

“Pro Football: Once A Small Town Sport” Television Documentary Film

C. ROBERT BARNETT

Marshall University

SKIP HILL

Huntington, West Virginia

“Pro Football: Once A Small Town Sport” is a one-hour television documentary produced by WPBY-TV in Huntington, West Virginia. The film uses a blend of narration by David Diles, rare film footage of early games, photographs and interviews with players of the era to trace the experiences of two southern Ohio football teams from 1919 to 1934. The Ironton Tanks and the Portsmouth Spartans, on whom the documentary focuses, were typical of the semi-pro teams which flourished in the 1920’s. Their experiences provide a means to explore one manifestation of the small town boosterism of the 1920’s and of the impact of the depression in the 1930’s. Moreover, the film suggests that the teams reflected not only a different era in football but in American society in general: a time when a team of school teachers could challenge and beat the best in the NFL; a time when a small town’s resources were adequate to compete with major cities.

In contrast to the institutionalization of contemporary professional football, the early teams often were fluid products of the localities which they represented. The Ironton Tanks came into existence in 1919 when a group of local residents got together after the war to play football. Although the team later recruited players who were paid salaries and provided with teaching positions in the local schools, the town owned the team throughout its existence. This town of 14,000, fielded a semi-pro team which defeated three NFL teams in 1930: the New York Giants, the Chicago Bears and the Portsmouth Spartans.

Similarly the Portsmouth Spartans evolved from a local, semi-pro team to one which was able to join the NFL in 1930. In 1931, the Spartans were second in the league and in 1932 played the Chicago Bears indoors in Chicago Stadium for the NFL championship.

Despite success on the field, the Depression was an insurmountable obstacle for each team. Financial problems forced the Tanks to disband in 1930 and the sale of the Spartans in 1933 (they became the Detroit Lions).



Mel Adelman arriving for one of the evening sessions