

The Riverview Melting Pot

by Jan Nieman

Emil's chunky pink fingers thumped the Wurlitzer organ, and the vibrating basses drove the rhythm through my body. A boy draped over the rink's railing left his post and skated over to me. He placed his arm around my waist and asked the magic words, "You want to do the next dance?" Giddy with teenage delight, we rolled off together.

After years of trying out for cheerleading or a role in a high-school play, my friend Grace and I realized we were never going to be members of the in-group. We switched gears and poured our energy into roller skating. To our surprise, but total satisfaction, our social life took off.

On Friday evenings we exited our bus at Milwaukee's Riverview skating rink and dashed down steep wooden steps leading to the river. There a shabby monster of a concrete building belched out the tunes of our day. Emil's heavy beat on the rink's organ drifted up, compelling us to join the fun inside, where rolling wheels bruised wooden planks, creating a dusty, nostril-assaulting odor that clung to our clothes, yet beckoned us week after week.

We weren't the first skating generation at the Riverview. The original 1917 structure featured a ceiling with an elevated bandstand hanging from it and when lowered, doubled as a venue for political speeches and prize fights. Ladies wore long skirts, frilly hats, and large puffed sleeves as they glided along on the recent invention of four-wheeled fitted shoe skates.

In 1929 a fire turned the structure into a pile of ashes and rebuilt in 1940, sans the ceiling bandstand, into an enormous rink that hosted Wisconsin State Roller Skating

Championships. By then, women skaters wore slacks or knee-high swinging skirts, and had abandoned the simple style of skating around and around the rink. Men skaters limited their wardrobe to long pants...forever. Intricate jumps, lifts, and figures with predetermined steps were incessantly practiced by solo and couple dancers.

Except for dressing in jeans or skimpy skirts, nothing much had changed by 1954 when Grace and I showed up. We practiced our moves on areas adjacent to the main rink until we braved joining the skaters. The payoff for all that rehearsal was hearing a guy ask, "Hey, you interested in skating together?"

Of course!

The Riverview was a melting pot that thrust together the offspring of parents who did not look kindly to their children crossing narrow cultural and religious boundaries. East-side wealthy teens did not meet there. Neither did the rink beckon Asians nor Blacks. This was the hangout for lower-middle-class German, Italian, Irish, and Polish kids. They came from segregated but adjoining neighborhoods and sought out one another over objections from parents who seldom dated outside their ethnicities. My '50s teen generation ignored those unwritten rules and formed friendships based on three new ones:

Rule #1: accept "most" skating invitations

Rule #2: show up at the rink on Friday nights

Rule #3: keep one's butt off the floor

Grace's strict Baptist parents took issue with skimpy skating skirts that scarcely covered one's heinie, but under her persistent pestering they allowed her to wear demure slacks. I sewed short taffeta skirts and topped them with buttoned-down-the-back

sweaters...such hot stuff. I dared to puff my first and last cigarette at the rink, learned how to flirt and gently decline with a “No, thank you” to men much too old for me (an exception to Rule #1 about accepting “most” invitations).

My first serious skating partner was Polish/Catholic. I was German/Lutheran, but soon we were going steady (skating partners tended to become dating partners). His father discovered our mismatched religions, and further disturbed by disparate ancestries, banned him from the rink. End of relationship (See Rule #2 about showing up).

However, the Riverview offered up another skating beau and we rolled off together for several months before my mother discovered he was Italian/Catholic and sniped, “Can’t you find any Lutherans there?” Religion trumped German ancestry, but not by much. She did allow me to continue my Friday night outings.

My new partner and I considered entering one of Wisconsin’s roller skating contests. By studying other skaters, we learned and practiced the simple steps for couples without any lifts or jumps. We graduated to increasingly difficult dances: the Keats Foxtrot, the Progressive Tango, and the California Swing.

My team-mate was significantly more graceful and fearless than I as we swayed around the rink. I could not overcome my fear and embarrassment of falling. We practiced for two years and felt ready to fill out the contest entry forms when one Friday night he shared some disturbing news.

“I hate to tell you this, but my family is moving back to Michigan.”

Our plans to enter Wisconsin’s Roller Skating Championships were dashed (Rule #2 about being present). I moped, skated alone, and attempted a few jumps. I considered

entering the solo competition, but my previous fears prevented me from giving it my all (Rule #3 – keep butt off floor).

Meanwhile, I graduated from high school and entered college, where anyone could find a compatible group – another melting pot. I discovered dancing at the student union and teaching it at Arthur Murray’s helped with tuition. My Friday nights at the rink became fewer.

In English 201 I chanced to sit next to a neat guy with a sense of humor. Notes and whispers flew back and forth, irritating several nearby classmates. Did we care? No! I believe I received a C-minus.

We dated for a couple of weeks, and holding my breath, I asked, “Have you ever roller skated?”

“Not really. Cedarburg is pretty small. No roller rinks there. Why?”

“I used to skate quite a bit. Maybe we could go sometime?”

“Ah, I don’t have skates.”

“Oh, that’s OK. You can rent them at the rink.”

I hoped that along with becoming my boyfriend, he’d become my third skating partner. After several dates at the Riverview, he was still holding himself upright by clutching my sleeve while his knees skimmed the wood planks. He flunked Rule #3. Did you recall keeping butt off floor?

Decision time: Skating Partner or Boyfriend?

Mom asked, “Is he Lutheran?”

“I think so.”

“There you are. Who cares if he can’t skate?” Head coyly tilted, she added, “Any chance he would be German?”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t sure.

For her...a miracle...one and perhaps two out of two!

Despite my mother’s approval (known as the kiss of death for a teen romance), I wed that German/Lutheran non-skater. Grace, her parents relieved she hadn’t met the devil on skates, married a Baptist farmer and lived hundreds of miles from anything rolling except hay bales.

We matured beyond lives totally absorbed and wrapped up in roller skating. But once in a while, a woody aroma infiltrates my dreams. The deep pulsating of a Wurlitzer beats out a long-forgotten rhythm, and I’m swaying, flying around the rink, an uncertain teen who found a place of acceptance at the Riverview melting pot.