

7700 "A" Street, P.O. Box 81846

Lincoln, Nebraska 68501

Phone (402) 489-8811

ISSN 0896-1379

Historical Roller Skating **OVERVIEW**

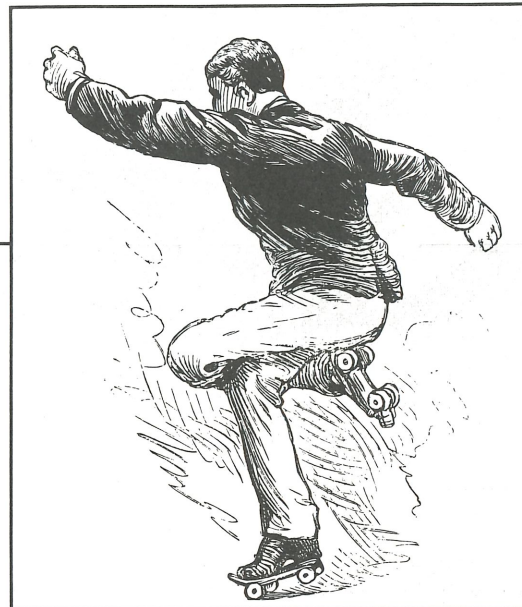
Issue No. 27 September 1988

The First Roller Skating Craze — the 1880s

The popularity of roller skating in the United States has repeatedly risen and then declined. During the decade of the 1880s, it flourished among all segments of the population throughout the country, signaling the first roller skating "craze." But roller skating was not alone in this new-found public acceptance.

Before the mid-19th century, this country had virtually

no organized sports as we know them today. Few people played outdoor games. With the beginnings of industrialization and an increasing urban population, alarmed observers found the national health deteriorating because of a general lack of exercise. The noted essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of "the invalid habits of this country."





NEW YORK CITY.—OPENING OF THE OLYMPIAN ROLLER-SKATING RINK, ON BROADWAY, BETWEEN FIFTY-SECOND AND FIFTY-THIRD STREETS, JANUARY 19TH.—FROM A SKETCH BY A STAFF ARTIST.—SEE PAGE 395.

The Olympian Roller Skating Rink, located on Broadway between 52nd and 53rd Streets in New York City, opened on January 19, 1885. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 31, 1885.

A campaign began to break down the prejudice against sports as an idle diversion and to encourage more active participation in outdoor games. The editor of the widely read magazine *Harper's Monthly* (XIII, 1856) asserted that failure to participate in sports had turned young Americans into "a pale, pasty-faced, narrow chested, spindled-shanked, dwarfed race—a mere walking manniken...."

In the years immediately following the Civil War, participation in games and sports gradually became fashionable among the wealthy. As activities which could appeal to everyone were invented or developed, the general public followed the style-setters. Baseball, croquet, archery, lawn tennis, and bicycling joined roller skating among the sports whose popularity climbed.

James Plimpton's invention of the "rocking action" skate in 1863 laid the foundation for the acceptance of roller skating. By promoting skating as a respectable pastime, Plimpton's franchised rinks catered to the elite, who soon made it a fashionable pursuit. Some of his competitors, including Horace Bigelow and Samuel Winslow,

spread skating and skating rinks to many more people eager to adopt the newest fad.

The contemporary press was filled with notices of new rinks and accounts of the activities within them. The *New Haven (Conn.) Register* of May 1, 1888, reprinted items appearing in that city's newspapers a century earlier. A rink or "skating parlor" opened on Dwight Street in 1880. "Parlor skating or roller skating," reported one paper, "has the benefits of a gentle and health-giving exercise, without any of the objectionable features which attend the dance of today."

An instructor at the rink showed impressive skills. According to one writer, "It apparently makes no difference to him whether one foot or both feet are on the floor, or whether he skates on his heels or on his toes, and though he seems to tie his legs up into double-bow knots and apparently loses his feet in a labyrinth of mysterious movements, it seems an impossibility for him to lose his balance and fall."

Reportedly one secret of the rink's success was to follow Plimpton's practice. "The manager of the rink,"

said one newspaper, "has adopted a wise policy in making the assemblies, which are held daily, select affairs, and by reserving the right of admission to the rink to only unobjectionable parties has secured a class of patronage to which no lady or gentleman can take exception.

"Therefore, the utmost sociability and the fullest and freest enjoyment prevails, and there is just enough exclusiveness to give to the assemblies the fascination which young people who get into society thoroughly enjoy."

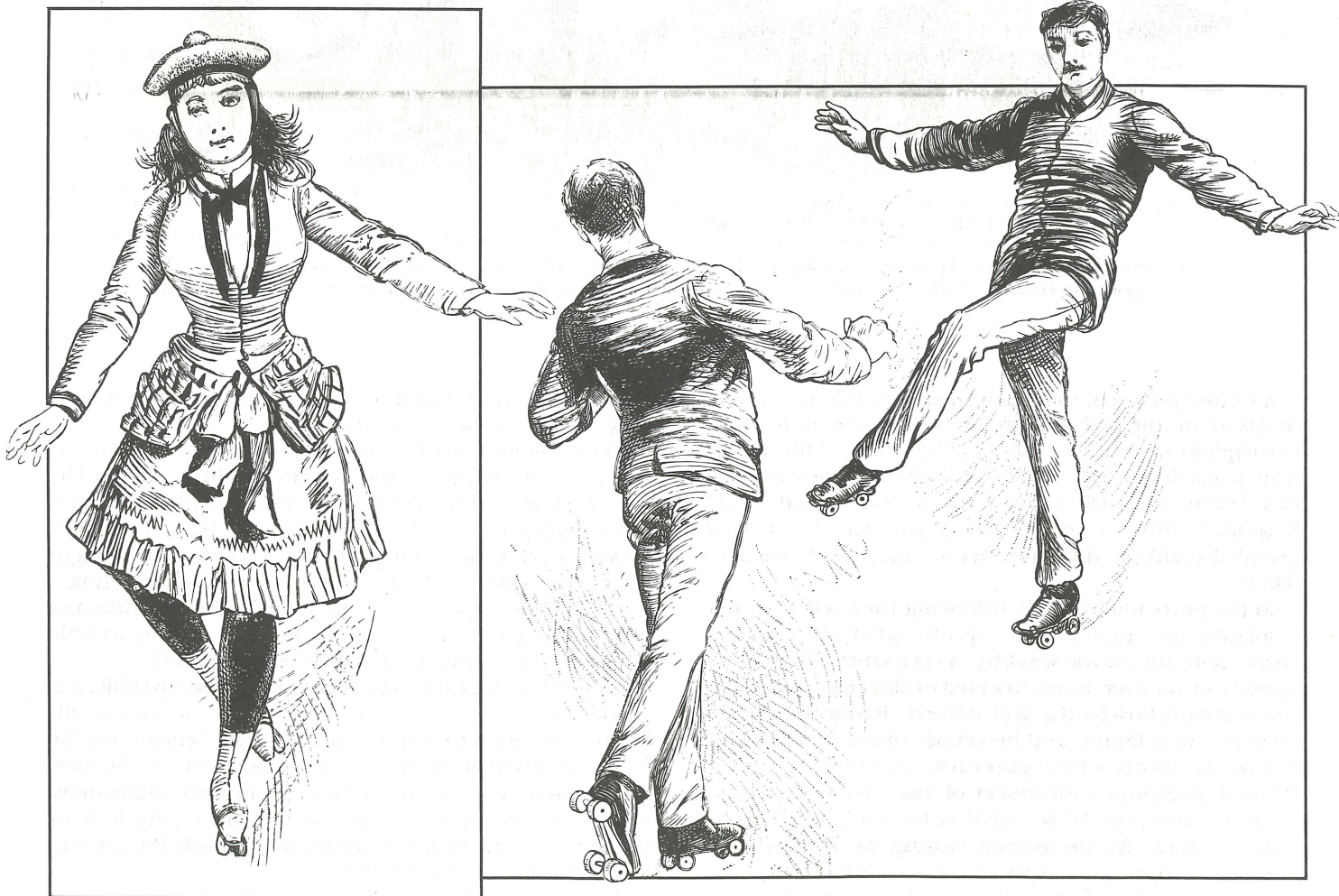
Recreation on roller skates was not confined to the East Coast. The editor of the *Friend (Neb.) Telegraph* told this tale on himself in the March 4, 1884, issue: "The citizens of our village lost a grand treat Wednesday when they missed seeing us take a tumble at the skating rink. Howsoever, the big grease spot at the west end of the hall is supposed to mark the exact spot. We expect to make another trial in the near future when we have sufficiently recovered. Let everyone be on hand to observe the fun and have a good laugh."

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper reported on the opening of the Olympian Rink in New York City by observing that "roller skating seems to have become a mania with both old and young. Its fascinations are indescribable, and, unlike most other sports, it is highly recommended by both physicians and clergymen. It has proved seriously detrimental to liquor and billiard saloons; the youth of today, instead of spending his evenings in playing 'pool for the drinks,' can now be seen wheeling around the skating floor with some lady com-

panion, and instead of coming from his sport with callow and whitened complexion, he emerges from this exhilarating exercise with the glow of health in every feature." (January 31, 1885)

By the early 1890s, the popularity of roller skating diminished, and the period of the first craze ended. An article from the *Adams County Democrat*, published in Hastings, Neb., on November 21, 1919, traces the not unfamiliar story of a former roller skating rink. "H. Gaudreault, the stockman who recently bought the Knapp farm just west of the city, purchased the old Stanner livery barn at the corner of Fourth Street and Hastings Avenue, and Monday workmen began tearing the old building down, the lumber in same to be used by Mr. Gaudreault in the erection of a stock sales pavilion of which more detailed mention is made elsewhere in this paper.

"This old barn has been one of the ancient landmarks in the city. It was first built as a skating rink when the skating rink craze spread all over Nebraska in the 80s, later converted into a livery stable. Dave Bigelow bought it on a mortgage in 1896 when county clerk and sold it to Mr. Stanner for something less than \$1700. Mr. Stanner engaged in the livery business and continued at it until the automobile put the liverymen out of business a few years ago. Mr. Stanner recently sold the property to a holding company of our businessmen, this company having in view utilizing the site for a city auditorium."



From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 31, 1885.

Farmer Stebbins on Rollers

by Will Carleton

Dear Cousin John,
We got here safe—my worthy wife an' me
An' put up at James Sunnyhopes'—a pleasant place to be;
An' Isabel, his oldest girl, is home from school just now,
An' pets me with her manners all her young man will
allow;
An' his good wife has monstrous sweet an' culinary
ways:
It is a summery place to pass a few cold winter days.

Besides, I've various cast-iron friends in different parts
o' town,
That's always glad to have me call whenever I come
down;
But yesterday, when 'mongst the same I undertook to
roam,
I could not find a single one that seemed to be to home!
An' when I asked their whereabouts, the answer was,
"I think,
If you're a-goin' down that way, you'll find 'em at the
Rink."

I asked what night the Lyceum folks would hold their
next debate
(I've sometimes gone an' helped 'em wield the cares of
church an' state);
An' if protracted meetin's now was holdin' anywhere
(I like to get my soul fed up with fresh celestial fare);
Or when the next church social was; they'd give a
knowin' wink,
An' say, "I b'lieve there's nothin' now transpirin' but the
Rink."

"What is this 'Rink'?" I innocent inquired, that night at
tea.
"Oh, you must go," said Isabel, "this very night with me!
And Mrs. Stebbins she must go, an' skate there with us
too!"
My wife replied, "My dear, just please inform me when
I do.
But you two go." An' so we went; an' saw a circus there,
With which few sights I've ever struck will anyways
compare.

It seems a good-sized meetin'-house had given up its
pews
(The church an' pastor has resigned, from spiritual blues.)
An' several acres of the floor was made a skatin' ground,
Where folks of every shape an' size went skippin' round
an' round:
An' in the midst a big brass band was helpin' on the fun,
An' everything was gay as sixteen weddin's joined in one.

I've seen small insects crazy like go circlin' through the
air,
An' wondered if they thought some time they'd maybe
get somewhere;
I've seen a million river-bugs go scootin' round an'
round,

An' wondered what 'twas all about or what they'd lost or
found;
But men an' women, boys an' girls, upon a hard-wood
floor,
All whirlin' round like folks possessed, I never saw
before.

An' then it all came back to me, the things I'd read and
heard
About the rinks an' how their ways was wicked an'
absurd:
I'd learned somewhere that skatin' wasn't a healthy thing
to do;
But there was Doctor Saddlebags—his fam'ly with him
too.
I'd heard that 'twasn't a proper place for Christian folks
to seek;

Old Deacon Perseverance Jinks flew past me like a streak.
Then Sister Is'bel Sunnyhopes put on a pair o' skates,
An' started off as if she'd run through several different
States.
My goodness! How that gal showed up! I never did opine
That she could twist herself to look so charmin' an' so
fine;
And then a fellow that she knew took hold o' hands with
her,
A sort o' double crossways like, an' helped her, as it
were.

I used to skate; an' 'twas a sport of which I once was
fond.
Why, I could write my autograph on Tompkins' saw-mill
pond.
Of course to slip on runners, that is one thing, one may
say,
An' movin' round on casters is a somewhat different
way;
But when the fun that fellow had came flashin' to my
eye,
I says, "I'm young again; by George, I'll skate once more
or die!"

A little boy a pair o' skates to fit my boots soon found—
He had to put 'em on for me (I weigh three hundred
pound);
An' then I straightened up an' says, "Look here, you
younger chaps,
You think you're runnin' some'at past us older heads,
perhaps.
If this young lady here to me will trust awhile her fate,
I'll go around a dozen times an' show you how to skate."

She was a niceish plump young gal, I'd noticed quite a
while,
An' she reached out her hands with 'most too daughterly
a smile;
But off we pushed, with might an' main—when all to
once the wheels



Farmer Stebbins at the Rink. From *Harper's Weekly*, July 25, 1885.

Departed suddenly above, an' took along my heels;
My head assailed the floor as if 'twas tryin' to get
through,
An' all the stars I ever saw arrived at once in view.

'Twas sing'lar (as not quite unlike a saw-log there I lay)
How many of the other folks was goin' that same way;
They stumbled over me in one large animated heap,
An' formed a pile o' legs an' arms not far from ten foot
deep;
But after they had all climbed off, in rather fierce
surprise,
I lay there like a saw-log still—considerin' how to rise.

Then dignified I rose, with hands upon my ample waist,
An' then sat down again with large and very painful
haste;
An' rose again, and started off to find a place to rest,
Then on my gentle stomach stood, an' tore my meetin'
vest;
When Sister Sunnyhopes slid up, as trim as trim could be,
An' she an' her young fellow took compassionate charge
o' me.

Then after I'd got off the skates, an' flung 'em out o'
reach,
I rose, while all grew hushed an' still, an' made the
followin' speech:
"My friends, I've struck a small idea (an' struck it pretty
square),
Which physic'ly an' morally will some attention bear:
Those who their balance can preserve are safe here any
day;
An' those who can't, I rather think, had better keep
away."

Then I limped out, with very strong unprecedented
pains,
An' hired a horse at liberal rates to draw home my
remains;
An' lay abed three days, while wife laughed at an' nursed
me well,
An' used up all the arnica two drug stores had to sell;
An' when Miss Is'bel Sunnyhopes said, "Won't you skate
once more?"
I answered, "Not while I remain on this terrestrial
shore."

From *Harper's Weekly*, July 25, 1885.

Hall of Fame Members



April Allen	Debra Coyne LaBriola and John LaBriola	Joan LaBriola Thorn and Robert LaBriola	Nancy Lee Parker
Laurene Anselmi Patton	Randy Dayney	Joan Lidstone Watson and James Lidstone	Edward Perales
Fleurette Arseneault Jeffers and Dan Littel	Natalie Dunn Taylor	Gail Locke Walker and Bill Pate	Jane Puracchio Butera
Linda Jo Baker	Bill Ferraro	John Matejec	Marilyn Roberts and Gary Castro
Pat Bergin	George Grudza	Tim McGuire	Gail Robovitsky Sherman and Ron Robovitsky
Johnny "Preacher" Black	Richard Gustafson	Karen Mejia and Raymond Chappatta	Carolyn Slinger Porter
Phyllis Bulleigh Alley and Cecil Davis	Sylvia Haffke	Rick Mullican	Tim Small
Patricia Ann Carroll Healy	Michael Jacques	J. W. Norcross, Jr.	Shirley Snyder Weaver
Linda Mottice Clemons and Adolph Wacker	Bettie Jennings and Cliff Shattenkerk	Evelyn Olson	Walter Stakosa
Jack Courtney	Arthur "Buzz" Kerwin	Jane Pankey Horne and Richard Horne	David Tassinari
	Leon Krimm		Dickey Thibodeaux
	Nancy Kromis		Charles Wahlig

Hall of Fame Nominations Sought

Among the highlights of the recent National Championships were the ceremonies inducting Singles champion Tim McGuire and Speed champion Tim Small into the USAC/RS Amateur Athletes Roller Skating Hall of Fame. Next year, other skaters will be selected for this honor by the USAC/RS Board of Directors.

To be eligible for nomination to the Hall of Fame in 1989, the individual or team must have contributed significantly to their sport as an amateur skater (coaching and teaching accomplishments are excluded); their accomplishments as amateur competitors must have been innovative or exceptional, and of lasting duration; and the individual or team must have retired from active competition by the end of the 1983-84 season (ending with the 1984 World Championships).

The museum conducts research and assembles information on Hall of Fame candidates for consideration by the USAC/RS Board. If you would like to recommend someone for election, send a letter to museum director Anne Diffendal explaining why you think this individual or team is worthy of the honor, giving a short summary of their accomplishments and contributions to the sport. Please send your suggestions by December 1, 1988, so that they can be included in the 1989 selection process.

Roller Derby Remembered

An article on the Transcontinental Roller Derby in the March 1988 issue of *Historical Roller Skating Overview* prompted two readers to describe their experiences of the early days of this spectacle.

Rose Martin of Detroit recalls that "it was our sister Clarice Martin Gerych who won the first Transcontinental Roller Derby in Chicago in 1935. My sister Marge Martin McLaughlen & brother Roland Martin & myself went to the Coliseum to see Col. Seltzer's Roller Derby & watch our big sister. She & her 2nd partner Bernie McKay won. Skating the distance routed from New York City to L.A."

Veteran marathon skater Bill Henning also participated in the first Roller Derby. He writes from Chicago, "Just got the news in regard to Roller Derby which started in 1935 in Chicago at the Coliseum. I was one of the skaters at the start and also [the] oldest skater at the time. I was 35 years old then but I only skated in Derby for 5 years. We have a club now called the Roller Derby Has Beens and just had our 51st skating party here in Chicago, and every year we go to different states to have our conventions. I am the oldest member at 94 years of age.... I started to roller skate in 1905 at Riverview Roller Rink here in Chicago. I also was manager of 4 roller rinks both in Chicago and Baltimore. In 1923 I won my first world championship in a 21 day meet in Baltimore.... I enjoyed the story... about Ma Bogash and her son Billy who really was a good skater and put on a good show every time he was in the Derby shows...."

Curator's Corner

Contributors of \$5 receive their choice of the National Museum of Roller Skating

Pin or Patch (please specify)

Contributors of \$15 or more become honorary members of the Museum and receive a membership pin and card, the quarterly newsletter, and free admission to the museum.

<input type="checkbox"/> Individual/Family	\$ 15.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Patron	\$250.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Donor	\$ 50.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor	\$500.00 +
<input type="checkbox"/> Associate Patron	\$100.00		

Check or money order enclosed payable to the National Museum of Roller Skating.

Visa or Mastercard

Card number: _____ Exp. _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Please charge the card indicated for 12 monthly payments of \$ _____ each (minimum of \$10 per month).

Contributions are tax-deductible.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip _____

Mail to:

The National Museum of Roller Skating,
PO Box 81846, Lincoln, NE 68501

National Museum of Roller Skating Board of Trustees:

Bert Anselmi, President, Pontiac, MI; Robert Bollinger, Portland, OR; Marvin Facher, Montclair, NJ; Chester Fried, South River, NJ; Mills Lynn, Charleston, WV; Joe Nazzaro, Jr., Euless, TX; George Pickard, Lincoln, NE; James Turner, Racine, WI; Richard Young, Warwick, RI.

Anne Diffendal, Director and Curator.

Historical Roller Skating Overview is mailed quarterly to the honorary members of the National Museum of Roller Skating. Contributions from readers are welcome. Address inquiries and comments to the Museum Director.

Museum Trustees' Change

Trustees W.C. Ludasher of Eddington, Pa., and Keith Ware of Chicago, Ill., have retired from the museum Board. Many thanks to them for their time and energy devoted to preserving roller skating's heritage. Welcome to new members Mills Lynn of Charleston, W.Va., and Joe Nazzaro, Jr., of Euless, Texas. The museum will benefit from their ideas as we continue to try and improve services and develop new programs.

National Championships

We greeted many old friends and made some new ones during the USAC/RS National Artistic and Indoor Speed Championships, which were held again this summer in Lincoln. The museum receives, by far, its largest number of visitors in this two-week period. The exhibits of skates from the 19th century and from Vaudeville or other stage shows generated the most interest. Pictures and descriptions of the accomplishments of members of the Amateur Athletes Hall of Fame were examined with care. A number of people took the opportunity to review back issues of periodicals and competitive programs in the museum's collections. Some found their own names or pictures in print to show to their children or their grandchildren. Others looked for mention of their teachers or coaches, friends, or relatives. Some compared the changing styles in competitive costumes through the years. Many viewed videotapes of previous world and national championships. A few took the opportunity to donate items to the museum collections or to make financial contributions.

Memorials

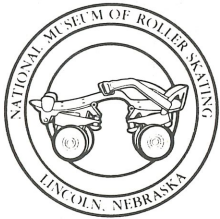
The museum has recently received a number of memorial donations: from the staff of The Rolladium in Pontiac, Mich., in memory of artistic teacher Judith Michael; from John Milligan in memory of California teacher Ray Hough; and from Marian D. McCormick, Chester and Marjorie Hildebrand, Michael Brooslin, Robert Bollinger, Annelie Anderson, John Milligan, Leita Couey, and Ronald L. Ecklund in memory of long-time RSROA staff member Maggie Eng.

The Museum in Spain

Skates and copies of illustrations from the museum collections are on display at the World Roller Hockey Championship and the Congress of the Federation Internationale de Roller Skating (FIRS), held in La Coruna, Spain, September 7-11. Museum Trustee and USAC/RS Executive Director George Pickard took with him to Europe two skates with wooden plates and wheels, both made in the United States in the 1880s. One employs the "rocking action" mechanism invented in 1863 by James Plimpton; the other does not. The graphic material includes 1880s woodcuts, one showing a roller polo (an early name for roller hockey) game in progress.



The first roller skating craze in the United States occurred in the 1880s. Illustrations with skating themes appeared frequently in publications of the day, such as this one from *Harper's Young People*, April 26, 1881.



7700 "A" Street
P.O. Box 81846
Lincoln, Nebraska 68501

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
LINCOLN, NE
Permit No. 599

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED