Drive-ins? I miss the dancing hot dogs most of all

By Rhonda Wheeler
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Hey, where did all the drive-in movie theatres go?

They once dotted the landscape, lighting up night skies well before anyone had ever heard of TV, video games and cocooning.

In recent years, however, the skies have darkened and what was once a common site on the Canadian landscape is now all but gone.

Me, I've actually gone only twice. The first time I was about 5, bundled up under a pile of blankets in the back seat of my parents Mercury.

It didn't matter that I couldn't keep my eyes open long enough to see Olivia Newton-John work her magic in Xanadu that night. It was the experience I remember, not the movie - bugs, dancing hot dogs, pesky brother, cheap speakers and all.

And it's the experience that keeps at least a handful off drive-in diehards marching on.

"Everyone has a great memory of a drive-in," says Jerry Sprackman, who has been credited as the mastermind behind The Docks Drive-In in Toronto, Ont.

"I get a kick when I see kids coming here in their pajamas. I take my little son and he loves it."

A driving range and mini-putt golf course by day and a theatre by night, Sprackman says The Docks sees an equal mix of families and couples coming to take in the double features . . . just like it the old days.

"The drive-in was a magical place," recalls Al Wineland, who spent the better part of his teens pumping soda at his uncle's auto theatre in Memphis, Tenn. "People met at the drive-in, they fell in love there, some got engaged there."

I can relate. Almost 20 years after falling asleep during Xanadu, my would-be fiancé wanted to pop the question at the drive-in . . . the same drive-in where his father proposed to his mother. All together now, "awwwwwwwwwwwww!"

It would have been a great story to tell our children, if we had actually found the place ... and if we would have stayed together.

Instead, we drove up and down the strip looking for the big screen, which, we had no idea, had gone dark. (In drive-in lingo that means shut down.)

Little did we know or realize that it was a trend.

That particular theatre and every other in our area, save for one, went dark.

Why? It's the same reason why my relationship with Jimmy came to an end - the love affair fizzled and we found other things to do.

"By the 1980s everything had changed," says Wineland. "Multiplexes started popping up everywhere. They offered more selection and they were easier to get to. And that's what people want these days."

Ah yes, the multiplex . . . Greek for 'the food costs as much or more than the movie'. It also means more movies, more often. Then came home theatre, which meant cocooners - a trendy name for closet introverts - and couch potatoes (hey, you are what you eat), would never have to leave the comforts of home - and risk human contact - to watch a flick. Then the Internet became accessible, which just added insult to injury. How is beyond me: drive-in screen, 60-feet; computer monitor, 15 inches . . . diagonal. You do the math.

"I don't think people really understand what they're giving up," says Wineland. "Going to the drive-in ... it wasn't just a place to watch movies, it was a place where you could build memories. It's sad that we would forsake that for what, the choice of a dozen movies under the same roof?"

Sprackman, who runs the only downtown drive-in in North America, has another take on their demise. He blames plain old economics.

Drive-ins have traditionally been located on the outskirts of town, but as cities expanded the land became more valuable and it was simply more profitable for drive-in owners to sell out.

How do entrepreneurs like Sprackman make a go of it, especially considering the fate of most other drive-ins? Like I said, it's not about the movies, it's about the experience: bugs, dancing hot dogs, pesky brother, cheap speakers and all. For that, I'd trade cocooning, the Internet, TV and economics any day, or night, of the week.

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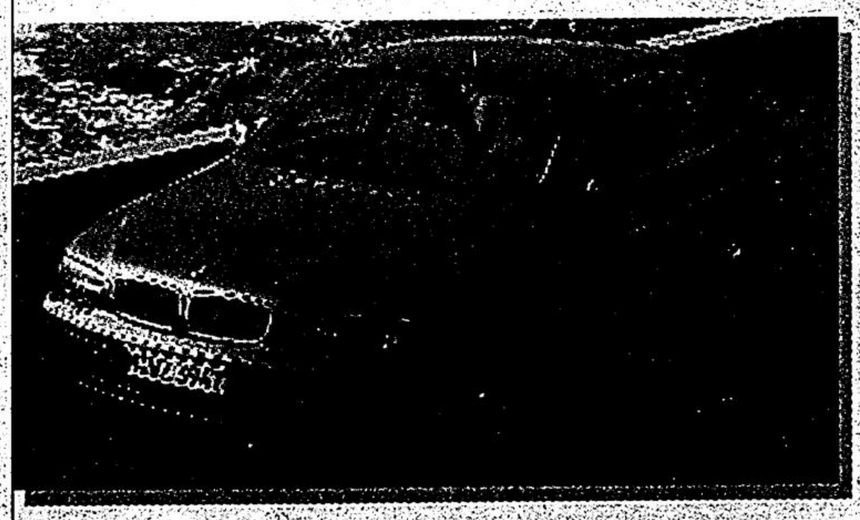

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