

# Historical Roller Skating

# OVERVIEW

National Museum of Roller Skating  
4730 South Street  
P.O. Box 6579  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68506-0579  
Phone 402-483-7551

June 1994

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*Bicycle exhibition at a rink in San Francisco in 1907. Photo donated by Ernie St. Germain.*

# CURATOR'S CORNER

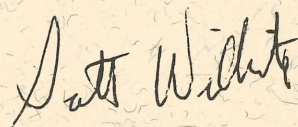
Greetings from the museum!

The 1994 museum raffle was a success this year with the grand prize of \$5,000 going to Stan Cantor. Many thanks to those of you who made donations and a special thanks to the individuals who helped with the actual drawing of tickets. Over 500 tickets were sold with many being purchased at the RSA Convention in Las Vegas. Congratulations to all of the winning ticket holders!

The trade show at the RSA Convention also went well. For the first time the museum was able to show off many interesting items from its collection at the convention by using a glass display case. Some of the items featured included several early in-line skates from the 1800s, Skating Vanities programs, and medals.

An interesting idea was suggested at the trade show. Why not organize a campaign to have a postage stamp created for roller skating? I don't know all of the particulars of how to go about getting a postage stamp accepted by the post master but for anyone interested in working on such a campaign feel free to contact me.

Finally, this issue of the *Overview* looks at the interrelated development of both roller skating and bicycling. While at first this might seem an odd subject to discuss in a newsletter dedicated to roller skating history, bear with me. In the last year I have been struck by the many references to bicycling that turn up in the museum's archives, particularly in articles from the 19th century.



Scott Wilhite,  
Director and Curator

## CHARLOTTE GROVES AND MILTON ARANSON HONORED BY THE RSA

Charlotte Groves of Marysville, Wash., was recently awarded a Life Membership honor from the RSA for her many years of service to the roller skating industry. Milton Aranson of Pittsburgh, Pa., was presented with the RSA Hall of Fame Award for his long-time dedication to roller skating. Congratulations to both!

## 1994 Museum Raffle Winners

Stan Cantor, Santa Rosa, Calif.	\$5,000
Tim Mitchell, Fayetteville, Tenn.	\$1,000
Harry & Lori Walker, Fort Worth, Texas	\$ 500
Linda Katz, Columbus, Ohio	\$ 250
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Jack Becker, Seabrook, Md.	\$ 100
Pat & Evie Pattison, Federal Way, Wash.	\$ 100
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Hyles Hagy, Dauphin, Pa.	\$ 100
Keith Brainard, Warren, Ohio	\$ 100
Ted Moyes & Joe Nazzaro Sr., Memphis, Tenn.	\$ 100
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Pete Sinoyiannis, Tamarac, Fla.	\$ 100
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# The Early Development of Roller Skates and the Bicycle

Roller skating and bicycling share more than being wheeled locomotion. Both have some remarkable similarities in their early development's and were wildly popular in the latter half of the 19th century with each going through several "boom" periods.

While historians generally credit cycling with having a major impact on late nineteenth century society, roller skating's importance to that period is often down played, if not completely forgotten in most circles. But a further investigation of their related developments reveals that they both exerted a great deal of influence on society.

The first roller skate to be patented and the first patented bicycle (called the "Dandy Horse") occurred within a year of one another in Paris, France. The skate, from 1819, was called the "Petitbled," and had a wood plate, leather straps, and 3 wheels placed in-line. The bicycle, patented in 1818, was a primitive version of what we now ride in that there were no pedals. The rider attempted to balance between two wheels, with one placed in front and one behind. The "Dandy" straddled a piece of wood between the wheels and used a walking motion to ride down the road. Neither of these attempts at wheeled locomotion had a steering mechanism other than to lift the contraptions off of the ground and point them in a new direction.

Both of these inventions brought about a whole new concept to humankind: balance on wheels. This is something that in modern times is taken for granted but it was a great leap of the imagination for people in the 19th century. So much so that neither garnered much support because of their design and the materials used. Both roller skating and bicycling would

have to grapple with this concept of balance on wheels for a number of years.

The similarities between cycling and roller skating increase as the nineteenth century advanced.

With the invention of the crank/pedal driven bicycle (called the Velocipede), the quest for balance seemed to be attained for cycling. The disputed inventor, Pierre Lallement, demonstrated his machine in Paris in 1863. According to one historian, "Lallement mastered the twin arts of keeping the machine upright and in motion, a feat once thought to be impossible." It is said that Lallement himself was unimpressed with this new form of locomotion and didn't bother to patent it. Fortunately, he took two of the cycles with him when he moved from Paris to America. After being arrested twice for frightening horses while riding his velocipede, the contraption started to inspire some interest. But it wasn't until 1866 that he attempted to go into business and patented his invention and became the first holder of a bicycle patent in the U.S. Yet Lallement was better at inventing than business

and his cycle never really caught on with the masses.

However, quite the opposite for roller skating was occurring at this time. In 1863, James Leonard Plimpton had patented his "Circular Running Roller Skate," the first skate which could be turned without lifting the foot off of the ground. Plimpton's invention created a frenzy of roller skating in New York which quickly spread through much of the U.S., crossed the Atlantic to England, and spread through much of Europe. The ability to steer proved to be the difference between a curious novelty item and a rec-



Man on a "highwheeler," June 3, 1885. Al Flath collection.

reational activity sought after by the masses.

With the invention of his "Improved Circular Running Roller Skate" in 1866, interest in skating increased even more. Other companies sprang up and Plimpton had to sue many companies, both in the U.S. and abroad, for patent infringement.

Quite possibly it is through the popularity of Plimpton's 1863 skates that the concept of balancing, and propelling oneself, on a wheeled device was accepted by the masses. Bear in mind that roller skating was relatively cheap for either purchase or rental of skates and provided reasonably priced recreation across class boundaries.

**B**icycles, on the other hand, were likely to cost on the average around \$150 which was quite a sum of money in the latter half of the nineteenth century. But sales of Lallement's Velocipede were also hampered by the fact that it weighed in at around 150 pounds and had the dubious nickname of "bone shaker."

But the torch was taken up in the cause of the bicycle with the invention of the "ordinary" or "highwheeler" with its trademark large front wheel. Describing the highwheeler in 1896, historian Archibald Sharp noted that the "design of the Ordinary is simplicity itself and it still remains the embodiment of grace and elegance in cycle construction." Invented by James Starley of Coventry, England, the Ordinary created the first real boom for cycling in the 1870s. Because of this Starley is considered the father of the bicycle.

Interestingly, Starley was sued for patent infringement by James L. Plimpton for trying to develop a "rocking action" roller skate. Conversely, Levant M. Richardson, the man credited with putting ball-bearings into roller skates in the 1880s and founder of the roller skate manufacturing giant, the Richardson Ball Bearing Skate Company, had previously been the manager of the Monarch Cycle Company in America.

Richardson's use of ball-bearings is credited with giving the roller skating industry its second boom in popularity. The bearings enabled skaters to glide

much more smoothly than had previously been possible. More manufacturers appeared and prospered in the 1880s. The Samuel Winslow Skate Company produced over a millions pairs of skates alone. The Spalding Brothers produced roller skates as early as the 1870s and continued to produce them for a number of years. Spalding was also a major manufacturer of bicycles in the 1880s and 90s. Clearly, roller skating and bicycling were linked early on as they were developing as forms of recreation.

One example of this comes from the Institute Roller Skating Rink which was being run in Boston in the 1880s. A program published by the rink in 1886 makes many references to bicycling. In fact there was

a bicycle riding school located directly on the premises. Other articles mention photographers who "make a specialty of souvenirs for skating rinks by taking portraits of skaters and bicyclists."

Rinks were also well known for providing trick bicycle riders with venues to perform before an audience. The Wilson Brothers performed at the Institute Roller Skating Rink giving "one of the most remarkable exhibitions of trick and fancy bicycling ever witnessed."

Besides sharing space for performances and recreation bicycling and roller skating often shared venues for athletic events. The increased interest in both as competi-

tive sports launched many racing events for cycling and roller skating. Velodromes were shared locations for racing in the latter part of the 19th century providing smooth surfaces for speed events. Road racing was also popular for both skating and bicycling.

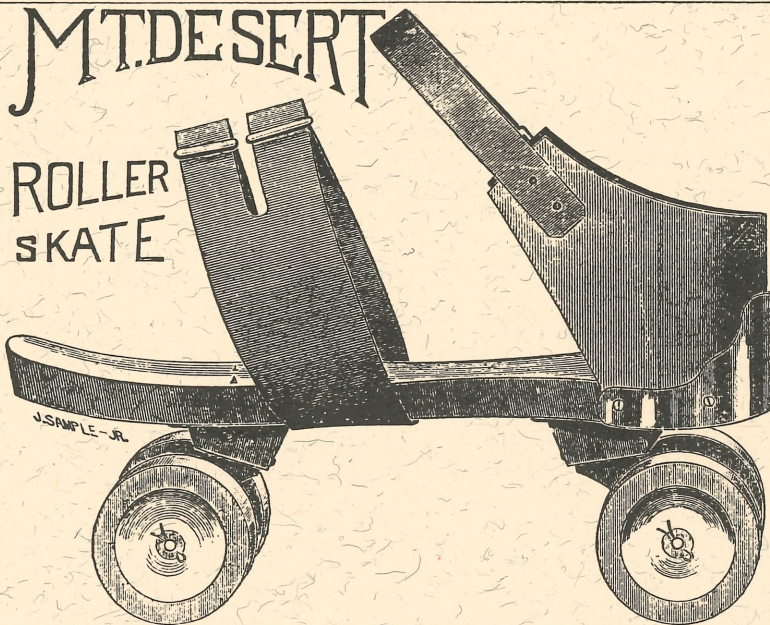
**R**oller skating and bicycling were linked early on in business ventures, manufacturing practices, as a mode of recreation, and through athletic events. In a 1945 book published by the Schwinn Bicycle Company, the author states, "the fact remains that the bicycle industry was the father of the motor car and the grandfather of aviation." Given that the roller skating industry preceded the cycling industry by more than a decade, perhaps the roller skate is really the great grandfather in this family of technological advancements. □



Lallement's "Boneshaker" or velocipede.  
Drawing furnished by the Schwinn Bicycle Company.

# MT. DESERT

## ROLLER SKATE



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# COLUMBIA BICYCLES.

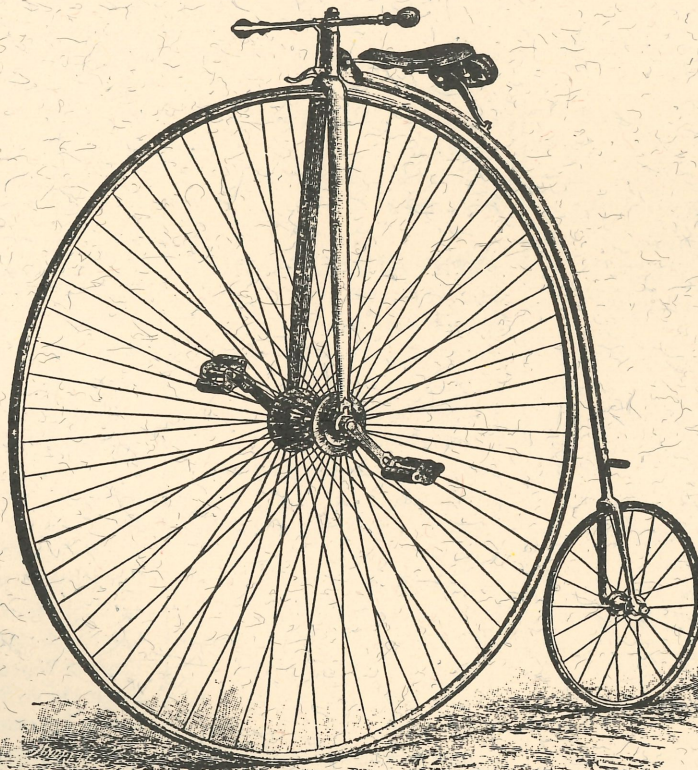
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*Advertisements for the Mt. Desert roller skate and Columbia Cicycle  
taken from a roller skating rink program published in 1884.*

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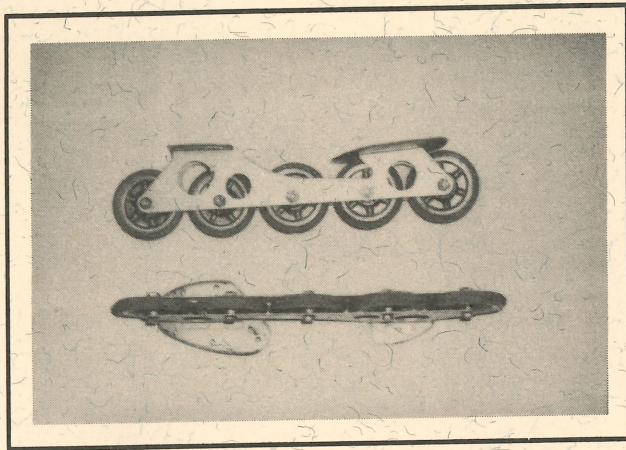
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□

## MUSEUM NOTES

Johan M. Bennink donated this pair of in-line skates manufactured by Anker Roller Boots Holland in the 1960s. They were used for ice-skate training in the summer. Mr. Bennink says that they were hard to skate on because of the high rolling resistance of the wheels. Notice how thin the wheels are.

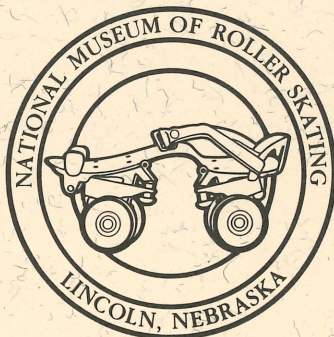


Other donations were made by Jenner and Dolores Vincent, Al Sarnelle, Rollerblade, Inc., Tony Dipietro, Joan Mayers, Carol Berres, Nelda LeCorchick, Rose Martin, Andy Devito, and M. G. Klecinsky.

Robert Bollinger made a donation in memory of Lanny Werner of National Skate Distributors who recently passed away.

## 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's name on the memorial which will be displayed permanently at the National Museum of Roller Skating. For details contact the director.



## 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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**Contributions are tax-deductible up to the amount permitted by law.**



*An illustration from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper depicting activities at a roller skating rink in 1885. Note the trick bicycle rider.*

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