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The drive-in: no passing fad

Story by Alice Tallmadge

Weekend nights, around 7:30, a sparsely traveled street in Glenwood quietly begins to fill with cars. By 7:55 the line has backed up around the corner, almost reaching Franklin Boulevard. Motors purr, cough or smoke. Radios blast or soothe. Bags of popcorn grow soggy in the back seat. Children, adults and teenagers alike grow wiggly with impatience. And although the waiting's the same on one side of the fence as on the other, the night's adventure isn't official until the Eugene Drive-In Theatre has finally opened its gates.

A wave of relief and anticipation ripples through the line. Cars begin to move forward. Big fat tires with names like Desert Dueler, Ridge Runner and Road Hugger, Eagle GT carry pick-ups, shiny imported sedans, vintage Mustangs and accident-weary Chevys move through the gates. The cars wander slowly across the huge lot's ridged surface, and position themselves in scattered, erratic formations in front of one of the three wide screens.

A sense of existing on the downside of its heyday permeates the drive-in, which is owned by Larry Moyer, of Portland, owner of Moyer Theatres. At the entrance gate the bulbless floodlight sockets are corroded and rusty. Buildings on the lot are ragged, with dull peeling paint and broken windows. The second booth is empty. Stubbard grasses and pithy urban weeds dapple the lot. The large concession area dwarfs the waiting customers. One counter is empty, a holding area for empty cardboard boxes and CO₂ cartridges, a reminder of a busier era.

But the people who come to the drive-in, with their pizzas, dogs, kids, friends, wives, boyfriends and bags of beer and popcorn seem oblivious to its physical fatigue. They love it. They don't want to be anywhere else.

"You can drink beer, smoke dope, hang out with whoever you want to and nobody else. You can drive your muscle car over and sit in it and relax and eat fast food. There's so many good things about the drive-in," says one happy, slightly bleary-eyed customer. "It's more private, more relaxing," says another young woman, slightly ruffled after unfolding herself from the confines of an MG sports car.

The people who work at the drive-in share in appreciating the spirit of the place. "I love what I do. Not many people can say that, but I can," says Bennie Westfall, manager of the drive-in. She doesn't even like movies that much, hardly ever even watches them. Every once in a while a good one comes along. "I saw 'E.T.' 27 times and I saw 'Best Little Whorehouse in Texas' 14 times. That was a funny movie."

Bennie sits at a desk in the low-ceilinged projection room, blatant-

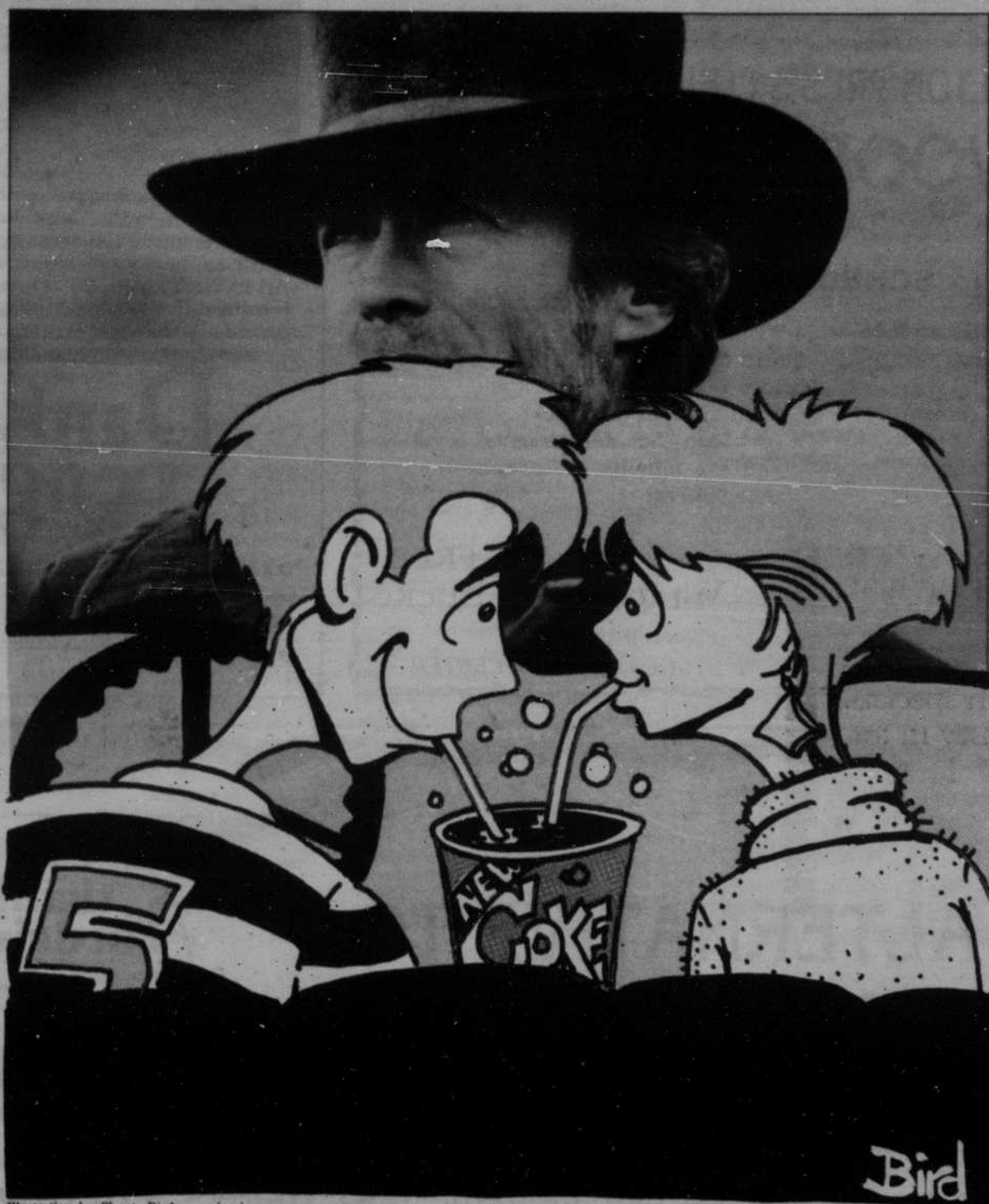


Illustration by Shawn Bird

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ly human among the strips of celluloid, three-foot wide platters of film, spools and projection equipment. Outside horns begin to honk. She sticks her head out the door to gauge the light. Time at the drive-in is back in the sky where it used to be — when it's dark is when the show starts.

Bennie's job is to keep things in line — "she writes the book around here," says one employee — but the assistant manager is the one with his fingers in the works. He walks around the projection room with its caches of fragile bulbs and moving parts like an English gardener amongst his roses. He shows off the \$500 dollar quartz glass xenon bulb that provides light for the projector as if it were one of his prize

specimens. The bulb burns with 4000 watts of electricity, and could "kill somebody standing nearby" if it exploded, he says.

Old-style projectors used a carbon arc lamp to provide light, he explains. Two welding rods are burnt into each other to create the intense light needed to project the film onto the screen. Now the powerful xenon bulb is encased in a shatterproof projection box with three sets of safety catches. On top of the whirring projector lays the do-it-yourself kit for cleaning the projectors, one yellow and one green toothbrush. "You can double the life of a film if you keep your projectors clean," he says.

"People who work at theaters are really nuts," says Becky, who sells tickets at the entrance booth.

She loves her job. "You meet all kinds," says Tammy, who, until recently, worked with her. "I'm talking all kinds."

People who come to the drive-in are usually in a good mood, Becky says. "They're on a date, they're feeling up. They're coming to have a good time."

There's a thing or two to learn from selling tickets at the drive-in. Even customers have their patterns, Becky says. "The people that come in — you can tell about people from their faces — when there's a martial arts movie, people come in who just look like they'd like a martial arts movie. When 'Revenge of the Nerds' was playing, all these pimply high school kids came."

"Wild comedies bring the loose

crowd," says Jim Banks, the drive-in's weekend lot man. He keeps an ear out for rowdy voices in the parking lot, an eye out for kids "spinnin' cookies" in the gravel. He doesn't like trouble, so he walks fast and carries a sharp pencil. Usually writing down a license plate number is enough to convince a carload to leave or quiet down, he says. If it doesn't, the state police usually have a car patrolling nearby, and a 911 call can have them there in minutes.

The future of the drive-in is uncertain, says Banks. It's first in line of four sites chosen by the Lane Transit District for its new operations facility. According to Mark Pangborn, Director of Administrative Services for LTD, statistics compiled by his office show that the drive-in site would be the cheapest for LTD to develop. If it's chosen, this could well be its last season.

Banks doesn't want to see the drive-in sold.

"It gives kids a cheap place to go, something to do that keeps them off the gut and out of trouble. I was a teenager once. I know what it's like," he says.

A well-dressed man in his thirties comes up to the counter where Banks is standing. He's upset, needs to speak with someone. His Lear Jet stereo system can't pick up the drive-in's 20-watt AM station. Banks goes out to investigate the problem.

Individual car speakers are passe at the drive-in. The system works off radio sound, and customers need to have a car radio that works, or bring a portable. The radio-sound system has practically no maintenance cost for the drive-in, but it's tough on car batteries.

"If the battery isn't strong it's not going to last," says Dorothy Probst, who works the concession stand. Many don't. Jumper cables are in the back room, and the management gives boosts for free.

A young, black-haired woman comes in to buy popcorn. "Crash 'n Burn" says one side of her red T-shirt. "Here comes Trouble" says the other. Another young woman named Anna stops and says she likes the drive-in because she can "see good movies over again for cheap." Her friend Jenny walks up and introduces Earl, a pink plastic flamingo, and they wander off into the lot.

By 11 on this particular night the drive-in is quiet. Kids are asleep. Couples are snuggling in compact huddles or are totally invisible. Popcorn and plastic cups litter the lot. In the morning, mewing pigeons, crows and seagulls will swoop down from their roosts on top of the screens and feed on the leavings of tonight's crowd.

As the three screens flicker soundlessly over the roofs of the cars, motors start up, one-by-one. Cars roll quietly over the humped lot and drive slowly past the green neon entrance sign, humming its welcome to a now empty street.