

Historic Minnesota rink welcomed decades of musicians, still a community staple

By Kathy Bergstrom

Skaters at Minnesota's Maple Lake Pavilion can spend a summer evening enjoying lake views while roller skating in a building with a storied past.

Located on the shores of Maple Lake about two miles south of Mentor, Minn., the rink has been welcoming skaters since it opened in 1928. Crowds have diminished as the nature of the surrounding area has changed, but owner Duaine Sanden views the rink as public service.

Maple Lake is in the northwest corner of Minnesota about 50 miles from North Dakota and 65 miles from Manitoba, Canada.

The rink was bought by Katherine and Wen Schuh in 1949. Wen Schuh had been a big band leader during the Great Depression and traveled with his band of about dozen musicians from Chicago to Spokane, Sanden said.

The band had played at the rink, and the owners told the Schuhs they wanted to sell. So the couple got off the road and became rink owners.

The purchase price for the property, which includes 320 feet of lake frontage was \$6,000, Sanden said.

"They operated it as a roller rink, and it was a regular Saturday night old time dance

place," he recalled. Duke Ellington and Lawrence Welk played at the pavilion.

Skating sessions were held Tuesday and Friday nights and Sunday afternoons.

Sunday nights would feature modern dance, and that turned into rock 'n roll by the late 1950s, attracting acts like The Yardbirds, The Kingsmen and Tommy James and the Shondells along with regional bands, Sanden said.

Several of the top bands of the late '50s all the way up into the '70s played at the rink, he said. During the winter months the Schuhs worked other jobs in the Minneapolis area.

Sadly, Wen Schuh passed away in 1960 when he was just in his late 50s. But Katherine Schuh continued running the rink.

Sanden used to hang out at the rink and sold tickets for dances through the 1960s and 1970s. "We'd sell 300 tickets for a very good band," he remembered. "It was just a fun place to come."

Skating sessions were typically Friday and Sunday afternoons and would draw 100 skaters per session. The dances stopped in 1978 after the drinking age in Minnesota was lowered to 18, and the debris left behind by the large crowds became unmanageable.



The interior of the Maple Lake Pavilion in Mentor, Mn. set up for a party.

Katherine Schuh eventually broke her hip, and Sanden became her caretaker in the last few years of her life. She left him the property when she died in 2006.

The modern-day Maple Lake Pavilion is open for public skating on Friday nights and is rented by groups the rest of the weekend. Eight to 10 wedding receptions are held each summer, and the building hosts other special events like an arts and crafts show and a Halloween party.

The crowds have diminished as the surrounding area has changed from a resort community to more of an area for single-family summer homes, Sanden said. Local school districts have consolidated providing further evidence of the shrinking youth

population.

Sanden, 68, is the sports director of a radio station in nearby Grand Forks, N.D. He is the one and only employee and keeps the rink open from May 1 through Labor Day.

The pavilion has 288 pairs of quad roller skates, but skaters are allowed to use roller blades if they have them.

The rectangular building has a concession stand, stage and dressing room. It features 14 6-by-8 foot screened windows, which are shuttered during the cold months.

"We have supplemental heat for spring and fall days if they're chilly, but once we start hitting Minnesota lows of under 20 degrees, it's a very hard building to heat," Sanden said.

Friday night summer skating sessions typically draw 15 to 20 skaters. You'll find Sanden making ice cream sundaes, renting skates and running the music system while he rings up sales on a 1911 cash register.

Maple Lake Pavilion has a large library of old records but also plays modern music.

The income from the rental of eight boat docks combined with revenue from wedding receptions and other special events keeps the pavilion self-sustaining if not profitable, Sanden said.



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