

# Historical Roller Skating OVERVIEW

National Museum of Roller Skating  
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*C.W. Lowe (front) opening a rink in Beaumont, Texas, 1926. Photo donated by C.W. Lowe.*

# CURATOR'S CORNER

Greetings.

I hope your New Year is going well!

The annual museum raffle is in full swing. If you wish to purchase a ticket (or tickets) please send check or money order to the National Museum of Roller Skating. The drawing for the grand prize, which is \$5,000, will be on May 12, 1994, at the RSA convention in Las Vegas. You need not be present to win. Tickets are \$50 each.

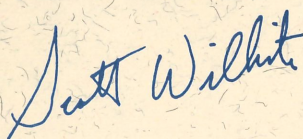
Revenue from the raffle will be used to support the programs and activities of the National Museum of Roller Skating to increase roller skating's visibility, legitimacy, and recognition for the benefit of all involved in the roller skating industry and roller sports.

The museum will be publishing a new book entitled, "The Evolution of the Roller Skate: 1820-Present," in the spring. This photo exhibition will feature skates from our collection and will replace the out-of-date 1983 catalog, "The First Fifty Years: American Roller Skates 1860-1910." Look for it to be available very soon.

This issue of the "Overview" features the historical importance of music to roller skating. Along with the usual photos and archival items presented, George Pickard, has graciously contributed an article.

Finally, a bit of sad news from the roller skating world. We recently learned that Lillian Franks Sarnelli passed away. She was in the extremely popular "Skating Franks" novelty and vaudeville team with her father, Charles Franks. She started skating at the age of 3½ in 1901, and was referred to as Baby Lillian. As a team Charles and Lillian toured the United States, Canada, England, France, Germany, and Russia. They were reported in 1916 to be the "greatest skating act that ever visited the European countries."

Ironically, the news came as I was in the process of remodeling the museum display on the "Skating Franks." She will be missed.



Scott Wilhite,  
Director and Curator



Photo of Lillian Franks in 1914, taken in Bordeaux, France. The dress she is wearing is on display at the museum. Photo donated by Lillian Sarnelli.

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Historical Roller Skating Overview is the newsletter of the National Museum of Roller Skating. It is available only through honorary membership in the museum. Minimum annual contribution is \$15.00. All inquiries, comments should be sent to the Museum Director, 4730 South St., P.O. Box 6579, Lincoln, NE 68506.

by George Pickard, Museum Board of Trustees

## MUSIC ALWAYS IMPORTANT TO ROLLER SKATING

As near as historians can determine, roller skating began in Europe in the early 1700's. It was likely started as an experiment intended to extend the ice skating season or to move ice skating indoors during a period prior to the creation of artificial ice. This occurred more than 100 years before the creation of commercial roller skating rinks. Early roller skating incentives were to entertain and amuse fashionable European salons as well as to portray skating in the theater. Many have heard the classic story that in 1735 mechanical inventor Joseph Merlin roller skated at a posh party in London, while playing the violin and crashed into a large mirror, causing extensive damage to it and him. Even then music played an important but sometimes distracting roller skating function. Previous to the 20th century, only the aristocrats and wealthy enjoyed such a thing as leisure time, while everyone else worked 10 and 12-hour days to scrape out a basic existence.

Composers and theater directors aided the development of roller skating. On stage, dancers presented ice skating scenes using rollers to replicate ice pond scenes. This included the famous opera of Meyerbeer "Le Prophete" in 1849, that had an ice scene in it in which his famous piece "Les Patineurs" was featured utilizing roller skaters. It was a great success and led to other such stage presentations, particularly in London and Paris.

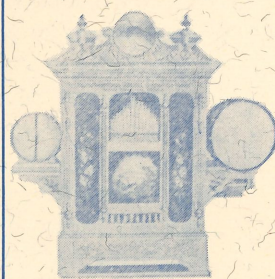
In 1863 an American, James Plimpton, invented the rocking action roller skate that enabled it to be easily steered with body lean. Not only was Plimpton a mechanical genius of great insight, but his promotional abilities were of equal proportion. Plimpton organized the New York Roller Skating Association in 1863 and built at a cost of \$100,000 a rink in New York City, where roller skating could be accommodated. At the time, this was an enormous sum of money, when you consider that Plimpton's skate, wooden plate with boxwood wheels, sold for \$3. Most working-class people slaved for \$1 or \$2 a day. In the summer of 1866, Plimpton's New York Roller Skating Association opened another rink in the ultra-fashionable Newport, Rhode Island, converting a large

dining room into a summer rink to accommodate vacationing New Yorkers in this pre-air conditioning era. Plimpton did his best to bring roller skating to the attention of "educated and refined classes".

The music played in these new rinks was largely live performances by brass bands. Professional instructors were hired, exhibitions presented and dance movements performed on roller skates, including "The Promenade Step", "On To Richmond", "The Philadelphia Twist" and more. Spalding's Manual of Roller Skating, 1884, stated "Expert skaters will find no trouble in learning to waltz or go through the movements of quadrilles on rollers. A thorough proficiency in the movements will enable the skater to acquire with comparative ease the necessary steps for waltzing."

Brass bands continued to flourish within the more affluent rink facilities in larger cities throughout the turn of the century. This phenomenon spread throughout the United States and into Europe. The music and the skating became a popular attraction, even to non-participants. Quoting from a contemporary newspaper, Morris Traub in his 1944 edition of "Roller Skating Through the Years": "It naturally draws to itself an attendance composed of the best people in the city, and great care is taken by the management that nothing shall occur to mar the sense of refinement or propriety entertained by an audience of this character...The Casino Rink in Chicago will seat 3,000 spectators on the main floor and in the gallery and private boxes...The music is furnished by the band of the First Regiment I.N.G., directed by Prof. Austin, a coronetist of no mean note, and whose excellent quality is his adaptability."

As roller skating entered the 1900's, it experienced fluctuations in popularity. More and more working class people were acquiring a measure of leisure time and high society was tiring of the pastime. Some of the social elite found it less than decorous to end up on their behinds in the middle of the rink floor, to the amusement of their contemporaries. Such accidents led to sport defections. Rinks found it necessary to conserve resources as their customer base shifted to



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less affluent patrons and at times because of lessened participation. One of the first things to go in a tightened budget would be the expensive orchestras that formerly provided musical accompaniment for roller skating. At this same time, America was deep in a period of mechanical inventiveness, leading to the creation of the mechanical band organ and early electric organs, new means to provide the oomph-pa-pas for roller skating rinks. The early band organs operated from compressed air and used music rolls much like player pianos, which were advertised as "superior in tone and volume to any rink band or any other make organ." The latest popular tunes were supplied for band organs on roll music and these were very well received by rink owners. As late as the 1950's, a rink in downtown Cleveland was using a band organ situated in the center of the floor. If memory serves me correct, it was the old Skateland on Euclid Avenue.

Roller skating required a solid musical beat by which dancing couples could synchronize their skating steps. The penalty for missteps was a crashing fall to the floor, so there was less tolerance for rhythm subtly on behalf of skate dancers of modest ability. Another early musical source was the Deagan "Electric Unafon" used in rinks around the country. This instrument played from a keyboard and was advertised as "weather proof, fool proof, always in tune, unique and makes every patron a repeater". It was said that the instrument's "volume was enormous and tone entrancingly beautiful. The tone is in quality, rousing and exhilarating to such an extent that it puts life in the feet of skaters." WOW, I wish I was there.

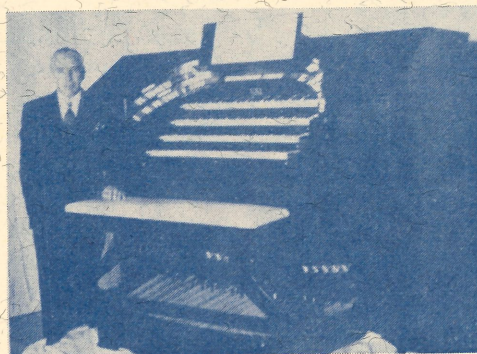
Organ music was contemporary entertainment in America of the 1920's, 30's and 40's. Organ music was played on every radio station, as background music for the soaps (then on radio) and general fill-in music. Many stations had their own organist to play musical interludes from time to time when a local station lost its feed from the network in New York or Chicago. This was a time when homes commonly had a piano and/or organ. Sheet music sold as well or better than recorded discs and every department store had a sheet music section. Therefore, organ music was eminently acceptable to the public for roller skating. Theater pipe organs were installed in some of the larger, more affluent rinks that had the space for the pipes and the patience to keep them all in tune. The Wurlitzer Organ was the granddaddy of them all, and had the facility to entirely duplicate a brass band

with one man at the keyboard. In the 40's and 50's there were numerous rinks with Wurlitzer Organs or other pipes, such as the Oaks Rink in Portland, Oregon, the Elmhurst and Hub Rinks in Chicago, the Arena Gardens and Arcadia Rinks in Detroit, the Rollerade in Cleveland and many others that now escape my memory.

I am not sure when the Hammond Electronic Organ began manufacture, but this was by far the most popular organ in rinks throughout the 30's, 40's and 50's. It could be played with a solid beat for roller skating, took up little space, required little more maintenance than a radio and had the flexibility of tone and rhythm to adapt to all of the roller skating tempi in common use for roller skating dances. In the late 30's, urged on by a Wall Street millionaire, Perry Rawson, rinks adapted European ice dances to roller skates and spread this practice like wildfire throughout the United States. Every rink of importance had teaching staff to show patrons these new steps and to incorporate the performance of waltzes, tangos, foxtrots, two-steps, etc., as "dance specials" in the evening programs.

One must remember that the 30's and 40's were the era of the big bands and ballroom dancing. This contemporary music could be easily transferred from the dance hall to the roller rink via Hammond and pipe organs, played in strict tempi to regulate precision of the couple and pace within the skating center. Roller skating rinks were extremely popular with adults as well as children. Children had less money to spend in those days. The dances, both simple and complex, acted as a social mixer within the rink to create new friendships and establish a club-like atmosphere with regular patrons. Many rinks in the larger cities would not admit children to evening sessions, as it interfered with adult recreation.

Many rinks without sufficient funds, space or commitment to maintain a pipe organ, chose to add various keyboard instruments to their Hammond organ to increase its musicality. Electronic rhythm sections, including such branded attachments as "Novacord" and "Solo-Vox" were attached to Hammonds in roller rinks, long before these organ enhancements became built in to modern transistor keyboards and electronic gadgetry. These rinks pointed with pride to their musical programs which featured the Hammond organ WITH Novacord. As organ music became less contemporary in the 50's and 60's to the



*The Wurlitzer organ from the Redondo Rink in Washington. (taken from Skating News, Nov. 1948)*

American public, after radio became less programmed and more D.J. oriented, many people identified organ music with "rink music". That is, until the rinks slowly began to abandon organ music in favor of more contemporary recorded music.

Not all rinks sold their Hammond organs, particularly those with a well-established clientele of adults. The old-timers still wanted to hear organ music and skate dances. The kids wanted rock and roll. A lot of rinks compromised between the two, setting aside two or three nights a week when they played organ music which attracted largely adult patrons. While diminishing slightly every year, this trend continued through the 60's and early 70's until the advent of disco roller skating. Disco music had a strongly emphasized beat that was transferrable to roller skating in a free-form manner, without defined dance steps. It encouraged "doing your own thing" movements and an unformatted "strolling" style of roller skating. Girls and boys, men and women, flocked to the rinks because disco roller skating was "IN". The Hollywood stars were roller discoing. For many rinks this was the final blow that pushed out organ music altogether. A rink didn't need to have special dance skating programs which were no longer contemporary, in fact during the disco era the bulk of customers wouldn't tolerate it. It was easier to open the doors and let the disco music sell itself. Of course, when the disco fad faded in 1981, so had all the skate dancers that followed organ music to roller skating Valhalla.

Disco roller skating was not really a new phenomenon. The Capehart Orchestrope phonograph amplifier and speaker system was developed in the late 1920's. Capehart was only one of many such manufacturers of electronic sound equipment that advertised "unusual range and volume for music". When recorded music on 78 rpm shellac discs evolved from "acoustic" recording to electronic, the sound greatly improved from what it had been when the great tenor Caruso hollered songs into an inverted megaphone at the turn of the century. Electronic recordings lead to electronic reproduction and greatly magnified sound levels. The power amp was invented and its application adapted to roller skating. Of course, initially in the 30's and 40's, it was organ music that was amplified in most rinks. Some of it quite badly, as the old shellac discs would wear and the static and sur-



*Russell Bice, the organist at the Arena Gardens. Photo donated by Mr. & Mrs. Richard McLauchlen.*

face noise would also be greatly amplified. But this didn't dampen the ardor of the skate dancers.

Hi-fi music was not introduced to roller skating until much after the advent of 45 and 33 rpm micro-groove records. In the late 60's owners and operators began developing high fidelity sound systems in their rinks, using the latest speaker and reproduction technology. Power amps grew larger and speakers were scientifically situated all over the rink for uniform musical clarity.

And yet, post-disco roller skating in the 80's may have found that the loud, sometimes raucous, popular music of modern times drove away most of what was left of the adult skaters. Rock and roll music wasn't very adaptable to dancing on skates in the old-time sense. The traditionalists disappeared. There is some train of thought that with the loss of adults, the teenagers left too because roller skating became too identified as "kid's stuff."

Not only is the music of the Billboard Top 100 now less appealing to adults, but the current unregulated nature of session skating where the younger majority is often engaged in unpredictable movement, makes this scene somewhat more risky for the uninitiated adult. They can't relate and stay away.

In the last 30 years roller skating has changed from what was traditional adult entertainment to almost exclusive children's recreation, in terms of public participation in session roller skating. For the previous 200 years, music was the mucilage that pasted together commercial recreational roller skating as an adult industry. The evolution of rink music, perhaps similar to the condition of the dinosaur, may be responsible for the demise of adults from public skating sessions. Furthermore, the absence of formal and even informal rink dancing programs that serve to initiate social contact, may now discourage integration of newcomers into the rink's social fabric and activities. The absence of formalized programming offers no incentive to patrons for improving their skating ability and remaining involved with the rink as their main recreational resource. What had worked for 200 years in terms of adult music and rink programming, was abandoned in the 1980's and 90's in the interest of furnishing music to which adults may not relate. **Is it possible that we can learn from our own roller skating history?** ■

# Museum Notes

This issue the National Museum of Roller Skating would like to salute all of the members who have contributed to the ongoing success of the museum through their continued support:

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The museum recently received archival items from the World Figure (Ice) Skating Museum including some papers and articles about James L. Plimpton and this brochure on Richardson Skates.

Other donations were made by Anne Pals, Gordon Evans, Gary Castro, George Pickard, Brent Cocking c/o Judy Wilson, Bob Bergeron, and Sam Nieswizski.

**PATRON MEMORIAL PLAQUE**

Remember that the Patron Memorial Plaque still has spaces available for individuals who have made contributions to roller skating history. This could include everyone from rink owners to athletes. A one-time fee of \$250 will place a person on the memorial which will be displayed permanently at the National Museum of Roller Skating. For details contact the director.

**CORRECTION:** The "Overview" mis-identified Kay Voss Stockdell as Kay Stockdell in the last issue of the newsletter. We regret the oversight.

**RSA Sectional Chapter # 12** made a donation to the museum in memory of Bettye Cardwell.

**Be a Part of History**

The history of roller skating is fragile. Once it is lost, it may never be regained. Help the National Museum of Roller Skating preserve the rich history of our sport by joining one of our special membership categories listed below. Future roller skaters will thank you.

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