Rotobowling Never Quite Caught on in Greece

by Bill Sauers

In the late 1940s, as bowling was becoming more popular, the residents of Greece had several choices of where to bowl, including Boem’s on Edgemere Drive and the Charlotte bowling hall on Stutson Street. Along the Ridge there was the Lyon’s Den, Domm Brothers, and Ridge Bowling, but with no AC and the dependence on pin boys, they were not what anyone today would call truly modern. The first truly “modern” bowling hall in the Town of Greece was first proposed by the Fasano family. Their plan would not only bring a modern bowling hall to the town, but at the same time introduce a new game that might revolutionize the bowling industry.

In 1946, Michael Fasano and his sons, Ernest and Donato, purchased the Lee property at the intersection of Dewey Avenue, Maiden Lane and Stone Road and within a year proposed building a “Huge” Shopping Plaza which would include a 24 alley bowling hall. The facility would not be the standard bowling game, however, but a new revolutionary game called Rotobowling.

First patented by Orville Whittle of Florida and being franchised around the country, it was unlike regulation bowling. The game used a 94-foot carpeted alley with lights along the edge, rubber cushion banks on each side, and hazard pins suspended over the courts. The balls were propelled down the alley with a device that looked similar to an upright vacuum cleaner. The game was dependent upon a player’s ability to bank shots rather than on physical ability. Scoring combined the total number of pins downed and the number of times the ball was banked.

It seems the Fasinos had some trouble explaining the game to the Town leaders who had the mistaken impression that it was a gambling game with an elaborate pay-off device. Gambling of any kind, including bingo, was illegal in New York State at the time. There was also the fear that the bar in the facility would be too close to Barnard School. By the time things were worked out with the Town, the Fasinos began to realize there was no future in the game. They probably discovered that people were not amused with a noiseless game that took no physical effort.

The Fasinos than looked for other opportunities and in 1954 opened their plaza with a new modern Loblaw’s grocery, Cramer’s Drug Store and several other stores, including a restaurant with a bar. We can wonder if the Fasano’s realized that as they opened their plaza, bowling was in fact, being revolutionized. Down the road a mile and a half, Sam Mink at his Ridge Bowling Hall was introducing the Rochester area public to the AMF “pinspotter”, the first automatic pin setting machine, the single most revolutionary item in bowling history.

Modern bowling halls would eventually come to Greece, but not without a struggle. In 1956 Schantz Construction proposed a bowling hall opposite the new Northgate plaza and in 1957 a hall was proposed at McCall and Stone Roads on the Frear Estate. They were both opposed by neighbors and the Town. But soon Dewey Gardens and nearby Terrace Gardens were opened, followed by Maiden Lanes in 1960.

History has all but forgotten the Rotobowling game, and the Fasino’s proposed plan. Luckily for the Fasinos, they realized the public didn’t want to play their game and gave up their Rotobowling franchise before construction began. They did build a plaza, and although the tenants changed throughout the years, the plaza itself lasted nearly a half century.