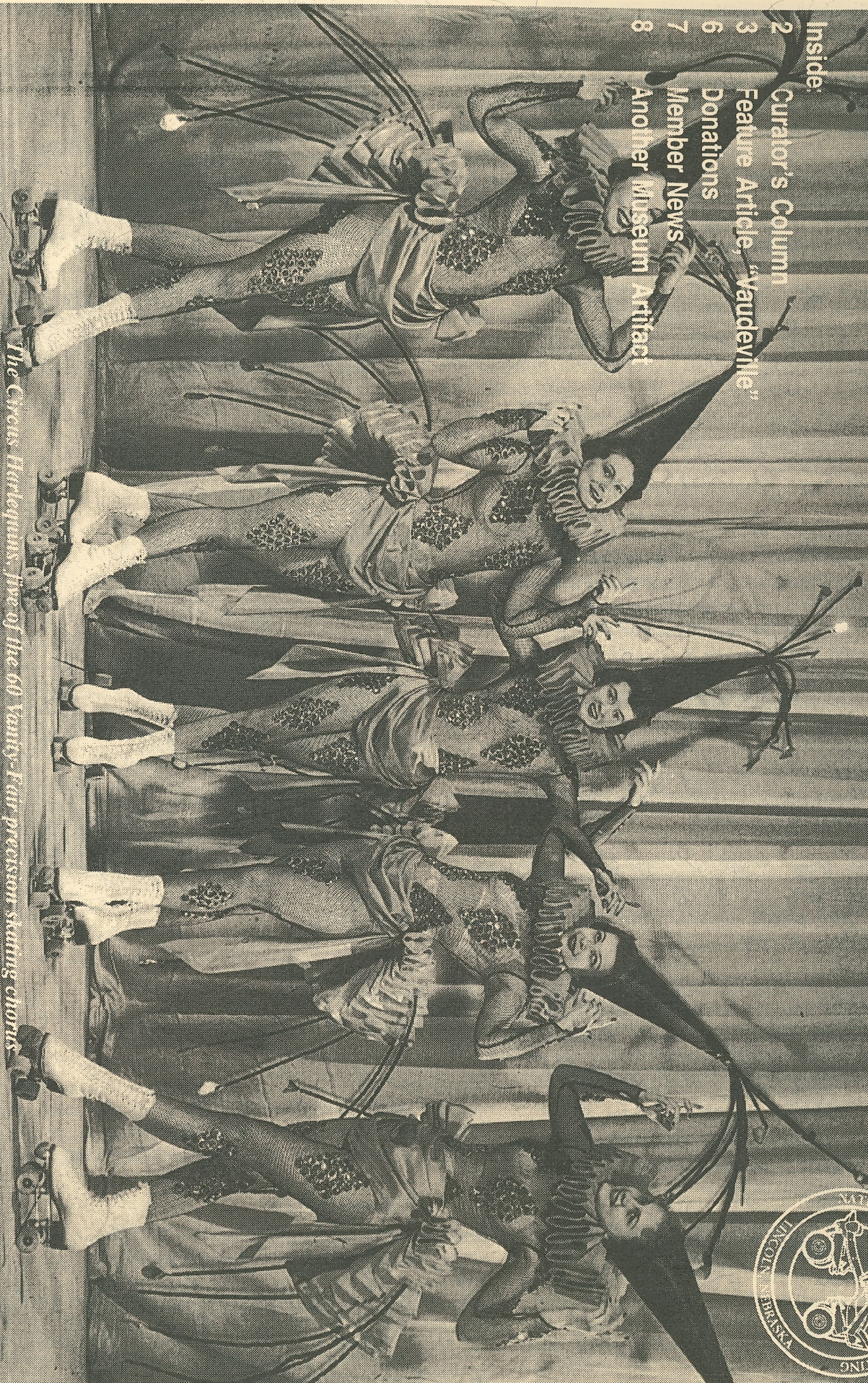


HISTORICAL ROLLER SKATING OVERVIEW

October/November 1997
Issue No. 60

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The Circus Harkquins, five of the 60 Varsity Fair precision skating choruses of the internationally famous Skating Vanities of 1951 will be just a part of the completely different \$1,000,000 musical show with a company of 140.

Recent gift from Peggy Wallace Boucher (97.68.13)



Dear members,

Since the release of *The History of Roller Skating*, there have been several questions on how to obtain a copy. There are four choices each member or non-member can make: ¹Renew your membership and receive a copy, ²Purchase a book at the member price, \$15, ³Non-members may join the museum and receive a copy, ⁴Non-members may purchase a book at the non-member price, \$20. I hope this clears up any concerns regarding obtaining a copy of *The History of Roller Skating*.

Last month, two representatives from the San Francisco International Airport & Museum were here to choose the objects that will be on display. After carefully selecting objects, the museum will send approximately 275 items for twelve exhibit cases entitled: 1870s-1890s; In-Line Roller Skates; Vaudeville; Skate Cases; Rink Stickers; Health; Street Skating; Roller Derby; Oddities; Roller Hockey; Artistic Skating; and Speed Skating. This exhibit will be ready for viewing by December 1 and remain available for six months until June 1, 1998 in the South Terminal of the airport.

Also, over the Labor Day weekend, the museum sent several roller hockey related artifacts to the NHL Florida Panthers for their annual HockeyFest. This hockey fan celebration was the largest to date, with over 13,500 people in attendance learning the fascinating history of roller polo (photograph above right).

Recently, the museum received several donations from Oxygen and Rossignol skate companies. Oxygen donated three pairs of in-line roller skates; 1998's Aggressive and Ozone skates, as well as an original pair of Krypton fitness skates. The Rossignol Step-In skates donated are also quite unique since the boot can be released from the plate and used as a walking shoe (similar idea to street skates, except in-lines).

The feature article this issue is on the popular Vaudeville roller skating performers, from 1900-30, by Assistant Curator, Sarah Webber. Sarah worked diligently to obtain information regarding this era, as you will find in the article.

Once again, Roller Skating Association International is incorporating a Safe Skating Week into National Roller Skating Month (October). RSA-I affiliated rinks will have programs designed to teach people how to skate safely, both inside and outside the skating center. Skating centers are promoted as the safest places for people to skate.

A quick note, if you are moving, please inform the museum of your change of address--to ensure delivery of the newsletter and other notices in a timely manner.

Thanks for your support. Enjoy this issue of the newsletter and don't forget to fall back on October 26!

Michael Zaidman
Director & Curator



A roller hockey exhibit at the Florida Panther's HockeyFest '97 this past Labor Day Weekend in Ft. Lauderdale. Gift from Jonas Kalkstein (97.78.3).

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Historical Roller Skating Overview is published bimonthly for members of the National Museum of Roller Skating. It is available only through honorary membership in the museum. Minimum annual contribution is \$25.00. Send correspondence and change of address to: Museum Director, 4730 South Street, P.O. Box 6579, Lincoln, Nebraska 68506, USA.

Breath-Taking Stunts, Embellished Costumes, & Fancy Skating: Vaudeville Roller Skating Performers & Performances, 1900-1930

Beginning in the early twentieth century, Jesse Darling learned to roller skate, becoming so accomplished she left her hometown of Providence, Rhode Island to perform in the large rinks up and down the East coast. Darling left her spectators with the impression they just witnessed a fairy floating through the air.



Jesse Darling doing her famous candle walk on roller skates. Gift of Armond Champa (80.6.53a)

Knowledge of her graceful skating beauty even spread across the Atlantic. In 1909, the "Peerless Princess of the Little Wheels" traveled to Europe, performing her fancy skating act in rinks across England, France, and Germany. Upon her return from Europe, Darling left the world of rink skating to turn instead to a far more lucrative arena: vaudeville. Many roller skaters followed a similar path as Darling in the early twentieth century, and focused their attention on seeing their names on playbills across the United States.

Early Vaudeville

Vaudeville, or variety shows, probably originated in their obvious form in the nineteenth century, coming to the United States via visiting English music hall and tavern performers. Originally a feature of saloons and beer halls, by the 1880s several entertainment promoters decided to expand the audience of variety shows by cleaning up the acts and moving them from beer halls to theaters. Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Albee transformed the variety shows into vaudeville acts suitable for gentlemen, women and children, opening a theater in 1893 in New York

City featuring light operas, plays, and singing, all completely respectable in nature. The two business men, who entered the theater business after leaving the circus and side-show museums featuring midgets and bearded men, sought to tap into the vast popularity of both. Though fellow New Yorker Tony Pastor led the transition from bawdy to good family fun in the 1880s with his wholesome theater, Keith and Albee, unlike Pastor, were not so concerned with improving the condition of the working man's entertainment as with providing him and his family a place to spend their money.

By the turn of the century, vaudeville became a staple of middle class existence in the United States, offering respectable thrills to parents and children. Managers and booking agents sent their performers to the over 2,000 small theaters which popped up across the country by 1910. Vaudeville performers awed audiences with high wire and acrobatic acts, dancers and singers captured their attention, comedians made them laugh, and Houdini, as well as lesser-known magicians, amazed them. Of the numerous types of acts and hundreds of performers, trick and fancy roller skaters became part of the vaudeville circuit.

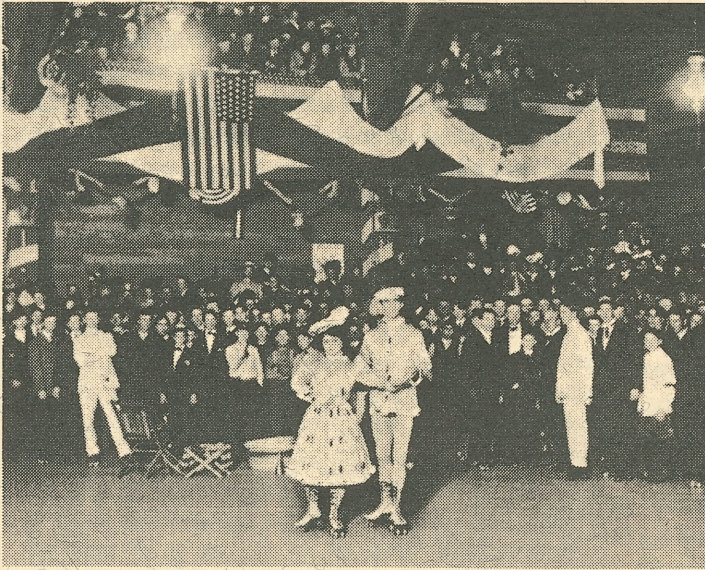
Vaudeville Roller Skaters

Vaudeville roller skaters shared much in common with their fellow vaudeville performers. One of the great shared experiences involved the amount of travel all vaudeville performers underwent. By the beginning of the century, the vast majority employed booking agents and managers to schedule their tours. All skaters performed as part of a larger vaudeville act. For instance, the Skating Bijouves, when they appeared at the New Orleans Orpheum in 1915 were one of nine acts who performed a matinee at 2:15 and later at 8:15. Their "Act Beautiful" performance lasted ten minutes, and made up only a part of the evening's entertainment.

Before entering into the lucrative area of vaudeville touring, most roller skaters performed in rinks. Their skating exhibitions at rinks across the country often involved racing against spectators or other local skaters. Howard Fielding,



Jesse Darling and Henry A. Simmons, the Skating Bijouves, performing in their elaborately embroidered costumes. Gift of Armond Champa (80.6.47)



The Rexos about to perform in an unidentified rink in San Francisco, around 1907. Gift of Ernie St. Germain (83.15.2)

who later teamed with Helen Carlos to form Fielding and Carlos, began his career skating exhibitions solo in rinks from 1902 until 1908. His exhibitions included fancy and trick skating as well as "meeting all comers" who challenged him to a race, though few ever beat him. Similarly, Adelaide D'vorak prior to joining the vaudeville circuit, skated challenges in rinks across the country, remaining undefeated.

Of the many accomplished roller skaters on the vaudeville circuit after 1900, only Charles Frank could claim to be the "Dean of Roller Skaters." Frank began skating in the 1880s during the early years of vaudeville, and insisted on being referred to as "Professor Frank." Other roller skaters deferred to his authority as a teacher of early vaudeville skating, and credited him with originating and developing many of the vaudevillian roller skaters' tricks. Though immensely popular on his own, in 1905 he added his five year old daughter Lillian to his act, becoming known as "the Franks."

The Franks, like many performing roller skaters both before and after them, traveled to Europe in 1908. With their young daughter in tow, Charles and his wife Margaret toured France, Russia, Germany, and Great Britain, where Lillian and Charles awed audiences. In 1914, while in France, the Franks ran out of money and could only afford to send Charles and Lillian on to Italy for their next engagement. Though intending to send for his wife as soon as he obtained an advance on their act, the eruption of the First World War permanently separated the family. Charles and Lillian, forced to return to the United States, left the continent and Margaret behind, where she died during the influenza epidemic. Their would-be triumphant return to the United States as "the greatest skating act to ever visit Europe" was tempered by the loss of Margaret.

Many vaudeville roller skaters gained fame and prestige following a European tour. Earl Reynolds, who skated with his wife Nellie Donegan as Reynolds and Donegan, toured Europe for a year, returning to the vaudeville circuit as "one of the prettiest novelty acts in vaudeville." John Davidson, whom Reynolds called "one of the greatest all-around skaters that ever buckled a skate strap over his foot," likewise gained fame on both sides of the Atlantic. Though equally accomplished as a fancy and trick skater, Davidson became known for his stilt skating and acrobatic performances.

Other roller skaters in vaudeville performed trick and stunt skating that left their audience amazed. Ernest and LaRue McCroskey, who formed the Skating Macks, routinely included spinning, chair hurdling, and barrel jumping in their act. The Rexos, a husband and wife skating pair, gained fame through their acrobatic and contortion skating, which many roller skaters copied. Gracie Ayer performed graceful and startling tricks which delighted her audience, using a pair of skates weighing twelve pounds and measuring eight inches from the surface and six inches in diameter.

Perhaps the most famous of the breath-taking stunts became known as the "Dip of Death." Few skaters performed the act. Mr. Van Frank, who became known throughout the country as Dare Devil Frank, earned the reputation as one of the most daring exhibition roller skaters in the country. Frank often ended his performance with the Dip of Death, which involved skating from the top of the rink down a twelve-inch board at a speed of 70 miles per hour. Ernest McCroskey of the Skating Macks also ended his performance with the Dip of Death, only he reportedly skated down a two-inch pipe.



Gene and Irene Emerald, the Emerald Sisters, in a photo still promoting the White City "Skating Classic," two of the gorgeously costumed girls who appeared in the act in 1924 (97.0.787).



Margie LaRue posing in a skirt shorter than even many flappers dared to wear in the 1920s. Gift of C. W. Lowe, Jr. (83.101.113)

Along with stunts, vaudeville skaters performed fancy skating acts that elicited a different sort of excitement from the crowd. Among the fancy skaters who performed in vaudeville, Jesse Darling, Adelaide D'vorak, and the Rexos became synonymous with beautiful skating. Darling, who teamed with Henry A. Simmons to form the Skating Bijouves upon her return from Europe, routinely received rave reviews from audiences and reporters alike. The *Atlanta Georgian* in 1915 referred to the Skating Bijouves as "the best in they're line ever seen here," and gave particularly warm praise to Darling, calling her "especially graceful."

Many vaudeville roller skaters performed a combination of trick and fancy skating. Lillian Frank, for instance, followed in her father's footsteps as both a trick and fancy skater. While a majority of her act relied on fancy skating, the younger Frank also performed acrobatics, and skated on stilts 20 inches high and on unicycles.

In 1920, the roller skate dance instructor at the White City rink in Chicago, H. W. Plain, combined the best of both artistic and trick skating in his "Skate Circus." Held in five rings, roller skaters performed five different acts simultaneously. Performances included plain skating in the first ring, whirlwind spins and novel acrobatics in the second, extraordinary stunts on a unicycle in the third, comedians on skates in the fourth, and artistic skating in the final ring. As the grand finale, all

the skaters went into a spin.

For all of the wonder of the skating acts, however, part of the audiences' delight in the performances extended beyond the talent of the skater to the elaborate beauty of their costumes. Acts often advertised the beauty of their costumes as an attraction. The vaudeville "Skating Classic" act of Gene and Irene and the Emeralde Sisters in 1924 encouraged people to see their show by promising a "most gorgeous skating extravaganza" complete with "gorgeously costumed" girls. The act cost \$5,000 to produce, largely due to the expense of the radium-treated costumes which were different for each routine.

Vaudeville roller skaters' costumes reflected regular clothing of the time, albeit highly stylized and embellished with decoration not typically seen in every-day wear. Don Donnelle, a trick skater in vaudeville who performed around 1915, added sparkle to his performances by wearing a brightly sequined jacket and pants. Costumes typically were heavily decorated, often with sequins such as Donnelle's, or with embroidery.

Vaudeville costumes also went beyond the confines of every-day wear, often exposing more of the body. Jesse Darling often performed in a skirt that fell above her knees in a time before such a length was seen off of a theater stage. Her partner, Henry Simmons, likewise appeared on stage in an outfit few men wore off the stage: a pair of close fitting tights. Margie LaRue, of the Skating Macks, appeared in skirts much shorter than even many flappers dared to wear in the 1920s.

Roller skaters often chose their costumes based on the theme of their performance. Lillian Franks wore a Russian outfit consisting of a tunic and pantaloons for her Russian number and Dare Devil Frank routinely appeared in a devil costume. For special events, like holidays, skaters wore certain evocative costumes, such as the Miss Columbia costume donned by Evelyn Clarstrom on July 4th at the White City rink in Chicago. Spectators came not only to see the fancy or trick skating, but also to see the fantastic costumes adorning the skaters.

The End of Vaudeville

Though fancy skating and embellished costumes fascinated audiences, during the 1920s Americans became increasingly less interested in vaudeville. By 1930, the Golden Age of Vaudeville, which lasted for fifty years, effectively ended. Though movies were not new, in 1927 Hollywood released the first sound motion picture, *The Jazz Singer*. The new talkies quickly took over the attention and finally the pocket books of Americans. Owners of theaters where vaudeville performers once acted and skated turned them into movie houses. Radio also clamored for the attention of Americans, and, like movies, won. Finally, the Great Depression sounded the death knell for vaudeville, as people lacked the economic resources to patronize the now barely existing vaudeville. By the middle of the 1930s, the vaudeville circuit had disappeared from the United States.--Sarah Webber

Further Reading:

Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Bernard Sobel, *A Pictorial History of Vaudeville* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1961).

CONTRIBUTIONS

Memorial gifts have been received from the following in memory of Dorothy Brown Tamaccio:

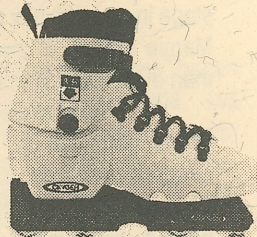
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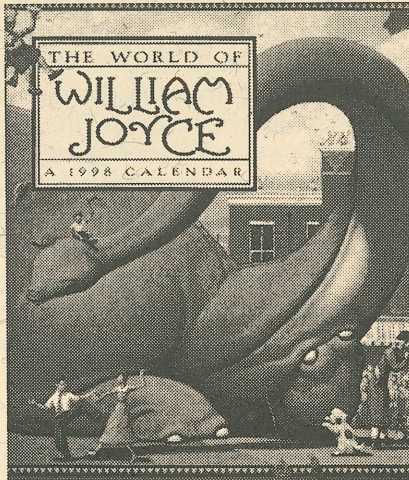


The National Museum of Roller Skating's collection has grown each year because of donors such as these who have contributed to the growth of the museum. If you have an artifact that you would like to donate, please contact the museum before donating. The following donors have contributed since August: **Bob Cahn, Caitlyn Dlouhy (Harper Collins Pub.), Bob Chantland, CCM, John Douglass (Rossignol), Marydell Forbes (Human Kinetics), Chester Fried, Sarah Johnson, Janet Jordan, Mary Jurkiewicz, Jonas Kalkstein (Florida Panthers), CW Lowe, Fred Ludwig, Mills Lynn, Rose Martin, Andrew Murray (Wheel Hog), Ann Obenchain (Oxygen), George Pickard, Nadine Pokorny-Meis, Gil & Joan Reddin, Joe Rogers, Dr. Edward Schwartz, Jay Sorensen, Ken Springer, Jeanette Tupe, and Peggy Wallace Boucher.**

Ann Obenchain from Oxygen, donated three pairs of skates including the OZ 1.1 (left) and AR Low top (right):



Caitlyn Dlouhy from Harper Collins Publishing donated this calendar the museum helped with by loaning a photograph of James L. Plimpton's roller skate.

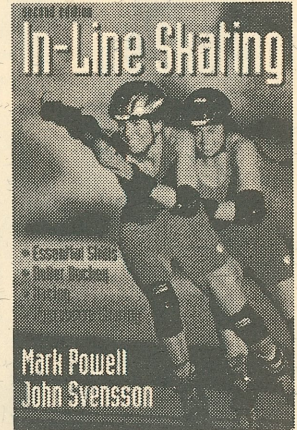


Jeanette Tupe from USA Roller Skating donated rule books, programs, and patches, from the national governing body of roller skating. Shown here is the Artistic patch design.



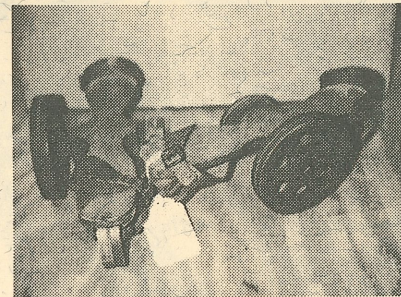
John Douglass from Rossignol donated a pair of Step-In skates.

Marydell Forbes from Human Kinetics publishers donated a copy of their latest skate book, "In-Line Skating" by Mark Powell and John Svensson.



Andrew Murray from Wheel Hog donated archival information on this new advance application on reprofiling your wheel system.

Even a Little Will Help!



Recently, the Museum was offered these skates, however, the Museum needs your help to purchase these skates. These roller skates were patented in 1865 and called Gregg roller skates. If you are interested in helping purchase these skates, please mail in the information below.

If you can help your Museum with a modest contribution above your membership dues, please send it in now and keep the Museum's collection growing. (An immodest contribution would be even better!) Thank you!

I am happy to help the Museum with the enclosed contribution.

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Did You Know?

MEMBERSHIP QUIZ RESULTS

When was roller hockey a demonstration sport in the Olympics?

Answer: 1992 in Barcelona, Spain.

Winners: Sam Nieswizski & Cynthia Gates

Do You Know?

NEXT MEMBERSHIP QUIZ

When was the first public skating rink opened as opposed to a private club?

The first two correct answers will win a postcard set from the museum store.

Please mail your answer to the museum.

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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*.

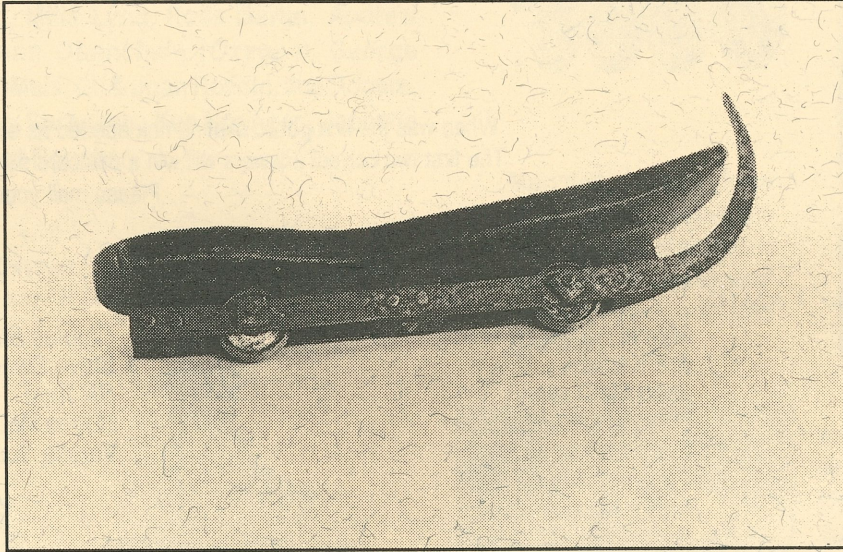
First Friday Tours, free 30 minutes tours of the museum the first Friday of every month at 12:15pm!

MEMBER'S NEWS

ANOTHER MUSEUM ARTIFACT



This roller skate developed by Le Grande and used in the opera "Le Prophete," in 1849. This skate was a theatrical prop designed to look like an ice skate when used on the stage. The opera was so successful that it initiated a great deal of interest in roller skating.



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