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Good times rolled at Ellport Roller Rink

Louise Carroll For The Ledger

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The Ellport Roller Rink was a popular hangout until it closed in 2009. *Ellwood City Ledger*

ELLPORT -- It was a sad day when the Ellport Roller Rink closed in 2009, but memories of the good times are still fresh.

Jeri Rough, 61, who lives in Ellport, feels the sadness every time she rides past the former site of the rink, at 215 Connoquenessing Blvd.

"When it closed, it broke my heart, but I have many, many good memories," Rough said. "It was a big part of my life."

Rough started skating when she was 5, and when she was 14, she went to work for the owners, Tom and Shirley Stover, who were from West Virginia. Rough worked

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"When I got the job, it was like someone handed me a million dollars. I adored the place. I handed out skates and worked the concession stand," Rough said. "Shirley gave me skating lessons. I learned to do the waltz and blues, and I gave skating lessons to beginner skaters.

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"It was awesome. We skated to live organ music, and when the organ was gone, we skated to organ music on tape," she said.

Shortly before Harold "Sonny" Rough and his wife, Sally, bought the roller rink in 1971, Jeri married their son Ron, and she continued to work there.

"It was so wonderful with all the muscle cars parked in the parking lot, and we had rock 'n' roll instead of organ music, and there was music by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones," Rough said.

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Rough recalls the all-night skates, which began at 7 p.m. and ended at 7 the next morning.

"About 120 started out skating, but by midnight, many of the teenagers were asleep under the pinball machines or on the benches, and their parents would come and get them. By 7 a.m., there were about 30 skaters there," she said.

When Sonny died in 1990, his son Tim took over the rink. Tim was a competitive skater who won more than 50 awards. When he turned professional, he became a coach. He taught hundreds of people of all ages how to skate and was known as a patient coach who always had a smile on his face.

Laurie LaVarta-Smith began skating at the rink in 1975, when she was a fourth-grader at Locust Grove School.

"I took lessons, worked weekends at the rink and competed from about 1979 to 1981. I was a complete 'rink rat' from 1975 to 1981," Smith said. "During this time, Sonny and Sally treated me like a daughter."

Smith skated competitively until she was 14 but continued to skate for recreation. Several years later, she returned to skate competitively and help Tim run the rink seven days a week from 1983 to 1992.

The rink was the place to be, and on Friday evenings, there were many teenagers from Ellwood City and the surrounding area. On Saturday afternoons, the skaters were mostly younger -- 5 to 12 years old, with parents. In the evening, teenagers would come out. Sunday afternoons, the skaters were mainly family groups who would skate after attending church.

Smith recalls that the teenagers had a favorite drink that the girls called The Rainbow and the boys called Suicide.

"It was a mixture of Coke, cherry pop, root beer and Sprite," Smith said.

She recalled that skaters played games including the Limbo, and there was a prize -- a free drink or a free skate -- for the one who could get the lowest. They also did the Chicken Dance and the Hokey Pokey.

"A favorite game was Four Corners," Smith said. "A whistle would blow and skaters would go to their nearest corner. There was a 5-by-5-inch wooden die, and someone would heave it down the floor, and if (the) number two came up, those in that corner had to sit down. It went on until there was a winner."

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The rink had a jukebox with the top-10 hits being played on radio. Each week, a man would come and put the 45s that were the newest top-10 hits in the jukebox.

"Sonny's favorite song, 'New York, New York' by Frank Sinatra, was always in the jukebox, and he played it frequently," Smith said. "Another fun thing was the races. Sonny would narrate them, like 'The little girl in pink is out in front. Hey, you guys, my grandmother can skate faster than that.'

"For many, skating was their first interaction with the opposite sex, holding hands while skating. When the music ended, many would wipe their sweaty palms on their pants," Smith remembered.

The rink closed in 2009. Tim Rough's death on Jan. 15 saddened many people but brought to their minds the good times they spent at the roller rink.

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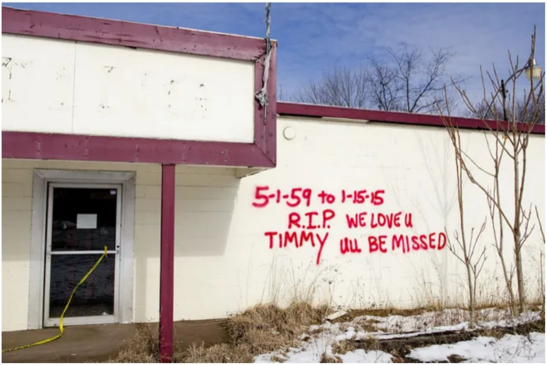

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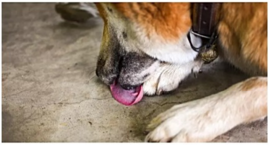

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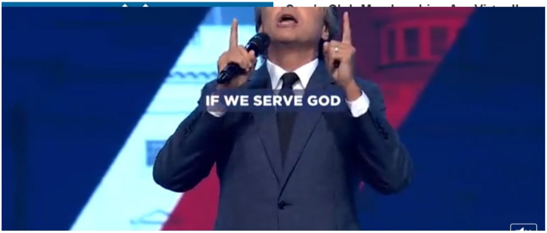

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