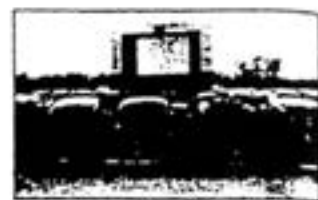# Hathaway's Drive-In

The upstate New York theater that's still going strong

BY DIANNE STEVENS

The year was 1955 and my older sister and I were sitting in our jammies in the back seat of our dad's brand new, red and white 1954 Buick Riviera hardtop. It was a gorgeous car and the first (and only) car that my dad ever bought new, but my sister and I were more impressed by the cute little elephant with the huge ears flying across the big screen in front of us than by the car. We were at Hathaway's Drive-In Theater in North Hoosick, New York, and watching *Dumbo* there as a child is one of my earliest memories of the drive-in.

Hathaway's had been making memories and providing fun weekend entertainment for several years before that, though—since May 7, 1948, to be exact. *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* was the very first movie shown. I came on the scene a few months later—I "arrived" in North Hoosick in November of 1948, so you could say that the drive-in and I grew up together.

Back in 1948, according to Town of Hoosick historian, Gilbert Wright, "Tickets cost 50 cents for everyone over 12 years of age. There were spaces for 300 cars, and bleachers for walk-ins. There was a concession stand, but in the early years, a refreshment cart was also pushed around the grounds to serve those in cars." A stage was also built where country-western bands would perform.

Though Hathaway's Drive-In is now more than 50 years old, other drive-ins had been around since the 1930s. In fact, the very first drive-in theater was invented by Richard M. Hollingshead of New Jersey,

and opened on Tuesday, June 6, 1933. *Wife Beware* was the name of the first movie he showed. Richard began experimenting by using a sheet for a screen in his backyard. He placed a radio behind it and mounted a Kodak projector on the hood of his car. Then he moved on to finding the correct angles and spacing for ramps so that people in cars could see over the cars in front of them. He got a patent for the first drive-in theater on May 16, 1933. By January of 1942, there were 95 drive-ins across 27 states, with Ohio leading the way with 11 drive-ins of its own.

Then, in the 1950s when my parents began taking my sister and me to Hathaway's Drive-In, drive-ins hit the big numbers. In 1948, when Hathaway's opened, there were less than 1,000 drive-ins nationwide. In 1958, there were close to 5,000. I always felt so lucky to have a drive-in right in my hometown. We went to a lot of movies during our childhood, and when our aunt, uncle and cousins came to visit in the summer, that's where we spent many a Saturday night. There was even a swing set outside the concession stand to keep us amused until it was dark enough for the movie to begin.

A few summers later, in 1960, my sister and I sat huddled together in the back seat of our dad's 1957 Plymouth Suburban station wagon, our eyes transfixed on the big screen. The piercing sound of shrieking, stabbing violins permeated the car and, in the front seat, my mother turned to my father and said worriedly, "I don't think this is the kind of movie we should have taken the girls to, Alfred!" We had just

watched the shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*! But oddly, instead of having nightmares, my sister and I, at ages 13 and 12, became dyed-in-the-wool Hitchcock fans that night. We thought it was the coolest movie ever, much to our panicked parents' relief. And what fun it was to brag to our friends that we'd seen such a scary, grown-up movie!

When Hathaway's was first built, it might have had speakers under the screen that were common in the early drive-ins, but, later on, the speakers were hung on posts placed between each pair of cars. Sometimes the patrons would forget to remove the speakers before driving off and break the wire.

By the 1980s, the number of outdoor theaters in the U.S. had dropped to 900, and their popularity had begun to fade. Some blamed the advent of cable TV and video games for their demise. Urban sprawl resulted in some drive-ins being replaced by shopping centers. But, in North Hoosick, Hathaway's was still alive.

Then, in the 1990s, an odd phenomenon took place. The number of theaters closing slowed down. And, in 1990, Karl Pingree, Hathaway's current owner, bought the drive-in. When I asked him if he'd ever run a drive-in before, he chuckled and said that when he bought Hathaway's, he knew about as much about drive-ins as I did, but he learned fast. He began showing first run movies, and feels this has contributed to the continued success of the drive-in. In 1998, however, he showed a movie a little older; he threw a 50th Anniversary celebration at Hathaway's and showed *State Fair*, the second movie ever shown there in 1948!

Hathaway's Drive-In has been a big part of many of our lives—from our childhoods, through our teenage and dating years, to when many patrons brought children and grandchildren of their own to sit in the back seat in their jammies and be mesmerized by that big screen. And, even if the movie wasn't so good, there was always other entertainment around, like people jumping out of trunks, or cars rolling off the mound and taking speaker poles with them. How could indoor movie theaters or big-screen TV's ever compete with that? How could drive-ins ever truly go out of style?