

But you had to bring your own hot chocolate  
The Danville News  
Robert John Andrews  
25 January, 2024  
“Old Smoothies”  
Word Count: 750

It wasn't until I was storing our Christmas decorations that I spotted them. I thought they were lost. But there they were, hung up by their laces behind my Brittany 12 speed bicycle suspended amidst cobwebs from the garage rafters. My black ice-skates. The last time those steel blades tasted ice must have been when I took my youth fellowship to a farm pond down in the Octorara region.

They once were Christmas new. I'd sling them over my shoulder and we roistered toward the ice skate rink at my hometown LaGrande Park. Some buddies would sport ice hockey skates. The younger kids relied on double-bladed skates.

Every winter, Fanwood flooded a concrete basin near the tennis courts. It was circular, about a foot deep with a thirty yard diameter. It always froze, back then. We'd swagger on down with our ice-skates swung over our shoulders, lace up, and skate for hours. Some of us would try to cover up our lack of skill by acting silly. The girls would get annoyed when we'd skate behind them and grab the pom pom of their long-tail crochet hats. Then they giggle because that's why they wore them. Years later, you smile at this initiation of discovery. Winter was when you overcame the hesitancy to approach girls. You could even touch them. Your gloves and their mittens gave moral support. You never got cold, even when the mittens and gloves got frosty. You might even invite a girl over to the burn barrel where the fire crackled and you could offer to buy her a hot chocolate. Come summer, LaGrande playground would host movies projected onto a screen hung from a telephone pole. From the recreation shed you could borrow shooting checkers and other games, or else play tether ball or kickball. The ball fields were where the town hosted its summer carnival. When you're a kid every day is a festival. Or should be.

In High School our youth fellowship would carpool over to Echo Lake Park and spend the afternoon skating. There they also kept the burn barrels burning. But you had to bring your own hot chocolate.

None of us would have qualified for the Olympics. We fell a lot. Bumped knees and embarrassment. You lose control easily. We collided because we weren't good at stopping. You envied those who already had mastered the balance of ice skating. But you get up and practice and eventually discover the joy of gliding, sliding. You felt elegant. You felt free. At least until you started up a whip and spun fast and guffawed when the last fellow flew off into the cattails. Then it was your turn to whirl at the end and hold on.

Athol Fugard's play, "Master Harold" ...and the Boys, takes place in apartheid South Africa. It's a painful play about three persons and their pain -- the young master named Harold and two older black servants, Sam and Willie. Sam preserved his sense of humanity by his love for ballroom dancing. Ballroom dancing serves as a metaphor for his dream for a graceful society, a "world without collisions."

"Old Smoothies," a song by folksinger Steve Goodman, captures this same sense of tearful beauty when he sings about an anticipated sequence in an ice show. The spectacular part of the show would pause. They'd lower the lights, soften the music to a waltz, spotlight two skaters: "Two old people on skates,

Sequined septuagenarians, Doing their figure eights, How they'd glide 'round the arena, So serene and sublime, They had been the old smoothies for a long, long time.”

Not that I've ever been an old smoothie, but there have been moments when I skated debonair enough. Once or twice at Echo Lake I enjoyed skating with a partner, side by side, right hand in right hand, left hand in left hand. Those tender memories of puppy romance.

Some say that the sense of balance is our sixth sense, joining touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. This makes sense. Without equilibrium, life can become dizzy and clumsy.

In my dreams I still skate across Echo Lake or around the LaGrande ice rink, gliding, sliding. I have lost my balance often enough since, skidding out of control. Ice, after all, is slippery. You tighten up the laces. It's a gift when you recover your balance and attempt a figure eight, side by side, right hand in right hand, left hand in left hand. Keeping balance is a gift of grace.