

# MANY ARE THE CAREFREE MEMORIES

*Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits*

The Belgian musician and engineer, Joseph Merlin, introduced it to the world in 1760, showcasing his invention at a masquerade party in London. It lacked maneuverability and control, so wasn't very popular. By 1819, Frenchman, M. Petitbled, patented a style for practical use. By the 1880s it had gained a wide popularity with all, becoming the pastime of roller skating.

Richfield Springs was not to be outdone in providing everything that might have an appeal to visitors, and roller skating at the Canadarago Park and Pavilion was no exception. Located two miles south of the Village of Richfield Springs, about one mile past the Lake House, the rink opened in 1905. Besides skating, there were many types of amusement offered to visitors as well as local people. Some of these are mentioned in an article from June 21, 1906 in the MERCURY:

“The Messrs. Fox & Son were complemented with a large attendance, considering the weather at the opening of the Canadarago Park and Pavilion last Saturday afternoon and evening. The gentlemen were certainly fortunate in securing such a fine orchestra and in having everything about the premises in such good condition so early in the season. The Pavilion, with its 11,000 feet of floor, affords one of the finest roller skating rinks in the state and the number which availed themselves of the opportunity to enjoy this exhilarating sport bodes well for the prosperity and popularity of the park. Arrangements have been made for serving light lunches and only soft drinks are sold there, while provisions are made for keeping good order. A half-hour service was carried out on the trolley, giving all an opportunity to get there and return with ease and the railroad company promises equally good service during the season. Announcements have been sent out stating that the orchestra will be in attendance for skating on Saturday and Sunday next. The fleet of thirty new rowboats has been shipped from the factory and is daily expected. A new dock has been built for the use of the steamer Vixen which will make

regular stops there.”

By the time the rink opened here, skates had improved from Merlin's metal-wheeled boots which could only be used in a straight line because turning or curving was very difficult. Technological improvements on the design helped to make roller skating popular for the first time in the 1850s in Europe. Rubber wheels were used in 1859. In 1863, the four-wheeled turning roller skate, or quad skate, with four wheels set in two side by side pairs, was first designed in New York City by James Leonard Plimpton in an attempt to improve on previous designs. The skate used a rubber cushion that allowed the skater to manage a curve by pressing his weight to one side or the other. There were many other designs patented through the years including the toe stop in 1876. This gave skaters the ability to stop by tipping the skate onto the toe. Roller skates were being mass-produced in America in the 1880s with thousands of skates being produced every week during peak sales.

In the early 1900s, roller skating evolved into a competitive sport with speed skating. Locally, James McClelland and Matthew Meehan were two who frequently raced at Canadarago, at times against Rollis Berkhelmer of Columbus, Ohio, who was considered the best special skater in the country.

Skating wasn't the only activity offered for public entertainment at the park. It was always open for free to those who wished to have a picnic, swim, or stroll round the grounds. There was also bowling, shuffleboard, boating and listening to excellent music. These and other special attractions such as wrestling matches, balloon ascensions and parachute jumps, moving pictures shows and, of course, a ride on the merry-go-round or, in 1908, the Chubbuck Wheel Swing driven by gasoline engine, were also available at a small admission price. If you were a skater, there were many events such as a masquerade skating ball, baseball games on skates, barrel racing on skates and any number of games and competitions to test



your bravery and ability. Food was always available.

If you did not choose to skate, there was always music provided for your enjoyment. During the 'Big Band Era' the best could be heard at Canadarago Park. The list of some of the performers included Ray Anthony, Cab Calloway, Gene Krupa, Duke Ellington, Vaughn Monroe, Guy Lombardo, Ella Fitzgerald, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey and Frank Sinatra. For skating, music was provided by local bands. Starting in 1939, organists were hired to create the required atmosphere.

The Canadarago Roller Club was organized in 1940 with approximately seventy-five members meeting twice a week. Instructions on various forms of dancing were given by the staff of the best skaters. A publication called THE ROLLER REVIEW was a popular way to keep up on the latest happenings in the sport.

As with many resorts, World War II brought a decline in attendance and people chose other things to interest them. Modern lifestyles and the high cost of repairs brought about the closing of Canadarago Park and its sale in 1992. The skating rink was taken down in July of that same year.

Artistic, figure, dance, freestyle, precision, singles or pairs, speed skating, group,, roller hockey, derby, roller blade - no matter what you choose, you can find the form of skating that suits you. From its modest beginnings



to its present resurgence, roller skating has come a long way from clamp on skates.

As suggested in a poem that appeared in the first issue of the ROLLER REVIEW:

*'A visit to our beautiful rink is something worth your while.*

*Your time will be well spent, I think, so bring your friends and skate in style. Canadarago welcomes all with open arms, I'm sure,*

*So come one and all and enjoy the fun of a sport that is wholesome and pure.'*

Unfortunately, it's only in memory that we can enjoy the park these days but memories of good times, perhaps a romance or two, and thoughts of the thousands of people it brought enjoyment to, in some way will keep Canadarago Park alive. Don't forget your skate key!