

Watch It!: Drive-ins are the place to be this summer



Misquamicut Drive-In Theater, summer 2019; photo credit: Caswell Cooke

You remember it well. The excitement of leaving the house early to get a good spot in front of your selected screen at the drive-in. The little playground where you could maybe play with other kids before dark, never worrying about scratches or worse from being thrown off the roundabout. Running back to the car in your pajamas as anxious horns started blaring to prompt the projectionist to start the movie. You might have sat on the back of the station wagon door with the window down, or at the back of the family van with the doors wide open, or maybe even pitched a lawn chair in front of the car until the mosquitoes got you. Your parents might have had that smoky coil on the dashboard to try and dissuade the pests from hanging around (or you might have been there on a date, and missed the movies completely).

Your parents packed a bag with soda, chips and cheese popcorn, but still you yearned to go to the snack bar! Clam cakes, hot dogs, hamburgers, pizza, meatball sandwiches, candy, soda and ice cream called to you! The dancing-treat commercials at half time lured you into further desire. You waited for this moment to go stand in line at the bathrooms so you wouldn't miss any part of the movie, half hoping the parents would smell the food at the snack bar and give in. Tensions mounted as the announcer popped in halfway through the second movie to remind us the snack bar would be closing soon, but still the parents didn't budge. You fell asleep before the end of the second movie, vaguely aware of the bumpy ride out of the parking lot late at night.

Then something happened in the mid-80s. People stopped going, just like that. The Hilltop, Lonsdale and Seekonk Drive-Ins sat and deteriorated for many years. The current Rustic Tri View Drive-In became a XXX theater to try and stay afloat.

And then, many years later — perhaps in a burst of nostalgia — something again shifted. A revitalization of sorts occurred, and people came back. Technology, like the times, has improved. Movies have sharper images. You no longer hang a speaker inside the car window but tune in on your radio. If you're sitting outside the car you're at the mercy of the neighboring patrons, hoping their radio is up loud

enough. Despite home technology developments, some drive-in theaters have stood the test of time and hold their appeal. Sure, you could be sitting at home in your underwear drinking a cocktail while streaming on your 135" Smart TV, but there's just something about the drive-in theater. You want your kids to know the experience! And when you're charged by the carload, there's an incentive to pack in everyone — including the family dog.

While larger-scale drive-in options have dwindled, there are now impromptu drive-ins in certain communities as summer weather allows. One of these seems to stand out above the rest. If you haven't yet experienced the Misquamicut Drive-In Theater, put it on your list of things to do this summer. Misquamicut, the Narragansett word for *place of the red fish*, is the most popular beach in RI. Not just a beach, the village has been a popular tourist attraction thanks to its restaurants, shops and even water slides. Nestled among these attractions is Wuskenau ("New") Town Beach, where said movie screen is situated. It started as a small community thing. They built a makeshift screen and waited. *If you build it, ...* As the attraction's popularity soared, improvements were made. Last year, the screen was enlarged 4 feet on the top and 4 feet on the sides, allowing for better viewing of widescreen movies.

COVID has not been a total deterrent. "We are currently at half capacity, limited to 120 cars per night. Every other spot is skipped to allow for social distancing," says Caswell Cooke, who recently celebrated 20 years as executive director of the Misquamicut Business Association. "We normally have double that, so the movies do sell out each night." Another new feature due to COVID is pre-ordering from the snack bar. "When you arrive at the theater, you are given a QR code to scan, or use a Facebook link to order popcorn, hotdogs, candy and soda with cashless pickup," explains Cooke. Not hungry? Check out the concession stand anyway to show the kids retro Coke bottles and openers. "It's almost like a step back in time." Entry tickets are purchased via Eventbrite for the same reason. "It's actually been a better system for us, not having to manage cash, and also we're able to see how many cars to expect in advance," adds Cooke. It's likely this system will become the new normal.

Misquamicut Drive-In Theater is now in its 10th season. Rain or shine, it matters not. People come religiously, and movie times have gone from once per week to seven days, from May to September, and sometimes October. Don't expect kiddie movies. Patrons are typically "adults with kids 10 and over, or young adults getting the experience of a date at the drive-in, like their grandparents did." Cooke adds, "We are pet friendly." Movies such as JAWS are a regular repeat, running 2 or 3 nights each week. "For some reason, this movie is really popular at the beach," laughs Cooke. "It always sells out!" He is also proud of the fact they run retro commercials an hour before show time, like the aforementioned dancing treats, the Native American in his canoe driven to tears over litter, and others we middle-agers remember fondly. It'll bring you back; let the kids scoff! Gates open at 6:30pm. No alcohol allowed. *Wuskenau Town Beach, Pondsides Lot, 316 Atlantic Ave Westerly (next to the waterslides). For more info, call 401-322-1026.*

The Misquamicut Business Association also puts on various other shows, including musical and comedy acts. "Our goal for this whole thing is to encourage people to come to Misquamicut and enjoy entertainment," says Cooke, proudly adding their staff is mainly composed of teenagers and college students. For a list of happenings, visit their website at www.misquamicut.org, or their Facebook page.

Impromptu locations have been options in the past, like Providence's Movies on the Block. They projected on a building for several summers, in a small parking lot where you'd pitch a lawn chair. That doesn't appear to be an option during this summer of COVID. Other options have included

NewportFILM Outdoors on Aquidneck Island, Narragansett Town Beach, Rocky Point Park, Roger Williams Park and Crescent Park Looff Carousel.

Some theaters are closed temporarily or are limiting the number of viewers per showing. These drive-ins are currently open for business. Contact the theater for more information.

Mendon Twin Drive-In, opened in 1954, mendondrivein.com, 35 Milford St, Mendon, Mass, 508-473-4958

Rustic Tri View, 1950s style drive-in, facebook.com/RusticDriveIn, 1195 Eddie Dowling Hwy, North Smithfield, 401-769-7601

Mansfield Drive-in Theatre & Marketplace, mansfielddrivein.com, 228 Stanford Rd, Mansfield Center, Conn, 860-423-4441