

DORNEY ROLLER RINK SET THE SCENE FOR ROMANCE

By MORNING CALL

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Let's spin the Old Nostalgia Machine back to July 26, 1941, "When Melvin Met Thelma."

That was the day that couple began going around together at the famous Dorney Park Roller Skating Rink, where many local lovebirds met their life mates.

Melvin and Thelma Warke today live in Whitehall Township, but back then, they were just two youngsters having a good time at one of the most popular spots in the Valley.

The "Rink" prided itself as a place for skaters, from 6-60 ... says the old ad provided to me by Robert Ott, my Dorney Park correspondent.

There was a session in the afternoon and one in the evening, Ott said, during which 78 rpm records were used for the music. The rink was a dance pavilion before it was converted for skating, he said.

On the south side of the building was a platform where the "lookers" could stand and watch the skaters as they moved over the maple floor.

Skating eventually lost its appeal, and Ott said, "We put in a dark walk-through called the Whacky Shack."

The building was destroyed in a fire in 1972.

Back with Thelma and Mel on their first date, the couple finished skating and wound up on the roller coaster. Back then you could go on repeat rides, and the best seat was the back, where you really got thrown around, said Thelma.

"We rode on the roller coaster 10 times in a row. At 10 cents a ticket, it amounted to \$1 each. Mel thought I was a gold digger!"

Then they hopped in 21-year-old Mel's brand-new convertible and headed across the city, over the Tilghman Street Bridge for a place called "The Blue Pig," where they had the drive-in's famous "Black Cow." Colorful date, Mel!

At Thelma's request, I tried to find out more about the Blue Pig. Apparently, it was off Union Boulevard, just over the bridge, near where Western Electric was built in 1945. It is noted in city directories from about 1937 to 1942 as owned by two men from the Harrisburg area. Not much more could be found in our files.

Thelma believes a black cow was root beer and chocolate ice cream.

If their first date was typical for the Lehigh Valley, their marriage certainly wasn't. Mel and Thelma dated often at the rink until he was drafted in February 1942. By September 1942, Mel and Thelma were engaged, and in September 1943 they were headed to Camp Gruber in Muskogee, Okla., to be married.

They went to the courthouse for their license, where she discovered her signature was not even necessary. Only the man signed for the license, which cost \$2. There were no such things as blood tests.

They headed for the bus station, where they missed the last bus to camp. So they hitchhiked. "This farmer picked us up and when we told him we were getting married, he thought this was great."

He drove them to the gate, where the guard gave him a special pass to drive them right to the chapel. Unfortunately, he couldn't stay for the wedding, which took another twist. The chaplain was new to his post and wasn't licensed to marry anybody there.

So while the chaplain put out an S.O.S. for another minister, Thelma, dressed in her black and white Shepherd's plaid outfit, sat down at the chapel organ and played her own wedding music while they waited.

"There was nobody there but us," she said. "The windows were open, and I remember thinking how nice the birds were singing. They were my vocalists."

While they were looking for a minister, a call went out for any woman on base who could serve as a maid of honor. "We could not find any woman anywhere in the camp, so one of the base majors was my bridesmaid, and the new chaplain was our witness."

By the time they were married, word had spread to the mess hall, where the cook had prepared a special wedding meal for the couple. He made a leg of lamb, said Thelma, "the one thing I had never eaten. I always think of Mary's little lamb. I took a bite, but it was the last time I ever ate lamb."

She did enjoy the nice cake the cook had made.

So for those of you who think your weddings must be huge, elaborate affairs, and just perfect, consider this. The Warkes have been married 55 years and have five children and nine grandchildren.