

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Growing Up at Fort Snelling

**Honoring the First Regiment
of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry
for Fifty Years**

JOHN H. GUTHMANN, PAGE 11



Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County

KRISTINA HER, PAGE 1

By the Numbers . . .

For nearly fifty years, a large population of Hmong from Southeast Asia have called Ramsey County home. As the community grew, they brought seeds, planted gardens, opened grocery stores, joined co-ops to learn American farming practices, sold produce at farmers' markets, and opened innovative restaurants. Today, an integral part of the Hmong foodways community is the twelve-year-old Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA). This group of farmers owns 155 acres in nearby Dakota County and supplies fresh produce to Twin Cities' markets, schools, hospitals, and individual families. To learn more, see Kristina Her's cover story "Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County" on page 1.

Number of acres owned by HAFA:

155

Number of fruit, vegetable, herb, and flower varieties grown by HAFA farmers and sold to customers in the Twin Cities:

160

Percentage of Hmong American farmers among all farmers contributing to Twin Cities' markets:

50%

Number of years a typical farmer member at HAFA has been growing produce or flowers:

20

Typical plot size each farmer at HAFA works:

5-10 acres

SOURCES: Hmong American Farmers Association website, accessed July 2023, <https://www.hmongfarmers.com/>.

ON THE COVER



This exquisite Hmong village story cloth in the Minnesota Historical Society collections depicts the Hmong relationship with food and farms in Laos. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

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Message from the Editorial Board

What defines us as a place or a people? The Civil War stamped the new state of Minnesota as the proud home of the First Regiment of the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry and shaped its future. Over 100 years later, Hmong refugees fleeing from war in Southeast Asia began arriving here, forever changing and enhancing the culture of Ramsey County. The struggles and triumphs of these disparate events are reflected in two of our articles this summer. Kristina Her writes lovingly of the important role that food has always played for the Hmong and how, after a rocky start, Hmong foodways thrive today in St. Paul and beyond. John Guthmann tells tales of his beloved *second* First Minnesota, a group of devoted reenactors faithful to the authentic experience of our original volunteer infantry. These and other articles in this issue offer insights into the many stories that define us.

Anne Field
Chair, Editorial Board

Corrections: In "A Slow Track to Nowhere: St. Paul's Downtown People Mover" (Spring 2023), Metropolitan Council Chairperson John Boland was misidentified. Also, Saint Paul City Council Member Vic Tedesco did not represent the West Side. At that time, council members were elected at-large and represented the entire city. RCHS regrets the errors.

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Roller Skating in Ramsey County

HEIDI HELLER

On January 18, 1882, the *St. Paul Daily Globe* published the happenings of a St. Paul City Council meeting. On the agenda—J. H. Fenton. The Chicago-based roller skate manufacturer proposed to introduce his skating business to St. Paul. He sought to pay \$500 (\$14,796 today) to rent space for two months in Market Hall at Seventh and Wabasha Streets. He hoped to construct a new maple floor and use the space as a roller rink. The council rejected Fenton's proposal a few weeks later. These small news blurbs appear to be the first notices of an attempt to bring the growing worldwide roller skating craze to the city.¹

Fenton tried again a year later. This time, his proposal passed. With some fits and starts, skating rolled into Ramsey County, becoming a popular recreational activity for generations to come.²

Early Rollers

Skating can be traced to the twelfth century. Innovators in Northern European countries developed ice skating into a popular mode of recreation and transportation—skating on frozen waterways was more convenient when the “roads were blocked by snow.” It's believed that, sometime in the 1700s, an unknown Dutch ice skating enthusiast invented the first pair of roller skates—wooden spools attached to strips of wood and nailed to a skater's shoes. These primitive roller skates made it possible to skate through the spring, summer, and fall, although they likely did not provide the smoothest ride.³

In 1760, Belgian inventor John Joseph Merlin was the first recorded person credited with inventing roller skates. Unfortunately, his invention proved disastrous, as the metal-wheeled skates were unsteerable. It is said that at a party, he was showing off his skating prowess while playing the violin. He crashed into a large, expensive mirror, destroying the mirror, injuring

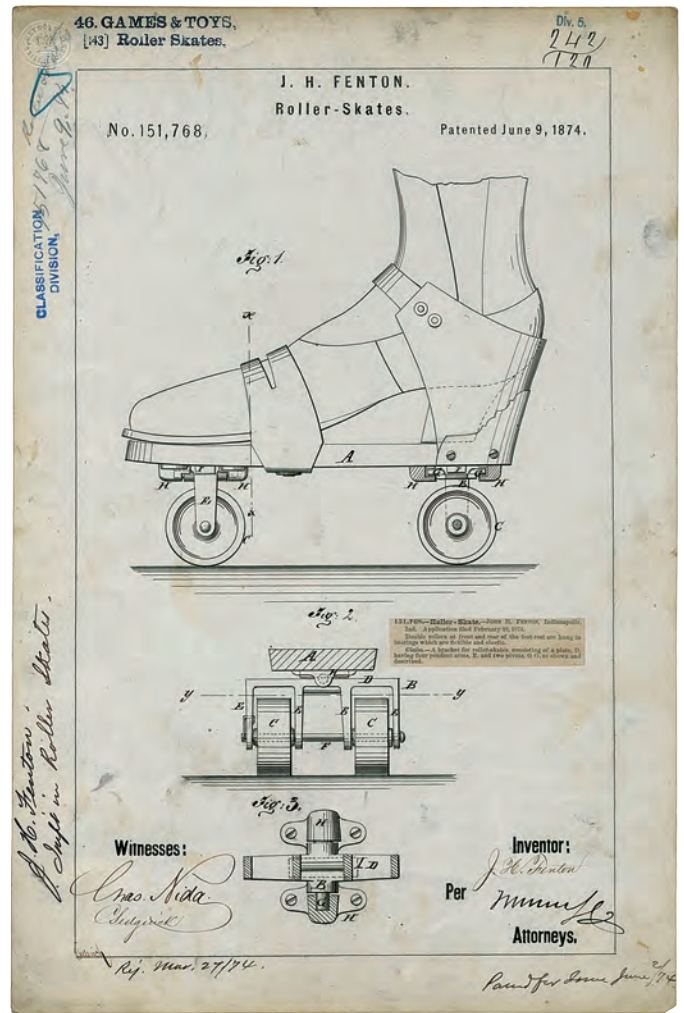
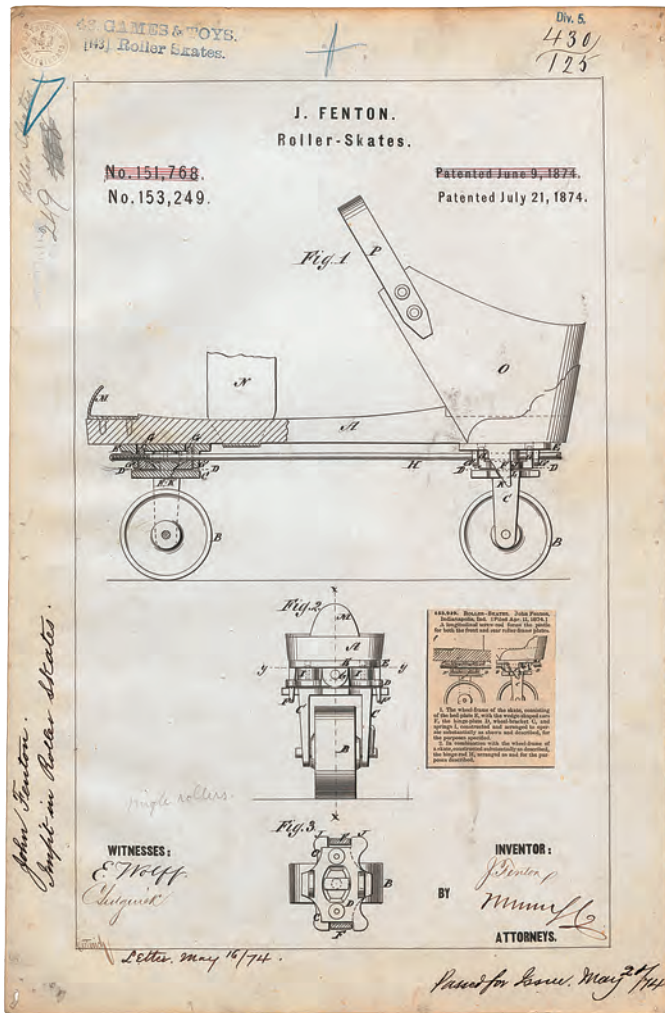
himself, ruining his violin, and hampering the development of roller skates for the next thirty years.⁴

Most early roller skates resembled ice skates or today's roller blades and, as mentioned above, were difficult to steer or brake. The game changer came in 1863 when New Yorker James Plimpton invented the four-wheel roller skate, giving skaters the ability to better control their direction. Plimpton's skate revolutionized the activity. Over the next twenty years, skates continued to evolve. By the 1880s, people were strapping and clamping Plimpton-style skates onto the front and back of shoes to take a spin around the block. Having created the supply, Plimpton needed to increase the demand for his product. In summer 1866, he opened the first public roller rink in the United States at the Atlantic House in Newport, Rhode Island. He converted the hotel's dining room into a rink, rented skates, and provided lessons. The rink drew wealthy individuals summering in Newport from around the world.⁵

Just Roll with It

The United States' first big roller skating boom occurred in the 1880s. Around 400 manufacturers were producing almost 300,000 pairs of roller skates a month. Massachusetts and Connecticut were the two largest skate producers, followed by Richmond and Muncie, Indiana. Richmond was home to eighteen different manufacturers and produced about one-third of the country's skates. *The New York Times* reported that some manufacturers claimed to be making \$1,000 a day from skate sales. Mass production made skates more accessible and less expensive—about \$6 a pair. With more roller skates came more roller rinks. By 1885, an estimated 40,000 rinks operated around the country.⁶

It seems Fenton's rink at Market Hall opened in late April or May under a one-month contract



with the city. The rink promoted a “Grand Reception for the Young Men’s Roller Skating Association” on May 3 along with a general advertisement published May 6 announcing daily skate sessions. No additional press appears after that date. The rink’s success was short lived. It should be noted that Fenton’s rink was ultimately *not* the first in St. Paul. A rink called the Wigwam debuted at Sixth and Fort Road on February 25 that year. Management advertised heavily before a partial roof collapse shut the rink down briefly. However, they were back to advertising when Fenton’s rink debuted, promoting the Wigwam as the city’s “original” rink. After that, the facility announced new managers in May. By mid-June, all mention of the Wigwam had disappeared from the papers, as well.⁷

Not to worry. By 1885, the *St. Paul City Directory* listed five new rinks— St. Paul Roller Rink (Tenth and Jackson – opened 1884); Exposition

Rink (Fourth between Wabasha and St. Peter); Parker, Cook & Gowan Roller Rink (Summit between Third and Rice); Post Siding Roller Rink (1030 E. Seventh); and West Side Roller Rink (Dakota Avenue, near Susan).⁸

New rinks catered to roller skaters during this initial boom. The St. Paul Roller Rink touted its “immense building,” complete with a 7,500-square-foot “floor devoted exclusively to skating” with “ten feet on each side for spectators.” Wooden rink floors came in maple, birch, or oak and claimed to be smooth as glass. Electric lights were promoted as a modern improvement. Live bands played a variety of polkas, marches, and waltzes for the eager skaters, who paid between \$.20 and \$.25 admission and rented skates for about \$.15. It was a cheap date. Rink owners often hired local professionals advertised as “professors” to perform exhibitions and encourage captivated wannabe-skaters

With his revolutionary four-wheel skate, James Plimpton inspired others to create their own designs, including J. H. Fenton in 1874. Years before Fenton opened his short-lived St. Paul rink in 1883, he, too, designed and patented roller skates, including single- and double-wheel models. *Records of the Patent and Trademark Office (1849-1925)*, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

LITTLE DANNIE SPRAGUE,
 Only Five Years of Age,
Champion Child Skater of the World,
 AT THE
West Side Roller Rink
SATURDAY.
MATINEE, May 2, 1885, and EVENING.
 Little Dannie will also appear as the Pert Little Miss.

Skating dynamo "Little Dannie Sprague" drew audiences to local rinks with the hope that intrigued viewers would try the new sport themselves and purchase tickets for an evening skate. *In St. Paul Daily Globe, May 1, 1885, 8.*

to sign up for lessons. Professor F. L. Crocker, employed by St. Paul Roller Rink, was one who shared "his skill on skates."⁹

Fierce competition for skaters quickly developed between the local rinks. Special promotions and events attracted skaters. St. Paul Roller Rink advertised a train from St. Paul back to Minneapolis at 11:15 p.m. following its grand opening on April 1, 1884. The business hoped to draw skaters from St. Paul and Minneapolis. The promotion worked—with an audience of about 900 people. West Roller Rink advertised unspecified prizes for a Hat Carnival—first place to the lady with the most elegant hat, second to the gentleman with the highest hat, third to the lady or gentleman with the "widest rimmed" hat, and fourth place to the person wearing the smallest hat. The rink also featured an exhibition by "Little Dannie Sprague," billed as the five-year-old world skating champion. Sprague, from Minneapolis, wowed crowds throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin with his tricks and skating expertise.¹⁰

Speed skating also drew huge crowds. Some rinks enticed audiences of over 14,000 with big prizes of up to \$2,000 for top skaters. Before it closed, the Wigwam, advertised medals for the winners of a two-mile-race, which were to be awarded by the "most graceful lady skater." The St. Paul Roller Rink presented a gold medal to

the winner of a ten-hour skating race. Thirteen-year-old Harry Toomey skated ninety-three miles and impressed spectators so much that they collected an extra \$25 cash prize, equal to about \$763.19 today, to complement his medal.¹¹

Beware the Evils of Roller Skating

Despite enthusiasm for the new entertainment, the early skating craze was met with mixed opinions by medical professionals and religious leaders. Many physicians believed roller skating—like ice skating, bicycling, and horseback riding—was "a stimulating and beneficial form of exercise." Others viewed the activity as physically and morally damaging. An 1885 article in the *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* questioned the safety of roller skating for young women:

[The] fascination of rhythmic motion, the witchery of music, and the social absorption of the rink, frequently beguiled weak-nerved and light-headed young women into an amount and kind of violent exercise which is permanently injurious to them.¹²

Although concerns appeared to be for the well-being of delicate young ladies, there also was worry that roller skating was a psychological virus overtaking young people. Adversaries warned that "those who cannot indulge" in "the amusement rationally and decently, should be kept away" from the activity. A few physicians blamed an increase of pneumonia deaths on roller skating. They viewed it as violent exercise in heated rooms that led to "fatal inflammation of the lungs" when exhausted skaters then ventured into the cold night air. Most doctors, however, concluded that roller skating—with some limitations—did no long-term damage to skaters and saw it as a good form of exercise.¹³

Health concerns paled in comparison to the growing worry about the moral damage caused by skating. Those who worked to uphold social and moral standards frowned upon casual acquaintances and unsupervised meetings. Many religious leaders argued that the popular entertainment produced too many opportunities for youth of the opposite sex to socialize without appropriate chaperones. Such acquaintances could be avoided in acceptable places, such as

concert salons or the opera house, where individuals sat in separate seats without contact. But rinks provided inappropriate venues for the much feared meetups and close interaction between young men and women.¹⁴

After *The New York Times* ran a story in early 1885 about Methodist and Presbyterian ministers denouncing the evils of roller skating, the *St. Paul Globe* interviewed Twin Cities' pastors to gauge their views. Results were mixed. Rev. R. Forbes of St. Paul's Jackson Street Methodist Episcopal Church expressed concern that roller skating, or any other craze, was demoralizing and believed the rinks to be damaging to the community. He added that if it kept people from saloons, it was a good thing, but if it was keeping them from church and tithing to worthy causes, it was bad. Rev. Robert MacLaren of St. Paul's First Presbyterian Church expressed no direct opposition to the exercise that roller skating provided. Yet, he refused to allow his son or daughter to step foot in any rink. The venues were open to anyone willing to pay the \$.25 admission fee, which made it impossible for "a proper distinction of class or character," even if the owners enforced certain rules. The reverend assumed that rinks provided an opportunity for the moral and respectable to be in contact with the "immoral and vicious."¹⁵

Methodist minister C. A. Van Anda saw it as "a pathway to ruin, a device of the devil, [and] frivolous amusement" that called youth away from church and prayer, loosened their morals, and destroyed "the stamina of character." Rev. J. F. Wagner pontificated that skating rinks were "pernicious to the morals" and a complete waste of time. He planned to preach on their evils. Yet, a few ministers wished to participate themselves. Universalist Rev. J. H. Tuttle had little concern for the activity, stating, "that if I were younger and less portly, I should be tempted to indulge in the sport myself."¹⁶

Skate, Stumble, and Fall

Fortunately, the concerned had little to fear because the 1880s' roller skating craze ended as quickly as it started. Of the five rinks listed in the 1885 city directory, only a couple appeared the following year. Although a few of the rinks remained open, they were now being used for skating and other activities. The West Side and



St. Paul Roller Rinks held dances in addition to skating, and the Post Siding Rink hosted meetings for groups like the Taxpayers' Association of the Fifth Ward. By June 1888, the once highly touted St. Paul Roller Rink was auctioned off as a potential livery and boarding stable. Like many crazes, roller skating had been replaced by the next big fad—tobogganing, which took off around the time St. Paul launched its inaugural Winter Carnival in 1886. Mayor Edmund Rice promoted tobogganing, ice skating, and snowshoeing as "innocent and invigorating amusements" in his comments at the laying of the Ice Palace corner block.¹⁷

As the first roller skating frenzy wound down and early rinks closed their doors, new rinks took their place while the sport slowly evolved. From the early 1900s through the 1940s, Down Town Rink (Twelfth and Robert); Lafayette Skating Rink (Lafayette and Partridge); Selby Roller Rink (596 Selby); Arcadia Roller Rink (Eighth and Cedar); the Hollow Skating Rink (549 St. Anthony); the Coliseum (Lexington and University); and Oxford Skating Rink (1053 Grand) appeared on the scene. Even Harriet Island boasted a rink for a period. Some rinks had staying power. Others did not.¹⁸

In 1909, an unidentified young woman skates near what is believed to be 741 Case Avenue—not far from Cleveland High School, which can be seen in the background. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.



In 1915, Raymond 'King' Kelley (25) and Harley Davidson (33) competed against one another at the Arcadia Roller Rink in downtown St. Paul. Davidson, having recently returned from a tour in Australia, was working there at the time. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



Roller rink owners and skate manufacturers explored new ways to draw enthusiasts to the rinks. Skating associations popped up around the county to promote and organize competitive skating and draw attention to the sport. The Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) formed in 1937 in Detroit, Michigan, promoted roller skating, and “establish[ed] good business practices for skating rinks.” The Western Skating Association organized in the early 1900s to oversee the growing sport of competitive speed skating in Midwestern states, including Minnesota.¹⁹

St. Paul crowed about some of its early champions in this new competitive skating era, including Raymond 'King' Kelly. Born here in 1889, Kelly was an athlete. He played professional football for the St. Paul Laurels and amateur baseball for the Boston Grays. He played golf and tennis, boxed, wrestled, and ran track and field. He eventually added amateur speed ice skating to the mix and branched out to speed roller skating. From 1912 through 1914, he was voted greatest all-around athlete in the skating world by the Western Skating Association. Over time, Kelly was named the Northwestern Amateur Champion Speed Skating and Amateur Champion of Minnesota and won over 100 races, including a six-day roller race. In 1914, he

beat the previously undefeated English champion, Bert Randall, at a race in Detroit. As Kelly described it, Randall “set the pace virtually all the way and I couldn’t get past him. But on the last turn coming into the stretch I zoomed way out on one leg and then cut down in front of him to hand Bert his first defeat by inches.”²⁰

A year later, Kelly beat the professional speed skater, Harley Davidson (no relation to the motorcycle company). Davidson was also a St. Paul legend. He was born in 1881, and skating was in his blood. His father, John X. Davidson, was a champion skater from Ohio in the 1870s. Davidson and his siblings learned to ice skate on Lake Como. As a child, he and his family toured throughout Europe giving exhibitions on ice and roller skates.²¹

The competition between the two appeared intense. According to *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune* on January 29, 1915, Kelly had thrown out a challenge to Davidson. Davidson agreed to three races. The men met for the first race on February 3, 1915. Davidson won the first one-mile challenge by twenty-five feet. The following night, he claimed the second half-mile race, this time by five feet. Kelly, however, won the final, drama-filled one mile closer.²²

Kelly hung up his amateur speed skates in 1916. He served in World War I and then worked for the US Postal Service until his retirement. Kelly was long remembered for his sporting accomplishments, as was Davidson.²³

The Golden Era

Eventually, roller skating made a massive comeback. Some credit likely goes to the rink owners and skate manufacturers who worked to keep roller skating relevant in the decades after the initial craze. Other recognition goes to Americans seeking ways to escape the realities of living through the Great Depression and World War II. Whatever the reasons, from the 1940s through the 1960s, various rinks popped up around Ramsey County, drawing competitive amateurs and anyone looking for a safe, wholesome, and entertaining activity. Oxford Skating Rink, the Hollow Skating Rink, and the Coliseum were joined by two new venues in the growing Ramsey County suburbs—Shoreview Roller Rink (Highway 96 and Hodgson Road) and Silver Skate in North St. Paul (2492 Seventh).²⁴

Roller rinks became the go-to hangout for teenagers. Thanks to evolving social norms, roller skating was now viewed by most as an innocent activity. Rinks were considered a safe place for youth to congregate. Rink owners welcomed teens, while rink guards supervised on the skate floor. Janice (Jan) Sinna, who grew up in Shoreview, said roller skating provided an activity for the kids living in the country. It kept her and her brother, Terrance (Terry), out of trouble. Sandy McClure, also from Shoreview, recalled the skating rink as “a safe place for parents to drop their kids off on a Friday or Saturday night.” Rink regulars were known as “rink rats.” Shoreview “rink rats” became so numerous that they formed a skating club called the Shoreview Rollers, with nearly eighty members. The skaters participated in parades, held formals, and crowned their own royalty to represent their hometown rink in competitions against other rink royalty.²⁵

Interestingly, now, instead of speaking out against the once-dreaded activity, churches jumped on the roller skating bandwagon by opening their own rinks. The Church of St. Bernard (1150 Albemarle), which boasted a bowling alley and roller rink, was supervised by Father Romuald Bloms, and the wooden-planked gym floor was a big draw for skaters at Sacred Heart Church (840 E. Sixth) in the 1960s. St. Michael’s (43 E. Colorado) also had a skating club. Numerous individuals share their memories of skating on Friday nights and weekend afternoons at these rinks on the Old St. Paul History Facebook page. They recall meeting future spouses, forming friendships with kids from other schools, and skating on jam-packed floors.²⁶

Speak to any adult who grew up in Ramsey County during this golden era, and they likely have a skating story to share. Gloria Massey from St. Paul’s Rondo neighborhood remembered that friends gathered at the Coliseum on Saturday nights. During the week, they skated at club-sponsored parties and ventured to the Dairy Queen on Lexington and Fuller afterward. For Floyd Smaller Jr., also from Rondo, the Coliseum was a melting pot of teenagers from across the Twin Cities. Shoreview native Jaci Krebsbach recalled taking a bus that picked kids up at designated spots before dropping them off at the Spring Lake Park Rink (1625 Highway 10).



Joyce Smith Spector (left) met her future husband, Sam, here at the Coliseum in the early 1940s. They married in 1944. The couple managed the Coliseum and then Skatedium. Their children Mike, Steve, and Sue spent their formative years skating, working, or just hanging out at the rinks with their parents and friends. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society and Sue Nelson.*



Members of the St. Michael’s Skating Club circle around a rink under the watchful eyes of the parish priest. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

And for Nancy Boulay, who skated at Saints North, there was nothing better than hanging out with friends Amy, Tammy, Dawn, and Joan. They’d listen to Debby Boone’s “You Light Up My Life” and “Endless Love” by Lionel Richie and Diana Ross, while rolling along in their quad skates with pom poms.²⁷

Let the Competition Begin

Amateur Competitive Skating at Shoreview Roller Rink

Ladies and gentlemen, next up in the 1962 Tri-State Competition on the Silver Skate floor we have sister and brother partners—fifteen-year-old Jan Sinna and thirteen-year-old Terry Sinna performing the ‘Continental Waltz.’^a

Competitive roller skating debuted in the 1920s. With the formation of the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) in 1937, the sport took off. Minnesota belonged to the North Central RSROA region. In the 1960s, Skatedium was among the first Ramsey County rinks to host amateur competitive skaters. The Shoreview Roller Rink joined the competition when rink owners Bruce and Anna Mae Peet “were approached by a professional instructor” interested in teaching competitive roller skating. Over the years, the rink had three different pros—Tom Powers, Rollie Matson, and Bill Konen.^b

After watching local competitive skaters practice, Janice (Jan) and Terrance (Terry) Sinna, long-time “rink rats” and members of the Shoreview Rollers, wanted to give the sport a try. Jan earned money to pay for their lessons and travel by ironing, babysitting, and doing other odd chores. Training was intense. They practiced after school, taking a break for dinner, and returning each evening to practice again. They rehearsed up to seven hours a day, seven days a week, refining and memorizing their dance routines and their spins and jumps for the freestyle routine. All that work came with one goal for the Sinnas and other skaters—“winning gold.”^c

But, all that work also came with bumps and bruises. Broken wrists and arms were common—especially if skaters put their hands out to stop themselves in a tumble. Jan never broke a bone, but she remembers there was nothing worse than getting floor burns after falling and sliding across the skate floor in short skirts.^d

Competitive roller skating was similar to ice skating. The RSROA determined the classes (beginner, novice, intermediate), and classifications for competition (figure skating; dance skating; freestyle; speed skating; pairs freestyle; and fours freestyle skating, where two couples made a competitive team). Figure skating featured skaters tracing a series of three circles on the rink floor. Dance skating showcased a pair of skaters dancing to three chosen competition pieces including waltzes, tangos, foxtrot, blues, polkas, and marches. In freestyle, the coaches and skaters could choose their music and routine based on RSROA guidelines. Competitive skating was open to all ages beginning with the Diaper Division (under five) to the Senior Division (where the couples’ combined age had to be seventy-five or higher). Tristate events took place every six weeks, with regional and



Janice and Terrance Sinna practiced endlessly at their local Shoreview Roller Rink in the hope of placing in competition. The pair had a slight advantage as siblings. They seemed to move in similar ways, making the performance more precise. *Courtesy of Janice Sinna.*

national competitions during the summer. Jan traveled to Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, and Texas to compete.^e

Jan enjoyed dance skating with her brother. Some of her favorite memories are taking the winners’ stand with him in competition. She loved to watch Terry skate freestyle. As for personal awards, Jan was named Miss Minnesota RSROA, Shoreview Roller Rink Queen, and Queen of Hearts. Limited funds prevented her from competing at nationals.^f

Like competitive ice skaters, competitive roller skaters donned elaborate costumes. Girls and women “wore short skating skirts with blouses or fitted dresses and dyed-to-match gloves, boot covers, and tights.” Male skaters dressed in “smooth fitted pants, dress shirts, and short tuxedo-style jackets.” It was not unusual to change costumes multiple times at each competition. Jan knew how to sew and made all of her costumes and her brother’s, too, adding sparkly sequins that might give an edge up. She also made costumes for other club members and family.^g

At some point in the 1960s, the pros moved to Skatedium, ending competitive skating in Shoreview. The Sinnas and most other competitive skaters followed the pros. By 1966, the Shoreview Roller Rink closed, but the memories live on, as does the sport. Today, skating continues through USA Roller Sports, with Minnesota’s only competitive skate club at Skateville in Burnsville.^h

Many roller rink operators still live on in skaters' memories. Sam Spector managed the Coliseum Rink. In 1961, he opened Skatedium (1251 Arundel). It was sometimes called the RC Rink for the RC Cola sign on the building. Leetta Douglas took the St. Peter Claver bus with friends to Skatedium. She fondly remembers "doing the whip with friends," including Russel Balenger, who today is a Saint Paul City Council member. "You did *not* want to be on the end of that whip line," she recalls, with a chuckle. Spector, of course, kept a watchful eye on the floor activities to make sure no one got hurt. It seems the rink also had a memorable smell, thanks to Spector's El Producto Escepcionales cigars. One former skater on the Old St. Paul History Facebook page shared that, even today, when he smells cigar smoke, he's reminded of Skatedium. Of course, there would be NO smoking at St. Bernard's rink. There, Father Romuald was even a stickler when it came to the length of the girls' skirts. The young Catholic girls often made a stop in the church's bathroom before hitting the skate floor to ensure their skirts were the "right" length. Otherwise, Father would not let them skate. And Shoreview Rink rollers remember owners Bruce and Anna Mae Peet as generous people. Bruce sometimes chauffeured "Miss Shoreview Roller Rink" in his red convertible in local parades. He'd also deejay on occasion. Another favorite Shoreview activity happened at night's end. The Peets lined up quarters on one end of the floor, and kids raced across the rink to grab them. The skater who retrieved the one red-painted quarter was awarded free admission at their next visit.²⁸

Each new era of roller skating brought in new music. Organists had replaced live bands in the 1900s. They were cheaper to employ. Wurlitzer and Hammond Electric were two preferred organ brands. The Hammond, used at the Coliseum, could play "with a solid beat for roller skating, took up little space, and required little more maintenance than a radio." When the rink and its next door neighbor—Lexington Park (former home of the St. Paul Saints)—were demolished in 1958 to make way for a Red Owl grocery, the organ was saved. Spector, the Coliseum's manager at the time, moved the Hammond to Skatedium, where it remained a nostalgic draw for older skaters. What fun to skate to the "Beer

Barrel Polka" and other favorites. Over time, though, the popularity of organ music faded. In the 1960s and '70s, more rinks looked to deejays to spin the latest hit music—Dion's "Runaround Sue," Tony Orlando and Dawn's "Knock Three Times," and Paul Simon's "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard."²⁹

Ah, Ah, Ah, Ah, Stayin' Alive!

By the 1960s, the golden era of skating had begun a slow sunset. The once popular Shoreview Roller Rink closed by 1966 as interest in skating waned. It followed in the footsteps of Oxford, which shut its rink down in 1945. The Hollow closed its doors around 1958. But roller skating and rinks soon found new life thanks to 1970s' disco music, which introduced a popular "new tempo and style." Rinks jumped on the disco-era band wagon, ditching the organ completely. New sound systems played thumping, upbeat music, drawing a new generation of fans who danced to "Y.M.C.A." by the Village People, "Le Freak" by Chic, "Get Down Tonight" by KC & the Sunshine Band, "Stayin' Alive" by the Bee Gees, and "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor.³⁰

With the new trend came two more rinks to Ramsey County: Saints North in Maplewood (1818 Gervais) and Saints Rosedale in Roseville (2555 Fairview)—both with price tags of about \$500,000 and funded by local businessman Peter Boo and his investment group. These newcomers opened with welcome upgrades—air conditioning, high-fidelity sound systems, plastic skating floors, brightly carpeted lounge areas, and "acoustically designed interiors to reduce skating noise."³¹

Roller skating seemed to be everywhere. Skaters even brought their moves to the Minnesota State Fair in 1974. The *Pioneer Press* noted that at least a dozen roller skaters were seen in the fair crowds, with one skater putting on an impromptu show "by performing whirls, dance steps and other eye-catching feats." The popular entertainment was featured in movies such as *Roller Boogie* (1979), *Skatetown U.S.A.* (1979), and *Xanadu* (1980). And Linda Ronstadt's *Living in the USA* (1978) album cover highlighted the singer on skates.³²

Skating enthusiasts loved the Saints roller rinks' "Disco on Wheels," complete with multi-colored lights and disco music; New Year's Eve

There's More!

Check out three additional online sidebars: "Ramsey County Roller Skating Rinks," "Racism at the Roller Rink," and "When Dad Runs the Rink." Go to: <https://rchs.com/publishing/catalog/ramsey-county-history-summer-2023-roller-skating>.





Children return their skates after a Saturday All-Skate session at Saints North in 2017. Courtesy of Pete Boulay.

bashes with balloon drops; and school skate nights. All drew big crowds. Roller rinks put on birthday parties and other celebrations, and many religious organizations hosted “Christian roller skating part[ies].”³³

Pete Boulay, a.k.a. “PJ the DJ,” who worked at Saints North, remembers a packed rink. Saturdays was especially popular, with as many as six birthday parties at one time. Kids loved the hula hoop contest and seeing who could twirl the most hoops at once. Other favorites included the hokey pokey and the limbo, which challenged skaters to see just “how low they could go.” Boulay even joined in the fun. During the “Girls Only” skate, he’d don a large, foam, blonde wig and circle the floor with the girls as they yelled, “You’re not a girl,” clearly unimpressed by his “pretty” locks.³⁴

Last Dance?

By the 1990s, the hype of the disco era was long gone, and the number of roller rinks continued to decline. Teenagers were watching movies with friends or hanging out at the mall and no longer needed a place like the roller rink to congregate on weekend nights. Silver Skate closed in 1974. In 1986, Saints Rosedale shuttered,

followed a decade later by Skatedium. In 1996, only Saints North in Maplewood remained in Ramsey County.³⁵

Kenny and Wendy Pearson purchased Saints North in 2005, bringing new life to the rink through outreach to Scouting organizations and schools. New Year’s Eve celebrations included drawings for big prizes like a flat screen TV and special family packages. The Saint Paul Winter Carnival sponsored an official “Royal Skating Party” at the rink, complete with a visit from the Jr. Royal Family. Engagement with the skaters and ensuring they kept coming back was always the focus. And the Pearsons’ efforts worked. But, as with many other places, COVID-19 dealt the final blow. When the pandemic forced non-essential businesses to shut down in March 2020, Saints North closed its doors, reopened on a reduced schedule briefly that fall, and then, ultimately, called it quits. For the first time in 137 years, Ramsey County had no active indoor roller rink. Skating fans were forced to hit the parks or find other outdoor locations to skate. Despite the loss of the indoor rinks, countless memories of the glory days in Ramsey County remain. And, who knows—maybe, one day, another roller rink will open, inviting the next generation of skaters to create their own memories for the ages.³⁶

Acknowledgments: A huge thank you to Pete Boulay, Jacci Krebsbach, Sue Nelson, Jan Sinna, and Steve Spector for providing invaluable and heartwarming information on the Shoreview Roller Rink, Saints North, the Coliseum, and Skatedium. Although I never roller skated, I know many people who did and still cherish memories of their time at local rinks. Thanks to all who shared their stories on local Facebook history pages and helped me realize what fun I missed.

Heidi Heller is the archivist for the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. She also runs her own historical research business—Lamplight Research. She has written various blog posts as an archivist and for the Minneapolis-based, Historyapolis Project. Heller is a lifelong resident of Minnesota and lives in Ramsey County.

NOTES

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Notes for Sidebar on page 28

a. Janice Sinna, email correspondence with the author, April 29, 2023. Introduction as remembered by Jan Sinna sixty years ago; "Roller Skating," *The Minneapolis Star*, February 1, 1962, 36. Tri-State competitions took place in Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska. Skaters who placed in the top three in specific classes and categories continued to regionals, followed by nationals for the lucky few. In February 1962, Silver Skate in North St. Paul hosted that year's Tri-State event in Minnesota. It drew about 150 skaters. Coaches, parents, family members, and friends made up the cheering section.

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d. Sinna, email correspondence; Janice Sinna, phone conversation with editor, June 22, 2023. Jan Sinna remembers the wooden floors could get slippery. The competitive skaters often sprinkled resin powder on the floors, which helped alleviate the problem.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

The Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) strives to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community; deliver inspiring history programming; and incorporate local history in education.

The Society was established in 1949 to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the original programs told the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Ĥeyáta Othújwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 and rededicated in 2016 as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers public programming for youth and adults. Visit www.rchs.com for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps, courthouse and depot tours, and more. The Society serves more than 15,000 students annually on field trips or through school outreach. Programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

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Mnisóta Makhóche, the land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds, extends beyond the modern borders of Minnesota and is the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Dakhóta (Dakota) people. It is also home to the Anishinaabe and other Indigenous peoples, all who make up a vibrant community in Mnisóta Makhóche. RCHS acknowledges that its sites are located on and benefit from these sacred Dakota lands.

RCHS is committed to preserving our past, informing our present, and inspiring our future. Part of doing so is acknowledging the painful history and current challenges facing the Dakota people just as we celebrate the contributions of Dakota and other Indigenous peoples.

Find our full Land Acknowledgment Statement on our website, www.rchs.com. This includes actionable ways in which RCHS pledges to honor the Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of Mnisóta Makhóche.





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Photo credit: Jen Strom

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These young teens were members of St. Michael's Skating Club. Such clubs for devoted "rink rats" were popular in the 1950s and '60s. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Rolling through the Decades

Roller Skating in Ramsey County

HEIDI HELLER, PAGE 22

