

Rand Richards Cooper



●ZONERS

When the Fogmaster & spooning were king

Turn off your lights and drive left," our friendly booth guy said. "Soundtrack's on 88.1 FM."

It was only mid-June, but we were deep in the summer blockbuster movie doldrums. There was nothing we wanted to see. So we went to the drive-in.

I hadn't been there in ages; and if you're like most Americans, you haven't either. Seventy years have passed since Richard M. Hollingshead, after aiming a Kodak projector from his car roof at a screen nailed to a tree in his yard, made a patent application for "a novel construction in outdoor theaters whereby the transportation facilities to and from the theater are made to constitute an element of the seating facilities of the theater." Hollingshead's drive-in opened in Camden, New Jersey, in June of 1933, showing *Wife Beware* with Adolphe Menjou. Drive-ins—or ozoners, as they were quaintly called early on—boomed in the late '40s and '50s, stagnated through the '60s and '70s, and got decimated in the '80s. In my state, Connecticut, thirty-five of them (out of a mid-'60s peak of forty-two) were still operating in 1980. By 1985 the number was down to five. Today, just three remain.

My own childhood coincided with the tail end of the boom—I remember sitting beside my older sister in the jump seats of our parents' Checker, wailing away at *Old Yeller*. By the time I was a teenager, our drive-in had switched over to R- and X-rated films, unleashing startling visions of titanic eros on the horizon as you came out of the Stop N Shop nearby. The seedy image drive-ins acquired in the '70s partly obscured their origins as a family place. From the start, ads had pitched their convenience and informality ("Eat While You Look," "Knit While You Sit," "Leave Your Girdle at Home"), along with total family partic-

ipation; even reluctant Dad might be persuaded to come along, given a cigar and some beer in a bucket of ice. It was cheap family fun, no sitters required.

Molly and I don't have kids, and she was away for the weekend, so I drafted my sister and brother-in-law and their year-old daughter to go see *Tomb Raider*. On my way out the door, our bulldog, Bert, looked up with piteous eyes, so I took him too. We all arrived late, and when the radio in my sister's station wagon turned out to be on the blink, were forced to switch over to my car. A Geo Metro was not designed with movie-watching in mind. My brother-in-law, sitting in back, had to slump way down to see, shoving his legs up between our two front seats. My sister sat with the baby on her lap, breast-feeding. Bert blundered about, looking for a spot. Up on the screen, Angeline Jolie, dressed in judo-like pajamas, was doing some kind of indoor bungee jumping, swinging around on a huge rubber band in a vast palace atrium. Soon a squadron of mini-Darth Vaders broke in and began spraying automatic weapons fire.

"I can't see anything," my sister said. "Your windshield is all smeared."

I took my tee shirt off and tried to wipe the glass clear. Still "boinging" around on the rubber band, Angeline Jolie wasted the Darth Vader guys one by one with karate chops and cool stares.

"She must have had a lip job," my sister said. "Nobody has lips that puffy."

"I don't know," I said. "Jon Voight has puffy lips. Like father, like daughter."

"It's a lip job, I'm telling you."

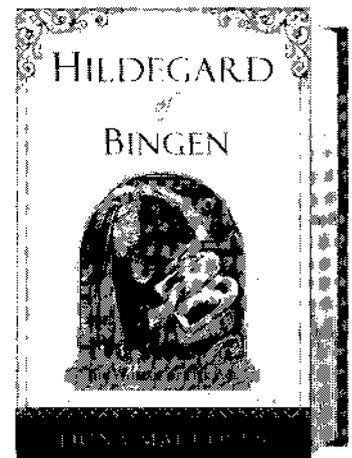
My brother-in-law agreed. And it wasn't just her lips that had been augmented, he pointed out.

"Quiet," my sister said. "I'm trying to watch."

"Hey, this is a drive-in."

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 Doubleday

He had a point. A drive-in was never about being quiet. From the start, a drive-in was about enjoying the privacy of your car. "Patrons can discuss, and cuss, the picture," observed the *Hollywood Reporter* in the 1940s. "They can sing the songs with the singers on the screen." I looked around. On one side of us, a group of six was having a little party on a blanket spread out behind their van. On the other, a young couple struggled to shush a wailing baby. I wondered what the scene was in the back rows, where in the old days, ushers with flashlights—the "park-and-pet police"—would enforce a no-spooning policy.

My sister wasn't feeling well. She and my brother-in-law traded places. She lay in the back seat and moaned ruefully about her sinus infection. "Maybe I should stand up," she said, "and it'll all drain to my feet." But she was too lazy. My brother-in-law and I repaired to the concession stand, following the aroma of vaporized fat. The menu listed fries and clam fritters, \$5 packs of cigarettes, and \$2.50 mosquito coils. "You got fries?" my sister said when we returned. "I thought you were going to eat healthy."

"This is healthy," he said. "Hey, it's a drive-in."

My sister and brother-in-law bailed out after the first show. I decided to stay a while. I had a folding chair in the trunk and set it up outside, Bert sprawled at my feet. The intermission cartoon featured a bun and hotdog in a comic routine, the bun attempting to coax the hotdog into doing tricks. I seemed to recall this same cartoon in a drive-in scene in *Grease*, playing in the background as John Travolta mournfully bays, *Candy, ba-a-by, I'm in misery...*

It was peaceful, sitting out in the open air. Ahead of me, the first two rows of spaces, long unused, had grown over, and the zone between screen and cars, where in olden days kiddie playgrounds and pony rides and miniature golf and vaudeville acts and jazz bands and Beautiful Child contests had lured families in hours before show time, was now a tangle of weeds. The semi-abandoned look of today's drive-in, with the old speaker poles tilting every which way, makes it hard to imagine how bustling a place it used to be. Picture usherettes on bicycles escorting you to your spot; carhops bringing food and baby-bottle warmers and cleaning your windshield; the Copiague, New York, drive-in held over twenty-five hundred cars and included a shuttle train that ferried cus-

tomers to various areas on the twenty-eight-acre site.

In their glory days, drive-ins expressed a particular, wacky strain of American imagination, their grandiosity and gadgetry revealing a culture captivated by technology. A drive-in in Phoenix, plagued by high temperatures, developed something called The Fogmaster, a system of fourteen-foot-high poles fitted out with water pipes and huge propellers that blew a fine mist across the lot. The Autoscope Drive-In in Albuquerque replaced the single giant screen with two hundred and sixty individual 3' x 5' monitors, with images conveyed from a central projector by a fantastic series of mirrors. At the Theater Motel in Brattleboro, Vermont, you could watch from your room through huge picture windows, while the Winter Haven, Florida, ozoner was built on the shores of a lake, so boaters could moviego while fishing. Asbury Park, New Jersey, was the home of Ed Brown's Drive-In and Fly-In, with capacity for five hundred cars and twenty-five small planes, which would land at the adjacent airstrip and taxi to the last row. Looking back, you can't help but feel affection for a time when multitasking reflected not a strategy for personal conquest, but a zany fantasy of combining unlikelies. One Memphis ozoner doubled as a Laundromat—turn in your dirty clothes on the way in, pick them up clean when you leave. Do this—while you do that!

The drive-in was geared to a particular, midcentury moment in American life: the baby boom and rush to the suburbs; low-cost real estate; the romance of big roomy cars; and the advent of a huge class of people wealthy enough to afford some entertainment of a summer eve, but frugal enough to want it cheap. When these factors changed, the equation no longer worked, and now the drive-in, once a showcase for novelties of every kind, has itself become a novelty.

I sat there in my lawn chair. The cartoon hot dog jumped into the bun. My dog snored. The next movie began, and from outside my car, I couldn't quite make out the words. What better way to drift through the blockbuster doldrums than that? □

