

Racism at the Roller Rink

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Ramsey County roller rinks were meant to be venues for recreation and amusement that were open to all. That was true, for the most part. But there are instances when discrimination reared its ugly head. The newspapers made note, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and community members stepped in when needed.

A few incidents were noted in the *St. Paul Recorder* in the early 1940s. On August 6, 1943, the paper reported that the NAACP received a complaint from a St. Paul resident who had been refused admittance to the Harriet Island Skating Rink—because of race. The NAACP sent a “strongly worded letter” to Fred Truax, St. Paul Commissioner of Parks and Playgrounds. Within four days, Truax ordered that “discrimination at the park be discontinued.”¹

The following year, the newspaper noted another incident. The owner of the Oxford Roller Rink threatened to ban Black groups from hosting skating parties there “because of alleged bad conduct.” The owner explained that he would only allow Blacks if they were part of an organized and sponsored group. Despite being warned that he was violating Minnesota’s Equal Rights law, the owner did not see his actions as discriminatory. He stated “that the race question” was only raised “by a few rowdies among the group, who were able to incite the entire group against the management.” Eventually, the owner acquiesced. The next sponsored and

supervised party went off without a hitch, and the ban was not implemented.²

One incident not documented in the news occurred at the Spring Lake Park rink, just outside of Ramsey County. According to Dr. David Vassar Taylor, who grew up in the Rondo neighborhood, the youth branch of the NAACP hosted skate parties at the Coliseum until it closed in 1958. After that, skaters traveled to the rink in Spring Lake Park. One evening, the group rented the venue for a private party. Upon their arrival, white youth refused to leave, harassing the teens. Soon, “a full-fledged riot broke out.” The police were called to break it up, but no police reports were ever filed. According to Dr. Taylor, “parents went in and handled it.” The story never made the newspapers, but, as Dr. Taylor pointed out, the youth were traumatized.³

In 1966, the State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD) investigated a claim that a Twin Cities’ rink owner was overcharging Black patrons. He also only booked Black groups on Tuesdays. On that day of the week, the owner did not provide rink guards for the safety of the skaters, despite the fact that this was a common practice the rest of the week. He also locked the emergency exits (a violation of fire code) “to prevent skaters from stealing the skates.” The owner had to sign off on an agreement ending the noted practices. The Commission later investigated five more rinks, including a few in Ramsey County. All were found to be treating patrons fairly.⁴

NOTES

1. “Truax Prompt in Ending Race Bar at Park,” *St. Paul Recorder*, August 6, 1943, 1.

2. “Oxford Wants to Ban Race for Bad Conduct,” *St. Paul Recorder*, January 7, 1944, 1, 4.

3. Dr. David Vassar Taylor, interview with Mary Murphy Gratz and Nora Murphy, in *Our Gathering Places History Project*, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MNHS), August 13, 1998; David Vassar

Taylor, interview with Kim Zielinski and Bettina Hess, in *Rondo Oral History Project*, Hand in Hand Productions, MNHS, April 2, 2003.

4. “Case #3-OR-P5,” Human Rights Department—Enforcement Division, Public Services/Accommodation, government records, MNHS; “SCAD Promised No Discrimination at T.C. Skating Rinks,” *St. Paul Recorder*, August 25, 1966, 1.