



Chicago's Starlite Drive-in, one of nearly 4500 open-air theaters constructed in the last ten years, has spaces for nearly 2000 carloads of movie-goers.

Big Boom in Outdoor Movies

In spite of TV, "ozone theaters" are having their biggest year ever, with chicken dinners, rock-and-roll music, and other lures for the whole family.

By Frank J. Taylor

In the up-or-down show business, the hot box-office bonanza nowadays is a Cinderella stepchild of the motion-picture industry known in Hollywood's vernacular as "the ozoners." Until recently, this stepchild was haughtily ignored by movie tycoons; now Cinderella is being welcomed into the cinema fold with open arms. This change of heart is justified; the once-despised orphan now brings home almost one fourth of Hollywood's income, sufficient to be the difference between profit and loss.

As might be suspected, an "ozoner" is one of those weird-looking open-air drive-in movies which stud the landscape outside American and Canadian cities, a phenomenon of the motor age found nowhere else on earth. In an ozoner, the customers bring their own seats, those of the family car. The management

obligingly provides a parking spot in front of the lofty screen, plus plenty of fresh air, hot dogs, pizza pies, pop and popcorn, along with jumbo screen stars two or four stories high. Anybody who wearies of the evening's drama can stretch out and go to sleep. About half of the patrons, knowing they are going to sack it before the show is over, come in their pajamas.

"Stand by the exit gate and peek into the cars as they leave a drive-in movie," suggested stocky, exuberant Robert L. Lippert, dean of open-air cinema enterprisers, whose chain of twenty-three ozoners stretches from Southern Oregon to the California-Mexico border. "You'll get an eye-opener," continued Lippert. "In nine out of ten cars you'll see young children asleep on the back seat and on the floor. That's why the ozoners are going over big. The drive-in

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When it's time for a change, parents may pick up fresh diapers for their offspring at the refreshment stand.



This playland at the Timonium, Md., drive-in helps keep the youngsters amused until the movie starts.

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movie is the answer to the sitter problem, and to the downtown parking problem. It's the answer to the young family's night out. It's the neighborhood theater of the future."

The enthusiasm flashing from Bob Lippert's black eyes is understandable. He is one of the fortunate pioneers who bet on ozone cinema when the well-heeled operators of "the hardtops," as Hollywood terms the conventional four-walls-and-a-roof movie houses, were laughing off the early and primitive drive-ins as a passing fad.

"Movie people thought I was absolutely crazy when I went around talking the butcher, the baker, and anybody who'd listen into putting a few dollars in those early drive-ins," recalled Lippert, who did just that to raise capital for his first ozoner in Sacramento, opened a dozen years back. Its lofty flapping canvas screen made the movie lovers look pretty grotesque when the wind blew.

But by what Lippert calls "the trial and error system," he solved the screen problem, and other problems as well, and moved up and down California's Central Valley, persuading other businessmen to risk dollars in additional open-air cinemas—four in Fresno, two in Modesto, until the chain of twenty-three extended from El Centro, near the Mexican border, to Medford, in Southern Oregon. Those who bet with Lippert on his ozoners shared the jack pot along with him.

By 1956, Box Office, the trade magazine that styles itself "the pulse of the motion-picture industry," reported that there were more than 5000 of the drive-in movies in the United States and Canada. Last year, when only a dozen or so new conventional theaters were opened in the entire country, 389 new drive-ins were launched at a cost of \$79,880,000 according to the Box Office survey. The pulse of the drive-ins is beating young and strong; that of many of the 13,000 older, conventional theaters is flickering. As the older picture houses are abandoned, few are being replaced, because it costs \$500 per seat to replace them, and only half that much to provide space for the bring-your-own-seats of the drive-in movie patrons, who, incidentally, spend as much for food and soft drinks at the concession stand as they do for entrance tickets. As a magnet for collecting nickels, dimes, quarters, and even dollars, the ozoner ranks with Coney Island.

The boom in drive-ins is a nationwide phenomenon. Weather has little influence on it. Illinois, for example, has 126 drive-ins, about average for a populous state. Pennsylvania has 226, North Carolina 274, more than California with 174. Texas boasts 472, many of them mushrooming out of the open prairie, midway between three or four cities, where each

is "the neighborhood movie for four hundred square miles." Canada has 221 drive-in movies, a number of them all-year-round operations, despite the cold winters. Scores of open-air movies in the northern states stay open through the winter. In some the owners provide small electric heaters for patrons' cars; other operators give each car owner a gallon of gas to keep the motor idling and run the car heater.

A surprise angle to the mushroom growth of the drive-ins is that nearly all of them were launched by comparative amateurs in the motion-picture entertainment field. While professional showmen kept on building hardtops, landowners, merchants, real estate, barbers, even farmers, with shoestrings for backers, converted cow pastures into open-air cinemas. One of the most lucrative chains, around Washington, D.C., eight drive-ins valued at over \$1,000,000, is owned by two enterprising Air Force majors, Walt Saunders and Bob Johnson, who started their first ozoner in 1949 with a shoestring of \$2000. A Long Island merchant, Sol Lerner, was able to build up a chain of seven drive-ins, which he sold to the professionals for over \$2,000,000. "Now Lerner spends his time changing suits," explains an envious neighbor.

A lot of these amateur amusement entrepreneurs, who did not know what

was in the book and what wasn't, resorted to gimmicks to lure patrons that are rated as downright unethical by veteran motion-picture exhibitors. Several Texas drive-ins, for example, operate laundries as a side line. The housewife, who might otherwise be spending the evening at home with the washing machine, drops her washing at the gate as the family enters the drive-in, and picks it up freshly laundered as she leaves—for a small consideration, of course. Some drive-ins offer warmed milk for babies, and fresh diapers, if their infant patrons forget to bring along a spare pair of pants. Others maintain nurseries and playgrounds for small fry, driving ranges for bored dads, open-air dance floors for teen-agers. Some offer "spook" programs, four shows lasting from midnight to dawn!

"The hottest firecracker in the drive-in-theater business," to quote an admiring film distributor, is Stanford Kohlberg, a short, round, swarthy character with intense blue eyes, who operates the Starlite Drive-In Theater on Highway U.S. 20, southwest of Chicago, which is a battleground of the ozoners. Kohlberg, who hails from an old Omaha vaudeville family, has tried so many come-ons to lure customers that he is rated as unfair competition by his more conservative rivals.

To kick off the 1956 summer season, for instance, Kohlberg lined up \$20,000

worth of live talent—bands, crooners, dancers and acrobats—for the last weekend in May. Dramatizing the weather gamble, which is the drive-in operator's nightmare, the heavens cut loose with the most torrential downpour Chicago had seen in years. But Kohlberg's troupers went on with the show, the crooners doing their best in the deluge that made them sound as though they were singing under water. And, pointing up the devotion of drive-in fans for their favorite amusement, more than 1000 customers turned out, in the face of storm warnings, to watch the show through moaning windshield wipers.

Kohlberg, who went broke operating hardtops just before the war, managed to reassemble a small nest egg by working in a Chicago war plant. While he labored, Kohlberg brooded about his lot and that of his fellow workers and dreamed of a new kind of amusement for the average family.

"I learned what it was to work all day at a greasy machine job, doing the same thing over and over," said Kohlberg. "I was frantic for relaxation. I know what it is for the man with four or five kids to have to dig into his pocket for an evening out. I thought, if a father and mother and all the kids could go to one place and have a good time together, that would be the greatest thing in the world."

Cogitating this idea put Kohlberg into the drive-in movie business. He found "angels" in two Chicago businessmen willing to bet on his ideas. They helped him buy eighty-seven acres near the suburb of Oak Lawn, "that babyland of Illinois," as Kohlberg describes it. Eight years ago, he opened up with a 1200-car drive-in, since enlarged to accommodate 1875 cars, plus 1000 seats for walk-in patrons. In 1953, Kohlberg decided to stay open all winter, and hasn't closed seasonally since.

Though rival outdoor movie operators insisted that Stan Kohlberg was plumb daffy to try to keep his drive-in open all winter, there were enough outdoor movie fans "as crazy as Kohlberg" who turned out night after night, to huddle snugly in their cars with motors idling to keep heaters functioning, to make all-year operation worth while. Nobody objected to the borealis around the screen pictures projected through raindrops and snowflakes. Nobody minded the cold winds off Lake Michigan. A couple of nights, sleet had cut down the visibility to a point where Kohlberg felt obligated to issue "fog checks" and advise patrons to come back tomorrow.

"Nothing but ground fogs close us down," boasts Kohlberg. "When the airports close down, we're closed down too."

Kohlberg has concentrated on lures that attract the customers in any kind of



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weather. Admission for adults is \$1.25; youngsters under twelve, as many as can be packed in a car, are free, and each gets a door prize. The \$1.25 pays for the movie, for dancing under the stars to music from name bands. It includes free milk for babies and free diapers if young mothers forget them. Kohlberg has a Kiddieland for youngsters too small to be interested in cinema drama. He has a miniature golf course and driving range for anyone in the family not interested in the picture. Three concession buildings purvey soft or hot drinks, pizza pies, hot dogs, hamburgers at popular prices. For one dollar Kohlberg sells his patrons a chicken dinner. One of his more brilliant ideas is the "Starlite Happiness Book," good for five or ten or fifteen dollars' worth of entertainment and food, sold on credit to any holder of a department-store or oil-company credit card. Kohlberg bills his charge accounts at the end of thirty days.

"Parents know their youngsters won't wind up in a beer hall," says Kohlberg. "With a Happiness Book a youth brings his girl to the Starlite, where we don't sell any alcoholic drinks. We even have attendants in the rest rooms to see that nobody spikes the soft drinks. The drive-in is the answer to the problem of wholesome amusement for teen-agers. I know, because I have seven girls and two boys, ranging from college age to three months."

This is a far cry from the early-day drive-ins, which were labeled "passion pits" by their hardtop competitors, because sin and cinema were thought to be inseparable within the confines of darkened automobiles. In the province of Quebec, Canada, drive-ins are still taboo, largely because the Catholic Church has not yet lifted an early ban on them. But elsewhere in Canada and all over the United States, the passion-pit problem seems to have resolved itself. The bulk of the patrons are young couples with children, to whom the drive-in is an opportunity to spend an evening out without investing in either a sitter or a parking space. The roughs, who apparently don't approve of the company of young parents with kids sleeping in the back seat, have gone elsewhere. To discourage the rowdy element and the liquor drinkers, the larger ozoners have special officers, with flashlights, patrolling the ramps.

In the Starlite Drive-In, Kohlberg can accommodate more patrons than Chicago's largest downtown theater. Several of his competitors whose drive-ins ring Chicago can do the same. The Essaness chain, which operates eleven hardtops as well as four ozoners, has about the same capacity in its largest drive-in, the Harlem Avenue Outdoor. Another, the new Bel-Air, which turned an unsightly old city dump on Cicero Avenue into a plush drive-in, has parking space for 2500 cars plus 1000 seats for customers who park outside and walk in. The M. & R. chain, which built the Bel-Air, also runs the Double Drive-In, with two movies showing at the same time on opposite sides of the huge metal screen. Ralph Smitha, manager of Essaness, once tried a four-screen drive-in, which wasn't a success. Smitha still considers the four-screener a great idea, even if the movie-goers didn't go for it.

"The drive-in attracts brand-new movie patrons," says Smitha. "Young families with children, young people with aged parents, people with dogs they won't leave at home, teen-agers, and college kids. You have to be where the customers can drive to your theater easily."

Smitha and most drive-in operators don't like to be close to shopping centers or race tracks on account of traffic congestion. They try to locate on a major highway into a city, because on hot summer nights many apartment-house dwellers like to drive out to the country for fresh air, just as young mothers yearn to escape the house for an evening.

"People like to go out without dressing up," says Smitha. "They can go to a drive-in in any kind of clothes."

The drive-in operators prefer not to be too near to roadside taverns or "clubs" that attract rowdies. Most drive-ins are now strictly chaperoned. Some work closely with churches and schools, offering their facilities free for Easter sunrise services and for outdoor civic gatherings.

Once he has his acreage, the drive-in proprietor, often a syndicate of local investors, lays it out, clamshell shape, with a screen and office where the clamshells would hook together. The ramps are graded in curves facing the screen, under which the office is usually located. It takes miles of underground wiring to connect the in-car speakers, located on posts between

cars. The posts also house the outlets into which are plugged the small electric heaters which plushier drive-ins offer as an inducement on cold evenings. In these drive-ins, every car, as it passes the ticket gate, is issued a car heater or, if the occupants don't want heat, a brass check; as they leave, the patrons turn in either a heater or the brass check.

In the center of the clamshell is the low concession building, which also houses the projectors and the toilet facilities. The combination cafeteria-soda fountain-candy counter is an all-important part of the drive-in, because the sale of food, hot and cold drinks, and candy accounts for a big bite of the drive-in's take. Many drive-in operators figure they can offer to run the movie on a bare break-even basis and make their profit from food, candy and drink sales. Some early drive-ins employed car hops to peddle food and drink. Now they run teasers on the screen, urging the patrons to come and get it, cafeteria style. They sell more over the counter, and sell fast.

In the larger 2000-car drive-ins, the rear ramps are one fifth of a mile from the screens, about as far as a picture can be seen without becoming fuzzy. The view from the last row is better, however, than that from the front row, dominated by a towering screen on which giant players as tall as a three-story house make love in soft, toned-down in-car speaker whispers. In Texas, some drive-ins have a rail behind the back ramp, where horses can be tethered or where riders can watch the pictures from saddles and their mounts can observe how the pampered nags of Hollywood earn their hay. These "gallop-ins" have become so popular that a few northern operators have borrowed the idea.

The drive-in boom is definitely a post-war phenomenon. In the past decade the number of drive-ins has leaped from 500 to almost 5000. During that time, the price tag on a 1000-car ozoner increased, depending on the cost of fifteen to fifty acres of pasture on a major highway near a center of population, from \$50,000 to \$500,000. The drive-in operators, most of them enterprisers easing their way into a fantastic new business, have accumulated a lot of lore on the habits of their patrons.

Instead of improvising, as the drive-in pioneers had to do, operators now can order their drive-in complete, except for land and ramps, from the Radio Corporation of America, which has come by a major stake in the business more or less by accident. RCA makes the bulk of the projectors, speakers, and even screens for the new open-air theaters. Another source is National Theater Supply. RCA even offers a drive-in package deal, including financing, to good prospects who have fifteen or more acres on a highway near a population center.

This makes a nice chunk of business. An average modern 1000-car drive-in is a \$250,000 investment, including some \$65,000 to \$70,000 worth of electrical equipment, and a \$25,000 metal screen that a 50-mile wind can't topple. It includes also a \$45,000 refreshment building, and \$25,000 worth of cafeteria equipment, all-important because up to 40 per cent of a successful drive-in's income is from the sale of food and soft drinks. A sizable drive-in has an annual gross income of \$750,000.

The way RCA got started as supplier to drive-ins shows the importance of being Johnny-on-the-spot at the right time, which was Camden, New Jersey, in 1933. That is where and when Richard Hollingshead and Willis W. Smith launched the world's first drive-in movie. Hollingshead took out a patent on the idea for the

ramps that elevated the windshields of his customers' cars toward the screen. The pioneer Camden drive-in encountered vociferous protests from the neighbors, because the high-volume loud speakers used in the first open-air cinema blasted the ears of everyone in the neighborhood. Hollingshead put that problem up to RCA engineers—largely because they were next-door neighbors—along with another question, namely, how to design a long-throw projector that wouldn't burn out after a few nights' operation. Also, how to keep the projector cool, so that it wouldn't damage the film which the exchanges were reluctant to rent to drive-ins on account of the heat generated in the long-throw projectors.

After many experiments, the RCA men solved all three problems and found themselves in the lucrative business of outfitting new drive-ins, a side line that has grown into an important division. The next speakers were located in pits, but the accumulated volume of the hundreds of small speakers was almost as bad as one big blast. Then the designers hit on speakers which attendants hung on bumpers, so that voices and music came booming up through the autos' hoods. That was pretty sepulchral, so RCA evolved a small, light, in-car speaker, which hung from a post between parked cars. All a customer has to do is reach out, pull in a speaker, and hang it inside his car window and turn the volume high or low, as he likes it. While they were at it, the RCA engineers designed translucent lights, enabling the customers to see where they were driving with the headlights off. Now, outside your car, a drive-in is as quiet and eerie as a moonlit graveyard.

Originator Hollingshead sold his patent to Smith, who founded an early Eastern drive-in chain, and licensed other pioneers, one to a city, to use the ramp idea. Smith happily collected royalties for a spell. The income was short-lived, however, because other promoters, eager to cut themselves in on the drive-in bonanza, contended that little humps of ground could not be patented. The argument went to court in a dozen infringement suits in as many states. When a Boston court ruled that the ramps were just so much landscape architecture and not patentable, the suits were thrown out of court everywhere, and the drive-in idea was anybody's. A rash of drive-in building broke out all over the country.

While the tall-talking Texans can boast that they have the most drive-ins, the Californians and the Floridians have been able to claim the poshest ozoners, at least until recently. In Southern California, where dependable weather makes drive-in cinemas an all-year-around enter-

tainment business, the operators have prided themselves on their landscaping and architectural designing. At best, drive-ins are anything but beautiful in the daytime, although at night the soft lights, the color on the screen, the stars above, and the neon entrances give them a certain eerie glamour. During the past two or three years, eastern operators, particularly in New Jersey and New York and other northern states, have invested sizable sums of money on landscaping, on the theory that it is in the daytime that Mrs. Housewife decides whether or not she would like to go to the movies, and which one she would like to see that night.

In recent years, many of the larger drive-ins have merged into chains. Scores of independent owners have turned their drive-ins over to chains to operate. The giant among the chains is Pacific-Drive-In Theaters, which has 38 major outdoor cinemas in and around Los Angeles, which is the drive-in hotbed of the country. Pacific-Drive-In is unique in another respect: it was bought by four veteran Hollywood movie tycoons who sensed the phenomenal potential of the outdoor cinema in time to capture the lion's share of the good sites for super drive-ins in the area. This has given Pacific an advantage enjoyed by drive-ins of no other area. Because of its mass coverage, Pacific can outbid the hardtops for first runs of big pictures, and frequently does so. Often half a dozen of Pacific's drive-ins will kick off a premiere simultaneously with two or three of the downtown Los Angeles and Hollywood movie palaces.

Whether or not this is worth while, except to prove that drive-ins are no longer the orphans of the movie industry, is a moot question. First-run pictures are rented by the exchanges on a bid basis which may give the distributor up to 70 per cent of the gate take, plus a flat minimum guarantee, leaving the drive-in operator less than a third. If he waits for a second run, the operator may keep up to two-thirds of the gate, the distributor one-third. Outside Southern California, drive-in operators have taken the attitude that they don't need first-run pictures to fill their ramps; second-runs will do just as well, because families are coming out for an evening anyway, so why not wait for a better break on the take?

In the East and Midwest, the drive-in chains have spread risks, weatherwise especially, by scattering their operations over large areas. The Loew chain operates twenty-six drive-ins extending from Connecticut to Florida. Smith Management Company of Boston has drive-ins throughout New England and the Middle Atlantic states and the Midwest, including the 2600-car Timonium, outside Bal-

timore. The whopper of all drive-ins, the 3000-car Troy, near Detroit, is in the Affiliated Theaters group. This giant is regarded as about as large as ozoners can be built, partly because of traffic problems, partly because of the distance from the screen to the back ramp. But the trend generally is toward larger drive-ins. There are now seventy in the country with a capacity of 1000 cars or more, including several that can accommodate more than 2000 cars. The latter have a greater seating capacity than Radio City Music Hall, the country's largest four-wall motion-picture palace.

Ever since the drive-ins began to flourish, Hollywood's most agile minds have been trying to figure out what type of cinema appeals most to outdoor movie fans. The answer seems to be action pictures in color. Color is all-important, because color pictures can be seen distinctly on the screen half an hour earlier than black and white. "Critic pictures don't pull in drive-in customers," one operator explained. "Drive-in movie fans like westerns, or any picture with action that fits into the holiday mood."

About the only problem that drive-in operators haven't been able to lick is ground fog. When a pea-soup fog settles, it means that, like the airlines, the drive-ins are fogged out. No matter how powerful the projector, the picture never gets to the screen. When the fog sweeps in, the drive-in managers get out the "fog checks," good for admission some other evening.

Solving the winter problem, according to operators who have kept open all year, is partly a matter of heaters, partly education. As summer draws to a close, the year-around operators in the colder areas begin flashing pep talks on the screen, reminding the customers that it is a lot more comfortable in a warm car in a drive-in than in a football stadium or on a golf course, and appealing to their pride. One of these come-ons used by the Garden Autotrium Drive-In of Ledge-wood, New Jersey, goes:

"Good evening, friends. It is certainly nice to know that we have so many wintertime drive-in fans with us this evening. You hardy folks may be interested to know that the temperature is now twenty-five degrees. We have always been of the opinion that real drive-in patrons would attend during the winter, just as they bundle up to go to a football game or ice skating. Here you have the advantage of the warm shelter of your own car. Why not tell your neighbors about our winter policy? They may think the drive-in theater is available to them only during the warm weather. The fact that you are here this evening proves that there are thousands of movie goers who would attend, but think drive-ins operate only from spring to fall. Pass along the good news that we will be here all winter, bringing you top entertainment."

According to Operator Wilfred Smith, this type of pep talk really gets them. He says people love to brag to their friends that they attended a drive-in movie when there was frost on the screen and ice was freezing in the puddles along the roadside.

The motion-picture industry now accepts the drive-in as "a phase of American life based on the decentralization of cities, along with supermarkets, shopping centers, and Levittowns," as one studio executive, David Lipton, of Universal-International Pictures, puts it. "The shift in population caused a shift in theaters. One modern drive-in takes the place of four little old-style neighborhood theaters. It is a phenomenon of the motor age, here to stay, so we might as well like it."

THE END



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