

# Memphis Skating Club hosts annual Winterfest Show

Members of the Memphis Figure Skating Club got into the holiday spirit with their annual Winterfest Show on December 9th and 10th at the East End Skating Center in Memphis, Tenn. More than 25 club skaters along with teachers from the Arlington High School Rolling Faculty Follies skated in the show to raise money for the high school's education foundation. The Jingle Bell Teachers learned skating basics and then entertained the crowd of 100+ spectators. There were special appearances by the district's superintendent and high school principal. Coach Caroline Mirelli began team practice in November, and uses the event to raise funds for a different Memphis area organization, while preparing her club to perform in front of an audience.



*Nineteen members of the Memphis Skating Club coordinating their routine in the Skater's Waltz.*



*Members of the Arlington High School faculty joined the fun as the Swingin' Jingle Bell Teachers.*

# Some things old, some things new, a floating floor and a blast from the past

By *Connie Evener*

Oaks Park Roller Skating Rink, located just south of Portland, Oregon, is the largest rink west of the Mississippi, and the longest continuously operating rink in the entire U.S. It opened, as part of the Oaks Park Amusement Park, once known as the "Coney Island of the Northwest," in 1905.

George Kolibaba, operator of the rink and the park, is a Portland native who has been skating there since the 1950s. As a matter of fact, he remembers riding the trolley that used to run from downtown Portland the three and a half miles to Oaks Park. He went on to skate competitively, then became a coach. He's still coaching, and is a past president of USA Roller Sports.

Since the mid-80s, Oaks Park has been a nonprofit corporation, charged with preserving as many of the traditions that have developed over the last 110 years as possible. And also with maintaining financial viability so it can continue serving the Portland area as an affordable recreation and entertainment center for all ages. Oaks Park is not a vacation destination, noted Kolibaba. "We do get people from out of town. But our focus is to be supportive of this area." Blending the old with the new is a balancing act, admitted Kolibaba, and so is keeping prices affordable. Lucky Portlanders can ride all day, and skate with rental included, for a fraction of what they'd pay at one of the behemoth parks like Disneyland.

Generations of skaters have glided around the 100 x 200 foot hard rock

maple floor. That golden surface, known affectionately in the old days as the "Grand Lady," is a rotunda floor. "It has the smaller boards, not the wide ones," explained Kolibaba. "The boards on the ends of the rink are steam-bent into an arc so when you go around a corner, it's exceptionally smooth because the boards are going the same way you are." In this day and age, the cost to replace the floor, he said, would be "astronomical."

The nearby Willamette River has a tendency to flood, and so severely at times that it has destroyed many of the huge trees the park was named for. In 1948, the Grand Lady suffered so much water damage that it took five months to restore her. Thanks to an imaginative engineer, the new floor was rebuilt on top of airtight iron barrels. "We've actually 'floated' the floor twice since then," said Kolibaba, "in December, 1964, and again in February, 1996." The floor, he said, floated inside the building like "a 100 x 200 foot barge," and sustained no damage in either of those major floods.

Since the early days Oaks Park has been a home for roller skating clubs dedicated to a variety of disciplines, from freestyle and dance to figures, speed and most recently, slalom. A roller derby team, the Rose City Rollers, is headquartered next door to the rink.

Beginning back in the 1930s, Oaks Park sponsored shows (think "Roller Capades") to raise funds for its skating clubs, and give competitive skaters the chance to learn how to perform solo in front of an audience. The shows were sanctioned by the Roller Skating



Rink Operators Association of America, which we now know as the RSA. "I was in some of those shows in the 60s," said Kolibaba. "The last show was in 1963. In 1964, we were ready for the show, but it was flooded out."

Of course Oaks Park has a sound system and deejays and plays the popular music people love skating to. But on Sunday afternoons and evenings, and Thursday evenings, Oaks Park presents a unique blast from the past: mostly contemporary music of the 80s and 90s played on its very own 1926 Wurlitzer organ, which has four keyboards and a venerable history at a local theater. "We installed it here in 1954. It's suspended from the ceiling over the center of the skating rink," said Kolibaba. "It's part of our heritage, and we have a large following of adults that love the organ."

And yes, some people do take one listen and decide they'll skate another time, he said, but others, young families and college students especially, love that Wurlitzer. Live music, after all,

is an Oaks Park tradition that started back in 1905 with a band called the D'Urbanos Royal Italians. The challenge for the future will be to find those musicians who still have the old skills necessary to coax music from the antique instrument.

Keeping the business, as well as the floor, afloat requires hanging on to some traditions and letting go of others, but replacing them with contemporary offerings that might go on to become traditions in their own right. Of course kids still do the hokey pokey and shake it all about, but there's also a newer Oaks Park's brainchild: a combination of skating and karaoke that they call Roll-A-Roke.

After all, who knows what will stand the test of time? It's all about blending and balancing, the new with the old, and keeping a glorious old landmark alive and well and earning its own keep for another century – or two.