



## Historical Roller Skating

# OVERVIEW

National Museum of Roller Skating  
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## THE ORIGINS OF ROLLER SKATING

The following piece is one opinion on how roller skating began, or how the skate was invented. It is taken from an old newspaper, the Sunday Mercury—New York, March 8, 1885. It is from the Plimpton archives.

## THIRTY YEARS IN GOTHAM

by Harry Hill

The roller-skatin' mania has struck the Madison Square Garden. The first big roller race has rolled up its big records. And at the garden the other night I met a lot of "roller rink men," as they are called, who gave me some reminiscences of roller skatin'.

Years ago (when Niblo's was a new thing, with the Ravels for its chief attractions), a pantomime was produced called "The Skaters of Wilna." As the title implies the main effects of this piece were found in the "Grand Skating Scene," which had its big feature,

and old Gabriel Ravel resolved to produce somethin' novel here. Hitherto the scenic effects of this scene had been chiefly relied upon, the snow, the ice, etc.—the skatin' bein' rather hinted at and suggested than done. But Ravel made up his mind to bring the skaters to the front and cudged his brains how to do it. Finally, after various consultations with his stage-carpenter, old Gabriel hit upon a practical idea. He got some boards cut out roughly in the shape of the sole of a foot, put four little wheels to these boards, tied the boards with wheels to the feet of his skaters and sent 'em on, amid the stage ice and snow.

The apparatus used was very crude and simple, but the results were very effective. The skatin' scene became the talk of the town, and the piece made a hit—all through its rough roller skates.

One night a Yankee called Plympton went to see "The Skaters of Wilna." He didn't care much about dramatic or scenic effects—he wasn't in that line—but he at once saw the germ of a big money idea in those roller skates.

*(continued on page 5)*

## PERSONALITY FROM THE PAST

Adelaide D'Vorak

In 1906 Miss Adelaide D'Vorak won the City Championship race in Cleveland, Ohio while still a schoolgirl. As she succeeded in defeating all on-comers, her fame and reputation grew. Five months after she first began skating, she was asked to race against the lady champion of West Virginia. Adelaide so outdistanced her, that she filled the rest of the week skating men speed skaters and defeated each of them. She soon gained the reputation of being the greatest lady speed skater. She took up fancy and trick skating as well, and put on exhibitions all over America and Europe until her health forced her to give up speed skating entirely and devote herself to fancy skating. In 1916 she was claimed to have one of the most artistic roller skating acts in the world.

(Information from Skaters History on Ice and Roller Skating published by the Western Skating Association, 1916.)



## MUSEUM RECEIVES COLLECTION OF OIL PAINTINGS FROM CHICAGO ROLLER SKATE COMPANY

As many of you are aware, the Chicago Skate Company closed its doors earlier this year. The museum has accepted a large number of items on loan from Chicago Skate. Among them are 7 original oil paintings of skate dancing couples. These paintings were used for Chicago Skate Company's promotional literature throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. These paintings add beautiful color to the museum. I hope that each and every one of you will be able to visit us in person and see the wonderful additions to our collections!

## THE BLAES BROTHERS' ROLLER SKATES

In 1940 Ed and Bill Blaes, along with their mother, ran a bicycle repair shop in Woodside, New York. Ed Blaes roller skated for fun and enjoyed free style skating. Like the inventor of the modern roller skate, J. L. Plimpton, Ed Blaes was dissatisfied with the roller skates available to him, so he designed and with his brother, built his own skates. To help with his jumps, he designed a toe stop which he cut and filed to shape by hand. It was quite innovative for the time.

When the Blaes Brothers introduced their skate, the results were so favorable that they were encouraged to continue. The toe stop was patented in the early 1940s.

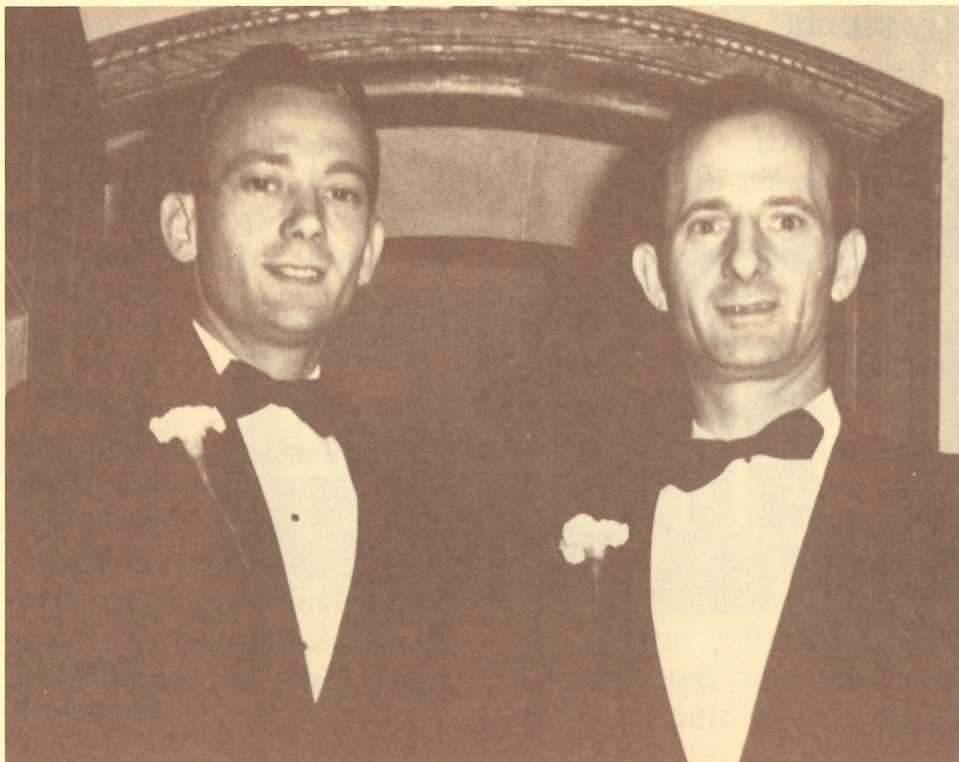
World War II interrupted their skate business, but they resumed it following their discharges from the service. They formed the Blaes Brothers Custom Skate Company. As the name implies, the skates were custom made, designed specifically for the needs and skating style of the individual. The skates were used by well-known skaters of the day such as Norman Latin, Pat Carroll, Gene Borges, William Van Wagner, and Carole Smola. Skaters from Queens Rink, Park Circle, and Wal-Cliffe, were their main customers.

The skates were not cheap, each pair cost over \$100.00. Skates with an excellent custom made boot such as that produced by Jon Telcher (ice skate boot maker from New York City), could run over \$300.00 a pair.

*(continued on page 4)*

*All Blaes photos gift of Michael Klecinsky.*

**Ed and Bill Blaes**



Again, like Plimpton, the Blaes top stop generated interest from other skate manufacturers, who proceeded to produce a similar product; however unlike Plimpton, the brothers did not have the funds to pursue patent infringement litigation.

The Blaes Company also made and manufactured their own wooden wheels, mainly from old maple bowling pins that were no longer in use and could be acquired for free to little cost from bowling alleys.

Very few Blaes Brothers skates were manufactured, and the skate never really went into full production. How many were made is not known, but probably not over 150 pairs. Ed Blaes died of a stroke in the late 1940s, and his brother, Bill, who was tired of fighting the bigger companies, closed the business.

Michael Klecinsky donated two pairs of Blaes Brothers skates to the museum and provided the information and photographs used for this article. Thanks so very much!

## DONORS TO THE COLLECTIONS

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, I wish to thank the following individuals who have donated items to our collections.

### 1992

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*(Donors to be continued in next issue.)*

(continued from page 1)

He got acquainted with Gabriel Ravel, and professed a great admiration for him and for his skates—was invited by the unsuspectin' Gabriel to view his skates—did so, examinin' 'em closely, though apparently carelessly; saw some defects in 'em which could readily be remedied, found out that Gabriel Ravel himself didn't think much of his own invention—regardin' his roller skates merely as a successful "make shift"—and ascertained that the old pantomimist had no thought of applyin' for a patent for his invention.

So Plympton set to work, made a slight alternation, though a decided improvement in the Ravel rollers, and then promptly applied for a patent for his invention (!). This application was granted, and thus on the actor's idea the Yankee laid the basis of a fortune. Plympton went, full of his patent, to England, and there a surprise awaited him. He found that the idea which Gabriel Ravel had certainly conceived in his own brain, and which Plympton thought he had been the only one to steal, or "adopt" from Ravel, had really occurred to other parties in England. In short, roller skatin' was known and practiced in England twenty years before Gabriel Ravel had, as he thought, invented the roller skate, or Plympton had, as he thought, made use of his idea.

To tell the truth roller skates have been known for over a thousand years. Roller skates of a rude kind, but still roller skates, have been found in the ruins of Pompeii, and were revived in France to please the beautiful Ninon D'Euclous, the mistress of the great French king.

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Roller skatin' fell through in England in a rather characteristic and peculiar way. It was ruined by its own popularity. Rinks were opened all over, and all classes of people came to 'em; but as the English are great sticklers for caste and class distinctions, and as all classes without distinction took to these roller rinks, why the "upper classes" soon withdrew their patronage. The vast "middle class" followed the example of their betters, and so the roller skating rinks in England fizzled out, (next line obliterated)

The real roller skatin' mania was brought over to this country by several Englishmen after the craze had played out in their own country. Reginald

Durand, an Englishman, came over and started roller skatin' in Boston. Other Englishmen followed suit, and then an American called Raymond took a hand in it, and a very full hand he had of it too.

Raymond was a Yankee like Plympton, and he started in that heaven of Yankees, Boston, from which centre of "culchah" both the roller skatin' mania and John L. Sullivan originated. Raymond was laughed at, at first, about his havin' roller skates on the brain. People said he had lost his business head, but events soon proved that his head was as level as a skatin' rink floor. He started a rink in Boston, the first rink of its kind in this country, and it was an enormous success from the first day. He came to New York, tried to get the American Institute for a rink, was called to his face a lunatic, persevered and has made a fortune.

Then Fred Fortmeyer, a well-known New York rower and club swinger and general sport, got rollers on the brain and went into it pell-mell. Other New York sports followed suit, and it is now the craze of the time.

Some folks think roller skatin' will last five years yet, others say seven; all agree that it won't last very long, but will be a tremendous big thing while it lasts.

## 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.

Contributors of \$5 or more receive their choice of the official Museum patch or pin.

Contributors of \$15 or more become Honorary Members of the Museum and receive a Museum membership pin, official identification card, the quarterly newsletter, and free admission whenever they visit the Museum.

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**All contributions are tax-deductible.**

Women have taken to it kindly, and school girls like Jeannie Houghton have developed wonderful aptitude for the roller skate. By the by, Jeannie and her manager, Dr. Noble, like most of the roller skaters of any account, hail from the Hub. Any number of "roller romances" have been published, but a friend of mine who was manager in the old Brooklyn Skatin' Rink told me the other night at the garden of a good practical joke he played on the manager of a Newark rink years ago. The Newark floor was very slippery, and my friend seein' that the manager of the place was a "green hand," determined to get a laugh on him. So, remarkin' on the slippery state of the floor, my friend told the manager of the Newark establishment that over at his place in Brooklyn they used a mixture of rosin and molasses to prevent the skates from slippin'. The poor Newark manager thank the Brooklyn manager for his hint, and gravely acted on it at once.

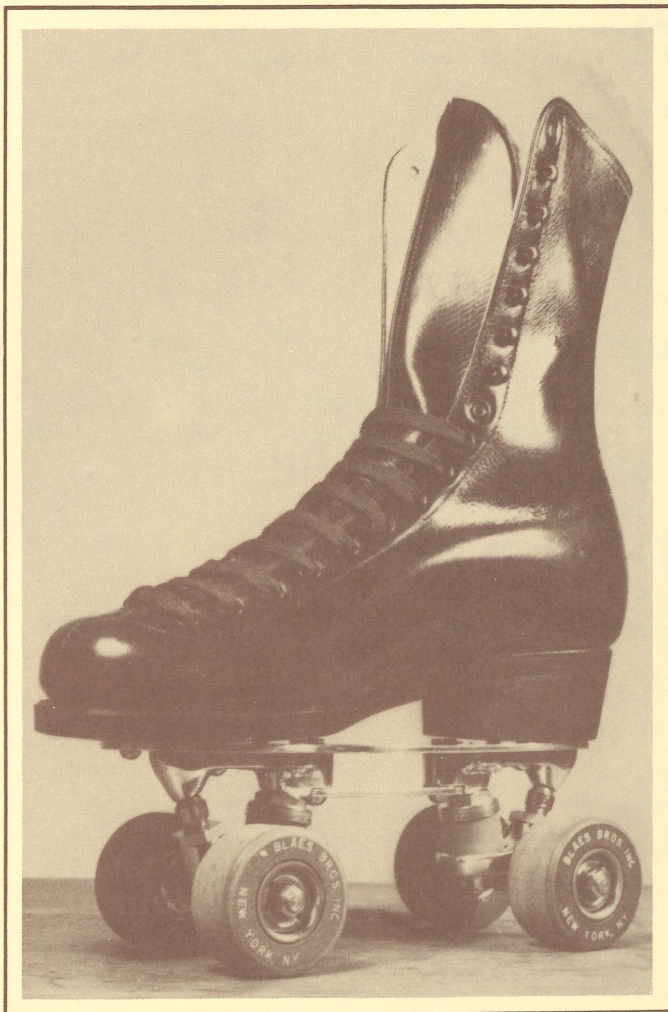
The very next night the Newark rink floor was covered with rosin and molasses, the two boiled together and sprinkled on the floor.

There was fun that night at the old Newark rink, plenty of fun, plenty of tumblin', plenty of laughin', plenty of swearin', but no skatin' worth mentionin'. The boys and girls liked it well enough, at least the tumblin' part of it, for it was, under the circumstances, literally "so sweet" to fall together. But then the molasses stuck; it ruined clothes, spoiled skirts, and stained pantaloons. On the whole there was too much "rollin'" for the money, and the manager of the Newark rink had to "shut up shop," for his place was afterwards completely deserted.

### **Editor's Comment:**

The true origin of the roller skate is unknown at this time. There is no other indication in any of the sources that I have found which indicate that J.L. Plimpton received the inspiration for his skate from the play described by Mr. Hall.

However, there is a pair of interesting skates here in the museum from the Plimpton collection that roughly fits the description of the skates Mr. Hall suggests were used in this play. I have been unable to find out any information at all about this particular pair of skates. As to roller skates existing in Pompeii--??





## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

In 1947 the Amateur World Championships were held December 5, 6 and 7th at the new National Arena in Washington, D. C. They were sanctioned by FIPR and conducted by the United States Amateur Roller Skating Association. Five teams were entered in the world dance championships. The winners were Barbara Killip Gallagher and Fred Ludwig of the United States, New York State and National Dance Champions. Dances skated for the Worlds were: The Killian, Tango Barn Dance, Three-Lobe-Eight, Dench Blues and the Keats Fox Trot. Mrs. Gallagher wore a dark green costume trimmed with gold.

Today, Barbara Killip Gallagher lives in Amsterdam, New York and recently joined the museum as an Associate Patron, and has made donations to our archives.

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