

Remember Drive-In Movies?

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¹One of the most vivid memories from my childhood was going to the drive-in movie theater with my mom, aunt, sister and cousins. For a few years all the kids somehow fit into the back seat. Later, we took Grandpa's truck and perched in the truck bed. The experience was so different than a movie theater. We waited all afternoon for it to get dark so we could go. Mom could sneak in all kinds of food you couldn't take into the multiplex, like one of those giant sandwiches all sliced into pieces. And, best of all, every time was a double feature. At our drive-in there were three screens. I vividly remember that a movie called *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* was playing on a screen behind us. My aunt spent half of our movie looking for kids who were turned around to see what that movie was about and swatting us on the head.

²Even though I studied marketing in school, I never forgot about the movies and the drive-in theater that, like so many others, eventually closed and was replaced by a shopping center. So I bent my career in that direction. First I joined an online community that shared stories and pictures about the drive-ins of old. Then I found a drive-in near me so that I could see if it was as fun as I remembered. Finally, with some money I'd saved, I bought a drive-in that was about to go under and saved it. As owner of the Hi-Way Drive-In, I'd like to share some of my passion with you, but I'd also like to explore a particular concern.

³Drive-ins are interesting for many reasons. According to Professor Rodney Luther in the 1950 *Journal of Marketing*, most were non-segregated. This was one of the few entertainment venues of the time that could say that. Ellen Bryan Voigt's (1987) poem about a traditional movie theater, "At the Movie: Virginia, 1956," notes the segregation, as African Americans "paid at a separate entrance, stayed upstairs." Professor Luther also points out how much more convenient the drive-in was for persons with disabilities or mobility issues. The Rebel Circus blog (2014) argues that drive-ins displayed the complexity of American life in other ways: there were cars filled with sleeping kids in the backseats next to cars with necking teenagers. The drive-in was American democracy on display.

⁴Of course, drive-ins are a vanishing species. America's love affair with its cars has cooled a bit since the 1950s. Stadium seating with rocking chairs and surround sound makes traditional theaters more attractive to many. Drive-ins, which used to number over 5000, have dwindled to 338 nationwide (Lumford, 2014). The Apache Drive-In in Globe, Arizona closed in 2013 in part because the cost of the conversion to digital projection is too expensive for a break-even business whose land is becoming too valuable not to sell as its town grows up around it (Gleich, 2013)

⁵Solutions to such a thing are hard to come by, if at all. At least two drive-ins have GoFundMe pages, but the donations are slim. The Fairlee Drive-In ran a successful Kickstarter campaign in 2014, but that is the only success story. I was only able to enter the drive-in business because I was lucky with some investments and wanted to try my hand at something I loved. But I can't do this forever if no one comes to see the movies.

⁶Blogs have tried to raise awareness, like Rebel Circus and Nerve, but knowing is not the same as doing. As Walt Disney said, "The best way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing". And once we are all aware, what then? Take something like disease awareness, for example. We can all get more screening because we are aware, but as the American Urological Association says about prostate cancer (Carter et al. 2013), sometimes that doesn't really help. I get worried, take expensive and painful and unnecessary tests, and, as with prostate cancer for a certain age of men, don't actually increase my lifespan.

⁷In this case, what would we do with our awareness? Do we even know what it would take to make a dent in the problem?

⁸Well, if we are in a denting mood, I've got some ideas. Spread the word! Help out a drive-in's funding campaign. Like the Save The Drive-Ins Facebook page and share its content with others. I think there are some people who don't even know the industry exists anymore! Of course, this is all bigger than you and me. And money and awareness will only take us so far. But what can you do, individually?

⁹There are some practical things you can do to help. Come see movies at my drive-in, or any drive-in that happens to be near you! Every one of the 338 that remain is run by people who are barely making ends meet and doing it because they love it. They replaced the drive-in in my hometown with a Wal-Mart. How many of the people who work there could say the same?

¹⁰I don't know if I would have imagined I would be doing this as a career when I was a kid, but I'm glad I am. You probably had a different passion as a child. Perhaps you moved on (in 7th grade I did want to be an architect). But perhaps you, like me, are working on something you've always loved. That's great. If so, you can understand why I just want to ask you all to go to the movies!

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