



WEBFOOTER EXTRA

OCTOBER 2017

Leo Seltzer's Race of Nations



The four remaining couples at Leo Seltzer's Race of Nations at the Ice Coliseum in Portland in 1934.

◆ Walkathons and Dance Marathons – see page 2.

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Walkathons – Dance Marathons

Where did the concept of dance marathons originate? Dance marathons can be traced back to 1364 in London. In 1879, the people of Chicago participated in a walking contest that was held in Exposition Hall. The idea of a marathon harks back to classical Greek civilization and footraces. With the premier of the modern Olympics in 1896, attention was focused on sporting events that emphasized competition between nations with individuals who attempted to set “world records.”

After World War I, dance marathons began as part of the craze to break world records. The dance marathon phenomenon can be divided into three phases: hourly dance contests in the early 1920s; entertainment spectacles from 1923 to 1928; and Depression-era entertainment from 1929 to 1934.

The first phase could be described as non-stop dancing to live music and could not be considered entertainment. In fact, it was somewhat boring to watch. Special attractions were added to the central event of the dance endurance contest. The second phase of marathons culminated in 1928 with a show at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Rules were developed to govern the entire event and the result was the combination of athletic competition and theater. These rules established things like dancing time and rest periods, generally specifying 45 minutes of dancing followed by 15 minutes of rest, 24 hours a day.

The dance hall was partitioned into a dance competition area, a stage area for entertainers, orchestra pits for the band, resting places and medical quarters as well as offstage control and supply centers. Marathons and walkathons included emcees, floor judges, an orchestra, entertainers, nurses, food providers, barbers, hawkers of souvenirs, and snacks for the spectators and special guests as well as the contestants. Marathons developed into a complex event involving competition, drama, music and other kinds of entertainment as well as audience participation.

The years of the Great Depression were times of torment for many Americans. They faced the specter of poverty and joblessness fueled by a sense of hopelessness and despair. Dance marathons became extremely popular as many out of work people would compete for money and prizes. Others who sought fame and fortune entered the pageants of fatigue and endurance contests.

The third phase of the dance marathons evolved into Depression-era entertainment. The competitors were no longer just amateurs, but they were comprised of a mix of professional entertainers and amateurs. The pros went from marathon to marathon, often following a particular promoter. Sometimes the promoters asked these contestants to participate in mock weddings, fights, specialty numbers or other staged events. Other contestants stayed in the contest only long enough to milk it for food or a place to flop. Local celebrities would often drop by to say a few words of encouragement to the contestants. In this third phase, dance marathons also became known as walkathons. Races and elimination features were incorporated into the walkathons. Contestants had to maintain some form of continual motion—usually a combination of dancing and walking.

Leo Seltzer

Born in Helena, Montana in 1903, Leo Seltzer was the third son of David and Celia Seltzer who had emigrated from Romania. David Seltzer became a cattle rancher and operated a general store. Unfortunately, Celia Seltzer was in delicate health and could not handle the Montana winters, so the Seltzer family moved to Portland where the boys attended school.

Leo got his start in the show world as an usher in various theaters while he was attending Lincoln High School and playing basketball. Upon his graduation, he made a name as the leading West Coast salesman for Universal Film Exchange at the age of 17.



Leo A. Seltzer

Seltzer had been a star athlete in high school and he founded the Ramblers basketball team. After leaving Universal several years later, Leo and his brother Oscar built a chain of theaters, including: the Alameda, the Highway and the Oregon Theater. Their father built the first Columbia Theater in Portland.

When the Great Depression struck in 1929, making ends meet was a very big challenge to nearly everyone at this time in history. It was about this time that twenty-six year old Leo Seltzer began investigating his rapidly declining theater business. His theaters were empty. He soon learned that his customers were being lured away by a little-known amusement park named Lotus Isle where couples dragged themselves endlessly around a dance floor. Some collapsed while others remained upright for several months to win a cash prize. Seltzer determined that it was attributed to "Walkathon Fever."

By 1931, the country had endured two years of the Great Depression and people had lost interest in the movies. Seeing and seizing an opportunity, Leo Seltzer set out to elevate the entertainment racket to a 'legitimate' business enterprise. With financial backing from Portland Mayor George Baker, Portland theater owner Walter Tebbetts and others, Seltzer started his first walkathon in Hoquiam, Washington. When he staged his first dance walkathon, hundreds of unemployed people showed up, hoping to win a \$1,000 cash prize.

Building on the success of that first walkathon, Seltzer founded and became president of the American Walkathon Company. Seltzer created a road show unit, the only one of its kind in the United States. They scored in Denver and Kansas City, so Seltzer opened in Chicago. According to Billboard Magazine, "Mr. Seltzer's Walkathon venture has proven one of the most profitable in the decade, attracting capacity crowds in every city."

Seltzer hired some of his friends from high school as well as some of the entertainers at Lotus Isle and he attracted unknowns like Frankie Lane and Red Skelton who became emcees. The walkathon craze made Seltzer a millionaire several times over. Most of the money made by Seltzer was from concessions.



Leo A. Seltzer started the American Walkathon Company which was billed as the "Best Walkathon Organization" in the United States.



LEO A. SELTZER'S

WALKATHON ORGANIZATIONS
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The Billboard ON ITS 40th ANNIVERSARY
ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR 4th ANNIVERSARY

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The Courts Have Sustained!!
ORGANIZATION WILL MAINTAIN!!!**

<p style="text-align: center;">COLISEUM Chicago</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PERSONNEL</p> <p><i>Entertainments:</i> EDDIE SNIDER RAJAH BERGMAN SKIPPER SPIEGLE GORDON WHITNEY ART WOFFE</p> <p><i>Administrations:</i> <i>Managers:</i> SIDNEY COHEN <i>Head Floor Judges:</i> WELLS SLOINGER <i>Floor Staff:</i> CHUCK FATTON CHESTER SWAAR BILLY BRINSON <i>Nurses:</i> ISABELLE SIMONSON WINIFRED RAUSA <i>Kitchen Staff:</i> MRS. ELLA FRED JERRY RAIBLE <i>Concessions:</i> GEORGE SLOINGER SAM BROCATO MARCIE JORDAN GUS SIMMONS ELIZABETH MARVIN JUANITA HERMANN</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ARCADIA GARDENS Chicago LEO A. SELTZER HEADQUARTERS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PERSONNEL</p> <p><i>Entertainments:</i> HENRY POLK LES MCCULLUM JIMMY BITTNER PAT O'DAY</p> <p><i>Administrations:</i> <i>Managers:</i> OSCAR SELTZER <i>Head Floor Judges:</i> WELLS SLOINGER <i>Judges:</i> STAN ALLEN <i>Floor Staff:</i> TIM MURPHY CHARLIE AHRENS JOE POOCH <i>Nurses:</i> CAROLINE BARTON <i>Maintenance:</i> TOM DOPKE <i>Kitchen Staff:</i> "MOM" PARENTI MARY KOLOSKI <i>Concessions:</i> GEORGE SLOINGER MARION JORDAN JACK ROTCHER</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">BIRMINGHAM Alabama</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PERSONNEL</p> <p><i>Entertainments:</i> SAM CORE CHICK SNIDER EDDIE BROWN TEX SWAN</p> <p><i>Administrations:</i> <i>Managers:</i> PAULINE JACKSON <i>Head Floor Judge:</i> TRUETT TURNER <i>Floor Staff:</i> LOU JARVIS CHARLIE COOK <i>Nurses:</i> MARGE WALKER <i>Maintenance:</i> EARL KING <i>Kitchen Staff:</i> IVY KRONAGE <i>Concessions:</i> MRS. EARL KING</p>
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TEN ADDITIONAL SHOWS TO OPEN BEFORE SUMMER

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Seltzer was always concerned for his "walkers," making sure they had proper meals and rest periods. He took care of any of their medical needs as well. Seltzer would eventually hold 22 walkathons. By the late 1930s, other events would overtake walkathons in popularity and with another world war on the horizon, industry had been revived and people were going back to work. No one had time to watch people move in a circle on a dance floor.

By the mid-1930s, the walkathon's popularity began to wane, and Seltzer began to look for more opportunities. A national roller-skating craze began to take hold and Seltzer seized a chance to exploit this new frenzy. In the summer of 1935, Seltzer became manager of the Chicago Coliseum, an historic arena where William Jennings Bryan had been nominated for the presidency. Seltzer had read in the Literary Digest that 93% of Americans had roller skated at some point in their lives. He advertised for skaters to join his first "Roller Derby" on August 13, 1935. Twenty thousand spectators filled the Coliseum to see the Transcontinental Roller Derby.

Teams consisted of a male skater and a female skater and they would alternate at times, so that one of them was always skating. The teams would skate 64,000 laps or about 4,000 miles, covering about 100 miles a day over a period of six weeks. During breaks, skaters would perform skits or acts and the audience would show its appreciation by throwing coins at them. Skaters could gain an advantage by breaking out of a group and trying to pick up a lap on other skaters (a "jam"). Before long, skaters were banding together to try and block back skaters who were leaving the pack. At first, this was not allowed, but the audience liked that aspect so much that Seltzer incorporated it into the rules.

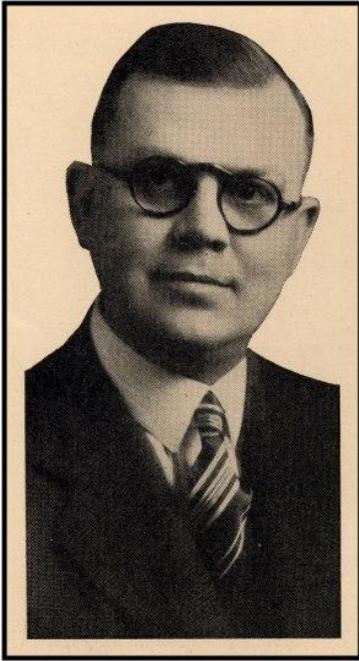
Teaming up with sportswriter Damon Runyon, who helped Leo rewrite the rules, they added some violence; skaters would elbow each other and whip each other around like slingshots, slamming opponents into an unforgiving rail. Seltzer hated it, but the fans went wild. Violence pleased the fans; they loved this often dirty, cheap-shot action. The more the skaters pummeled each other, the more the audience cheered.

"In 1928 it was tree-sitting. In 1930 it was dance marathons. In 1932 it was Walkathons. Last week it appeared possible that in 1936 the U. S. appetite for preposterous endurance might take an even more eccentric form: the Roller Derby. In Chicago 25 young men and women were roller-skating in circles around the Coliseum. They had been doing so since Christmas Day. It was the fourth Roller Derby held in the U. S. since last August. Crowds averaged 10,000 a day." (Time Magazine Monday, Feb. 03, 1936)

When Roller Derby appeared in Los Angeles at the Pan Pacific Auditorium in 1937, Hollywood celebrities such as W.C. Fields, Mickey Rooney, Eddie Cantor, George Burns, Gracie Allen, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Cary Grant and Eleanor Powell flocked to seats in the reserved boxes. The stars of both screen and track continued to appear at the Pan Pacific through the early 1950s.

Roller Derby made its national TV debut in 1947, becoming one of the first television hits for ABC. Seltzer despised what the game had become and called it quits in 1958 when his son Jerry moved the team to the San Francisco Bay area. Jerry would eventually syndicate Roller Derby to 120 TV stations. The original Roller Derby was popular for nearly four decades. Jerry closed the family business on Dec. 8, 1973. In 1971, Leo Seltzer, the "father of Roller Derby," was interviewed for an article in the Oregon Journal and he shared his memories of selling newspapers for the Oregon Journal and the Telegram from his "choice spot" at the Portland Hotel steam bath entrance on 6th and Yamhill streets during his youth.

He considered Oregon his home base all of his life and he maintained a summer home at Gearhart where he was often mistaken for a professional clam digger. Leo passed away on January 30, 1978. In the 1980s, Roller Derby became "Roller Games" for a while. As of November 2013, there were 1,513 Roller Derby amateur leagues in 41 countries.



Walter A. Tebbetts

Walter Tebbetts was one of the most prominent names in Portland Theater history. He was born in Beatrice, Nebraska on November 28, 1885. After finishing school in Beatrice, he became a teacher there. Tebbetts came to Portland in 1909. Two years later, in 1911, at the age of 26, he began operating the old Empire Theater at Grand and Hawthorne. These were the good old five and ten days, when a good show was a four-reeler—a two-reel feature, a one-reel comedy and a one-reel short.

Tebbetts built his first theater in Portland in 1913 and named it the Alhambra. Later, the name was changed to the Mount Tabor Theater.

Walter A. Tebbetts

In 1923, Tebbetts built the Laurelhurst Theater; then he built the ornate Hollywood Theater in 1926. Tebbetts had owned, managed or built twelve moving picture theaters in Portland, including the Empire, the New Grand, the Alhambra, the Montavilla, the State, the Highway, the Laurelhurst, the Lombard, the Crest, the Roseway and the Hollywood.



The Hollywood Theatre at 41st and Sandy built by Walter Tebbetts in 1926.



Having opened with a Grand Gala on Saturday Dec. 31, 1927, Walter Tebbetts Oriental Theatre at Grand and Morrison Streets welcomed the Air Corps Revue in 1930.

After building the Hollywood Theater, Walter Tebbetts took a trip abroad and he conceived the idea of building a theatre fashioned after and decorated and furnished like the temples of the Orient. Upon his return, Tebbetts conferred with George Weatherly regarding such a theatre to be built adjoining a twelve-story office building near the east end of the Morrison Bridge. In 1927, Weatherly opened his 12-story Weatherly Building and the "veritable Temple of East India," the Oriental Theatre, considered a masterpiece in theatrical architecture. Tebbetts was the owner and manager of this palatial picture palace.

Walter Tebbetts became a Walkathon Promoter, holding a Dance Marathon at Atlantic City in 1932. Early in 1933, he held a show at Camden, New Jersey, using one of the hangars at Central Airport. Later, on September 9, 1933 Tebbetts held a show at The Auditorium at Atlantic City. Tebbetts hired Red Skelton as a youthful comic emcee. Paducah, Kentucky became the site of another show that Tebbetts opened on January 16. It was followed by another show at Atlanta's Southeast Fair Grounds on January 23, 1934.

Tebbetts opened at Dreamland Park Ballroom in Newark, New Jersey on July 31, 1934. On September 8, 1934, Tebbetts opened a Walk-a-Derby at Trenton, New Jersey. Then on October 26, Tebbetts opened at Grand Rapids, Michigan. He opened a show at the Olympic Park Ballroom in Irvington, New Jersey on January 29, 1935 and again on April 6. Later that year, on October 8, Walter Tebbetts opened a show at a former airplane hangar in Camden, New Jersey.

After the Walkathons began to lose their popularity, Tebbetts returned to Portland to manage his theater interests. He remained active until his death in January 1962.

UPCOMING SHOWS IN PORTLAND



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