

Rinks in Old Gander

(by Robert G Pelley, 21-01-21)
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Gander, then as now, means snow. That, in old Gander, meant mostly more hard work, with less mechanical help and conveniences than today. There were no snowmobiles, snow throwers or sidewalk plows. Besides moose hunting and ice fishing, there was not a lot to do.

But one activity caught on, that of being on a pair of ice skates. It depended however on the type of work done and where it was carried out.

There were both official rinks and unofficial skating areas. The best known unofficial skating area was of course Deadmans Pond, used in particular during the early part of the war by the staff of the Royal Air Force Ferry Command. After the war, it took a while to have a proper rink in Gander, so Deadman's Pond continued for a good ten years or so as a popular place to skate.

However, for a bit of a change, people also went Twin Ponds about seven miles out the road, west of Gander.

There was an unofficial rink on the Army side, though it seems to have been primarily of post-war use. This was the gravel pit north of the parade ground. It filled up with water in fall and, being protected somewhat from the wind, generally gave a fairly smooth sheet of ice.

One might ask why there was no "official" rink on the Army side. This was due to the nature of the job. When a battalion with three infantry companies came to protect Gander, one company stayed in Botwood, one was on security duties around the airfield, while the third was on training exercises, with a frequent rotation through these three functions. As well, infantry units tended not to stay in Gander for a very long time. Skates would simply be extra baggage. The Army Side and gravel pit are shown in the following photo.



Army side gravel pit

There was no official rink on the wartime American side either. There was a very good reason for that. Except for the fellows who came from the most northern states, such as Massachusetts or Illinois, which had hockey teams in the Nation Hockey League, there was fairly little familiarity the art of skating.

However two points should be noted. Firstly, a rink did eventually open in the post-war period and will be described later. Secondly, the Americans military concentrated more on baseball, perpetuated by the Americans civilians working for the airlines.

After the war, when civilians took over the former military barracks on the American side, adverturous kids discovered a frog pond a short way

down the road (Washington Avenue), leading from the present terminal towards the lake. This for a while became a place for the young kids to learn to skate - avoiding the weeds that stuck up through the ice increased their skating skills.



American side "frog pond"

This brings us to the official rinks, built for more or less organised activity. The first rink came available during the period when civilians built the pre-war aerodrome. It was basically a specific area, shown as such on maps and blueprints, but without a structure above it. In other words, it was an open-air rink in the general area of the railway station, the Administration building and the first hangar.

The following blueprint from 1942 shows the location of the rink relative to other terrain features :



Some other elements worth noting areas are as follows:

° on the top of the blueprint one can see the railway line, a "proposed" train station (in reality a replacement for an older one) and, further to the left, a staff house

° near the bottom of the blueprint, the Admin building and the hangar. These buildings were more or less across the runway from today's terminal.

This can be seen in the following photo:



Gander 1939

The staff house was used civilian personnel at first but later, for a short while, by RCAF officers. It was replaced by a standard barracks (bldg 132). The original staff house, which accommodated most of the early users of the rink is shown here:



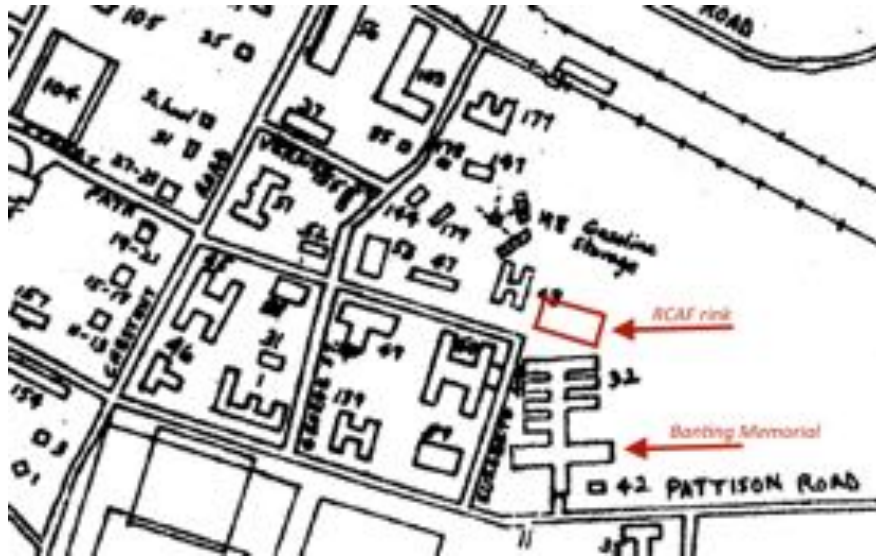
Original staff house

The following are two snaps snow the rink in use:

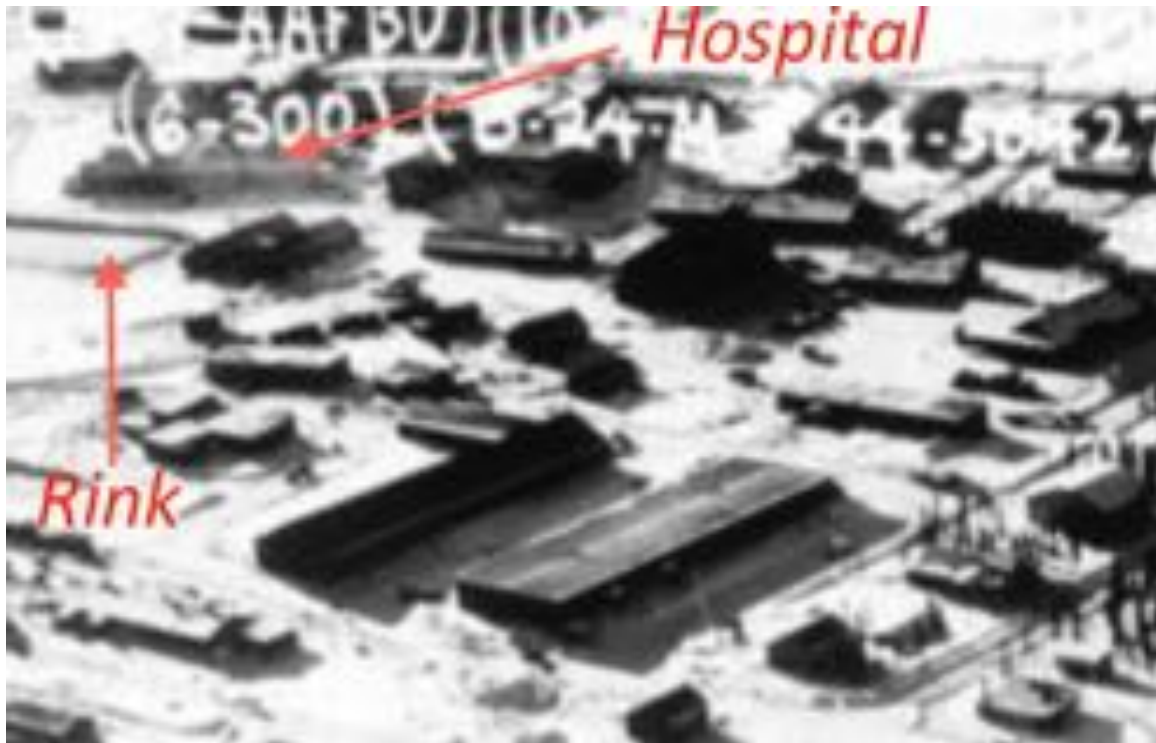


Admin area rink

The next rink that was set up as a permanent feature was on what was known as the Canadian or RCAF side. Little is known about it especially as it was in a less travelled area. It was immediately north of the Banting Memorial Hospital, near the opposite end from the main entrance.



Roughly the same area can be seen from this photo (from the report of a crash north of the railway track near the bottom of Foss Avenue:



The next photo shows members of 10 Bomber Reconnaissance Squadron using this rink:



The next rink to be created was in the RAF Ferry Command area. From different aerial photos, it would appear that it would have been used for the first time during the winter of 1943-44. It was still used at least until 1949 as can be seen from this air photo from that period.



Next two photos are from winter 1944-45.

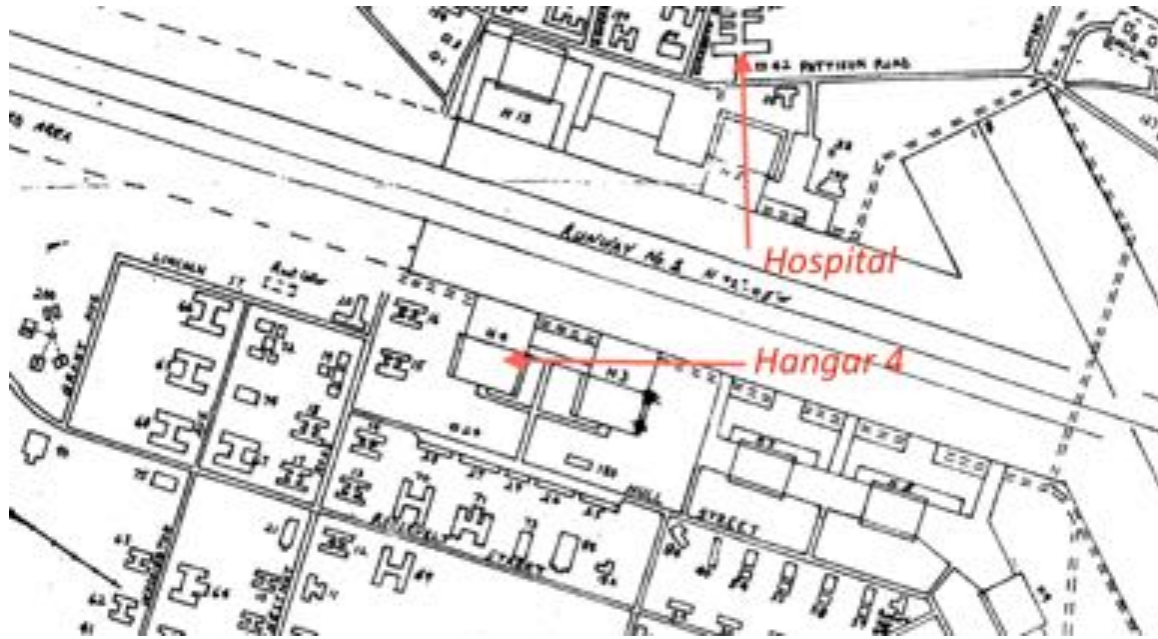


The ladies are primarily Morse code operators on the staff of the RAF.



Right after the war, a hangar was converted as more permanent structure. This was hangar 4 on the American side, but the Americans having left, it was now left to the RCAF to set up and operated it.

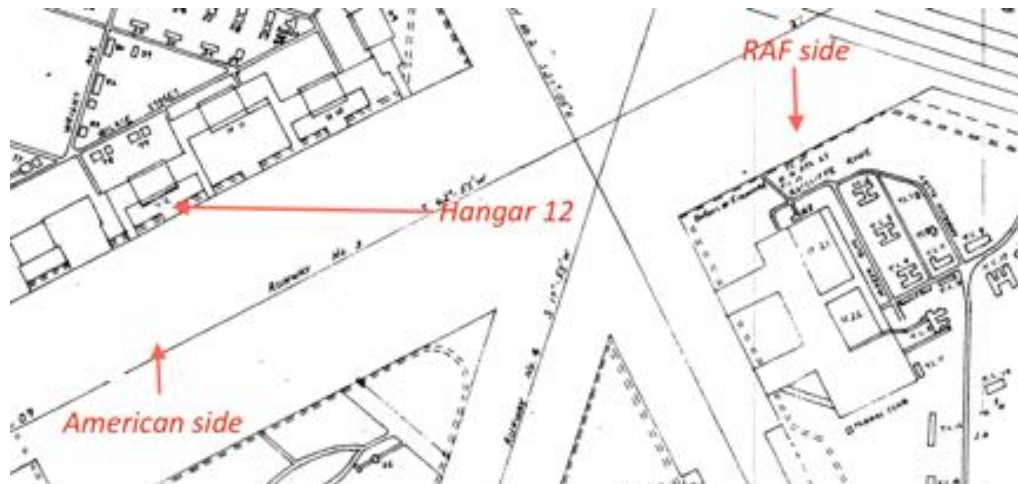
It was 160 ft x 100 ft as opposed to a modern NHL style rink which measures 200 x 85. It used the "natural refrigeration system", meaning that they just flooded the ice and left the doors open.



This hangar was followed by another in the winter of 1946-47. It should be remembered that with the end of the war, Gander had precious little to take care of an onslaught of civilian passengers. While Hanger 22 used formerly by the RAF was being set up as a terminal to receive passengers and crews, hangar 12 was used temporarily for that purpose.

When the civilian terminal became operational, hangar 12 became available for other purposes. It was therefore available as rink. With this "new modern rink", the idea of a local hockey team took form. The Gander All-Stars and later Gander Flyers played against teams from St. John's, Grand Falls, Buchans, Clarenville and Corner Brook. Organising these hockey games was not simple, as this rink, like previous one, was based on the "open-door" refrigeration system. This meant very often that the ice got soft.

This sketch shows the location:



This is the rink inside:



One of Gander's best hockey players, a pioneer from the earliest days, was John Murphy. This is what he said when interviewed by Gander historian Frank Tibbo in 2005.

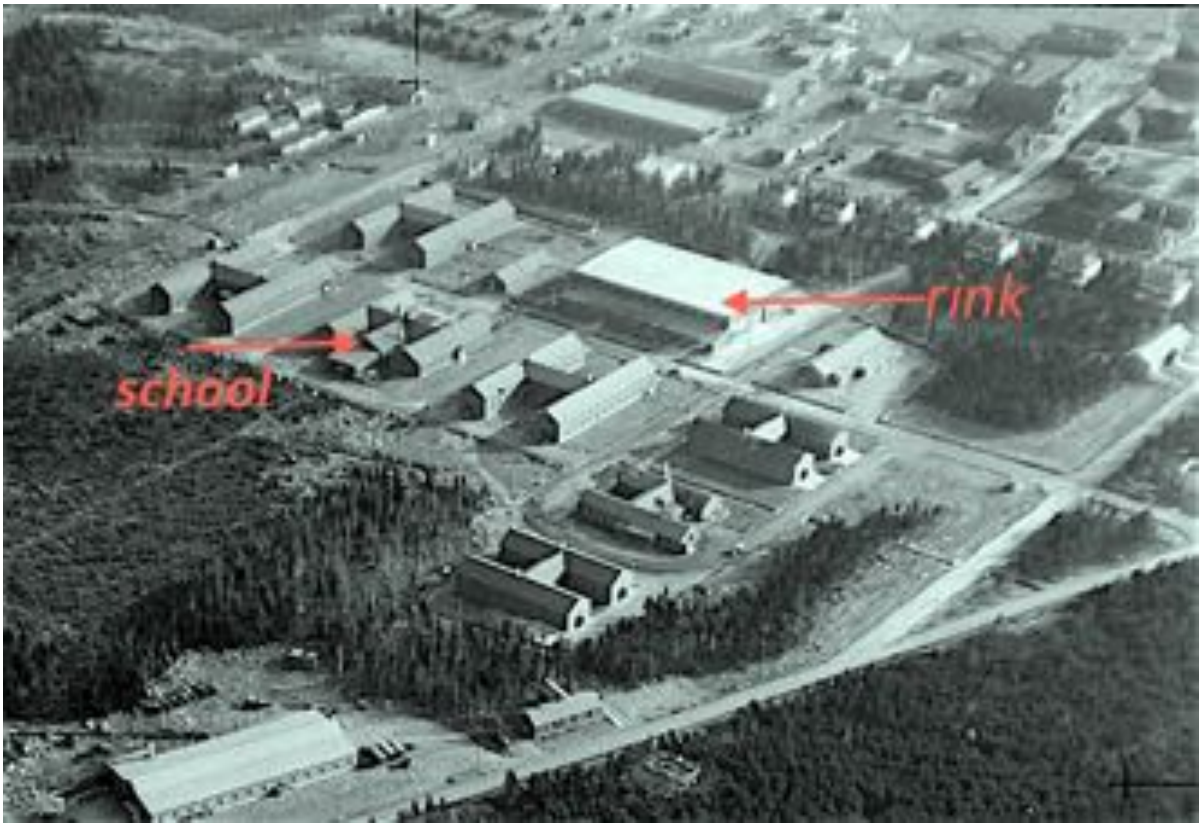
"Then we moved to Hangar 12 on the American Side. That hangar was opened and operated initially by Mr. Jack Lush. (...) Mr. Lush got a one dollar lease to put a rink in the hangar in the winter of 1947. Jack Nolan and Frank Broderick later operated it and Father McCarthy actually ran it for a year until the Gander Hockey Association took over the reins. The Herder Memorial playoffs were actually played in Gander in 1948 between Grand Falls and St. Bon's."

As can be seen, there were no bleachers. Services were at a minimum, but skates could be sharpened on regular grinders operated by two gentleman with a steady hand, Mr Duncan Mosher and Mr Len Butt. To put an edge on the skates, they used a hand emery stone or a light file. No concave edge then! Leo Fowler, who worked for Imperial and lived in an apartment building about a 10-minute walk from the rink, also sharpened skates, with the proper equipment.

It was a cold inside the rink as it was outside. But after a game, the men could always drop into Cy's Tavern, just next door, run by Cy Oates.

The weather of 1954 was not good for hockey with some very cold stretches. but about two weeks before the playoffs, the ice in Hangar went soft from the abnormally high temperatures. This led official and unofficial leaders in Gander to think about having a rink with permanent artificial ice. It didn't take long to spot the right building.

Building 104, the RCAF recreation hall on the Canadian side was just what was required. In the mid-1950s, it housed on the west side two classrooms of the Hunt Memorial Academy across the road, while on the east side, there was a bowling alley and chapter of the BPOE Elks club. Other space was used by the Masonic Club and the Air Cadets. It also contained a small rifle range, an unused swimming pool and a well-equipped gymnasium. It was often used for different events from cowboy singers to pro wrestling.



An ad hoc Board of Governors was formed included airport authorities and local residents including Dr James Paton, Rev McCarthy, Jerry

Wakeham, Eric Winsor, Frank Lawlor, Ted Henley and John Murphy. The Newfoundland Brewery contributed 10000\$ to start the ball rolling, basically to cover the cost of installing the ice cooling system. Residents were asked to chip in 20\$ a family over a certain period. Apparently, with ticket sales and the original contribution, everything was paid for within a year.-

The first job was to seal the floor of the gym with black pitch which came in large metal drums and melted on the job. Bleachers were installed along the sides. The area of the former classrooms was repurposed primarily as lockers rooms for home and visiting teams and a canteen.

The "Gander Gardens" officially opened on 15 March 1956 and, though the new town was well advanced, it remained in operation until 1960.



Over and above the hockey players, several names merit mention. Mrs Bowes came with her cowbell and hardly missed a game. Jennie Lehr sold tickets in several rinks for years. Wes "Bucko" Trainor as coach changed the way hockey was played.

Main sources of information:

- various photos supplied by the late Fred Smeaton, jr
- various interviews and descriptions done by Frank Tibbo
- blueprint supplied by Darrell Hillier
- photos taken by Helen Fausak, code operator, via the North Atlantic Aviation Museum
- photos from the Gander Heritage Trails
- notes on Gander from "Faye's pages" compiled by Faye (Lewis) Raynard