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## Article Title: Fred øBright Starø Murree: Pawnee Roller Skater

Full Citation: Anne P Diffendal, ed., øFred øBright Starø Murree: Pawnee Roller Skater,ø *Nebraska History* 70 (1989): 158-163

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1989Skater.pdf>

Date: 11/29/2011

Article Summary: Fred Murree began as a speed roller skater in the 1870s and continued as a trick skater until 1943. The article includes his reminiscences and those of Marjorie McLaughlen, who witnessed some of his performances in a Detroit skating rink owned by her father.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Fred øBright Starø Murree, Frank Clayton

Place Names: Omaha, Nebraska; Boston, Massachusetts;

Keywords: Fred øBright Starø Murree, Frank Clayton, roller skater, Institute Rink (Boston), Olympic Rink (Boston), Argyle Rink (Boston), Raymond Skate Company, pin bearing wheels, ball bearing wheels, six-day roller race

Photographs / Images: patterns traced by Fred Murreeø skates during his fancy skating performances; Fred Murree in 1939 in his øBright Starø costume; Olympian Roller Skating Rink, New York City (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 31, 1885; copy of drawings accompanying James L Plimptonø original patent for modern roller skates in 1863; cover of a program for a marathon race like ones in which Murree participated; skaters Roland Cioni and CW Lowe preparing to race in a Nevada, Missouri, rink in 1922

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# FRED "BRIGHT STAR" MURREE: PAWNEE ROLLER SKATER

*Edited by Anne P. Diffendal*

## INTRODUCTION

Fred Murree, a Pawnee Indian, was among the world's first professional roller skaters. Beginning as a speed skater in the 1870s, he spent the latter part of his career performing as a "fancy" or trick skater in Indian costume under the name of Bright Star. He retired in 1943; the exact date of his death is unknown. His reminiscences were published in the *1937-38 Yearbook* of the Arena Gardens Roller Skating Club of Detroit, Michigan.

## MURREE'S REMINISCENCE

I was born October 7, 1861, in a little village just outside of Omaha, Nebraska, which was then mostly wilderness. There were three brothers and one sister in our family.

If you recall your history of 1875, the government herded all the different tribes of Indians and tried to get them all on one reservation in Oklahoma. My dad knew that country very well and did not like it or the idea. Therefore, instead of going to Oklahoma we drove east to Massachusetts. My mother had died when I was five years of age. We came directly east from Oklahoma taking three months to reach our destination.<sup>1</sup>

While traveling, all of our personal belongings were transported in a two-wheeled cart drawn by a pony. Father and I riding our ponies at either side of the cart.

When we arrived in Boston we sold all three ponies and the cart in order to

buy furniture and have a place to live. I started to public school, and attended for three weeks during which time I had to fight morning, noon and night, until I licked the biggest kid in school. The fighting was caused by my wearing long braids and the difference in our races. Also by my age, for I was 17, and only in kindergarten.

One morning I was going along to school when a young fellow about my own age came up to me and said, "Say, there, Indian, how would you like a job?" I looked at him and saw he was sincere and replied, "Sure," so I was told to come to the local rink with him to help put on skates. We were to receive three dollars weekly and tips. We went over on the coach and he took me to the Institute Rink.

I got the job and did not get home until midnight that night. Dad was worried, but when I told him what had occurred, he said, "If you wish to work, go ahead." So I had worked at that rink eight months when they put on a five mile race open to anyone under eighteen. Mr. Agerton, who worked at the Plimpton Skate Company, furnished all skates used at the Institute Rink at that time and a special pair with pin bearing wheels was made up for me. (Ball bearing wheels were still unknown.)

I was put into training immediately and at the time of the race there were 18 entrants who all looked to be exceptionally fast. However, only three finished, one being Kenneth Skinner later to give his name to the "Skinner" Wheel and Bushing, still used. He was the fastest known speed skater of that

time (his record being 16 minutes for the five miles) and myself. I won the race by 15.52, cutting eight seconds from the fastest record of that time.<sup>2</sup>

The crowd put me on their shoulders and held such a celebration I did not get home until the early hours and I had to walk for there was no transportation at that hour. The next morning's papers were full of the news and later in the day Mr. Frank Clayton, manager of the Argyle Rink in Boston, called. Through underhanded strategy with my father a contract was signed, binding me until I reached the age of 21, promising him \$1000 at that time.

I skated 284 winning five mile races for Mr. Clayton during that time. (By the way, my father never received the money.) This contributed toward making roller skating popular. Thirteen rinks were operating in Boston by 1880, each rink being operated by a skate company. The ones I remember were Plimpton Skate Company, American Club Skates, Nuit Skate Company, Martha's Vineyard Skate by Winslow, the Hygienic Skate, Richardson Skate, Raymond, and Union Hardware.

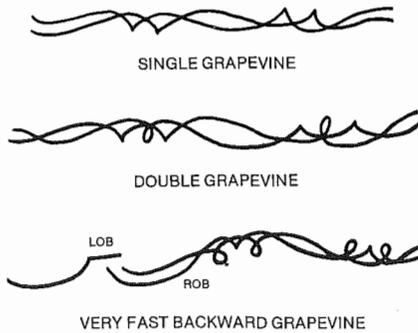
The first ball bearing skate on the market was the Skinner racing skate in 1880.<sup>3</sup> I got the second pair turned out of the popper and in my next race I skated five miles in 15 minutes flat on the same track on which I won my first recognition.<sup>4</sup>

This was a professional race and I raced Skinner, acclaimed professional racer of the day. The rink had an asphalt surface. The following spring the Olympic Rink was to be built by the Raymond Skate Company. During the

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*Anne P. Diffendal, former director of the National Museum of Roller Skating in Lincoln, is a consulting historian.*

## Fred "Bright Star" Murree



Some of the patterns traced by Fred Murree's skates during his fancy skating performances. "Fancy" skating consisted of intricate combinations of steps and turns. From James Turner's *History of Roller Skating* (Lincoln: Roller Skating Rink Operators Association of America, 1975), 83.

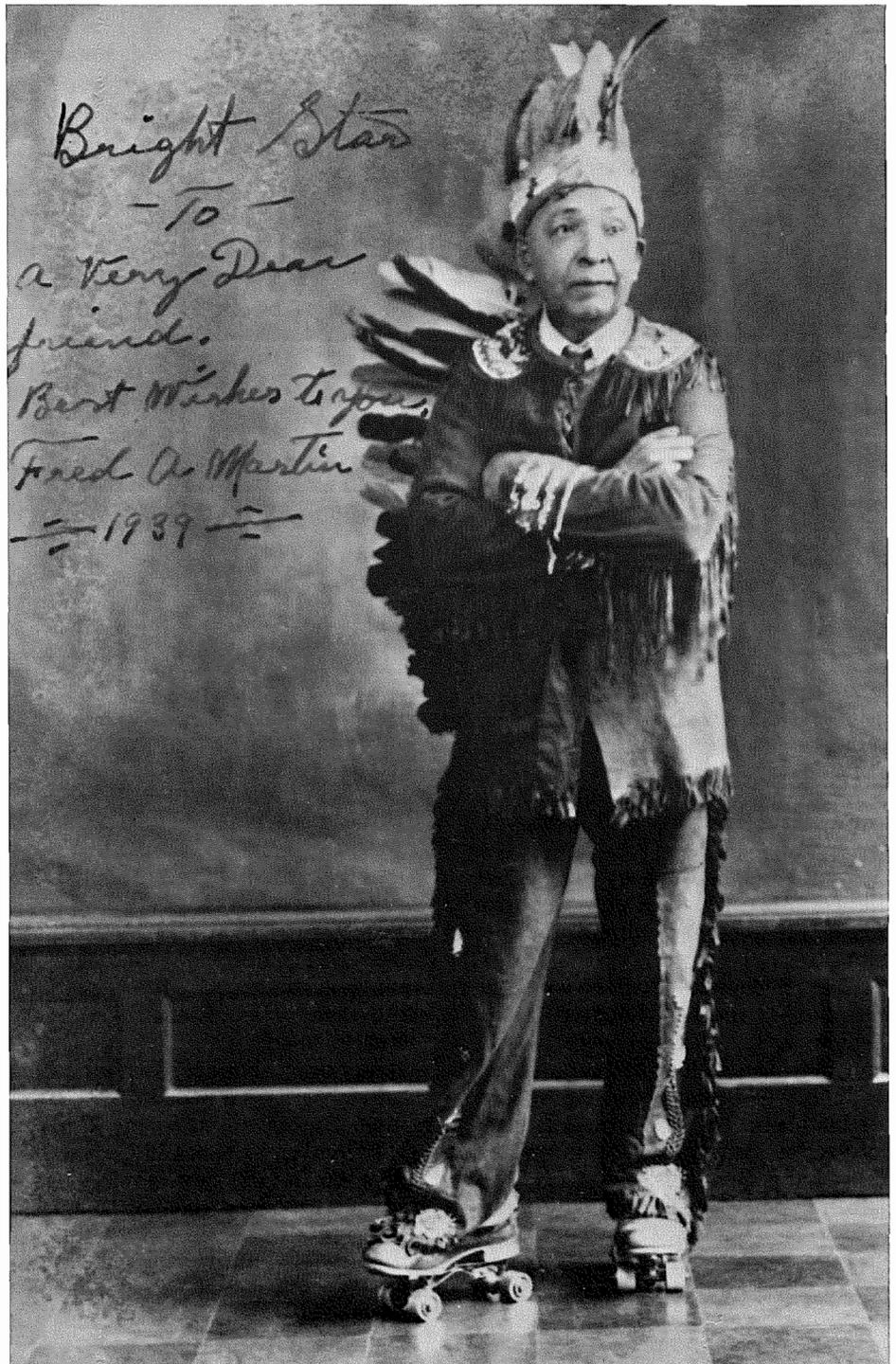
winter the roof of the Institute Rink caved in under pressure of a heavy snow, making the Olympic the largest known rink in all of the surrounding towns near Boston. Although, all towns supported a good sized rink so Manager Clayton had me booked six months in advance at all times.

In 1881 the first six-day roller race was held at the Old Madison Square Gardens in New York and was won by Donovan, who died from pneumonia three weeks later, brought on by the after effects of the strain.

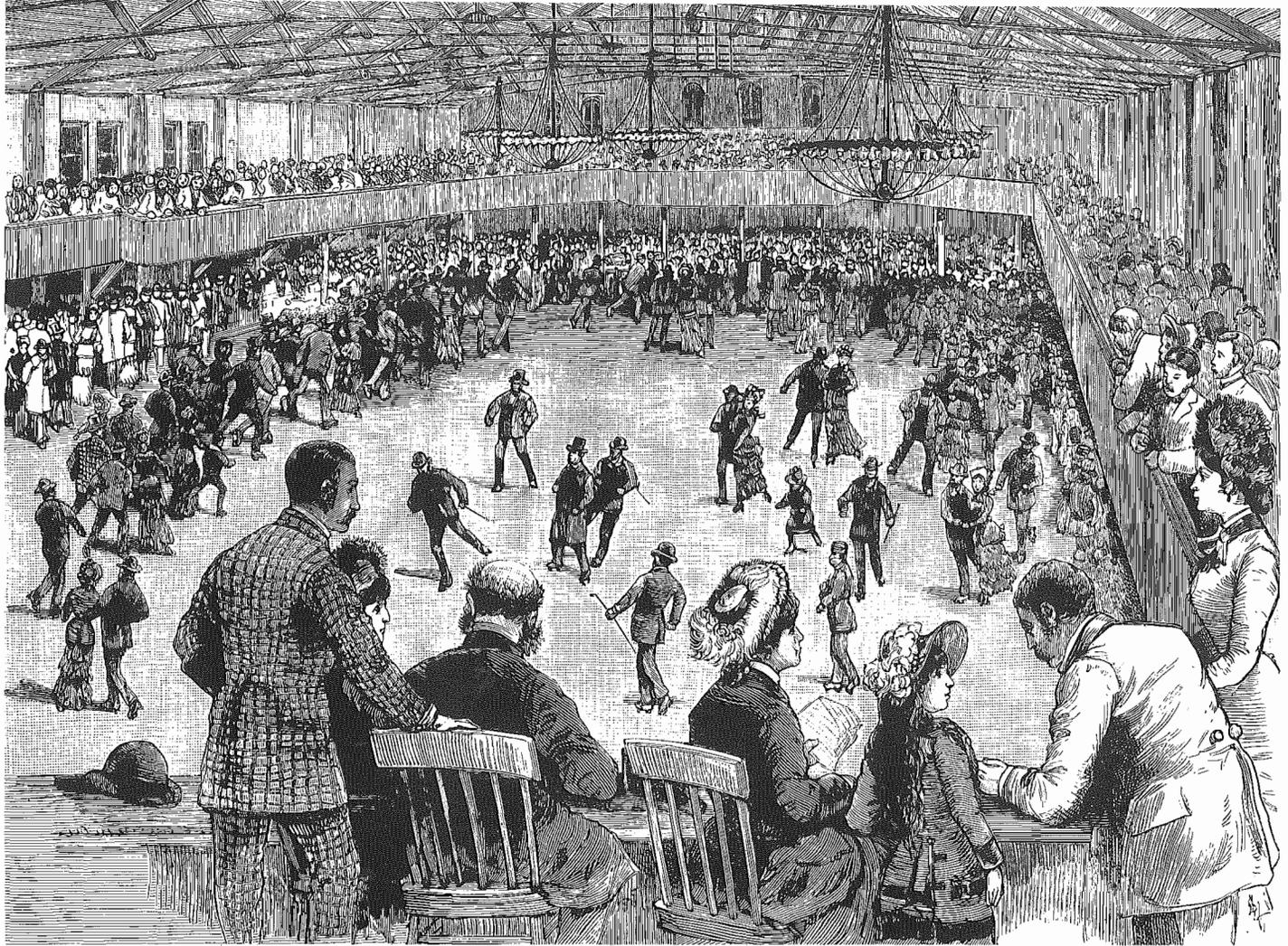
New York City then passed a new ordinance prohibiting any more 144 hours a week races. The next race was in 1882 but 72 hours was the limit for continuous skating.

Fred Snowton, Boston boy, won this race. Charlie Walton second, Jimmy Omelia third, Eugene Mattox fourth, Dan Doherty fifth. Conditions were improving so much that the 1,124 miles were covered in the 72 hours of skating. (The same distance was covered in 144 hours of skating previously.)

I did not race this time but was saved for the next week to race all comers. At that point of my career, just before my twenty-first birthday, I ran away from Clayton. Clayton saw my dad and I was returned to work at \$100 per week and all expenses. I exhibited twice daily and fifteen minutes later dressed for the



Fred Murree in 1939 wearing one of the costumes in which he performed as "Bright Star." From Fred A. Martin Collection, National Museum of Roller Skating, Lincoln.



*The Olympian Roller Skating Rink, New York City. From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, January 31, 1885. The 1880s were a boom period for roller skating as American industrial machines, always ready to invest in a new fad, began producing roller skates by the thousands.*

track, racing anyone and everyone, seven days a week.

When I finished out my contract at the age of 21, I started entering open races and averaged winning 50 per cent.

Then I had an offer to go to England, but, in 1884 the rink boom began to decline. A lot of them were closed, many having acquired bad reputations for themselves and lent a bad light to the business. The crash included not only roller skating, but theatres and dance halls; all went.

In 1887 there were few rinks operating in the United States outside of Chicago. None at all in Boston.

The Raymond Skate Company gave me an offer to go to Australia, but when I got as far as England I changed my mind and toured through Italy, Germany and back through France, on my own hook, giving exhibitions before hundreds of thousands, including many crowned heads.

Roller skating had been dead about seven years in the United States but was still flourishing in Europe. For five years in England it was even a bigger craze than it had been in the United States and skating was managed by American managers for American skate companies. Richardson Skate taking the lead.

It was along about 1893 when skating began to perk up a little in the United States. During all this time Chicago had several rinks operating.

The American skate factories were working night and day all that time making skates for export. When I returned from England there was nothing doing here so I went to South America, Argentina and Brazil. All rinks were open and this is the first time in my experience I had seen such sights. Natives skated in their bare feet!

I did not like it there, not being able to acclimate myself, so I returned to North America. When I returned to

Boston, Frank Pilings had just put up a new rink called the Ocean Pier Rink at Crescent Beach. (The following year a big gale swept Ocean Pier Rink completely away. It had a floor that was one-fourth of a mile long out over the water, and only 70 feet wide inside.) I skated two five-mile races there a week, for \$150 weekly salary all summer.

It was at Ocean Pier Rink that I met my wife, Frances Alice Clews, formerly of Birmingham, England. I made my home in the little city of Red Lion, Pennsylvania, where we still live. We have one son who now lives in California.

Since returning to this country — I have exhibited continuously in rinks throughout the east and middle-west. I have had offers to do my turn in vaudeville many times in the past years but I felt, and still feel, that roller skating has a place in the rinks and to be fully respected — there it must stay.<sup>5</sup> I am now 77 years of age and feel that I

have enjoyed a full and useful life on skates.

### CONCLUSION

Murree continued skating through the early 1940s. Marjorie Martin McLauchlen, daughter of the owner of the Arena Gardens Skating Rink in Detroit and a skating instructor there, remembers Bright Star's performances.<sup>6</sup>

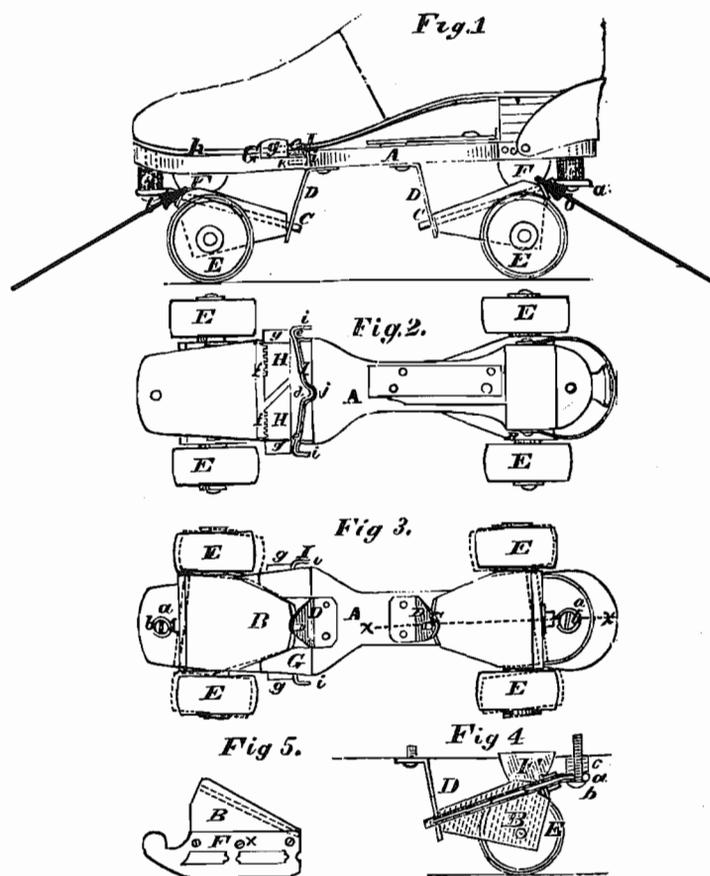
### MARJORIE McLAUCHLEN REMINISCENCE

His act was a solo. He entered after a prelude of Indian War Dance music, in a solo spot light, with arms outstretched and head held high, in full chieftain garb, with long strides. Even at age 79 he would flow on one foot in this entrance 'till he was in position to start a free style routine, none of which is seen today as it was of the 19th century, early 20th century. It consisted of intricate movements of "Four Leaf Clovers," "Grapevines," "Spirals," and "Spread Eagles" . . . at which time he would pick up objects with his teeth. His balance was smooth. This was done to the slow music of "Moon Dance," a slow Indian ballad. Then [he would] swing into his finale of quick 2-steps and schottisch movements to "Red Wing," a fast, cute song of the time with Indian accent. His exit was to "Indian War Dance" followed by many encores.

Bright Star was announced to his audience, whether young or old, and a calm came over the skaters so you could hear a pin drop. During matinees, the children were encouraged to sit in a circle around his skating area. When his music started, all eyes waited for his performance. After each performance, the people would gather around for his autograph and ask questions of his Indian heritage. He was very proud, very small in stature, but big in appearance. The public at this time (1930s) were attracted to the American Indians both in the USA and Great Britain because of the Cowboy and Indian stories and movies.

## United States Patent Office.

Copy of the Drawings Accompanying Plimpton's Original Patent of January 6th, 1863.

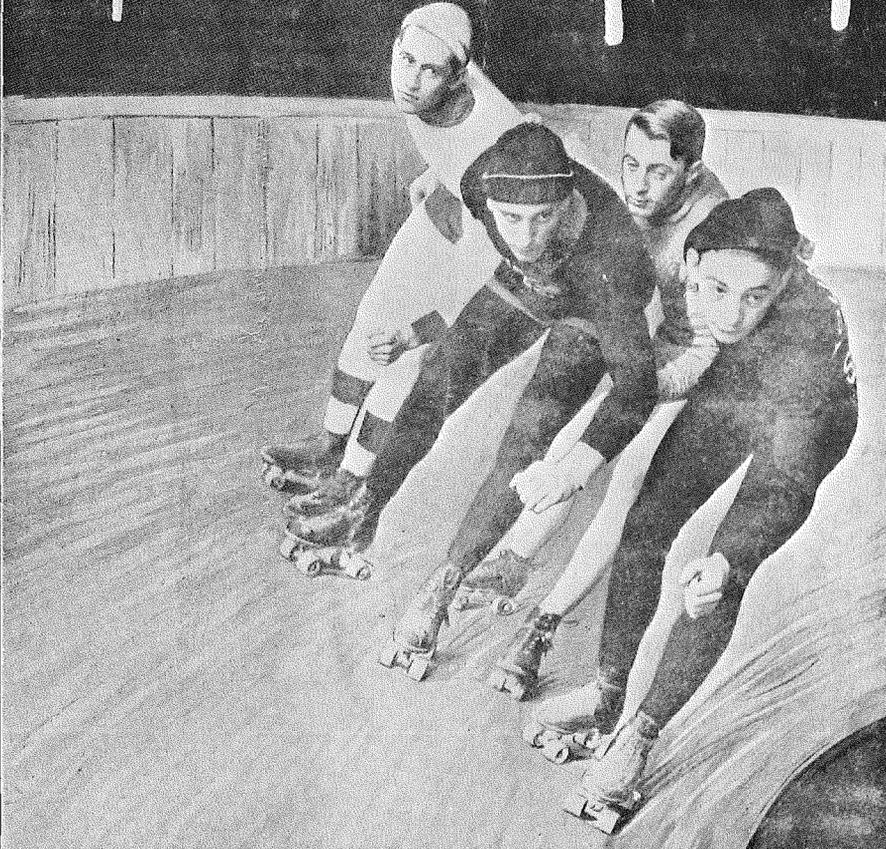


And Division A. of the reissue No. 3906, dated April 5, 1870—reissue No. 4292, dated March 7, 1871

Murree began his career as a professional skater during the wave of popular enthusiasm that followed the invention of the modern roller skate in 1863 by James L. Plimpton of Massachusetts. Plimpton put a rubber cushion (indicated by arrows on Figure 1) between the plate and the axles, giving flexibility and allowing the skate to turn as the skater put weight on one side or the other. Courtesy of National Museum of Roller Skating, Lincoln.

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*The program for a marathon race like the ones in which Murree participated. Courtesy of National Museum of Roller Skating, Lincoln.*

## Fred "Bright Star" Murree



*Two roller skaters, Roland Cioni (left) and C. W. Lowe, prepare to race in a Nevada, Missouri, rink in 1922. From C. W. Lowe, Jr., Collection, National Museum of Roller Skating, Lincoln.*

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Writing long after the event, Fred Murree may have become confused about his departure from Massachusetts. Or perhaps he meant that he and his father traveled to Oklahoma with the tribe, not intending to remain, and then began their journey to the East.

<sup>2</sup>The Pawnee were great runners, noted for

covering vast areas of the Plains swiftly on foot. By setting records in long-distance races on roller skates, Murree may have been showing that traditional endurance.

<sup>3</sup>Murree's memory failed him regarding this date. L. M. Richardson patented the first roller skate wheels with ball bearings in 1884. Kenneth A. Skinner of Boston set many national and world speed records on Richardson's racing skates.

<sup>4</sup>Modern skaters can cover that distance in approximately ten minutes.

<sup>5</sup>Trick or "fancy" skating was a popular act in vaudeville and other stage and club shows during the first decades of this century. However, Murree preferred to perform only in rinks.

<sup>6</sup>Letter from Marjorie Martin McLaughlen, May 2, 1988.