

# Textile Leagues and Early Competition for Women

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The purpose of this study is to trace the participation of women in sports and athletics in the Piedmont region of South Carolina. The investigator will examine materials relating to participation, competition, and tournaments provided within the mill villages and inter-mill leagues.

The economic and social history of the Piedmont region cannot be told in any type of complete manner unless one studies the impact of the mill villages which sprang up during the expansion of cotton manufacturing during the 1880s. The first South Carolina mill was established in 1790; in 1867 there were two mills in the Greenville district and seven mills in the Spartanburg district. By 1901 there were eighteen cotton mills in Spartanburg County alone.

As the mills were established so were the villages surrounding the mill. The mill owners provided housing (rent varied from 15¢ to 40¢ per room per week in 1941), stores, churches, community centers, recreation centers, athletic facilities, and schools. (South Carolina named a State Supervisor of Mill Schools in the early 1900s).

Women participated in sports and their teams had a following as did the men's teams. Women participated locally, regionally, and if good enough, in national AAU tournaments. Sports were important to the owners; women were hired for mill positions if their basketball skills were proficient. The women tried out for teams, were recruited to change jobs, and while playing basketball received regular pay when they were travelling.

The Southern Textile Basketball Tournament in Greenville is still played each spring, indicating its longevity and status. However, the tournament is no longer restricted to those who work in mills or who live in mill villages. Although still a favorite in upstate South Carolina, the tournament does not retain the multi-state prestige it once had. As early as the 1920s the tournament attracted 150 teams from a five state region.

Women were not only recruited as players, but in 1916 a woman was named as recreation leader at Saxon Mill, Spartanburg, and Chesnee Mill. Ms. Potwan was a Northerner and this appointment was made in conjunction with a program at Winthrop College in Rock Hill, South Carolina.

It is this investigator's speculation that the mill owners sponsored athletic teams for men and women for the prestige that winning teams could bring to the mill, to provide a sense of belonging on the part of the participants and the community, and that the mill owners probably felt that the sense of comradeship developed through these teams would keep the workers from the unionization that was taking place in the North. Further study will reveal support for, refutation of, or modification of these speculations, and perhaps provide an indication concerning the benefits of the programs. For whatever reasons, the textile leagues provided the women of the South an avenue for competition in the athletic arena when such avenues were not available in the colleges.