

ICE SKATING

The winters used to be cold enough for outdoor ice skating. Growing up in Pittsburgh in the 50's and 60's, each winter provided opportunities to try balancing on thin steel blades and moving across the hard ice. It would be decades before I gave up the struggle.

Uncle Raleigh loved ice skating. The big, heavy set man skated beautifully despite his size and weight. He taught his two daughters, Alice Louise and Chrissy, to skate at an early age. They were my favorite playmates, so I needed to learn to skate as well. They were accomplished skaters before I ever put on a pair of ice skates. I watched them skate at the Duquesne Gardens before it was torn down in 1956.

When the Gardens became unavailable, Uncle Raleigh built a skating rink in his back yard. Late at night he could be seen squirting water with a hose to create a smooth surface. The rink was large for my young legs but too small for the longer legs of my two brothers. I needed several strides before turning the corner, when I managed to stay up long enough to reach the corner.

My brothers' hockey skates presented significant challenges. Tightening the bindings was a frequently repeated ritual. It required the assistance of adults in my early years. Gradually I learned to tighten them

myself. The tight bindings, however, did not make up for weak ankles that tired quickly after laps around the backyard rink.

For several years a larger rink appeared in Sheraden Park, the long ravine below our house in a pocket neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The ravine broadened into a ball field a long walk from where we lived. Wooden benches near the batter's cage provided the place for storing boots and putting on skates. A flooded infield provided the skating area and that is where I learned the side to side motions that propelled skaters around the ice. Turning corners required a crossover step and many falls before it was mastered.

A pair of figure skates greatly improved my efforts to stay upright on the ice. Alice Louise and Chrissy had figure skates and said that the high leather bindings kept their ankles from wobbling. The high leather bindings worked for me as well. The only problem was a sharp metal tooth at the toe of the skate. The toe was great for pivoting and skating backwards. It also tended to catch in ruts, producing at best a stumble and at worst a fall. Nevertheless, the figure skates managed to keep me upright for long stretches of time.

The figure skates accompanied me to the University of Toronto. The campus hockey rink had an open skate after the Friday night game, and crowds of skaters circled endlessly around the rink. Less crowded was the

frozen reflection pool downtown at City Hall. Unfortunately, it drew a younger crowd that raced around the cylindrical pool. My rhythmical strokes seemed painfully slow by comparison. Skating in Canada ceased to be fun.

Back in Pittsburgh, outdoor rinks opened in both North Park and South Park. Far from Canada, my skating once again seemed fast and fluid. It became my favorite outdoor activity.

In 1986, I moved to Harrisburg. The figure skates came with me but outdoor rinks were scarce. When ice clogged the Susquehanna River, it had the consistency of a glacier, not the smooth flat surface of a skating rink. No one tried to skate on its rugged surface.

As skating opportunities diminished, so too did my willingness to risk falling on the hard ice. By the time I moved years later to Philadelphia, the figure skates did not make the trip. Thus ended my efforts to sail across the hard ice.