

# A Fresh Look At Nebraska



By LuAnn Schindler

It started with a bed sheet and two trees.

New Jersey businessman Richard Hollingshead theorized he could boost auto parts sales by establishing a place where people could park their cars and watch a movie outdoors.

Hollingshead nailed a sheet between trees, put a 1928 movie projector on the car hood, and placed a radio behind the "screen" for sound. After patenting his idea, the world's first drive-in opened in Camden, New Jersey, on June 6, 1933. The movie: "Wife Beware." Admission: a quarter.

Now, for the "reel" truth.

Meadow Grove residents watched the first outdoor motion picture on June 10, 1925. That's eight years before Hollingshead received a patent for the drive-in.

Meadow Grove's businessmen determined free outdoor movies would attract business. City Hall's wall served as the screen. The projector sat in the bandstand across the street. By 1930, both Wednesday and Saturday night screenings were offered.

The town board voted against showing "talkies," citing them as a nuisance. But Cecil Rouse and Merle Simpson set up the equipment for a sneak peek.

The Meadow Grove News states in June 1931, three reels of talkies surprised the 2,000 attendees. Benches filled up, people sat in or on top of vehicles, and others stood to get a glimpse of the silver screen.

Ok, so actually it was brick....

At the peak of popularity in the 1950s, more than 40 Nebraska drive-ins were operated.

Now, two outdoor theaters remain. Sandhills Drive-in, the state's newest, opened in 1994 near Alliance.

Neligh hosts Nebraska's oldest drive-in. The Starlite Auto Theater - now known as the Starlite Drive-In - cost \$40,000 and opened July 31, 1952.

My family spent our fair share of evenings at the drive-in. Frames play in slow-mo in my mind.

Frame one: Chadron, 1966 and 1967. Parents attend summer school at Chadron State. On weekends, we frequent the Starlight. The best part: swinging on the playground equipment in front of the giant screen.

Frame two: Albion. When we'd venture along Highway 14 to our grandparents' house, a movie would flicker in the distance and come into view as we junction with Highway 39.

Frame three: Norfolk, 1975. My aunt takes my sister and me to Death Race 2000. Ick!

Frame four: Hastings. It's where I fell in love with John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever," suffered through cheap "B" movies on dates, and sat through a four-movie marathon during a rainstorm. Hey, we got free donuts after the third flick.

Frame five: Neligh's Starlite. Aunt Deana's sugared popcorn. Double features with my kids on family night. Five dollar mega-cups with one buck refills. Vanilla coke.

Even after we moved to Norfolk, Courtney and I would go on Friday nights. What 16-year-old wants to watch a double feature with her mom at the drive-in? My kid. Why? Quality time. Memories.

Drive-ins are more than a pop culture blast from the past. They represent simpler times. It's a place for family bonding, first dates stealing kisses, and concession stand goodies marching across the screen, all beneath the starlit sky.