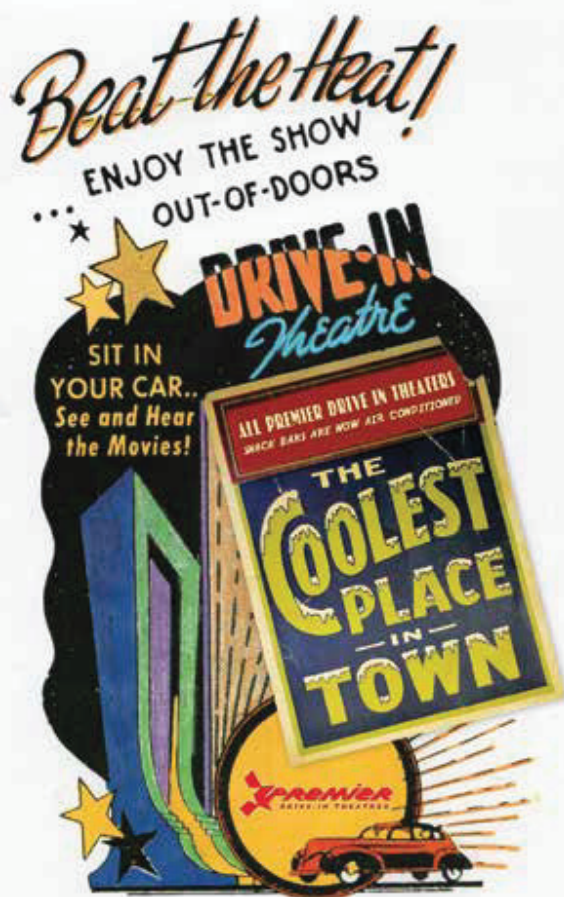


# LET'S ALL GO TO THE DRIVE-IN and Have Ourselves a Treat

By Lorraine Payette



**Y**aba-daba-DOO! With a scurry of feet and a cloud of dust, the Flintstones, Rubbles, Dino and Baby Puss pile into the car at the end of a long day working at the gravel pit in Bedrock to take off for the drive-in movie. The main feature for the evening is "The Monster", and as the sun goes down, everyone eagerly awaits the best entertainment in town.

Every episode of "The Flintstones" started with a trip to the drive-in. There wasn't a family around who didn't indulge in this perfect way to spend an evening together. No air conditioning? No TV? No other way to entertain the kids on a hot summer's evening? No problem.

Richard M. Hollingshead Jr. was onto something big when he decided to experiment and show a movie in his backyard. The first drive-in opened in Camden, New Jersey, on June 6, 1933, with a huge marquis boldly announcing "Drive-In Theatre – 'World's First' – Sit in Your Car – See and Hear Movies" with prices of 25¢ per car, 25¢ per person, three or more people \$1.00".

By the time it reached its peak in 1958, there were 4,063 theatres running in the US and 250 in Canada.

At the drive-in, everyone could have a private viewing of a great show in a public venue. It didn't matter what you wore or who you were – your car was your own private box and you were the lord of this domain. It was a deal that couldn't be beat – always a double feature (sometimes triple or even an all nighters') for the same price as a ticket for the indoor theatre. The kids could cry or fight, the dog could get over excited, you could talk or laugh or cry or throw popcorn and it was okay. No one would tell you to sit down or shut up because this was your space to have a good time your way. You could sit in the car, in front of the car, or even on top of the car.

Dad would open the doors to the family vehicle, and everyone would rush to get in. Mum packed a picnic meal; the kids would be in their PJ's with favourite toy and blankets. The family dog would hop in with the kids and off you'd go for a great night of fun.

Every good drive-in theatre had a picnic and play area set up next to the big screen. No puny thumb operated job here – a good screen measured 50' x 100' (about 112' diagonal). For sound you parked next to posts and hung the attached speakers from your car windows. If you got lucky and the space beside you was empty, you could have two and pretend it was stereo. Families could enjoy each others company in the shadow of the screen, all watching the kids and sharing the end of the day.

As the sun went down and the mosquitoes came out, everyone would race back to their cars from the picnic area. The short subjects would start, followed by a children's movie and then something for the entire family. A playbill might consist of Porky Pig cartoons, a newsreel, "20,000 Leagues under the Sea", "Paint Your Wagon" and "The Ten Commandments". Kids had regular



Top: Thousands of people at a time could enjoy a private showing of a good film in a public venue

Right: June 6, 1933, Camden, New Jersey – the start of a phenomenon

bedtimes back then, and most would be asleep before the end of the first feature, waking occasionally to the sounds of adults in the front seat. For tiny tots, it could get confusing. You would not remember getting home, and then wake up after having strange dreams of sailing in the Nautilus with Captain Nemo while Moses sang “Hand Me down That Can of Beans”.

When kids started doing their own driving, the drive-in presented new, interesting challenges. Teenagers quickly figured out just how many of their friends could fit in the trunk of a D-body Chrysler so they could sneak them in. It got hot, smelly and crowded in there, and sounded like a train running over you if it started to rain, but it was all part of the game. University students parked on hillsides within sight of the theatres and watched the movies from there, making up their own dialogue.

Sometimes, car windows would get very steamed up due to extra entertainment going on inside. More than one life started at a viewing of “War of the Worlds” or “I Was a Teenage Wolfman”.

Whether you patronized the Mustang, Sunset, Starlite, Stardust or The 5, it was always the place to go. You could count on long lines at the snack bar where popcorn, hot dogs and ice-cold pop had their own special taste. There were even longer lines at the washrooms as people hurried to get done before the next show started. More than one kid got a first taste of onion rings or pepper steak at the drive-in.



Most of these great entertainment centres are gone. They slowly lost their lustre over time, becoming crumbling hulks by the roadsides. Great screens fell apart, theatres were rezoned and demolished. A few still remain, bravely facing the latest threat – digitization of movies and projectors.

But the great memories will always be there, ready for reliving. At least 16 drive-ins are still alive in Ontario and ready to share that experience with a new generation of theatre goers. Yaba-daba-DOO! LH

## Editors Note

Growing up near Alexandria, On. there was a drive-in at the Ontario/Quebec border near Lancaster called the Border drive-in. In Pembroke where I lived for 20 years until 2011 there was a drive in called the Sky-Light which did operate up to the year I left. Kingston has a drive in at Family Fun World. For a list of locations of drive-in theatres in Ontario, please go to [www.waybacktimes.com/drive-inlist.html](http://www.waybacktimes.com/drive-inlist.html).