CREATE

VINTAGE ST. PETE: When Gay Blades was the center of the skating universe

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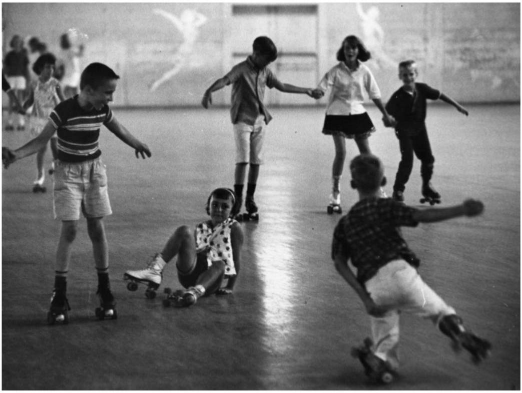
By **Bill DeYoung**



October 18, 1965: Students from Shore Acres Elementary at Gay Blades Roller Rink. Tampa Bay Times.

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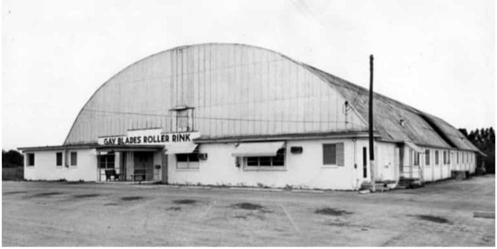
VINTAGE ST. PETE is a series focused on our city's illustrious (and occasionally notorious) past. Many of these features have appeared in the* Catalyst *over the past two years, and new stories (like this one) will be added as time goes on.

"All skate, all skate!"

When Elynor Gould's voice came over the public address system at Gay Blades Roller Rink, the skaters on the floor – sometimes numbering in the hundreds – knew that the couples' skate, backwards skate, Hokey Pokey or other specialty spotlight was over. "All skate" was the announcement that everyone, no matter their skill level, was allowed back onto the floor. It was time to roll.



Gay Blades, photographed in 1964. Tampa Bay Times.

Gay Blades was one of St. Petersburg's most popular recreation centers for nearly 35 years. The odd-looking building at 2191 9th Avenue North, with the Quonset Hut-style tin roof bolted to thin concrete walls, was home to the largest hardwood maple floor (90 by 180 feet) in the bay area.

Other roller skating rinks came and went in St. Pete – the Boulevard, the Pastime, the Pinellas, the Zink and Southland among them – but none had the staying power of Gay Blades, which opened in 1950 and was still packing 'em in when it was sold to make way for a medical arts building in 1985.

At least three generations of St. Petersburgers gracefully glided, stop-started hugging the railing, or fell repeatedly on that smooth and

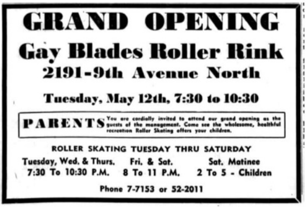
Mary Morrison, 14, competed in Junior Girls Freestyle.

unyielding surface, bruising knees, elbows and derrieres.

With the exception of its first three years, the building was owned and operated by the Gould family, late of Des Moines, Iowa. Robert Gould and his wife Elynor ran a rink there, and when they moved to St. Pete, along with their three kids they brought several hundred pairs of rental skates, snack bar appliances and an old Hammond organ to provide music to skate to (the organist came along, too).

The St. Pete rink had been named in honor of the famous Gay Blades Rollerdrome, at 52nd Street and Broadway in New York. The Goulds leased and subsequently purchased the facility from the owner, who hadn't made much of a success of it.

Pre-World War II, roller skating was the province of adults almost exclusively. Bob Gould, who would become president of the RSROA (Roller Skating Rinks of America), was instrumental in getting younger and younger children into skates and onto the hardwood.



GRAND OPENING

Gay Blades Roller Rink

2191-9th Avenue North

Tuesday, May 12th, 7:30 to 10:30

PARENTS You are cordially invited to attend our grand opening as the guests of the management. Come see the wholesome, healthful recreation Roller Skating offers your children.

ROLLER SKATING TUESDAY THRU SATURDAY

Tuesday, Wed. & Thurs.	Fri. & Sat.	Sat. Matinee
7:30 To 10:30 P.M.	8 To 11 P.M.	2 To 5 - Children

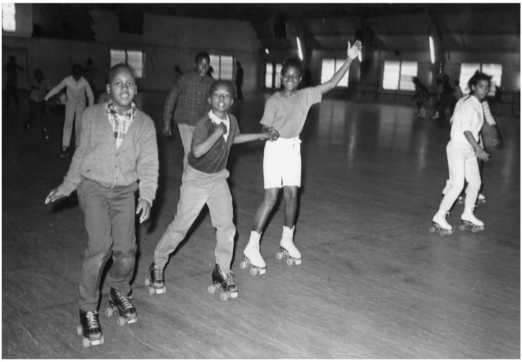
Phone 7-7153 or 52-2011

With the widespread scourge of juvenile delinquency becoming an even greater problem, we have noticed many commendations in the daily newspapers, with regard to the wonderful aid being given to small communities by roller skating rinks. There are, according to juvenile authorities, far too few "supervised" recreational outfits for the youngsters, teen-agers and young adults, and it is only with "supervised" recreation that we are going to be able to attain the eventual reduction in such delinquency.

Gay Blades Newsletter (*Roll Call*), reprinted from *Skating*

***News*, October 1954**

“My dad hired a public relations man, George Russell, and he’s the one who really got the youth coming there,” remembers Frank “Buddy” Gould, 79. “He went around to the elementary schools and the junior high schools, and proposed that they sell tickets right there at the schools. Not at the rink. My mom used to stay up nights stamping the names of different schools on these tickets. And Dad would deliver them to the schools.



December 13, 1966: Glenoak Elementary students at a Gay Blades afternoon skating party. Tampa Bay Times.

“And the schools could announce over the intercom that they were going to have a skating party. They sold the tickets for a dollar, and the school got 40 or 50 cents. So it was a fundraising thing for the school.”

It was an ingenious marketing plan. Along with a percentage of ticket sales, the Goulds kept the snack bar profits, and the money from skate rentals.

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“The ticket got you in the door, but if you didn’t have your own skates, you had to rent them,” says Buddy Gould, who was a competitive speed skater in his teens.

Camilla Mosley, age 14

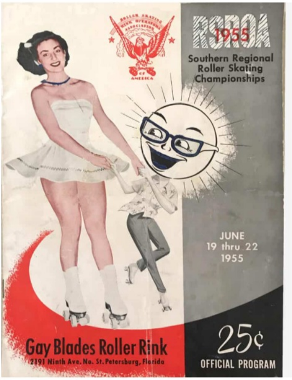
After-school “skating parties,” with specially-chartered buses, took place weekdays (with separate hours for elementary and junior high kids). High schoolers and adults tended to come for the evening sessions, and the biggest crowds of all skated on Friday and Saturday nights.

Until a major renovation in 1976, the building was not air-conditioned. An aggregate of loud exhaust fans drew air through the translucent jalousie windows.

It was all part of the Gay Blades charm, according to Camilla Mosley, 68. “When you were born and raised here, the heat didn’t bother you,” she says.

Her family caught the Gay Blades bug in 1954. “My daddy skated, and so he taught all four of us kids to skate,” she remembers. “And we all took lessons there; we were known as the Skating Mosleys; each one of us did something different.

“Everybody knew us at the skating rink. I skated in Southeastern Regionals and freestyle. I got the bronze medal. And my sister Debbie and her husband ended up in Nationals in 1984, and they came in fifth in the nation.” She keeps photos from every era on her wall.


Roller Skating Rink Operators Association of America
RSROA
1955
Southern Regional Roller Skating Championships
JUNE 19 thru 22 1955
Gay Blades Roller Rink
2191 Ninth Ave. No. St. Petersburg, Florida
25¢
OFFICIAL PROGRAM

Young Camilla Mosley took private lessons during the week, learning to jump and spin. Other students were taught dance routines and performed in snappy costumes; still others aspired to be speed skaters.

Handsome young Link Lester was a competitive skater, and an instructor.

Remembers his daughter, Tammy Lester Ingram: "They had a show in the late '50s, before I was born. For a charity. They put a slide up in the ceiling that they came out of, he said, going faster than lightning. He would come off the slide doing a freestyle jump."

Link Lester with skating partner Joyce Trainor.

Tammy took dance lessons at Gay Blades – but her father's legend loomed large. Everybody knew and admired Link Lester. "I was jealous because he was so, so good and I just didn't get that 'great' gene that he had," she laughs. "But I held my own."

She was at Gay Blades after school most days, and on the weekends. And she worked in the snack bar as a teen, in the '70s. "The skating rink was my whole life, basically," Tammy, 59, recalls. "Elynor was like a second grandmother to me. They were just wonderful people."

She met her husband, Jim Ingram, at the rink. He was a speed skater and a "floor guard" – a whistle-carrying referee, to put a stop to fights (which were infrequent) and generally keep the round-and-round flowing smoothly.

On the Facebook group page *People Who Have Fond Memories of Gay Blades Roller Rink*, certain themes are recurrent: My husband and I met

there, I spent every weekend there, I learned to skate there, I competed in the Southeastern Regionals there, I broke my arm there, I always went after school, I won a pair of skates in Mr. Gould's raffle …

Friday nights were particularly important if you attended St. Petersburg High School, which was just three blocks west up 9th Avenue.

"We would all race to see who would get down to the skating rink first to tell Mrs. Gould the score of the football game so she could announce it to the rink," Mosley, class of '69, recalls.

"I only got down there twice that I can remember, but I ran my butt off 'cause I didn't have a car. I ran as fast as I could and told Mrs. Gould the score. She would announce your name because you were the one who informed her. And it was a big deal to have your name announced over the intercom."

"We're very strict and believe in close supervision," says Mrs. Gould, the attractive, grey-haired matriarch of the rink, who personally supervises the whole show with an iron hand. A guard walks into the front office, and she chides him for a messy shirttail hanging out. "Are you going to tuck that in?" she challenges him. "No," he teases, but a moment later the guard skates by, shirttail neatly tucked in.

On Friday and Saturday nights the scene changes. The crowd is mostly teenagers looking for more than a couple hours frittered away on roller skates. A half hour before Gay Blades opens, the parking lot is almost empty, but already teens hang over the entrance rail, or sit on the roofs of cars, yelling greetings when someone new arrives.

Carolyn Nolte-Watts, *St. Petersburg Times,* June 17, 1974

In the mid 1970s, the one and a half-inch thick floor was ruined when the retention pond out back flooded during a thunderstorm. Bob Gould took out a small business loan to have the floor replaced and make additional upgrades.

Elynor Gould and her son, Frank "Buddy" Gould.

Buddy Gould bought the business from his parents in 1976; he added a drop ceiling, better lights and a more powerful sound system for the house record player. And he changed the name to Gould's Roller Skating Rink.

His father died the following year. "A tireless worker, Mr. Gould devoted himself to the promotion of roller skating," read his obituary in the *St. Petersburg Times.*

During the "roller disco" craze of the late '70s, Buddy built a DJ booth and hired young record-spinners to broadcast the latest hits on weekends. "The DJ could manage the crowd with the music," he remembers, "and of course some of the kids brought their own records they wanted him to play."

Over time, the weekend nights began to attract different crowds. While white teenagers came to skate on Fridays, Saturdays became predominantly Black. It was, Gould explains, just a natural process. Something that organically happened.

Weekend evening skating hours were 8 to 11 p.m. both days. Saturday nights at 9:45, at his patrons' request, the skates came off and it turned into a dance party on the hardwood floor. These became known as "Soul Music Nights."

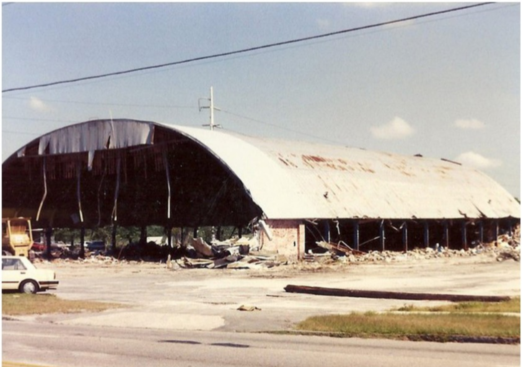
In June 1985, Gould agreed to sell Gay Blades lock, stock and skate rentals to Hospital Corporation of America, which owned the Edward H. White Hospital next door. The rink wasn't for sale – but, he explains, they made him an offer he couldn't refuse. The money was simply too good.

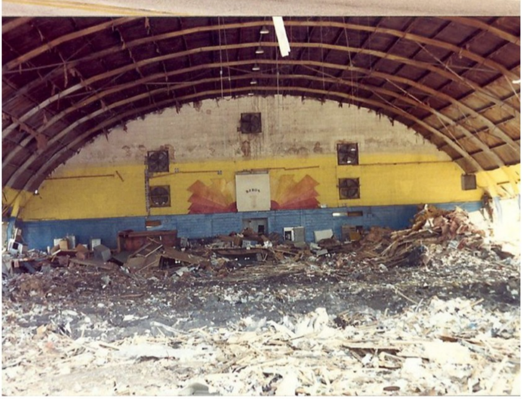
With a zoning change and other legalities on the table, half a year went by before HCA was able to take ownership and demolish the 35-year-old building. This gave Buddy Gould the time to wind down the school parties and the skating classes, and to arrange to donate the rental skates, video games and snack bar equipment to locate charities.

“It’ll do my heart good if they can get some use out of them,” he told the newspaper that November. “I think I’ll loaf for a few months.”

The delay also provided those multiple generations of St. Petersburg skaters time to remember, and to grieve a time gone by.

“I took pictures during demolition,” says Tammy Lester Ingram. “I stood there and I took pictures and I cried.”





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