

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Drive-ins Did It

Raphael Holinshed was an English historian, whose *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* was published in 1587. More commonly known as *Holinshed's Chronicles*, this work was a major source for William Shakespeare, providing the plot of *Macbeth* and portions of *Cymbeline* and *King Lear*.

While "the Bard of Avon" produced most of his plays between 1589 and 1613, young lovers in the Twentieth Century had another Hollingshead to thank for their theatrical productions (but this Hollingshead thought they would be more for young families, not young lovers).

The drive-in theater was the brainchild of a chemical company magnate from Camden, New Jersey, named Richard M. Hollingshead, Jr., who tested his ideas by nailing a screen to trees in his backyard. The first drive-in opened on June 6, 1933, in Pennsauken, New Jersey. Hollingshead advertised, "The whole family is welcome, regardless of how noisy the children are".

That popular idea (that entire families could go to the movies without having to hire a baby sitter or worry about kids disrupting the audience) soon had drive-ins being built across the nation.

Film Daily Year Book 1942 published a list of ninety-five drive-ins across the nation in twenty-seven states, and Louisiana had only two (New Orleans and Shreveport). Back in the early 1940s, New Orleans' very first drive-in was on Canal Boulevard out by the Lake.

The country's obsession with the automobile spurred drive-in construction from the 1940s into the 1960s, especially in rural and suburban areas across the United States. The number peaked at 4,063 in 1958, and the Crescent City area had as many as ten by the

1960s. They were:

The Do, the Airline, the Jeff, the Crescent and *the Westgate* on the Eastbank of Jefferson Parish; *the Marrero, the Gretna Green* and *the Algiers* on the Westbank; *the Skyvue* in Gentilly (one of the most popular names across the nation); *the St. Bernard* in Arabi; and *the Tiger* in Slidell.

The Algiers Twin Drive-in was located at 3424 General Meyer Avenue. *The Crescent Drive-In Theater* acquired its name from the Crescent Airline Shopping Center, whose complex included the land it occupied at 1761 Airline Highway. Back in the 50s *the Crescent* shared its marquee with a Maison Blanche department store. *The Jeff* was at 4100 Jefferson Highway, the *Skyvue* at 5947 Chef Menteur Highway, *The Airline* at 4000 Airline near Cleary (now a Sams Club), *the Westgate* on Veterans Highway and *the Do* (torn down after showing its last B movie in the 1980s to build the Old Metairie Village Shopping Center and the upscale DeLimon Place condominium complex at 801 Metairie Road. Completed by Crosby Development Corp. in 1994, it was named for Henry DeLimon, who owned an orange grove on the property during the early 1900s.).

The drive-ins were great for the family, but soon teen wolves teeming with testosterone found the privacy of their car a most seductive surrounding for romance. Many Metairie moviegoers mused that *the Do* was more like *the Do It Drive-in*. In the 50s, this activity gave these theaters a reputation as “passion pits” in the media (as well as popular song).

The Everly Brothers tried to “Wake Up Little Susie”:

“We’ve both been sound asleep, wake up, little Susie, and weep
The movie’s over, it’s four o’clock, and we’re in trouble deep”

But she still wouldn’t wake up:

“The movie wasn’t so hot, it didn’t have much of a plot
We fell asleep, our goose is cooked, our reputation is shot”

The Reflections sang about their experiences in “Just Like Romeo and Juliet” (with apologies to the Bard):

“Gonna buy somethin’ I could ride in
Take my girl datin’ at the drive-in
Our love’s gonna be written down in history
Just Like Romeo and Juliet”

And for those not quite old enough to have experienced a drive-in visit, there’s always the *Grease* classic “Alone At The Drive-in Movie”

with Olivia Newton-John as Sandy singing:

"I'm all alone
At the drive-in movie
It's a feelin' that ain't too groovy
Watchin' werevolves without you ... (werewolf howl)"

She continues her lament with:

"Drinkin' beer in the backseat
All alone just ain't too neat
At the passion pit wanting you."

"Unsteamed windows" were a real problem for this conflicted *ingénue*. And if you were in the greater New Orleans area, "Pic" coils were available from the concession stands to repel another variety of neck feeders, the mosquitoes.

As with conventional movie theaters, the snack bar or refreshment center was the profit center for drive-ins. To push passionate patrons to the concession stands, trailer ads called snipes were projected on the screens to make the sale. Anthropomorphism played a big part with dancing hot dogs and animated popcorn boxes. Sometimes silhouettes of sophomores sneaking their sweethearts from their car trunks showed themselves across the screen. Oh, and "Please remember to replace the speaker on the post when you leave the theatre".

That sums up the drive-ins main components: large outdoor screen, concession stand, projection booth and ample parking lot for the cars with a sound system alongside each bay. At first, sound was provided by big speakers on the screen, but later by an individual speaker hung from each car's window (attached by a wire). Later on one could pick up the movie on the car radio.

Daylight savings time heralded the end of the drive-in because it subtracted an hour from outdoor evening viewing time. Color TV, video rentals and the whim of inclement weather contributed to the decline of drive-ins. The novelty wore off as suburban development spread further outward. Land became more valuable for development as 70s fare at drive-ins changed to exploitation films and sometimes to porn. It was time for a change. Today there is a nostalgic status given to the few that remain across the country.

Walker Percy, whose novels are set in and around New Orleans, mentions the "Moonlite Drive-In" in his first book, *The Moviegoer*, which won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1962. Delving deeply into man's dislocation in this age of modern malaise, Percy describes gnats swimming "in the projection light" as "the screen

shimmers in the sweet heavy air" and talks about the girls being just like "in the movies who won't put out until you prove to them what a nice unselfish fellow you are". Meanwhile, kids are sitting on "a bench under the projector" as they "eat snowballs".

Recent years have seen the rise of the "guerilla drive-in" movement that touts screenings via the internet. Devotees show up at odd screen locations (like walls of warehouses and bridge pillars) for showings that tend toward the indie, cult or experimental film. It's a far cry from when the "gorilla" on the screen was "King Kong" and the big ape making a pass was snuggled comfortably right there in the car.

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