

## Historical Roller Skating

# OVERVIEW

Issue No. 3

September 1982

### CURATOR'S CORNER

First of all, thanks to all of you who sent in comments about the newsletter. Several of you addressed the idea of reprinting articles from the 1940's SKATING REVIEW dealing with the "basics" of roller skating. Although we were unable to include any of these in this issue, several will be appearing soon. The museum also has a large collection of other periodicals, from which we intend to print several of the more interesting items.

My thanks also to those members who managed to convince others to join in our effort. Although our membership is now over 250 people, we still need your help if the museum is to continue developing. To a large extent, our success depends on the participation of the members. In addition, I would appreciate it if you would let me know if you run across objects and materials which could be of interest to our collections. Beginning in the upcoming issues of SKATE and ROLLER SKATING BUSINESS, we will be publishing a "want" list as part of the Museum Update column.

During the next year, we hope to be able to publish a collections catalogue of some of the skates in the museum collection. The format will most likely follow that used in the story on 2 and 3 wheel skates contained in this issue. Other publications might include an updated, comprehensive history of roller skating (both the industry and the sport), and perhaps a limited edition set of 19th Century roller skating prints. However, all these plans are dependant upon the response from both the members and the roller skating community as a whole. So, please let me know if these items would be of interest to you.

Lastly, a few notes about museums which have roller skates on display. The Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington currently has a pair of 1829 English "Volito" skates, and a pair of Plimpton's original 1863 skates on display. We are currently working on an arrangement to bring all of the Smithsonian's skates here to Lincoln. Several of the skates from our collection will be on display at the Chicago Historical Society from December to June 1983 in the exhibit "Chicago Toys & Games" If any of you know of other museums that have roller skates in their collections, please drop me a note.

**Michael W. Brooslin,**  
Director & Curator

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The newsletter of the National Museum of Roller Skating is available only through membership in the museum. Minimum annual contribution is \$15. The newsletter is published 4 times a year to inform the museum's honorary members of happenings at the museum and about aspects of roller history. Although the museum cannot pay for articles, contributions by the readers are welcome. All articles, inquiries or comments should be sent to the Museum Curator.

## HARLEY DAVIDSON

Harley Davidson, World Champion roller skater, was in no way associated with the motorcycle of the same name. Mr. Davidson did indeed tell many people that this was true, mostly for publicity purposes, which may account for the fact that this mistaken belief persists today. The Harley Davidson Motor Company was named after the firm's founders: William S. Harley, William A. Davidson, Walter Davidson, and Arthur Davidson. None of these Davidsons were related to Harley.



Born in 1861, Harley Davidson came from a family of skaters. Almost the entire family learned to skate on ice, on Lake Como in St. Paul, Minnesota. Harley's father, John X. Davidson was considered by many to be one of the best skaters in Ohio before he moved west. Harley, his brother Payson, and his sisters Bertie and Fannie learned to ice skate first, although they were all accomplished roller skaters. Harley's first time on rollers was in 1884. Harley's sister Mabel was the first of the Davidsons to roller skate professionally, making a tour of several western states at age 10 with her father. Like others in the family, Mable later turned to ice skating. With his sister Fannie and his brother John F., Harley toured Europe in 1909, giving exhibitions of both ice and roller skating. John F. Davidson also gave up the rollers for ice skating, performing with Ethel Dean in London. John is perhaps best known as one of the few ice "stilt" skaters. Bertie Davidson retired from roller skating to persue an acting career, appearing on Broadway in 1910 under the stage name "Gilbertie Learcock".

Harley Davidson first appeared on the competitive skating scene when he defeated Mr. Joseph F. Donohugue of Newburgh, NY, on the Hudson River to become the American Ice Skating Champion. As a ice speed skater, Davidson set several American records. In 1904 Harley turned to roller skating, entering the ranks of the professional speed skating circuit in 1905. It is for his accomplishments as a roller racer that his is best remembered. His most memorable race was the World's Professional Championships of 1909, held at the Olympia Rink in London, England on February 26. The competition began with 150 skaters, who required races in 16 rinks to narrow the field down to 5 for the finals. Harley, his brother John, Allie Moore from Michigan, and 2 British skaters qualified to compete for the title. There were over 14,000 spectators on hand for the event, the largest crowd to witness a roller skating race up to that time. Harley won the race, earning the \$2000 purse and a diamond studded platinum medal valued at over \$500 (then). During the next three years, Davidson raced in America, Canada and in Europe, meeting the best speed skaters of his time in challenge matches, and usually emerging victorious. Among those who raced against Harley were Fred Martin, Arthur G. Eglington, Roland Cioni, Frank Bacon, Rodney Peters and Jesse Carey.

In 1913 Davidson again went overseas, touring Australia. In addition to competing in several match races, all of which he won, Harley gave exhibitions of trick and artistic roller skating. In common with many of the other professional roller racers of that era, Davidson performed fancy skating when not actually racing. While in Australia, Harley met Miss Ray Collins of Sydney, an accomplished ice skater who became his partner in 1916 when Davidson again took up ice skating.

From 1916, Harley gradually retired from roller racing, and turned to artistic and fancy skating, both on ice and on rollers. Although he occasionally competed in professional speed races into the early 1920's, Davidson was consistently defeated by the younger skaters like Fred Martin and Roland Cioni. Harley retired completely from skating when he was in his early sixties.

Although extremely successful, roller racing and artistic exhibitions did not give Harley financial security. Unlike the other professionals of that time, Davidson did not have a rink managing job to fall back upon. However, his former colleagues rallied to support the greatest professional roller racer of all time, and in the 1940's were able to raise funds for him through several testimonial dinners. During his skating career, Harley Davidson started over 4,000 races and was victorious 3,035 times, in addition to numerous 2nd and 3rd place finishes. He won over 200 medals along with silver cups, trophies, awards and plaques. He also set 6 world records in roller skating (listed on the back page of the newsletter). Harley Davidson was also a well-rounded athlete, being accomplished in the sports of boxing, lacrosse, wrestling, running, baseball, swimming and bicycling. Harley competed as a professional bicycle racer in the late 1890's.

In 1917 Harley was asked to what he attributed his success as a speed skater. He felt it was due to "good living, eating plain foods, and regular habits". All this aside, hard work also had a lot to do with his accomplishments; Davidson regularly did over 50,000 mile of road running to limber up for a professional racing season.

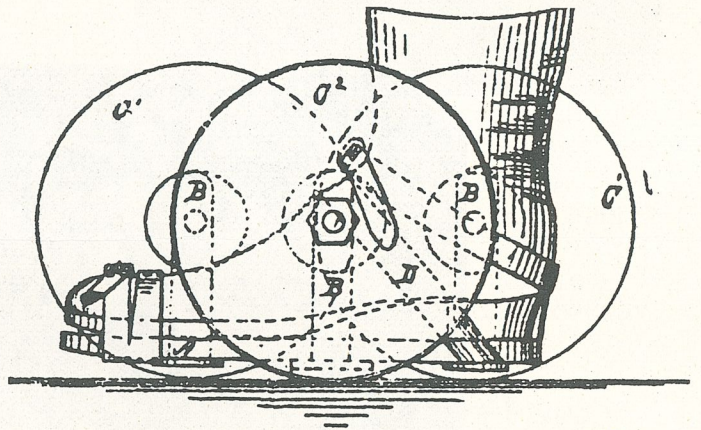
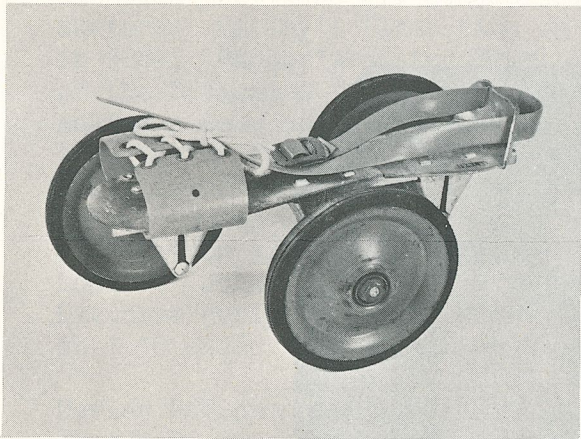


Above - Contestants in the 2 mile professional championships held at the St. Louis Jai-Alai arena in 1911. The 2 men in overcoats standing at far left and right were the owners of the arena, which later became the Winter Garden ice rink. Standing, left to right: Lawrence Sibenaler, 1910 OK state champion; Rodney Peters of St. Louis; McKinley of Chicago; G. Edwards & G. Peters of St. Louis; Jack Fotch of Michigan; and Harley Davidson. Middle row: Fred Martin, 1910 Pacific Coast champ; Fred Tyrell of Chicago, 1909 IL state champ; "Midge" Sherman & Louis Bradbury of Kansas City; and Jesse Carey, European & 1915 World Amateur champ. Bottom row; Roland Cioni, World Professional champ 1914-21; Frank Bacon of Pittsburg, 1908 "Billboard" champ; and Ray O'Neil, St. Louis City champ 1910-16.

## TWO & THREE WHEEL ROLLER SKATES

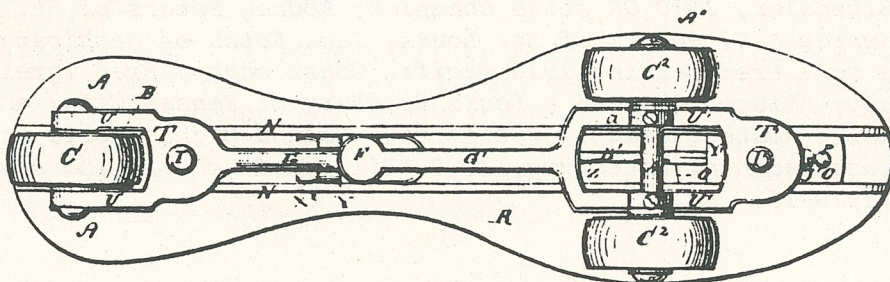
Since the invention of the modern "rocking" roller skate by James L. Plimpton in 1863, others have continually sought to improve upon his concept. Many inventors have tried this by either adding to or subtracting from the basic roller skate of four wheels. From the 1860's, roller skate designs have been patented with a few as two wheels, and as many as 16 wheels. The two and three wheel versions however, seem to have been the most popular deviation from the standard skate. The inventors of these skates believed that turning would be made easier if one had to balance on only 2 or 3 wheels. They were proven right in their assumptions, but for the average roller skater the skates were impractical to use. This was due to the exceptional balance needed to skate with these, especially in a straight line. Because 2 and 3 wheel skates were harder to use and become proficient with, they never achieved the popularity of the standard 4 wheel model, although there are several firms which still manufacture limited numbers of them today. The more modern versions of the 2 and 3 wheel skate were designed with ice skaters in mind, so they could train during the summer months. According to the frequency of manufacture, the 2 and 3 wheel skates were most popular during the time from 1880 through 1910.

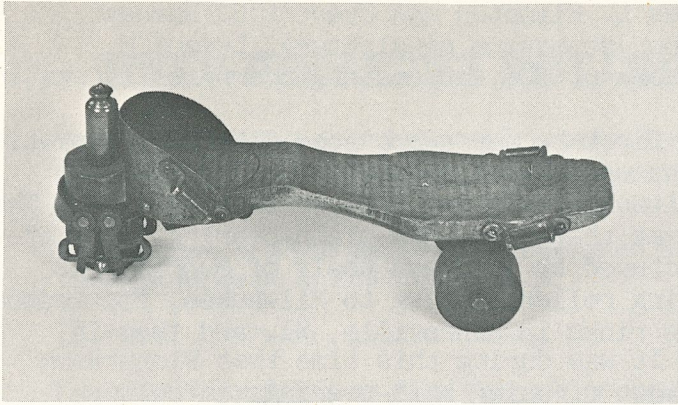
The museum has acquired many examples of both 2 and 3 wheel roller skates, from Al Kish, Richard Young, Bert Anselmi, Chester Fried, the Chicago Roller Skate Company and others. The following is a representative sample of those 3 wheelers in the museum collection, along with several 19th Century patent designs. The conclusion of this article, featuring 2 wheel skates, will appear in the next issue of the museum's newsletter.



Above - One of the first known examples of a 3 wheel skate, patented on October 26, 1869 by N.W. Hubbard. This skate (right) is unusual in that the foot actually "fits" into the roller skate, with the top of the wheels higher than the sole of the boot. Many similarities between this design and the 3 wheel skate at left, produced in Great Britain during the 1960's can be easily seen. Indeed, if one were to turn Hubbard's skate upside-down, you would essentially have the British model, including the arrangement of the wheels. The tires on this modern 3 wheeler are rubber.

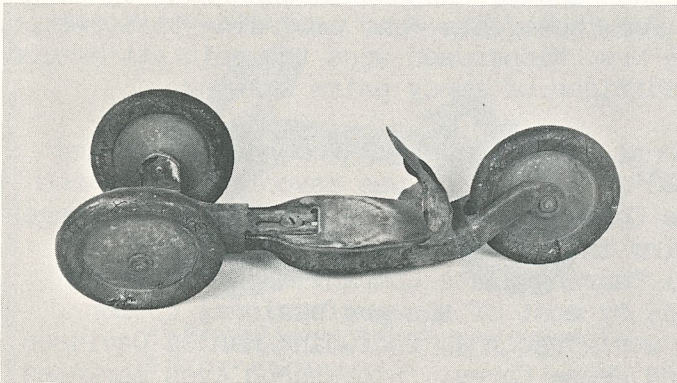
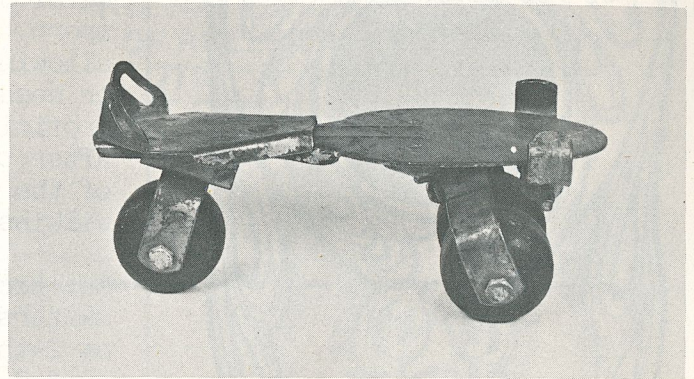
Below - Cyrus W. Saladee was one of the most prolific roller skate designers and inventors of the 19th Century. This 3 wheel roller skate of his was patented in 1876. A unique feature of this design was that the trucks were detachable. This allowed the skater to change from 3 wheels to 2, or to 4 wheels by changing the trucks.





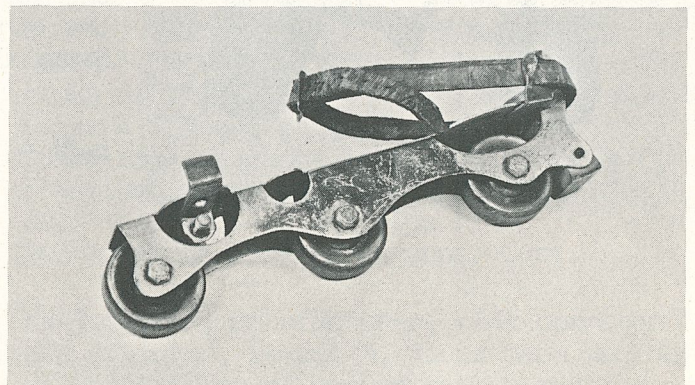
An imaginative 3 wheel design with an adjustable rear roller. The single rear wheel was made to turn right or left, and was returned to its normal (straight) position by the action of a concealed spring. The rear wheel could also shift to the front or the rear of its normal position under the control of metal "fingers" and springs. This design was supposed to improve turning ability. It was patented by Robert Hutton on October 16, 1877. The foot would be held on by leather straps, missing on this model.

An adjustable length 3 wheel skate made by the W.J. Baker Company of Newport, Kentucky around the turn of the century. This skate could be adjusted to fit many different shoe sizes by sliding the central portion of the plate forward or back, and tightening the screws to hold it into place, much like the old children's street skates. The rubber wheels are completely round. The single rear wheel is attached to the plate directly, while the front wheels are held on with a "rocker" action truck.



Designed to challenge the children's roller scooter in the 1930's, the "Skooter Skate" was manufactured by the Brinkman Engineering Company of Dayton, Ohio. Used as a single skate rather than in pairs, the foot was held on only by slipping the toe underneath the bracket at the front of the plate. The wheels were made of rubber. Like many of the other 3 wheelers, this model could be adjusted lengthwise.

Made by the BEB Skate Company during the late 1930's, the "Best Ever Built" had its 3 wheels attached in an in-line arrangement. Made in small, medium and large sizes, this skate did not have any action, the wheels being attached directly to the plate. An unusual feature is the wood "brake" located behind the rear wheel. By lifting the toe, the skater would make the brake press against the rear wheel, stopping the skate.



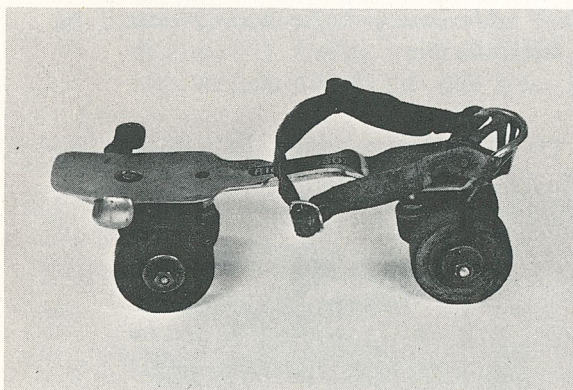
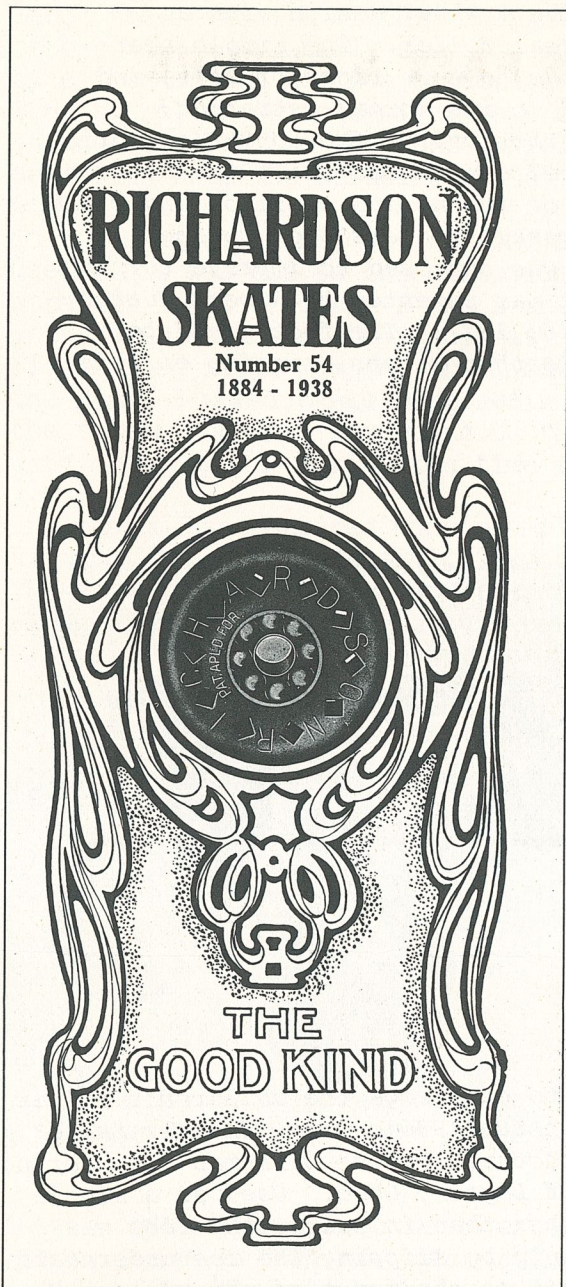
Along with James L. Plimpton and Everett H. Barney (profiled in the 1st museum newsletter), Levant M. Richardson was one of the fathers of modern roller skating.

Mr. Richardson first became associated with roller skating in 1881, when he opened and operated the Exposition Building in Milwaukee, WI, as a roller skating rink. The skates he used at that time were plain-bearing "Muncie" skates, manufactured by Thaddeus Neely of Muncie, IN. After introducing roller skating to Milwaukee, Richardson left to operate rinks in Janesville, WI, and then in Freeport, IL. It was during this time that Richardson conceived the idea of using ball-bearings in roller skates. After much experimentation and refinement, Mr. Richardson was granted a patent for steel ball-bearings in roller skates by the U.S. Patent Office on December 9, 1884. The use of the ball-bearing was a revolutionary development, resulting in the greater popularity of the sport. Ball-bearings created less friction on the wheels, allowing the skate to roll better than with the plain- or needle-bearing skates. People could become more proficient as roller skating was less strenuous. Soon after this, in 1885 Levant Richardson became the manager of the roller skate and bicycle department of the John Wilkinson Company, a large sporting goods firm in Chicago.

Mr. Richardson and his wife were accomplished roller skaters themselves. In the fall of 1883, the Casino Rink at 24th & State streets in Chicago, built and operated by A.G. Spaulding & Brothers, was opened with the Richardsons in attendance. Also, a large rink at Curtis and Washington streets was erected by the Willoughby Company. The attendance at both of these rinks openings was over 5,000 for the events, and according to contemporary accounts, Mr. & Mrs. Richardson were the main attraction with their exhibitions of fancy pairs skating.

During the several years following the roller skating boom of the 1880's, Richardson was associated with the Monarch Bicycle Company, serving as the business manager. He left that firm in 1898, when he organized the Richardson Ball Bearing Skate Company. "Richardson" skates were used by most of the professional roller racers who set world records, including Harley Davidson, Fred Martin, and Jesse Carey. Richardson even marketed a line of "Harley Davidson" racing boots in 1915. The Richardson skate company soon became famous throughout the world, and into the 1940's were a major rival to the other company in the Windy City, the Chicago Roller Skate Company (organized in 1905). Other products that

*Left - The standard model of Richardson's clamp-on rink skate, 1905. (Gift of Mr. Earl Brainard)*



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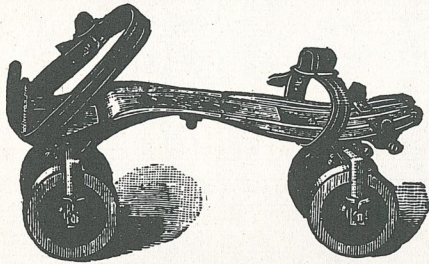
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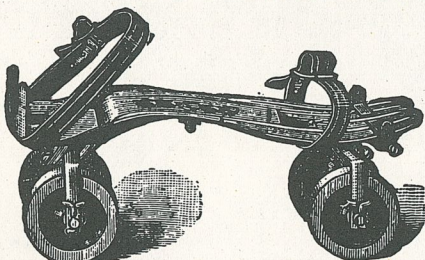
### THE MUNCIE.

It is the only Adjustable-Bottom Skate manufactured. It can be changed from one size to another instantly. It can be made plain or scientific.

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Gent's Adjustable Iron Bottom, Nos. 5, 6, 7 and 8.....	per pair, \$4 00
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Ladies' " " " " 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.....	" 4 00
Child's " " " " 10, 11, 12 and 13.....	" 4 00

## THE MUNCIE PLATED SKATE.



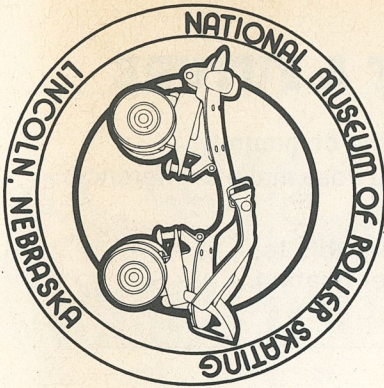
This skate is handsomely plated and is a fine skate for prize or presentation.

**Price per pair, \$6.00.**

Richardson made or distributed included automatic bands, uniforms, maintenance equipment, and portable rinks.

In addition, Richardson continued to promote the sport. In 1902 he opened the Chicago Coliseum as a skating rink. At that time it was a risky venture, as there had not been a roller rink in Chicago for 15 years; the daily rent of the building was \$150 and the total operating expenses averaged \$250 per day. However, his risk was justified as large crowds packed the Coliseum. Roller skating was experiencing another boom period. Mr. Richardson also operated many of the largest and successful rinks of that era, both in America and in England. These included the Cincinnati Music Hall, Mechanic's Pavillion in San Francisco, Denver's Manhattan Rink, the Sheffield and New Brighton rinks in England, and a roller rink in Havana, Cuba.

An inventor, manufacturer, rink operator and promoter, Levant M. Richardson was one of the fathers of modern roller skating.



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SPEED ROLLER SKATING RECORDS SET BY HARLEY DAVIDSON

- $\frac{1}{2}$  mile race (flat track) - 1 minute, 21 seconds. At the Premier Rink in Liverpool, England, December 15, 1909.
- 1 mile race (flat track) - 2 minutes, 45 seconds. At the Olympia Rink in London, England, February 26, 1909.
- 1 mile race (banked track) - 2 minutes, 37.4 seconds. At the Riverview Rink in Chicago, Illinois during 1907.
- 2 mile race (banked track) - 5 minutes, 25.8 seconds. At the Riverview Rink in Chicago, Illinois during 1907.
- 10 mile race (flat track) - 32 minutes, 41 seconds. At the Riverview Rink in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 20, 1912.
- Ten Hour Endurance race (flat track) - 127 miles. Set as an amateur skater in St. Paul, Minnesota during 1892.

*NEXT ISSUE: The professional Vaudville skating act of Fielding and Carlos, the conclusion of "2 and 3 wheel roller skates", several 1940's SKATING REVIEW features, and much more.*