

Distillery Children: Alice Worts

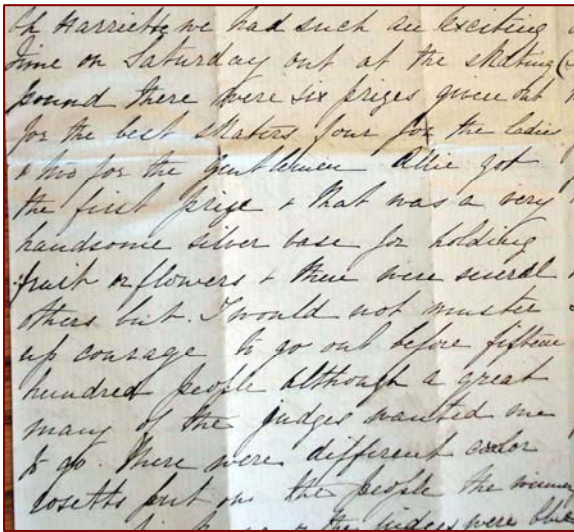


Alice Worts, *Canadian Illustrated News* in 1863 TPL

Victorian – even post-Victorian – industrial sites are generally associated with adult, male workers. And, indeed, Gooderham & Worts was no exception. The vast majority of workers – at every level – were adult males. But there were others. For many years, young boys in their early teens – perhaps younger – also worked at the distillery. These young workers included both the sons of owners and sons of ordinary employees. (So far, no references to young girls have come to light, but the search continues.) Beyond these young workers were the children who grew up in the immediate area, such as the large Gooderham and Worts families.

This is the first of an occasional series devoted to the children who lived, worked, and played near Gooderham & Worts, from the earliest days onward. Today's article features 10-year old Alice Worts, who lived with a large family in her father [James Gooderham Worts' house](#) on Mill Street.

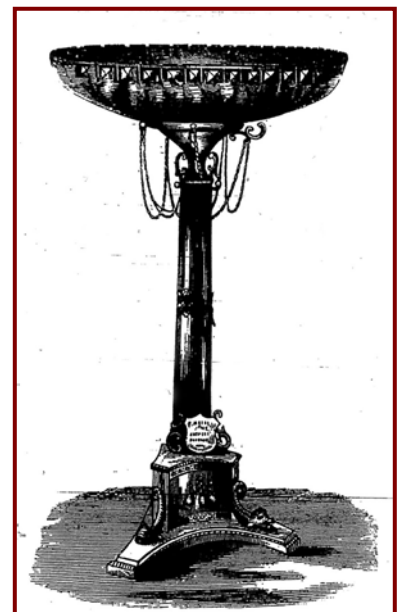
On Saturday, March 7, 1863, little Alice twirled her way to victory over a dozen older competitors in the Ladies competition held on the new Victoria Skating rink at Sherbourne and Gerrard (now Allan Gardens). According to the *Canadian Illustrated News* reporter, the young ladies created a “fairy scene, as the skaters flitted hither and thither, surrounded by a large circle of enchanted admirers.” In this pre-Zamboni era, the ice proved to be “in a bad condition,” favouring the younger and lighter competitors who skimmed across the surface while some of their older and heavier rivals broke through the ice and fell. Among the legion of Gooderham and Worts supporters who had undoubtedly trekked up to the rink from the distillery district was Alice’s older sister Clara, who described the event in a letter to her cousin or friend, “my dear Harriette.”



Clara's letter to Harriette

“Oh Harriette we had such an exciting time on Saturday out at the skating round.... Alice got the first prize & that was a very handsome silver vase for holding fruit or flowers I could not muster up courage to go out before fifteen hundred people although a great many of the judges wanted me to go... We were up there from one o'clock until after six in the evening & to hear the congratulations that were given to Alice she being such a little child to the growing up young ladies. We had Maule's band and after the prizes were given out we had dancing the quadrilles such a nice place to flirt).”

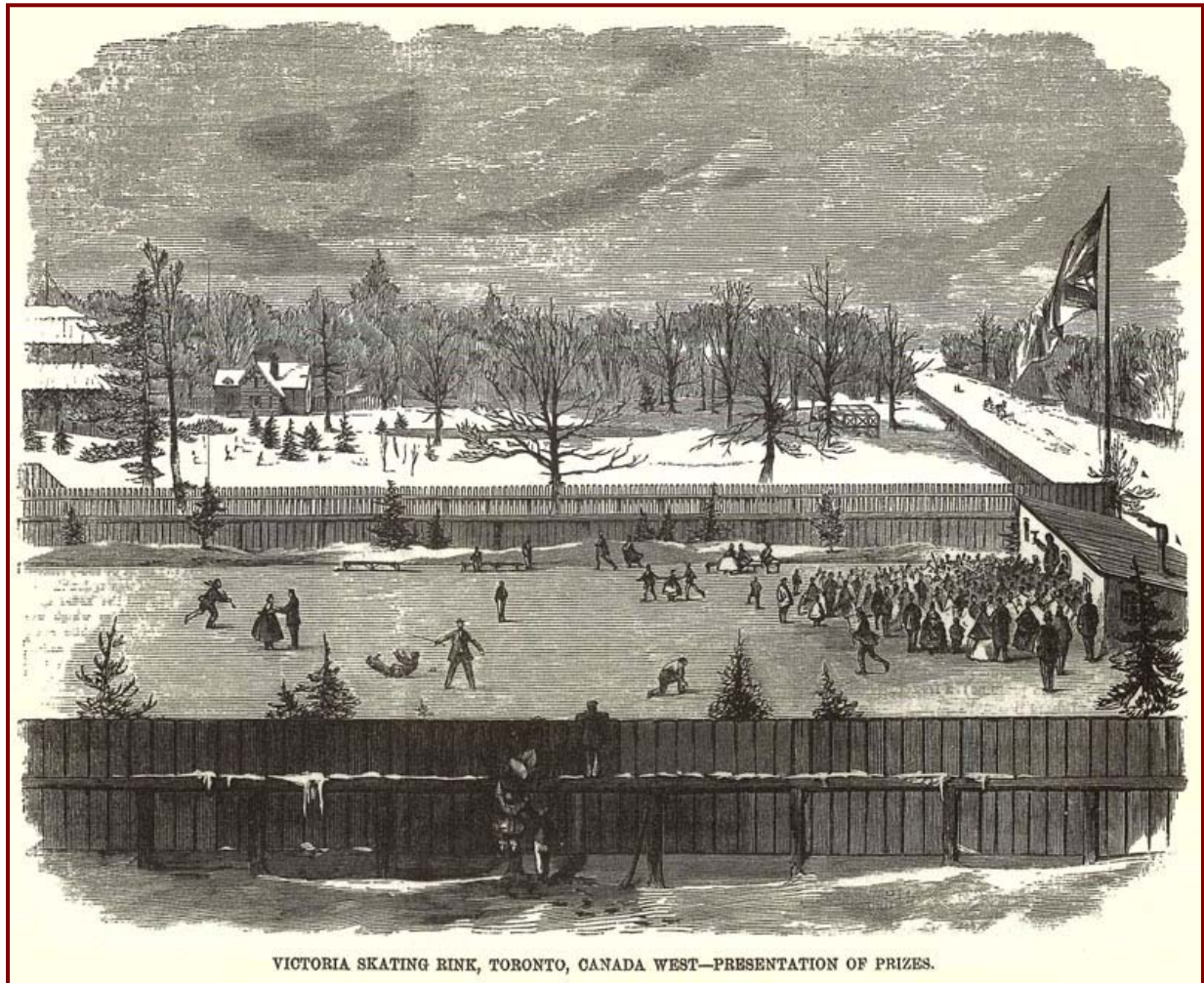
Formal prize-giving happened a week later when the Mayor could be in attendance. Mayor John George Bowes lavished praise on everyone, but especially on Alice Worts, who “although so little a girl, stood first on the list.” After Alice received her ornate prize – a \$50 silver flower stand of Grecian style created by Toronto jeweler J. E. Ellis of King Street – her father, the “eminent distiller of Trinity Street,” rose to reply on behalf of his family. The proud father noted that Alice’s prize was not only the first prize won on the Victoria Skating Rink, but also the first that had ever been awarded in a skating competition in Toronto. He went on to say how pleased he was that the “young ladies took such pleasure in that invigorating exercise” and boasted that he had “five children on skates on the rink” – a boast that was topped by the mayor with seven and an unknown enthusiast who had nine. No doubt, young Alice and her siblings and many cousins actually learned to skate closer to home when the Toronto Bay froze over, as it did in those days.



Alice Worts' prize silver vase

To mark this first skating competition in Toronto, and the social prominence of the Worts family, young Alice was featured on the cover of the *Canadian Illustrated News*

– relegating an engraving of the recent royal wedding of the Prince and Princess of Wales to an inside page. “The portrait of this beautiful girl, Miss Alice Worts, is given on our first page,” explained the reporter. “Though so accomplished in the charming art of flitting on the ice like a fairy, she is only ten years old.” Sadly, Alice could not be photographed at the skating rink or outside her home in the distillery district. Photographic limitations meant that she had to pose in Eli Palmer’s studio in front of a nice snowy, but non-Toronto, backdrop with uncharacteristic hills rather than the distillery or the Toronto Island behind her.



Scene of Alice Worts’ triumph: Victoria Skating Rink on the site of today’s Allan Gardens where Mayor Bowes brandishes Alice’s prize while kids scale the fence

Thanks to Doug Worts for sharing the letter by Clara Worts. There is an unresolved conflict between the date of Clara’s letter (March 1, 1862) and the dates given by the April 4, 1863 *Canadian Illustrated News* (March 7 and 14, 1863), which both appear to describe the same event. Whatever the precise date, the spirit and most details of the two reports coincide.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com.