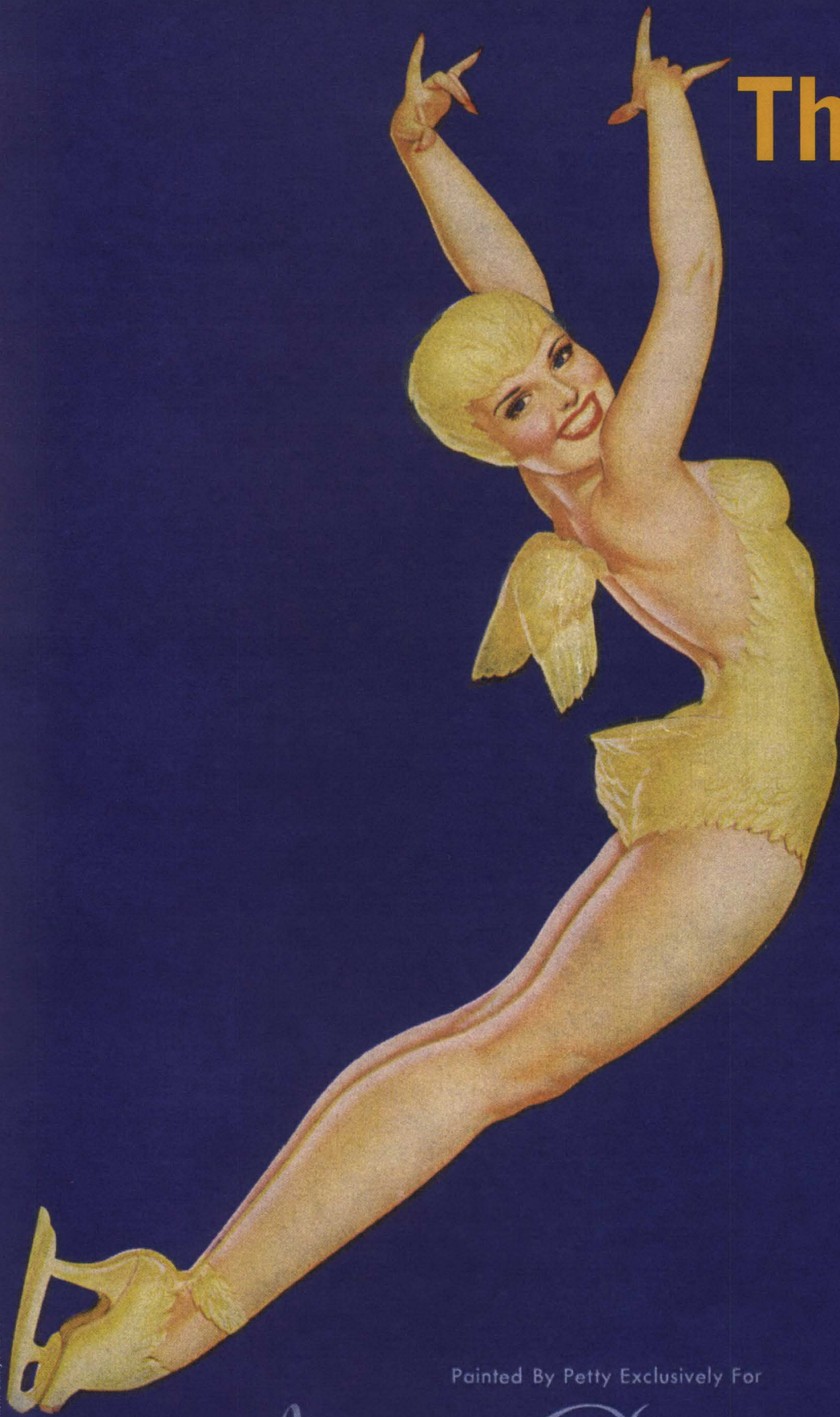


The Harris



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Ice-Capades
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Family and its Ice Capades

By Mary A. Biehl

On July 9, 1898, entertainment guru John P. Harris went shopping on the streets and boardwalks of Atlantic City for bearded ladies, two-headed babies, and talented fleas for his World Museum in Pittsburgh. He couldn't have known that at the same time back in Pittsburgh, his son John H. Harris was being born and his museum was burning down. Or that this odd series of events would one day lead to a worldwide skating sensation, the Ice Capades.

Not one to be discouraged by the fire, Harris joined with his brother-in-law, Harry Davis, to acquire and operate everything from flea circuses to legitimate theaters. In 1905, Harris and Davis – the “czars of Pittsburgh entertainment” – opened the Nickelodeon at 433-435 Smithfield Street in Pittsburgh. Their Nickelodeon, the world's first theater dedicated to moving pictures, is considered the genesis of the motion picture business. In less than a quarter-century, motion pictures would become the fourth largest industry in America.

The opening of the Nickelodeon marked the beginning of Harris Amusement Companies. The son born to Harris in 1898 – John H. Harris, or “Johnny” as his father called him – would take over the business in the 1920s. At a young age, Johnny had displayed an entrepreneurial flair by running a lemonade stand and working a lucrative paper route. He is said to have sold more peanuts than anyone at Forbes Field. Johnny served in the Army in 1918, then

entered Georgetown University, receiving a law degree in 1922. Despite his potential as a lawyer, Johnny's passion was in entertainment, even choosing to spend his vacations from school working in the film industry. It's little wonder that immediately following his college graduation, Johnny entered the family business.

Johnny's first task at Harris Amusement Companies was to take over the Strand Theater in Youngstown, Pa. After proving himself, he was given the task of reviving a vaudeville house in McKeesport. By 1926, Johnny was managing all of the company's out-of-town theaters and did so until his father's death in that same year. After 1926, he increased the company's count of theaters from 14 to 25.

After his father's death, John H. Harris inherited the family business, but he grew bored with the movie industry and sold the theater chain to Warner Brothers Pictures (though he signed a three-year contract to continue overseeing the Pittsburgh theaters). In 1932, with Harris Amusement Companies suffering from the effects of the Depression and the family fortune dwindling, Harris tried a new venture. He leased Duquesne Gardens, a streetcar barn-turned-skating rink and theater in Oakland, and began scheduling skating, hockey, boxing, rodeo, bike racing, and other sports and amusements. His wide-ranging lineup pulled the company out of debt and turned it back into a profitable business.

Hockey fans were hard to find during the Depression so Harris took another risk by hiring legendary Olympic skater Sonja Henie to entertain the crowds between periods. The turning point for the comeback of Duquesne Gardens and the Harris Amusement



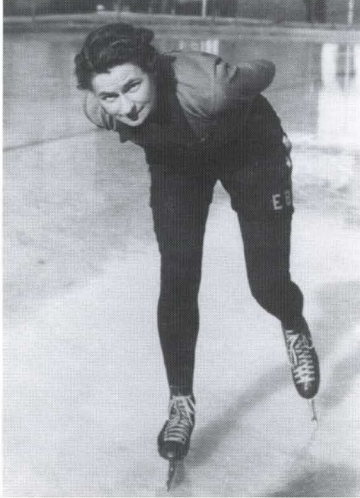
The fondly remembered Duquesne Gardens, North Craig Street in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh.

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Company was on March 31, 1936, when Henie performed before and during the Hershey Cup, a hockey playoff match between the Pittsburgh Yellow Jackets and Atlantic City Seagulls. Henie created a sensation among the people of Pittsburgh, to whom figure skating was somewhat of a mystery. Sports fans and foes alike began coming just to see her perform.

The success of Henie's performance confirmed Harris's faith in ice skating as a spectator amusement, and his plans for an ice spectacular went into full swing. The Ice Capades premiered at Duquesne Gardens in September of 1940. Harris used his experience from working in the film and entertainment industry and modeled the Ice Capades after Broadway shows. He oversaw every stage of the production, starting with the hiring of 150 performers, almost all women. The young ladies were not allowed to wear slips, nor were they to run about. They were instructed by Olympic champion Rosemary Stewart, and they lived and traveled in a boarding school atmosphere, chaperoned by a carefully chosen duenna and registered nurse. It is said no errors were tolerated. The average age of the performers was 19; average salary was \$65 per week. Their elaborate costumes were designed by the world's finest stage costumers, costing about \$450 each.

In 1945, the Ice Capades played in 20 cities in the U.S. and Canada for 48 weeks of the year. Harris had offices in New York



Edith Baum, a well-known speed skater from Pittsburgh, c1930.

fanned the city's interest in hockey and kept Duquesne Gardens from closing in a time of economic hardship. For a man who had faced financial ruin and a company that was near bankruptcy, it was truly a feat that in 1963, Harris sold the Ice Capades for \$5.5 million.

Harris died in 1969 at the age of 70, having influenced hockey history in Western Pennsylvania, and of course, leaving behind a legacy of ice skating extravaganzas. A sports fan at heart, Harris once said, "If you enjoy what you're doing, it's not work." His vision for blending entertainment and sports had long-lasting implications, though unfortunately, the Ice Capades did not fare as well.

Olympic gold medalist and world figure-skating champion Scott Hamilton spent two years touring with the Ice Capades in the 1980s, but when new owners didn't renew his contract, he started Stars On Ice. Its success, along with Disney shows, took its toll on the once-dominant production. Ice Capades still managed to celebrate its 50th Anniversary, starting in 1989 with a Barbie-themed show; Barbie and Ken dolls were sold exclusively at the performances. However, the holding company (which also owned the Harlem Globetrotters) was in trouble and the show declared bankruptcy in 1991. To the rescue came Olympic gold-medalist

and Los Angeles; he was out of town over 200 days of the year, traveling with the Ice Capades for the first three weeks of a new show and was always on hand for all 26 performances when it played in Pittsburgh. With the success of his spectacular, he was encouraged to invest in further business ventures and bought 20 more theaters.

Not only did Harris influence the entertainment business with the creation of the Ice Capades, he also



Among the hockey teams to play at Duquesne Gardens were the Pittsburgh Pirates (for the NHL), Yellow Jackets (U.S. Amateur Hockey Association), and Shamrocks (International Hockey League). In 1936, John Harris started the Hornets, an American Hockey League team that played for 26 seasons in Pittsburgh, garnering Calder Cup championships in 1952, 1955, and 1967. Playing both at the Gardens and the Civic Arena, the Hornets served as the minor-league affiliate for the Toronto Maple Leafs and later the Detroit Red Wings. Two of the finest goalies in AHL history, Gil Mayer (pictured in net) and Aldege "Baz" Bastien (right, as coach), anchored the Hornets defense. After a career-ending eye injury, Bastien served as Hornets head coach and later as general manager, a position he also held with the Penguins from 1976 to 1983.

Dorothy Hamill, who had gotten a seven-figure contract with Ice Capades back in 1976. In 1993, she and then-husband Kenneth Forsythe bought the show, but also could not stop the slide. Hamill sold it a couple years later to a group headed by televangelist Pat Robertson, and Hamill herself filed for bankruptcy in 1996. ☼

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