

LET'S ROLL!

The History of Rollerland - "The Nation's Finest Skating Pavilion."¹

By Tom Monahan

Preface

The current popularity of in-line roller skating, and the construction of Renton's new skating area in Liberty Park might seem, to those unaware of the city's history, like a totally new development. But Renton has a long history of daring individuals who risked pain, injury and public humiliation, by strapping on a pair of roller skates and taking to the rink. Back before the invention of in-line skates and nationally televised competitions, Renton's roller-racers went to a special place to show off their skill on four wheels. That place was called Rollerland.



Skaters dressed for a performance line up in the practice room at Rollerland.



Renton Historical Quarterly

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Renton Historical Museum

235 Mill Avenue South

Renton, WA 98055-2133

Phone: 425.255.2330

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Hours:

Tuesday - Saturday 10:00am - 4:00pm

Admission: \$3 for adults

\$1 for children

Always free to members and to the general public on the first Wednesday and third Saturday of the month.

Board Meetings: Please call the museum for time and location.



President's Message

By Bob Hunt, President

The More Things Change...

Elizabeth Stewart has accepted an offer to become our next Museum Supervisor. You can read a brief introduction from her elsewhere in this quarterly. Those who have met her, and many who are eagerly awaiting their chance, are excited at the prospect of her ideas, her energy and her enthusiasm for what we can do together with our museum. Because of a variety of timing issues, we won't have her officially aboard until April 17th, but she has already found a satisfactory residence here in town and she is in the process of getting herself moved and settled. We'll be making a big fuss about her at the Annual Membership Meeting on June 7th at the Museum, but you can come down before then and bend her ear. I think you'll be equally as excited.

Some of the Board members and spouses got to take a short field trip down to the White River Valley Museum in Auburn recently. If you haven't taken the trip, I highly recommend it. Their facility has many of the things that we could wish for here: space to work (and even space for a working gift shop), to catalog and research, to meet and educate, and most of all to exhibit and display. One gallery is dedicated to new exhibits that rotate approximately quarterly. Their geographic scope is larger, so the topics are a bit broader in some areas than what we might cover in our permanent gallery. The exhibits are interesting and well put together, with some brief reading along the way. The location is wonderfully situated near the library, a beautiful park and the senior center in a central, but quiet part of town.

But it isn't just the space that makes White River an interesting museum. They have an excellent staff and an army of volunteers who seem to share a vision that has lasted longer than any one person or group. Looking at the list of donors and supporters who've helped them achieve this vision, I'd guess that they have communicated that vision well and shared it with the community. The docents are proud of their place and it shows.

I see many of these same characteristics in our people here. We've taken a slower (and certainly less expensive) road to get to where we are and our goals are not the same. But we have been on a journey for some years and done some good things along the way. Many of you have provided most of the sweat and produced some wonderful results. Still, I hear from you that you want to see new exhibits, see some of the artifacts that don't get out from storage, and see some of the things that you, your family and friends have donated come out and tell our stories. Maybe some freshness in the gallery or some exhibits loaned from other places would add to the value of having a museum here in Renton.

The work of the last few years has been to improve our organization. Now we will start the process of change out where you can see it. And, as with all of the changes that we've experienced over the years, you get to be part of it and your efforts will be the actual work that makes it something even better and uniquely Renton. Are you ready to have your stories turn into a display or an event? Let's get to work.

Renton Museum Report

By Elizabeth P. Stewart

Someone on the museum board recently told me that everyone used to enjoy hearing Steve Anderson's stories; in that tradition, instead of a dry retelling of my past accomplishments, I thought I'd introduce myself as new Museum Supervisor with a story. My career in history began after my divorce years ago when I decided to go back to school and finish my B.A. I moved from Florida to attend the University of South Carolina, planning ultimately to get an M.A. in Historic Preservation. I knew what I wanted to study, but I also wanted to try lots of different kinds of history: Latin American, Russian, European, in addition to American History.

In my second year, I registered for a course on the history of Mexico taught by Professor Michael Scardaville, who also happened to be Chair of the Public History M.A. program. Mike believed that historians can be as useful and fulfilled working outside the university, a notion that has to be sold to many academics. He was also dedicated to accurate history that is fair to the spirit of the times it tries to recreate. His course focused on the everyday lives of individuals caught up in sweeping social and political change: conquest by the Spanish, the Mexican Revolution, and the vagaries of American foreign policy. Perhaps because I was studying a history so different from ours, I became even more powerfully aware of the ways in which the past affects every one of us. By the time I took the final exam—a complicated essay question asking students to use the example of one small city to explain which historical events most changed the nation—I had become captivated by the interplay between local and national history.

After reading my final exam, Mike took me aside and asked me what my aspirations were. What did I hope to do with my degree, he wondered? I explained that my plan was to study Historic Preservation after finishing my B.A. He looked at me with some puzzlement, and patiently explained that someone like me, interested in historical change, would probably be less than stimulated by the “bricks and mortar” focus of the Historic Preservation course of study. In a conversation that would change my life, this very astute professor encouraged me to consider going on for a Ph.D. I knew instantly that he was right about my interests.

That one course and that one conversation changed the direction of my life; ten years later I completed my Ph.D. in American History. I have organized exhibits and public programming, I have worked with oral history and material culture, I have written publications and exhibit text—all the things a historian does in a museum setting. These experiences have demonstrated to me that understanding history is essential to making sense of the world. Particularly in a city like Renton, where change is coming so fast, the Renton Historical Museum can help influence the direction of the community's future by preserving, documenting, and educating about its heritage. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to work with Dorota, Tom, Daisy, the Board, museum volunteers, and the City of Renton to make the Renton Historical Museum a community heritage center that the whole city can be proud of!



Let's Roll continued from page 1

Rollin' Rollin' rollin'....

Back before television and computers gave everyone more reasons to stay at home, recreational activities usually involved going out and interacting with the public to socialize and stay fit. With the popularization of the roller rink as a place to have fun and get exercise, a “Golden Age of Roller Skating” was begun, leading to the creation of more than 3,000 rinks in the United States, between the years 1937-1959.² Renton joined in this trend in 1945, when the skating pavilion soon to be named Rollerland was built at 14265 Rainier Avenue, housed in an enormous 150’x180’ building. The original owner was a man named Burt Lobberegt³, and the rink he constructed would be made with skater’s preferences in mind. There were few sharp angles and corners in the building, with most of the inner walls being rounded and curved. This gave skaters an added sense of security, knowing that they wouldn’t crash into any sharp edges.

Great attention was paid to the physical details that made a visit to Rollerland a feast for all the senses. Beautiful hardwood floors and plenty of backspace greeted visitors before they ever got to the skating area. The front entrance was decorated with glass blocks in the walls, in the Art Deco style. Just inside the main lobby, a fully stocked snack bar waited for patrons who sought fresh grilled cheeseburgers and tasty chocolate milkshakes, as well as other treats. Not far from the snack bar was a practice room for first time skaters. This was a special area where novices could slip and slide without fear of ridicule, and without tripping up more advanced skaters. A man known as “Smokey” volunteered to help teach new skaters how to keep their balance in this room.⁴

Past the snack bar and practice room, a group of pinball machines were installed. Anyone not wishing to participate in the skating could still have a great time at Rollerland – at an affordable price. By 1963, admission was still only 60¢ a ticket. There were also lots of benches set up around the rink area for spectators to sit and watch the action. Next to the pinball machines was a skate rental desk with a full-time repairman who was always ready to deal with any broken skates. The most impressive part of the Rollerland complex was the roller rink itself. An enormous Wurlitzer pipe organ provided a symphony of music and sound effects, with the pipes located in the center of the rink itself, inside a circular enclosure. As skaters made their laps around this central sound system, organist Pete Kraucher⁵ would fill the air with popular melodies, and a wide variety of sound effects, which would reverberate and bounce along the rounded walls. Long before modern “surround sound” speakers and CD technology, Rollerland’s sound system was a marvel.⁶



Above: Lew Wells and Tubby Clark pose with the famous Rollerland Wurlitzer Pipe Organ. Mr. Wells was one of a number of organists who performed at Rollerland over the years.

Below: Six girls dressed up as leopards for a carnival themed performance at Rollerland, with skaters portraying the animals.

Saturday Night Fever

By 1954, Rollerland was just beginning to capitalize on the growing popularity of skating rinks. Mr. Lobberegt was no longer interested in running the business, and so he sold the rink to a pair of brothers named Dominick and Louis Delaurenti, along with their silent partner, Wes Stout. Mr. Stout preferred to let the Delaurenti brothers handle the day to day operations of the rink, a job which they committed themselves to with gusto. Dominick's daughter Shirley soon became involved in competitive roller-skating at Rollerland. She recently described the different activities and competitions that Rollerland hosted:

“ There was skating almost every day, but the best times were on Friday and Saturday nights. Two sessions were held, one from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., and the other from 10 p.m. until midnight. All of the best skaters came to the late session. The session would start off with an “all skate” for one song, where everyone could participate. Then they would play a song just for couples. There were florescent lights along the walls, which would let people know which direction the skaters would go, and they would switch direction every few minutes just to keep things interesting. There were kids known as “floor boys” whose job it was to keep order out on the floor and watch for speeders. They would make sure that no one was skating in a way that was dangerous or likely to cause problems, and I don't remember there ever being any problems caused by anyone.”⁷ Shirley also described other session types which were meant to keep things exciting, like having one song where everyone was encouraged to skate backwards.

Along with the general skating to the music, certain dances were announced at different times during the night. The rink would soon be filled with couples, roller-dancing to traditional dances like the Waltz and Tango, or less formal steps like the Bunny Hop or the Hokey-Pokey. Those free skaters that weren't big fans of the Hokey-Pokey could take the opportunity to rest on one of the benches until a free skate song was announced again.

Beside the general public skate sessions, some of the more proficient skaters at Rollerland began to put shows together. Just like the more famous “Ice Capades” these “Roller Capades” featured costume themes and lines of dancers doing tricks and high kicks, which resembled a Las Vegas review (on a much smaller, amateur scale). Skaters of all age groups would collaborate to create an exciting spectacle on wheels for the enjoyment of the public.



Let's Roll story continued on page 6

Gold, Silver & Bronze

Skating at Rollerland did not consist of just dances, shows and free skating, however. With weekend evenings being reserved for recreational skating, competitive skating occupied the daylight hours. Those with better than average skills could choose to enter competitions where professional judges would critique their dance skills with a trained eye for detail. Serious skaters worked hard to perfect their techniques, mastering a variety of different dance steps and maneuvers, which they then had to execute before the judges. Those skaters who mastered the basics were awarded a bronze medal. By learning more difficult routines, competitors worked their way up to a silver medal. Those who were the most talented and committed to their sport, managed to earn the gold medal, symbolizing their mastery of several different roller skating styles and movements. Shirley Delaurenti Garrison, who participated in these competitions, stressed that these medals were not given out arbitrarily, and working your way up to earning a gold medal was a real accomplishment within the roller skating community. Skaters in this program were competing under a set of national standards, and all over America, these awards were recognized as distinguishing the medal winners as being on the top level of American Skaters.⁸

Competitions were held in several categories, including figure skating and racing. There were special events for singles and pairs, and competitors were matched against opponents according to age group and gender, with juvenile boys competing against other juvenile boys, novice pairs against each other, etc. The wide variety of categories listed in competition flyers show that during its heyday, Rollerland was a thriving hub for this exciting sport.⁹ Soon its reputation for being a premier venue for skating competitions got out to the wider skating community, and before long Rollerland was hosting the American Amateur Roller-Skating Championships, sponsored by the Roller Skating Rink Owners of America. Athletes from all over the Pacific Northwest made the journey to Renton to compete.



Above: Roller Skaters Ellen Brooks, Shari Stall and Shirley Delaurenti (Garrison) pose in their costumes.

Some Renton skaters became so proficient through Rollerland's competitions that they traveled to many other parts of the U.S. to compete against the best skaters in the country. One in particular, Dennis Rossman, traveled to competitions deep in the southeastern U.S. According to his mother Anne Rossman, her family traveled around the country as he continued to win. "Really it was a lot of fun. We went to Arkansas, Fort Worth, Texas, Dallas, Texas and Lincoln, Nebraska. That was where he won nationals, in Lincoln, Nebraska. When it came to Dennis' turn to compete, I went to him and said, 'Son, God bless you. Do the best you can, and don't worry if you make a mistake. Just keep going. Mother will be outside praying for you.' Then I would go outside while he'd be inside skating. I never saw one routine in all the years he skated. I would cry. These kids worked for years, and they make one little mistake and they're through."¹⁰ Despite his mother's nervousness, Dennis Rossman went on to become one of the most successful skating champions that Rollerland ever produced.

Hot Wheels

By 1963, the roller skating trend that had swept through Renton and the rest of the country through the 1950's had begun to slow. Although Rollerland was still well attended and the Delaurenti brothers were not planning on selling out, it was clear to those that skated there regularly that attendance had begun to decline. Unfortunately, we can only speculate whether Rollerland could have lasted until roller-skating hit another peak of popularity in the late 1970's, because on 9 July 1963 at approximately 2:50 p.m., fate stepped in to settle the issue once and for all. According to newspaper reports, Renton Fire Chief M.C. "Scotty" Walls stated that a fire broke out in the back of Rollerland near an incinerator. According to Walls, some trash had been burned in the incinerator, located approximately 30 feet from a shed at the rear of the building. The department theorized that sparks from the burn barrels ignited the shed, which in turn caught the main building on fire. Fred Bowman, an employee of Nick and Louis Delaurenti, was inside working at the time of the blaze. He said that an unidentified person began to pound on the door to warn him of the fire, and he fled quickly.¹¹

Firefighters from the Renton, Kent, Panther Lake, Spring Glen and Boeing Fire Departments and engine companies from King County Fire District #s 20, 25 and 40, fought a heroic battle against the flames that lasted well into the evening. Two Renton firefighters were injured trying to put out the fire. Dave Walsh suffered burns to his hands, and Karl Strom received a nail wound to his foot. During the blaze, the firemen also lost a ladder as one of the concrete block walls on the north side of the building collapsed. Luckily, two firefighters who were on the roof at the time, managed to scramble down the ladder before the wall collapsed on it. The Renton Police Department pulled men off duty to help with crowd control, as the massive clouds of smoke and a wall of flames attracted spectators from all directions. Rainier Avenue had to be temporarily shut down to one lane, but police managed to keep traffic moving.

The heat from the flames became so intense that it blistered the paint on one fire engine. Despite their best efforts, the beautiful roller rink was completely destroyed. "We didn't even save a skate key," Dominick Delaurenti later told reporters. Damage was estimated to be nearly \$350,000. While part of the losses were covered by insurance, many of the items lost were irreplaceable. The heat of the flames silenced forever the \$25,000 pipe organ, which had produced such a fabulous variety of sounds for the skaters.¹² Also lost in the inferno were the personal effects of many of the skaters. Dennis Rossman, who was crowned the National Singles Champion skater in the intermediate class the year before, lost a valuable pair of skates, as well as his championship trophy. Also lost in the fire were over 1000 other pairs of skates, used by the public.¹³

Despite their shock and sadness at the loss, the Delaurentis and Mrs. Stout, the widow of their silent partner Wes Stout, who by this time had passed away, only had the best interest of the public at heart. After thanking the Renton Fire Department for their efforts, they announced that anyone who had purchased general admission ticket books in advance could stop by to their temporary office and get a full refund. Ironically, the beautiful hardwood floor, which had been the pride of Rollerland, was not damaged by the fire itself, but by the water used to extinguish the flames.

End of an Era

Along with the 20 employees who lost their jobs with the destruction of Rollerland, and the obvious loss to the Delaurenti and Stout families, the city of Renton lost a very special place when the fire consumed the rink. The owners determined that rebuilding Rollerland would be too costly, and the Delaurenti brothers went on to other business ventures. The legacy of the era that Rollerland pioneered in our city continues today with the resurgence of popularity for skating, which has come around in the last two decades. The old style roller skates have been replaced with the more agile in-line skates, where the wheels are placed in a strait line like an ice skate blade. It is easy to turn on cable television today and see people roller-skating, from the competitive events on ESPN2, to the Roller-Derby themed show "Roller Girls." The interest in skating seems to grow every day. Those lucky enough to have been able to enjoy Rollerland for themselves, can only wonder about how popular a place it would be in Renton today. Though the building is long gone, Rollerland will continue to live on in the happy memories of many Rentonians for years to come.



- 1 Taken from Rollerland letterhead.
- 2 For more information about the "Golden Age of Roller Skating," I recommend the book *Skate Crazy*, by Lou Brooks.
- 3 There is some dispute over the spelling of his name. The author took this spelling from an article in the *Renton Chronicle*. Other people interviewed for this story remember his name being "Laborette."
- 4 Telephone Interview with Shirley Garrison, February 8, 2006
- 5 There were other gentlemen who played the organ at Rollerland over the years. Another was Lew Wells, who appears in a photograph in this story.
- 6 Ibid citation 3
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Ibid
- 9 The Renton Museum has a Rollerland Collection filled with programs, ephemera and announcements for a wide variety of events held during the mid 1960's.
- 10 Taken from the transcripts of an oral history interview of Anne Rossman, conducted May 24, 2002 by Nancy Fairman and Marian Sutton.
- 11 *Renton Record Chronicle*, Wednesday July 10, 1963. Page 1
- 12 *The Seattle Times*, Wednesday July 10, 1963. Page 2
- 13 *Renton Record Chronicle*, July 10, 1963. Page 1

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The Renton History Museum is currently looking for Board Members. The board meets at the Museum on the 4th Wednesday at 6:00pm. If you are an enthusiastic individual who is willing to assist with strategic planning and promoting the Museum, we look forward to meeting you.



For further information and a trustee packet, please email Vicky Persson at:
vicky.persson@usbank.com

Docent Training and Spring 2006 Historical Presentation Series

By Dorata Rahn, Volunteer Coordinator

The Renton School District informed us recently that the third grade field trips scheduled from May 9th through 26th are cancelled this year, due to the lack of School District staff available to look after the tours. This is a very unexpected development. However, we were informed that individual classes may still reserve museum tours with us. As a result, docent training will proceed as scheduled.

We are inviting any potential tour guide candidates to attend the training. We need more docents than we currently have to handle increasing number of tours from other places as well. There is no obligation to become a docent after the training is over. By attending the training, candidates can learn how to give a museum tour and check their comfort level in public speaking. This is also a great way of learning Renton history by interpreting the museum exhibits.

During docent training we will discuss different guiding techniques depending on the age level of a visiting group. Current docents will share their skills and knowledge of giving a tour. We want to advertise our services in the community, so we need to make sure that we have a sufficient number of well trained tour guides able to handle new demands. We also don't want to get out of practice, as we hope the problems at the Renton School District are temporary, and the tours will resume next year.

Three docent training sessions are planned beginning March 14 and will be followed each time by lectures from invited speakers. The audience members who don't participate in docent training (except museum members and children), will be charged a small fee for the lectures. The date of the forth training is reserved in case it is necessary.

Participation registration begins at 2:15pm. Training starts at 2:30pm and ends about 3:30pm. Tour guides will have a few minutes to have a snack before the presentation begins at 4:00pm. Docent training is scheduled as follows:

- ◆ Tuesday, March 14 - 2:15 to 5:00pm including Father Luigi Rossi: Storyteller, Pioneer, Chaplain, and Missionary presentation at 4:00pm.
- ◆ Tuesday, March 28 - 2:15 to 5:00pm including Immigrants in the Puget Sound lecture at 4:00pm.
- ◆ Tuesday, April 11 - 2:15 to 5:00pm including Arts of the Raven Coast presentation at 4:00pm.
- ◆ Tuesday, April 25 - 2:15 to 4:00pm reserved as necessary.

We strongly encourage potential tour guide candidates to participate in docent training. Your services are in demand and the museum staff will greatly appreciate your involvement in educating our community about Renton history. This is an important part of our mission.



Above: Aunt Harriet and Brother Ely

Gift Shop



The Museum Gift Shop is a great place to do your gift shopping. New items and books have been added to the gift shop. We have just received a new shipment of the Centennial Afghans, selling for \$74.59 plus tax and have a nice selection of books, including Chief Seattle's Vision "How Can One Sell the Air?" Revised Edition for \$9.95 plus tax



New Members

Jacqueline Ridgley Adams
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**Membership
 Renewals for 2006**

Notices were sent out in November. Those not paid now are considered past due.

2006 Membership Rates

Student/Teacher/Senior	\$12
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**One time fee. Lifetime Memberships will be transferred to the living spouse.*

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denotes former Society Life Member



denotes former Society member

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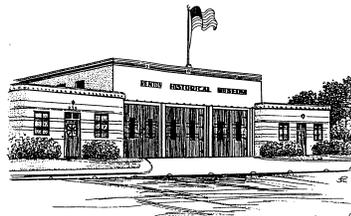
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*Bill & Carol Collins with
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Centennial Snapshot



In honor of the Easter season, here is a picture showing members of the Methodist Church of Renton acting out the biblical story of King David. The date of this image is not known. If you, or someone you know, can tell us the names of the people in the photo, or the date when it was taken, please contact the museum.



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