acrobatics, a lifestyle

LAURA MALT SCHNEIDERMAN and MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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PITTSBURGH (AP) — Every Thursday night at the Neville Roller Drome, the Steel City Rollers and other skaters flow out on the floor, some of them performing dance moves, others practicing in a synchronized line.

The 14-member group of African American skaters is a vibrant part of a disappearing pastime.

Roller skating used to be so popular that post-World War II Allegheny County had at least 18 rinks. Only two remain today: the Neville Roller Drome on Neville Island and the smaller Eden Park in McKeesport. Among some enthusiasts and especially among the African American community, the affection for roller skating never died.

Closing is far from Neville Roller Drome owner Jim Park's mind. "We do have expansion plans," he said. "We want to build a sport future." He sees his family opening a multi-floor family entertainment center within five years.

Several years ago Mr. Park responded to requests to have an adults-only night for skating, and his staff takes the age limit seriously. Patrons are carded upon entry to make sure they are at least 18. In many cities, African American skaters make up the largest proportion of the people at Adult Nights. The term "Adult Night" is often code for Black Night. But at the Roller Drome, the crowd is about half white, and a community atmosphere prevails, with hugs and smiles exchanged among skaters and references to the "skate family."

In addition to their regular Thursdays, the Steel City Rollers travel to various roller skating parties in North America.

"I was over the whole party scene, but I still wanted to go out . and this is a lot healthier and a lot of fun. I met a lot of friends here," said Brittany McNeill, 27, of Homewood North.

The modern-day world of roller skating is on display in the February 2019 HBO documentary "United Skates." It details how skaters in different cities develop different styles and signature moves: Chicago does JB skating — a form of high stepping and occasional dips named for James Brown. California has the Cali Slide, a smooth series of turns. Baltimore has snapping, where a skater spins or turns on one foot to face the opposite direction. Detroit has sliding — skating as hard and fast as they can sideways. And Pittsburgh?

Pittsburgh skaters often skate backward, called "rexing," and dance on skates, said Darryl "Dangerous D" Meadows, 62, president of the Steel City Rollers and a part-time Uber driver.

"We can do everything every other city can do, but they can't do everything we do," said Dawna "Ms. Pittsburgh" Biggs, 58, of the Hill District.

Synchronized skating in a line goes by many names: stepping, strutting, shuffling, striding. When a venue holds a silent skate party, skaters wear headphones to hear one of several channels of music. The color of the lights on the headphones indicates which channel each skater is listening to.

Some skaters put colored lights that flash on and off under their skates. Some people customize their skates with small wheels that allow the skater to move sideways. The Pittsburgh club doesn't use small wheels, which are harder than regular wheels and can ruin a rink floor.

"United Skates" shows the slow disappearance of roller skating rinks in spite of their popularity. Property values have gone up, making rink owners more willing to sell. Also, many rink owners have aged and don't have succession plans. When an owner retires, his or her rink often closes.

"We don't want any more rinks shutting down," Meadows said. He remembers the Ardmore Rolling Skating Palace in Forest Hills, the Coliseum in Homewood, the Ches-A-Rena in Cheswick, the Spinning Wheels in Castle Shannon and the Romp N Roll in Shaler, all closed now. Many recreation centers used to include skating on their gym floors. These venues began slowly closing through the decades, with many shutting in the 1990s.

"A lot of us grew up skating," Meadows said.

"When we put our skates on, it's just about the release of the day," said Brent Robertson, 69, of McKeesport. "That's what bonds us together."

The history of skating was tainted by racism. De facto segregation kept black skaters out of most rinks nationwide until the civil rights era. In PIttsburgh the only rink open to black skaters initially was the Pythian Temple Roller Rink inside a black social club in the Hill District. It opened in 1935 and closed about two years later. The white proprietors of the Penn Roller Skating Rink in 1938 canceled a skate party when they learned that some of the guests would be African American. The Diamond roller rink on the North Side opened to black skaters in 1953, under pressure from the national Congress of Racial Equality. In 1960, members of the largely African American Perry High Y-Teens Club were denied entry to the Chateau Roller Rink in Coraopolis. The owners were found guilty of violating state law and gave a public apology.

While racial tension is no longer an issue at Pittsburgh rinks, it lingers in other cities. In Euclid, Ohio, outside Cleveland, police are trying to shut down the historically black Pla-Mor rink allegedly because of fighting outside the rink. The Steel City Rollers traveled to Cleveland in June to support keeping the Pla-Mor open.

Skating's continued appeal may be linked to its relatively low cost. Admission to the Roller Drome rink costs $10, $3 for skate rental. Skates can cost between $60 and $1,500, and they can last more than a decade. Learning to roller skate does not require paid lessons, at least for the kind of skating the Steel City Rollers do. It does require dedication. When India Garner, 34, of Moon decided she wanted to learn, "I'd record it (at the rink) and practice it" at home, she said.

And skaters love the health benefits of skating. Sayings about stress relief include "leave it on the wood" and "roll until the wheels come off."

Adults often teach children how to skate. James "Buddy" Bey, 62, of Wilkinsburg keeps a stuffed toy monkey pinned to his shirt when he skates, a gift from a young girl he taught to skate. It reminds him of his teacher, Will McDowell, who died of a heart attack on a roller skating rink floor in the early 1990s.

"I miss him. I miss him a lot," Bey said.

The Rollers will be honoring the 85th birthday of longtime skater Bob Trent on Sept. 22 at the Roller Drome. Trent skates with a walker.

"It's more than a hobby," said Garner. "It's a lifestyle."

What follows is an incomplete list of Allegheny County roller skating rinks.

Rinks marked (asterisk) are still operating.

Ardmore Gardens (Forest Hills): This rink was first mentioned in newspaper archives in a 1938 advertisement. In 1947 a newspaper squib referred to it as "Nu-Ardmore Gardens." It is unclear what its relationship was to the Memory Lane Roller Rink also on Ardmore Boulevard.

Ardmore Roller Skating Palace (2400 Ardmore Blvd., Forest Hills): This was built on the same plot of land as the Memory Lane rink. The Ardmore closed in 2005 after problems with "unruly" teens.

Bedford Roller Rink (Bedford Avenue and Erin Street, Hill District): This rink was listed in the 1908 Pittsburgh Directory and was still in business in 1912.

Broadway Roller Rink (Ohio Avenue, Glassport): This rink was first mentioned in online newspaper archives in a 1946 advertisement. High winds collapsed its roof in 1963.

Chateau Roller Rink (329 Forest Grove Road, Coraopolis): This rink opened on Dec. 30, 1954. It is unclear when it closed.

Ches-A-Rena (Route 88, Cheswick): This rink was built in 1947. Its last mention in local newspaper archives as a roller skating rink was in 1998.

Diamond Market (Second floor, Market Square, Downtown): This rink closed in 1951 when the traffic police division moved into its space.

—Eden Park (428 Eden Park Blvd., McKeesport): This rink has been operating since at least 1964.

Flamingo Roller Rink (Larimer Avenue at Auburn Street, East Liberty): Its first newspaper advertisements appear to date form 1945. It burned down in 1954.

Godfrey Roller Rink (2312 Centre Ave., Middle Hill): The only mention of this rink in online archives comes from June 1, 1949, squibs in the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph and The Pittsburgh Press.

Greater Pittsburgh Coliseum (7310 Frankstown Ave., Homewood South): This rink closed sometime between 1989 and 1991.

Greater Pittsburgh Roller Rink (Steubenville Pike, Robinson): The earliest mention of this rink in Pittsburgh newspapers was from 1955. It closed in 1961, with the property being leased to Bruce Molded Plastics Corp.

The Lexington Roller Rink (Broad Street and Larimer Avenue, East Liberty): The earliest mention of this rink in newspaper archives is a 1945 advertisement. The rink closed in 1958, and the building burned sometime before April 26, 1960.

Memory Lane Roller Skating Rink (Ardmore Boulevard, Forest Hills): Memory Lane, a former streetcar barn, had a grand opening in 1950. Its closing date is uncertain. See “Ardmore Rolling Skating Palace” above.

—Neville Roller Drome (5109 Neville Road, Neville Island): This rink has been operating since 1948.

Palisades (100 Fifth Ave., McKeesport): This rink appears to have begun newspaper advertising in 1945. It may have closed in 1976, when Bill and Sandra Speney stopped owning it, but the exact time it ceased being a roller rink is unclear.

Penn Roller Skating Rink or New Penn Roller Skating Rink (5200 Penn Ave., Bloomfield): The last reference of this establishment seems to be from 1942.

Pine Valley Roller Rink (9700 block of Perry Highway, Wexford): This rink first appears in local newspapers in 1960. Its last mention as a roller rink is in 1964.

Pythian Temple Roller Rink (2007 Centre Ave., Hill District): This rink was the first open to black skaters.

It opened inside a black social club in 1935 and closed about two years later.

Romp N Roll (Shaler): Closed Dec. 3, 2016.

Sheraden Roller Rink (Sheraden): The first newspaper archive mention of this rink comes from 1937. Its last mention in local newspapers is from 1945.

Spinning Wheels Roller Rink (2940 Library Road, Castle Shannon): The last mention of this rink as a roller skating venue was 1995. A Busy Beaver opened on the site in 1996.

Sports Haven Roller Rink (Carol Street, Bridgeville): This rink was mentioned in local newspaper advertisements from 1949 to 1953.

Weaver Roller Rink (Penn Township): This rink appears in local newspapers only in 1949.

Westray Plaza (917 Lincoln Ave., East Liberty): It is unclear when this venue stopped being used as a roller rink.

Source: Post-Gazette archives

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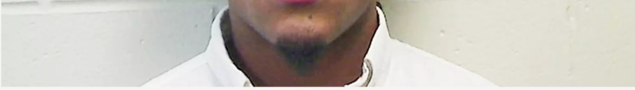

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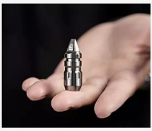

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