

## The Bibb Skate Arena

The gray and green metal building at 5335 Hawkinsville Road, Macon, GA started out as the Silver Blades Ice Skating rink. Silver Blades was owned and operated by the Crawford brothers, notable real estate investors in Bibb County. To quote an old Macon friend of mine, Harry Lucas, "only Yankees went ice skating".

Silver Blades was purchased out of bankruptcy by Mr. Franklin Pierce Davenport in 1956 for less than \$20,000. Mr. Davenport did not care for his Christian names, preferring to be called "FP". (We all called him Mr. D.) Mr. D's first idea was to convert the ice skating rink to a warehouse. Upon conveyance of the title for the property, Mr. D set about removing the pipes used to create the ice skating surface. Mr. D was a masterful marketer, as he conned, er, convinced his nephew, 16 year old Michael Skelly, later to be called "Mister Mike", that using a cutting torch was "fun". Young Michael Skelly removed all refrigeration pipes and trucked them to the old Macon Iron Company to sell as scrap.

It was Mr. D's sister, Helen Davenport Skelly, and Michael Skelly's mom, that came up with the original idea to put in hardwood flooring and convert the ice skating rink to a roller-skating rink. "The Barn" was born! Mr. D may have given location the lofty name, the Bibb Skate Arena, but everyone I knew called it "The Barn".

It seems there had been an earlier roller-skating rink at Cochran Field, now the Macon Municipal Airport. That roller rink closed in the early 1950s.

There was a demand for roller-skating in Macon. There was a history of roller-skating in Macon. Roller-skating was offered at Durr's Lake and at Lakeside Park, but their rinks were smaller than "the Barn". Ice skating was too cost intensive with its refrigeration and ice surface maintenance, but roller-skating had a built in demand in Macon and besides "only Yankees went ice skating".

"The Barn" opened for roller skating business in 1957. Because the location had been an ice skating rink, there were existing boys and girls toilets, a ticket office, a snack bar and racks for storing skates. There was no need for a major capital investment to convert the building from an ice skating rink to a roller-skating rink.

Initially it was not a large space, about 5,000 square feet for the skating area, and all of the flooring was laid straight across the entire length of the skating floor. When skaters got to the end of the skating floor to make their turn, it was like skating across a washboard. Your skates actually made a rumbling noise when you skated perpendicular to the wooden flooring strips!

In 1962 "The Barn" was closed for renovation. I thought my life had ended. My social life did end....for a few months. A new, lower roofed metal addition to "The Barn" was constructed. The area of the skating surface was increased from 5,000

square feet to 20,000 square feet. The Cincinnati Flooring Company was retained to install a new roller-skating surface that featured a “rotunda” floor. A “rotunda” floor is constructed so that the hardwood flooring is curved on the ends. The oak flooring strips actually followed the direction of the skater’s wheels. No more skating perpendicular to the flooring, no more washboard skating surface, no more rumbling skates at the corners! We were in roller-skating high cotton when “the Barn” reopened.

“The Barn” was not air conditioned when I was roller-skating there. There were 6 large exhaust fans built into one end of the building. These fans were very effective in keeping the place at a temperature where you could roller skate during the summer months without coming home soaking wet with sweat. In July 1994 hurricane Alberto stuck Macon. The Bibb Skate Arena was air conditioned later that summer.

Mr. D actually lived at the skating rink. He had a 2 bedroom, 2 bath apartment constructed above part of the old building with windows that looked out on the skating floor. I never saw him up there watching the skaters. He was always working the ticket office, the skate rental area or the snack bar. When the toilet got stopped up, it was Mr. D and plunger to the rescue. He was NOT an absentee business owner.

There was parking for 160 cars at “the Barn”. Parents were allowed inside free to watch their kids skate. I remember the cost for an evening of skating was 50 cents + 25 cents for skate rental. (That price increased to \$5 for skating + \$1 for skate rental by the time “the Barn” closed.) Where else could parents drop off their kids for an evening for 75 cents and know that they were going to be well cared for. It was the cheapest babysitting service on record. “The Barn” offered a wholesome evening activity for 4 hours for 75 cents. Three generations of middle Georgians have glided around those oak floors on roller-skates.

Mr. D had a list of “Teenage Commandments” painted in black and white that hung in the ticket office. Here they are:

1. Don't let your parents down, they brought you up.
2. Stop and think and you won't drink.
3. Be smart, obey, and you'll give orders yourself one day.
4. Ditch dirty thoughts fast, or they'll ditch you.
5. Show off driving is juvenile, don't act your age
6. Pick the right friends to be picked for a friend.
7. Choose a date who is fit for a mate.
8. Don't go steady, unless you are ready.
9. Love God, surrender 100% to Jesus.
10. Live prayerfully and carefully, the soul you save will be your own.

Boys only skates, girls only skates, couples only skates....anything to make skating interesting, inclusive and different. In an effort to encourage some interaction between boys and girls, and to bring out the shy children, there was a "flash light skate". The boys would stand in the middle of the rink and the girls would stand around the edge. One by one the boys would tell the man with the flashlight who to point his "beam of affection" toward and the couple would then start around the rink. Later in the evening the roles would be reversed. The girls would stand in the middle and the boys would stand around the edge. If a couple skated both of these skates together, they might as well move in together. They were practically engaged. It was at the boys choice flashlight skate that I proclaimed my love for Marsha Middlebrooks and she reciprocated thirty minutes later at the girls choice skate. We were in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Ah, young love.

Music was an integral part of roller-skating. Mr. D had a large collection of 45 RPM singles that he played on a phonograph connected to the sound system inside the rink. This collection was constantly updated with the latest hits. A record needed a certain rhythm to make roller-skating around the rink fun. All the girls liked Marcie Blane's "Bobby's Girl" and Shelley Fabares' "Johnny Angel". The boys liked more up-tempo records. The Beachboys "409" was cause for boys to skate REALLY fast. Most girls wisely left the skating floor for the length of "409". The music determined what was happening on the skating floor.

"I went on my first date to "the Barn". My parents knew that it was a safe place. Nothing bad was going to happen there. I also liked the music there. Mr. D had a great record collection. We had a record player at home and a few records, but no where near the selection at 'the Barn'". - Terri Thames

Truth be told, Mr. D was the first person to ever pay me money for music! I was 17 years old and "managing" a local Macon band named The Celtics. He paid the Celtics \$35 to perform at a Saturday night sock hop at "the Barn". He paid them \$50 for their second performance. I tried to convince the band that it was because of their superior management that they got a \$15 raise. Sock hops were a regular thing at "the Barn". They happened on Saturday night after the roller-skating was ended at 10PM. No shoes were allowed on the skating floor. There was a small stage set up in the southwest corner of the rink, just big enough for 4 or 5 musicians. No lighting and the sound system left A LOT to be desired, but it got the job done. The bands all did cover versions of what ever was being played on WNEX, the local Top 40 station. The sock hop bands played one 50 minute set. The evening was over at 11PM.

Mr. D knew his market. He went to all the churches in the Rutland and Sofkee neighborhood and offered each of them a dedicated night in the week. Tuesday night was Avondale Baptist night, Wednesday night was Liberty Methodist night and so forth. Mr. D also made certain nights available to various high school classes. Monday would be the 10<sup>th</sup> grade class one week, then the 11<sup>th</sup> grade class the next week, then the 12<sup>th</sup> grade class the next week. Birthday parties, corporate events,

FFA, 4H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, Brownies.....they ALL had roller-skating events. "The Barn" stayed busy as a result of Mr. D's marketing prowess.

It was at one of the Avondale Baptist roller-skating events that my mom fell and broke her "tailbone", her coccyx. It was painful for her and a source of amusement for my dad, my brother and sister and me. Mom's broken "tail bone" was a source of family jokes around the Thanksgiving dinner table for decades.

There was a snack bar at "the Barn". It sold the normal selection of M&Ms, Baby Ruth, Snickers, popcorn etc. "I remember hotdogs were part of the selection. The best thing was the 'rainbow' drink. The soft drinks there were served from a fountain. If you ordered a 'rainbow', you got a little orange, a little Dr. Pepper, a little 7UP, a little Grape and a little Coca Cola....hence the name 'rainbow'" – Alfred Morris. Mrs. Tidwell ran the snack bar. Her husband was the security person for the rink....not that you needed a lot of security for a bunch of pre-teens and teenagers. Peggy Tidwell got to skate free, I think.

There was always a young adult man, older than the normal roller-skaters, who skated when I was skating there. He was not from the neighborhood. He was an amazing roller-skater. He had his own black "precision" roller-skates, and he used them with great effect. (Men's skates – BLACK, women's skates – WHITE) He would skate strong and fast, forward and backward. Everyone else was roller-skating in an elongated circle and he was roller-skating in a giant figure 8. Most of the skaters started skating regularly at about age 5 and stopped at about age 18, once they started dating and had access to an automobile. This guy was 25 – 30 years old. I never saw him with a woman, but man he could ROLLER SKATE. He rarely spoke with "the kids". He would interact with Mr. D and occasionally help with "the flash light" skate or teach someone to skate backwards, but mostly he kept to himself and roller-skated. He NEVER took a break. He never went to the snack bar. He just was gliding across that oak floor like he was a million miles away. There might have been 125 kids on the skating floor, but for him, the floor was vacant. We were all roller-skating for entertainment. Roller-skating was more of a spiritual activity for him.

Mr. D gave the rink to his nephew Michael Skelly in 1969 with the instructions "you take it". Michael, a graduate of Macon's Lanier High School, was 21 years old at the time. It should be said that the Skellys put in an ocean full of sweat equity in running "the Barn". It was the Skellys that introduced roller hockey and roller derby to "the Barn". The Skellys took care of Mr. D until he passed in 1995. "Mr. Mike" and his wife "Mama Joyce" owned the rink, lived in the rink and ran the rink for 45 years, until its recent sale. They did lease it to another local family to run for 2 years. Other than that 2 year period, "the Barn" was under the control of the Davenport/Skelly family.

"The Barn" made it unscathed through all of the social changes that we saw in America. July 3 – 5, 1970 the Second Atlanta International Pop festival was

produced in Byron, Georgia.....100 miles south of Atlanta and 4 miles south of “the Barn”. A million hippies descended on Middle Georgia to see Jimi Hendrix, the Allman Brothers Band, Procol Harem, Jethro Tull, Mountain and many other bands of the day. “The Barn” wisely decided to close for that Forth of July vacation.

Macon high schools were integrated in 1965. “The Barn” was integrated a few years later.

True to form, the Skellys had their own set of rules to match Mr. D’s “The Ten Rules for Dating”.

“Dress Rules, casual dress clothes.

No Hippie Junk, Beads etc.

No Military shirts or jackets

No sleeveless (sic) shirts MEN

No bear (sic) midrifts LADIES

All skaters must wear shoes

Any person creating a disturbance on these premises will be prosecuted.

No exceptions

The management.”

Sadly, “the Barn” is now just a memory. For my mom, it was a pain in her ass, but for a lot of people my age from Middle Georgia, it was a magical place. I guess this is progress.

With thanks to Michael Skelly, Alfred Morris, Jackie Clark, Harry Lucas, Joe Clark, Terri Thames, Marsha Middlebrooks and last but not least Joyce “I’m 73 and I don’t remember anything” Cox.