

# Warm Winter Memories of a Cool Neighborhood Park

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People say the memories of certain smells stay with you for a lifetime. Corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick's Day, the sterile smell of a dentist's office, athletic socks in a gym bag or the xylene-based color design markers I used back in college. Even my ice skates have a familiar smell. Not bad, just familiar — like old leather mixed with slush.

I was recently driving through the neighborhood near my childhood home where I grew up on the northern edge of Milwaukee County, and I decided to take a slow drive down memory lane. Everything looked smaller than I remembered, except the trees. Eventually I ended up at the neighborhood park where I spent countless hours playing pickup ball games, hanging out with friends and ice skating.

Yes, ice skating. Every single day. After school, after dinner and on weekends.

I grew up back in the 1970s when we seemed to have endless winters. Snowstorms began in November and kept coming through March. I remember once having to dig "down" through the snow bank to get to my mailbox. The streets were like caverns carved into the tundra. We built snow forts of such magnitude you could almost get lost in them. The country was in the midst of an energy crisis and an oil embargo. Recycling was just becoming a familiar word, although no one was really doing it yet. The recession of the early 1980s was looming on the horizon, and aerosol spray cans were being banned because of ozone depletion. Acid rain was on its way. I guess the economy and the environment were in just as much peril as they are today.

This return visit to the park triggered some fond memories for me, and I began to wonder if the park still had ice skating there in the winter. I

walked around taking photos of the pavilion and the surrounding site. The doors were locked, and the windows had blinds on them. The pavilion had an architectural style that somehow reminded me of a pilgrim hat. While I was there, a maintenance truck pulled up with two park staff people in it who were making their rounds and emptying trash receptacles. I asked them if there was still ice skating at this park, and they both looked at me with a puzzled glance, saying that there has never been ice skating here as long as they could remember. I suddenly felt very old.

Every winter, before the holidays, the ice rink was prepared just outside the doors of the park pavilion. Snow was plowed off a large grassy area into a large oval, and the snow banks acted as the perimeter edge holding in the flooding water until the ice was formed. During the week after school, the entire place was active by 3:30 in the afternoon with casual skaters, hockey players and a few cool guys with racing-blade skates. After dinner and homework, it was back again to the ice for an evening game of tag in which everyone on the rink usually participated. The perimeter snow banks were the "safe" zone, and anyone with

sharp blades and figure skates had an advantage of maneuverability.

The park and pavilion were managed by a full-time, year-round superintendent named Dave. He was well known and liked by all the park users. His office door was always open, and on his desk was a big, heavy, black rotary telephone with a coiled cord that was plugged into the wall (remember those?). If the vending machine needed restocking, or if someone needed first aid, Dave was there to take care of it. If someone was out of line or bullying someone, Dave had no problem resolving the conflict so that everyone could enjoy himself or herself.

During the cold winter months of endless ice skating, the pavilion was a great warming house. It was furnished with bench seating and cubby-holes for your boots. The floors were entirely covered with those thin, rubber-like mats so the skaters could walk around inside the pavilion. The smell of the rubber mats is also something that I will always remember, blended with the smell of hot cocoa, damp mittens and the cedar boards that covered the walls.

As I now walked around the well-built pavilion with its limestone veneer (the



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masons built this place to last), I began to think about how, back in the 1970s we had all of these amenities available at all times for public use, and how nowadays we only have limited use of these types of facilities and there are far fewer of them. Dave was the full-time attendant managing the neighborhood park year-round, setting up the ice rink in the winter and the wading pool in summer. I'm sure it wasn't an easy, inexpensive task to plow the snow, make the ice, put down all the mats, staff the office, maintain the ice throughout winter and then, in spring, store all the mats and restore the turf. While it was affordable to do all of this back then, we have all come to accept the reality of budget cuts, consolidation of resources, higher operational costs, lower tax rates and reduced maintenance staffs. The unpredictable weather and recent warmer winters have also made it more difficult to maintain the ice.

Many other things have changed since then as well, including our society and parental control. How many parents today would let their 11-year-old kid walk over a mile, alone or with a sibling, to go ice skating all day with people they don't know? It was very different back in the 1970s — we had more independence, and we had to make our choices and plan things on our own without cell phones or texting. I'm not one of those types of people who shun technology and who thinks it was so much better back then; it was just very different. And now, as a parent, I don't think I would be comfortable letting my young kids be on their own for hours and hours without having a parent or responsible sibling with a cell phone along with them. So I have changed as well.

Luckily, all is not lost. There are still some excellent facilities and opportunities to enjoy a day of ice skating throughout the region, albeit fewer of them. Most likely, you will have to drive a car to get to them, but they offer a great family experience. Park systems throughout the state have done an excellent job of providing facilities and amenities for ice skating, tobogganing, sledging and cross-country skiing. They have responded to the public needs while working within their means. While this results in fewer facilities and reduced hours of operation, there are still plenty of opportunities to create wonderful memories, including the smell of old leather ice skates mixed with slush. ■

Thank you for awarding the Madison College Recreation Association scholarships to attend the WPRA conference.

It is vital for students to attend professional conferences and workshops in their chosen fields. This learning experience not only helps to create a better base of knowledge surrounding our future careers, but it also creates networking experiences that can be hard to get while sitting in a classroom.

This conference was a great opportunity for us to learn about existing issues and new trends in recreation management fields; this information is crucial to get ahead in the industry. The sessions offer great insight to the business aspect of the industry, as well as reinforcing the reason many enter the recreation field: to ensure that everyone has opportunities to recreate. The sessions were informative, interesting and an igniting force for everyone in attendance, whether they came as students, new employees of the field, or seasoned professionals.

We enjoyed the variety of speakers at the conference: youth sports, senior storytelling, LGBT issues, social media and many more! Each one of us is excited to take what we learned back to our studies, fellow students and, most of all, our jobs.

Attending the 2013 WPRA Conference was a refreshing and reinvigorating experience. Meeting professionals from around the state who had the same passion and common goals was awesome. The tailgate social was a fun experience and helped us realize that students don't need to be intimidated by professionals; they are there to help us make our industry better each year! Every person whom we came into contact with had something good to say or to show us how to be better professionals in the industry and better people. The ability to network and learn from professionals in all the different areas of recreation management is an important skill that we will never forget.

Once again, we cannot tell you how much the Madison College Recreation Association members appreciated the scholarship and thank you for a wonderful conference! ■

Thank you again, and see you next year!

Jessica Daniels	Claire Lamberty	Brett Viney
Heather Finco	Eddie Morales	
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Samantha Jensen	Christopher Tremel	