

**ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK
PALISADE GARDENS
By Karon Covington**

For forty years, the large flashy neon sign on the Palisade Gardens stopped traffic at the corner of University and Utah when people spotted it for the first time. The roller skating girl was truly a North Park landmark, but people from everywhere in San Diego knew the location of the roller rink. It was commonly used as a directional point, so you might have said to a friend, “Go west on University to the roller rink and turn right at the next corner. The tennis courts are about three blocks down the street – I’ll meet you there.” To this day, when someone is coming to my house for the first time, I frequently say, “Do you remember where the roller rink used to be?” It is surprising to me how many people say, “yes.”

Leonard Vlotoff, who built the rink in 1945, said that President Harry Truman had just lifted the World War II building controls when construction began. Before the project was complete, the price of materials had skyrocketed, and the cost had escalated from \$52,000 to \$100,000. Vlotoff, his two partners and the owner of the property, divided the overage.

One of the other owners was John Albert Wright. A World War II veteran, he served in the elite 101st Airborne Division, the first unit parachuted behind the German lines during the Normandy Invasion. Later, his unit was the first to enter the camp at Buchenwald. He came home from the war and operated the Palisade Gardens for the next 40 years. Wright was also involved with community affairs in North Park, and helped revive the post-war Toyland Parade. I like to think that his 40 years at that fun-filled roller rink were a fitting overlay to the war experiences. His 1991 obituary notes that his ashes were scattered on the Colorado River by a boat regatta.

The goal when the rink opened was to make \$10,000 a year apiece, but when it became apparent that the partners would not make that kind of money, they diversified by investing in other businesses. The rink became a “rich man’s hobby,” joked Vlotoff. When the rink opened in 1946, it cost only 75 cents for an evening of skating. The price included clamp-on skates – shoe skates were an extra quarter. Day skating cost 35 cents, and those were the highest prices in town. The weekend \$1.00 special, good on Saturday and Sunday, included the admission, the skate rental, a soda and a bus ride from an outlying neighborhood to the rink and a ride back.

The rink closed in 1985 with an event called, “The Last Great Skate.” This nostalgic event received widespread media coverage. Vlotoff said, “It was a peaceful end.” He recalled some of the noteworthy days of the Palisade Gardens rink: “One of the highlights was when we had a party for the blind. They skated beautifully.” He said he fixed up guide ropes similar to a boxing ring. The skaters just followed around the barrier. “You’ll meet people who skated,” he said, “whose kids skated and their grandkids all skated at Palisade.”

Vlotoff said the real blow to the rink was the insurance crisis. During the first 15 years of business the rink never had liability insurance. In the end, the cost to insure became larger than the rink's income, and Vlotoff had to shut it down. He sold the property for almost nine times as much as the total cost of construction. The 21,000 square foot site was torn down to be replaced by a mixed-use project with store fronts on the ground floor and apartments above. One of Mr. Vlotoff's hopes was that the original neon sign would somehow become a part of the new structure. The architect for the new project expressed interest in the neon, but said he did not know its whereabouts. Does anyone know what happened to this North Park Landmark?