

ON THE BIG SCREEN



There's a certain allure to the movie-going experience. Filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino and Christopher Nolan champion the social aura that movies create when seen in an auditorium filled with people. But amid this social philosophy, a more niche experience garners its own merit — that of the drive-in theater. While created before World War II, drive-in theaters gained popularity in the 1940s with the increased democratization of automobiles. Their popularity continued to rise through the '50s for families and romantic dates, thanks to the privacy and lower ticket cost compared to traditional theaters. Attendance, unfortunately, took a dive with the advent of the home video market and the rise of cable TV in the 1980s. But in Illinois, about a half-dozen locations, including three on or near Route 66, still keep the spirit of the drive-in theater alive. One of these, in the capital city of Springfield, already claimed a storied past, even before being re-opened in 2002.

The Springfield Twin Drive-In opened on the south side of Springfield in 1973 — a late-comer in the drive-in theater business — before becoming the Green Meadows Drive-In a couple of years later, and then closing in 1980. In 1992, the Knight family, owners of the neighboring Knight's Action Park, realized the opportunity right next door after a dozen years of the theater's dormancy. But it was ten more years before the drive-in finally reopened its gates as the Route 66 Drive-In in 2002, just in time to coincide with the 50th anniversary of their Knight's Action Park business.

"It was a nice extension of what we were already doing over at the park," said Doug Knight, owner of Knight's Action Park, "We favor a safe place where families can go together and have a good time, and the drive-in seemed like an easy fit for that." And it added to the fame and appeal of the Knight family's business reputation in the Springfield area — Doug Knight is one of the "Living Legends," Visit Springfield's tour of their most legendary local entrepreneurs.

Perhaps beyond initial expectations, the opening two seasons of the drive-in were so strong that a second screen was added. Although the original speakers were gone long

before Knight acquired the destination, patrons now use their radios to tune into 91.3FM for Screen 1 and 106.3FM for Screen 2. The location itself is over twelve acres in size, and each screen can hold 252 cars. Those are a lot of moviegoers. Consequently, the screens have to be big enough to accommodate such a large audience, which is why they're each 40-by-80 feet in scope. The sheer volume of the park was fortuitous for massive numbers of patrons for almost two decades, but then, a storm cloud approached.

In 2020, like many other businesses, movie theaters were affected heavily by the pandemic. While closed entirely during the early weeks, the theater was able to open back up in early May 2020, albeit with strict guidelines. Tickets had to be bought in advance, audience members couldn't sit outside their cars, food could only be ordered through the FanFood app, and only 125 vehicles were allowed per screening. None of this mattered much, considering that the studios could only trickle movies out to theaters instead of flooding the market with blockbusters as they normally do during the summer.

However, attendance has been steadily improving, and they're open rain or shine during the season — which currently runs from April 1st to October 24th. "In this last year, we've seen quite a bit of improvement with the number of guests we see come in," said Knight, who's still hopeful about the drive-in's future. "We always have a few regular customers who come to the drive-in religiously at least once a week for the fresh popcorn and the experience." With the limited number of major releases, they've turned to classic films to fill the parking spaces, such as *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Twister*.

"The drive-in is more of a family experience than anything," said Knight. "You get to have your own space; families can bring the kids. I see it all the time where the young ones come in wearing their pajamas." That's ultimately what makes drive-in theaters unique — they offer an experience that's both communal and intimate at the same time. While movie theaters may continue to struggle with the availability of streaming and same-day releases, loyal fans remain who want to see their favorite movies under the clear, open Illinois sky.