

## Ria Johnston 98, dies in Bunnell - August 20, 2011



Ria Johnston, who died Saturday at age 98, was one of the original skaters in the traveling Ice Capades show in the 1940s. (Johnston family)

Ria Allen Johnston didn't even have to audition when John Harris picked her as one of the original skaters for the traveling Ice Capades show in the 1940s.

The Bunnell woman was living in New York when the promoter saw her gliding across an ice rink and invited her to become one of the skating beauties who toured the country, made movies and helped raise \$50 million in war bonds after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Her six years with the Ice Capades were just the tip of an iceberg of life adventures.

Johnston, a widow, died Saturday at 98, at home where she lived with her daughter, Nell Brown.

Born in Jacksonville on May 9, 1913, she moved to Flagler County with her family in 1919.

She attended Florida State University in the 1920s when it was a small women's college, taught preschool at a Methodist church in the 1930s and had moved to New York where she was studying violin in the 1940s.

"Mr. John Harris, who was establishing this ice skating company, asked her if she would like to audition in Philadelphia," Brown said. "Mom thought he was coming on to her and she went to the rink manager to complain."

When Johnston learned Harris was the real deal, she went to Philadelphia. Without even an audition, Harris hired her on the spot.

In 1945, A.B. Johnston, a back-home friend she kept in touch with, asked her to leave the show and come home to Flagler County to become his wife. She did, had three children, volunteered at church and in schools, tended garden, taught Sunday school and traveled.

At 87, Johnston climbed out of the emergency hatch of a stranded cable car in the North Carolina mountains.

In later years, when her mind was good but her health failed, she lived with Brown under nurses' care.

She shared stories with her retired son-in-law and, although blind, enjoyed listening to Alex Trebek ask Jeopardy questions.

"I miss her already," said son-in-law Jim Brown.

"Miss Ria and I were close," said Janet Powell, a church friend. "When she wasn't able to go to church any more, I took her chicken and dumplings. I loved to listen to her stories."

A long-time neighbor and former student, Ray Mercer, 85, said at age 4 he was in her pre-school class.

"As my teacher, I loved her. She was fun and loved children. When she returned from New York, it was like she had never gone," he said.

In recent years they would chat.

"There is no house between mine and hers," Mercer said. "I will miss enjoying pound cake with her."

Johnston is also survived by two sons, John and Albert Johnston, both of Bunnell, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Craig Flagler Palms Funeral Home is in charge.