

HISTORICAL ROLLER SKATING OVERVIEW

February/March 1998

Issue No. 62

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Peggy Wallace posing with her roller skating partner Frank Foster during their spectacular "Bolero" production number, one of nine production sequences and thirty-two specialty numbers in the Skating Vanities-Olsen & Johnson extravaganza.

*Gift of Peggy Wallace Boucher
(97.68.17)*



Dear Members,

February and March kick off our annual fundraiser for the New Year! Each year we ask our members and friends for extra support. The 1998 raffle will be held during the Roller Skating Association International's 61st Convention and Trade Show at Coronado Springs in Orlando, Florida. This raffle supports the museum's operating budget, collections care, and exhibits programs. In return for your support, you have a chance to win cash. The raffle system operates by museum board members selling tickets for \$50 each. The tickets are put in a squirrel cage and then on May 6, 1998, 24 tickets are drawn. The first fifteen tickets win \$100 each (\$1500 total). The next four tickets drawn receive \$250 each (\$1000). The following three tickets drawn receive \$500 each (\$1500) and the next ticket wins \$1000. The twenty-fourth ticket drawn is the Grand Prize winner of \$5000 which concludes the \$10,000 worth of cash prizes.

Last year the museum raised \$17,000, and this year, we hope to raise even more. The museum needs your support to continue our operations of traveling exhibits, publications, and collections management. Please help support your museum by sending your personalized raffle ticket on page six. Please note, you need not be present to win, and you can't win if you don't play!

In December, I attended the Roller Skating Association International's grand opening of their new building located in Indianapolis, Indiana. The photograph on the right depicts the ribbon cutting of the new building with RSAI President, David Schafer, with staff, board members, and visitors watching on.

Don't forget, we have an exhibit at the San Francisco International Airport in Lobby B of the South Terminal. The name of the exhibit changed to "A Medley of Skates and Memorabilia" and is remarkable! The museum received photographs from museum member Russ Davis shown on page six in this issue. The exhibition will run until the end of May.

New exhibits in the museum include the "Earliest Roller Skates" and "Patented Roller Skates 1860-82" which feature some of the oldest artifacts in the collection including the museum's recent purchase of 1878 roller skates. Several issues ago, I asked for donations to purchase these skates and several members responded. I would like to thank those who did contribute and hope others will contribute when another opportunity presents itself.

Our condolences are sent to the Rendfrey family who lost Ray Rendfrey after the New Year. Ray operated the Holiday Skating Center in Delanco, New Jersey. Ray started as a rink operator in 1952 and was a strong museum supporter. His son, Ted, now runs the family rink operation.

The feature article this month is about the Skating Vanities. The Vanities was an international touring group on roller skates delighting crowds wherever they went. In the spring, a revised exhibit will be installed with informative labels and more photographs from some recent donors.

Thanks again for your support. Enjoy the newsletter!

Michael Zaidman
Director & Curator



At the Roller Skating Association International grand opening in Indianapolis, Indiana. This new facility will aid this trade association for many years to come.

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Follies on Wheels: The Skating Vanities, 1940-1955

by Sarah Webber

In 1940, an enterprising sports promoter from Minneapolis attended an exhibition roller skating performance in Chicago. One skater in particular caught his eye: a blonde teenager with the pose of a ballerina. The young woman captured Harold Steinman's imagination, and soon after leaving the performance, he hatched an idea for a traveling roller skating extravaganza. The Skating Vanities was born.



A young Gloria Nord during her Good Will Ambassador tour for the *Skating Review*.

*Gift of Richard & Marge McLaughlen
(81.33.497)*

Soon after conceiving the idea of a follies on wheels, Steinman approached the young skater who caught his imagination, Gloria Nordskog. Though still in high school, Nordskog possessed extensive professional experience. Born in Hollywood, California, the youngest of four daughters, Nordskog grew up in the backyard of America's popular entertainment capital. A ballet dancer since a small child, Nordskog entered the vaudeville and nightclub circuits of southern California at age 11, and appeared as a dancer in several Warner Brothers' movie shorts as well as in minor roles in a few "Our Gang" comedies. However, Nordskog was finally 'discovered' while attending the opening of the Roller Bowl in Hollywood with her boyfriend Dick Payton. While roller skating that night, Mickey Rooney bumped into her and knocked her down. After apologizing, Rooney introduced the young couple to the Roller Bowl's owner, Sid Gravman, who, upon noting the ballet-like movements of Nordskog's roller skating, suggested he train her in roller skate dancing.

After instruction at the Roller Bowl, Nordskog went to work in the polished floor shows of the Ambassador and the Royal Palms. Following a performance at the Royal Palms, Edward Smith, a former newspaper man, approached Nordskog and asked her to appear in a new roller skating magazine he planned on starting. Believing that what roller skating needed was an attractive star comparable to Sonja Henie, who greatly increased the popularity of ice skating, Smith decided to promote Nordskog as roller skating's celebrity to boost roller skating's popularity. Smith

shortened Nordskog's name to Nord and showcased her in a series of photo stills depicting a love story between two skaters entitled "Skating Scraps" in his new magazine *Skating Review* before sending her out across the country. Promoting her as a new type of skating professional, Smith sent Gloria Nord around the country, accompanied by her mother, to give exhibitions in rinks, theaters, and cafes as the Good Will Ambassador for his new magazine. Harold Steinman spotted her during one such exhibition in Chicago. Friends since he caused her spill and then introduced her to fame, Mickey Rooney noted that Nord's whirlwind career made his head spin. "If I had introduced her to Louis B. Mayer that night at Gravman's, by this time she'd probably be playing Andy Hardy," Rooney, referring to the movie character he frequently played, commented to *Collier's* in the spring of 1942.

After securing the commitment of Nord, Steinman set off around the country to gather more roller skating talent for his production. The former fight manager toured the United States for two years, visiting many of the nation's numerous roller rinks and picking up talent where he found it. He also advertised and sent letters to rink owners in an effort to build his troupe. Many roller skaters, like Dolly Durkin who quit her job as a secretary, left their desk jobs to join Steinman. However, Steinman also ran into problems as he tried recruiting amateur roller skaters, most of whom refused to give up their amateur status and thus their chance to participate in local and national competitions. This attachment to an amateur status forced Steinman to recruit many non-roller skaters. In addition to recruiting people with at least some roller skating talent promise, Steinman also hired former vaudeville jugglers, acrobats, and comedians whom he likewise taught to roller skate. By 1942, he had toured the



The original Roller Follies of 1942 program.
Gift of George Pickard (81.1.151)



Members of the Skating Vanities performing the fan number during the show's first season, fall 1942.

Gift of Peggy Wallace Boucher (97.68.1)

country long enough to gather sixty performers.

Upon securing over \$100,000, Steinman began production of the first original musical extravaganza on roller skates. Originally called the Roller Follies of 1942, the show opened in Baltimore on January 7, 1942. Steinman referred to his Follies "a new type of entertainment," stating that his show constituted "the first time that a professional roller skating show has ever been assembled and produced to scale and proportion comparable to the best musical revues Broadway has to offer." Though playing to numerous sell-out crowds as it toured the east coast, many experienced roller skaters believed the show lacked professionalism. *Skating Review* called for revisions, and expressed hope that more seasoned roller skating talent could be attracted to the production. Evidently, Steinman and his backers agreed, for the cast took the summer off to revise and strengthen their skating performances.

The show re-opened as the Skating Vanities that September in Chicago. *Skating Review* lauded the improvements made to the production, calling it "a better show from the standpoint of competitive skating than it was last season." The roller skating magazine editors noted the "better grade of skating" among numerous chorus members, as well as among the former vaudeville performers. The editors further praised Nord, commenting on her improved jumps and noting that she obviously worked hard all summer on school figures as well as on the details of competitive roller skate dances. "This year," the magazine concluded, "skaters need have no hesitancy in recommending the Vanities as an example of roller skating at its best."

Chicago newspapers agreed, giving rave reviews. Rinks across the city brought their skating clubs en masse. Playing before sell-out crowds during its final five performances in the Windy City, over 10,000 people were turned away, unable to buy tickets. The show then traveled north to Milwaukee on the 20th of September. After Milwaukee, the Vanities played seven more cities before ending in Dallas on December 13, 1942. By the end of 1942, nearly a quarter of a million people saw the Skating Vanities.

The Skating Vanities quickly drew national attention, both with

roller skaters and the general public. *Newsweek* and the *Post* ran extensive articles on the Vanities in 1942. Edward Smith, whose *Skating Review* introduced Gloria Nord to the Vanities producer, hailed the show as "a great thing for the roller sport," that would "do for rollers what the ice shows have done for ice." Because of this, Smith believed that the Skating Vanities "deserves the whole-hearted support of every skater and every rink." Individually, Smith's former Good Will Ambassador gained the greatest spotlight. Referred to as the "Sonja Henie of Roller Skates," Nord appeared in feature articles in magazines such as *Pic* and *Collier's*.

Though Gloria Nord received the majority of public attention, the Vanities also featured the "Rollerettes." Promoted as the first professional roller skating chorus, Gae Foster, who previously coached the famous line girls at the Roxy Theater in New York City, choreographed the group. The twenty-four girls who made up the Rollerettes shared thirty-nine local, city, and national roller skating titles, and were picked out from among 1,000 applicants for a spot. In addition to such seasoned roller skaters, the Vanities also starred the former vaudeville comedy couple, Buster West and Lucille Page, who made their debut on roller skates with the show, as well as juggler Bobby May, who learned the difficult trick of juggling while roller skating.

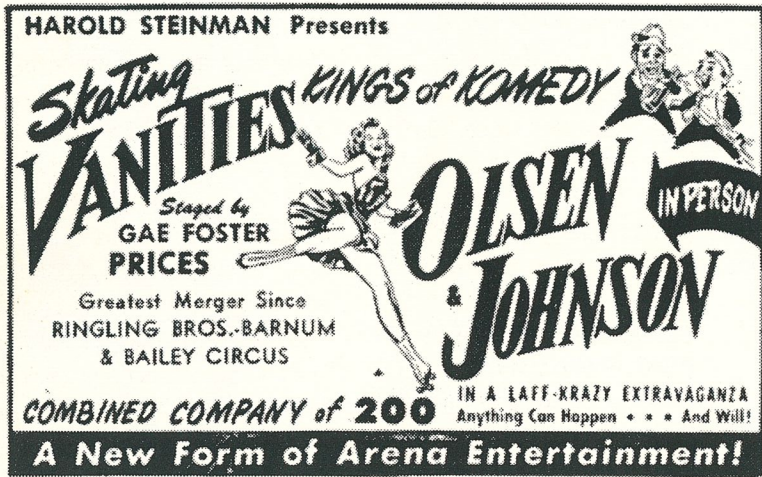
The second season opened in Cleveland in 1943. With World War II now affecting nearly every aspect of life in the United States, the Vanities struggled but managed to continue with their road production, acquiring two freight cars to ferry the equipment, masonite flooring which was laid down for every performance, and costumes. The Skating Vanities continued to entertain Americans during the war, even with twenty-nine of the performers gone into service by 1945. To support their enlisted peers, as well as the millions of other Americans in the service, cast members aided in the selling of war bonds and secured donors for Red Cross Blood Drives, as well as entertained servicemen at army hospitals and camps.

Determined to continue to entertain for the duration of the war, in 1943 the Skating Vanities began its second season, and embarked on an ambitious tour across the United States. That spring, Twentieth Century Fox talent scouts caught the Vanities at Roxy's Theater in New York City, and persuaded the management to break the bookings long enough for a film appearance. That May, the cast of the Skating Vanities traveled to Nord's hometown to appear in the Betty Grable film, "Pin Up Girl." While



Fans in Quebec watch the Skating Vanities performing in September, 1948.

Gift of Peggy Wallace Boucher (97.68.20)



An advertisement for the Skating Vanities-Olsen & Johnson show appearing in the 1953 National Roller Skating Guide.

starring Grable, the movie spotlighted the Vanities in a key skating sequence, with Gloria Nord taking center stage and even given a small speaking part. While Grable did not roller skate in the lavish, Technicolor musical, a May 1944 *Saturday Evening Post* article noted the excellence of those who did, the whirling men and women who provided chorus-routine backgrounds for the picture. The article particularly noted Nord, a "curvesome ballerina on rollers," who achieved "ballet routines on rollers with spectacular effect." *Skating Review* predicted that "Pin Up Girl" would bring even larger crowds to Vanities performances.

Indeed, increased attendance was a result of the movie. In 1944, over 900,000 people saw a Vanities show. By the 1945 season, attendance reached over one million, more than four times the attendance from the first year. While attendance improved, so did the quality of the production. The *Saturday Evening Post* called the show "glittering and breath-taking." Both the *Buffalo Courier Express* and the *Montreal, Canada Standard* stated that the roller skating extravaganza "topped ice shows." *Skating Review* called the 1945 season the best so far, noting that nothing lacked in the way of good roller skating and that the public accepted the Skating Vanities "with the same enthusiasm they have accepted the big ice show."

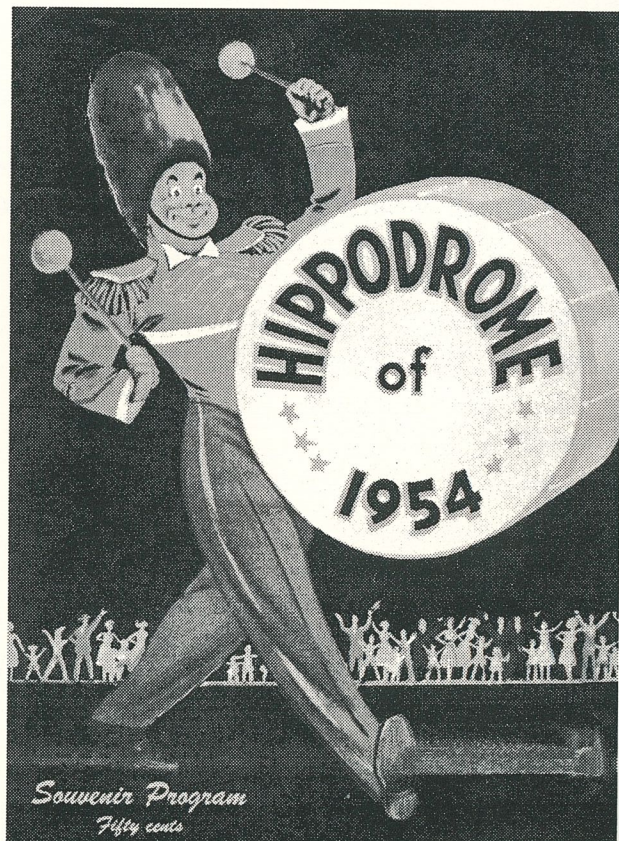
The public continued to embrace the Skating Vanities through several more seasons. By 1947, attendance reached nearly a million and a half as the Vanities toured twenty-eight cities in the United States and Canada. By the late 1940s, the Skating Vanities extended their touring schedule to several European cities, including Paris, London, and Zurich. Skating Vanities cast members, particularly Nord, appeared in Wheaties, Ovaltine, and Camels cigarettes ads, spotlighting their stardom. The Vanities continued to grow, increasing in both the size of the cast as well as the cost of production. Starting in the 1948 season, producing the Vanities cost well over a million dollars.

By the early 1950s, however, the popularity of the Skating Vanities began to decline. In 1951, their ballerina left maple rollers for ice in England. Gloria Nord accepted the starring roller in a *Sleeping Beauty* ice skating production in London. She continued to perform in London, and became known there by the mid 1950s as the "Ice Queen." Peggy Wallace, a world champion figure and accomplished roller skate dancer who had been with the Vanities for a few seasons, took over the starring role after Nord's departure from roller skates.

Along with Wallace, the Skating Vanities also added the "Kings of Comedy," Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson after Nord left. The two comedians,

whose previous work extended from vaudeville to radio to cinema and television, had been partners for thirty years before joining the Vanities. Promoted as the "greatest merger since Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus," the combined cast exceeded two hundred and the performance lasted for nearly three hours. The "New Show Combination That's Making Entertainment History," as another billing stated, traveled to major arenas and auditoriums in the United States and Canada during the 1952-1953 season.

In 1954, Steinman, along with choreographer and director Gae Foster, developed a new production, the Hippodrome of 1954. Though the Skating Vanities, now starring eighteen year old three-time national figure skating champion Nancy Lee Parker, national figure champion Gail Locke, and the acrobatic team of Tony and Caroline Mirelli, headlined, Steinman strayed away from the pure roller skating format for his new production. Hippodrome of 1954 included ballet sequences, Lottie Meyer's "Disappearing Diving Girls," as well as a circus production number and the "dancing Waters," a production of lights, water and music. Seeking to satisfy a broader audience in the mid 1950s, Steinman added various novelty acts such as a unicyclist and Larry Grisold's "Dry Diving Act." As a solo production, the Skating Vanities ended, and soon completely disappeared. Though greatly missed by many, the traveling roller skating production was no longer competitive against the shows flickering into millions of Americans homes.



Souvenir program for the Hippodrome of 1954, which included the Skating Vanities.

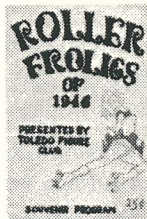
1998 RAFFLE TICKET! DONATIONS

The NMRS's collection has grown each year because of donors like the following people who have contributed to the growth of the museum. If you have an artifact that you would like to donate, please contact the museum before donating. Thank you for your support. The following donors have contributed since November: **Everett D. Bryan, Mr. & Mrs. Attilio Carbone, John Chrien, Tom & Sylvia Costlow, Russ Davis, John & Barbara Dayney, Margot Hager, Fred Lutz, Sam Nieswizski, Jim Pollard, Lou Ann Rinker, Irene Robertson, Roller Skating Association International, Jean-Ann Ruppel, Steve Schwartz, Gregg Smith, Vantage Press, Margaret Walker, & Tawne Weber.**

Margot Hager was the first to receive the Earl & Inez Van Horn trophy (right) in 1940 and this donation is now in the new exhibit on Artistic Skating.



John Chrien donated several souvenir programs (below):



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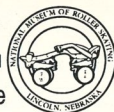
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Donation \$50. Total of \$10,000 in cash prizes. Grand prize \$5,000! Drawing to take place, May 6, 1998, at the RSA International convention during the President's Dinner. Ticket holders need not be present to win. All proceeds benefit the museum.



The National Museum of Roller Skating is a publicly supported, charitable organization.



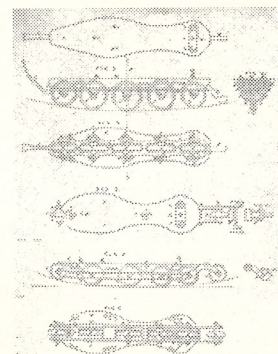
Tawne Weber donated her artistic costume from the National Championships from 1990 when she placed second with Jim Dulla in Senior Dance.



Gregg Smith donated his first place outfit from the 1988 World Artistic Championship.



Sam Nieswizski donated several patent designs including the Volito skate invented by John Tyers in 1823.



Russ Davis took these photographs on a recent trip through the San Francisco Airport of the museum's exhibit, "A Medley of Skates & Memorabilia."





The NMRS would like to thank these members who have either renewed or *joined* the museum since our last issue. Your support is appreciated!

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Did You Know?

MEMBERSHIP QUIZ RESULTS

Besides winning two Elementary Pairs National Championships in 1971 and 1972 with Robin Miller, who is this man and what movie did he star in?

Answer: Jim Bray starred in Roller Boogie.

Winners: Heather Martin and Sam Nieswizski.

Do You Know?

NEXT MEMBERSHIP QUIZ

1939 was the first US National Amateur Artistic Championship. What rink hosted the dance competition?

The first two correct answers will win a museum mug from the museum store. Please mail your answers to the museum.



Do you have roller skating memories?

While photographs may say a thousand words, defining captions are still necessary. If you have recollections about roller skating at a particular roller rink, watching the Skating Vanities or the Roller Derby, attending Nationals, or roller hockey experiences before 1970, please let us know! We would love to hear your memories! Write us, send an audio tape, fax, or e-mail us.

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Membership includes a subscription to the member's newsletter, *Historical Roller Skating Overview*, 10% off museum store items, a membership card, and a copy of *The History of Roller Skating*, ISBN 0-9658192-0-5.

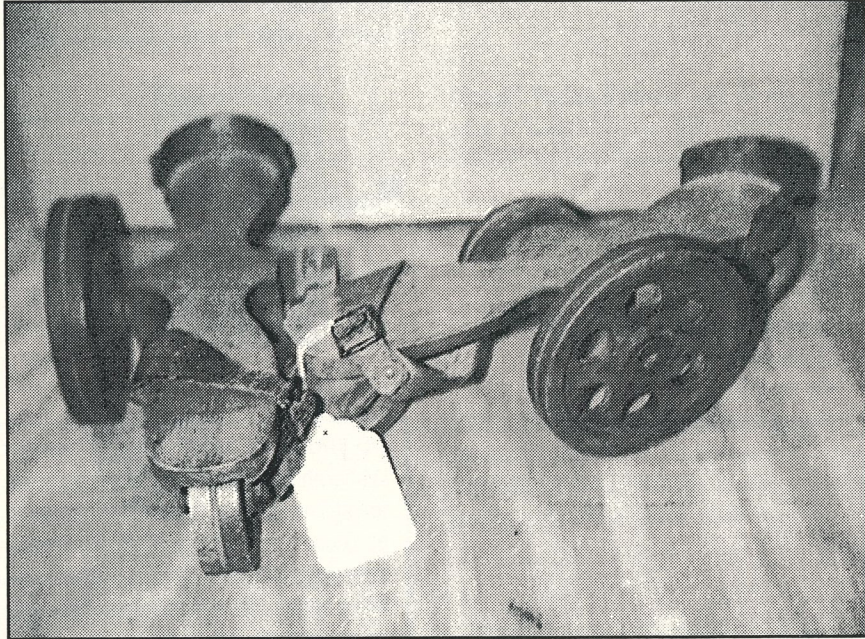
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tours of the museum the first Friday
of every month at 12:15 p.m.!**

QUIZ & MEMBERS JOIN HERE!



The improved parlor skate patented September 24, 1878 by Washington Parker Gregg, Boston, Massachusetts. This is the third edition of the original parlor skate from 1865. This skate has a large middle wheel arranged on the outer side of the plate, in combination with a smaller middle wheel arranged on the inner side of the plate supposedly to turn easier.

These skates are a new addition to the collection. These skates are now in the collection because of the support from museum members: Bert Anselmi, Charlotte Groves, Mills Lynn, Charles Stiles, and Maurice & Gordon Van Roekel (98.1).



BUY YOUR 1998 MUSEUM RAFFLE TICKET ON PAGE SIX!

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