

A return to yesteryear:



Eighty years ago, there were none. Fifty years ago, there were more than 4,000. Today, the hawk-eyed movie hound might find America's highways and byways peppered with a few hundred drive-in movie theaters — dusky, almost Mesozoic monuments to nostalgia, a different zeitgeist that played host to submarine-sized automobiles; an endless parade of cheap-o, teen-oriented flicks; and a sparkly eyed, almost willful naïveté.

Remembering the American cultural landscape of the past half-century without the drive-in movie theater — after all, where would Danny have pined after Sandy in “Grease,” or the Greasers have covertly met in “The Outsiders”? — is like trying to recall snow cones without ice. But no such arena existed until, circa 1932 in Camden, N.J., chemical company magnate Richard M. Hollingshead Jr. began experimenting with outdoor projection in his expansive driveway. This led to the world's first formal drive-in theater. Its slogan? “The whole family is welcome, regardless of how noisy the children are.”

“Drive-in Movie Memories” director Kurt Kuenne believes this “family-friendliness” (especially in the pre-television world) was a huge reason for the drive-in theater's initial success. “Ultimately, the drive-in movie experience was an event that combined the romance of the automobile with the romance of the movies — the ability to be ‘alone but in a group’ under the stars,” says Kuenne.

Joe Bob Briggs, the syndicated film critic and humorist known as the “drive-in movie guy” for more than two decades (his late-night “Joe Bob's Drive-In Theater” was, in its heyday, the highest-

rated show on TV's The Movie Channel) and who currently boasts a significant Web presence at www.joebobbriggs.com, says the explosion of drive-ins in the 1940s and '50s was an expression of, uh, auto-erotica.

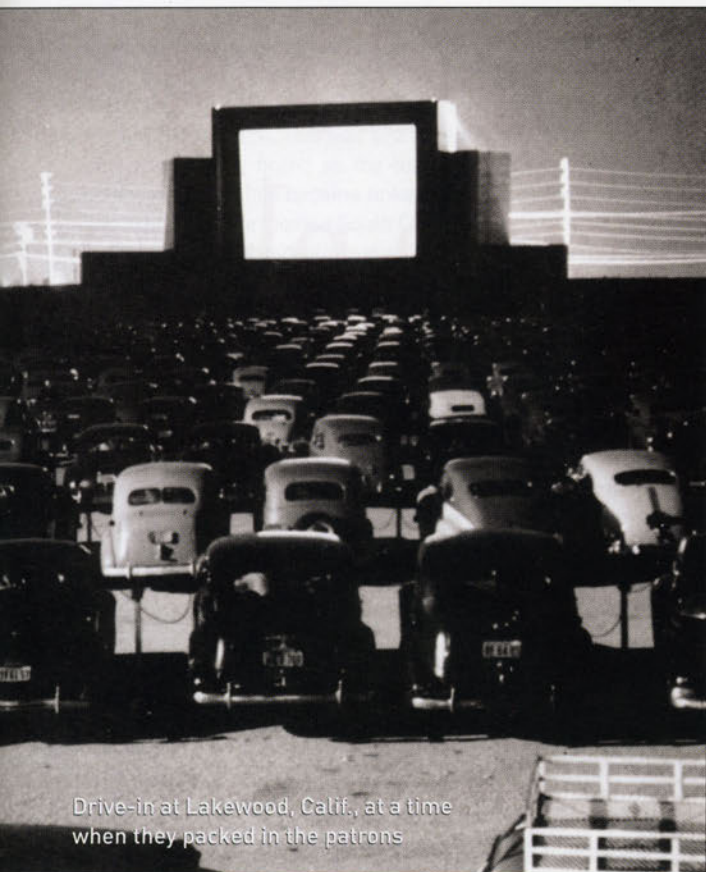
“After the War, cars were big, cheap and plentiful. People wanted to do everything in their car, including see movies,” Briggs (real name John Bloom) says. “You could relax in the car, sleep in the car, watch movies in the car and — ahem — do *other* things in the car.”

This latter point, that drive-ins provided a comparatively safe haven for nubile teens to study anatomy, led to measurable shifts in the types of films Hollywood produced. Much like the success of “Jaws” and “Star Wars” launched a new wave of blockbuster tentpole flicks in the 1970s, the sharp increase of window-fogging adolescence at drive-ins heralded a new interest in quick, cheap genre fare, dubbed “drive-in pictures.”

“A scary movie is the best date movie. The jumps and jolts bring a boy and a girl closer together, but the Frankie Avalon-Annette Funicello beach pictures were great, too,” says Kuenne, whose 2008 film “Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father” was named one of the year's best documentaries by the National Board of Review. “These are quick, cheap films aimed toward exploitation, catering to a teenaged audience. You could miss big chunks of these pictures — for, uh, whatever reason — and still be able to jump right back in to the story.”

But by the 1980s, home video exploded, allowing large families and dating teenagers alike to watch whatever they wanted in the privacy of their own homes. Meanwhile, land values skyrocketed,

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Drive-in at Lakewood, Calif., at a time when they packed in the patrons

making it bad business to continue operating drive-in theaters. "Once land developers realized they could build shopping malls on the same area where a drive-in theater was operating, they realized they could be using that space to make money all day and night, every day of the week, not just on weekends, in the evening, when the weather was agreeable," says Kuenne. "That, plus the explosion of home video, effectively killed the drive-in movie theater."

Jon Bokenkamp, writer-director of the 1995 documentary "After Sunset: The Life & Times of the Drive-In Theater," believes that such venues were a perfect crystallization of a very specific American moment and now serve as a metaphor for simpler times. "The drive-in was a product of its time, but it doesn't necessarily translate well to modern times," he says. "It's a wonderfully romantic idea, but if you want to see a blockbuster, the projection and sound at a modern theater just can't be duplicated at a drive-in."

But reports of the drive-in movie theater's total demise have, as it turns out, been somewhat exaggerated. Indeed, hundreds of drive-ins still run regularly across America, offering audiences a blast from the past — a cozy, communal, nostalgia-drenched moviegoing experience; a time machine to a different era. In her forthcoming film, "Going Attractions: The Rise and Fall of the American Drive-in Theatre", filmmaker April Wright traveled to every state except Alaska to film more than 400 open, abandoned or former sites of drive-in theaters.

With the help of Wright, Kuenne, Bokenkamp and Briggs, Moving Pictures presents our list of the Best Drive-In Theaters in America (in alphabetical order).

■ **Admiral Twin**, Tulsa, Okla. One of the few remaining drive-ins along Route 66, Admiral Twin is featured in the Francis Ford Coppola film "The Outsiders." "This place is special," says Wright. "It's a two-

sided screen made entirely of wood and has historical status as one of the largest standing wood structures in the United States."

■ **Amusement Park Drive In**, Billings, Mont. Built completely from recycled materials, including a movie screen originally used in Wyoming, Amusement Park Drive In works hard to keep crowds coming — even if it's not for the movies, strictly speaking. "Last I heard, the owner — who came from the carnival business — is installing a roller coaster around the screen," says Wright. "Whatever keeps 'em coming."

■ **Boulevard**, Kansas City, Kan. The best of three drive-ins in the Kansas City area, Boulevard is the first theater to install Sony Digital DTS Sound. "You can get it from the speakers or your FM car radio," says Wright. "It's *almost* as good as movie theater sound."

■ **Capitol 6**, San Jose, Calif. Widely believed to be California's most successful operating drive-in theater, it also offers multiple screens and a rotating schedule of a half-dozen or more films. "It's well kept up, well run, and the projection and sound quality is good," says Kuenne, who believes the theater continues to survive because of California's perennially moderate weather.

■ **Ford-Wyoming Drive In**, Dearborn, Mich. Boasting nine screens and the largest car capacity of any drive-in, present or past, Ford-Wyoming still does a booming business. "With Detroit auto workers on shifts, this drive-in has crowds coming in all night long," says Wright. "I was there at 3 a.m. recently, and there was a *huge* line of cars waiting to get in."

■ **Movie Manor Motel**, Monte Vista, Colo. Perhaps the most indelible, memorable drive-in in the country, this is a motel built around a standing drive-in theater, with each motel room facing the movie screen. "You can lay in bed and watch the movie from the comfort of your room," says Kuenne. "It's quite a magical experience that no one else has replicated." Bonus points for Movie Manor because each motel room is named after a movie star. "I stayed in the John Wayne Room while I was there," Kuenne says.

■ **Scottsdale 6**, Scottsdale, Ariz. While the rest of America's drive-ins were being torn down in the late '70s, this multiplex was just being built. "It was trying to compete with the indoor theaters of the time," says Wright, who loves the drive-in's "unique architecture, with large, round snack bars and projection rooms." While many other drive-in theaters added screens to their original design, Scottsdale 6 was actually conceived to project multiple movies on multiple screens, giving it a big edge in the tech category.

■ **Shankweiler's**, Orefield, Penn. Drive-in completists simply *must* visit this one, opened in 1934 and operating ever since. It is the oldest drive-in theater in continuous operation — in the world.

■ **Sky-Vue**, Lamesa, Texas. Family owned-and-operated for three decades, Sky-Vue boasts one of the best drive-in theater playgrounds in the world. "A lot of drive-ins removed their playgrounds in the '70s, usually due to maintenance costs or increasing insurance liability, but this place still has a wonderful family atmosphere," says Kuenne, who also gives a hearty thumbs-up to the venue's world-famous Chihuahua Sandwich, an original creation. "It consists of two corn tortillas fried flat, their special house chili, onions, lettuce, pimento cheese and jalapeno peppers," Kuenne says. "I had two or three one night and highly recommend them."

■ **Starlight Six**, Atlanta, Ga. Classic cars, awesome local and touring bands, plus current movies on six screens highlight Starlight Six's annual Drive Invasion celebration. Opened in 1949, the Six is not high-tech, or even especially beautiful, but its dedicated celebration of community moviegoing makes it a marvel. "And you can actually camp out and spend the night at the drive-in during Drive Invasion," says Wright. "Which is pretty cool." -MP