

Donna Atwood dies at 85; longtime Ice Capades star

Billed as 'the Sweetheart of the Ice,' Donna Atwood started skating as a teenager. Largely self-taught, she signed with the Ice Capades at 16 and within a year was its star.



Donna Atwood, in a 1955 publicity photo, skated with the Ice Capades from ages 16 to 31, when she hung up her skates to stay home to raise her children.

By Valerie J. Nelson, Los Angeles Times

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Ice Capades star Donna Atwood had spent almost half her life on the road when she left professional figure-skating behind at 31 to raise her three young children in a custom-built Beverly Hills home complete with a piano that folded into the wall.

She was so famous that Times headlines from the era used only her first name. "Donna to Retire in 1956 for Home Life," said one atop an article that portrayed her as longing to "trade it all in for 'home, sweet home.' "

Yet it was a bittersweet decision for both Atwood and her husband, John H. Harris, operating owner of the touring Ice Capades show. To have his wife home full time, he had to give up the longtime star of his successful enterprise.

"She was at the top of her game, and all of a sudden, she's home," said Don Harris, one of her twin sons. "That was a huge turning point in her life."

Atwood died Dec. 20 of respiratory problems at the Motion Picture Television & Country House in Woodland

Hills. Her family confirmed her death this week. She was 85.

Inspired after seeing Olympic champion Sonja Henie's ice revue, a 13-year-old Atwood skated onto the ice for the first time at the Polar Palace in Hollywood.

Days before her 16th birthday, the largely self-taught skater medaled twice at the 1941 U.S. Figure Skating Championships. She won the senior pairs crown with Eugene Turner and also took the junior ladies title.

Harris was scouting for new Ice Capades talent when he saw Atwood skate in 1941 and offered her a contract.

"The Olympics were being canceled because of World War II, so she didn't have those to aim for," her son said, "and her family didn't have any money" because her pharmacist father had died.

At 16, she signed with the show and within a year was its star, "charming audiences" and displaying "dramatic flair," according to a tribute in the 2002 U.S. Figure Skating Championships program.

Billed as "the Sweetheart of the Ice," she toured the U.S. and Canada for 15 years, giving more than 6,000 performances in two dozen venues, *The Times* reported in 1956.

Disney used her as one of two human models for the ice-skating sequence with [Bambi and Thumper](#) in the 1942 animated Disney movie "Bambi."

Life magazine put Atwood and her longtime Ice Capades skating partner Bobby Specht on the cover in 1946 along with a simple headline: "Ice Show."

In 1949, she married Harris, who was 27 years her senior. A year later, she gave birth to twin sons and had a daughter in 1952.

To make it easier for her to travel with young children, the Ice Capades prop shop built a portable nursery out of a 10-foot traveling trunk that could be rolled into her hotel room, her son said.

When her sons reached school age, it was time for Atwood to establish "a real home" and retire, she said upon announcing her decision.

On her farewell tour, she starred in an Ice Capades production of "Peter Pan" that was a condensed version of the Broadway show. She made her entrance flying above the audience. It was, she often said, her favorite role.

Donna Arlene Atwood was born Feb. 14, 1925, in Newton, Kan., to Chester and Attie Atwood. Her family moved to Albuquerque, N.M., before relocating to Los Angeles when she was 9.

From age 3, she had taken dancing lessons. After her father died when she was 13, her older brother gave Atwood her first pair of ice skates.

Her marriage to Harris proved "stormy," according to the 1973 book "Whatever Became Of?"

The couple divorced in 1959 and Harris sold the Ice Capades in 1963 for a reported \$5 million. He died at 70 in

1969.

Atwood, who never remarried, eventually moved to Marina del Rey and in her later years lived in Palm Desert.

Once her children were grown, she began coaching young figure skaters in the early 1970s after growing "tired of doing nothing," she told The Times in 1978.

"I really like to see kids get started right," she said, "and I'm a bug on position."

She is survived by her sons, Don Harris, a Paramount Pictures executive, of Ventura, and Dennis Harris, a lawyer, of Manhattan Beach; daughter Donna Greenfield, a real estate agent, of Boston and Washington, D.C.; and five grandchildren.

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