

They had a brand-new pair of roller skates...



"History & Heritage" is a series on Montclair history, written by representatives of the Montclair History Center and the Montclair Public Library. Mike Farrelly is a trustee of the Montclair History Center and has been the official township historian, a volunteer position, since 2004.

Despite its name, the Montclair Opera House on Bloomfield Avenue was never a place to get dressed up and see works by Rossini or Puccini. It began life as a roller-skating rink on March 30, 1885. There was a bandstand where a small band could play while people zipped by on the "new craze," roller skates.

Roller skates had been invented in England in the 1740s. Nobody knows who the inventor was. They were somewhat like the in-line skates of today. For some reason they were first used in the theater. Performers would whiz in and out of the scene on a pair of these newfangled devices.

It wasn't until the 1860s when James Plimpton developed "quad" skates, and several inventors improved the design, that roller-skating became the "thing to do" in Europe and in the United States. In 1866, Newport, Rhode Island, erroneously claimed to have built the first roller skating rink in the world, but several had been built in England before that. It may have been the first in the United States. Many rinks followed shortly thereafter. There were rinks in Morristown, Dover, and Orange. A Montclair Times article dated Feb. 28, 1885, described the fad, and said that the rink in Orange earned \$25,000 in profits during its first five months.

BUILT FOR SPEED?

Edward F. Totten of Dover leased property from Mary Horton on Bloomfield Avenue and spent about \$4,000 to build a roller rink. (The skating rink in this article is not to be confused with a rink that was built in the 1940s on Bloomfield Avenue. African Americans were banned from the later rink, which became the focus of a civil rights struggle. Nor is the Opera House to be confused with the Montclair Operetta Club building on Valley Road.)

It was very plain architecturally, both inside and outside, but every effort was expended to create a state-of-the-art skating surface. The base was a normal wood floor, which was covered by thick waterproof tarpaper, which was meant to dampen noise and keep moisture out so the skating surface wouldn't warp. The top layer was made up of 2-inch strips of hard maple pressed tightly together. The corners were mitered. According to a March 28, 1885, Montclair Times article, this was done so that skaters would never have to skate against the grain of the wood. The surface was then heavily waxed.

The bandstand was suspended from the roof trusses so there was no chance of uneven settling. Lighting was provided by 18 large "star" lamps with three gas jets each. Three rows of stadium-type seating ran the length of the skating surface, which was 50 feet by 150 feet. There were skate-fitting rooms for men and for women. The staff took pains to adjust skates properly on every customer. There was also a smoking room for gentlemen. There was music every night and on occasional afternoons. It was popular: 1,500 people attended the opening on March 30.

The management took great pains to provide entertainment. Often there were performances by expert skaters and bicyclists. Trick skater Minnie Madden appeared on opening night. Music was provided by the Montclair Brass Band. One of the first acrobats to perform there was Bertie Hendricks, who skated around blazing bottles, and also skated on stilts. That same night Eddie Leopold amazed the crowd when he leaped off a moving bicycle to pick a handkerchief up off the floor, did a handspring, caught up with his moving bike and then remounted it while it was still in motion.

Sometimes there would be comedy acts. In April 1885, Morrow and Drew, burlesque skating clowns, appeared. In May "Professor" George Howell entertained the crowds with his trained dogs. Because of its size, the rink was also used for galas and cotillions. However, like so many fads, roller-skating died out after a couple of years. A similar rink in Pavonia, Jersey City, which was built in 1885 for \$11,000, sold for \$1,350 in 1886.

BECOMING AN 'OPERA HOUSE'

Philip Young, a local bicycle maker and repairman, bought the rink on Bloomfield Avenue. He ran his own business on site, but decided to reopen it in 1888 as a bicycle rink. He continued the tradition of playing music while people rode. He built a stage with gas footlights and brought in all kinds of acts. The venue became known as the Montclair Opera House, or the Bicycle Opera House.

In November of 1895, Young showcased "The Two Johns," a comedy group bolstered by singers, headed by John C. "Fatty" Stewart, who was famous for his impressions. In February of 1897 Young brought in Hi Henry's "Big City Minstrel Show," which featured mummies. Young also opened the doors to public meetings, such as political organizations and large house and estate sales.

Montclair conducted meetings there, but declined to pay rent. In 1902, after years of wrangling, the township attorney declared that it was unlawful to pay Young rent for civic affairs. To bolster his income, Young had sold fireworks. On March 8, 1905, the building burned to the ground; fireworks were probably the cause. There was no insurance; Young never rebuilt.

There's a red brick building there now, with three storefronts, 395, 397 and 399 Bloomfield Ave.



A young man on roller skates, 1910.

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