

Posted online: May 9, 2004 12:20 AM
 , or by Print publication date: May 9, 2004

Skateland closing in on last go-round

The skating rink seems huge and empty in the hours before it opens. It isn't. Our memories are here still, gliding quietly in the cool darkness.

Skateland, as you know, is coming down. Progress has a price, and May will be the East Moline institution's last month. It appealed to young and old, but many Quad-Citians remember it fondly as host of our pre-teen dramas. Caught in those awkward years, too young to drive and too old to stay home, Skateland was a place to be.

"Just a couple of months ago, a lady stopped by and just wanted to look around. She said she skated here 40 years ago and just wanted to see it was still here," said Judy Johnston-Bowser, who has managed Skateland since 1975. "We have that happen a lot. There are a lot of memories in this place."

Mrs. Johnston-Bowser is daughter to Roy Johnston, who built the rink at 4181 Kennedy Drive in 1960. Four generations of the family have been in the roller-skating business beginning in Galesburg in 1928. Skateland has lived through several incarnations, in downtown Moline in 1936, at the Mississippi Fairgrounds in 1938, on 12th Street in Rock Island in 1940, and building a rink at 406 7th St., Moline, in 1945.

Mr. Johnston's son, Bud Johnston remembers his first job at the rink -- sweeping up.

"They put a broom in my hand when I was 6 or 8 years old," he said. "The first time I did it, I think I found a nickel and a dime. I swept pretty vigorously after that."

Mrs. Johnston-Bowser started as a snack room girl. They both remember their father staying at the rink late, sleeping overnight on the snack room tables, working on the specialized, delicate epoxy that covered the floor.



**Compass
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Chronicles**

Todd Welvaert



Photo: Todd Welvaert
 After 43 years of memories in East Moline, Skateland will offer its last skate at the end of May. The Johnston family, Bud Johnston, Judy Johnston-Bowser, and father, Roy Johnston, have been there since the beginning.

Miracle Ear

Rated Tops



Mrs. Johnston-Bowser smiles when she thinks of all the former employees. They are asking for as many who are around to show up for a former-employee skate from 1 to 4 p.m. May 23. There are many around still.

"(Moline Police Chief) Steve Ethridge served as a floor guard. You had to be able to skate backward," she said. "Denny Jacobs and his wife, (retiring East Moline Police Chief) Reggie Freeman practically grew up here."

Romances blossomed and hearts were broken in scattered, slow orbits. Bud Johnston guesses there's been thousands of couples who met at the rink and went on to marry. The rink even hosted one marriage ceremony, the president and vice president of a local skating club.

"Back in '65 to '70, if you were between 15 and 18 and it was date night, your parents only trusted you to go to three places: the movies, bowling or skating," Mr. Johnston remembers. "When we first opened, we had a policy, no jeans. You had to wear dress pants."

That's changed. A lot has changed. Business always has been a roller-coaster ride, but the skating rinks are becoming few and far between. The advent of the inline skate has helped and hurt, increasing skating's popularity while making it an outdoor sport. Bud Johnston would leave the rink to go on to start a business selling skating equipment to other rinks. He remembers having business at more than 70 rinks in Chicago. Now there are less than six.

"A lot of rinks got built in those years of 15 percent interest," Mr. Johnston said. "A lot of them didn't make it when the business slowed down."

Skateland was solid. It's the second-largest skating rink in Illinois and routinely hosted 700 to 800 skaters on Friday and Saturday nights in skatings heydays, in the disco years.

Skating's changed since. Mrs. Johnston-Bowser created events to keep up with and appeal to the ever-changing kids. Skateland, however, hasn't changed that much.

The lights that set the agenda to an afternoon or evening of skating are still there. Most don't work, the owners say, hit by one too many errant inline hockey pucks, but they are still there.

They measured skating sessions, providing an odd shot-clock for pre-teen love stories. Strut your stuff during "Boys Only," see who might possibly be available during "Girls Only." Jockey for position during a "Reverse," make contact during "Intermission." You know what comes next.

Who can forget the sweaty-palmed apprehension brought on by "Moonlight Couples Skate" or worse yet, the impossible hardness of the dished plastic seats around the rink during "Ladies Choice," aching to hear the call for "all skate, everybody skate," that would wipe the slate clean?

Until the "Clear the floor please," light came on and the music would stop.

Taking off your skates and feeling your feet still wanting that smooth glide. Returning the borrowed skates at the counter and being purged squinting

into the blazing sunlight when Mom or Dad came for pickup.

Our memories will be here still, gliding in the cool darkness. You've got a chance to catch them, at least until the end of May, when, for the last time, the light will come asking to "Clear the floor please."

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