



City of San Bernardino Historical and Pioneer Society P.O. Box 875, San Bernardino, CA 92402

LIBRARY NEWS MARCH 2009

By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

Last month I ran a piece by Ronnie Featherstone on San Bernardino businessman Harry Dickerman and his roller rink. Ronnie works from memory and is sometimes aided by Rialto historian John Adams. Inspired by Ronnie's story, John and I decided to expand on it, and we have worked together for about the last two months gathering information. In the course of our inquiries we located Harry's children Bobby Dickerman and Diana Dickerman Speckels. We also were able to find Ken Kelly, the son of the rink's builder Paul I. Kelly.

They were all helpful, but special mention goes to Bobby, who not only provided/substantiated the basic facts, including some surprises, but also supplied us with all the family photographs in this history. And our thanks to Steve Shaw for contributing some 1967 photographs of the fire at Harry's Roller Rink, which were taken by a San Bernardino *Sun-Telegram* employee.

As for John Adams, he is indefatigable. In addition to traveling to the usual historian's haunts, such as the Arda Haenszel California Room at the Feldheim Library and the San Bernardino County Archives, John spent untold hours checking out Internet sources. He found many people who remembered the rink, and curiously, most of them remembered the rink manager Harold Blizin, and the organist Bonnie Dixon. This means that people were really attached emotionally to Harry's.



Postcard courtesy Dave Rutherford

HARRY DICKERMAN: AN ENTERPRISING MAN

Mention Harry's Roller Rink to just about anybody who lived in the San Bernardino area in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, and chances are you will be met with a big smile and a rush of positive recollections of that wonderful place. It was good, cheap, family entertainment, and a source of fond memories. The owner for most of the life of the roller rink, although not the founder, was Harry Dickerman.

Harry had another enterprise of similar fame, the Baseline Drive-In Theater, located in what is now the city of Highland, and this business he did build from scratch. It was another source of inexpensive, wholesome entertainment for people of the San Bernardino Valley. In the 1950s he started another roller rink in Glendale, which he called Harry's Roller Rink #2. A fourth business came late, in 1965, and this was Harry's Restaurant, located on South E Street near the roller rink. The restaurant proved to be another success for this remarkable businessman.

Harry was born in the last decade of the 19th Century. People of his generation were those most affected by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Just when they were hitting what should have been their peak productive years, the economy greatly contracted and was nearly destroyed. There was not much venture capital floating about in those days, so Harry had to finance his businesses from his own savings and borrowing capacity. He built up his holdings by offering family entertainment at competitive prices, by using innovative methods to attract customers, and by prudently managing his enterprises.



Harry Dickerman 1898-1988

Harry's parents were Russian immigrants, who came to New York in the 1890s. Judging from the occupations his father listed in the various census records, the family was far from wealthy. Harry was born in New York City on May 14, 1898, the fifth of six children born to Louis and Fannie Dickerman. In the opening years of the 20th Century the family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1920, then 22 years of age, Harry was living in the home of his older sister Anna and her husband Morris Guttman, together with his nephew Don and niece Lillian. Another nephew, Budd, would be born soon thereafter. In later years Harry was closely associated with Don and Budd, as both were managers of his Minnesota businesses, and all three men eventually moved to Southern California during or shortly after World War II.

By 1930 Harry had moved in with his sister Sarah and her husband David Gilman. At that time, Harry was a theater proprietor, according to the census for that year. Somehow he had managed to propel himself from the menial jobs of his earlier years to a position of ownership. Irving Gilman, Sarah's son, is listed as the theater manager, at the ripe old age of 24. (Another son, Sid Gilman, later became famous as a football coach for the San Diego Chargers and Los Angeles Rams.)

In the summer of 1935 one of Harry's three theaters, the Northtown, was bombed twice. Budd remembers it and says that the first time it was a stink bomb and Harry thought it was the work of pranksters. The second time was much more serious. The explosion ripped out the front of the theater, doing \$1,000 in damage, and shattered the windows of nearby stores. Witnesses saw three men driving away after the blast and it was discovered that competitors objected to Harry offering giveaways on "gift nights" to attract customers (probably drawings for prizes, using admission tickets). They referred to his advertising gimmick as "unethical practices." Trade journals described the struggle between movie house

owners as “The Chance Games War.” Harry agreed to forego the gift-night plan. He continued in the theater business for several more years before selling all of his Minneapolis theaters to Don Guttman.

By 1945 Harry had relocated to San Bernardino where, in that year, he entered into a contract with Paul I. Kelly, owner of an existing roller skating establishment called “Harry’s Rink.” The details of this arrangement are spelled out in a document recorded in the Official Records of San Bernardino County, a discovery made through the diligent research of Rialto historian John Adams. This purchase agreement identified Harry Fiander as the man for whom the rink was named and who was currently leasing the rink from Paul Kelly. Dickerman purchased Fiander’s interest and entered into an agreement to buy the rink and a lot 300 feet by 150 feet located on South E Street. The purchase price was \$20,000, with a payment of \$2,000 down upon signing the agreement on October 1, 1945, another \$4,000 on Jan 1, 1946, and \$500 per month thereafter. Once the principal had been paid down to \$10,000, Kelly was to issue a grant deed to Dickerman and accept a mortgage for the outstanding balance.



Aerial view, looking southwest, of Harry’s Roller Rink circa 1950 when it was at 905 South E Street. The rink is the oblong building with the rounded roof (center), just above the Orange Show’s football stadium. Left of Harry’s are buildings that comprised Paul Kelly’s Southwest Lumber Company.

The purchase agreement does not address the issue of when the rink was constructed. The earliest reference found to Harry’s Rink is in a telephone book dated February 1939. The rink is listed at 905 South E Street, which is just south of where the Orange Show built their stadium in 1941. At first it was

ROLLER SKATE

for Fun and Exercise

Swing to the Scintillating Music of
Our Hammond Organ

Commencing October 1st
New Skating Sessions . . .

Open Every Evening
7:30 to 10:30 Late Session Sat. Nite
10:30 to 12 Midnight



SATURDAY AND SUNDAY MATINEES

2 Till 4:30 — Send the Kiddies

Matinee Admission
Including Skate Rental **30¢**

HARRY'S RINK
905 SOUTH E STREET ½ MILE BELOW ORANGE SHOW

thought that the rink might have been moved from the old Urbita Springs Park located across the street. The Pacific Electric Company sold the park to Ernest Pickering in 1924, and Pickering built a ballroom and roller rink as major improvements in that year. These were located at the entrance to the park off Colton Avenue and the dimensions of the rink, as determined from aerial photographs, closely matched the size of Harry’s. Recently the whereabouts of one of Paul’s sons, Kenneth Kelly, was discovered and he cleared up the questions surrounding the rink’s origins.

Ken was born in 1929 and has a memory of activities in the late 1930s. His father had determined to build a roller rink in 1938 although why is still in question. There already was at least one roller rink nearby, but Paul undertook to construct another, anyway. One reason might be that the other rink, or rinks, in the area did not have high quality floors.

Harry Fiander had been in the business locally since at least 1930, when he was listed in the San Bernardino census as being a rink proprietor. It is thought that Fiander and Kelly collaborated in determining the viability of building a new rink of quality construction. The land was graded and the lumber was stacked in preparation for building when the floods of February and March 1938 struck the area. Paul had a lumberyard on the site, Southwest Lumber Company, and when Lytle Creek overflowed its banks the existing structures, as well as the lumber and other building materials stored on the property, suffered major damage. This setback was only temporary, as the building was completed by the end of the year.



This photo, looking northeast this time, probably dates to 1953. The Swing Auditorium was opened that year and can be seen in the center of the Orange Show grounds (large vertical-walled building). Harry's Roller Rink is still in its original spot next to Orange Show Stadium (lower right). Across from the stadium, to the west, is Scaramella's Dairy, whose north property straddles Lytle Creek. Dickerman bought the dairy for the new location of his rink.

Shortly after Harry Dickerman purchased the rink, he became a proud father. He had married Sallie Hersh, a Minnesota woman, and in 1946 their son Robert M. (Bobby) Dickerman was born. Tragically, Sallie died of natural causes when Bobby was only 14 months old. In 1950 Harry married Estelle Shane,

and in 1952 Diana Dickerman was born. Both Bobby and Diana went to local schools in San Bernardino. Diana put her married name (Speckels) and city of residence on one of those find-your-classmates sites, and we thus were able to acquire her phone number. She put us in touch with Bobby, who has greatly assisted in the writing of this story. Below are some of the family photographs he shared with us.



Courtesy Robert M. Dickerman

Bobby, Harry, Diana, and Estelle – 1955



Courtesy Robert M. Dickerman

Estelle, Harry and Diana –1957



Courtesy Robert M. Dickerman

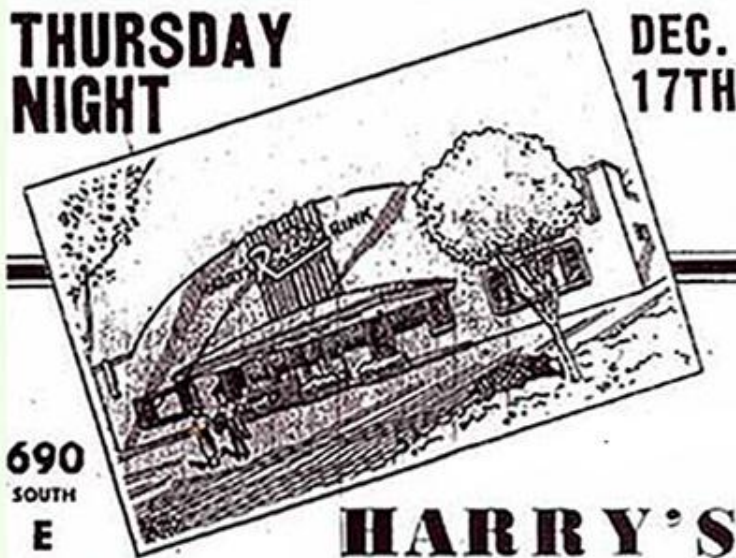
Left to right: Harry, Estelle, and close friends Evelyn and “Chief” Levin

One of the first things Bobby told us was that the rink, the actual building itself, was physically moved to 690 South E Street in 1953. He remembers that wheels were placed under the structure, and when it was rolled up the street he thought it looked like the rink itself was skating. Another of John Adams’ archival finds was a document written by Earl Buie in his capacity as Secretary-Manager of the National Orange Show. Buie stated that the property at 905 South E Street was purchased by the Orange Show in late 1952, and that they would not be held responsible for the removal of the structure. The building’s owner was identified as Harry Dickerman’s Atlas Theatre Company. By the end of the following year the move was completed and all the remodeling finished. Harry took out the following large advertisement in the *Daily Sun* for the Grand Opening on December 17, 1953.

GRAND OPENING

THURSDAY NIGHT

DEC. 17TH



690
SOUTH
E

HARRY'S ROLLER RINK

Beautiful, New
**SNACK
BAR**

Skate to the Scintillating
Music of Bonnie Dixon at
The Hammond Organ!

You'll appreciate the smooth, new
maple floor . . . the fascinating, huge
Arizona flagstone fireplace!

SATURDAY NIGHT . . . 2 SESSIONS . . . 7:30 - 10:00 . . . 10:00 - 12:00

EVERY NIGHT
7:30 to 10:30 P.M.
ADMISSION . . .
65¢
SHOE SKATES 35¢

MATINEE
SAT. . SUN. 2 P.M.
ADMISSION . . .
50¢
SHOE SKATES 25¢

Choose the
"CHICAGO"
SHOE SKATE OUTFIT

You can buy "CHICAGO" Roller Skates with confidence. Fully guaranteed by manufacturer with added assurance of three quality and features which only a half century of experience could perfect. Make your selection today! It's added Life and Popularity.

STYLES FOR LADIES AND MEN—CHOICE OF WOOD OR PIERRE WHEELS



Harry left the oversight of his businesses to general managers. The first rink manager, while it was at the 905 South E address, was his nephew Budd Guttman. The general manager in the 1950s was Harold Blizin. Harold was an in-law, having married Harry's niece Leah Guttman. Harold was a kindly man and is recalled with affection by a generation of skaters. One Eisenhower High School grad described him as having a jovial personality.

Another stated that Harold used to give him rides to Harry's: "I used to go to the skating rink often, sometimes three or four times in a week. Occasionally Harold would give me a ride to the rink on his way in. If I needed a ride I'd stand out on Foothill Blvd at about 6:30 P.M. and he would pick me up. This happened because once he saw me trying to hitch hike and he told me not to do so, but just wait for him and he'd pick me up. One other thing Harold would do was give me a short knuckle rub on the head while calling me an affectionate term, 'rapscallion.'"

Another part of the Harry's Roller Rink family was organ player Bonnie Dixon, although in her case it was figuratively, not literally. Actually all employees were treated as family, and you could probably add the rink customers, for that matter. Bonnie (Bradley) Dixon was a professional musician all of her life, and was very popular with the skaters, not only for her wonderful music, which lifted every-one's spirits, but also for her personality. She really made that Hammond Organ sing. She played on a raised platform at the north end of the building, opposite the entrance, in a glassed-in cubicle.

The skaters respected the rule that she was not to be bothered while playing, but whenever she took a break and stepped into the public area, her admirers mobbed her. During the Korean War the servicemen in particular hung out at the rink, and many a bride met her husband there.

San Bernardino resident Eleanor Finneran was a patron of Harry's in the early 1950s. She recalls the fine condition of Harry's floor. Waxed to a high shine, the skating surface was superior to other rinks she went to, ranging as far west as Whittier, and San Diego to the south.

In 1956 Harry bought and remodeled an existing building in Glendale, and it became Harry's Roller Rink #2. Bobby, who lived in the area for a few months each year, would go to the Glendale rink. He remembers skating with Rita Hayworth's daughter Princess Yasmin Aga Khan in 1963. When Harry and Bobby were at the rink, Harry closed the evening by singing, "I'll See You In My Dreams," which he dedicated to his son. Later in 1963, Harry sold the Glendale rink. The name was changed to Moonlight Rollerway—and it still exists. Bobby says it looks the same, and even has the original telephone number from 1956.



The Moonlight Rollerway, formerly Harry's Roller Rink #2, still looks the same as it did when it was Harry's in the 1950s and '60s, according to Bobby Dickerman

One of Bobby's memories is of an advertising promotion that featured a fiberglass figure of a woman in a yellow skating dress on the roof of a 1957 Ford Station Wagon. The car had lettering on the side advertising both rinks. The figure was supported on a steel rod and as the car drove about town, the rod rotated so that the woman twirled around as if she were skating. At Christmas she was replaced with a Santa Claus figure. Unfortunately, Bobby could not locate a photo of the car and skater.

In 1948, not long after he bought the San Bernardino skating rink, Harry began a new business, one he built from the ground up. This was the Baseline Drive-In Theater, located on the south side of Base Line Street, a block east of Victoria Avenue. The concept of the drive-in movie theater was fairly new—the first patent in the nation was issued on the East Coast in 1933—but Harry's theater experience probably helped convince him that this could be a good investment. Bobby said that his cousin Budd played an integral part in buying the 20 acres of land in what is now the City of Highland. This was to be a major investment; contemporary news accounts estimated the cost of the facility at \$125,000.



Courtesy Robert M. Dickerman

The marquee shows the movies “California,” released in 1946, and “House Across the Bay,” which came out in 1940



Courtesy Robert M. Dickerman

Frontal view of the theater from Base Line Street, showing the back of the huge movie screen

Neighbors did not welcome the proposition of a giant screen nearby and protests were lodged when it was heard before the County Planning Commission. An attorney representing a group of adjacent property owners opposed the theater, citing noise, traffic congestion, reduced property values and general nuisance as some of the detrimental aspects of the proposal. Planning director Tony Zenz had a list of stringent requirements attached to the conditional approval, including fencing, landscaping and traffic control. When the item went before the Board of Supervisors, the neighbors' attorney repeated

their concerns and said they did not want a theater there under any conditions. Harry's lawyer, Donald W. Jordan, presented a survey he had taken of property owners living next to the Tri-City Drive-In Theater in Loma Linda. The neighbors there said they had no objections to the theater. The Highland Chamber of Commerce had investigated the matter and was in favor of the project. One hundred people attended the Board of Supervisors meeting, and the paper reported it as a "spirited" public hearing.

As a teenager in the 1950s I went to the drive-in on numerous occasions, and in 1961 I spent several months there as an usher. My recollection is that the place was pretty quiet. The movie soundtrack was broadcast from a wired speaker that you took off a post and hooked onto the inside of the car window or door, and even with the windows rolled down, the sound did not carry very far. People sometimes forgot and drove off with the speaker, ripping it off its post. Customers were asked to turn off their lights at the ticket window. Obviously this was to avoid annoying other drive-in patrons, but it also avoided lighting up the neighborhood. That, and the trees and large bushes which sheltered the exterior boundaries, kept car lights from being a problem. The cars entered and left using driveway access to Base Line in a commercial area, so traffic was not a problem, either. All in all, the drive-in was a good neighbor.

In 1955 Harry sold the drive-in to Pacific Theaters. His nephew Don Guttman was the vice president and general manager of the chain. The Baseline Drive-In Theater closed in about 1985.

Ten years later, in 1965, Harry built a drive-in restaurant just south of his roller rink at 694 South E Street. The cost at the outset, according to the paper, was estimated to be \$85,000, including the land. This became a popular spot. Radio stations KFX and KMEN were broadcast from "Uncle Harry's Restaurant." The name of the place eventually became "Uncle Harry's Dixie Dogs and Burgers."

Sadly, Harry's Roller Rink burned down in 1967. The fire began before dawn on January 10th and most of the interior of the building was charred, including the skating floor and wood roof supports. About 30 firemen responded quickly, some within minutes of the alarm, but the fire had spread through the whole building by the time they arrived. A news article of the event noted that it was the only rink within the city, although there were three others in the San Bernardino Valley.



Courtesy Steve Shaw

Smoke from the fire was visible for two miles



Courtesy Steve Shaw

The fire spread so rapidly that Blitz, the rink's German Shepherd watchdog, died before firemen could get to him



Courtesy Steve Shaw

A fireman checks out the charred remains of Harry's Roller Rink

Thus ended the 22 years of Harry's roller skating enterprise. He still had the restaurant, but he had moved to the San Fernando Valley area and his interests changed. He died years later on March 25, 1988, a few weeks before his 90th birthday. Harry Dickerman passed on, but he left a legacy of great memories to so many of us.

Richard D. Thompson

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