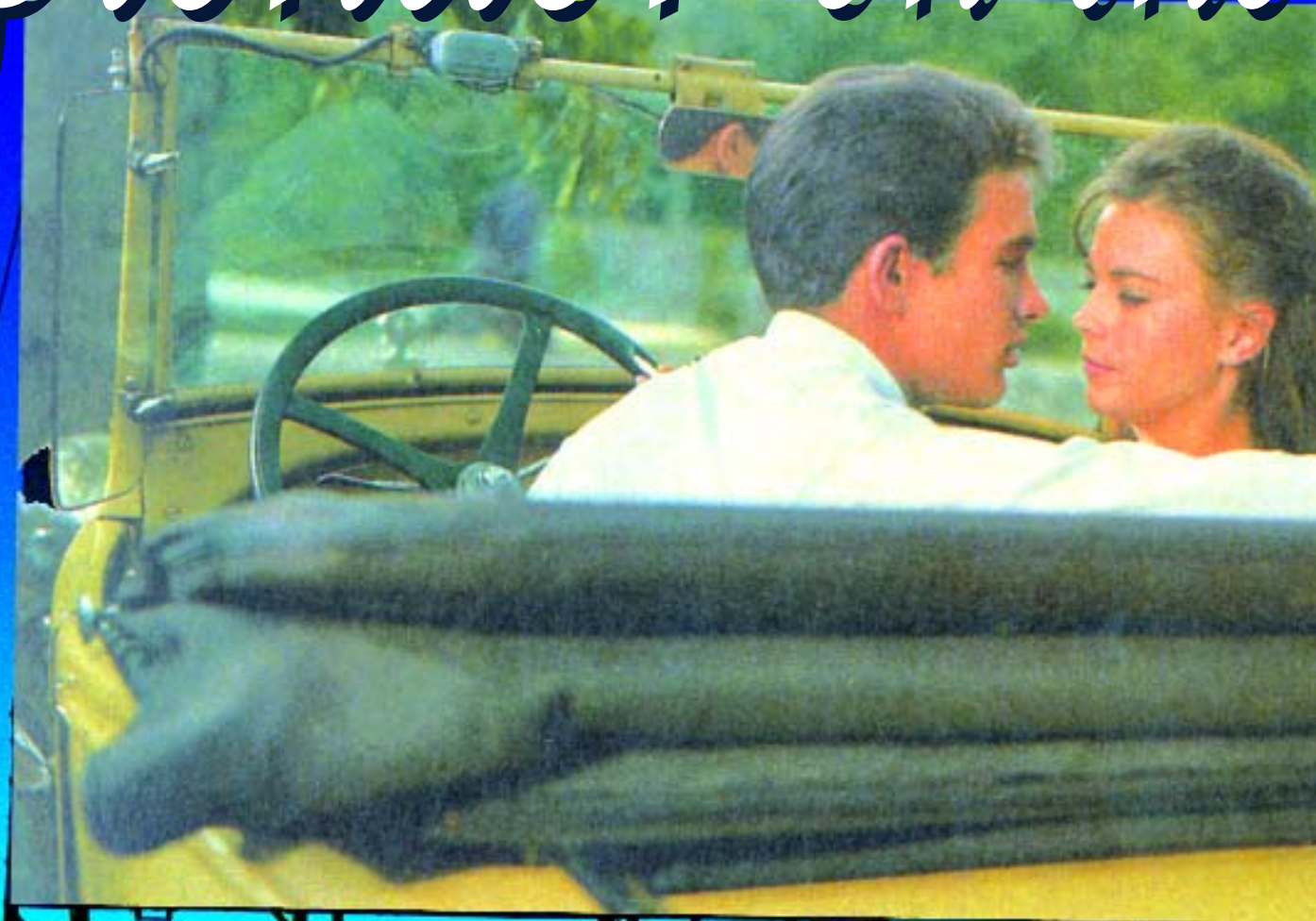


Splendor on the



A scene from *Splendor in the Grass*, a 1961 film about coming of age in Kansas. Movie scene courtesy Warner Bros., Kobal Collection.



Screen

*No matter what was
playing on the big screen,
we found a splendor in the
night, a magic under the
stars, at our favorite
drive-in theater.*

By Susan S. Novak

In the fading summer evening's light, life was looking good from my six-year-old perspective. I had foregone my usual after-supper games and exploits with the neighborhood gang and even agreed to an early bath. We were going to see something special, my parents had said, and I would get to stay up past my bedtime. This, undoubtedly, was going to be good. Six-year-olds know these things.

And so, clutching a pillow and wearing my favorite Red Ball Jets, I jumped into our '63 turquoise Chevy II and we took off, me not really understanding that I was about to sample a piece of our culture, to witness more than a media event, but actually a step in our media history that was already in its decline, would eventually fade, and then would return to enjoy a retro-resurgence when I hit middle-age.

We were going to the drive-in movies.

I remember the huge white screen, so enormous and gaping that it frightened me, just a little. I remember the chunky grey speaker that Dad hooked to the driver's side window, the bag of popcorn Mom passed to the back seat, and the warm summer air blowing through the car as Chuck Connors, Luke Halpin, and that amazing

In the summer of 1961 the *Saturday Evening Post* recognized the popularity of the drive-in theater with this cover illustration.

FACING PAGE, TOP: Ad for the 1946 grand opening of Kansas's first drive-in theater, in Wichita. BOTTOM RIGHT: The Starlite in Wichita, Kansas's only twin drive-in operating today, asks motorists to please use parking lights when entering the lot. BOTTOM LEFT: A Marx Brothers classic was among the first movies shown during the 1947 opening season of Dodge City's drive-in.



Flipper the dolphin flashed on the screen and filled our little Chevy's entire front window. The sound from the weathered speaker was a bit scratchy at times, and the well-worn film flickered in some scenes, but overall it was an amazing experience—one that I've always remembered even though my six-year-old eyelids couldn't stay open all the way to the closing credits.

I had witnessed the magic.

According to Kerry Segrave, author of the extensive *Drive-In Theaters*, the whole mystique of drive-in movies was conceived in U.S. Patent No. 1,909,537, granted to thirty-three-year-old New Jersey native Richard Hollingshead Jr. on May 16, 1933. The son of a manufacturer of automobile-related products, Richard knew what the public

needed and wanted, even in hard times. And what better product to offer the public than a form of easily accessible family entertainment that welcomed casual dress ("Leave Your Girdle at Home," proclaimed one advertisement) and required no more effort than driving an automobile? After early experiments in his own driveway and help from the RCA Victor Company for a large-scale sound system, Hollingshead opened the first "drive-in theater" (later also known as "ozoners," "autotoriums," or "passion pits") on June 6, 1933.

Drive-ins went through their share of growing pains as the concept caught on. Sound systems originally set up around the parking areas quickly drew noise complaints from neighbors, even when the theaters were located on the outskirts of towns. This led to the concept of individual speakers, which some own-

GRAND OPENING

TONIGHT—THURSDAY—7:30 P.M.!



81 DRIVE-IN THEATRE



ers attempted to create by means of an underground system of tunnels that brought the sound up through grated covers beneath the cars. Aside from the tinny quality of the voices produced by traveling through the metal tunnels, and the fact that the sound was neither synchronized to the movie nor controllable for volume, patrons disliked the idea of the voices rising up through their floorboards. Inclement weather, too, had a tendency to short out the system as the tunnels filled with water. RCA finally developed the in-car speaker in 1941, but wartime production almost immediately halted their manufacture until 1946. Even then, some theater owners expressed concern over use of such speakers, and their fears were not entirely unfounded. More than one absentminded patron drove off with a speaker still attached to his window, either ripping the speaker and

cord off the pole, or worse, removing the entire driver's side window.

After the war ended in 1945, drive-ins boomed. Owners of these establishments, however, hoping to lease current films, found themselves in bitter battles with the major movie companies, many of whom owned indoor theaters and felt threatened by the increase in their outdoor counterparts. Nevertheless, these "ozoners" succeeded, and gimmicks to attract audiences abounded. Some put in playground facilities or offered pony rides prior to the shows to keep the youngsters occupied; others brought in bands and set up dance floors beneath the screens for those patrons who wanted to come early and kick up their heels. Even beauty pageants brought in the customers before sunset.

In addition, the concession stands worked hard to win over the dinner business. Fried chicken and ribs soon supplemented the standard popcorn-and-hot-dog fare. Some theaters required their patrons to come to the concession stand to order; a few took orders at the ticket booth and had the meal ready later on, either for pick-up or delivery to the car. Concessionaires also wheeled their carts around the lots, hawking their wares at the risk of disturbing those who came to actually view the movies.

No service seemed to be overlooked by owners intent on gaining customers. One theater reported to have welcomed a group that arrived on horseback, lining up the riders at the back where they enjoyed a movie and dinner on their mounts. Even more creative was the group that tried fly-in theaters, for those who preferred a more grand entrance to the theater in their airplanes. Insects and humidity were combatted in some places with huge fans blowing a constant stream of air through the rows, first horizontally, later vertically. Neither was terribly successful, nor were in-car heaters that were offered in hopes of retaining customers through the winter months.

Many owners sent workers around with towels and bottles of glass cleaner, washing windshields for better patron viewing. More creative—and harder-working—proprietors took in laundry at the ticket booths, to be cleaned and ready for pick-up by the closing credits. A few hardy souls even experimented with accepting patrons' grocery lists, allowing the moviegoers to have their errands run for an extra charge while they were entertained on the big screen.

The fact remained that no drive-in was necessarily a big money-making operation throughout the whole year, especially those in colder climates. Many owners, therefore,

looked for ways to bring in additional revenue from their property during the off-times. Some rented spaces in the parking lot on the weekends for swap meets and flea markets; some made deals with preachers who reached out to mobile flocks and rented the facilities on Sunday mornings for drive-in parishoners.



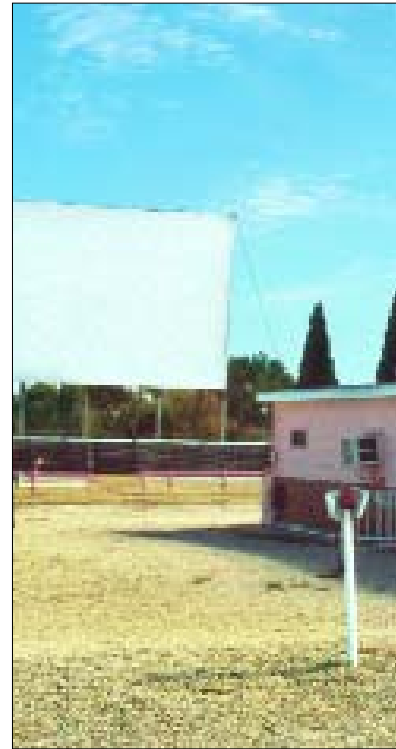
Despite conflicts with movie production companies and indoor theater owners who feared competition, the drive-in boom had a good run through the 1950s, but the 1960s saw business trailing off. By the 1970s televisions, and later VCRs, were driving the drive-ins right out of business, as were real estate values: land that housed the autotoriums became far more valuable as other businesses and developments moved in. A case in point: Tal's Drive-In in Coffeyville, which opened in 1949 and closed in September 2000—the land sold, the theater razed, and in its place an elementary school is being erected. As interest in drive-ins dwindled, B movies and old spaghetti Westerns played the screens, and in the 1980s and early 1990s the few drive-ins left were more renowned for their use as places to meet and visit than for the quality of the entertainment that happened to be playing on the big screen. Today, it seems, we have too many other entertainment options available to us as family members scatter in all directions for weekend fun.

Although no definitive study has been done on Kansas drive-ins, most of these businesses started up in the state immediately following World War II and were firmly established here by 1948, when eleven were reported to be operating. A mere six years later, the number had climbed to 107 establishments, and by 1958 growth had peaked at 125.

The 81-Drive-In Theater in Wichita, which billed itself as Kansas's first, was built on Broadway, five miles north of the city, and it opened on August 15, 1946, under the ownership of O. F. Sullivan, R. E. Conrad, Charles A. Bull, and Paul Slagel. On the playbill that first night was *Silver Skates*, "Grand Musical Spectacle on Ice"; *Belita*, *Queen of the Ice*; and "Mammoth 81 Varieties," which included the Three Stooges, cartoons, news, and "Colorado Fishing." "No More Parking Problems," the ads announced. "See and Hear a Movie in the Privacy of Your Own Car," "Playground Equipment for the Kiddies," "A Picnic and a Movie Combined."

Another early-comer in Kansas was Dodge City's South Drive-In Theatre, built in 1947 by Glen and Roma Cooper (and now owned by son Ron and family). Among its claims to fame were visits from stars Rex Allen and Smiley Burnett.

In May 1948 Garden City announced the opening of its Drive-In Theatre, billed as "Entertainment Under the Stars." At a price of fifty





Come Early and Enjoy the Music Of
Steel Smith and His Melody Masters
FREE BALLOONS and FREE LOLLYPOPS
For the Kiddles Opening Night

MODERN SNACK BAR

Featuring Hamburgers, Hot Dogs, Sandwiches, Soft Drinks,
Ice Cream Bars.

Popcorn, Coffee, Candy and Cigarettes

Bottle Warming Service for Babies at the Snack Bar

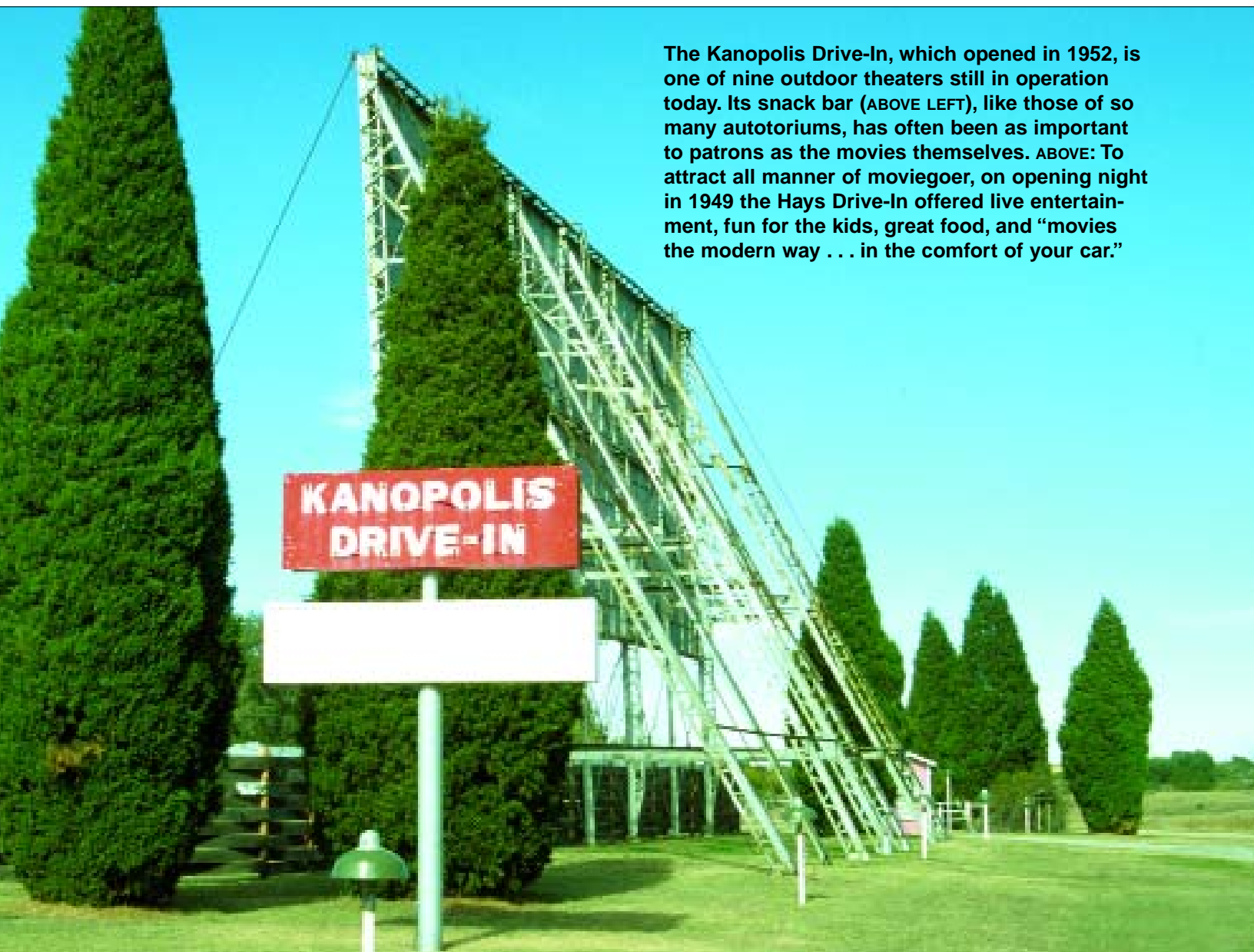
EAT WHILE YOU ENJOY THE SHOW

THE HAYS DRIVE-IN THEATRE

Invites You

To Enjoy The Movies The Modern Way

"Come As You Are--Enjoy a Show in the Comfort of Your Car"



The Kanopolis Drive-In, which opened in 1952, is one of nine outdoor theaters still in operation today. Its snack bar (ABOVE LEFT), like those of so many autotoriums, has often been as important to patrons as the movies themselves. ABOVE: To attract all manner of moviegoer, on opening night in 1949 the Hays Drive-In offered live entertainment, fun for the kids, great food, and "movies the modern way . . . in the comfort of your car."



Kansas City's Boulevard theater, operating since 1950, prides itself today on being the world's first digital drive-in. RIGHT: Standing midway between Paola and Osawatomie, the MidWay Drive-In has been drawing area customers since 1952. FAR RIGHT: A special price for carloads of movie fans heightened the appeal of drive-ins over the years. The Starlite in Wichita continues the custom.

cents for adults and nine cents for “Kiddies,” it touted such attributes as the “Newest, most modern projection and sound equipment!” and “Bottle warming services for babies.” The theaters in both Dodge City and Garden City must have enjoyed success, because later in 1948 owners Glen Cooper and Wade Renick, of Dodge City and Garden City, respectively, announced their purchase of ten acres of land east of Hays for the location of their third drive-in. The theater project would cost “at least \$65,000,” the *Hays Daily News* reported. “We think Hays is an ideal city in which to establish a family theatre,” proclaimed Cooper. Citing the drive-in’s benefits, he explained, “Mothers and fathers and all the kids can get into the family car . . . and can sit in comfort throughout the theatre program. . . . The papas can smoke and take off their shoes if they wish. If the children . . . cry no one else can hear them.” Scheduled to open on April 1, 1949, the actual opening came on June 2. The Hays newspaper devoted a full page to the opening night advertisement, complete with statements of hearty congratulations from numerous local businesses.

By 1949 Kansas hosted such establishments as Tal’s Drive-In; the Iris Drive-In in Hutchinson; the Lawrence Drive-In in Lawrence; the Kansas Drive-In and the Shawnee Drive-In in the Kansas City area; the Drive-In Theatre (which changed its

name to the Community Drive-In in 1953) and the Starlight Drive In Theatre, both in Topeka; and one that still operates today: the Star-Vu in El Dorado. Another crop sprang up in 1950, among which three currently are open for business: Kansas City’s Boulevard Drive-In Theatre; the Star-Vue in Anthony; and the 54 Drive-In in Gas. Three more “survivors” into the twenty-first century came along in the early 1950s: the Kanopolis Drive-In (1952, originally called Lake View) in Kanopolis; the MidWay near Paola (1952); and the Pageant Drive-In in Medicine Lodge (1953).

Kansans hold many fond memories of drive-ins: more than one former teenager still proudly boasts of utilizing trunk space to sneak in past the ticket takers, not so much to avoid payment as to see if they could get away with it. There were first dates; carloads of overexcited, pajama-clad neighborhood youngsters; front-row views of the smooching couples in the car in the next stall, or worse, of your brother and his date in the front seat.

Christie Stanley of Topeka and Roger Ericksten of Halstead have recollections that are more behind-the-scenes: their father, Byers Ericksten, ran the projector for the Sabetha Drive-In in the early 1960s. “We had to go around and make sure the sound was turned off on all the speak-



ers before the patrons came in,” Christie remembers. “They played music on the sound system before the movie started, and we didn’t want speakers to be running if no one was listening to them.” “Sometimes we’d find money on the ground, so that made the effort worthwhile” says Roger, who also helped run the projectors. “The booth had two projectors set up with the reels of the movie, and Dad would know to start up the second projector when he saw the little box in the upper right-hand corner of the screen; that was the cue the first reel was about to end.” Double features made for a late night when these two were younger: more than once Christie fell asleep in the family car while waiting for the movies’ final scenes. Byers was always the last to leave the parking lot and often had to wake up sleepy (or otherwise incapacitated) patrons or shoo off amorous couples.

Wes Neal has a long history with Kansas City’s Boulevard Drive-In. He has worked there for nearly fifty years and has owned the place for seventeen. On opening night, June 30, 1950, the Boulevard, competing with six other drive-ins in the Kansas City area, showed the film *The Lady Takes a Sailor*. During its first decade and into the early 1960s, this ozoner did an amazing business. One Saturday evening the lot registered eleven hundred cars coming through the gates.

Today Wes’s old wood-paneled office is covered with pictures of his favorite stars (Marilyn Monroe holds a prominent spot), and he points lovingly from his window to his expansive six-hundred-stall drive-in. “You go ahead and walk around out

there,” he says proudly. “You won’t find a blade of grass growing up anywhere in that drive. And I check every one of those speakers, every week, to make sure they work.” Speakers aren’t a necessity in this theatre, however. The Boulevard was the first in the world to install digital sound, meaning Wes’s patrons can tune their car radios to a set station and hear the highest quality movie sound through their own audio system, or they can choose to listen to distortion-free sound the old-fashioned way, using the speakers.

In these early years of this new century, drive-ins, like bell-bottoms and lava lamps and so many other pieces of our culture from forty and fifty years ago, are attempting a comeback. Across Kansas and the nation, preservation groups are purchasing and restoring marquees, if not whole theaters, to retain the flavor of an earlier time in our media-hungry and star-struck past. But unfortunately, most of these charming establishments have gone the way of Herington’s old Rocket Drive-in, which, in the late 1960s, suffered the effects of one of Kansas’s famous tornadoes and whose large screen was blown down, never to be resurrected.

On the morning after the storm, the sign on the marquee read, “Gone With the Wind.”

KH

SUE NOVAK of Lawrence is the managing editor of *Kansas Heritage*. She holds many fond memories of the splendor of the outdoor screen.