

‘We go there ostensibly to play tennis, but tennis is an ingredient, not an essence’: Lawn Tennis in Niagara-on-the-Lake, c.1880s-1920s

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Abstract

From the 1880s, to the 1920s, the small Ontario town of Niagara-on-the-Lake experienced marked growth in its tourism industry. Catering predominantly to wealthy upper-middle-class Canadian and American visitors, the lake-side settlement offered numerous opportunities for polite recreation. Chief among them was lawn tennis, a sport that sat somewhat outside of the mainstream in terms of its high-class, mixed-sex participation demographic. While its players were imbued with a strong amateur philosophy, local boosters recognized the sport’s potential to generate tourism income through its two tournaments, but this hinged on the outward presentation among its players/guests of refined gentility – a reflection of both class and gender norms – both on and off the court. In this presentation, I will consider how lawn tennis tournaments fit into the town’s burgeoning tourism industry, examine significant socio-historically relevant features of these tournaments, and position the tennis events in NOTL in the context of the broader historical development of tennis in Canada in order to assess their overall significance.

Keywords: gender; history; social class; sport; tourism