



Episode 909, Story 2 – Exercise Records

Tukufu: This case asks what a box of old records can reveal about an early era in American physical fitness. Oakland fitness fanatic and health club owner Jack LaLanne energizes the local airwaves. His revolutionary fitness program motivates viewers off the couch and into action. LaLanne's fitness show was on national TV for decades. But was LaLanne the first to use new technology to bring exercise into the American home? Now, Mary Fillman from Springfield, Virginia wonders whether her grandfather was a fitness pioneer in the roaring 20s.

Mary Fillman: Come on in.

Tukufu: Thank you. Okay, so what do you got for me?

Mary: Well, I have a set of 78 rpm records from the 1920s that are an exercise program.

Tukufu: Where'd you get this from?

Mary: My mother bought them from a garage sale in the 60s for fifteen cents. She bought them because the instructor on these records was my grandfather, Wallace Rogerson. And he made these records and marketed them. And I never got to meet him and I wanted to be able to hear them again.

Tukufu: So what can you tell me about your grandfather?



Mary: Not much. My dad didn't grow up with him. So all I've been able to learn is what I've been able to research myself. So I was able to find his World War I draft record.

Tukufu: Date of birth, November 29, 1880.

Mary: And I thought it was kind of unusual under present occupation he's down there as a physical trainer.

Tukufu: Mary didn't realize that exercise records existed in the 1920s. She wonders if her grandfather was a pioneer.

What can I find out for you?

Mary: Was he the Jack LaLanne of the Roaring Twenties?

Tukufu: Now do you mind if I just sit here and check everything out?

Mary: Take your time.

Tukufu: So there are five records there are different exercises in the cover of the various records.

Listen to some of this, "No woman who is honest with herself will deny the charm of a well balanced, symmetric figure." So no doubt there is a kind of emphasis on women.



And the word “reducing” is on each record. It does remind me of those exercises I used to see my mother doing to Jack LaLanne.

“Get Thin to Music”. It’s in relatively good condition to be this old. Copyright 1920. And then in here, copyright 1920 and 1921. And over here I have patent November 14, 1922. All these different dates seem a little odd to me.

You know I need to find out more about Wallace Rogerson. The record label puts Wallace in Chicago. Press Club of Chicago, 1922. Wallace M. Rogerson, President of the Wallace Institute has made “Get Thin to Music,” a byword in America. Wallace gave physical training classes, sent out exercise instructions, and in 1917, recorded his voice with a dictating machine. This aroused so much interest that in a course of a year he set about to manufacture disc records. The Wallace records have found their way into almost every other home in the nation. That’s a major claim. But I don’t see a lot to back it up, I’d have expected to find more on Wallace. The first thing I need to do is hear what’s on these records.

Professor Patrick Huber has written on popular culture in the 1920s.

Have you ever heard of this guy?

Patrick Huber: I have heard of Wallace. In my research I’ve run across ads for the Wallace reducing records. But I’ve never seen the actual physical record or heard them.

Tukufu: Oh, really?

Patrick: No.



Tukufu: Well, let's play one. So talk about what was going on at this time.

Patrick: The period in which these records were manufactured there's a dramatic shift in American attitudes toward the body.

Tukufu: Patrick explains how Americans had been lifting barbells and doing callisthenic exercises since the 19th century. But the emphasis was on fitness, not weight loss.

Patrick: In the 1890s you would have had this linkage between being overweight and wealth.

Tukufu: The notion was that the portly had ample money for food, while the poor stayed lean and hungry. But that attitude changed by the 1920s. Patrick explains how industrialization helped create desk jobs for the middle class and a consumer society.

Patrick: So increasingly this sort of sedentary life style that really begins in the 1920s. And at the same time you also have middle class Americans who enjoy more paid vacations, shorter work weeks, increasing income. And so now they have more time and more money to spend on exercise and physical fitness.

Tukufu: And all this income established a new market. One that Wallace Roberson appeared to notice: women.

Patrick: And there's a new emphasis on this feminine idea of beauty that's emerging in the flapper figure. This rail-thin, flat chested, small hipped, almost



boyish figure that becomes really the new idea of feminine beauty during the 1920s.

Tukufu: So his program was clearly directed at women?

Patrick: This is the new standard of beauty. And so in order to conform to this image women are beginning to count calories and to diet and to try to shed excess weight, or reducing as they call it which is in the title of Wallace's reducing records.

Tukufu: Patrick says Wallace saw an opportunity and took it.

So how successful was he?

Patrick: Well I think I have something that'll help to answer that question. This is a research file from Talking Machine World, which was a trade journal that was aimed at the manufacturers and distributors and retailers of phonographs and phonograph records. In April of 1922 in this ad he is claiming to have sold --

Tukufu: More than 50,000 sets.

Patrick: 50,000 sets of his records. There's a great deal of self promotion I would imagine in that particular advertisement.

Tukufu: So Wallace comes on the scene and he introduces his exercise mode. Was he the first person to do this?



Patrick: Well he claimed he was. This is an ad from June 1922 Talking Machine World and there's a note here that's quite interesting.

Tukufu: Wallace is the originator of the music method of physical exercise. Similar records are imitations which will all be prosecuted with vigor.

So what are the similar records that he's referring to?

Patrick: Well there were at least four other sets of these exercise records from the period 1922, 1923.

Tukufu: So Wallace had competition. But was he the first?

Jan Todd, sports historian and formerly the world's strongest woman meets me at the stark center for physical culture and sports at the University of Texas in Austin.

Check this out, this is how it sounds.

Jan Todd: That is so great.

Tukufu: "That thin physical form."

Jan: I know.

Tukufu: "That makes life worth while."



Jan: I know. This is that theme of, "Let's be thin, let's be slender" He figured out how to market just to women. You know that I think is a sort of new thing.

Tukufu: Was our guy the first person to develop a set of phonograph records for exercise?

Jan: A little bit hard to say for sure. But certainly in the 20s, in like '22, '23, '24, we see a number of other record sets being sold by different people. There's the RCA Victor Company. The pro boxer Gene Tunney who was World Champion comes out with his own set of exercise records in '27. So clearly there was a market for these and clearly somebody had a bright idea that allowed people to use the technology of the day.

Tukufu: Jan says the link between technology and home exercise is the real innovation.

Jan: If you look at the continuum here we have this moment in the 1920s where we have exercise records. And then we hit the 50s and that of course is the era of Jack LaLanne. What made Jack LaLanne really famous was he took a new technology, which was television, and he figured out how to use that technology to do something that nobody else had done. And then we come into the 1980s and of course that's when all of sudden we have video recorders in our houses and that allowed Jane Fonda, with being the primary one, allowed women all of a sudden again to use the very latest technology to do exercise at home. So if Wallace truly is the first person then he is the person who takes the latest technology and figures out how to do something new with that.

Tukufu: But Jan has never seen Wallace's name associated with this innovation.



Jan: I mean I've spent 20 years of my life studying the history of exercise. Particularly women's exercises, what I specialize in. And he completely is off the grid for me. You know how this works. It's what gets saved that's so often what we remember.

Tukufu: Jan says the man everyone remembers is Walter Camp.

Jan: Walter Camp was the football coach at Yale University. A very respected figure in early American history because he was a sort of national hero and really helped establish the game of football.

Tukufu: During World War I, Camp was hired by the military to shape up the troops. Around 1917 he developed a short callisthenic routine called the "Daily Dozen." He eventually develops a program in Washington, D.C. for government officials. By the early 1920s, camp plays off his fame and releases the daily dozen on records. The earliest such records Jan has seen.

Tukufu: So who was first, Camp or Wallace?

Jan: That's a really hard question for me because I'm not sure I really have all the resources here to answer it.

Tukufu: Jan has an idea. Finding out who was advertising their records first could yield some clues.

Jan: We have a pretty good run of Physical Culture which was the main exercise magazine in America at that time. So looking at it might give us some clues as to



who came first. Let's see what we can find. I'm not seeing anything about records.

Tukufu: Wait a minute, Wait a minute. Here's your guy!

Jan: Oh, is that Camp?

Tukufu: Yes.

Jan: Oh it is.

Tukufu: How 10 Minutes Fun Everyday Keeps Me Fit. By Walter Camp.

Jan: When I look at that page there's nothing there to draw me in as a woman. I don't see anything there that says oh, women should read this, at all. So this is August of '21?

Tukufu: August, 1921.

Jan: I'll be darned. Well is Wallace in there?

Tukufu: Whoa! There we go! Get thin to music.

Jan: The Camp doesn't say anything about thinness, slenderness and there it is, Get Thin to Music.

Tukufu: Both of them are advertising in August of 1921 and they're in the same magazine.



How do I find out if he was the first guy?

Jan: I think the person you might want to talk to is Jim Middleton who lives in Battle Creek, Michigan. He's an antique record collector and he's really made a study of the 1920s. He may be able to help.

Tukufu: Jim Middleton of Battle Creek, Michigan has been collecting exercise records since the 1990s.

Tukufu: I'm trying to find out who made these exercise phonograph records first. Wallace or Camp? His collection includes a larger selection of 1920s exercise records than the Library of Congress.

Jim Middleton: All right. This isn't an MP3 it's an MP minus 1.

Tukufu: Okay.

Jim: This is a Columbia phonograph from the early 1920s. Here we have the Wallace collection from my archive. Along with the Walter Camp Daily Dozen.

Tukufu: So this is the Camp collection?

Jim: Absolutely. The Walter Camp Daily Dozen health building exercises comes as a five record set. Along with some exercise directions there. We can even play one of these for you.

Tukufu: Let's check it out.



Jim: Yeah, warm this puppy up.

Tukufu: The martial music seems targeted at men, but the exercises are similar to Wallace's.

Tukufu: So when did he make these?

Jim: According to the copyright notice on the record itself, these were made in 1921.

Tukufu: And see mines it has copyright right here on the cover 1920 but then inside it has copyright 1920 and 1921. And if you look on the album here it says, patented November 14, 1922.

Jim: That would not be terribly unusual for someone who's developing a brand new idea to try to document and essentially show progress of his idea as it comes to full patent.

Tukufu: So how can I find out whose record came first?

Jim: I have one more piece of information that might be helpful to you. Little booklet right here.

Tukufu: Jim believes Wallace's first set of exercise records was pressed by the Columbia Phonograph Company.

Jim: It was very common for the Columbia Phonograph Company to put out what we call vanity pressings. You come to them with an idea for recording, you give



them the money, they open up their factory to you to press your own records. And they kept records of the records. This booklet here on page 56 indicates something very interesting.

Tukufu: One of the first things you said is that you hadn't listened to your grandfather since the 1960s. Why don't we take a listen to his voice?

Mary: I didn't know him so, you know, that's the only way I will know him. So I really appreciate that.

Tukufu: I tell Mary that Wallace claimed to have sold 50,000 records by 1922. But he wasn't the only one trying to corner this market. Walter camp's program was being advertised at the same time.

In trying to provide you an answer, we had to figure out who came first: Camp or your grandfather.

Mary: And?

Tukufu: Here it is. Look at this. A Wallace exercise record from a 1920s set sold with box and manual.

Jim: This means that he printed his records at Columbia in 1920.

Tukufu: Camp's records were printed in 1921.



Jim: This is the proof that I would need to show that he indeed is the first person to market music exercise on record for home use. In other words, the first man to get you fit to music.

Mary: That is fantastic. He was ahead of his time. I can't wait to tell my brother and my whole family will be thrilled to hear that.

Tukufu: In the mid-1930s, Wallace extended his weight-reducing method to a Chicago radio program known by the "Get Thin to Music" slogan. After Wallace's death in 1943, his records stayed in circulation at least until the 1950s, but were not nearly as well known as camp's and almost lost to history.