

When Dad Runs the Rink

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Ask Steve Spector what it was like growing up at a roller rink, and he will tell you, “It’s like going home.” He should know—skating and roller rinks have always been a big part of his life.¹

Steve’s parents, Sam and Joyce Spector, met at the Coliseum Roller Rink and married in 1944. Sam managed the Coliseum for the owner, John Lane. Lane had previously run a “well-known prohibition spot” called the Boulevard of Paris at Lexington and University and later was elected to the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners. When the Coliseum closed in 1958, Sam stayed in the skating business and eventually opened Skatedium with Joyce in 1961 at 1251 Arundel Street.²

Steve and his younger sister, Sue Nelson, remember growing up at Skatedium. Sue literally learned to skate before she could walk. Because of a hip problem, she was in a brace from infancy until she was fifteen months old. Once the brace was removed, her dad brought her to the rink, put her in skates, and off she went. Sue loved to



Sam Spector managed two St. Paul roller rinks for more than forty years: *Left:* Sam Spector helped a youngster get used to his skates on the floor of the Coliseum rink in the late 1940s; *Top:* Sam, Joyce, and Steve Spector at Skatedium in the early '80s; *Above:* Steve and Joyce Spector with skater Shelbyjean Sahlstrom (*left*) around 1976. *Courtesy of Sue Nelson.*

skate and went to the rink as often as she could. After returning home from morning kindergarten at Como Park Elementary, she would call her father at the rink and say, “Daddy, I’m home! Come pick me up.” And he did.³

Steve started hanging out at the rink at age three. Whenever he was feeling down, he would lace up his skates. After a few laps, everything seemed better. Skating ran through Steve’s veins, so it was not surprising that he followed in his father’s footsteps. He, like his father, also met his wife at the roller rink. Eventually, he helped run the family business. When Sam passed away in 1984, Steve and his mother continued to operate Skatedium.⁴

At Skatedium’s peak, the rink was so packed on Friday and Saturday nights that skaters had to be turned away at the door. Many regulars became “family,” with birthday, holiday, and neighborhood parties held at the venue. After the Friday morning skate, many folks went to breakfast together.⁵

Steve and Sue shared that their father was known for his generosity. If anyone came to him

with a problem, Sam offered to help. And, he encouraged organizations such as Union Gospel Mission to bring kids to skate for free. Everyone referred to him as Uncle Sam.⁶

Despite changing music tastes over time, Skatedium was one of the few rinks that continued to play live organ music. Marshall McGraw was Skatedium’s organist for years. He played the instrument in various ball parks and at Skatedium on Monday and Wednesday nights and on Friday mornings for many of the “old timers.” Skatedium also played popular music. Steve recalls anything by Michael Jackson was a big hit, as was music by Earth, Wind & Fire because they had the perfect beat.⁷

Skatedium closed in 1996 after the building’s owner did not renew the lease. Steve saved the old Hammond organ, however. It now resides in his basement. Steve remained in the skating business, bringing many of Skatedium’s staff and skaters to Saints North, where he worked for twenty-five years. Today, he deejays one night a week—Classic Night—at Coon Rapids’ Cheap Skate.⁸

NOTES

1. Steve Spector, phone interview with author, May 24, 2023.

2. Sue Nelson, email interview with author, May 11, 2023; “Ex-Official Found Dead in Office,” *Star Tribune*, June 3, 1952, 20.

3. Nelson interview. Older sibling, Mike, was not especially interested in rink life.

4. Spector interview.

5. Nelson interview.

6. Nelson interview.

7. Spector interview.

8. Spector interview; Nelson interview.