

The end of an era: Holyoke bowling

Written by Darci Tomky

Wednesday, 14 November 2012 14:12 -

Since the sport first rolled into town in July 1959, bowling has been a historic and memorable pastime for many in Holyoke.

“It was a booming business,” said Don Hewitt, the first manager of Holyoke Bowling Lanes at 219 S. Campbell Ave. With dozens of teams, the six lanes at the alley were open every day of the week, and people of every age just couldn’t get enough of the competitive sport.

Now, with business slowing down, Marshall Thompson, the owner of what is now called Scormor Lanes, has decided to close the doors, amazed at how much bowling has changed over the last two decades.

When he bought the business in the mid-1980s, Marshall had six nights of leagues and bowlers not only from Holyoke, but from as far as a 50-mile radius.

“It was basically a family thing for 28 years,” said Marshall, explaining he owned the alley for a couple years before turning over the reins to his dad, Bob Thompson.

Bob owned Scormor Lanes for 26 years, with Marshall taking over the last couple years.

“For 26 years I really enjoyed it,” said Bob.



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Son and father, Marshall and Bob Thompson, owned Scormor Lanes in Holyoke for nearly 30 years. After deciding to close the bowling alley this year, they uncovered some fun items like the old bowling score boards pictured above.

—Enterprise photo

Five generations of the Thompson family have bowled at the Holyoke lanes. Bowling for 65 years, Bob said he started, along with his dad Robert Thompson, when the alley opened in Holyoke in 1959. Marshall has bowled for 40 years, and his kids and now grandkids have also learned to bowl.

“All our family parties were there,” they said, and Marshall was even married at the bowling alley. They give a lot of credit to their wives, Shirley and Tina.

Bob said the competition is one of the things he loves most about bowling, and he and Marshall certainly have scores to be proud of from their many years of bowling.

“And it’s something anybody can do,” said Marshall. Kids in school invest a lot of time in other sports, he said. “But bowling—that’s something they can do for the rest of their lives.”

Over the years they have taken teams to state almost every year and even to the national competition a few times.

They said the original machines—AMF automatic pin setting machines installed in 1959 from Celebrity Lanes in Denver—were still used to this day. Bob said he did a major overhaul on the machines every summer, but they still worked great after so many years.

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A café was always a constant part of the bowling alley, and there was a game room for the kids.

Many of the older people in town are really sad to see the bowling alley go, said the Thompsons, but they have seen a decline in bowlers over the years. The younger generations just don't want to commit to joining bowling leagues.

It's quite a different picture from what it was 50 years ago.

In the late 1950s, bowling alleys were popping up all over the country. George Reynolds and Ed Burke made a wise investment to put in a business in Holyoke.

Hewitt, who was the manager for two years after the lanes opened in 1959, said he could have had the lanes open 24/7. He made back Reynolds and Burke's investment in only three months.

Leaving the alley around 1 a.m. every night and returning again at 8 a.m. to clean the lanes, Hewitt said people were already knocking on the door, ready to get in some time on the lanes.

Monday through Thursday, two leagues were held each night with six teams in each league. With nearly 50 teams, Hewitt said just about every church and every business in the area rounded up a team, complete with matching bowling shirts he sold at the alley.

Fridays and Sunday evenings were mixed doubles, and Saturday morning was reserved for the kids.

At three games for a dollar, people couldn't beat that price for fun entertainment, and they "spared" no expense for a good time.

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A game room at the bowling alley included ping pong, pinball machines and a jukebox, and some tasty treats could be enjoyed at a snack bar run by Jim Harvey, owner of the Sweet Shop in Holyoke. Shirley Groshans assisted at the front desk.

Hewitt mentioned that when the bowling alley first opened, they had to get city laws changed so they could serve soft drinks. Rules concerning drinks of any sort had been passed earlier due to a previous duck pin bowling alley.

Holyoke Bowling Lanes also held big tournaments for area bowlers, and both young and old were addicted to the thrill of a strike.

Hewitt, a member of the 700 Bowling Club of America, remembers bowling a score of 277 during league bowling one night and scoring a 756 series during open bowling.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the bowling alley in Holyoke continued to thrive with various owners and managers. It seemed that the sport of bowling was right up Holyoke's alley.



After its grand opening in November 1947, Dirks Roller Rink, owned by Lewis and Dora Dirks, boasted 6,000 square feet of maple wood skating surface and a fun time for both young and old alike. After five and a half years as a skating rink, the building on South Campbell Avenue in Holyoke housed furniture stores and eventually a bowling alley from 1959-2012.

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Building gets start as roller rink in 1947

For over five years, the small town of Holyoke boasted of having the best roller rink between Denver and Omaha, not a claim to be taken lightly.

Dirks Roller Rink proudly opened with a big crowd Nov. 21, 1947. Offering 240 pairs of rink skates, 30 pairs of shoe skates, organ melodies on 78 rpm records and 6,000 square feet of skating surface, this was the hippest place in town.

Dorothy (Dirks) Skinner said her parents, Lewis and Dora Dirks, were always saying there wasn't anything for kids to do in Holyoke. So, when they moved back to the area from Iowa in 1947, they quickly made plans for the construction of a roller rink.

With cement blocks from Chappell Hollostone Co. in Chappell, Neb., a large building was constructed in the 200 block of South Campbell Avenue.

Seven miles of maple flooring, sanded five times, was laid for the roller skating rink, with 35,000 nails spaced 12 inches apart. Benches were installed around the rink and a lunch room to the side.

Clarence From was the floor manager, and Anna Denbo served cold drinks, coffee, ice cream and sandwiches in the cafeteria.

Skinner, who was in sixth grade when her parents opened the rink, said people of every age came to skate, not just the children. She and her friends came up with a lot of dance routines throughout the years, and her favorite game was crack the whip. And, like many others her age, she got to know her future husband, Doyle, a bit better after hours spent at the skating rink.

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After five and a half years as a roller rink, the building was converted to a furniture store until becoming the bowling alley in 1959.

Phillips County has recently purchased the property, which is immediately to the east of the courthouse, to use for storage for the county.

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