

Drive-in movie theaters make comeback thanks to COVID

It was really the perfect evening. Late June in the summer of COVID, just before dusk, the rain clouds gathered in the northwest sky, but they would wait. In the company of friends, driving northeast on Manchester Avenue in Wabash to the junction of highways 24 and 13. And there it is, on the left, just beyond the intersection, an artifact from the past that has become very much a part of the present: The 13-24 Drive-In movie theater. Out front, a neon marque informing that “Pink Droid” has been postponed, but “Field of Dreams” would be showing this night, just as soon as the daylight faded. That will be \$6 for the car and all who are inside.

Through the turnstile, down the lane on the right, onto the road that runs the perimeter of the several acres of parked cars, sedans facing to the west, SUVs and pickups facing east so as to use the tailgate as a bench from which to watch the movie.

Some were milling around, talking with friends; others set folding chairs in place. All were focused to some degree the

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A MOMENT
Ed Breen



big white wall ahead, the surface that would become the screen for the journey to wherever the movie would take us. In this case, the Iowa farm field where Ray Kinsella would build his baseball diamond, a field not unlike the one on which we are parked for the next few hours.

The drive-in theater experience, once a staple of small town and suburban life, has been resuscitated in this summer of our discontent, re-creating a place to gather at appropriate social distance and, well, just

forget about all of it and watch a movie, in this case a movie which really ought to watch from the cheap seats in the farm field on a summer evening. Perfect.

The 13-24 Drive-In in Wabash has been there since Truman Rembusch built it in 1951 at a time when a flurry of drive-ins were being built around the country. In 1947 there were 155 of them; by 1951, 4,151 dotted the landscape at the edge of town. Marion had two: The Hi-Way Drive-In south on the Bypass and the Marion-Aire west of town on the north side of Ind. 18, not far from where the CIE plant now stands.

They were fashionable, fun and trendy. Keep in mind: These were the post-war years. Moms and dads were making babies, building homes, reshaping life in America. The TV had not yet overtaken us. You pulled into the drive-in, parked the car – in fact the first drive-in theater was in June 1933 in Camden, N.J. and its builder Richard Hollingshead called it a “park-in theatre.” You parked the car, rolled down one window from which you suspended the speaker that was attached to an ad-



The 13-24 Drive-in theater begins to fill up with movie-goers. Photo by Ed Breen

jacent post. That’s how the “talkie” part was delivered. Today, at the Wabash theater, you simply tune the car radio to a specified FM frequency, and with the quad speakers in your car, you have the theater experience right there in your own little world.

The story is told in New Jersey that Hollingshead came up with the car-movie combination as a solution to a practical problem: His aged mother enjoyed movies, but was a tad too portly to fit in a theater seat.

“He stuck her in a car and put a 1928 projector on the hood of the car, and tied two sheets to trees in his yard,” wrote movie his-

torian Jim Kopp. Problem solved. Idea born.

There are now about 330 outdoor theaters functioning in America; 17 of them are in Indiana. The Wabash theater is now owned by the Honeywell Foundation because several years ago these preservationists saw the need to keep it, even if movie-goers didn’t. There is Hummel’s over in Winchester, Mels in Throntown, GQT in Huntington, and a couple in the Indianapolis area. Tibbs Drive-In is out on the southwest side. In fact, in 1958 there were 120 outdoor theaters in Indiana.

Maybe the most notorious of them up into the 1970s was the Blackford

Drive-In, out south of Hartford City on Ind. 3. It had come onto hard times and hung on by becoming a purveyor of porn flicks back before they were as available as the nearest phone or laptop.

Local sport used to dictate that the young Turks would sneak in, go to the concession stand and have prominent local people paged on the public address system.

Changing times, TV in every room, and Daylight Saving Time pretty much turned out the lights on the drive-in experience.

But it’s still fun, even in old age and especially on an evening in summer.

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