

New devices may bring people back to drive-ins

By Scott Pendleton

Battalion Staff

The owner and the manager of a drive-in theater were considering the large number of cars parked there one weekend night. "If business gets any better," they agreed, "we ought to start showing movies."

This old joke (circa the Korean War) represents a typical attitude about drive-ins — that is, that the main attraction is not on the screen, but on the seat beside you. A poll given to 100 moviegoers revealed that *not* watching the movie is a still a reason to go.

"I don't think drive-ins are good unless you are with a boyfriend," a girl confided. Some people made derogatory comments, labelling drive-ins as "passion pits" and "make out spots." Others had ambivalent feelings.

"I like to go because of the effect on girls," someone wrote. "I don't like to go because I don't get to see much of the movie."

What you can do with beer at a drive-in was another popular reason to go. Many said they enjoy the informality and atmosphere of being outdoors, not to mention the low admission price. Parents said they could take their children to a drive-in with less worry than to an indoor theater.

Numerous reasons to avoid drive-ins were given, with poor sound quality topping the list. Drive-ins were commonly considered to be "scummy," "grungy" or "ragged out." Bad weather, in-

ferior movies, mosquitos and the audience were other negative factors listed.

"The people my mother told me not to associate with hang out at drive-ins," one person responded.

"People who go to them tend to be rude, noisy and obnoxious," another answered. Yet some of the people polled indicated that they enjoy the freedom to be loud at drive-ins.

Considering the negative attitudes that people have about drive-ins, it's a wonder that anyone goes to them. And among the people polled at the four theaters listed above, a large percentage do not. (see box)

This is a striking contrast to the days when outdoor theaters were the bread and butter of the movie industry.

"In recent years it has become practically an automatic reflex to bemoan the fate of indoor theaters and to paint glowing pictures of the ever growing number of drive-ins."

That statement appeared in *The 13th Annual Theater Catalog* in 1955, the same year that Texas had more than 10 percent of the drive-in theaters in the country.

But the movie industry was faced with a different set of circumstances in those days.

The drive-in was a product of the depression. William Hollingshead, who conceived the idea, realized that the last things people would give up during the hard times were cars and movies. After experimenting with a home projector placed on the roof of his car and aimed at his garage wall,

he patented the idea.

Though born in the thirties, the drive-in began to thrive on post World War II social values.

"Drive-in theaters, of course, have proved to be a tremendous success in appealing to the public taste of this day and age," *The 13th Annual Theater Catalog* continues. "America is on wheels — America has gone informal in dress — there is no longer a class distinction — there are no longer domestic servants — all of this is reflected in the drive-in's success."

The drive-in became the focal point of family activity. In order to keep customers there as much of the day as possible, theater owners scheduled entertainment ranging from concerts to wrestling bouts during the daylight hours. Many put playgrounds; some even had swimming pools, restaurants, skating rinks and driving ranges.

The decade from 1946-56 turned out to be the golden age of the drive-in. The 4,340 drive-ins in 1955 dwindled to 3,502 by 1963. Indoor theaters were declining as well, from 17,811 in 1948 to 9,150 in 1963, according to statistics furnished by the National Association of Theatre Owners.

Industry insiders blame television for the decline. TV was the new toy in the 1950s. It kept people in their houses and away from theaters. Then again, Hollywood was producing no movies better or even different than the entertainment TV offered free.

Once the novelty of TV wore off and movie-makers began to ex-

plore subjects taboo to television, audiences returned to the theaters.

From 1963, the number of indoor theaters climbed steadily up to 12,990 in 1977. Drive-ins increased from 1963 until there were 3,772 in 1973. But in 1977 the number was down again to 3,564.

Increasing land values have been a big contributor to the continued decline in the drive-in's numbers. Built in the country, many drive-ins found themselves surrounded as towns grew up. The land values soared, making it more profitable to sell the land than to show movies. For instance, in 1969 the Skyway Drive-in was moved from its old location on Texas Avenue out to East 29th Street and the lands sold for the Manor East Mall.

Ambient light, which detracts from picture quality, overcame many drive-ins. The Circle Drive-in behind Skaggs suffered from that problem. William Schulman, who leased the theater from A.P. Boyett until the summer of 1975, says that the floodlights reflecting off of Zachry Engineering Center and the light from the Skaggs shopping center washed out the picture. (Ambient light didn't kill the Circle, though. Boyett terminated the lease to put the land to other use.)

It's impossible to talk about local movie theaters without further mention of the Schulmans. The Schulman family has been showing movies in Brazos County for three generations, ever since William's father bought out the

theaters in Bryan in 1926.

The family now owns the Palace, Campus, Manor East 3, and Skyway Theaters. They also own the Queen, which they use for storage, and at one time rented the now vacant Dixie Theater. (Cinema I & II is not owned by the Schulmans, but by Plitt Theaters.)

It's a true family business, running all these theaters. William oversees the operation of all the theaters and manages the Manor East 3. Sons Mark and Morris manage the Campus and Skyway theaters. Another son, Craig, works at the Campus.

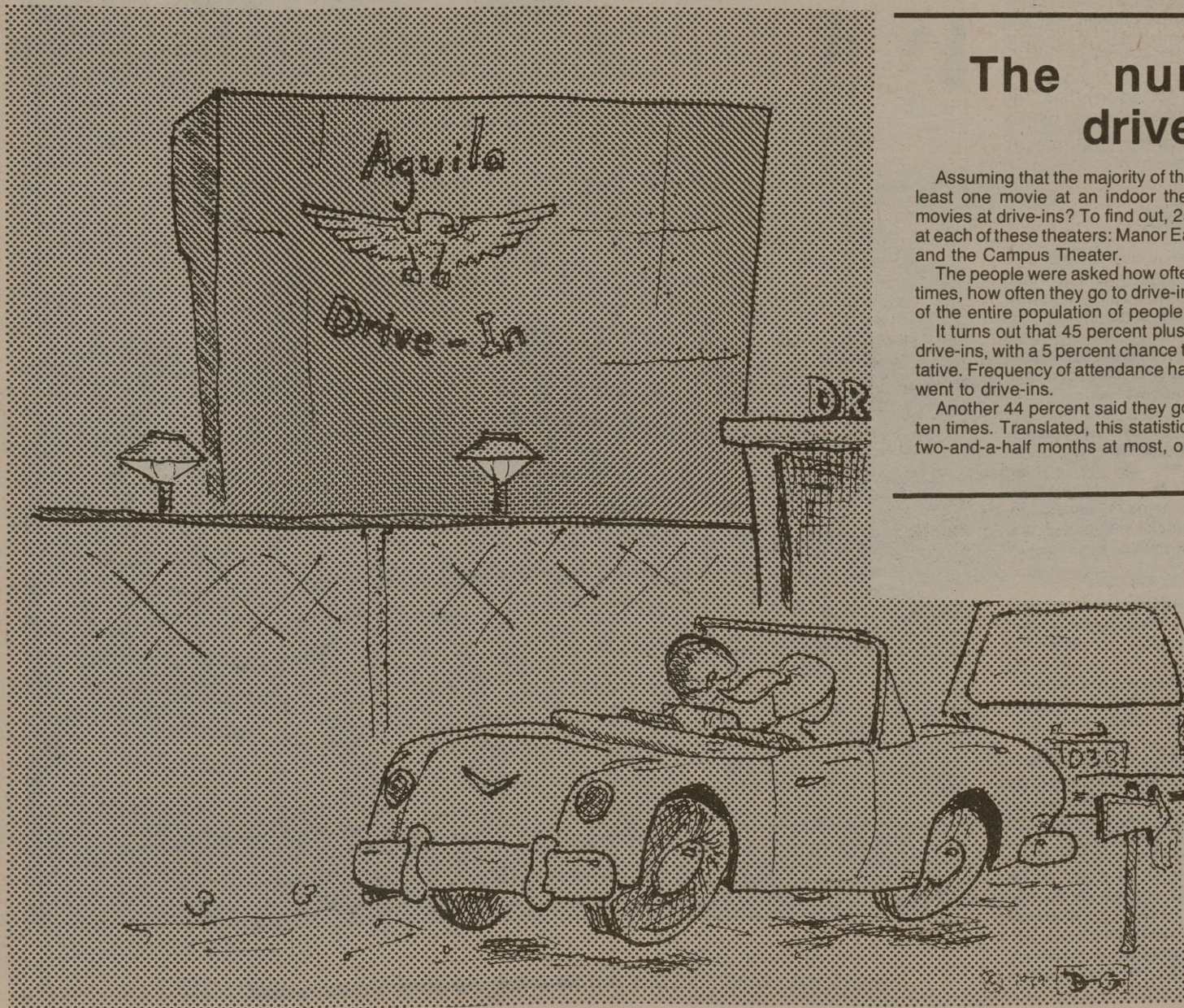
"Drive-ins aren't making the kind of money they used to, before multiple theaters started, but they won't go completely out of business," William Schulman says.

He feels that drive-ins have a "built-in" audience of people who don't like to go to any but drive-in theaters. They don't want to dress up, and prefer staying in a car to going indoors.

Does Schulman find many beer cans at the Skyway? "Oh Lord," he says, rolling his eyes. But he has had no fights or other trouble there.

Monday dollar nights, which boast the Skyway's biggest crowds, bring mainly minority and low-income families, Schulman says.

In addition, people from surrounding towns like Hearne, North Zulch and Madisonville are dedicated to seeing movies at the drive-in, Morris Schulman says. But he feels the Skyway could get bigger crowds if it got better mov-



The numbers on drive-ins

Assuming that the majority of the movie-going population sees at least one movie at an indoor theater, what proportion also sees movies at drive-ins? To find out, 25 people were randomly sampled at each of these theaters: Manor East 3, Cinema I & II, Aggie Cinema and the Campus Theater.

The people were asked how often they go to movies, and of those times, how often they go to drive-ins. The results are representative of the entire population of people who go to those theaters.

It turns out that 45 percent plus or minus 10 percent never go to drive-ins, with a 5 percent chance that the sample was misrepresentative. Frequency of attendance had no bearing on how often people went to drive-ins.

Another 44 percent said they go to drive-ins less than one out of ten times. Translated, this statistic means these people go once in two-and-a-half months at most, once every two years at least.

Artwork by
Doug Graham

DRIVE-IN MOVIES reached their greatest popularity in the mid-1950s, when scenes like the one at left were common. Now, though other forms of entertainment have taken away much of the market, drive-ins are patronized by a more diverse population, above right, who come to the movies for the same reasons their parents did.