

THE DRIVE-IN THEATRE (and other tidbits)

I had been working at the Rosa theatre for several years for La Verne Kienert. It was fun working there for him and his wife, and the rest of his family. We all had fun, but there were bad times and good times, as there are at other places of work. Fortunately, the good times outweighed the bad time by far.

Then one day, he asked me if I would like to work at the Drive-in as well. I was surprised by that question. I said 'YES' without hesitation.

It took a bit to get the place back into shape. He ordered speaker cones for the speakers that hung on the speaker posts and I had to go through all of them. I changed the ones that were bad and believe me, most of them were bad. I also went through the film projectors and carbon arc lamp houses. I checked the sprockets, rollers, the adjustments and whatever else I had to do. Then I went through the arc lamps. I tested them and made adjustments, then cleaned it all up.

The sound technician came in and we worked on the amplifiers. These were the old tube type and put out a lot of power for the two-hundred and some speakers we had on the grounds.

Meanwhile, La Verne's family was busy cleaning up the popcorn machine, candy counter and everything else in the vending area. They received a new soda-dispensing machine as well. The ice cream freezer was cleaned and new stock was brought in. Popcorn seed, candy and ice cream, soda cups, lids and straws. There were hot dogs, hamburgers, pizzas and whatever else they would sell.

Some painting was done and the rest rooms were cleaned up. The box office at the entrance was also cleaned up. I went through the letters for the marquee board that sat out by the highway and took an inventory.

For a test, I took a couple of reels of film from the Rosa to the Drive-in and ran them through the projectors. I made a few more adjustments on the projectors and arc-lamps, then checked the sound outside at each speaker. If a speaker ramp didn't work, I had to start digging up the wires and search for a broken wire that fed the ramp. It took about a full week to get everything working.

For music, there was a reel-to-reel tape deck in the booth and a few reel tapes that were left there. They were played for the pre-show and intermission music.

But the opening night came around and we were all very nervous. The first night, you can't tell what could go wrong until it happens. I'd say that they went pretty darn good. The yard had filled up with cars and it was a very interesting evening/night.

I, along with the other projectionists had to learn when dusk was setting in for it to be dark enough to start the movie and be able to see it on the screen.

There were times that the film would break, as it did at many other theatres. Sometimes it was due to projectionist error when he threaded the film in the projector, or if we got one film in that some other theatre had problems with it and didn't get it repaired right, then it would show up in our projectors. At times, it was quite chaotic. We would have to stop the projector and 're-thread' the film in the projector.

Also at times, but not as often, we would forget to change the carbons that created the light to shine through the film. They would burn down short and go out. Then we had to deal with the short – hot

carbon rods to take them out and put in new ones. We worked hard to keep the movie going without the problems showing up on the screen. We came up with a lot of tricks/secrets to do that and nobody else was none-the-wiser.

At times, if a film loop would slip through two sprockets, we learned how to work the loop back in-between the two sprockets and never have to shut the projector down.

For those of you who don't know it, the movies came in, in two film cans. The usual length movie had five to six reels of film. Each reel was about twenty minutes long. We would have to wind the film onto our reels, but at the same time, keep a check on the film for bad spots and try to repair them right away. We had bins that we put the film reels into to keep them somewhat clean. There were two projectors to show the reels on. "How did that work?" you ask.

We would first take the 'preview' reel and thread that up on one projector. That would usually be a short reel of previews. (We had to splice the previews together onto one reel that we used specifically for the previews). Then the first reel of the movie went on the other projector. At the start of the show, we would first arc up the lamp house and get the carbons adjusted right. Then we would start up the projector and flip a switch for the sound, and open the 'douser' for the light to shine through the film. At the end of the preview reel, there were what we called "Q" marks on the end of the last preview. The first 'Q' mark – we would turn on the other projector and get it running, then when we saw the second 'Q' mark, we would have to step on the changeover switch and hit the sound switch at the same time. Everything would change over with-in the blink of an eye. It was the same with the movie reels, but they had the factory 'Q' marks. They were seven seconds apart. This we had to do with each reel of film.

When we threaded up the film, it had what was called a numbered leader. We would thread up so the number five or up to seven, was in the window where the light shown through the film. That would give the projector enough time to get up to speed.

There were times that a reel didn't have the last 'Q' mark and we would miss the change over, but did it as quickly as we could. Then just before we re-wound that reel, we would make our own 'Q' marks on the end of the film. The 'Q' marks would only be on four frames of the picture, in the upper right hand corner. They were only there of a blink of an eye since the film traveled through the projector at the rate of twenty-four frames per second. So, if we blinked or sneezed at the wrong time, we would miss one of them. (sorry):).

Then there were times we became so interested in the movie, we would see a 'Q' mark show up on the screen. You talk about someone who jumps and nothing else matters, we would first start the projector running, then arc (light up) the lamp house, and then make the changeover. Sometimes we made it and no one ever knew what we were going through in the booth, or there would be a slight mess up in the movie.

To this day, I still see the 'Q' marks on the older movies.

And yes, we all had daytime jobs too. At times, a very tired projectionist would fall asleep. As the end of the film would go through the projector sound head, it would make a lot of noise over the sound system and that would wake us up, or the sound of horns outside would.

Talking about the sound, that is where along the one edge of the film, was two squiggly lines that contained the sound of the movie. A strong but narrow and thin light beam would shine through the film and be caught on an electric eye and sent to the pre-amplifier to be converted into sound, then that was sent to the main amplifier and distributed to the speakers.

Everything had to be kept clean, and that was hard to do since dust was almost everywhere from the cars driving into or out of the grounds. The projection booth was not air-conditioned and it would get hot in there. We had no choice to have the booth windows and the ceiling vent open.

We also had small fans blowing out the portholes where the pictures were shown through. That was to keep most of the bugs from coming in or landing on the projector lens.

The candy stand would become quite busy before the show started, and sometimes the projectionist would help. Again, with customers coming in and going out through the doors, dust and bugs would come in as well. We all worked hard to keep things clean at all times.

If the box office became busy, and that had happened a few times, the projectionist would help work the candy stand with one of the girls going out to the box office and help sell tickets. We would open up the 'exit' lane as a second entrance lane. We had to because the traffic was backed up out onto the shoulder of highway 10. There would be a traffic cop out there to help control traffic on the highway so there wouldn't be an accident. But that was only a few times.

At times, the box office would run low on change and someone would have to run some out to them from the candy stand, or at times it was the other way around.

And then there were the nights when some people were caught sneaking someone in – in the trunk of their car. That happened to me one night when I was patrolling the grounds. I was looking in one direction, and then someone parked not too far away started laughing. I looked and he was looking at me and laughing. I turned around a little more and saw someone open their trunk, then a person got out. I couldn't believe it. I went over to them and politely told them that they would have to go out to the box office and buy a ticket or they would have to leave. They went and bought their ticket.

There were also times that at the end of the night, some people would forget to hang their speaker back on the post before they left and would drive off with the speaker. The wires would tear out of the speaker post and sometimes, they would open their window and push the speaker out onto the ground. Others would keep the speaker and take it home with them.

At times, but not very often, a fight would break out on the grounds. Whoever was on patrol that night would have to try to break it up. But if it was a bad fight, the law would be called in. That didn't happen much, but it did happen just a few times.

One time, I also saw some heads bobbing up and down along on the other side of some lilac bushes at one end of the grounds. I knew what was going on and went over that way. I had only seen two heads at first, but when I walked around the end of the bushes, there were about five or six of them. I didn't know just to do, but I stood my ground. I asked them what they were doing and they said nothing. I replied, "I know what you're doing, you're waiting for the show to start and then you're going to sneak in. I hope you know that the person that owns the drive-in, owns this property too and you're

trespassing." I waited for the worst to happen when they stood up, but they turned around and walked away. You can't believe what a relief that was.

A couple of times, there was a fender bender on the grounds. Not much could be done, but have the drivers exchange information. They were very nice about that.

It was my job to clean the place up the next morning. I would hang the speakers back up on the posts (and straighten out the posts if needed), pick up all the trash and put it in a trash bag that I would carry with me. At times, those bags became full and heavy of there was a big mess.

I would find all kinds of things out there, (some were un-mentionable). But my favorite was finding full-un-opened beer cans. I didn't drink nor have I ever. I would pick up a beer can and shake it up and then throw it at the speaker post base (which was concrete) and watch it explode. It looked like a little bomb going off with the blast of beer flying up into the air. Sometimes if the can was just nicked, it would shoot a fountain of beer into the air.

Then Laverne asked me what I was doing with the un-opened cans of beer that I would find. I told him what I did. He said I should save them and put them in the fridge in the building so he could have a beer in the evening after the box office closed up. I did and he and his wife would usually have a variety of beer to choose from.

During the movie, my favorite to eat was a Kit Kat with buttered popcorn. The taste was great. A couple of the others that worked there didn't believe me. I told them to try it and they did. They liked it too and would also have a Kit Kat along with their popcorn. (Now you see what I started?)

At times, I would stand in the entryway from the (little kitchen) to the vending area and talk to some of the customers. It was interesting to have a short conversation now and then with the many different personalities. At times, the candy stand would get busy for a short time and since I was right there, I would help get them caught up. I wasn't the only one that did that, the other projectionists that worked there helped them a lot too on the nights they worked.

The weather had a roll in the picture being shown on the screen as well. I remember a couple of nights during a good hard rain, the picture would show up on the rain drops coming down. If the rain was coming down in sheets, you could see the picture in the sheets. It almost looked as though it was in 3-D at times.

And then there were the foggy nights. That made it hard for the picture to get to the screen. At times again, the picture would show up on the fog. Other times, the fog was so thick, I couldn't see the picture out there at all. It was just a bright beam of light shooting into the fog. I would check outside and a few cars would honk their horns because they couldn't see the picture. I couldn't do anything about it. Other cars didn't make a sound, but I guess that's because they were a rockin'.

In the later years of the Drive-In, business started to fall off some. The movies weren't what they used to be for one thing, and the 'fad' of the Drive-In was slowly going downhill. But the last weekend that it was open, there was a car club that talked to La Verne about having a car movie the next weekend. He thought hard about that since he had been thinking about closing it early. They way I understood it, is that there would be about fifty or more cars there.

La Verne and his wife worked hard to get the car movies for that weekend. We geared up for that event and he did extra advertising. We were ready for a final big night. There were seven cars that showed up before the movie started. After I got the movie going, I stepped outside to see how many more showed up, but it was just the seven cars out there.

At intermission time, there were still only the seven cars. Half way through the second movie, still only seven cars.

La Verne was standing outside and I went over to ask him about it. He was very disappointed about the whole thing. He said to me, "That's it, we're done." I looked at him and asked him if I should start taking the speakers down for the season and close up the buildings. He told me that it's wouldn't be for the season, it would be for good.

I couldn't believe it, but thought it might happen. I just didn't think it would happen this time, that maybe we would get one more season out of the place yet. But I was wrong.

I took care of things during the next week. I changed the marquee board to say "Thanks for the good years, we are closed."

I cleaned the box office and closed it up. Cleaned the bathrooms and candy stand and closed them up. Then cleaned the put things away in the projection booth and closed that up. I took the speakers down and put them away. Then drained the water system down and prepared that for the winter.

Most of the time, when the Drive-In was closed for the season, we still had vending stock in the place. Soda cups and lids, popcorn seed in bags, popcorn cups and oil and many other things. It sort of served as a warehouse for the Rosa.

I remember one winter, I went out there to get some supplies for the Rosa. There was a lot of snow on the ground at this one time. (I'm glad I had a four-wheel-drive truck). But even at that, I got stuck once going over a speaker ramp that had a snowdrift on it. I didn't realize when I first went into it, but then it seemed as though my truck was riding higher than usual. I looked around and then my truck dropped – it sunk into the snowdrift. I got stuck.

Good thing we had a shovel out there. I shoveled around my truck and got out with no other problems. I got the stock and took it back to the Rosa.

The Drive-In was a lot of fun not just for the people that worked there, but also for the customers.

It just saddens me that a fun place like that had to die.

A note about the film, the movies had some technical advancements made to them. At first, there was the automated system. When we twinned the Rosa, Mr. Settle decided to change over to an automated system. This is where we would take all of the film reels and splice them together onto a platter system. The film laid on its side now. It would come off the platter and go through a series of rollers and then into the projector, Then through another series of rollers and back onto another platter. The series of rollers acted as a regulator for the platter speeds. This eliminated the need for a projectionist to constantly remain in the projection booth. We only had to thread up the film, push the start button when it was time to start the movie, then we could leave the booth. If the film broke, there was a safety feature that would shut everything down. We had to put a marker strip on the film toward the end of

the film so the automation control would bring up the house lights at the right time, close the curtain, and shut things off.

At the end of the week (or the end of the film run), we would have to run the film off and back onto the individual shipping reels to be shipped out.

The rest of the changes that were made are what I have heard.

They discontinued the film part of the medium and went to a DVD projection type of showing the movies. And the latest I've heard is that they now just use a small circuit board and insert it into a computer and they just download the movie onto a memory chip from a satellite. Then they just insert it into another type of projector and the movie is shown that way. But let me tell you, the theatres do have to pay for these movies. They always did. Plus some film companies require a percentage of what the box office takes in (especially if it's a big hit).

After Mr. Settle passed on, I managed the Rosa on my own for his estate for a couple of years. When Titanic came out, I wanted it as a first run. The booker I talked to about it said the rates were steep. I told him I wanted it as a first run either way. The rates were a flat out dollar number, with a ninety percent of the ticket take for the first week. He thought I was sort of crazy, but I knew that if I got it right away, people would know that we were showing it. And they did.

People came in from all over – Appleton and the Fox Valley, Stevens Point and even Marshfield. We were filling up not only for the first week, but also for the next few weeks. And as the weeks went on, the percentage rates went down, eighty percent the second week, seventy percent the third week, and so on. We kept the movie for about six weeks.

The booker kept asking me to let it go because there were other theatres waiting for it as well. The film companies only put out so many 'Prints' of a movie and the films had to be shipped around from theatre to theatre. But with other theatres picking up on the movie after the first week (when the rates were lower), more people started going to their local theatres and our business for that film was beginning to slow down some. We would fill up to about half capacity. I figured it was time to let Titanic go. But we made a lot of money on that film.

I started at the Rosa in June of 1966 as my father was a part time projectionist. I would hang out in the booth with him and started doing some of the work just for fun. I liked it. I saw a lot of faces come and go.

I continued working at the Rosa until a couple of years after it became part of Roger's Cinemas chain.

I worked there until October of 2001. It was the best thirty-five years of my life. And it is true when they say, "If you enjoy your work, you will never work a day in your life."

Hope you enjoyed this article, but know you know what it is like to work at a Drive-In or any other theatre business.

Sincerely,

Jack Gill