

# Dixie Skateland makes the good times roll in Michigan

By Pamela Kleibrink Thompson

“The opening of Dixie Skateland was a special time for me,” recalls Mildred (Millie) Wells Sakall Anderson, “as I was the one who urged Mr. Berns to build the rink.” After Millie convinced her brother-in-law that Newport, Mich., needed a place that would be fun for all ages, building contractor Chester (C.L.) Berns had no doubt about who to hire as Dixie Skateland’s first manager.

Millie still remembers the grand opening on December 19, 1958, watching the skaters whirl around the rink to organ music. The rink has always been a family business. James, the oldest son of C.L., took over management of the rink when he was still a teenager in 1962. In 1975 C.L. formed a partnership with his other sons (Timothy, John and Chester Jr.) to operate the roller rink.

Tim and Kathy Berns purchased the rink from the rest of the family after Chester Berns died in 1998. According to Millie, “Tim and his wife Kathy are the secret ingredients that keep many skaters coming back week after week. Tim and Kathy’s love of kids combined with their sense of humor and enthusiasm is a winning combination.” Sock hops were popular during the rink’s



Tim Berns (co-owner), Mildred Wells Sakall Anderson (first manager and Tim’s aunt), Sarah Berns (Tim’s daughter) and Kathy Berns (Tim’s wife and co-owner) celebrate the 50th anniversary of Dixie Skateland with a birthday cake in 2008. (All photos courtesy of Dixie Skateland, Newport, Mich.)

earlier days. James made arrangements with a local radio station to bring in singers who were just beginning their careers. Imagine dancing on Dixie Skateland’s terrazzo stone floors while being entertained by Stevie Wonder, Brenda Lee, Neil Diamond, Fabian, Bobby Vinton, Wayne Newton, or the Supremes. “A lot of stars started out here,” notes Kathy Berns. Nearly a thousand dancers filled

the floor at the sock hops.

About five years ago, when the economy declined, Kathy and Tim decided to offer a free skate on the last Wednesday of the month. “We had close to 300 skaters last March when the weather was cold,” remembers Kathy. “At the most recent free skate on September 25, we had 106 people. But when the weather turns bad, we’ll get more. We want to give everyone the chance to try skating. They can come and see what the rink is like and if they have fun they might come back.” Besides the free skate, Dixie Skateland also helps the community by sponsoring a baseball team and bowling team.

When Dixie Skateland first opened, the cinder block and brick building was 72 feet by 120 feet and shag carpeting formed a cushioned wainscoting. It’s been expanded several times over the last 55 years. In 1964 a 25 foot by 50 foot snack bar and concession area was added, and in 1976 the skating floor size increased with a 54 by 70 foot addition. Disco lighting was added in 1978, which pulses in sync with the music.

Four years ago a “stuff shop” was added where kids can buy a variety of inexpensive merchandise like flashing glasses, hats or inflatable guitars, all priced less than five dollars. This year the shag carpeting was replaced by red and blue plush which provides a soft landing space if a skater crashes into the wall.

Last July, the Berns’ daughter Amy selected Dixie Skateland for her wedding reception. The family used some ideas from another article in Rinksider to decorate the rink with white tulle hung from the disco lights. Tim and Kathy met years ago at a wedding and got to know each other in high school. Tim gave a pair of white high top skates with disco laces to Kathy for a graduation gift in the ‘70s. They were married in 1976 and have been on a roll ever since.

Dixie Skateland is a place for celebrations and hosts groups such as Girl Scouts and local schools. Kathy enjoys donning her Party Panda costume to help revelers enjoy their time at birthday parties. The Berns’ other daughter, Sarah, 32, also makes sure that the good times continue at the rink by maintaining the Facebook pages, designing posters for school parties and acting as DJ. When Sarah’s son, Trey Laidler, turned 6, he danced the hokey pokey and chicken dance in the center of the rink with Party Panda (his grandma Kathy). Kathy points out that both Sarah and Trey started skating when they were one year old - as soon as they could walk. Kathy believes Sarah will take over operations in the future.

Dixie Skateland is busy with events and activities throughout the year. There is a roller derby team that calls Dixie Skateland home, and on Thursday nights the floor is crowded with Zumba enthusiasts. There are Halloween costume events and all-night New Years’ Eve festivities, including breakfast. Limbo, pickle eating contests and themed color competitions (who is the greenest), are just a few of the creative ideas the Berns use to continue their family’s tradition of wholesome recreation.

This December skaters will enjoy some special treats, including a birthday cake to celebrate the 55th birthday of Dixie Skateland. Kathy is researching



From left to right: Frances Wells (Gladys Wells Berns’ mom and grandmother to John and Tim), John Berns, Gladys Berns (Chester-C.L. Berns’ wife and sister of Mildred Wells Sakall) and Tim Berns on skates.

the original prices of the rink and will roll back prices to those of 1958. One thing is certain: skaters will have lots of fun in this safe, family-friendly place as they have since its opening. Dixie Skateland is open on Fridays from 7-11 p.m. (admission \$5), Saturdays from 7-10 p.m. (admission \$3), and Sundays from 2-4:30 p.m. (admission \$3). Regular skate rental is \$1.50 and roller blades or speed skates are \$2.50 - except during the monthly free skates when they cost only \$1.

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