

Ice Skating in the 1940s—50s

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Before I indulge in my experiences with ice-skating I would like to enlighten the reader with some early facts about this favourite pastime.

Australia's first ice rink opened in Adelaide in 1904. It had 8,000sq. Metres of ice and was named the "Glaciarium", it could seat 3,000 spectators, held three sessions a day, admission was one shilling, to hire ice skates was sixpence. This rink was closed after only two years of operation when the operator moved the business to Melbourne and operated for the next 50 years.

Sydney's first ice rink, also named the "Glaciarium", was opened during 1907 in George Street near the Central Railway Station. Ice Skating became so popular that a second ice rink was opened during 1938. This one was called "The Ice Palais" and was situated in the Hall of Industries at the old Sydney Showground.

When World War 2 was in progress these rinks were a favourite place with our servicemen, also visiting servicemen from overseas whilst on R. and R. [Rest and Relaxation] leave.

About the time and age of 19 (1946) a group of my friends and I, namely Max McCutcheon, Tom Tozer, Kevin Tracey and Ray Ryan decided that we should have a go at ice-skating. One Saturday morning in winter we caught the steam train into Sydney and walked down to the Glaciarium Ice Rink, which was near Broadway and not far from Central Railway. When I started courting a young lass by the name of Judy Martz, not long after we had started skating, she started coming with us.

The learning process was usually wet and painful, as we would frequently fall over, there was a low wall right around the ice rink for learners to hold onto and gaps in the wall to step onto the ice, it took us a few visits to the rink to properly maintain our balance and eventually stay on our feet.

The skates that we had to hire at the rink did not help, as they were always blunt and would slide out from under you. We were told that if we slipped the attendant, who gave out the skates, one shilling he would give us a good sharp set, as in order to grip the ice, skates had to have two sharp edges.

The Glaci had three sessions daily: 10am to 12am, 2pm to 4pm, and 8pm to 10.30pm. Saturday night entry cost 3/9 (3 shillings and nine pence) and to hire skates cost sixpence. If desired, dancing lessons (on ice) with an instructor could be booked at the office for a nominal fee.

During the night a bell would ring. This meant to clear the ice, as there would be separate sessions for public skating, dancing if you wished or could, speed skating for those who wanted to have a go. During the dancing and speed sessions only the public who wanted to participate were allowed on the ice. The same bell would mean for you to stop and do reverse skating around the rink.

When we were proficient enough, and could afford the cost, we ventured into buying our own skates. I can remember my first pair, second hand ones, came up for sale at the ice rink and I quickly purchased them. The first thing I had done was to get them sharpened. Later, when we could afford, it Judy and I had custom made boots made to fit our feet.

So great was our love affair with ice-skating, we would regularly go into Sydney early on every Saturday morning. We would catch the 7.30am steam train from Riverstone and go to the morning session, which started at 10 o'clock and went until 12 o'clock, then out to get a bit of lunch and go to one of the afternoon picture sessions at one of the many theatres in Sydney. Some of these were the "Capitol, Lyceum, Regent and the State". The State was a magnificent theatre with a large stage; it housed a large pipe organ, which would rise up from below the stage level with the organist playing. It was always a pleasure to visit this theatre, if only to admire the beautiful building. We normally chose to sit in the "Dress Circle". There were times we would do the three sessions of skating.

Occasionally we would go to the "Tivoli" to watch "Stiffy and Mo", (Roy Rene's stage name was Mo Mackie), and sometimes to see the comedian George Wallace. These were great entertainers in their day that captivated large audiences. There were also the chorus girls in their flimsy outfits. After the pictures or Tivoli sessions we would go to the "Peoples Palace Cafe" in George Street for a meal. This café had a downstairs section, which we always used. Being downstairs, the noise from the street was not so bad. Then it was back to the Glaciarium in time for the night skating session that started at 8 o'clock.

On Saturday nights we would skate around the ice to the beautiful sounds of the "Blue Danube Waltz" the "Skaters Waltz" and the "Tales from the Vienna Woods", all great favourites of mine. Other tunes would be played from the large live orchestra that was situated at one end and above the rink. This orchestra only played on Saturday nights. For the other sessions recorded music was played.

If we chose we could leave our skates at the rink, at a cost. A number was painted under the boots, quote this number and your skates were given. We tried this, but not often, as we usually took our skates home to dry and clean them and put Vaseline on the metal, so as to prevent rust forming on the sharpened part of the blade, and also to polish the leather boots.

Dress code was strictly observed on the ice, men wore a suit and tie, women could wear street clothes or if preferred the traditional short skirt dress with no break [no midriff]. If men turned up with no tie one could be loaned from the office. Two male supervisors were always on the ice to enforce the dress code and they also did not allow any misbehaviour to other skaters, if so it was out the door. The night was for everyone to be able to enjoy this pastime.

There was a first-aid room for accidents that often occurred as someone could fall over. It was natural to put your hands on the ice to protect your fall; a following skater could and did cut the fingers.

After the skating session was over we would walk up to Central Station and catch the last steam train leaving for home, leaving Central Station at 10.55pm, getting into Riverstone at midnight.

This train always had mixed carriages. The normal walk through ones had a toilet situated in the middle of the carriage, to be used by both gender. At the end of each carriage, near the door, there was always a glass jar filled with water and a drinking glass to quench your thirst. The other type of carriages were what was called "Box" carriages. These were single compartment carriages with a door at either end opening onto the platform and a single toilet at one end.

The carriage doors were lockable only from the outside. I had managed to find a piece of square steel that fitted the train door lock. This came from an old house door lock and was fashioned into a key. I would wait until the train had cleared Central Station then lock the two doors and pull up the timber shutters. This prevented anyone else from getting in and also from seeing in. This way we could lay down on the seats and not be disturbed by other passengers. If there was not enough room for all of us on the seats some would get up on the metal luggage racks. These were quite narrow and not very comfortable, being constructed of steel with wire mesh. I would unlock both doors as we came into Riverstone station. A lot of the old Box carriages had a series of photos in them.

The Glaci was not the only ice rink we visited, also on our list were the ones at the Sydney Showground located in the Hall of Industries named "The Ice Palais". This opened in 1938 and closed in 1951. To get there we would get the Rattlers [trams] from Central Railway Station. Prince Alfred Park was an open-air rink. We only visited these several times, later we tried the rink at Homebush.

The ice rinks were seasonal and on closing night at the Glaci they would turn off the refrigeration for the ice. Naturally the ice would start to melt and a film of water would form. It was always on to try and bring down as many skaters as possible while yourself trying to avoid contact with the ice, which was impossible. On this night we would normally go home wet, or sometimes we would take a change of clothes.

Judy and I started to have dance lessons and were asked by our male instructor to take part in an ice show with some well known skater at the time. We both agreed, however we had to make up our own clothes to represent French characters at a French café. This proved no problem, as Judy's mother was a dressmaker. Before the show we had to go into Sydney on Sundays for rehearsals. The rink was closed to the public on Sundays. We normally had to wait for the ice hockey players to finish their practise. The show finally came and went off quite well and we were both happy to be part of it. These ice shows would be put on at various times of the ice skating season and always featured the recognized skaters of the day. There was always a packed house at these shows.

Saturday nights to avoid waiting in the usual big line up at the ticket office; we would buy a book of tickets at the office with a certain amount of tickets in it. The ticket collector would be in the cubicle to collect the money but would not start until 8pm. Getting there early, we would have him tear out one ticket which allowed us to walk straight in and get our regular seats, as we always met in the same place. Saturday nights were always a packed house. On occasions we would travel in to see an ice hockey match.

Two types of skates were used. The normal and most used was the "Figure Skate"; these had a set of teeth at the front end and were used mainly for figure skating and dancing. The people doing exhibitions all wore this type. The other type, being called the "Tube Skate", was used mainly for speed skating and used by the ice hockey players. Judy, Kevin and I used figure skates while the others chose the Tubes.

We started our love for ice-skating in 1946 and continued until 1952 rarely missing a Saturday during the open season.