

December 2017

*Rolling Thru Time*  
Newsletter

# The National Museum of Roller Skating

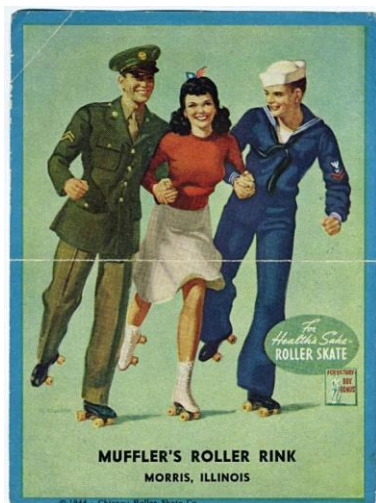


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## "Chicago Rink Rats" Book Released

By Alan Bacon

*The following is a combination book review and highlights from a conversation with the author*



*"Trio skating was popularized in the early 1940s along with the rink advertisement 'For Health's Sake-Roller Skate!'"*  
*Picture and caption courtesy of Tom Russo.*

"The Wurlitzer suddenly went silent from the all-skate warmups . . ." The rink owner took the microphone and announced that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. "A moment of silence was held for the boys and America. After this, the Wurlitzer belted out *America the Beautiful*. Skaters joined Johnson and sang along,"

Impactful writing characterizes Tom Russo's newly released book, *Chicago Rink Rats: The Roller Capital in Its Heyday*. Depicting another lively moment, Russo writes of a speed race: "The starter gun went off as six speedsters sprinted from the starting line at the scheduled time of 10:00 p.m. central standard time." To add even more drama, Russo intersperses updates and news from the war front to orient the reader to the historical context. For example, one paragraph ends with a description of basic forward skating, and the next paragraph seamlessly begins: "The balance of power of the war was shifting in favor of the Allies."

Russo said during a recent interview that his rough drafts seemed somewhat boring. He asked himself what is the story, because he writes a story, not just facts, though there are a multitude of fascinating facts. To energize the story of speed skating, for example, he read the accounts of Fred Martin, and used his personal background in a wide range of sports competition to add drama. The final draft is anything but boring.

"In Chicago, it was 2:46 p.m. when the word (about Pearl Harbor) reached the rink, the city and the nation." This excerpt combines vivid details of events inside rinks with the larger context of the American war effort and American culture, which is a hallmark of this book. This book is not just for industry insiders, but for a larger American audience. Anyone interested in American studies and culture would find this forgotten information insightful. The histories of common pastimes such as bicycles and baseball are somewhat well known, but roller skating doesn't enjoy the same common background knowledge. This book is a great addition to that lost history. Readers will be astounded to learn the impact roller skating played in the war effort, to women's and African-American's rights, and even to the post-war baby boom.

*story cont. after photos*





Although his dad skated primarily to socialize (top picture, far right,) his mother, Marion Smith's, (bottom picture, left) dance partner in the 1940s was Earl Knight. Knight went on to be RSROA's speed champion of 1952.

Russo became interested in this project when he was helping his 90-year-old mother write her legacy letters. "She didn't have all the facts," Russo said in a recent interview, which prompted him to research and write the book. Though his parents stopped skating regularly when the kids came along, he said he grew up with the life-long skating friends of his parents.

Images courtesy of Tom Russo

#### *Story Cont.*

But industry insiders, whether rink owners or competitive skaters, will find this rediscovered history particularly provocative. What is more remarkable is that this information comes from an "outsider." Russo has never worked in a rink or been a competitive skater, or been a curator at the skating museum. He grew up in the Chicago suburbs as an occasional recreational skater, a hobby he continues today in Myrtle Beach. His inspiration for the project came from helping his 90-year-old mother write her legacy letters. He then discovered how roller skating significantly impacted her, her friends, and many others coming of age in Chicago during the 1940s. "On rink nights, the gang would gather at the drugstore or hamburger place and figure out which rink to visit..." He cites one ad's tag line: "Roller Skate Dance is your passport to Social Independence."

What knowledge Russo lacks from not being an industry insider, is made up by a fresh perspective from his thorough research. The 238-page book contains 435 citations, 90 images, and four pages of bibliography. Though around 100 citations come from former RSROA publications like *Skate Review /Skating News*, another 150 citations come from *Billboard Magazine*, which is a first for a book on skating history. Today, *Billboard* is known for its music charts and industry coverage, but in its beginnings in 1894, this weekly publication covered a range of entertainment from circuses to Vaudeville, including a page each issue on roller skating (up until the early 1960s).



Skaters at the Savoy Roller Rink in Chicago in 1941. Russo traces the trail of jazz music preferred at the Savoy as it morphs into disco music that will drive the next boom after the Golden Age. He also documents the struggle African-Americans had in obtaining equal access to entertainment venues, including some roller rinks.

*Image from the Library of Congress*



Chicago Stadium was the site of the 1929 world speed championship and, in the 1940s, host for roller derby and Skating Vanities. The multipurpose sports center was built in 1929 by Paddy Harmon. "Paddy Harmon is credited with reviving the sport of roller skating in 1904 and earned the title of 'father of roller skating . . .,'" writes Russo.

*Image courtesy of Tom Russo*

#### *Story Cont.*

Russo's information is never too elementary for the industry insider. His bibliography will keep roller skating historians busy for years. In addition to *Billboard*, he cites information from a Master of Arts thesis by Romy Poletti called *Residual Culture of Roller Rinks: Media, the Music & Nostalgia of Roller Skating*. It's a fascinating read.

The book's acknowledgements include a nod to our museum: "And a special thanks goes to Peggy Young at the USA Roller Sports, who carved out the time to locate images from the National Museum of Roller Skating archives."

The book primarily covers the Golden Age of Roller Skating, from 1937-1959, with the biggest focus on the WW II years. He does connect the Golden Age to the skating boom of 1900-1910 and the Disco boom years from 1977-1982, and concludes with some thoughts on the state of roller skating today. No book on skating history covers the Golden Age with the kind of detail Russo has revealed in his research. By the end of this era, America had 5,000 roller rinks (when there were 200 ice rinks), and roller skating becoming the number one participatory sport in America. In spite of the challenges of the war years, roller skating thrived.

What George Pickard does to detail the contributions of individual "Titans" of the post WW II era in his book, Russo does for the diversity of the 19 rinks in Chicago during the Golden Years along with a dozen national flagship rinks scattered from Portland, Ore. to Long Island. "Each Chicago roller rink is a story unto itself," he writes. Enthusiasts will



have a good time arguing whether it was New York with its 41 rinks (including the Mineola and Empire), Detroit with the flagship rinks of the Arena Gardens and Arcadia, or the state of Ohio that deserve the honor of "Roller Capital." His mother skated at Madison Gardens (1906-circa 1968), but she didn't know how the rink started or ended. He found out, and that became the model for research on other rinks.

Russo documents how the federal government officially supported roller skating during the war years, for maintaining physical fitness and moral, including the building of roller rinks, especially on military bases. One example he cites is of personal interest to this writer. It was the Paradise Roller Rink in Pasco, Washington, across the Columbia River from my current rink in Richland. The rink was on one of the major naval air training stations in the country during the war, including training some of the first WAVES cadets. When the government closed that rink in 1949, my parents soon opened their first rink called the New Paradise Rink in downtown Pasco.

*Image courtesy of Tom Russo*



*Story Cont.*

Russo explores many other subjects: Gloria Nord; the importance of speed skating that connected the 1900 boom to the Golden Age; the importance of dance skating; RSROA's charity drives; some leaders of that era; the rivalry of the RSROA with the ARSA. He even talks about rink floor construction. One of the most interesting topics is his treatment of the importance of music to that era's boom, and later, to the Disco boom.

He doesn't express strong opinions, with one exception: The importance of adult patrons to the boom of the Golden Age, Disco era, and the importance today to "create the opportunities for adults." He has taken up recreational skating again. He cites shuffle skaters, jam skaters and JB skaters with their regional variations, along with traditional organ inspired skating, as examples of how adults today are still skating to the music.

One might finish the book with a sad sense of loss; nowhere near 5,000 rinks survive in the U.S, and all the rinks specifically mentioned in the book have closed except for The Oaks in Portland, Oregon (1905-present). But Russo reminds us that when the Golden Age appeared, it wasn't the first boom in skating, and he doesn't believe it will be the last. "Writers from each generation called roller skating a fad, but given that it has entered its third century, the craze persists," he writes. "However, the revival of roller derby in 2004 . . . suggests that the nine lives of roller skating have yet to end."

## Tom Russo Launches Book Signing at Orbit Skate Center



"Author Tom Russo's book launch of Chicago Rink Rats at the Orbit Skate Center Dec. 2, 2017 with Jaci Zimmerman Charbonneau

Zimmerman is the 1962 ARSA National Dance Skate Champion and contributed both images and her experiences as an ARSA dance skater in the late 1950s to early 1960s. She turned professional after international competition and coached Chicago's youth for a number of years." Image and caption courtesy of Tom Russo.

Russo said he had a blast at the book signing at Orbit Skate Center. Many friends and people connected with the book dropped by. He also went to the Elmhurst Museum, which has commissioned him to help produce a 12-panel display about this era in roller skating that will be exhibited at the museum from July to November 2018. There is renewed nostalgia locally for the Elm rink (1956-89), a rink that he writes about in his book. He also will be working with the Lombard Roller Rink that is located nearby. Russo sees this partnership with the Lombard, leveraging skating nostalgia, being a model for other rinks.

## Museum Highlights

- Sixty deaf children visited the museum on Dec. 1st before going on to Beatrice to skate.
- George Pickard, Kurt Anselmi, and Jim Pollard's names were added to a plaque in the museum. It states: "This plaque is dedicated in honor of the following individuals for their significant contribution and love for the Sport of Roller Skating." Historical high donations to the museum were received in memory of these three individuals.
- Fernando Regueiro donated a USA Derby shirt at the recent USARS board meeting. Also, Fernando made some suggestions to improve the Roller Derby Exhibit Display at the museum.
- David and Debbie Adamy donated a copy of the USARSA/RSROA merger and the patch and photos at the recent USARS board meeting.
- Nellie Lillie, museum Vice President, had breakfast with a few of the LA Roller Girls in New York City recently, before they competed at the Apollo Theater for Showtime. The producer told Nellie that they are the first roller skating act he can recall competing on the show. The show is scheduled to air in January.
- **The museum made the list of the oddest museums along with the International Banana Museum in California and the Barbed Wire Museum in Kansas. As Nellie Lillie points out, "odd is usually the most interesting." This list was created by TravelPulse, a company that provides destination information to travel agents and consumers. For more detail see this link:**

<http://www.travelpulse.com/news/entertainment/america-s-oddest-museums.html>

### STAY CONNECTED

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[www.rollerskatingmuseum.com](http://www.rollerskatingmuseum.com)

The National Museum of Roller Skating is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization located in Lincoln, Nebraska. It is the only dedicated roller skating museum in the world. We are committed to the preservation of the history of roller skating. With over 50 displays cases, the museum educates the public on all aspects of roller skating, which dates back to the first patented skate from 1819.

National Museum Rollerskating | 4730 South St, Lincoln, NE 68506  
[www.rollerskatingmuseum.com](http://www.rollerskatingmuseum.com)

