

Game Changers

JUMP BALL—that crucial moment at the start of every basketball game. A photographer from St. Paul’s Ray-Bell Films staged such a moment in 1927. The photo’s strong composition, with three girls forming a triangle before a background defined by horizontal lines, attracts your eye. But it’s the details that draw you in. The more you look at the scene, the more there is to discover.

There is no record of the girls’ names or how they ended up in this photo. We do not know why they are in what appears to be a community room rather than a gym. But their of-the-moment bobbed hairdos and sporty outfits evoke youth, modernity, and vitality. By the 1920s, sailor shirts and bloomers were the norm for girls’ athletic attire. These suits, and the socks worn with them, were often made of scratchy, heavy wool. But they allowed girls to run and jump with relative ease—a far cry from the long-sleeved blouses and full-length dark hose worn by the first generation of female basketball players.

Why take a photo of spirited girls ready to hit the court? The “W” on the right-side girl’s blouse offers a clue. It stands for “Wells,” as in the Wells

Memorial House, which occupied a four-story brick building at 116 North Eleventh Street in Minneapolis. Organized by St. Mark’s Protestant Episcopal Church, Wells was a settlement house serving the low-income residents of its northside neighborhood. The house’s annual report for 1929 describes how its “greatest value” since its founding two decades earlier “seems to have been in the work with boys and girls.”

Day nursery, kindergarten, manual training, music courses, athletics, sports, summer camp and clubs have given the young people, largely of other nationalities, a training ground for highest ideals of American citizenship.

Wells organized boys’ and girls’ basketball teams that competed in the local settlement house circuit. Since 1891, when James Naismith invented the game to occupy boys he described as “incorrigibles” at a YMCA in Massachusetts, basketball was promoted as an uplifting, healthy activity. Over time the game took on the promise of patriotism, as well. Educators credited basketball with the power to send children—especially immigrants and students at Native American boarding schools—along the road to productive citizenship.

Within months of its invention, women had taken up basketball. Female college students were likely the first Minnesota athletes to play the game: Naismith’s friend Max Exner taught the rules to his female students shortly after he became Carleton College’s first physical culture instructor in 1892. College women of this era looked beyond traditional



Girls playing basketball at Wells Memorial House, Minneapolis. (PHOTO BY RAY-BELL FILMS, 1927)

domestic roles to professions like teaching and social work. Among the staff and volunteers who sustained programs at Wells, there were surely college-educated women committed to sharing the virtues of basketball along with its rules.

Those who saw this photo in the 1920s might have understood its message of athletic training as a means of civic and moral improvement. What do modern viewers see? There’s no single answer, of course. But the scene is timeless and universal, repeated by generations of girls in countless Minnesota gyms, playgrounds, driveways, and yards over the last century. A moment of hope, of luck, of skill—the jump shot, like many crucial moments in a girl’s life—is just the beginning.

—Kate Roberts

Since the birth of our nation, girls have been on the front lines of change. The Minnesota History Center delves into this history with *Girlhood (It’s complicated)*, an exhibit from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History and Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, running from September 7, 2024–June 1, 2025.

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