one afternoon off a fortnight by engaging in a robust game of 'basket-ball' (netball) dressed in their army greatcoats. This is primarily a propaganda film screened in British cinemas to help change the puritanical view of the public towards women in uniform who served in France. The second is a very recently re-discovered and restored film of the 1932 Dominion Basketball [netball] Tournament in Aotearoa New Zealand. For the next 20 years this cherished fragment was shared around the often isolated provincial basketball associations in the country. It provided the only accessible source of moving images for local women to glimpse their game being played at a representative level and tells a story more vivid than just a snapshot of healthy settler society New Zealand women at play.

Keywords: netball, women, sport history, cinema newsreels

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Introduction

As a women-only sport largely confined to Britain and the reaches of its historical Dominions, netball (previously known as basketball, outdoor basketball or women's basketball) does not have a wealth of visual images or moving pictures through which to reveal its early history (Henley,2012). The term netball will be used predominantly throughout this article to provide clarity for the modern reader but essentially women's netball and basketball are the same game and as with any sport evolved with structural and regional differences. After the introduction of the game to England in 1895 (developed out of James Naismith's 1891 invention of indoor basketball) it went through a series of rule changes designed to create a style of play deemed more suitable for the recreational pursuits of young women (Treagus 2011, Andrew 1997, Taylor 2001, Nauright & Broomhall 1994, Marfell 2012). By 1905 an English Rule Book had gone out to international basketball playing associations. Another in the 1920s included Australia and New Zealand (Jobling & Barham, 1991). Despite these attempts at regulation various iterations of the game were still being played through to the end of the 1950s when the modern 7 a-side game and the universal name of netball became the international standard.

The very early version of netball played by the WAAC in the 1918 cinema newsreel, 'The Women's Army in France' (IWM 405) is conducted according to the physical and social space available for these women in the army base camp in wartime France and in all likelihood the game was mocked up hurriedly for the camera. In contrast, the games in the 1932 New Zealand 9 a-side tournament film ('NZBA Tournament film 1932') are being played in a very serious, competitive mode and are being keenly umpired. These two pieces of archival film offer a rich source of contrast: one as a cinema newsreel made for domestic propaganda purposes during the First World War and the other made fourteen years later by the rapidly growing national sport for New Zealand women desperate to gather and preserve images of the elite level of their competition to share with their often isolated provincial unions. However these two pieces of film also offer a point of historical sports commonality rarely documented – that of young women playing their chosen game whenever and where ever they can and through which they reflect their cultural identity and vital physicality.

Literature review and Methodology

This article draws on very distinct areas of critical literature and primary resources in order to analyse the production of these two pieces of early film produced and distributed in very different geographic locations, historical situations and industry circumstance. The work of Krisztina Robert (1997, 2008), Angela Wollacott (1994), Janet Watson (2004), Lucy Noakes (2006) and Susan Grayzel (1977), provide a valuable social and political context for the wartime role of the WAACs profiled in the 1918 newsreel. Philip M. Taylor's *The Foreign Office and British Propaganda during the First World War* (1980) and David Monger's 2014 study of the influence of the National War Aims Committee propaganda on women's roles and paid employment both provide a wider political context.

The New Zealand film is also produced at a time of considerable economic hardship and social change - that of The Great Depression which hit severely affected rural areas of the country in 1932. Local historian Tony Simpson's *The Slump* 1990, and

the oral histories contained in *The Sugarbag Years* (1974) provide a snapshot of the impact of the Depression on New Zealand. In contrast to the 1918 British state controlled production of a domestic propaganda film, the New Zealand Basketball Association's (NZBA) record of the 1932 tournament was made with a very different intent and with significantly fewer resources. The only record of the production and distribution of this rare piece of film is gleaned through brief entries in the archived minutes of the NZBA Executive 1925 -1960. The paucity of primary and secondary sources about women playing netball in New Zealand during this period is a considerable limitation in contrast to the wealth of documentation and scholarship focused on the activities of the WAACs serving in France.

British cultural historian Mike Huggins scholarship of the visual representation of sport (2007, 2008, 2011, 2015) and the representation of gender in cinema newsreels also informs my theoretical approach. His 2007 article, 'And Now, Something for the Ladies' focused on images of women playing sport in cinema newsreels and is particularly pertinent to this discussion, as is the work of Nicholas Hiley and Luke McKernan on the British Universities Newsreel Project (2001) and McKernan's ongoing scholarship of cinema newsreels and news documentary (1992, 2000, 2002, 2009). McKernan's regularly updated 'Witnessing the Past': Researcher's Guide to British Newsreels, London BUFVC' (1983) provides some key reminders as to how to research and view archival footage:

It is the expectations or experience that we bring to it that makes it communicate with us (para 3).

...We need to be informed as was the original audience before viewing the film ...it brings it back to life (para 5).

Drawing on the above scholarship and using a conventional film analysis approach of considering aspects of pre-production, production and post production this article seeks to bring these two pieces of film profiling women playing netball "back to life" (McKernan, 1983, para.5) and in doing so contribute to the under researched gaps in women's sporting history.

Factors influencing pre-production, production, and post production

Although the 1918 newsreel footage was planned, shot and edited by experienced production personnel for the time in comparison to the less sophisticated 1932 New Zealand production, the same methodological approach can be used for both films to analyse the significance of the footage. Firstly, following McKernan's guide (1983) it is necessary to understand the context in which the film was made: who filmed it; for what purpose; for whom; under what constraints; and the skill level of the production crew. There are also very practical considerations which impact on the visual content of the film such as access to and quality of the production gear, the weather, the amount of time available, budget, location access and limitations and importantly the viewpoint of the client as well as the director in the field. The final cut in a newsreel, as Huggins (2007) notes has the capacity to convey some of the feel and atmosphere of the age in which it was made and the current social attitudes of the time. In the case of the WAAC newsreel it is also a window on the propaganda strategies of the British War Office at a time when they perceived the need for a rapid change in public opinion towards the women serving behind the lines.

‘The girl behind the man behind the gun’

The National War Aims Committee (NWAC) was established in 1917 to raise civilian morale in a climate of growing war-weariness. There was a separate propaganda focus on women to increase their efforts to maintain the home front and increase the number of women in the work force. (Badsey, 2014). By late 1917 there was a change in both the aim and delivery of domestic propaganda which was heavily influenced by the advertising and popular journalism backgrounds of Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe (*The Times, Daily Mail*) and Canadian newspaper men Max Atkin, Lord Beaverbrook (*Daily Express*) and the Cinema Division of the Ministry of Information reflected this change in focus and style. As the war ground inexorably onwards, service to the nation became out of necessity expected of both men and women (Grazel, 1997, p.156). By 1917 the rising death toll resulted in women taking over the essential non-combat services in order to free able bodied men for front line fighting. The creation of the WAAC in 1917 sanctioned women to wear khaki in non-combatant roles which were no longer confined to nursing or nurse aiding such as ambulance drivers, signallers, clerical assistants, gardeners, cooks, waitresses and maintenance engineers. This perceived threat to gender boundaries was construed by many as unfeminine as it challenged the central emotive thrust of domestic propaganda which reinforced the heroism of men fighting to protect ‘womankind and home’ (Grazel, 1997, p.153).

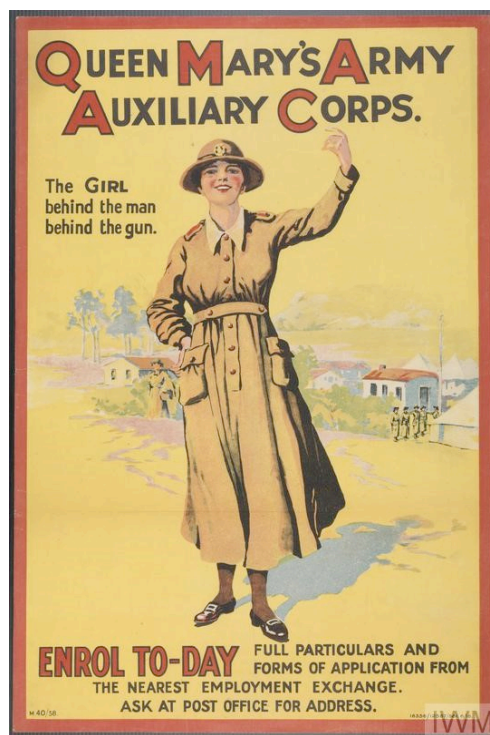


Figure 1: QMAAC recruitment poster (© IWM Art.IWM PST 13167)

By late 1917 a public backlash began to build which was fuelled by rumours of immorality and ill discipline amongst the WAAC (Nokes 2006, Robert 1997, Grazel 1997). This reached a peak in early 1918 and was expressed openly in the popular press and in public life. The military authorities acted quickly to counter these claims in order to stem a worrying drop in recruitment for the WAAC. A Commission of Inquiry was sent to France and this resulted in a “complete vindication” (Marlow,

1998, p.312) of the WAAC. Following the release of the Commission's findings a Royal endorsement was granted with the renaming of the WAAC to the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps. A huge publicity campaign focused on the Auxiliary travelled the country, often accompanied by royalty which gained "massive press coverage" (Robert, 2008, p.115). It was in this context that a series of newsreels was conceived by the Ministry of Information and screened in British cinemas.

'The Woman's Army in France' (IWM 405)

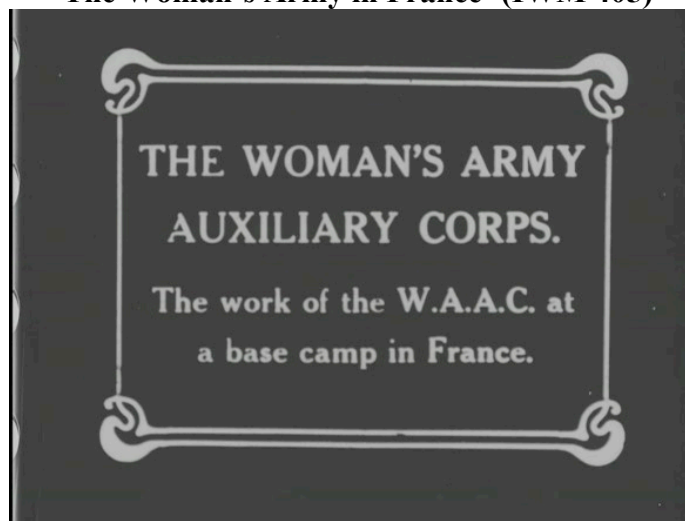


Figure 2: Title card 'The Women's Army in France' (© IWM 405)

This 7.48 minute silent newsreel, shot on 35mm black and white film stock is dated by the Imperial War Museum (IMW) Archives as 1918 which is likely to be in the summer months of the final year of the war before the November armistice. The newsreel footage, shot and edited by the Topical Film Company for British Ministry of Information, documents a 'day in the life of' WAACs serving in a rear base camp. There are seven segments shot in five different locations on the base; the cook house, officers' dining and reading rooms, exterior shots of buildings, the netball and drill area and the cemetery. The first is of WAACs preparing food and serving on the food line for the lower ranks. The next two segments are of WAACs dressed as waitresses serving the officers in their dining area and club reading room. This is followed by two short segments of a game of early basketball, a drill session then a longer scene to conclude the newsreel of WAACs tending the war graves in an extensive cemetery then marching back to the camp.

In order to present the dedicated work of the WAACs serving in France to the public in the best light, a number of practical decisions were made by the Cinema Division of the Ministry of Information. Most significantly the footage was gathered in summer devoid of the cloying mud which blighted the lives and deaths of all who served at the front and behind the lines in the Great War. The reality is that the WAACs laboured in often appalling conditions, twelve hours a day with half day off during the week and every alternative Sunday. They suffered stringent personal restrictions as the recollections of WAAC private Olive May Taylor reveal:

The barracks were very spartan & food poor & there was very little of it. We were subject to all of a soldier's discipline, but had none of the privelidges (*sic*) of a soldier. (cited in Jesse, 1919, p.305)

Most of the segments are based on everyday routine such as preparing and serving meals, but others would have been staged for the camera crew such as the drilling and basketball sequences and the strong pitch to public emotion of the women tending the war graves. In the majority of the segments the women are shown to be in selfless service catering to the needs of the fighting men and often overseen by men of rank. However, there are two short moments in the newsreel where the women, supervised by their own female officers, step out of rank and are just themselves; the segment when they are playing basketball and the other as they break ranks on the order to dismiss after drill training and run with youthful exuberance towards the camera. Here the personality of these women breaks through the careful control of the strategies of domestic propaganda and speaks across the generations.



Figure 3: 'Dismiss!' (© IWM 405)

WAACs playing 'basket-ball'

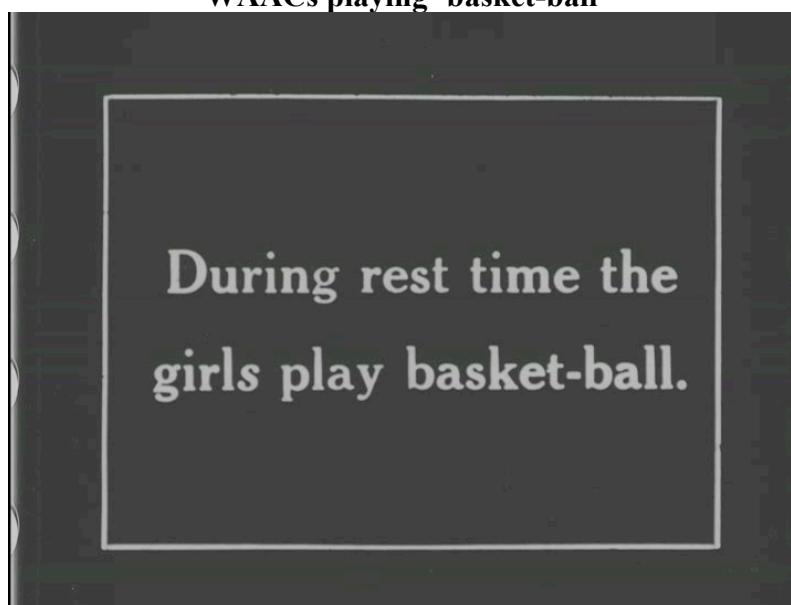


Figure 4: Basketball intertitle (© IWM 405)

The grassed drill area outside the barracks becomes a women-only space for the informal Sunday afternoon basketball game as evidenced by the all female onlookers. A roughly painted line marks the perimeter and possibly an outline of a goal circle at each end. However, there are no other in-court territory zones or restriction on player movement. The bounced ball restart and the running dribble indicates the shared indoor basketball heritage but the netted goal post without a backboard proves that this is a game of very early netball and not an informal game of indoor basketball played outdoors. An awareness of field position is indicated with the 'jumping centres' waiting to compete for the bounced restart and others standing in loose offensive and defensive pairings in the centre of the field. The ranked WAAC officer acting as umpire whistles the restart and then hurries off the field and behind the view of the camera which appears to be her only adjudicating function in the game. The lack of rules which are applicable or desirable in this recreational circumstance allow the game to flow at random up and down the field and wherever the ball is, so are a horde of energetic great-coated and stoutly shod young women.



Figure 5: The heavily favoured use of the long pass (© IWM 405)

In this 52 second segment the camera remains in the same position and pans slowly to cover the game although this is strangely compromised by the goal post area closest to the camera appearing to be out of the panning range or inclination of the cameraman. As the main action of the game is driving towards this goal area it is even more curious that this is not included by the camera setup or panning movement of the camera head. There are four cuts in this sequence. The first one appears to be film damage but the other three are a very early example of cutting highlights sequence from raw sports footage. Although there are no close-ups of any of the women throughout the whole newsreel, the last cut indicates the cameraman changed the lens to obtain a slightly tighter wide shot. This closes the last 12 minutes of this sequence and offers more visual engagement for the viewer.



Figure 6: Change of lens for closer wide shot (© IWM 405)

The significance of this 1918 basketball segment

This film is one of a number of newsreels made in 1918 by the Ministry of Information which profile the WAAC for propaganda purposes. ‘The Life of a WAAC’ (IWM 412) was shot in various locations in England using a mix of actuality and acting setups directly aimed at recruiting more young women into the service. The ‘Women’s Army in France’ (IWM 405) poses a more demanding production schedule in terms of location, time and level of difficulty. A comparison of these two newsreels reveals significant differences in the quality of shot coverage available from which to refine the final edit. This is hardly surprising if one considers the constraints under which the production crew would have been operating while on location in France. Nevertheless there is an understanding of how to talk to a female audience rather than talk at them.

The greatest significance is that this is the earliest recording of women playing netball in a European cinema newsreel and predates any New Zealand newsreel record of women playing netball by fifteen years. Its worth lies in the series of shots which capture how the game was played in that era. The majority of early archival footage from the 1920s only provide short shots of women playing the game as part of a montage or snapshot of daily life in Britain or her Dominions. It is rare therefore to get such a sustained moving image record of women playing the game.

The English Public School system reinforced the Edwardian belief that team sport was the perfect training ground to prepare young men for war. Whereas WWI reinforced the military value of sport training and competition to raise the fitness levels, morale and foster *esprit de corps* for the male troops (Manson and Riedi, 2010) but there is scant recorded evidence in British official or oral histories of the sport that women played during their active service in France. It was not that they did not play sport but questions around this topic were rarely if ever addressed to women participants in oral history projects where the focus was on their work life, physical conditions, social relationships, entertainment and friendships. In short, very few

researchers thought to ask these women what sport they played, how they organised such activities and what did it mean to them.

The women who volunteered for the WAAC were fit and strong with adventurous natures as well as motivated by a deep sense of patriotic duty. This newsreel demonstrates their exuberant physicality and proves they did play sport in the most unlikely and makeshift circumstances as did their male counterparts. The value of watching moving images of women playing an early version of the game is inestimable. Low resolution photographic stills or a reading of the 1905 or the 1920's English basketball rule book cannot compare. These women are out there playing their game which is like football or rugby for men – all that is required is a patch of land, a ball, a couple of goals, a few rudimentary rules and a heap of good cheer.

The 'lost' National Tournament film, Invercargill, New Zealand, 1932

The New Zealand Basketball Association (NZBA) had been officially formed in 1924. From the outset the women administering the sport were well aware of the importance of jockeying for space in print media reporting and being part of any new developments in broadcast technology (Henley, 2012). As hard as the NZBA and their provincial associations worked to gain access to print media and radio coverage what was missing was access to moving images of women playing the game. Silent newsreels were produced in New Zealand from 1929 and the first talkies in 1930 (Price, 1996). Their high percentage of male sport content was a reflection of perceived populist appeal by the content producers and theatrical entrepreneurs of the time. There were occasional glimpses of women playing netball in cinema newsreels from 1933 onwards but they were very fleeting and not suitable or obtainable for coaching or archival purposes (Henley, 2012). In reality, there was almost no amateur or professionally generated moving image of women playing netball in an era of moving image scarcity.

It was an act of significant determination, during the toughest years of The Depression that the NZBA decided to invest £20 in the production of a “moving picture of teams in play for Publicity Purposes” (NZBA Minutes, 30 September 1932) at the Invercargill National Tournament. This was a considerable investment for the NZBA at the time and well beyond the financial reach of any of their regional associations (Henley, 2012). There is no record of who was commissioned to shoot and edit this silent, 16mm, black and white tournament film of 25 minutes duration. When the film was completed it became obvious that associations in the poorer and sparsely populated areas of the country could not afford the expense of projection. Therefore the NZBA had to purchase a film projector to travel with the film. For the next twenty years, entries in the NZBA minutes (1925-1960) make brief mention of the film, constantly in need of repair, doing the rounds of the grateful minor associations. For many players, school teachers and coaches in these areas this film was the only way they could see, in action, how the game was played at the representative level.

Once New Zealand adopted the international 7 a-side game and with the introduction of television the 1932 film was no longer relevant. As with most amateur sports organisations there was no policy or even physical space dedicated for archiving material and the Invercargill tournament film quietly slipped out of view. For decades it was assumed to be lost or at best misplaced until it was re-discovered in 2016 in a

dusty cardboard box at the back of a garage, still in its original metal canister. The joy of re-discovery was tinged also with fear as a powerful smell of vinegar was leaking from the canister; a sign of badly decomposing film stock. Miraculously the dark arts of the film preservationist salvaged just over 25 minutes of the original film, with minimal damage to a few frames and loss of the opening title. To place the importance of the 1932 film in perspective it was not until 1958 that the NZBA tried to commission another film for “record” and “publicity” purposes (NZBA minutes, 19 April 1958) but this film was never made. Therefore the 1932 film, with the exception of a few fleeting glimpses of the game in an occasional cinema newsreel, became the major piece of archival footage recording New Zealand’s unique version of 9 a-side women’s basketball.

Social and economic context

It was quite a big ask for the Southland Basketball Association to host the annual tournament in 1932 and only 9 of 15 possible regional teams could afford the travel costs. This was the toughest year of The Depression in New Zealand with unemployment riots in the main streets of Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin. At this time, the total population of Southland was only 69,200 (NZ Official Year-Book 1933) with the majority spread across rural sheep farming holdings. The largest centre, Invercargill, with a population of 24,300 (ibid) was therefore very reactive to the economic fortunes of its farming population and by 1932 there was widespread hardship in the rural sector. Although impoverished New Zealand farmers were rarely forced off their land by the banks their almost complete loss of income impacted on shopkeepers in the small rural towns and city centres who “went bankrupt in droves” (Simpson, 1974, p.6). For women in particular it was a time that demanded desperately creative skills of self sufficiency but it also fostered a ‘get on with the job’ mentality no matter what the circumstances. This is illustrated by an article in the local newspaper as the Southland Basketball Association used the press to put out a very determined call for billets only two weeks from the start of the event:

A very poor response for homes for our visitors during their stay here has been made to the executive. We need 120 billets and with only a fortnight left, we have 30 billets. It took much persuasion on the part of your delegates last year to have this tournament allocated to Southland. Your delegates asked for it in your name, and now your (sic) are repudiating your responsibilities in the matter. Times are hard – yes we have heard that a great deal - but they are hard for us all. Many of you have no room available in your own home. We know that too, but all of you have friends, and it is necessary that you ask everyone.

... You are not asked to entertain the visitors, only to offer hospitality. So see what you can do for the honour of our province, and if any wellwishers of the game and ex-players read this, will they come forward and help? We will be most grateful. (Defence, *The Southland Daily News*, 6 August 1932)

The Tournament film

In contrast to the level of film making skill evident in the Ministry of Information's newsreel, this film could appear relatively amateur in execution. Although displaying understandably lower production values due to budget, access to production equipment and resources, there is evidence of meticulous planning and a competent level of technical production and post production skills. As can be seen by the main sections of the film listed below, a great deal of raw footage was required in order to craft such a cohesive and content rich overall structure in the edit:

1. Introduction of key administrators directly to the camera
2. Slow pan of assembled officials
3. Slow pan of spectators
4. Highlight sequences of five opening round games
5. Introduction of referees directly to camera
6. Introduction of team captains directly to camera
7. Highlight edit of final game: Southland v Hawkes Bay
8. The Winton Farewell: pan of Otago team all players and visitors, cars leaving town.

The edited highlights of the game footage dominate just over one third of the finished film which is why it was such a sought after resource throughout the country. There is even coverage of mid court and circle play to provide a record of the skills on display in all player positions.



Figure 7: fast and physical court play (courtesy NNZ)

The other third of the film is devoted to direct-to-camera presentations of key national and Southland officials, referees, team captains, a 360 degree pan of the mixed gender crowd at the games and the final 4.26 minute section of the farewell to the teams by the Winton sub-association on the final day. In contrast to the recording of games and constructing the competition aspect of the tournament it is this footage which provides

such a strong visual link with the participants which, as McKernan (1983) asserts, brings the people and the time when making this film “back to life” (para 5).



Figure 8: Miss E.B. Pay, Southland President. Direct address to camera at start of film. (Courtesy of NNZ)

One’s first reaction on viewing the film is that it must have originally had a soundtrack that has been lost over the decades because of the number of the segments which employ direct address to the camera. However, there is no record of this ever being a sound film although experimental sound technology did exist in New Zealand in 1932. Sections such as the visual introduction of the umpires, indicates strong directorial control over the movement and presentation of each official who steps into the camera frame, smiles, then exits. Mr N.R. Hamilton, in Figure 7 below, was more than up to the occasion in contrast to the giggling self-consciousness of many of the young women unused to the process of filming. However, their presentations add a naive charm to the film as well as providing an archival record of the rarely seen or recorded contribution made to society by New Zealand sportswomen.



Figure 9: Mr N.R. Hamilton, Hawkes Bay Referee who clearly enjoyed his cameo presentation to the camera. (Courtesy of NNZ)

The farewell at Winton

Of particular significance is the final section of the film which covers the farewell to the teams and delegates following an afternoon tea hosted by the small rural service town of Winton. All the visitors and hosts are assembled in the main street for the cameraman to record their images before those with cars depart which would have been a major social event for a small town of less than 1,000 people (NZ Year Book 1933). What is notable about this sequence is the care taken to record the faces of the participants. The mixed gender crowd is an indication of the importance of the women's game within local society and there is no indication of the hardship of the times. The women and men in the footage appear to be well dressed and convey an air of prosperity. In all likelihood this was not the case for many at the tournament or for the hosts. The film is therefore also a record of the determination for the underfunded and often marginalised recreational pursuits of women to be maintained despite the hardship of The Depression.



Fig 10: The assembled visitors in the main street of Winton before departure.
(Courtesy of NNZ).

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata

Eight years later in the early years of WWII, John Grierson, founder of the British documentary movement and head of British GPO Film Unit was brought to New Zealand to help establish a similar government film production unit. Grierson's presentation to a group of politicians and filmmakers exhorted them not to dwell on the superficial when making documentary film but to "put in something about the real things you do" (as cited in Dennis 1981, p. 22). He advised that such government

directed films be about people “..so we can see their faces and remember that New Zealand is not just a couple of spots on a distant map but a real place with a flash of the future in its eyes and a beat in its heart” (ibid). This is reinforced by McKernan (1983) who believed the major appeal of the newsreel was “the human face, looking at the camera” (para 13).

One of the most loved and frequently used Māori whakataukī or proverb in New Zealand poses the question: ‘He aha te mea nui o te ao?’ - what is the most important thing in the world? The traditional reply, ‘He tangata, he tangata, he tangata’, acknowledges the universal truth that ‘it is people, it is people, it is people’. Although detailing the political, institutional and cultural context surrounding these two films is important, what reaches out the most from these grainy images is the vitality and determination of these women, engaged in an activity that reveals much more than just the game that they chose to play. Netball is of course not the most important thing in the world but these two pieces of film contribute to making “the complex cultural landscape of women’s sporting lives more visible” (Huggins, 2007, p. 682) by documenting women playing their own game during two distinctly testing times in world history.

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