

Bucks County Herald – July 20, 2006

Peg (Diehl) Smith Ice Capades

Dear Friends,

Good morning. A Quakertown area woman with a remarkable past celebrates her 89th birthday next Tuesday. Margaret (Peggy) Smith was one of the 16 original female skaters with the internationally famous Ice-Capades. (Men were added later.) Beginning in 1940, “It was the most venerable of ice shows and featured some of the greatest names in ice-skating: Dick Button, Scott Hamilton, and Dorothy Hamill, who bought the show in 1991,” a Google search on the Internet revealed.

Brought up in West Point near Lansdale, Peggy (Diehl) Smith joined the Ice Capades in 1940 at age 25. Tall and strong, she appeared in two movies in 1941 and 1942. There are photos of her with actors George Raft and Edward G. Robinson, plus comedian Milton Bearle in one of her scrapbooks.

“Mom has trunks filled with memories from the shows,” her daughter Mikki Smith told me. “Mom has newspaper clippings from all over America and Canada.” Mikki and her sister Debbie Wetzel took me for a visit with their mother who lives in the Phoebe Home in Richlandtown.

We looked at one of the scrapbooks. “The handsome fellow in the U. S. Army Air Corp uniform is our father,” Debbie began. It turns out that William Arthur Smith was a member of the Ice Capades too. “That’s where they met,” Debbie said. At nearly 89, Peggy is still a beautiful woman.

World War II interrupted their life on ice. Bill Smith became a B-29 pilot flying missions in the Pacific. Because all the men ice skaters left for the service, the taller women dressed as men. Peggy became a “male” dancer. Typically, she made 10 costume changes nightly.

I was fascinated with the Ice-Capades’ programs. A three-hour performance included 26 to 28 separate acts...always with famous celebrities. At its peak, the Ice-Capades had 60 skaters.

The troupe traveled all over America by train with a two-week vacation each year. “We were paid \$25 per week,” Peggy said. But room and board was free. Actually, Ice-Capades skaters could save money. Times were tough. After all, it was the Great Depression.

“Each season started in Atlantic City and ended in California,” Peggy continued. “We toured every American city. The Ice-Capades put us up in the best hotels. My favorite was the Chateau Frontinac.” Can you imagine traveling the Canadian Pacific Railroad from Quebec to Vancouver? Spending nights in the Canadian Pacific hotels of Banff Springs and Lake Louise must have been fabulous.

Her husband was a comedian on ice. “I married him because he was the life of the party,” Peggy said. “But he was the same in person as he was on the ice...funny and charming.” Pointing to his picture, Peggy laughed, “I liked his smile.” They married in Hollywood with the founder of the Ice-Capades, John Harris, giving Peggy away.

“Mom and Dad were still skating in their 70’s,” Mikki told me.

“They were real good lookers, great performers,” Debbie added. “When they danced at ice rinks, a crowd would form just to watch them.”

I thought of the famous Olympic skater, Sonja Henie. Was she in the Ice-Capades, I wondered? “No way,” Peggie sniffed! Apparently, Ms. Henie wasn’t good enough to make the troupe.

Mikki and Debbie remember their childhood fondly. “Dad taught Debbie to skate before she could walk,” Mikki observed.

“Dad was a wonderful dancer,” Debbie recalled, “he always saved the polkas for me.”

Alas, the Ice-Capades are gone. But I do remember seeing one of the shows when I was a youngster. It had the aura of seeing the gorgeous Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall. Interestingly, the same person, Russell Markert, directed both the Rockettes and the Ice-Capades. Peggie Smith still has the Ice-Capades programs from 1940...signed by each of the original 16 skaters.

It was a simpler, more innocent time.

Sincerely,
Charles Meredith