

April/May 2000  
Issue No. #73



Historical  
Roller Skating

# Overview

National Museum  
of Roller Skating



*Continental Flyers trio: (from left to right) Unidentified male, Meta and Howard Bomier, circa 1930-42. The unidentified male only skated with the trio for four shows.*



# Curator's Column

**Dear Members:** This past January not only brought a new century but also brought a change of staff to the museum. After a short period without a Director, the museum now has a full time staff member. I began in the position of Director and Curator on January 3, 2000. I am very excited and thrilled to have this opportunity to serve in this position of preserving the history of rolling skating. While not a skater myself, I did enjoy street skating and my trips to the rink as a child so, working here has brought back wonderful memories. The collections of our museum continue to amaze me. In the short time since starting, I have learned much about roller skating that I had no idea existed. I have much more to learn and hope to continue down the path started by the previous Directors. I would like to thank the two most recent past Directors, Mike Zaidman and Susan Curtis, for providing training, support and continuing to be sources of information.

As promised in the last issue of the *Overview*, the feature article in this issue is on the Continental Flyers written by Susan Curtis. The Continental Flyers were a vaudeville group that tour the country performing heart-stopping spins. The article also features some of the photographs and artifacts donated by Howard Bomier to the museum.

The annual museum fundraiser is again upon us. The museum depends upon the funds received

from the raffle to continue operating. This year is no different; the museum needs your support. Proceeds from the raffle enable the museum to produce newsletters, update the exhibits and to continue educating others on the history of roller skating among many other activities.

The raffle drawing will be held on May 17 during the President's Dinner at the Roller Skating Association-International convention and trade show. Winners do not need to be present to win. The tickets sell for \$50 and can be purchased with a check, Visa, or Master Card. Please send in the raffle ticket form on page 7 or call the museum to purchase your ticket today.

A special word of thanks goes to Bill Wolf, USA Roller Sports editor and photographer, for his photography used throughout the newsletter.

Thanks again to all the members for your continued support of this museum.

Sincerely,

*Deborah L. Wallis*

Deborah L. Wallis  
Director and Curator

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#### Museum Hours

9 am to 5 pm, Monday through Friday.

Closed holidays and weekends.

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# Vaudeville Tonite: The Continental Flyers

By Susan Curtis

During the Great Depression in America, nightclubs offered vaudeville entertainment on Saturday nights. This was a big draw for customers who were willing to part with hard-earned dollars for entertainment. On Saturday nights between 1930 and 1942, patrons of Midwest nightclubs and outdoor fairs were treated to the trick skating of the Continental Flyers. Howard and Meta Bomier of Milwaukee, Wis., were the founding and permanent members of this act.

Howard Bomier was born June 16, 1908, in Marinette, Wis. He began skating when he was 17 years old. Howard loved skating and spent his free time at the Riverview Roller Rink in Milwaukee. In addition to trick skating, Howard became an excellent skate dancer. One evening in 1929, he approached a petite brunette named Meta Hilton and asked her to skate a waltz with him. She responded by telling him she could not waltz with him. She had been watching him and did not think she was good enough to keep up with him. Despite her reservations, Meta did waltz with Howard. Meta was born January 3, 1909 in Janesville, Wis. One year later, Howard and another skater traveled to Janesville, Wis., to perform amateur trick skating. Once again he met Meta Hilton at the rink and they began skating together both dance skating and trick skating. Meta and Howard did not have coaches or teachers instead they figured out tricks by themselves or among other trick skaters. New tricks were first practiced without skates and seated on a chair to work out the details of placement without risking injury to the skaters.



*The Continental Flyers trio: (from left) Anne Hofer, Howard and Meta Bomier, circa 1930-1942. (1999.26.1)*

their performing, the Continental Flyers often appeared as a trio. The group tried two men and one woman and also as two women and one man. One of the successful teams

included Howard, Meta, and Anne Hofer. They performed as a trio or as a double if Anne had to work. Various team members came and went in the early years, but as the Continental Flyers traveled farther to perform they limited the group to Howard and Meta.

Howard and Meta married in 1932. During the week, Meta worked as a telephone operator and Howard worked as a pattern maker for a clothing manufacturer. During this period, nightclubs offered vaudeville acts, so Howard and Meta worked all week and performed on the weekends.

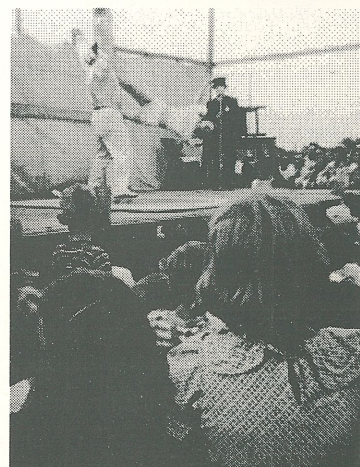
In a nightclub, the Continental Flyers would perform two shows, the first at 10 pm and the second between 12:30 and 1 am. Between the shows, the couple would sit in the club, watch the other acts and talk to people. One trio member who did not last was a man who insisted on drinking before their show, despite Howard's objections. As soon as they took the stage, the man dropped Meta and that ended his involvement with the Continental Flyers.

During this time, booking agents would find work for the performers and accompany them to the show. The standard fee for a one-night club date was \$10 to \$12 dollars. From this Howard paid the other Continental Flyers members and the booking agent. However, as little as this amount seems, during the Great Depression, these bookings kept the "wolf from the door." While many other Americans were jobless and standing in food lines, the Continental Flyers always managed to pay the rent and keep food on the table. During their career, the Continental Flyers worked with three booking agents.

Howard and Meta began traveling around the Milwaukee area rinks performing as amateur trick skaters, the Continental Flyers. One evening after an amateur night performance in a Milwaukee rink, a booking agent approached them. He told them how much he enjoyed their act and that he could get them bookings as professional skaters. In the early years of

The Continental Flyers' act typically lasted 3-5 minutes. In nightclubs with orchestras, Howard would provide the sheet music for the orchestra to play while they performed. Like other performances, the music was chosen for its enhancement of the act. The Continental Flyers primarily performed spins. Their one-leg spin, where Meta would hold onto Howard with only one foot around his neck, as

he would spin, was a crowd pleaser. Another crowd pleaser was their two-leg spin in which Howard would



*Continental Flyers duo performing a spin at an outdoor fair while the audience watches, circa 1930-42. (1999.26.11)*



spin in a circle holding Meta by the feet. Then he would rapidly flip her face up and face down while her head was close to the ground. These tricks would have to be carefully choreographed and practiced to avoid injury. Infrequently, Meta would finish this trick with chalk from the floor on her nose or forehead. They also would spin using a neck ring, in which in addition to spinning in a circle, Meta was also spinning by the neck. As an encore, the Continental Flyers would perform their straightjacket act. Meta would escape from a straightjacket while being spun by Howard, held only by her feet. Howard would invite someone from the audience to secure Meta in a regulation straightjacket. Then Meta and Howard would stand close together face-to-face and start spinning together. When they had gained enough momentum, Howard would lift Meta off the ground and she would lock her feet behind his neck. Then Howard would hold his arms out from his side, so Meta was holding on only with her feet.



*Magician's straightjacket worn by Meta during the Continental Flyers' performances. (99.26.24)*

Then while the audience watched in amazement, Meta would slip out of the straightjacket and throw it into the audience. One evening, a man in the audience in Oconomowac, Wis., who worked in a mental institution, tried to bet the act \$20 that Meta could not escape if he put the straightjacket on her, since he did this for a living. Meta refused his bet but allowed him to put her into the straightjacket as tightly as possible and then she promptly escaped. The man followed Meta and Howard for the rest of the evening, trying to get them to share the secret of her escape. The act had paid \$500 to a magician's supply store for the straightjacket and secret and only shared the secret with their daughter, D'Ete.

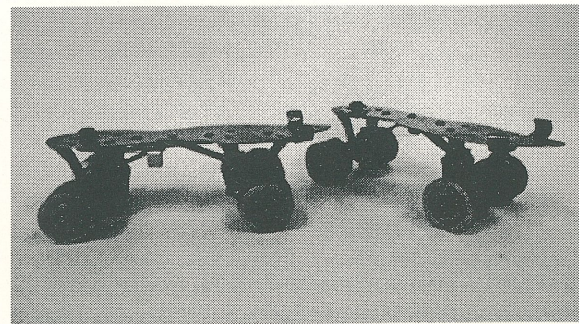
Even though Meta sewed and Howard was a pattern maker, their professional costumes were purchased from a local seamstress. However, they added the rhinestone embellishments.

Howard preferred performing in nightclubs to outdoor fairs. In nightclubs the audience was smaller and closer to the stage, allowing a more personal and intimate relationship between performer and audience. One venue where they played was a gambling cruise ship out of Green Bay, Wis. Although the ship docked in Green Bay each night, Howard and Meta stayed in accommodations on the ship for the week they performed there. On the first night of performing, the ship crew had the beer kegs stacked on one side of the ship causing it to list so Howard spent his first performance skating uphill. After the first show the crew moved the ship's ballast to the other side of the ship so the performers would have a level skating surface.



*Continental Flyers' suitcase packed with the performers' costumes and skates.*

No matter what the venue, the Continental Flyers carried their skating surface with them. They had two floors custom made for their performances. Chicago Skate Company made a 12 x 12 foot wood floor that the act would use in nightclubs on the floor next to the orchestra. In addition, Howard had Meta's father make another wood floor of heavier wooden slats on canvas. This second floor they used at outdoor fairs so they could have a smooth skating surface. Additionally, their skates were Chicago skates with alloy wheels and detachable boots that cost \$130 per pair. Howard and Meta only used the one pair of skates in the years that they performed, oiling the wheels and cleaning the skates after every performance.



*Meta Bomier's Chicago skates. (99.26.33a&b)*

They had to carry all their equipment and costumes with them to the different venues. After working all week and often on

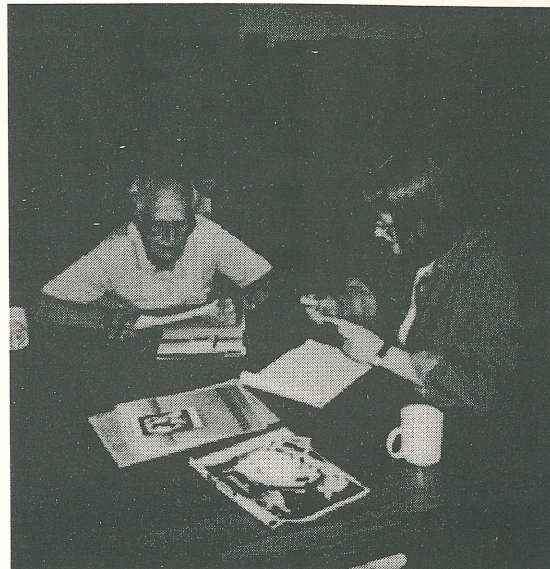


Saturdays, Howard and Meta would load up their car, drive to the performance, perform, then drive back home to get back to work on time. For a while, Meta's brother acted as their chauffeur, so the performers could sleep on the road. For their first car, Howard would roll up the skating floor and tie it to the roof of the car. Later, they purchased a 6-cylinder Ford coupe. Howard removed the back rumble seat so they could slide the rolled flooring into the car, only having it stick out the back a few inches.

During a performance in a theater in Winnipeg, Canada, the Continental Flyers were approached about joining a new organization called the USO. However, the act felt that it wasn't worth the risk of giving up dependable jobs in uncertain financial times to join such a new venture.

In 1939, the Continental Flyers performed for one week at the fair in Lincoln, Neb. Unfortunately, when Howard and Meta arrived in Lincoln, they found that all the hotels were filled. They met a woman who knew a farmer who might let them stay. She called and made arrangements for Howard and Meta and also a band to stay. Howard recalls this as his most enjoyable trip. The farm wife was an excellent cook and at the end of the week, invited them to their first barn dance. The other acts at the fair included a high-wire act, a swing pole act, and "folly" girls.

On days when they weren't performing, Howard and Meta skated recreationally. They were accomplished skate dancers who often found themselves alone on the skating floor being watched while they waltzed. In 1942, when Meta became pregnant with their daughter, D'Ete, they retired from performing. During World War II, they lived in Milwaukee, Wis., while Howard made uniforms for the military. After the war they returned to Minneapolis. After the birth of their daughter in November 1942, Howard and Meta limited their skating to recreation. Sometimes the couple would unroll their skating floor inside the garage and practice a few trick moves. D'Ete would beg her father to spin her like he did mom, but he would refuse, telling her it was too dangerous. D'Ete recalls her birthday parties. Her parents would allow



*Howard Bomier and Susan Curtis documenting photographs of the Continental Flyers, July 1, 1999.*

her to invite as many classmates as she wanted to the local roller skating rink. Inevitably, the focus would turn to her parents who would perform a few tricks to the delight of the children.

Meta passed away in 1987. At 91, Howard is still going strong and has recently moved to Phoenix with his daughter, D'Ete, and son-in-law, Dale Spies. In looking back at his skating career, Howard recalled that he and Meta were allowed to make much needed money during a difficult financial time. Their act was in such demand that they always knew that they could call a booking agent and be assured of a job. Howard remarked on the number of spins he sees skaters doing today that he did professionally 50 years ago. In July 1999, Howard donated his skates, costumes, photographs, and skating floor to the museum. These artifacts will soon be on display in the museum to further our understanding of professional vaudeville skaters.



*Window advertising the Continental Flyers performances in a Rockford, Ill. nightclub, circa 1930-42. (1999.26.10)*



# Membership Matters

## Thanks

The National Museum of Roller Skating would like to thank these members who have either joined or renewed membership with the museum since our last issue. Thank you for your support!

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*Thank you for joining!*

#### Gift Membership Form (Makes a Great Gift!)

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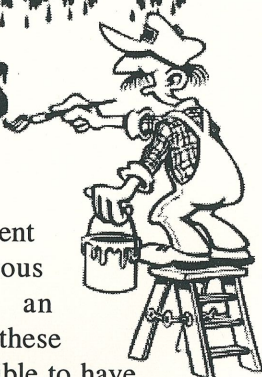
Benefits extend one year from join date. Please allow 3 weeks for processing. Membership includes a subscription to the member's newsletter, Historical Roller Skating Overview, 10% off museum store items, a membership card, and your choice of publications (please check one):

- The History of Roller Skating* ©1997 ISBN 0-9658192-0-5  
 *The Allure of the Rink* ©1999 ISBN 0-9658192-1-3

All donations are tax-deductible up to the amount permitted by law. Please clip/return to: National Museum of Roller Skating, PO Box 6579, Lincoln, Nebraska 68506



# PRESERVATION IN PROGRESS



The museum has been the recent recipient of two very generous people, David Ripp and an anonymous donor. Both of these individuals have made it possible to have films from our collection transferred to VHS tapes so they can be viewed. David Ripp, the grandson of Charles Snyder, and his company, Legacy Audio Inc., transferred films taken by Charles Snyder. Ripp and his company donated the time and materials to transfer the films and make a film log. The film log is a wonderful resource as Ripp was able to identify most of the skaters. An anonymous donor also donated funds to have the 1946 First Gold Medal Tests film transferred to VHS tape. The museum is very thankful to both of these individuals.

## MEMORIALS

The Patron Memorial Plaque was created to honor those individuals who have contributed to the growth of roller skating as a sport, recreation or business. A plaque may be purchased for a minimum contribution of \$250. Please fill out the information below if you are interested. All other donations are recognized in the newsletter.

*In memory of Wayne Wojnarowsky  
Howard Engle*

Michigan Chapters of the USARS and SRSTA  
Bert Anselmi

*In memory of Ruth Chrien  
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*In Memory of*     *In Honor of*     *On Occasion of*  
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PRESERVING OUR PAST FOR THE FUTURE

Donation \$50. Total of \$10,000 in cash prizes. Grand prize \$5,000! Drawing to take place, May 17, 2000, at the RSA International convention during the President's Dinner. Ticket holders need not be present to win. All proceeds benefit the museum.

The National Museum of Roller Skating is a publicly supported, charitable organization.

**Where:** At the RSA Convention

**When:** Wednesday night, May 17, 2000

**Why:** To Give You A Chance To Win while helping the National Museum of Roller Skating.

*Prizes Consist of:*

15 winners of \$100 each

4 winners of \$250 each

3 winners of \$500 each

1 winner of \$1,000

1 winner of \$5,000

*Total Prizes: \$10,000*

Tickets are sold for \$50 each

**How:** Buy a raffle ticket from the museum by calling 402/483-7551 or by sending in this form with payment.

**Ticket holders need not be present to win.**

**Deadline for this form is May 10, 2000.**

**Send to:** PO Box 6579, Lincoln, NE 68506

Cut or photocopy and mail with payment to the museum



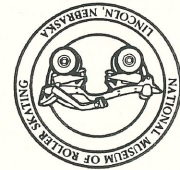
# Another Artifact



1930s postcard of mice skating and playing roller hockey. Gift of Bill Ludascher (1986.35.02)

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