

Elmhurst History Museum

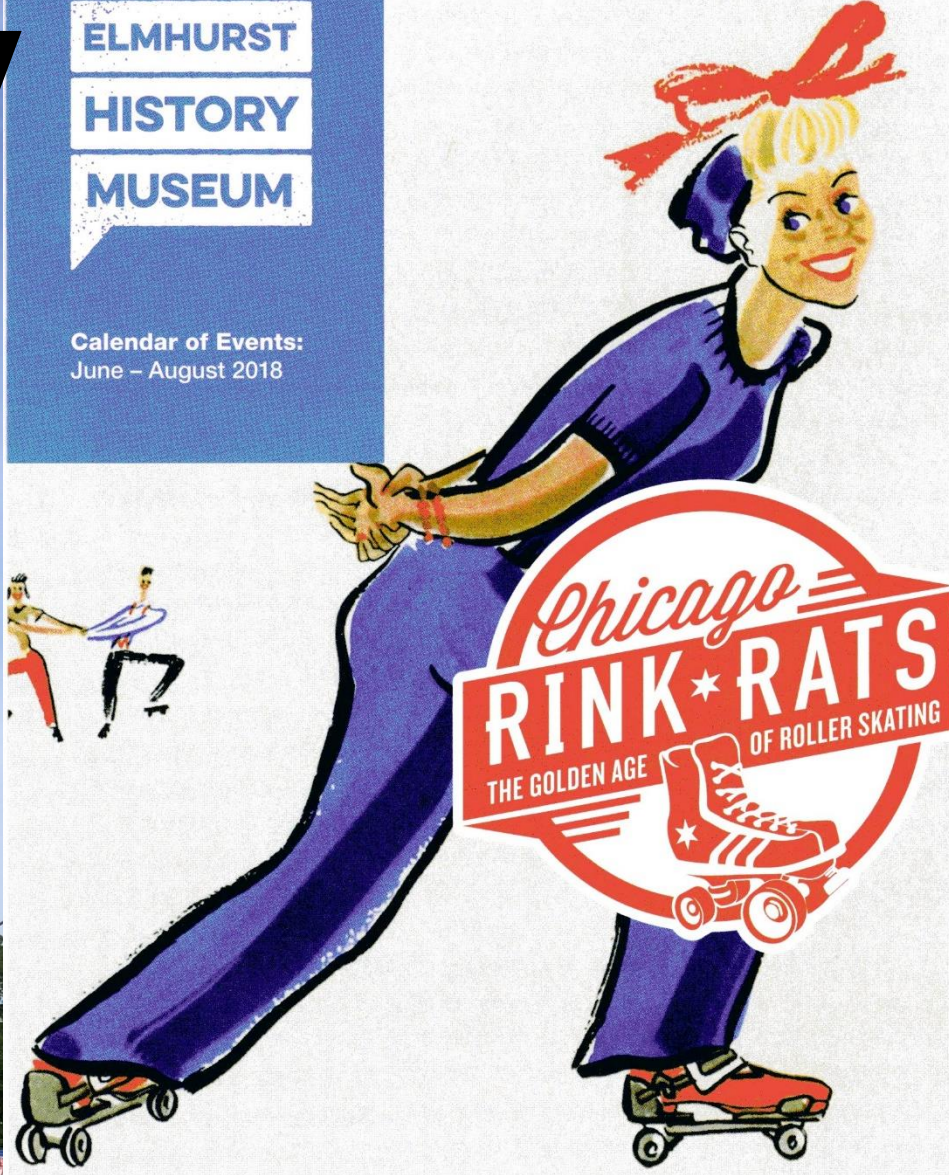
presents

A Special exhibit to commemorate The Golden Age of Roller Skating
July 13 – November 4, 2018



ELMHURST
HISTORY
MUSEUM

Calendar of Events:
June – August 2018



TAKE A NOSTALGIC TRIP TO THE
GLORY DAYS OF ROLLER SKATING

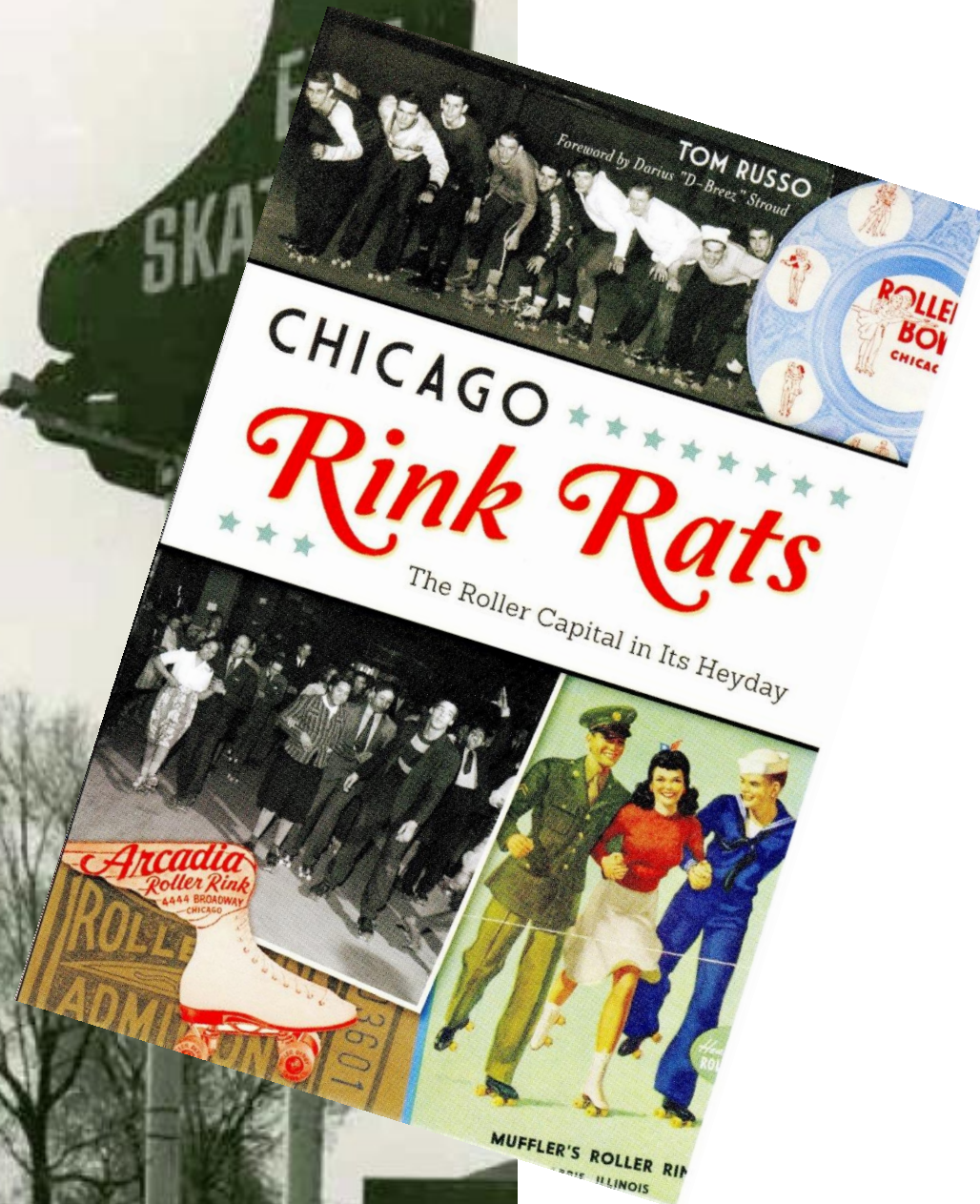
ELMHURST HERITAGE
FOUNDATION

SPECIAL EXHIBIT OPENING EVENT!
FRIDAY, JULY 13, 2018

CHICAGO RINK RATS: THE GOLDEN AGE OF ROLLER SKATING

July 13 –
November 4, 2018

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Rink owners advertised skating as a wholesome and healthy activity. Dress codes, rules of behavior, and schedules accommodating different ages and skill levels reinforced that image.

The nation's first love affair with roller skating was in the 1880s, but by the early 1900s, the public viewed skating as a low-class amusement for roughnecks. Nice people did not roller skate.

The formation of the Roller Skating Rink Owners Association (RSROA) in 1937 ushered in a new era for skating. The RSROA set rules for competitions and established professional career paths for skate coaches, instructors, rink managers, and performers. The organization's slogan, "Roller Skate to Health," re-emphasized skating's wholesome image to attract young and old alike



The Golden Age, inspired by rink owners, changed the image, encouraging classic adult roller skating.

The respectable pastime of skating is shown in this 1880 magazine illustration, right. The skating couple to the far right is from an 1885 skating manual. Skating was promoted as both healthy and moral form of entertainment. The book includes this statement from a member of the clergy:

Allow me to commend to you and your readers roller skating. It can and should substitute dancing as an exercise and amusement for the young people of both sexes. It furnishes indoor, lively, graceful exercise, both muscular and nervous excitement, and leaves no excuse for dancing. I wish there was a skating rink in every village and boarding school.

— Henley's Manual of Roller Skating, 1885

Skaters whirled around the rink, while couples whizzed along, with boys leading by skating backwards in a fog of cigarette smoke and rink surface rosin.

— Tom Russo, author,
Chicago Rink Rats: The Roller Capital in Its Heyday



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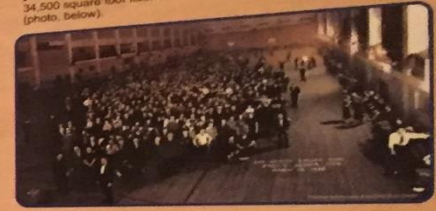
Homes of the Rink Rats: Chicago Area Skating Rinks



Chicago: Roller Capital of the Golden Age

Chicago speed skaters dominated racing events in the first half of the 20th century and were joined by amateur competitive dance and artistic skaters when these competitions emerged in the early 1940s. Chicago was the birthplace of roller derby when it rolled through the Chicago Coliseum in 1935.

As skating gained popularity, investors created mammoth rinks like the 202nd Armory Rink at 5917 North Broadway. Its 34,500 square foot floor was promoted as the world's largest rink (photo below).



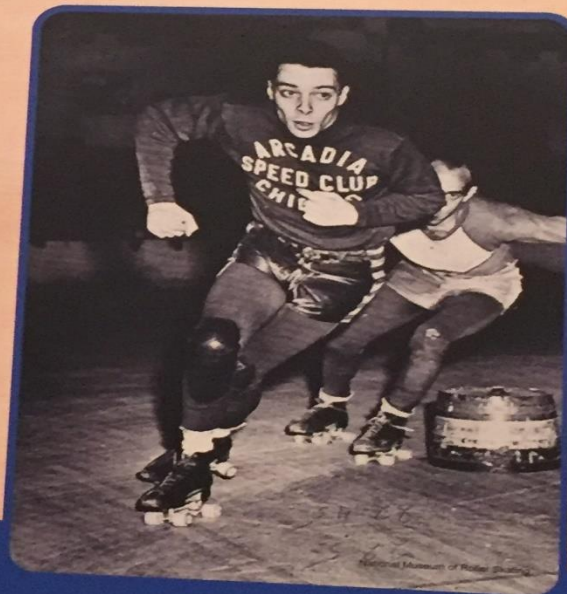
Speed skating was the first, formal, roller skate competition established by rink owner organizations. Chicago speed skaters dominated national competitions throughout the 1940s and early 1950s.



In Speed Skating You Win Yourself

These medals were awarded in 1947 at Chicago's Armory Rink. We don't know if they were won in competition or through participation in the rink's speed skating club. The Armory Rink was located at 16th Street and Michigan Avenue in Chicago, about one third of a mile west of Soldier Field.

Courtesy Sandra Levin & the Orbit Skate Center



Victory in artistic skating is something the judges sometimes give you but in speed skating, you win yourself!

— Skate Magazine, January, 1966

Speed skating competitions are as old as skating itself. Like roller derby and artistic skating, speed skating gained respectability and surged in popularity once RSROA organized sanctioned regional and national events. Much like track and field events, speed skating heats include short and long distances, and individual and relay events.

Skaters round a turn at the Illinois State Roller Skating Championship held in Chicago's Arcadia Rink in 1946 (left). Arcadia Speed Club racer Roy Sopper leads. The fastest amateur skaters average 20 miles an hour on the short, flat, 110 yard-long oval track.

Racers competed in a number of events at each meet. In 1941, Russell Brown of Chicago's Madison Gardens Rink set records in the senior men's 440, one-mile, and two-mile races that still stand today. These events were skated on a 125-yard track as opposed to today's 110-yard track. No one broke them for the 28 years between 1941 and 1970, when competitions switched to the 110-yard track, and no one has yet gone faster.



Skaters from Chicago's Arcadia Speed Club at the starting line in 1946. The Arcadia's skating club, as well as rival clubs in other Chicago rinks, dominated regional speed skating meets and sent a steady stream of competitors to national speed skating events.



Speed skating competitions soon had rivals as roller organizations established rules for artistic and dance competitions. Roller skate judging rules evolved from ice skating and, as well, those colorful, decorative sate outfits.

America's Loveliest Skating Queen



Skating Varieties was a traveling show, much like the big ice skating worked on routines for the 1942 opening of Skating Varieties at Chicago's Aragon. Roller rink, Lord and the Skating Varieties led thousands of girls saw Lord as a role model and looked to her not to copy her moves.

Lord's grace on skates and good looks propelled her to stardom in 1944, she and the "Vandy Vans" company leaders appeared in the film Pin Up Girl, with Betty Grable. Afterward, Lord herself became a pin-up girl, adored by thousands of servicemen.

From the Skating Varieties of 1944 program




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Skaters, 1944

Chicago was the birthplace for roller derby and the introduction of television in the late 1940s carried roller derby to entire new audience looking for roller action!



Chicago: Birthplace of Roller Derby

 Originally a grueling speed skating spectacle evolved by dance marathons, roller derby first roller derby. Held in 1935 at the Coliseum Coliseum (15th and Wabash) where women, male female teams racing around a banked track in an endurance contest meant to simulate a 2,000-mile cross-country race.

Press here to see the original Roller Derby.

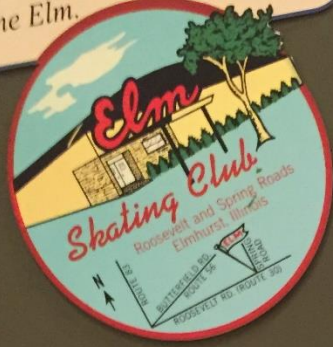
The fan reaction to the inevitable collisions and falls led promoters to create a different kind of derby in 1937. Press this button to see action from a 1948 Chicago bout.

Roller Derby's popularity peaked around 1950, and began a resurgence around 1970. Another revival hit growing with several Chicago-based women's and men's leagues active today.

Press this button to see contemporary Roller Derby action. 1960s courtesy Windy City Rollers.

There was nothing like The Elm. The Elm was it. No matter where I went, different roller rinks, I always came back to The Elm.

— Edward Highley



Behind the Green Doors: Roller Skating in Elmhurst

I'm one of them lucky ones that skated at The Elm.



The Golden Age rolled into Elmhurst in 1956, when Bill and Linda Fuchs opened The Elm at 375 West Roosevelt Road. The skating rink boasted a pair of eye-catching green doors, and a distinctive sign out from featuring a giant roller skate caught the attention of both visitors and regulars.



The Elm Skating Club boasted a 20,000 square foot hardwood maple floor, one of the largest rinks in the Chicago area at the time. Its location near the city of Chicago makes it a prime spot for skaters but also one that absorbed the noise of nearby streets.



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Rinks established skate clubs to recruit, train and promote competitive skaters. City rinks competed for the best skaters to fill their member ranks.

Skaters whirled around the rink, while couples whizzed along, with boys leading by skating backwards in a fog of cigarette smoke and rink surface rosin.

— Tom Russo, author, *Chicago Rink Rats: The Roller Capital in Its Heyday*



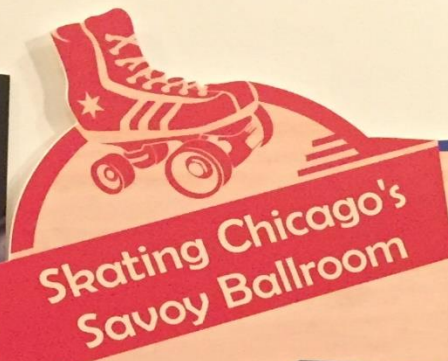
Roller skating emerged as the number one participatory sport in America in 1950. Across the country, 5,000 roller rinks and 18 million skaters defined an era that became roller skating's Golden Age—and Chicago was the center of it all.



The Golden Age of Roller Skating spanned from the late 1930s to the 1960s. It was a time following the Great Depression and during years of war when the country looked for affordable fun and community connections. Americans found both at neighborhood roller rinks.

What made roller skating so popular? Roller skating was hip, and everyone went to the rink. "Rink rats" were the regulars who filled the floors and were passionate for America's hottest sport. This is the story of the glory days of roller skating, Chicago's rink rats, and the skating rinks they called home.





Skating Chicago's Savoy Ballroom

Rather than an organ, Savoy skaters skated to live jazz. Two bands meant the music never broke. The photos here, taken in 1941, show band and skaters in action.



Jimmy Davis, a skating enthusiast and assistant manager at Chicago's Savoy Ballroom, convinced his employers to set aside one day a week when the neighborhood's people of color could roller skate. The Savoy became the city's first rink open to African Americans.

Jazz was the music for the Savoy's roller dancers and rhythm skating was their style. In rhythm skating, skaters improvise moves inspired by the music rather than performing choreographed moves done to certain kinds of music.



A rhythm and blues style of roller dance evolved from the jazz sounds and rhythm swing of the 1930s. Chicago's take on the new style was "Rhythm Skating," inspired by the music of Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, and other jazz greats. Skaters at the Savoy Ballroom were inspired by the music of Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, and other jazz greats. Skaters at the Savoy Ballroom were inspired by the music of Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, and other jazz greats.

The Savoy, a Chicago Southside ballroom, featured a black Jazz band where whites would go to see the "latest dance crazes." Jimmy Davis, asst. manager, lobbied white owners if Monday could be set aside for roller skating. Davis trained speed skaters and established a Midwest all-black league for speed skating. The Savoy's speed club dominated the Midwest circuit and the league was short lived.

But, roller skating persisted, resulting in the revival of roller skating in the Disco and that led to black subculture skate styles into the twenty-first century such as jam skating.

**Jimmy Davis, (center)
assistant manager and
roller skate enthusiast**



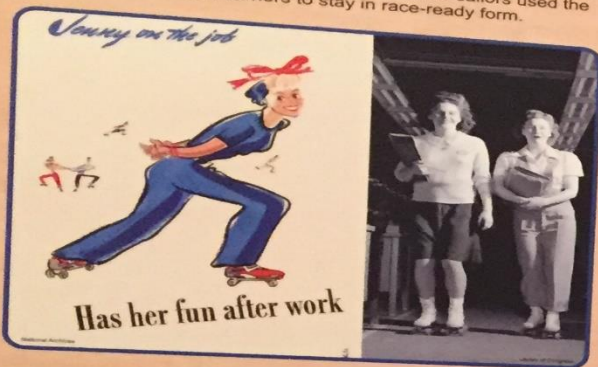
The Savoy

1938-48



**Skater swings
partner at the
Savoy Roller Rink**

Wartime rationing included metal, leather, food, gasoline, cigarettes, and roller skates. Civilians repaired and made do with older skates so U.S. service members could enjoy new ones. Once overseas, service members often asked for cigarettes, letters from home, and roller skates. Soldiers and marines sought out abandoned gymnasiums to roller skate while sailors used the lower decks of aircraft carriers to stay in race-ready form.



On the home front, roller rinks served as community hubs to meet friends, socialize, and forget the stress of war conditions. The federal public health service created a series of posters in 1943 featuring the character Jenny on the Job. Aimed at women entering the industrial work force, Jenny encouraged good health habits. This poster acknowledged skating's popularity and promoted it as a wholesome sport that would keep war industry workers fit and productive.



Skates found their way into factories. At huge war plants, female workers often used roller skates to move quickly over vast stretches to deliver documents. The roller skating war workers in these photos worked in California aircraft plants delivering inter-departmental messages.



Skating the War Years: 1941-1945



Jenny on the Job "has her fun after work!"

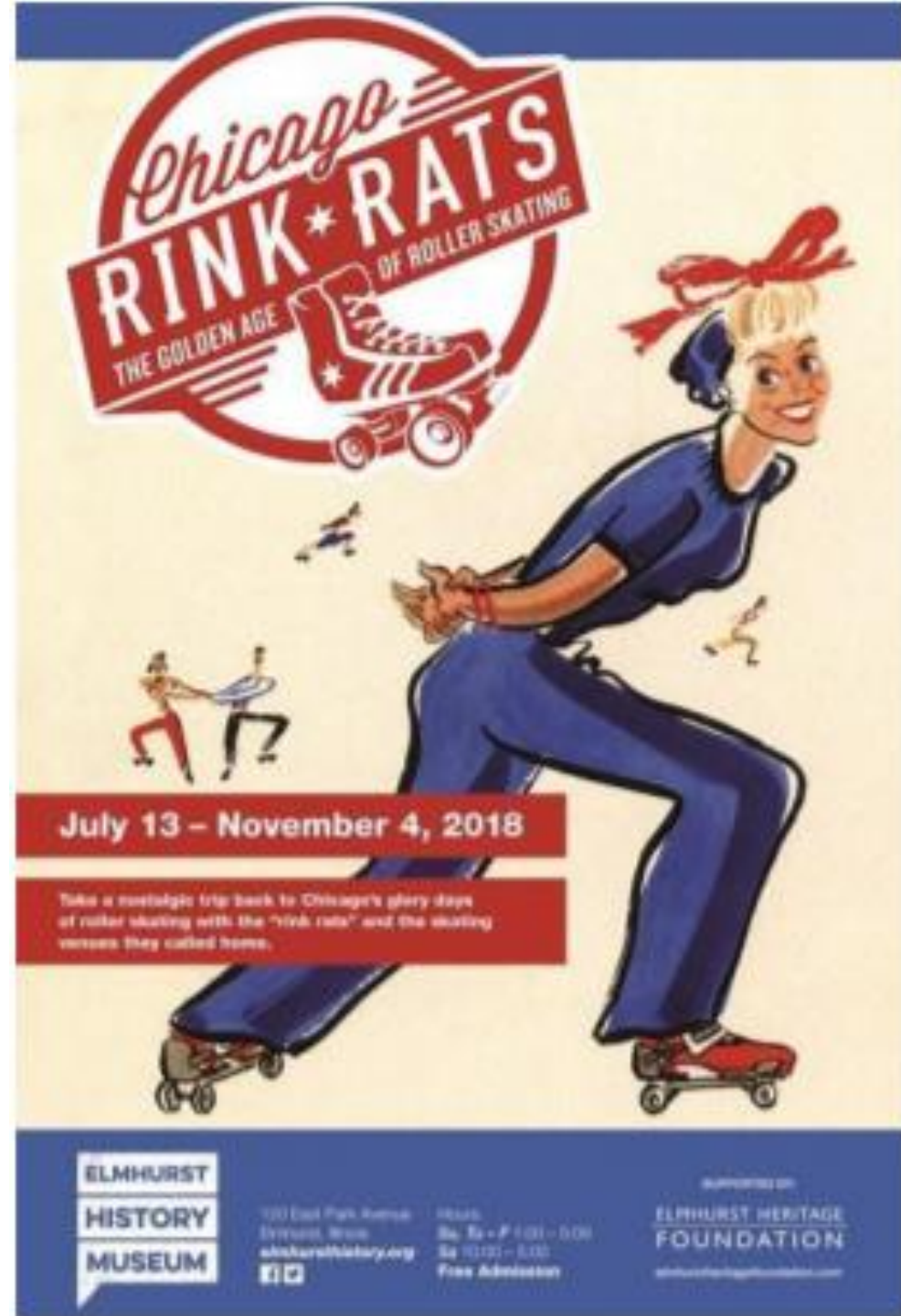
The caricature of Jenny was used by the U.S. Government's WWII *Federal Security Agency* to promote women in the workplace and the wearing of men's work clothes, a show of support for the war effort.

Women and minorities were recruited to work in war munition plants to meet the need as men were drafted and shipped overseas.



Jenny has her fun after work!

- Jenny was featured in a WWII propaganda campaign to entice women to wear overalls, slacks, gloves and hats to work in the war factories...not heard of before 1941!
- In this particular poster, Jenny “*has her fun after work*” and shows her in roller skates. This illustration depicts the extent to which roller skating as recreations had infiltrated the halls of the war department, actually the *Federal Security Agency*, as well as Washington DC.





**"You Not Only Hear
Pipe Organ Music —
You Feel It"**

— William Fuchs

The thing that was marvelous was the organ. I don't know if you heard about the organ, it was like being in Disney World. You had a suspension in the center of the rink — up, ceiling height, where the organ console was, and you just had banks of pipes that went all the way around the whole rink and it would have given Disney World a run for the money.

— Jerry Koppel

Because the organ pipes were installed above the skate floor, sound filled all corners of the big room. People called the effect "surround-a-sound."



Many talented organists played The Elm's massive pipe organ including Bill Kuczek. The sign you see on the organ console in this photo is the same one exhibited here (below). Each organist changed the nameplate when they performed.

The Elm's loudspeaker was a 1,000-pipe organ the size of a two-car garage. Organist Tony Tahlman invested in pipe organ parts and built the massive organ with the same devotion as a car enthusiast building a high-performance racer. For over twenty years, Tahlman served as "chairman" of the console.

This photo of The Elm, taken in 1981, shows the organist's console at left and the banks of pipes along the upper wall. A structure directly over the floor (not visible in the photo) held still more pipes.

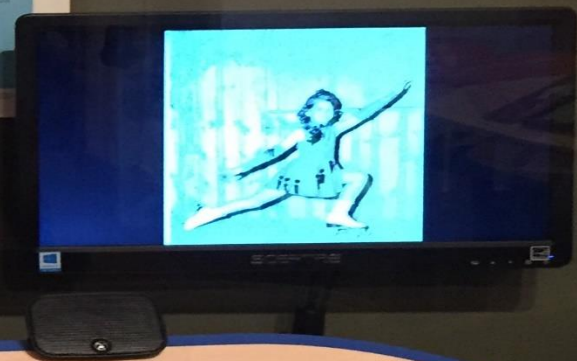




An organist and officer of the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) started "rink" records in 1950. Each recording lists the song title, dance style, and speed in beats per minute. Dominic Campese, the organist on these recordings, bought Rink in 1966 and operates it to this day.
 Courtesy Sandra Levitt & the Old Skate Center

From the Liner Notes:
 The organ used in this recording is a three-manual Wurlitzer housed in the Hub Rink in Chicago. To our knowledge, it is the most brilliant master instrument of its kind in the western hemisphere. Constructed in 1931, it has undergone extensive remodeling. This, along with redesigning of the soft in which it is situated, has transformed it into a unique theater organ with many unusual features.

In the 1979 movie, *Roller Boogie*, two kids from the opposite sides of town share a love of roller disco, and band together to win a skating contest and save their rink from an evil developer.
 Lower cut and more stylish than traditional high-top skates, roller disco skates better fit the funky mood of the roller disco.
 Skate skates courtesy Sandra Levitt & the Old Skate Center



Pipe Organs to Disco Records

Hundreds of wooden wheels rolling on a wooden floor make a lot of noise. Rink music had to be loud to be heard above the din. One hundred years ago, only two options were available: a live brass band or a theatre organ. As movies gained sound, organs that once provided silent movie soundtracks were sold cheap to roller rinks needing volume.

Eventually, recorded music and disc jockeys replaced rink organs. They could accommodate the new music kids wanted or the organ tunes their parents preferred.



These details about The Elm's organ are from a 1956 skating competition program.

Press to see and hear:



Organ music and skate dancing



Disco music and skate dancing



Wheels on Wood

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

The invention of the modern, four-wheel, steerable skate truck fueled the roller skating boom of the late 19th century. Chicago's Richardson Ball Bearing Skate Company improved on this design. In 1908, they introduced the ball bearing skate wheel that allowed skaters to go faster with less effort. In the 1950s, wood wheels gave way to synthetic compounds of varying "stickiness." Today, skaters can choose the kind of wheel they liked best for the style they skate.



BENEATH THE SURFACE

The noise of wooden wheels on hardwood floors plagued roller rinks throughout the Golden Age. Often, ballroom dance floors served a less suitable second life as roller rinks. The hardwood floors created echo chambers. As the sport grew in popularity, rink owners built new skating palaces from scratch, introducing innovative methods to minimize noise. Improvements in wheel design also helped reduce noise. Skate rinks often touted the quality of their floors as shown by this rink sticker.



1



2



3



4

1 Wood wheels required that floors be sprinkled with pine rosin for traction and often broke if a skater landed a jump too hard.

2 Wood wheels were a skater's only option until 1937 when the first synthetic wheels, made of a plastic and fiber material, were introduced by the Sure-Grip Skate Company.

3 "Clay" wheels were another innovation. Not really made of clay but a composite of plastic and other materials like ground walnut shells, these wheels became available after World War II.

4 Urethane is a rubber-like material that absorbs shocks and has good grip on wooden floors. Introduced in the 1970s, it is a quieter wheel than any of its harder cousins.

Anatomy of skate floors: mid-1950s

The Elm had a "rotunda" floor laid in a curved pattern at the rink's ends. On a rotunda floor, the skaters always roll with the grain of the wood. This gives smoother, quieter skating. You can see the curved floor boards in this photo.

Courtesy Jules Gianneschi

In 1956, The Elm's 20,000 square foot North American hardwood maple floor was the envy of Chicago rinks. While built for speed, the floor also absorbed the sound of rolling wood wheels. This model shows a cross-section of the floor's construction.

Maple skate floor

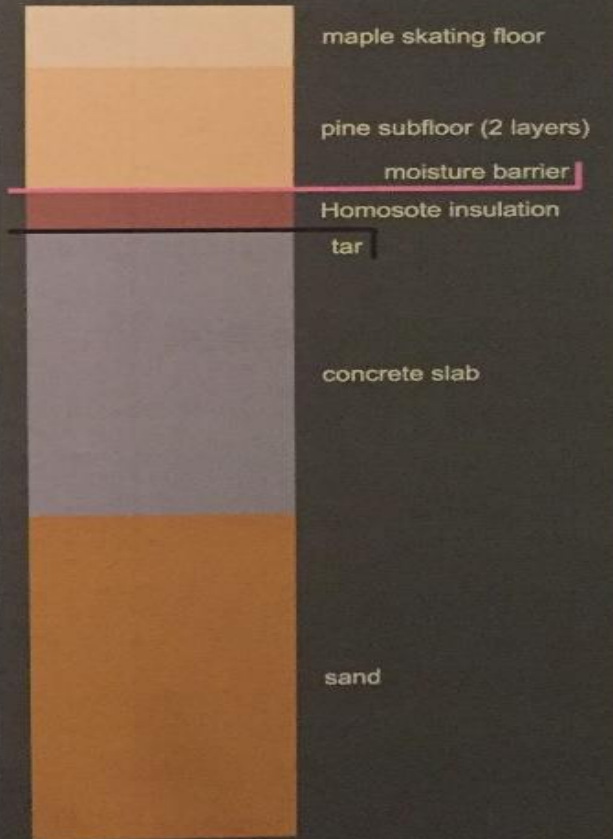
Pine subfloor

Homosote insulation

Concrete slab

Sand

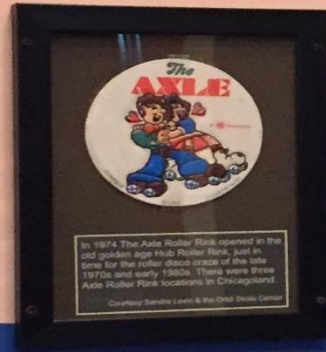
The challenge to rink owners in the 1940-50s was "how to quiet skate floors when wood wheels met maple floors and created a noise nuisance?" The Elm skate floor became a model for new rinks.



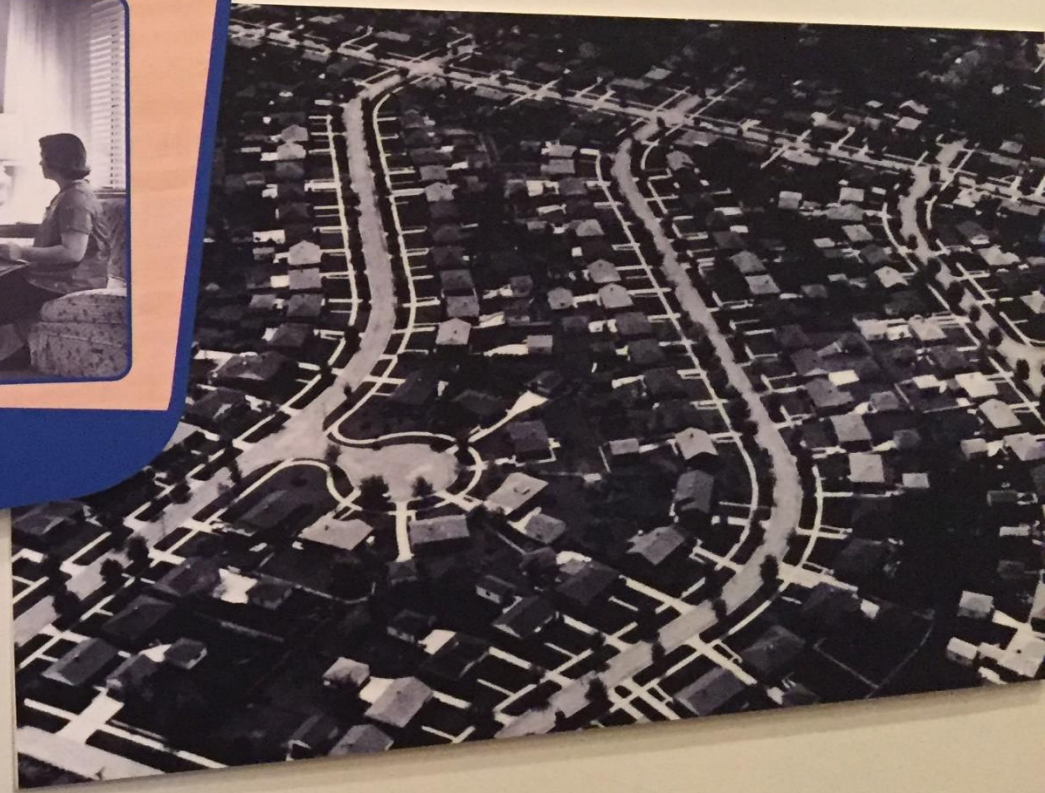
The Elmhurst History Museum special exhibit ended November 4, 2018. Its grand opening was the most attended in the museum's history while the exhibit generated a record number of visits.

The End of the Golden Age

Rock and roll music didn't work well with the formalized dance steps used in roller skating, and the kids who listened to it were not inclined to adapt themselves to their parents' music and pastimes. Cars expanded the distance people could go to fill their leisure time, while a new technology called "television" gave people something to do in the comfort of their living rooms. Interest in skating declined while insurance premiums and property values rose. Under these pressures, many rinks closed.



This is not what their parents did at the roller rink. The disco era of the 1970s revived skating for a brief time, but the ambiance of the organ music and skate dancing of the Golden Age was left behind.



The Golden Age of Roller Skating: 1938-59

A summary of final thoughts

- The Elmhurst History Museum exhibit was based on *Chicago Rink Rats: The Roller Capital in its Heyday*, published in 2017.
- The Golden Age ended as rinks were challenged by rising real estate values, insurance liability costs and as boomer generation who sought rock'n roll music, rejecting their parents love of pipe organ music.
- The Disco era spurred a revival for roller rinks with roller Disco and became a boom for recreational skate enthusiasts who etched out skate styles that live to this day such as Jam skating and rhythm skating.
- The origins of today's skate styles is a throwback to black rinks that offered alternative roller skating to jazz bank music, such as the Savoy Roller Rink.
- Chicago's claim as ***Roller Capital***, derives from several firsts, whether its from the silent movie *The Awful Skate* in 1907 by Chicago's Essanay Film Company, roller derby at the Chicago Stadium in 1935 or speed skaters dominance in national competition; Chicago rinks were at the forefront of roller skating's Golden Age.