June 21, 2017 - RIP Bob Bennett - Ice engineer extraordinaire and man for all seasons.

Willy Bietak Productions is extremely saddened to report the passing of Bob Bennett, Senior Ice Engineer for the company since its inception in 1986. Bob was instrumental in our success due in part to his exceptional skill with the mechanics and operation in the Ice making process. His creative genius allowed for ice equipment and rinks that could be quickly installed and precisely maintained to allow all skaters from Olympic Gold Medal Winners and Championship Hockey Teams to family's who first ventured onto a Holiday Ice Rink the absolute best experience available.

Robert "Bob" Bennett was born on Nov. 18th 1920 in Oklahoma one of six children. His family was part of the Oklahoma Land Rush. His grandfather delivered ice to the Calvary. They kept the ice in large holes in the ground. He had ice in his blood from early on!

His brother was an assistant to Gypsy Rose Lee. Bob was very proud of that. Because of his expertise, Bob was in demand for all Ice skating related film projects. He was the Ice Engineer on the 1951 Live TV series "Frosty Frolics" and many "Holiday On Ice" broadcasts. One of his early projects was the 1961 film "Snow White and the Three Stooges" with the Stooges and Olympic Gold Medalist Carol Heiss. On another film starring Olympic Gold Medalist and film star Sonja Henie they put black dye in the ice. They had to have 2 dresses made because the black spotted the dress!

Bob's first ice rink installation was for a show on the Aircraft carrier USS Lexington. He went on to travel America and the world making ice for shows in Mexico, Japan, South Africa, on the beach in Santa Monica and even at the Hollywood Bowl. He was a champion of Ice innovation and improvement. Always seeking ways to improve the ice skating experience, he was instrumental in the invention and

creation of the aluminum plate floor system universally used for today's touring ice shows and portable hockey rinks for the NHL.

Although he did not have his own Bob was a fan of children. He had a teddy bear mounted on the Zamboni at the Ice Capades. He rigged a string to pull so it would wave at the kids in the audience while he resurfaced the ice.

Bob cultivated many skills and talents in his remarkable ninety seven years of life. During WW II he was employed as a carpenter by the military and lost his hearing when a shell from a Japanese plane landed near him on Midway Island just after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He went stateside and utilized his skills to build prototype airplane models for the Air Force. He had an artistic eye and appreciation for beauty. He was an amazing portrait photographer. He was the only one to photograph Elvis Presley when he visited the Ice Capades a few decades ago and that picture made the papers! He was also a creative leather and wood carver and collector of magnificent wood boxes and sculptures. He had an extensive collection of vintage and antique ice skates and was a collector of scientific mechanical tools, sculpture and porcelain. He was a good craps player who always reinvested his winning in art. He liked fast cars and motorcycles.

One of Bob's closest associates and host of the Ice Follies and Ice Capades "Mr. Debonaire" Richard Dwyer beautifully expressed how he felt about Bob: "He was a wonderfully talented gentleman who contributed so much to our success in the professional Ice Skating World. He kept our careers going and always was so supportive and encouraging."

Bob Bennett represented the "Best of Everything"; he bought beautiful carvings, artwork, everyday items; he drove Mercedes and Porsches, he rode the best BMW motorcycles (with a Lalique statue on the front fender). If it was not top quality he would not have it. The same applied to his work. He always looked for a better solution when it came to portable ice rinks. He and Bob Ullrich (from Beverly Pacific Refrigeration) would get into lengthy and sometimes heated discussions about the available technologies and how to implement them. The outcome was always as close to a pristine quality as it could be. Bob had a great appreciation of everything beautiful, whether it was Nature or the applied- and the performing Arts, he loved it all. We will miss him very much!

It's Real Ice in Convention Hall for Skating Show

From Hutchinson New Herald, Oct. 14, 1950

And with thanks from Bob Recker from his historical files.

Real ice will be used on the floor of Convention Hall for the skating production of Icelandia.

Bob Bennett, refrigeration engineer who is responsible for the ice part of the show, said Friday almost every person who comes in asks the same question: "Is it real ice?"

Bennett assures that it is but the first minute his back is turned, a spectator sneaks up to the edge and touches ice before being finally convinced.

Ice making for the 30 by 40 rink is a full time job for Bennett. It takes him most of the night before the show is produced to get the ice ready for the 36 Icelandia performers.

Placing ice on the Convention hall's floor will be one of the easier jobs for Bennett. He at one time built an outside ice rink in Sacramento, CA when the mercury stood at 110 degrees.

Overseas tours have taken him to Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. In Manila, it was so hot when he made a rink that people decided he was a superman and he had several job offers to remain in Manila.

The show carries its own ice making equipment on a 33-foot long van. That equipment includes a compressor, condenser, brine cooler, and a condensing brine cooler, and a circulating pump. Forty coil sections, 20 feet long and 18 inches wide circulate the brine and are responsible for freezing the water.

As the first step in laying the rink, a large rug is placed on the floor to protest the finish. Next sheets of fake boards are placed over the rug. This is for insulation and prevents moisture from collecting and freezing underneath the floor.

On top of the board comes tar paper which is added to seal off moisture from beneath.

Then the 40 coils, about an inch in diameter are distributed evenly over the 30 by 40 foot space. A load of sand is spread evenly over the pipes until the sand barrel covers the pipes.

After all that is completed, Bennett is ready for the ice work.

The coils are attached to the pump on the van which forces the brine into the coils. This brine previously is chilled by ammonia in the van.

Using regular city water and a garden hose, Bennett applies a light spray of water to the sand surface.

Successive sprays of water are added and allowed to freeze until the ice reaches a depth of about one inch.

Bennett attempts to hold the rink ice only a couple of degrees below the freezing mark. At this temperature, the hollow ground skate ladies dig in better and allow better maneuverability than when the ice is colder and brittle.

For some reason – Bennett does not know why - water in some towns, freezes to a better softer ice than in others. Regardless of the temperature, Bennett said water from some cities causes brittle ice.

To keep the ice at the best temperature requires constant supervision. When the crowds begin arriving just before show time, their body heat acts like a stove to the ice and it begins to melt. The pumping unit has to be speeded up to handle the required additional freezing.

Bennett came into the business by accident. The radio program 'People Are Funny" wanted an ice rink and as Bennett was an available refrigeration engineer, he was asked to do the job. Since that time, eight years ago, every road ice show to leave Hollywood has carried him along when he is available.

To repair the destruction caused o the rink by the skaters, it is scraped off during an intermission. Then another spray is added to make the surface even.

Bennett said after the people find out definitely that the ice is real, there is one other question they always ask: "what do you do with the water after the show is over?"

"It's easy," Bennett explained. "They forget we are dealing with ice and not with water. We just chip the ice and haul it out."