

# The Movies Take to the Pastures

By JOHN DURANT

You can eat your dinner, get your car washed and see a movie all at once in the drive-ins, which theater owners despise and some people sneeringly call "passion pits." There are 2200 of them in the U. S. A. now, and they're really making money.

**F**OR the fifth year in a row now movie attendance has been going down, down, down like Alice's plunge to the bottom of the rabbit hole in her Wonderland adventure. The cinema dive, though, is no dream. It is real, and the industry is chewing its nails, wondering whether to blame its favorite whipping boy, television; the 20 per cent Federal tax on tickets; strikes and war fears; Hollywood's pinkish tint, or too-good weather, which is supposed to keep the customers away from the movies. Whatever the causes, attendance has been slipping away steadily, although recent figures indicate that the decline may now be slowing up. There is, however, one phase of the industry which has been running contrary to the general trend and bringing smiles to an increasing number of exhibitors.

It is the drive-in business, which has expanded phenomenally since the end of World War I. At the time of Pearl Harbor, for instance, there were less than 100 "ozoners" in the country. None was built during the war, but by 1947 there were 400, double that number the following year and now there are a probable 2200 in the United States and forty in Canada.

As one movie mogul famous for his malapropisms said, "They are sweeping the country like wildflowers." And Bob Hope recently commented, "There will soon be so many drive-ins in California that you'll be able to get married, have a honeymoon and get a divorce without ever getting out of your car."

Hope is not exaggerating too wildly. Here, for instance, are some of the things you can do at various ozoners without taking your eyes off the screen or missing a word of dialogue: You can eat a complete meal, get your car washed and serviced, including a change of tires, have the week's laundry done, your shopping list filled and the baby's bottle warmed. All this while the show is on.

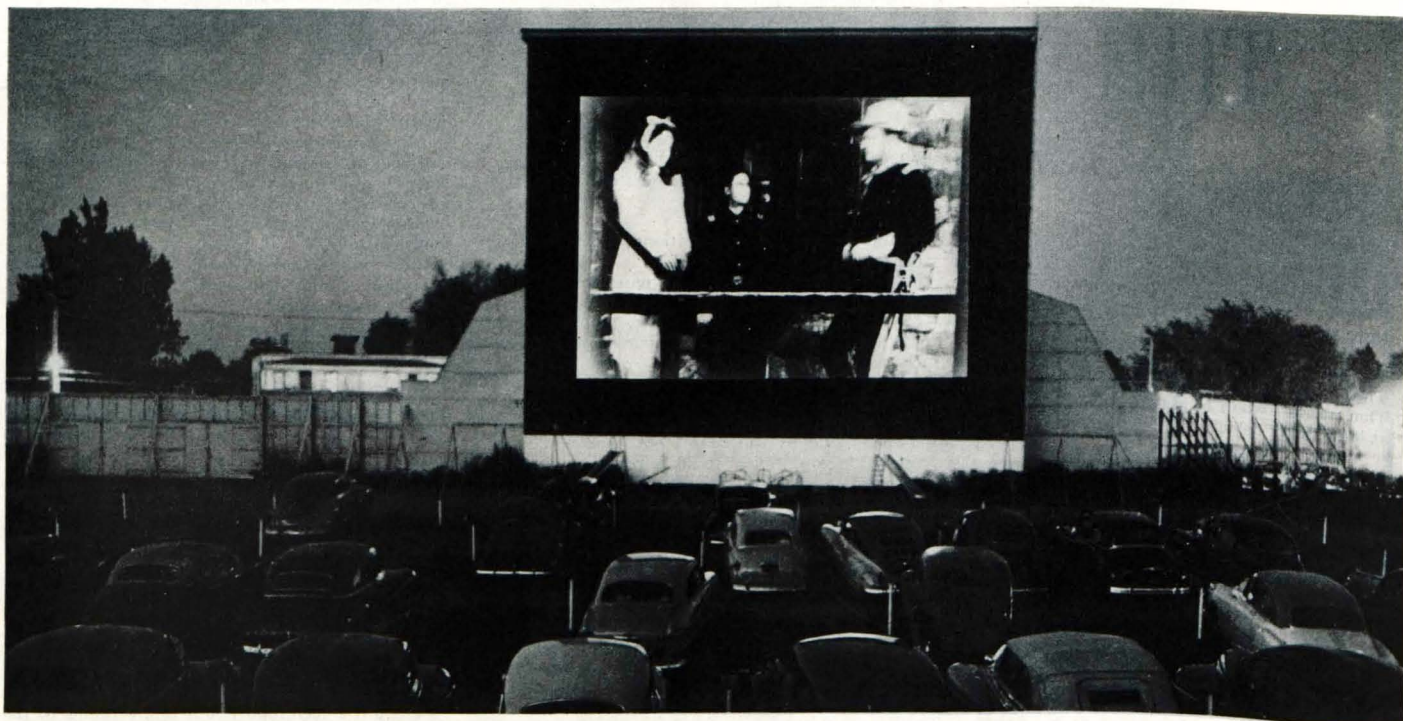
It's a cinch to attend a drive-in. You buy a ticket without getting out of your car, drive to one of the rows and take a position on a ramp which causes the car to tilt slightly upward at the front end. Alongside there's a speaker, attached to a post, which you unhook and fasten to the inside of your car window. Volume can be controlled by turning a switch, and although at first it may seem odd to be hearing sounds from a speaker next to your ear, with the action on the screen a couple of hundred yards away, the illusion is acceptable. If you want to leave in the middle of the show you replace the speaker in the post and drive forward over the ramp and make for the exit. Thus, there is no climbing over the laps of annoyed spectators as there is in the conventional theaters.

If Hope thinks that California is becoming overcrowded with drive-ins, he should visit Ohio and North Carolina, where every cow pasture is crowned by a screen. North Carolina, about one third the size of California in both population and area, boasts 125 ozoners to California's ninety-five. Ohio has 135. While California's theaters are larger and

hold more cars, the concentration of so many ozoners in the two other states is way out of proportion to their size. Why, no one knows. But the business is full of oddities. Texas, as you might expect, leads the country with some 200 theaters. Then come Ohio, North Carolina and Pennsylvania in that order, followed by California, where the drive-ins operate the year round and everybody owns a car.

Due to the rapidity of construction—and closings, in some regions—the business is in a constant state of flux, and figures are changing daily. One thing is apparent, however, and that is that the trend is up and the saturation point has not yet been reached. When it comes—movie people put it at 3500 drive-ins—it is anybody's guess whether there will be a sudden collapse, like the miniature-golf-course fiasco in the '30's, or a gradual leveling off, with the best-run theaters surviving.

Most conventional theater owners, who despise the ozoners and battle them at every turn, say the thing is a fad, that it's going too fast and, anyway, the places are no more than parking lots for petters. Variety, the bible of show business, calls them "passion pits with pix." Needless to say, there are no figures on petting frequency in drive-ins, but I can offer the result of a one-man nonsnooping survey made by myself. I talked with dozens of exhibitors, and all firmly stated that no more went on in the cars than in the rear seats of the conventional theaters. All were quite touchy on the subject, by



There's a playground for kids under the loom of the screen at the Mohawk Drive-In, near Albany, New York, and also John Wayne in a Western saga.

GEORGE BURNS

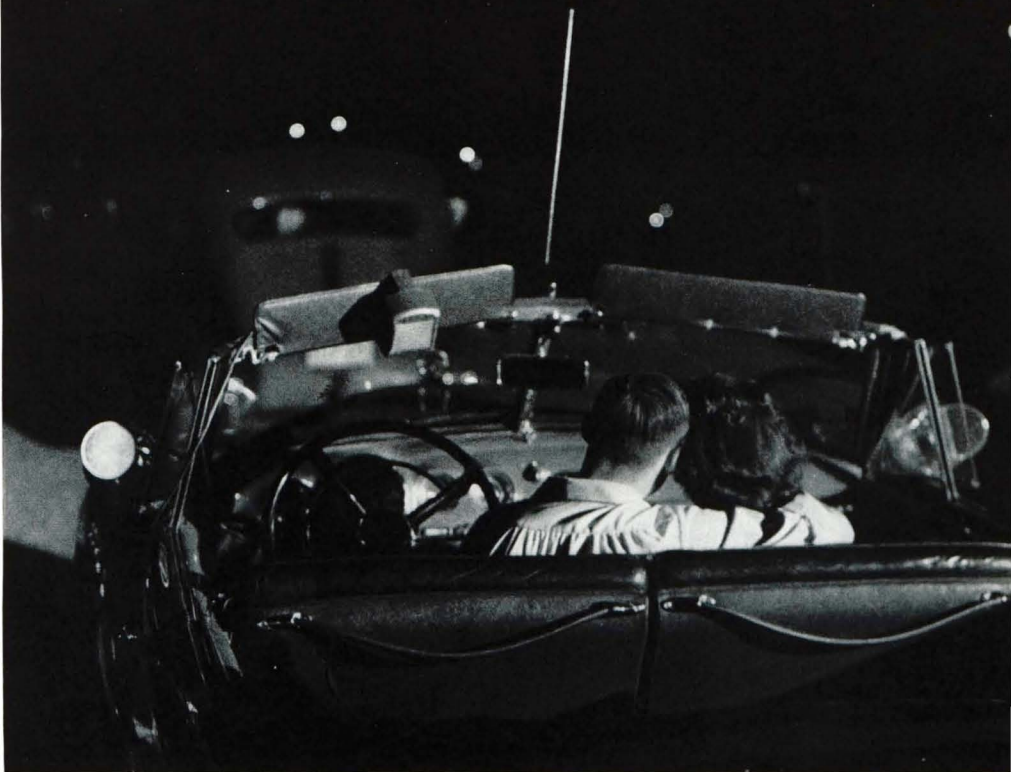


the way. Only one said he had ever had a complaint in that direction from a patron.

Leon Rosen, who has managed both types of theaters for the Fabian Theaters, a chain of eighty conventionals and seven drive-ins in the Middle Atlantic states, told me that more than 3,000,000 people have attended the ozoners he's managed and he has never received a single complaint. He could not say the same for his indoor theaters. "Sure, a fellow slips his arm around his girl in the drive-ins," he said. "The same as in the regular theaters or on a park bench. No more than that. And there's one thing you don't get in the drive-ins that you get inside. That's the guy on the prowl, the seat changer who molests lone women. There's none of that in the drive-ins."

Still, the bad name persists and is kept alive by gents'-room gags which probably stem from the pre-war days, when drive-ins were completely blacked out and circulating food vendors and ushers were a rarity. But what disproves the cheap gags more than anything else is the type of audience that fills the drive-ins today. It is by far a family audience, with a probable 75 per cent of the cars containing children who, incidentally, are let in free by most drive-ins if they are under twelve. This is the main reason the ozoners have been so successful—their appeal to the family group. They are the answer to parents who want to take in the movies, but can't leave their children alone at home. No baby sitters are needed. And the kids are no bother to anyone in the audience. There's no vaulting of theater seats, running up and down the aisles or drowning out the dialogue by yapping.

A workingman told me that the drive-ins had saved his family from a near split-up. He didn't like the movies, he said, and his wife did. The result was a battle every Saturday night, when she wanted to see a movie and he refused to go. Saturday night was his beer night, and no movies were going to interfere with it. His wife went anyway, and he stayed home sipping beer and keeping an eye on Junior. But this didn't work out. The weekly argument went on, and the breach between them got wider. Then, one Saturday night, he agreed to take in a drive-in with her, provided he could take along a couple of bottles of beer. After that everything was solved. They now go every Saturday night. She sits in the front seat with Junior and watches the flickers. He sits in back alone, with his beer in a bucket of ice, and pays little attention to the movie as he sips (Continued on Page 85)



Managers of outdoor movies claim that no more necking goes on in their amphitheaters than in the back rows of the indoor houses, and that there is considerably less opportunity for prowling mashers.



A mobile refreshment cart. Concessions are very valuable in the drive-ins—the ice-cream-and-soft-drink stand averages about half the box-office take.



Mr. and Mrs. Lowell Page, Jr., of Oneonta, New York, solve the baby-sitter problem by taking the kids—who get in free—with them to the drive-in.

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the brew and smokes cigars comfortably with his legs crossed. Now everybody is happy, and there's no more talk of a split-up.

After the war, the drive-ins began to go all out for the family trade. The so-called "moonlight" flooding of the parking area and aisle lighting came in, and exhibitors built children's play areas, with swings, slides, merry-go-rounds and pony rides. Some installed miniature railroads which hauled kids over several hundred yards of track. Picnic grounds, swimming pools and monkey villages appeared in the larger theaters. While the youngsters disport themselves at these elaborate plants, their parents can have a go at miniature golf courses and driving ranges or they can play shuffleboard, pitch horseshoes and dance before live bands.

That is the trend now in the de luxe drive-ins, ones with a capacity of, say, 800 cars or more. They are becoming community recreation centers, and the

idea is to attract people two or three hours before show time. It gives receipts a boost and the family a whole evening's outing, not just three hours at the movies, according to the new school of exhibitors. Many old-time managers disagree.

"This carnival stuff cheapens the business," one told me. "And the biggest mistake the drive-ins made was to let kids in free. They can't go to the indoor houses for nothing, so a lot of people think we show only rotten pictures and they stay away."

The manager touched a sore point here. The films shown in the ozoners are in the main pretty frightful. Most are third-run pictures, rusty with age. Drive-in exhibitors are not entirely to blame for this. Film distributors point out that their first loyalty is to their regular customers, the all-year conventional houses, and the ozoners must wait in line or pay through the nose.

It doesn't seem to make much difference what kind of pictures are shown, because drive-in fans are far less choosy than the indoor variety. A large part of them never have been

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regular indoor movie-goers, and almost any picture is new to them.

The ozoners have struck a rich vein of new fans. Leading the list are the moderate-income families who bring the kids to save money on baby-sitters. Furthermore, they don't have to dress up, find a parking place, walk a few blocks to a ticket booth and then stand in line. The drive-ins make it easy for them and for workers and farmers, who can come in their working clothes straight from the evening's chores, and for the aged and physically handicapped. They are a boon to the hard of hearing and to invalids, many of whom never saw a movie before the drive-ins. They draw fat men who have trouble wedging themselves between the arms of theater seats, and tall men sensitive about blocking off the screen from those behind. Add the teen-agers to these people, and you have a weekly attendance of about 7,000,000, an impressive share of the country's 60,000,000 weekly ticket buyers.

The father of the drive-ins is Richard M. Hollingshead, an inventor and manufacturer of chemicals, of Camden, New Jersey. In 1932, when he was in his early thirties, Hollingshead got an idea that movies could be shown outdoors and viewed from cars. He began experimenting. He put his 16-mm. projector on a stand in the driveway of his home, erected a screen on supports and sat in his car to see what it looked like. It looked fine as long as there wasn't another car in front of him, blocking off the screen. It was apparent that on a level surface only the front-row cars could get a complete view of the picture. Hollingshead, after much experimenting, devised the fan-shaped park-

ing area, the terracing of rows and the inclined ramp whereby people in cars which are tilted upward with the front end toward the screen can see over the cars in front. It also allowed proper vision for those in the rear seats of every car. Hollingshead was granted a patent on his ramp invention—the key to all drive-ins today—and with his cousin, W. Warren Smith, as partner, formed the Park-In Theaters, Inc. On June 7, 1933, in Camden, they launched the world's first drive-in, a 400-car theater with eight rows and a thirty-by-forty-foot screen. It was an immediate success.

On the strength of Hollingshead's patent (No. 1,909,537), the two partners went into the drive-in business. They furnished blueprints to prospective builders and issued franchises which granted exclusive territorial rights. For this, Hollingshead got a flat fee of \$1000 plus 5 per cent royalties on gross receipts.

During the next four years several theaters opened in California and New England—there were none as yet in the South and Middle West—and all paid license fees and royalties to Hollingshead. All except Loew's Drive-In Theaters, Inc., an Eastern chain, which had paid royalties in 1937, but refused to pay the following year, on the ground that Hollingshead's patent was invalid. It was not a patentable invention, said Loew's. Hollingshead immediately canceled the license and sued to collect unpaid royalties plus damages for patent infringement. He won the case, but lost the second round when Loew's appealed to the Federal Circuit Court in Boston, which last year, in reversing the lower court, stated in effect that the three features Hollingshead had origi-



nated—the fan-shaped parking area, terracing and the ramp—were not patentable. Hollingshead has since appealed to the United States Supreme Court, but it has refused to hear the appeal.

That's the way it stands now, and though Hollingshead today is not bitter, neither is he overjoyed by the way things have worked out. "It seems a shame that a person who creates and develops a new idea and goes through a procedure set down by law to obtain a patent cannot obtain remuneration when his patent gives everyone else profits," says Hollingshead, and adds, "If I were not independently fixed, I might feel bitter." He might well feel that way, for if his patent had been upheld he would have received royalties of staggering size. Drive-ins will take in more than \$150,000,000 this year.

On paper the drive-in-movie game looks like the one to be in. Building costs are small compared to those of regular theaters, and profits so large that it's possible to pay off the initial investment in two or three seasons. All you need besides a little capital is an empty lot in a good location and some equipment, a lot of which you can get on the cuff from theater-supply companies. Film rentals are as low as fifteen dollars for a feature picture, and the refreshment stand averages about half the box-office take.

That's on paper, of course, and it really works out that way sometimes. I watched one drive-in, the Del-Sego, near Oneonta, in Central New York, grow from a potato field to a 544-car theater in a few months. It cost \$75,000, with miniature golf course and driving range, and now, in its second year, grosses between \$3000 and \$4000 a week. It was built by William Warnken, a twenty-nine-year-old war veteran, and his partner, Bert Mitchell, neither of whom had any previous experience in show business. They picked an ideal location. There was no other drive-in within fifty miles, and the area has a population of 70,000 living within a radius of thirty miles. Ozoners draw up to thirty miles' distance, whereas ten miles is about the limit for conventionals. The partners expect to pay off the nut in another year or so. Meantime they labor only seven months a year.

But that is the sunny side of the picture. The pitfalls are many. Foremost are drainage and surfacing, items many an inexperienced builder has overlooked until he discovered after the first heavy rainstorm that he owned a lagoon. Leon Einhorn, one of the country's foremost drive-in architects, says that draining and surfacing a lot can run as high as \$100,000.

Another hazard is the weather. In the Northern states, where the season is limited to six or seven months, a late spring or an early fall, or both, can put a severe dent in the box office. Peter J. Marrone, manager of a 450-car theater at Sturbridge, Massachusetts, got an example of New England weather last spring when, after a balmy week, he opened on April thirteenth and was greeted by five inches of snow and twenty-seven cars.

There are many other problems peculiar to outdoor exhibitors: stalled cars that have to be towed away, flat tires, cars out of gas and cars whose horns get stuck during a love scene. Sometimes kids get lost on the way back from the refreshment stand and wander around bawling for the family car. When this happens, the youngster is usually brought to the projection

booth by an usher, where an announcement is made over the public-address system. Don Kennedy, a projectionist in a Michigan ozoner, likes to tell about the time a little girl was brought into his booth. A few minutes after the announcement her father showed up, and the two started out hand in hand. A little later they were back in the booth again. This time the old man was lost too.

Loss and damage to the in-car speakers is a current expense to operators. Often fans drive off forgetting that the speaker is still hitched to the car, and rip the thing from its post.

There is a limit to the number of rows in the drive-ins. In the rear rows of the big theaters the screen begins to look like a postage stamp and you need field glasses to tell Betty Hutton from Hopalong Cassidy's horse. Thus, the largest lots are limited to about 1000 cars, but a few run a couple of hundred more than that. The Four Screen Theater, in Chicago, however, takes 1200 cars and has only ten ramps. It has four screens, and so far is the only one in the country of its kind.

The Four Screen is one of the most elaborate plants in the country, at the opposite pole to the hundreds of converted cow pastures that sprinkle the rural sections. Some of the latter are unbelievably wretched, with screens nailed to trees or telegraph poles and

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The three phases of modern living are sin, suffer and repeat.

—HAROLD HAYNES.

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the parking area choked with weeds and stones. In a drive-in near Salt Lake City recently a woman drove up to the box office during the show and angrily demanded her money back. She told the manager that a cow had stuck its head through the car window and licked her face.

Apparently movie fans will try anything to beat their way in. Last summer, in Toledo, the police got a frantic call from Mrs. Herbert McManus, who reported that she had just seen a kidnapping from her window. She saw two men push a couple of women inside a car's trunk, close the lid and drive off at a high rate of speed. While city, county and state police set up a three-county roadblock, Mr. McManus gave chase in his car. Soon he was back home, calling the cops and telling them they'd better call the whole thing off. The kidnapers, Mr. McManus said, pulled into a drive-in, where the men bought two tickets and drove inside. Then the trunk was opened and the women got out and sat in the back seat to watch the movie for free.

The drive-ins, however, are willing to try about anything to lure fans through the turnstiles. One chain, for instance, holds auctions before show time and invites patrons to bring in anything they want sold; another runs bingo games based on speedometer mileage, and a third has a charge-account system open to anyone with means of identification at the gate.

But that's nothing to what may be coming. A theater-supply company is about to manufacture an outdoor screen on which it will be possible to see movies in broad daylight. With this screen and in-car heaters in every auto, the drive-ins may soon be giving the conventionals something more to worry about.

THE END