

History of Roller Skating in Lehigh Valley

Roller skating has been around for over 300 years. It got its start in the 1700's in Holland, when an unknown Dutchman attached wooden spools to blocks of wood to make the first pair of dry land skates, which were nicknamed "skeelers".



Central Park Allentown

In 1760 a famous Belgian inventor, Joseph Merlin, designed a pair of metal wheeled boots. He attended a masquerade party in London wearing his invention and decided to make a "grand entrance", playing the violin while skating across the ballroom floor. Unfortunately, he lost control and crashed into a wall-sized mirror on the other end of the room, severely injuring himself as well as the reputation of roller skating for the next several decades.

Nonetheless, the roller skate survived. In 1819 it glided more gracefully into society with the premier of the German ballet, "Der Maler oder die Wintervergnügen" (translated "The Painter or the Winter Fun"). The ballet called for ice skates, but because it was not possible to produce ice on stage, roller skates were used.

In 1840, skates gained notoriety for practical use, as they began to be used by barmaids in the vast German beer halls. By 1857, roller skating the first public skating rinks opened on the Strand of London and Floral Hall. All roller skates were in-line skates until around 1863, when American James Plimpton patented the modern design that is still used today. With two parallel sets of wheels made of boxwood and working on rubber springs, this was the first dry land skate that could maneuver in a smooth curve. This design gave the skater the ability to make turns and skate backward. At about the same time, E.H. Barney, a Massachusetts inventor, introduced the clamp-on skate, which was eventually modified to become adjustable. The clamp-on concept was popular until the 1960's.

In 1884, the use of pin ball bearings made roller skates roll smoother and weigh less. Around the turn of the century, the first roller skates with pre-attached boots were introduced, but these shoe skates were used mainly by professional skaters, while the general public preferred clamp-on skates.

In 1908, Madison Square Gardens in New York was made into a skating rink, and over the next several decades hundreds of roller skating rinks appeared in the United States and Europe. Different types of skating emerged, including ballroom roller dancing, speed skating and polo skating. During the 1930's, roller skating became a popular spectator sport. Skaters performed "death-defying feats" on platforms suspended high above audiences' heads in Vaudeville acts around the country.

Roller rinks were very popular in the 1940s and '50s. Many a romance was spawned at roller rinks, where couples skated to traditional, live roller skating music played by an organist.

The 1970s brought the roller disco craze. During this period, the use of organ music began to fade and disk jockeys played tunes for skaters under mirror balls and intricate light designs.

Today, roller skaters world-wide enjoy skating at public rinks and private parties. Many compete in dance, figure skating, freestyle, hockey and speed skating. While some who are involved in the sport believe that roller skating is on the decline, others report that it is growing.

Roller Skating in the Valley - Years Ago

Castle Gardens

Castle Gardens, was extremely popular years ago. The facility was a venue for a variety of entertainment over the decades - live music, dancing and, of course, roller skating.

The ballroom structure was in 1923, and known as the Al-Dorn Ballroom, but in 1935 it changed its name to Castle Gardens. The 1930s and 40s were a time a time of big bands. Benny Goodman, the Dorsey Brothers, Peggy Lee, and others were some of the names to play Castle Gardens. When rock n" roll became popular Castle Gardens changed its name to Castle Rock, and hosted such acts as Freddy Cannon, Annette Funicello, Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon. Roller skating to music became quite popular. The Gardens closed in 1985.

Central Park

The park opened July 1893, offering 40 acres of shady walks and ample park benches. Its popularity between 1906 to 1920. That year Central Park added a new outdoor theater that could seat 1,600 people. Plays and music concerts at the park were a favorite pastime to the people of the Lehigh Valley In later years roller skating through the park was a common sight. Unfortunately a string of fires starting from 1932 through till 1951 plagued the park. It was closed in December

of 1951.

Info on local rinks' schedules and addresses:

Independence Family Fun Center, 4345 Independence Drive,

Schnecksville, PA 18078. Seniors - Tuesday mornings 9:30 - 10:00 am (610) 769-5811

SkateAway

3860 Lehigh St, Hokendauqua PA 18052

www.skateaway.biz/skateawaywhitehall_session.htm

(610) 432-5002

RollerMotion

1609 Trexlertown Road - Macungie, PA 18062

<http://www.rollermotion.com/sessions>

(610) 398-0704

For more information, contact:

Lifestyles over 50

4847 Hamilton Boulevard

Allentown, PA 18106

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