

## Dutch Introduced Skating as Nutley's Winter Sport | Nutley Yesterday - Today - 1961



### *Dutch Introduced Skating as Nutley's Winter Sport*

FROM ERNEST L. BROADBENT

THE Dutch, whose favorite mode of winter transportation was skating on the canals of the lowlands, brought the sport with them and in those distant days when Nutley was a Dutch settlement the colonials dotted the place with artificial outdoor rinks by damming up the streams and letting the cold winters do the rest.

There are men alive today who remember the last of those rinks which survived the centuries until progress brought paved streets where country lanes once meandered. The last natural rink disappeared barely a half century ago.

Until its disappearance, that last outdoor rink was created by throwing a mud dam across the swampy course of Bearskin Brook which wound its way southward along a lane that extended south from High Street towards the A. A. Cueman farm which stood where Chestnut Street now crosses Bloomfield Avenue.

To the west of the lane lay the swamps, lined with elderberries and hazlenuts. Long ago filled in, and now covered with comfortable homes, the swamps were noisy with bull-frogs. When, every year at this time, the bull-frogs dug into the mud and frost filled the air, Amzi Cueman, who mixed the trades of farming

and carpentry, shoved a few planks into the swamp and dammed up the Bearskin Brook.

As the backed-up waters froze, they provided a perfect natural skating rink. Even if the ice broke, the water never was deep, so all Nutley, or all North Belleville, as it then was called, skated there every winter.

A city slicker from Hillside Park, an amusement place between Nutley and Belleville, decided one time to make money out of the pond and poured in a few inch-long goldfish. He planned to net the progeny and use them as prizes at his amusement park.

All went well for a while and the fish multiplied. The slicker began counting his future profits, when Amzi Cueman pulled his planks. The pond disappeared in a rush of waters down the swamp, and the goldfish were swept down Bearskin Brook, under the lane, through Mrs. Speer's water cress patch, into Rusby's pond and up to the grist mill.

The mill pond was famous for its big, old carp. After a few months of co-habitation, the goldfish took on girth and length and the young carp had a decided golden sheen. When, finally, the mill pond was drained some years later Nutley enjoyed the sight of four-foot goldfish and pink and white carp.

There are hundreds of Nutley men and women who remember the skating rink and the gold fish debacle, but none kept a fonder memory of that era than E. L. Broadbent who writes: "An ordinary country dirt road ran south in a fairly straight line from High Street to the Cueman Place and then along the foot of the hill to Church Street where it met the trail that the Lenape Indians called 'Over the Rocks.' At this time Church Street continued down behind Tuers' barn and turned in to Henry Simpson's place. There was also a lane to the center of the town. The road continued along the trail to Centre Street and from Centre Street to Harrison Street it was called Bloomfield Avenue.

"From High Street south, Valley Road, as it was called, was bordered on the east by a swamp almost to where Beech Street now enters Bloomfield Avenue where the swamp transferred itself to the other side of the road. From there on it was woods to Amzi Cueman's farm and the Ezra Tuers' place. From there to Harrison Street, it was farms. This swamp was from 200 to 300 feet wide, with woods covering the hill almost to Prospect Street.

"The people living on Valley Road at this time were the Garrabrants, Mrs. Halsey's parents; Jabez Freeman, a farmer; Amzi Cueman; Henry Ackerman, was a mason with a farm and orchard; A. C. Cockefair, another farmer-carpenter, then, near the edge of Tuers' woods, a family by the name of Brown, mother and son. I am quite sure of this as Harry Griffiths had an argument with the Brown boy and they were ready to fight when the Brown boy said, 'Wait, wait Harry till I get my false teeth out!' When he had them safely in his pocket there was no more fight in either of them. They were laughing too hard.

“The next houses belonged to Ezra Tuers, Henry Simpson and Thomas Riker, to Church Street. There were Simon Tuers and Silas Chappell to Centre Street, and beyond Centre Street the Smith Kingsland, Sam Hopper and Hiram Van Winkle farms lay. On the other side there was a house but I do not recall who owned it. Then Mrs. Gehring’s house and beyond Centre Street, Edward Ackerman, Robert Day and John Devausney. All of these houses with the exception of the Garrabrant’s and Cueman’s were Dutch Colonial one-and-a-half stories.

“The swamp was filled with all the swamp grasses; cat tails, pink, purple and white daisies and the edges near the forest were bordered with tree moss. The frogs, morning, noon, and night, were very noisy. Al Cockefair called them his canary birds. “The woods were filled with large trees of chestnut, oak, beech and birch, tulip or white wood, pepperidge berry and the lesser maple, dogwood, gum sassafras, locust, cedar and hickory nut, pig nut and butternut trees and many others. The Tuers’ woods were all big trees from two to five feet in diameter and they extended from the swamp almost to the top of Povershon Hill. Simon Tuers was very careful to keep the underbrush down and this expanse was like an immense park. Behind Henry Simpson’s place up the hill was a stand of about two acres or more of red cedars so close together that you had a job to get through them. They averaged from about five to fourteen feet high.

“The edges of the swamp were lined with flowers: Jack-in-the-pulpit, some were three feet high, dog-tooth yellow violets as well as all the different shades of purple ones, anemones, wild geranium, false solomon’s seal, hepaticas, spring beauties, ground cedar and a host of others. On the east side of the ‘Over the Rocks’ trail on the Tuers’ property was a grove of immense chestnut trees, very open, and that also was like a park.

“I remember finding seven nests of meadow larks on the Kingsland farm and the Kingslands were most careful of them. You know, the meadow larks nest in the grass and when they fly up they start to sing and don’t stop till they land again. They never fly high, but are about as big as a partridge and fly like them. Their song is about as happy and sweet as any bird in the woods. The Kingslands would not mow the grass within five feet of a meadow lark’s nest.

“The Tuers’ woods were full of squirrels and the stone rows full of chipmunks. Birds were all around. The first birds in the spring were the crows, then the blue birds, robin, cat bird, always talking to himself, brown thrasher, swamp robin, blue jay, wren, indigo blue bird, king fisher bird, barn and chimney swallows, martin phoebe, and a host at blossom time. One day, I counted forty-two different kinds.

“Both sides of Valley Road from High Street to the Cueman place were lined with hazelnut and elderberry bushes. Toward High Street not very far from Mrs. Gehring’s house was about half an acre of wild azalea, or pinkster, bordered with dogwood. When the two were in blossom it was a most beautiful

sight. If I had my wish I would like to live for a year in a place that had that much beauty. In the fall when the swallows were preparing to go south the air was filled with them. Then the black birds would come over Povershon Hill on their way to sleep in the salt meadow grass of the cedar swamp by the tens of thousands. All these things are what made me love to live in Franklin.

“Another spot of beauty was Rusby’s woods and the old grist mill. The mill wheel must have been thirty feet in diameter and in the wheel well I used to catch snapping turtles. On the side toward John Rusby’s, in a cove about three-quarters of an acre in extent, the water of the pond was about twelve inches deep and there the sunfish, goldfish and shiners had their nests, a bed of pebbles and the fish over them gently waving their fins to keep the water in motion and keep off intruders.

“There were weeping willows and in the upper end of the pond a muskrat house. I used to sit on the dam and fish for sunnies, shiners and killies. When fishing from the dam I had a small Winchester with me for shooting snakes and one morning in the spring I killed thirty (one a copperhead), that came out of the dam to sun themselves.

“The spring at John Stager’s emptied into the grist mill pond. Mrs. Silas Chappell had a fenced-in water cress patch and many a bunch of water cress did I get. Unless one had watched, as a boy, the October frosts make the leaves turn color, it would be impossible to visualize the beauty of the swamp and woods on both sides of Valley Road. I would like to spend the rest of my life in a place where there was so much beauty.”