

# it's our Anniversary 85 YEARS OF ENTERTAINMENT NAPIER FRIVOLITY MINSTRELS

## Spotlight beaming in on Frivs' 85th anniversary

More than 250 former Frivs from throughout New Zealand — as well as three from overseas — are expected in Napier next weekend to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the Napier Frivolity Minstrels.

The celebrations get under way on Friday night with an anniversary dinner at the War Memorial Hall and on Saturday the visitors will be among those in the audience watching a gala performance of the Frivs' 181 minstrel show and pantomime in the Napier Municipal Theatre.

Of the three overseas guests, two are from Australia and one is from the United States. Friv patrons from earlier years will no doubt remember Ivena Potban (now Mrs Ivena Spencer) who was a long-serving Friv with the company between 1940 and 1954. She is now living in California. Geoff Fell, from Brisbane, played drums for the Frivs from 1957 until 1964 and Jill Alsop (now Jill Hlser), also living in Brisbane, was on the stage between 1956 and 1963.

The Frivs opened their 181st season at the Westshore school hall last month before a capacity audience. Already it has played at Pukeora Home for the Disabled at Waipukurau, Tikokino, Taradale, Gisborne and Twyford.

The show traditionally culminates at the Napier Municipal Theatre for a short "city" season in November but this year, because of the jubilee and the forthcoming general election, the company decided to play its Municipal Theatre shows mid-way through the season.

### Back to the country

After shows at the theatre on October 10, 11 (twilight performance), 14 and 17, the cast will head back out of town to complete the country circuit. This will include performances at Patoka, Te Pohue, Eskdale, Puketapu, Clive as well as a show at the Eskdale Municipal Theatre, one at Featherston and Hastings Municipal Theatre, one at Featherston and one at the Frivs' own hall at Ahuriri. The season will end on December 5 with a final performance at the Napier Cosmopolitan Club.

The Napier Frivolity Minstrels' style of entertainment may not be everybody's cup of theatrical tea but their performance record is nothing short of remarkable.

With 85 years behind them, the Frivs are New Zealand's oldest entertainment group and during the years have given a way more than \$300,000 to charity. Their speciality has always been in taking the

show to the audiences in country areas — and they were doing that in the days when there was no television, or even radio for that matter.

Their inimitable style has won them friends wherever they have performed. It is a style that even after all these years still manages to get patrons rocking in their seats with laughter.

### Song and laughter

In the 85 years that have passed since the Frivs first took to the boards at the Eskdale Hall, they have played in just about every centre in Hawke's Bay and in many places beyond. They have gone in to work camps and into small country halls to give people song and laughter.

And the money raised from each show is pumped straight back into the community from which it was given. Special emphasis is placed — fund-raising for schools and on committees that cater for the young. The show is traditionally divided into two sections.

The first half is devoted to a fast-moving minstrel show full of quips, gags and music. Never far from the microphones in these routines are "Mr Interlocutor" and his four minstrel cornermen—Mr Sambo, Mr Bones, Mr Rastus and Mr Moses.

The second half of the programme is always pantomime time. Some years it has been the traditional version of a well-loved story, at other times it has been written just for the Frivs. But whichever pantomime is chosen, it is always delivered in typical Friv style.

This year's pantomime is Cinderella which the Frivs have performed on two earlier occasions, in 1942 and again in 1950.

Cinderella has this year been produced by Margaret Atkins while the minstrel show is in the hands of producer Joy Boston. Edith Ferguson is once again the musical director for the entire production and Alan Spivey the stage manager.



"MR Interlocutor", Alec Wishart, and his four minstrel cornermen (from left) Ken Smith, Roger Williams, Mike Coats and Glyn Lawrence.

## 'Radio Times' show

After 85 years performing in traditional minstrel style shows, the Frivs earlier this year moved into another style of entertainment.

In March they staged the "Frivs' Radio Times Show". Based on television's show of the same name the show was used to launch the

company's new restaurant theatre — for many years the Frivs' own rehearsal hall at Ahuriri.

So successful was the short season that plans are already well in hand to repeat the show early next year.

The society's president, Mr John

Ferguson, said he is confident Radio Times will become a regular feature of the Frivs' activities, not only for its entertainment value but also to raise funds to help cover the ever-increasing cost of getting the annual minstrel show and pantomime on the road.



**WATTIE ALLEN**, an original member of the Frivs — one of the amusing pictures published in "All the World's a Stage".

## Book traces Frivs right back to first performance

A commemorative history has been produced to mark the 85th anniversary of the Napier Frivolity Minstrels.

Entitled "All the World's a Stage", the book was compiled by a life member of the organisation and author of many pantomimes, Mr Sid Henney.

The 68-page edition traces the Frivs from their first performance in the Eskdale Hall, through First World War performances, including details of a fund-raising show for the Belgium relief fund, and up to the present day.

The Frivs have for many years been a mixed company, but it wasn't always like that. The organisation was founded by a small group of men who got together once a week in the Oddfellows Hall, Milton Road, for a singalong.

They contributed one shilling a night to pay for the rent of the hall and after practising for some time they made a public debut at the Eskdale Hall. After a couple of shows the men decided to enlarge the company and shows were later presented at Napier.



**Mr Wally Ireland**, patron and stalwart supporter of the Frivs.

**Mr John Ferguson**, now in his sixth year as president of the Frivs.

Havelock North, Port Ahuriri and Wauroa.

The company remained an all-male affair up until the outbreak of the First World War when membership became so

depleted that several young ladies were recruited to help keep the show on the road.

When the war ended the women were sent on their way but a little over 20 years later, when all but three members of the

company had joined the armed services for the Second World War, the call went out again for women to rally around to keep the show afloat.

From there the Frivs never looked back as the girls firmly established themselves in the organisation.

Over the years the Frivs have played in many New Zealand centres. Although they mainly tour around Hawke's Bay country towns, the company often ventured much further afield, including performances at Christchurch, Wellington, Hamilton and Tauranga.

These day trips are pretty well confined to Hawke's Bay or neighbouring provinces. This year the Frivs have performed at Gisborne and next month they will travel to Featherston for a weekend performance.

## In the limelight

A stalwart of the Frivs since 1918 when he joined the company has been Mr Wally Ireland.

Mr Ireland has been associated with many aspects of the organisation and for 35 years he as an active member on stage.

He retired from regular stage appearances after his role as one of the ugly sisters in the 1950

production of Cinderella.

"But like Sir Harry Lauder, I made about three farewell appearances and it wasn't until several years later that I finally left the footlights behind," said Mr Ireland.

Mr Ireland retired from president of the Napier Frivolity Minstrels in 1972 and the following year he was

elected patron — a position he still holds.

As a comedy artist Wally Ireland performed during his years on stage with such talent of the period as Bill Quarrie, Percy Spiller and Eric Amner.

When pantomimes became a feature of the second half of the Frivs' productions he became well known for his many characterisations.

The items he recalls that gave him the greatest pleasure among a host of comedy roles were: "Why Am I Always the Bridesmaid", "No One Loves a Fairy When She's Old", and "Toni the Swiss Mountaineer".

Mr Ireland received a civic honour from the City of Napier in 1977 for voluntary community service, awarded for his outstanding service in the field of entertainment.



**A SCENE** from this year's pantomime, "Cinderella" showing the fairy godmother (Pam Smith) and Buttons (Roger Williams).