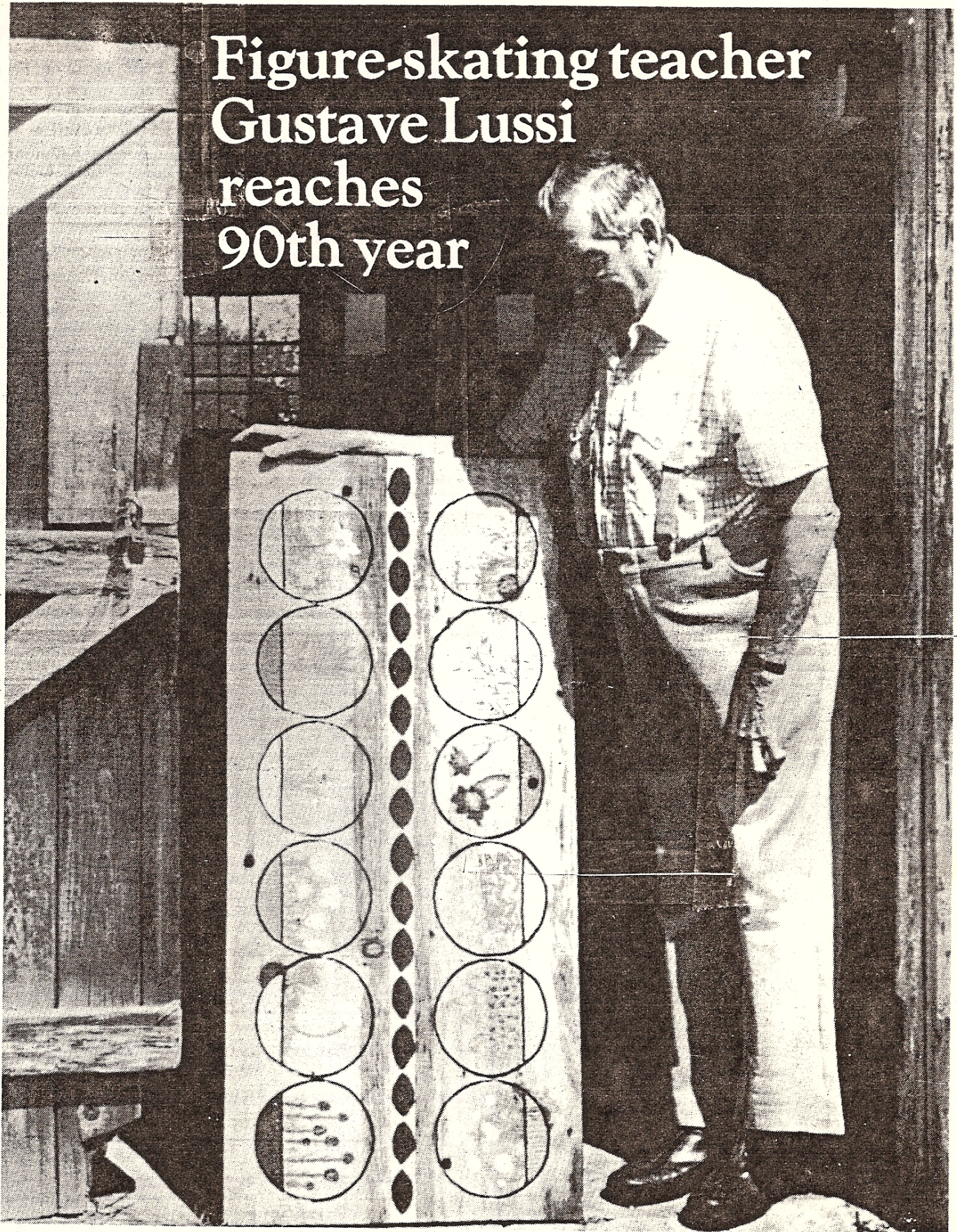


Figure-skating teacher Gustave Lussi reaches 90th year



Gus Lussi with florid table he made recently

Gustave Luss

By SUSAN McCANN

LAKE PLACID — On June 1, 1968, the night before his 70th birthday, Gustave Francois Lussi attended the ceremonies for the opening of the \$1 million addition to the Olympic Arena.

An audience of 700 rose to honor the recipient of a scroll inscribed with these words: "This skating rink is dedicated to Gustave Lussi whose inspiration and untiring efforts created summer skating in the Olympic Arena at Lake Placid and whose stellar skill as a figure skating teacher brought immeasurable benefits to this community."

This week Gus Lussi turned 90.

Born in Switzerland, young Lussi came to the United States when skating was in its infancy.

He first stayed with an uncle who owned a riding academy in Prospect Park in Brooklyn. His chores began at four in the morning when he would clean the harnesses and saddles before the riders came for their horses. After a few weeks he asked his uncle for some money and was told by him that the establishment did not pay for greenhorns.

"So," said Gus Lussi, as he recalls the story today, "I quit."

Then he took the subway to an employment agency on 6th Avenue in Manhattan and saw on their bulletin board that the St. Regis Hotel needed a dishwasher.

He took the job but spent off hours learning to skate at a rink in the Bronx. A skating champion of Switzerland first brought him to the rink, and it was this friend who, when he left New York for a job teaching skating in Philadelphia, promised to call Gus Lussi as soon as could arrange for him to become his assistant.

When the call came, however, Lussi did not have enough money to

make the trip to Philadelphia. The next morning, as he walked to the entrance to the subway, he was so discouraged that his head drooped, eyes downcast. There he saw a diamond stick pin lying in the snow.

He pawned the pin for \$75 and left for Philadelphia. Thus, on December 27, 1919, he began a new career as the assistant pro for the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society.

Prior to his introduction to skating at 21, he had been a ski jumper. After a nearly fatal accident that he recalls, "Scared the hell out of me," he quit. As a skater his first efforts to master the art of gliding on an edge were so comical that others on the ice laughed at his awkwardness. He likes to remember how he was able to prove his critics wrong.

"People stared at me and said, 'Look at that big, gawky fellow. He'll never be able to do anything.'" Twenty-three years after Lussi's inauspicious debut, a 12-year-old butterflyball from Englewood, New Jersey, was given the same prognosis.

The boy's first teacher told his father, "He couldn't be a skater — not even if a snowball could live in Hades." Six years later, as a handsome, muscular and perfectly conditioned young man, Dick Button, under Gus Lussi's tutelage, won the 1948 Olympics.

The journey from an inexperienced assistant to the teacher of the greatest skater the world had ever known had many twists and turns. Besides Philadelphia, Lussi taught in London, Ontario, Toronto and Ottawa in Canada and in Buffalo, New York, and back in Ardmore, Pennsylvania after the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society had moved to the suburbs.

But in 1921, when he saw a Pathe News report on the winter activities at the Lake Placid Club, Gus Lussi

si, skating master.

found the place he knew would be his home. He came to Lake Placid because it seemed so like his native Switzerland. In 1927 he bought land on Averyville Road a few miles outside the village where he eventually would build "Little Alps," his Swiss chalet in the Adirondack Mountains. Though he would teach in different clubs in several cities, he made his home in Lake Placid.

In the 12 years between his first teaching assignment and the opening of the arena just prior to the Olympic Games of 1932, Lussi developed his technique and began to change the sport of figure skating.

He studied the muscles and human anatomy and was helped in this area by a famous Philadelphia sculptor, R. Tait MacKenzie. MacKenzie gave Lussi an especially beautiful piece known as "The Bird." The statue still occupies a prominent place in the Lussi home.

Lussi believes that the most important changes brought about by his efforts were the development of the spin in free skating and the concept of closure in figures. Spinning had its comedic aspects in the 1920s. The skater would bend both arms at the elbows and point one forefinger down on the top of his head and the other at his rib cage as he turned slowly around. By the time Lussi perfected his technique, he spun so fast that he became a blur. He won bets with non-believers when he performed ninety-four revolutions without stopping.

Early figure 8's were left open at the center when the skater changed from one foot to the other. A large open space punctuated by what was called a "rat tail" did not appeal to Lussi. At first, the pupils who closed their circles so that the tracings made a true figure 8 were criticized and marked down by the judges. But Lussi would not back down and in time his revolutionary idea won acceptance.

Ski jumping influenced his skating. The takeoff for Dick Button's spectacular axel jump owes its athletic appeal to the technique of the skier as he left the ramp to lift himself with his chest thrust forward and his arms rounded and held slightly in front. The skier's technique is different today, but the position is still used for the only skating jump starting from a forward edge.

Over the years Gus Lussi always

maintained that he was partial to the pair as the most beautiful event in skating. As in the ballet, he thought the program should be a love affair between the partners. In 1928, Gustave Lussi met Thelma MacDowell of Saranac Lake. She had just graduated from Saranac Lake High School when a mutual friend arranged a blind date. Now on his way to becoming a celebrity, Lussi asked for more dates until he left for the winter to teach in Ottawa.

When he returned the next spring, he was so preoccupied with building "Little Alps" that he did not see Thelma MacDowell for another four years. Then, in April of 1932, a few months after she had been crowned Miss Olympic of Saranac Lake and appeared in the royal court during a ceremony at the Palace Theater in Lake Placid, Thelma MacDowell saw Gus Lussi again.

She was walking to her job in downtown Saranac Lake when he roared by on his way to sign a new

contract with the Minto Club in Ottawa. He stopped his gun metal grey Lancia convertible and asked if they might pick up where they left off as soon as he came back with his contract. She looked at his car and his enormous raccoon coat and his jaunty navy blue beret and said yes. Eight months later they were married.

The same year the Olympic Arena opened for its first session of summer

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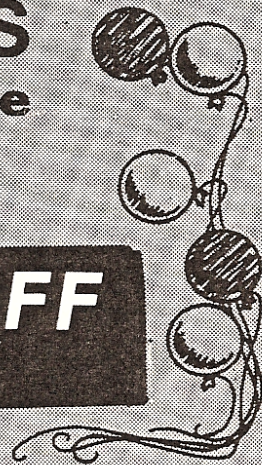
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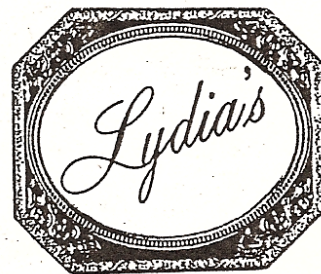
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recalls his career

skating. That August he directed the first of his spectacular summer shows, the cast of which included almost every important skater from the United States and Canada. In the November 1933 issue of "Skating Magazine," George M. Lattimer reported, "Without doubt it was the one outstanding and unusual sport events of the entire summer season — ice skating in August!"

He went on to say, "Most beautiful effects were secured by the lavish use of colored lights, arranged by Mr. Lussi, which helped to make the ice ballet a thing of infinite beauty and charm."

Lussi was the first to choreograph an interpretive competitive program

and was truly the master when it came to creating, directing and producing the most innovative and crowd pleasing shows on ice. He designed the scenery, the costumes, the lighting effects and the painting of the ice in addition to choosing the music and making up all the group numbers. By the third annual mid-summer carnival, several professional and amateur enthusiasts went to Lake Placid with the sole purpose of studying and examining his work.

In writing about "The Third Lake Placid Summer Carnival" in the November 1934 issue of "Skating Magazine," Richard L. Hapgood of the Skating Club of Boston described these further benefits: "To my mind, no competition can ever replace the Lake Placid carnivals as the best means of developing mutual interests and promoting warm friendships among the skaters of Canada and the United States. Larger groups of skaters are assembled than could ever be gathered for a competition. The strain of competition is entirely absent. Everyone is in the holiday spirit, bent upon having a good time; everyone skates hard under 'Gus' Lussi's direction (no skater who ever enjoyed that privilege would fail to work his heart out for him); everyone plays hard in the moments off the ice.

"... when enthusiastic skaters are assembled from Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto, from Boston, New Haven, New York, Philadelphia and Buffalo, the highest cooperative benefits to skating are achieved, true international friendships are born which cement our interests and sympathies and which will help to put North American skating into a powerful position. None of this would have been possible without the genius of 'Gus' Lussi."

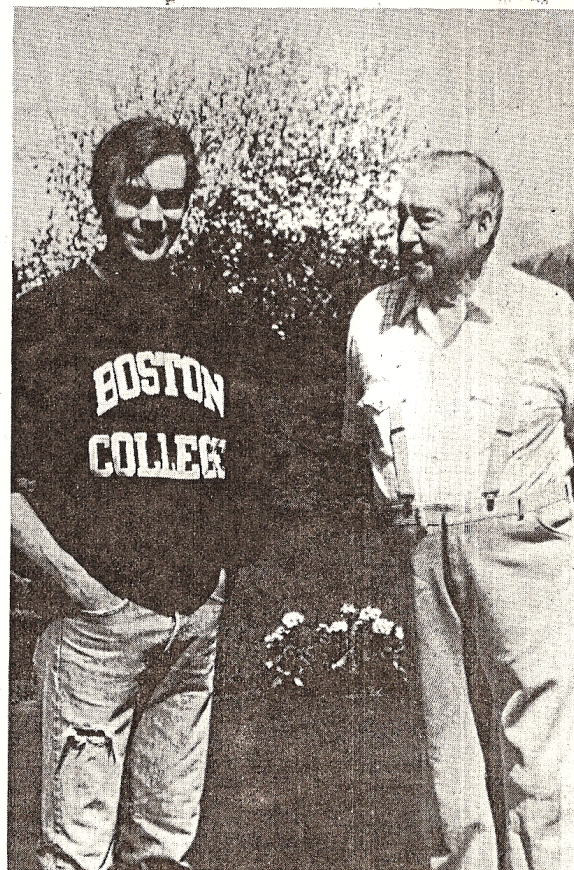
In 1936, instead of the usual carnival, Lussi expanded the scope of the production and called it the Fifth Annual Mid-Summer Operetta. He selected an Egyptian theme and supervised the construction of a four-tiered platform which supported an ornately spectacular Cleopatra's throne. The entire ice surface was painted bright red with a huge scarab in the center. Around this focal point were painted portraits of Egyptian gods.

Today Thelma and Gus Lussi spend the summer and early fall in Lake Placid and the winter in Florida. They have sold Little Alps and live closer to the village, still on Averyville Road but in an old farm house. Their two sons, Serge and Craig, have given them five grandchildren to whom they are devoted.

They live a full and happy life together, a partnership that now spans fifty-five years.

At the end of June, for three mornings every week, Gus Lussi will begin his sixty-ninth summer of teaching skating, still giving lessons and adding to the ranks of the hundreds of former pupils who will join his family and friends in wishing him a Happy 90th Birthday!

Susan Sterne McCann is a recent recipient of a grant from the Essex



Arthur, with famous grandfather, Gus Lussi

County Arts Council for her work on a novel set in Lake Placid. This award was made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. The novel takes place in the 1950s and tells of a young

pair team whose pro plays a major role in the outcome of the story. Since the author is a former Lussi pupil, the character of the pro bears a strong resemblance to the inimitable Gus Lussi.