

Grand Skating *by Lynn C. Bilton*

February 1934

Jessie tightened her laces and carefully tied a double bow. She deeply inhaled the night air. Air so cold her nostrils briefly froze together. Gosh, it was bitter! Once they were on the move, she would warm up.

“Shake a leg over there. We’re ready to shove off!” Tommy called.

The full moon was incredibly bright and the entire landscape was lit up like daytime. Good thing too, as they needed to watch carefully every step of this adventure.

“Now this is important. We are going to skate with our arms linked. Tom, you and I are on the outside and the two girls will be in the middle. And yes, there is a reason. Even though the river is frozen solid, there are still air holes. You’ve heard about them and they are deadly. If you happen to catch a skate blade on the edge of an air pocket, you won’t go in because we are all linked together.”

“And who wants to wear a Chicago Overcoat?!”

“What are you talking about?”

“A Chicago Overcoat. A coffin! It’s some of the new lingo I heard in Hamilton the other day.”

Jessie shook her head and laughed. The four friends had met up that night at the mouth of Big Creek. Jessie and Tommy lived on neighbouring farms on Baptist Church Road. The other two friends were also from Onondaga and their plan was to skate down the Grand River to the dam in Caledonia.

Her heart was racing and she took a slow, deep breath. The four linked arms securely and made their way mid river.

“OK, is everyone ready? Here we go!”

With one strong, smooth stroke to the right and then to the left, they fell quickly into motion as one unit. In no time the quartet was sailing down the ice. Time seemed to stand still as they flew past familiar landmarks.

“You know I heard it’s so cold this year, Lake Ontario has frozen over!”

“I suppose you heard that in Hamilton too!”

“As a matter of fact, I did. And it is a fact. I read it in the Hamilton Spectator.”

They all chuckled and continued skating on in silence, simply enjoying the voyage. A piercing train whistle in the dead calm broke the silence. With the sudden burst of noise, the four tightened their joined arms.

“Gosh, that scared me! With the clear night, it sounds like we’re right beside that train.”

“We are almost to the dam and you can see the railway bridge. Let’s take a break over on the bank until the train goes by.”

They sat on a large fallen tree to catch their breath. Skate laces were tightened and hats pulled down over cold ears.

“That didn’t take long! How far did we just skate Tommy?”

“It would be just over three miles but we made great time!”

Jessie shivered. The scent of lingering wood smoke on her scarf made her think how cozy it would be back in their farmhouse kitchen.

“Let’s head back. It’s too cold to sit still for any longer.”

Once again they linked arms. Stroke. Stroke. Their concentration and determination powered the unit. Their breath hung in the air and trailed behind them as they swept up the ice. It was thrilling and exciting and daring.

“Do you think anyone has ever done this before?”

“I doubt it. Conditions have never been this perfect in the past. If only our families could see us now!”

“But they won’t even hear about it, remember? Our pact was not to tell anyone. I would be in big trouble if my parents found out!”

“You’re right. But what a sight we must be. The full moon, the frozen Grand and the four of us. We must be a picture!”

The skaters’ silhouette was picture perfect but seen by no one that cold winter night. Jessie smiled to herself and privately pondered if she would ever tell anyone about that magical evening in the winter of 1934.

Notes

- There is documentation indicating the winter of 1934 was one of the coldest on record. Lake Ontario did freeze over. It was a rare occurrence.
- Jessie Atkinson and Tommy Howden grew up on farms on Baptist Church Road in Onondaga Township. They remained friends their entire lives.
- Jessie Atkinson was my mother and she *did* share the story of that enchanting evening!