

THE OAKS PARK SKATING RINK  
Surviving a Century

By Mackenzie Jamieson

At the hundred-year-old Oaks Park Staking Rink in Portland, Oregon little girl shuffles her skates along the floor. Her arms jet out like airplane wings to help her balance. Her body bobs up and down as she rides the waves of this strange strip of wood floor. Waves? Why does a skating rink have a strip of wavy flooring? "For fun," answers the warm tenor voice of the rink's door greeter. A proper title for him would be Mr. Pritchard. He is one of the few people left who holds stories behind the skating rink's history. The rest of the stories are frozen in fading photographs and forgotten newspaper articles. Mr. Pritchard contains more than half of the rink's lifetime in his head. It was 1938 when Mr. Pritchard started working at the rink. He was fifteen.

While Disneyland celebrates "fifty years of magic," it is just a teenager compared to The Oaks Amusement Park in Portland, Oregon. Video games, cable TV, and more modern amusement parks threaten the existence of old amusement parks such as the ones that run The Oaks Skating Rink. An yet, somehow this underdog of attractions has been bouncing from disaster after disaster. This little skating rink has dusted itself off from The Great Depression, the development of modern entertainment, and three floods.

The Oaks Skating Rink was built as an attraction at The Oaks Amusement Park. The year was 1905 and there was a friendly competition between The Oaks and the Lewis and Clark Exposition to see who would open first. The Oaks beat the Lewis and Clark Exposition by three days.

In those days men and women arrived by boat, train, and carriage. Everyone wore their best. Men in fine suits selling for ten dollars in those days, and women with long dresses, frilly hats, and parasols. Skating was one of the few athletic activities that was socially acceptable for women. Skates had to be installed onto the shoe, usually with the aid of one of the rink's skate boys. At that time skates were made of wood and secured with metal straps. Back then the wooden rink floor stretched from wall to wall without carpeting to cushion a crash. Metal railing was the only divider between observer and skater. People entered the skating rink from the boardwalk of The Oaks Amusement Park.

A black and white picture of seven teenage-looking boys hangs on the wall just a few feet behind Mr. Pritchard. It was taken around the time he started working at the rink. The skating rink, which belonged to The Oaks Amusement Park in Portland, Oregon, was inching towards its half-century mark in history. That was almost sixty-seven years ago.

Hundreds of people walk by that picture every day. Only a handful may discover that the first boy sitting on the left in the old photo is none other than Mr. Pritchard. The boys in the photograph wear striped knee-highs, knickers, jackets, and tie sit on a short stool. They were the

skate boys. From seven thirty to eleven o'clock at night the wooden chairs refilled constantly while the boys rushed back and forth from the skate rental booth to the customers, clamping metal skates to the bottom of their shoes.

That was before the carpeted walls and before the wavy floor along the back wall of the building. Behind his smile and twinkling eyes, Mr. Pritchard knows that there was something else that originally caused the waves on the floor. He was not really joking when he said the wavy floor was for fun. Robert Bollinger, Edwards' son, with the help of a wood specialist treated the warped remains of the floor to create the now wavy floor, which is unique to The Oaks Skating Rink.

Spring of 1948, the Willamette River burst at the seams from too much rain. Near the Sellwood Bridge an arm of land jets out into the river where The Oaks Skating Rink would be half underwater within hours. Employees barely had enough time to clear out the skating rink of its equipment.

Three days later when the water drained, what was left of the skating rink floor was a field of uprooted warped wood splinters. Reinstalling a new rink floor meant throwing a lot of money at the possibility of losing another floor in the event of future flooding. Nothing could be done but to close the rink. But Wait. Walker Leroy, the park's super intendent and main engineer had an idea: make a floating rink. Empty metal barrels could be used as buoys that would hold the floor above flood waters that entered the building. "He was an engineering genius," says Mr. Pritchard. People all over the world would call to ask Leroy questions about the engineering and physics of roller coaster rides. Though unconventional and a little crazy, Edward Bollinger the owner, gave idea a try. But they would have to wait until the next flood to try out the experimental floor.

Across from Mr. Pritchard's perch at the entrance hangs another major photograph from a bookmark in the rink's history—The 1950s. It was the age of poodle skirts, bobby sox and roller skates. When poodle skirts entered the scene, Mrs. Bollinger did not want skirts inside the building that drifted above the knees. "I was given the dastardly job of measuring," says Mr. Pritchard followed by a lighthearted chuckle.

The fifties were not only the roller-skating era, but also a major business boom for The Oaks Skating Rink. On a good day, the rink welcomes 800 people, but at the height of the skating age as many as 1,800 people lined up outside the rink doors. "You just opened the door and got out of the way," says Mr. Pritchard.

The fifties also brought boys with greased back hair, turned-up collars, and blue jeans who rolled cigarette packs in their sleeves. This group of boys was called "The Broadway Gang." They were not welcome here. In effort to keep The Oaks a wholesome family venue, a rule was enacted restricting guests from wearing plain white T-shirts and jeans not only at the rink but also at the amusement park. The white T-shirt rule was justified, Mr. Pritchard explains, by considering white T-shirts underwear. "Where do you buy a plain white T-shirt," asks Mr. Pritchard. "At the underwear counter." But one night, as Mr. Pritchard recalls, in the late 1960s four busloads of children showed up wearing jeans. Mr. Pritchard phoned Robert about the situation. Robert was now the owner of The Oaks since the passing of his father in 1949. He wasn't about to turn away

a large group of excited children. Since then, the jeans rule was lifted. As for the T-shirt rule, no one can recall when the restriction ended. It seems as if it just faded away in the mid-1980s.

Christmas of 1964 storms raged through Oregon causing major flooding and heavy damage to the Portland area. Once again flood waters threatened The Oaks. It had been almost sixteen years since the floating rink was installed. This would be the virgin voyage of the floating rink. Whether or not the barrels under the floor would save the rink was up to this flood and a few crossed fingers. As the waters crept closer to the rink building, workers were cutting the edges of the skating rink floor with chain saws. The floor was free, but it would not stay level. The electrical cords from the pipe organ kept the floor from rising, dipping corners of the floor into the flood waters. Leroy and a group of divers had to swim under the floor and cut the organ's electrical cords. Though the flood cost The Oaks 200,000 dollars of damage, the floating rink was a success. And this time it only took a month to be back in business.

Just over two decades later both the rink and Robert, who grew up at The Oaks, were getting closer to the age of retirement. By the 1980s old-fashioned amusement parks were closing all over the nation. The Oaks wasn't too far from the same fate. Robert, with The Oaks still close to his heart, wanted to see the park surpass his retirement. With no heirs to keep the park running in the family, Robert turned The Oaks into a nonprofit organization in 1985. "He was able to see his gift give people pleasure," explains Mr. Pritchard. Robert did not want to wait until he was dead to see people enjoy his gift.

Joe Norling was asked to run the park and skating rink as the C.E.O. "The place was in a sorry state," recalls Norling. "The culture of the park had turned less than wholesome." But with the focus on wholesome fun, Norling was able to bring the park back to being a positive family attraction.

1996 another flood threatened The Oaks. This time the park had a three-day notice to prepare for another disaster. By this time the little park that could was used to damage control. Except for one thing: no one really knew how the floating rink worked. The only information Norling had was through word of mouth. Norling and his crew looked at the structure of the rink and deduced where to cut the rink free. Yet again it wasn't that simple. When the water filled the skating rink building, the edges of the floor caught along the walls. The floor started to dip into the water. Workers took crowbars to pry the floating rink away from the walls. There was no way the floor could be left unwatched. With a couch, a port-a-potty, and crowbars in hand, Norling and five others camped out on the rink floor. It took a day and a half for the water to reach maximum height. Finally, the sun came out, and the wind started to blow. Norling couldn't ask for better conditions. Ten days later they were back in business.

Through the years The Oaks has grown in the hearts of Portland community. Mr. Pritchard says his life would be quite empty without it. After all, his parents met on the streetcar on the way to the amusement park. He met his own wife at the rink when he started skating there for fun around 1936. "I told my wife the other day that I was married to two things: you and The Oaks," says Mr. Pritchard like many of his side jokes that reveals a bit of truth. "It has provided me with laughter. It has provided me with everything."