



Ice skating podcast: History on Ice

Video Podcast Transcript

Minnesota Historical Society

People have been gliding across frozen water for thousands of years; since someone first got the idea to strap animal bones to their feet. But once the Dutch began sharpening the edges of iron blades, ice skating became more than a vehicle—it became an amusement. From the local rink or lake to ice shows and competitions, Minnesotans have embraced skating as a favorite winter pastime.

Minnesota's long winters and plentiful lakes have made ice skating accessible to anyone who could strap on a pair of skates. During the 19th Century, as skaters across the pond began executing more artistic, ballet-inspired moves and daring jumps, skating was gaining popularity on ponds across Minnesota. Ice skating was an integral part of the St. Paul Winter Carnival from its earliest years, and the Carnival would become the source of the first skating clubs in Minnesota. More permanent skating clubs began cropping up around local rinks across the state.

While there is usually no shortage of frozen water during a Minnesota winter, by the early 20th Century skaters were moving indoors. The hard, fast ice at the state's first and largest indoor rink – the Hippodrome at the State Fairgrounds, opened to skaters in 1908 and attracted numerous Twin Cities skaters, as well as audiences of up 7,500 people. Years later, the Arena in Minneapolis and the St. Paul Auditorium were also opened to skaters. Skaters took lessons, practiced figures, played hockey and watched performances in these enclosed, though sometimes frigid, venues.

As interest in skating increased, local businesses began taking notice. Ice skates usually consisted of a metal blade with a wooden base which would be tied tightly onto the skater's boots with straps strung through the base of the skate, like these racing skates. St. Paul bicycle repairman John E. Strauss was one of many Minnesota businessmen to begin manufacturing skate blades around the turn of the 20th century. In 1914, Strauss introduced a revolutionary new model: a closed-toe skate with a one piece-blade supported by three stanchions between the runner and the sole plate of the boot. Strauss also moved the toe picks below the boot. His design provided greater stability and control, enabling spins and jumps that were previously impossible. The Strauss design became the new standard in figure skating.

Strauss skates were worn widely within the skating community and earned high praise from such renowned skaters as Olympic champion Sonja Henie, who thanked Strauss in a letter, saying "I won the European championship in St. Moritz and the Worlds in Vienna on the skates made by you. I have been very satisfied with them." Strauss's own granddaughter, Dorothy Snell Curtis, competed nationally, taught skating for 20 years, and participated in Shipstads and Johnson's Ice Follies show.

Shipstads and Johnson's Ice Follies was the very first original traveling ice show, and it was developed by three boys from Minnesota. The variety show and chorus line on ice achieved record breaking success from 1936 to 1979 and became Disney On Ice in 1981, which still tours the nation.

Minnesota's ice skating tradition has always been paired with camaraderie and fun, no matter what the skill level or venue. Whether you've been skating all your life or are strapping on blades for the first time, what better way to stay warm in the bitter cold of a Minnesota winter? You'll find many collections about the history of ice skating, including the Strauss Skates company records and Ice Follies materials, in the Society's library. From WinterSkate at Rice Park in St. Paul, I'm Sondra Reiersen, Collections Assistant at the Minnesota Historical Society.