

## FUN ON THE ICE! ICE SKATING IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS

“Brownsville’s new ice skating rink will be formally opened tonight with a party scheduled from 7 to 10 p.m. The community’s ice skaters are invited to participate.”

That announcement in the Brownsville *Telegraph* generated excitement in Brownsville sixty years ago. The news rippled through a community experiencing one of its worst winters in decades. It was on Friday, February 2, 1945, that *Telegraph* readers learned that the community’s newest recreational facility was set to open.

“Located on the old Water Street athletic field, the rink is ready for the skaters,” the *Telegraph* reported. “Three huge bonfires will be burning on the three sides of the rink, and benches will be provided for the skaters. Music also is to be provided tonight.”

The old athletic field on Water Street served as the Brownsville High School football stadium until it was replaced in 1940 by Brownie Stadium in Hiller. The Water Street stadium stood where the Little League field (Fenwick Park) is now located. After Brownie Stadium opened in 1940, the abandoned Water Street field saw only sporadic informal activity.

As a boy, former South Side resident Chuck (Zeke) Hosler lived near the Water Street field. Chuck told me recently, “The Water Street field was not used for football after the new stadium opened, but it was occasionally used for pickup games of mushball and softball. I do remember when they built the ice skating rink at the old athletic field.”

In 1944, a plan was hatched to turn the unused Water Street field into an outdoor ice skating rink. The project, placed under the supervision of the Brownsville Youth Planning Commission, was repeatedly delayed by bad weather, but by February 1945, the new rink was ready to be opened to the public.

“Completion of the rink marks another of the projects of the Youth Planning Commission here,” the *Telegraph* noted, “and brings to a successful conclusion weeks of efforts during which those interested

were frustrated by the worst winter season in the last quarter of a century.”

Youth Planning Commission members Eli H. Hatfield, R. Donald Conn, Raymond T. Barner, the Rev. H. O. Danielson, Alan K. Taylor, and H. H. Baer arranged for workers under the direction of street commissioner Fred McAvoy to do the actual construction work. Young Chuck Hosler watched with great anticipation as the long earthen embankments were formed to enclose the new rink.

“The skating rink was built,” Chuck explained, “by putting a mound of dirt about one foot high around approximately half of the athletic field. Once the barrier was in place, the fire department pumped water from the river onto the flat surface inside the barrier. When it froze, it made a nice rink.”

All of the planning and hard work finally bore fruit on Friday night, February 2, 1945, when the rink was opened to nearly one thousand excited residents who showed up to see it or try it out. Everyone was in a festive mood, despite the fact that the mercury was hovering at the 16-degree mark.

“The night it opened,” Chuck Hosler said, “it was crowded with people from all over town.”

The next day’s *Telegraph* reported, “The glistening runners of several hundred ice skaters gave the Brownsville Youth Planning Commission’s rink at the old Water Street athletic field its formal baptism yesterday and last evening. Approximately 400 skaters were on hand to try the newly frozen surface, with 600 others appearing at the field as spectators. The icy floor of the rink was frozen to a smooth hardness by almost a week of sub-freezing weather. Four huge bonfires along the sides of the rink helped the skaters enjoy an evening of the winter sports.”

Organizers did more than construct the rink and fill it with water. A “canteen committee” of S. J. Rodgers, the Rev. H. O. Danielson, Velma Vig, and Howard E. Hamill made sure there was plenty of hot food and drink available to warm the skaters while popular recorded songs were played all evening over a loudspeaker system.

Bob Petriello visited the rink that first weekend, and in the following Monday’s *Telegraph*, he described the festivities in his popular column, *Red Peppers*.

“Officially opened only last Friday night,” Bob wrote, “the ice skating rink at the old athletic field already has caught on in a hurry with adults as well as youngsters in the community. Over a thousand already have glided along the newly constructed rink.

“The skaters wasted little time in enjoying the benefits as they

covered the rink until late yesterday, when a slight drizzle discouraged any further skating. Youngsters arrived at all hours Saturday and Sunday and many remained for three or four hours.”

Bob mentioned the names of some of the skaters who enjoyed the community’s newest asset.

“Attracting the eye of everyone present yesterday was Joe Parrinelo, 16-year-old youth from Vesta Six,” Bob commented. “The youngster is really a fancy dan on skates as he performed numerous stunts for the benefit of the skaters.

“Two of the younger skaters yesterday were Mary Jane Lessner, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Lessner, and Scott Campbell, son of Mr. and Mrs. Dolly Campbell. Both seemed to enjoy themselves to no end as they also took numerous spills on the ice. Another eight-year-old youngster who can hold her own on the ice is Carol Harsh, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Harsh. They tell us that she is also a top-flight roller-skater.

“West Brownsville was well represented yesterday afternoon on the ice with the following present: Dick Beeson, Emil Skorich, Jim Edwards, Jack Duff, Paul Durda, Jim Spelick, Dale Webster, Jack Stansfield, Jack Sabo, Carl Forsythe, Marker Stephenson, Jr., Rodney Stephenson, Bill Deems, Alec Azare, Bill Welsh, Steve Lovasci, Bobby Deems, Janice Slingen, and Lola Forsythe.”

The older generation wasn’t left out of the fun, as was proven when one gentleman playfully issued a challenge.

“A race around the rink between two old-timers is in the making,” Petriello declared, “as Syl Benedict issued a challenge to Henry Scotillo last night at the Elks. Henry was a well-known skater in Brownsville in his younger days. Billy Groah, who was standing with Benedict, also was challenged, but the latter said that he will have to think it over for a few days.”

South Side native Sherman Elias, now of White Oak, Pennsylvania, remembers being at the Water Street rink that opening weekend.

“They had bonfires burning and a lot of skaters,” Sherman told me. “We all had a wonderful time. There was no drinking or fighting.”

Of course, finding a pair of ice skates was a hurdle faced by anyone who wished to experience the new facility’s smooth surface.

“Many of the kids there didn’t have ice skates,” Chuck Hosler remarked, “so a lot of them were simply running and sliding in their shoes.”

Les Teasdale now resides in the sunny climes of Fort Walton Beach, Florida, but he enjoyed the Pennsylvania winters back in those days. Les didn’t have a pair of ice skates, but he clearly remembers whose skates

he borrowed the night he went to the Water Street ice rink.

“In 1947,” Les told me, “Bob Sargent and I went skating one evening at the Water Street rink. I remember the night well, because Margaret Strang lent me her skates. They were so tight that they limited the blood circulation in my feet, which became frostbitten.” Nevertheless, Les declared, “a great time was had by all, and I would like to convey a belated thank you to Margaret Strang Stewart.”

Margaret’s skates were the shoe-type, but as Brownsville native Chuck Rohrer told me, “There were all kinds of skates, including clamps that you could buy at Brownsville Hardware. For Christmas, some kids received a pair of real hockey shoe skates or figure skates with the saw-toothed toe, so you could dig in and get a fast start and stop.”

“One could purchase a pair of the inexpensive stamped steel, key screw clamp-on skates,” agreed Allison #1 native Tom Liberator, now of Portland, Oregon. “These skates utilized a fairly secure method to tighten four clamps against the thick soles and heels of high-top shoes.”

The clamp-on type of skate was less expensive, which was good news to a boy or girl whose pockets were distressingly light.

“Some kids had new ice skates if their parents could afford them,” Chuck Hosler noted, “but ice skates in Brownsville were hard to come by. I had an old pair from years ago that one of my uncles must have given to me.”

Of course, even if one had skates, getting downtown to use the Water Street rink was not always convenient for those whose homes were in the patches or villages surrounding Brownsville. For those would-be skaters, there were frozen surfaces near their homes that were not as elaborate as the Water Street rink, but that would serve their purpose. Ponds, swamps, lakes and reservoirs could be great ice skating rinks – as long as the ice didn’t break.

Next, we will venture to some of those places, where the thrill of skating onto a body of water whose frozen surface was of questionable strength was heightened by the ever-present element of danger.

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### *SKATING ON THIN ICE*

“My friends and I loved to skate on the early thin green ice that formed on the shallow areas of the patch reservoirs.”

Man-made ice skating rinks like the rink built on Water Street in 1945 lacked one feature that could only be experienced by skating on the frozen surfaces of lakes and ponds in the hills and lowlands surrounding

Brownsville.

The element of danger!

Who knew when a skater might crash through the ice?

Allison #1 native Tom Liberator has lived in Portland, Oregon, for forty years, but he still remembers the thrill of testing the ice at the Allison reservoir, a mile and a half west of the patch.

“In those days,” Tom commented, “your stature in the patch was measured by your spirit of recklessness and general defiance.”

And what better way to show off than to be the first skater to venture onto the apparently frozen surface of the reservoir?

“It was truly an exhilarating experience,” Tom said, “that required considerable skill. You had to judge the thickness and strength of the ice and apply even pressure on your gliding and propelling skates. You adjusted your speed as you viewed the vegetation passing beneath the surface and felt the rubbery, rolling action of the ice.

“My skating buddy was often Frank Lizanich, who now lives in Orlando,” Tom recalled. “We found that the Allison reservoir was the most challenging for us because of the uncertainty of the water’s residual heat. Skating there was a sunny daytime activity because you had to be observant, watch out for the slushy areas, and disregard the peril of falling through the ice.”

Falling through the ice!

That was a hazard faced by anyone who chose to risk skating on the frozen bodies of water that Mother Nature provided rather than at the safer man-made rinks. Rowes Run native John Batovsky, now living in Chester, Virginia, recalls how skaters prepared for the inevitable crash through the ice.

“We used to skate on Rowes Run Creek,” John told me, “about one hundred yards upstream from the old [United] Mine Workers Union hall. We also liked to skate on Redstone Creek beneath the steel bridge in Tippecanoe, where the stone and concrete bridge supports made good seats. We always built a good fire to stay warm, usually out of tree limbs and branches, but sometimes we would find an old tire to burn. Tires made a good hot fire, but we would go home smelling like burnt rubber.

“I remember one evening in particular when we were skating up at Tippecanoe, and we hadn’t even gotten a fire started when one of the guys stepped through thin ice. He was soaked past his knees, and we really had to scurry to get the fire going, as the temperature was below zero that night.”

West Brownsville young people wishing to spend an afternoon or evening ice skating often headed for a place called the “Swamp.” Thom Stapleton of Casa Grande, Arizona, grew up in West Brownsville and

remembers the Swamp.

“It was located downriver from the railroad bridge,” Thom explained, “near the old Lilley mine. It wasn’t very deep, so it stayed frozen for much of the winter. We had to cut off a few cat tails that stuck up through the ice, but otherwise it was a good surface. Not many families could afford ice skates, but with or without skates, lots of guys played hockey with a flattened tin can for a puck and a cut tree branch for a hockey stick.”

Chuck Rohrer of Orlando, Florida, was one of those guys.

“As a teenager living in West Brownsville sixty years ago,” Chuck recalled, “I had a good time ice skating at the Swamp. We played hockey by our own rules. The puck was a crushed canned milk can, and it sure hurt when it hit you in the ankle or shin. We made our hockey sticks from the root end of bent young trees growing out of the hillside. They were a little crude, but they worked fine.”

Janet Hackney Kinzel of Pleasanton, California, grew up on a farm on Heistersburg Road, one mile southwest of Penn Craft. Janet’s ice skating memories are a bit different, because her skating venue was created through the combined efforts of her father and nature.

“Our farm was named Crystal Springs,” Janet told me, “and was originally the Conwell farm. The current owners, with whom we visited this past autumn, are Rocky and Ruth DiCianno.

“In the spring of 1953, my father, J. D. Hackney, had a pond dug and a dam built on our farm. What an event! Huge earth movers came and pushed the dirt from the creek bed and surrounding land into a 14-foot high, 30-foot thick breastwork, which was to hold back the water of the little creek that meandered through the ‘hollow’ of our 30-acre farm.

“A spillway was built along with a large drainage pipe as tall as the dam. Throughout the summer of 1953, we watched as the pond, which was at least as big as a football field, filled with water. By the end of the summer, Dad was able to stock it with fish and we opened a fishing business. My job was to watch the snack shed, collect ticket money, and sell worms, which I did until I left the area in 1960.

“But the best times for me came as winter approached. Being outside in the snow was always fun for me at home and at Central School in Tower Hill. We didn’t have much money and much of our snow equipment was makeshift, but that year Christmas was unbelievable for me. Under the tree on Christmas morning was a pair of ice skates, for which I know my parents sacrificed greatly. I could hardly wait to get down to the pond to skate.

“There is nothing quite like being the first one on the ice of a pond. When the surface freezes, it creates an air space between the ice

and the water. When the ice gets stepped on, the frozen surface sinks to the top of the water and the air is forced out in a "Zzziipp" sound. I can still hear it.

“Over the years, many of my friends came to skate. We often skated at night in the moonlight. We played “Crack the Whip!” and somehow I was the one on the end almost every time. George Cox, who had a service station down the hill from us, would give us old tires that we would burn to keep warm. We stunk to high heaven, but nobody seemed to notice. When we came inside, my mom would have hot chocolate waiting to warm us up.

“Most of the time I envied the kids who lived in town, but on ice skating days I was pretty darn proud to live on a farm. Now I live in a place where the snow is up in the mountains, and we have drive to it and from it – quite different from living in it. I am very grateful for my roots in western Pennsylvania.”

Some young people experienced their greatest skating thrills on the frozen Monongahela River. West Brownsville native Judy Furlong Luda, now of Parma, Ohio, remembers bundling up to venture down to the riverbank on wintry days.



**In this photograph, taken in the 1890s, a youngster eagerly anticipates skating on the frozen Monongahela River while the adults clear snow and prepare to cut ice. The cut ice would be used in ice boxes or stored for sale later in the year. Behind them is the old wooden covered bridge, which crossed the river at the same location as the present inter-county bridge.**

“We wore whatever warm clothes we could find, including a heavy sweater under our coat,” Judy recalled. “The older kids used to skate on the river between the inter-county bridge and what they used to call the ‘beach,’ which was later known as Ehlers’ boat launch. I also remember kids skating on the river near California under the bridge, just as you went up Coal Center hill. The younger kids, most of whom did not have skates, were not allowed on the river.”

Next, our tale of ice skating in bygone years concludes with the story of Peter Hunt’s ice rink in the Dunlap Creek valley and more skating adventures on area ponds, lakes, and the Monongahela River.

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### *ICE SKATING JUST ISN’T WHAT IT USED TO BE!*

In the days before the popularity of indoor facilities, ice skating was an outdoor adventure, whether it took place at a manmade outdoor rink or on a frozen natural body of water. Mine reservoirs, the Monongahela River, and various ponds and lakes in the area provided many afternoons and evenings of winter fun for enthusiastic skaters.

Sometimes forgotten is the fact that ice which formed on lakes and ponds, unlike ice at modern artificially refrigerated indoor rinks, was usually a rough and difficult skating surface. For that reason, the first skaters on the scene often toted brooms and shovels to clear the snow and smooth the ice to make it fit for skating.

Hiller native Harry Hackney recalled, “I never had ice skates, because I never knew of a place to skate. Ice that freezes naturally is usually so rough it is impossible to skate on. Even manmade rinks need regular grooming or they become terrible. The surface needs to be flooded and allowed to refreeze on cold windless nights.”

One manmade outdoor ice rink that was popular in the 1950s and 1960s was located at Brownsville-Luzerne Community Park. Darla Pichard, now of Palm Bay, Florida, lived on Telegraph Road in those days. The park was just a short walk from her family’s home.

“My brother, mother, and I used to walk to Luzerne Park to ice skate on the pond,” Darla told me. “We were only allowed on the little pond, because it was not too deep. We had to carry our ice skates and either a broom or a shovel to clear the ice.”

Ray Smith of Rock Hill, South Carolina, also frequented the park in winter months. Like Darla, he chose to skate on what he called the “small lake” rather than on the park’s larger fishing lake.

“I am guessing it was in the late ’50s,” Ray recalled, “that we would

go skating on the ‘small’ lake at Luzerne Park. If you were standing with your back to the flag pole on top of the hill, looking towards the large lake, the small lake would have been on your left, down over the hill at the extreme lowest level of the park. If you remember the driving range that was there at one time, it was over the hill just to the right of the driving range.

“The big lake was never skated on because it was too deep to be sure it was safe. I remember upwards of twenty or more people used to skate at the small lake on any given night or weekend. My father, Ray Smith, used to bring old tires from the garage where he worked. We would roll them down the hill from the road to the small lake and set them on fire with railroad flares. We shoveled the snow off the lake every time it snowed, creating big piles along the edges of the lake.”

One area of the park was specifically altered to allow ice skating. On Monday, January 20, 1958, the *Brownsville Telegraph* reported, “A half-acre site at the Brownsville-Luzerne Community Park has been cleared and flooded with water, and the recent cold weather has resulted in formation of a fine skating rink. Hundreds of local youngsters have taken advantage of the new skating site. Youngsters are warned not to skate on the fishing lake at the park. The water in the lake is deep, and a fall through the ice could prove fatal.”

Ice skating on frozen lakes and ponds could indeed be hazardous. Nevertheless, danger did not deter determined (or foolhardy) skaters. During frigid weather, ice surfaces from Brier Hill to Filbert teemed with bundled-up boys and girls seeking winter fun.

Brownsville native Lucy Tharpe Karslake, now of Hudson, Ohio, sent me a 1950 photograph of herself in ice skates, standing on the snow-covered ice of the Brier Hill lake. In the photo’s background, several company houses can be seen perched on the hillside.

“I have no idea how we knew the lake was safe for skating,” Lucy confessed, “as we were the only ones on the lake that day.”

Filbert native Wes Campbell, now of Austin, Texas, skated on a pond near Filbert.

“We used to skate on a pond along the railroad tracks just below the mine, between Filbert #1 and Orient,” Wes explained. “We called it the ‘big pond.’ It usually froze over quickly, and it was a blast skating through the forest of cat tails. Before all the cat tails got



knocked down, we would cut paths through them and have races similar to automotive road races.”

Skaters today are willing to pay an admission fee to skate on mechanically refrigerated ice surfaces, the first of which, the Glaciarium in London, opened to the public in 1876. Of course, there were no artificial ice rinks in this area over a century ago, but an enterprising businessman could make a buck by providing an attractive outdoor venue where one could skate on naturally formed, carefully groomed ice.

Such a place existed near Brownsville several decades before the Glaciarium opened. The Brownsville entrepreneur was Peter Hunt, and his rink was famous in this area.

“Peter Hunt’s Famous Skating Rink” existed “some forty or more years ago,” wrote J. Percy Hart in his book *History and Directory of the Three Towns*. Hart penned those words in 1904, which tells us that Hunt’s rink was in use during the 1860s or earlier.

Hart wrote, “One of the most famous pleasure resorts here some forty or more years ago was the skating rink of Peter Hunt, who was himself a unique and interesting character. This rink was located on what was for many years known as the second bottom and stood near the fill and stone bridge of the Connellsville Central R. R., now building up



**This photo, taken more than a century ago, shows Valley Mill and Peter Hunt’s man-made ice skating rink along Dunlap Creek near Brownsville.**

Dunlap's Creek."

In those days, there were many mills along Dunlap Creek. They took advantage of the creek's free water power to turn their large water wheels, which in turn drove the mill's gears and grindstones. Peter Hunt's ice rink was located near a mill race, which enabled Hunt to create a fresh surface on his rink each day.

"Mr. Hunt flooded his rink every day during the winter," explained J. Percy Hart, "taking water from the mill race and thus provided an excellent skating surface."

Hunt also provided for the comfort and entertainment of the skaters, which explains why they were willing to pay to use his rink rather than take their chances on a pond near their home.

"He had a little house well provided with stoves in which skaters could warm and put on or take off their skates," Hart noted. "The old Grooms Band, led by Dr. Grooms, furnished excellent music, and many was the merry lad and lass who glided over the smooth surface of that rink to the enchanting strains of Dr. Grooms' music."

Kids in those days were just as mischievous as they are nowadays, as evidenced by their treatment of the elderly caretaker of Peter Hunt's rink.

"Outside the door of the little house," wrote Hart, "Mr. Hunt kept a thermometer. An old Scotchman who usually swept the rink attached much importance to this thermometer. If it indicated extreme cold he would go in often to warm, but if the mercury was above freezing he was positive it was not cold, no matter how he felt.

"Not infrequently the boys played tricks on the old man. They would hold the bulb of the thermometer in their hands till the mercury would climb up into the sixties. It is said that one cold day the old man was almost frozen, but when he looked at the thermometer and saw that the mercury stood far above freezing, he shambled, shivering, back to his work, murmuring that he did not know what was the matter with him as he could not stand the cold as well as he once did."

Ice skating is a sport that has been popular around here for several centuries, but it has become a very different pastime since the introduction of commercial indoor rinks, artificially produced ice, and prerecorded background music.

Ah, for the good old days of warming next to a pile of stinking burning tires; toting brooms and shovels to the nearest pond; skating through an obstacle course of protruding cattails; and occasionally crashing through the ice into the freezing water.

Yes, it's true.

Ice skating just isn't what it used to be.