

## Speed Skater



PERHAPS THE MOST CHEERING ASPECT of institutions devoted to preserving the public past is how generously they're willing to apply the term "history." This is as true of large state and national historical societies, museums, and academic libraries as it is of smaller local outfits, which often seem to maintain stricter standards of perceived significance.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in photo archives. A person of even moderate curiosity could spend years browsing in such archives, particularly if the person in question had no real agenda and was content to merely contemplate the myriad mysterious and often unannotated images that comprise the dizzying mosaic of our collective past.

What are all photographs, really, but paralyzed moments in time? And what is history but a vast procession—equal parts incoherent slideshow and impossible equation involving literally countless additions, subtractions, and cruel divisions—of moments in time?

Instinctively, my mind struggles to interrogate and animate every still photograph it encounters. I want to place the moment back in the stream of time and play at fast forwarding and rewinding.

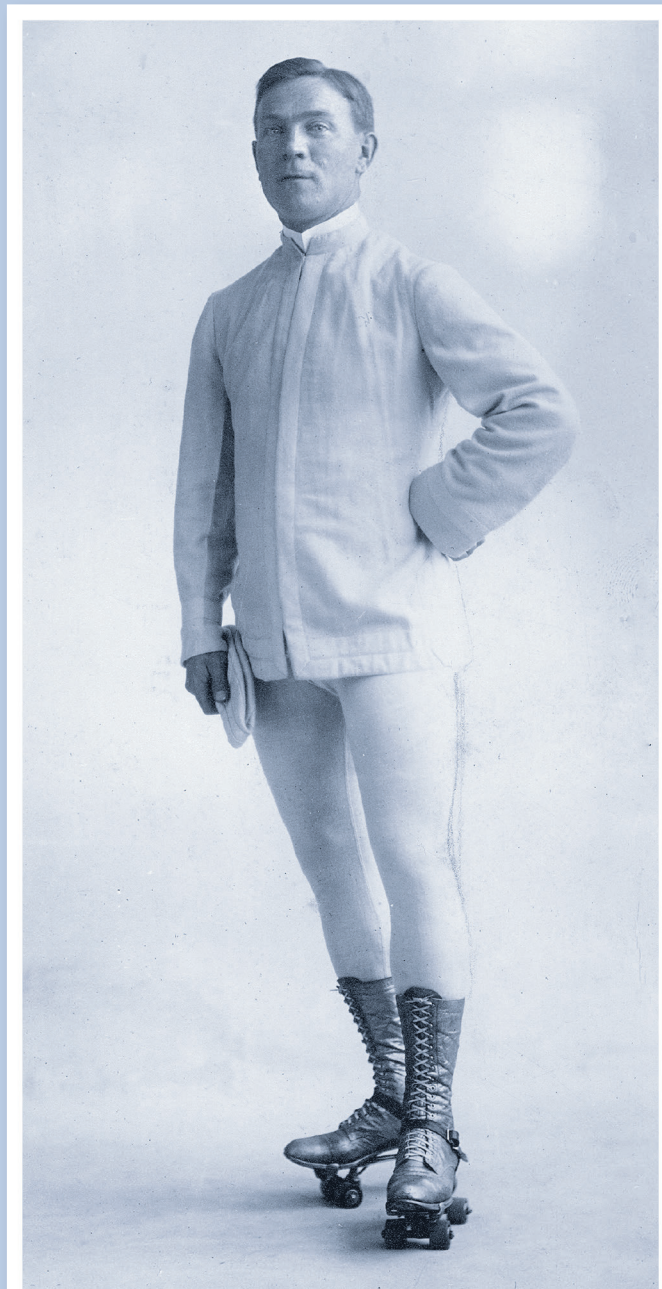
I cannot stumble across a portrait of a man named Harley Davidson (sans pants, or so it certainly appears) wearing roller skates and not be . . . well, delighted, first of all. And then curious, of course, in all sorts of directions. This man has no connection, alas, to the two legendary motorcycle manufacturers Harley and Davidson, but the coincidence is nonetheless striking. This man was a champion speed skater, and so we can imagine that this photograph captured him in a rare still moment aboard his roller skates. Perhaps a moment earlier he was in motion, and once the photo was made, I imagine that he was off again, flying along in his curious outfit, into the future, into the past, into history.

But here he is now: alive again. And, like Harley and Davidson before him, he was striving to make the twentieth century move ever faster beneath his feet, breathing

new meaning into the weird, ancient prophecy of Ezekiel: "The spirit of the living creatures is in the wheels."

—Brad Zellar

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*Harley Davidson, 1916 (MHS COLLECTIONS)*



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