



The Rose sat at the corner of Snelling Avenue and County Road C in Roseville from 1948 to 1979, and was Ramsey County's first drive-in movie theater. *Photo by Robert Murphy.*

"First Show at Dusk"

A History of Drive-in Movie Theaters in Ramsey County

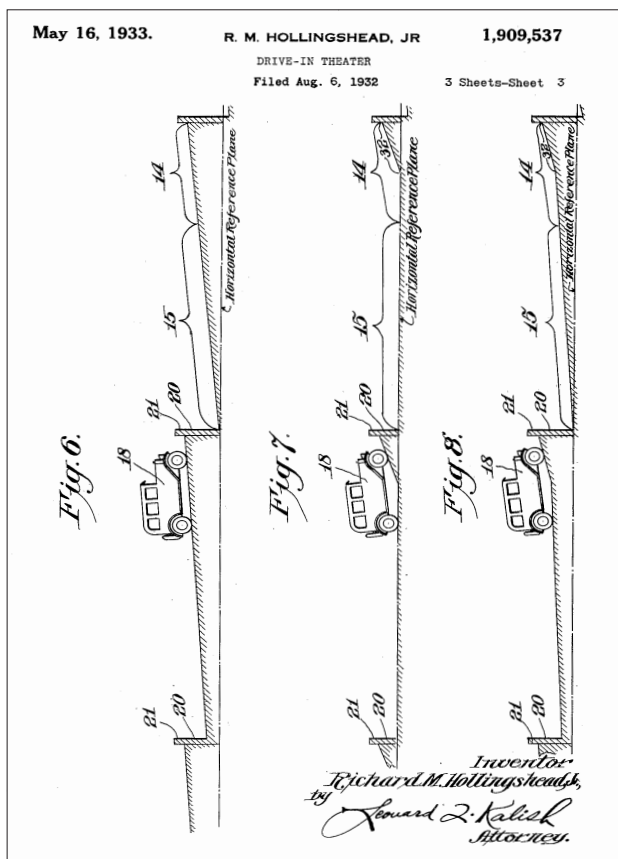
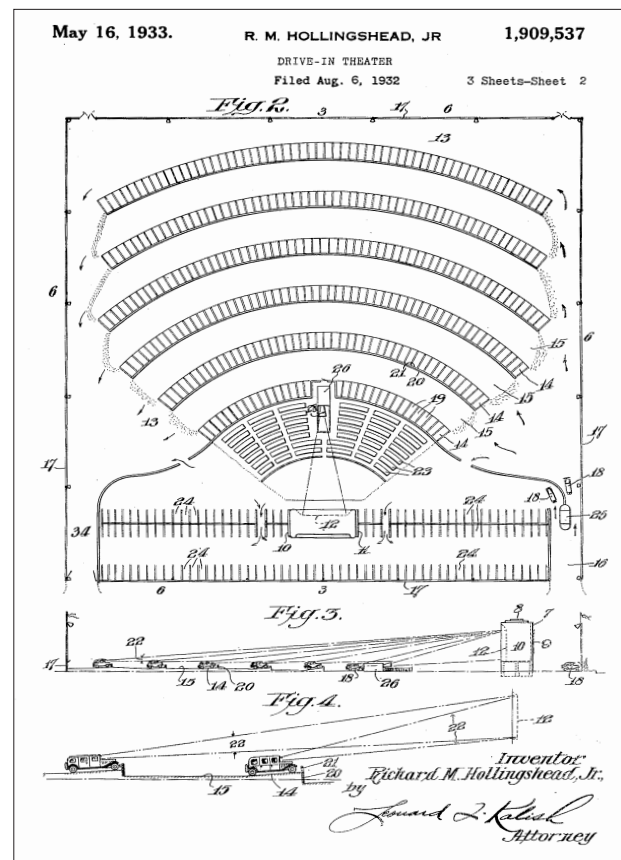
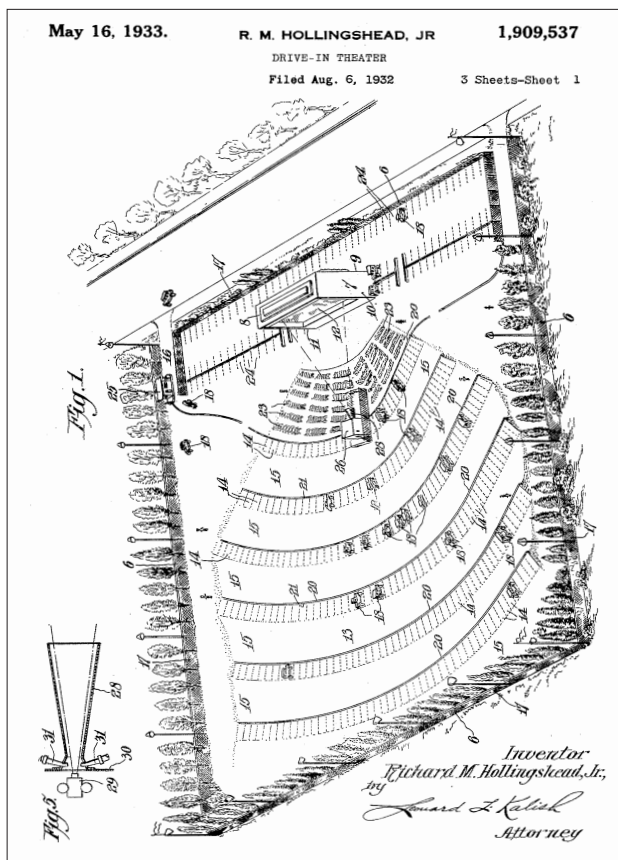
PETE BOULAY

In June 1979, my parents were eating dinner (and perhaps consuming a beverage) at the old Keller Golf Course Clubhouse, which was perched high on a hill with an expansive vista to the west overlooking Keller Lake. The enormous white screen of the Maple Leaf drive-in loomed in the distance. My sister Patty and I were waiting impatiently at home for our parents to pick us up to see *Superman*. Our parents lingered at the clubhouse until the screen came to life with the “ten minutes to showtime” countdown cartoon. They hurried home to get us, but we were late, and I missed how Superman came to earth. I groused a bit about that but was still thrilled to be at the drive-in.

Going to the drive-in became part of the fabric of Twin Cities entertainment when the first drive-in theater was built in Bloomington (called fittingly enough, “The Bloomington”) in

1947. The era came to a close when Lake Elmo’s Vali-Hi shut its doors for good in 2022. During the peak of operation, viewers could choose from nineteen drive-in theaters in the metro area, if one included the Hilltop Theater just across the river from Stillwater. There were three in Ramsey County. The Rose in Roseville at Snelling and County Road C, which ran from 1948-1979; and two in Maplewood: the Minnehaha, perched on the southeast corner of Minnehaha Avenue and East McKnight Road and operated from 1949-1982, and the Maple Leaf—the last built and the last to close—at the northwest junction of Highways 36 and 61. It operated for thirty-five years, from 1959-1994.

Minnesota was late to the drive-in movie craze. There were already 200 in operation across the US by the time Minnesota earth was graded for such a purpose. Operational logistics



A sketch from Richard Hollingshead, Jr.'s patent application shows the original concept for a drive-in theater, filed in 1932. Courtesy of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

for a drive-in operator in Minnesota proved challenging in this northern climate. The drive-in season in the Land of 10,000 Lakes was limited to May through September; however, taxes were assessed for twelve months. According to owners, this was one reason why running a drive-in was looked at as something of a real estate opportunity. Each death of a screen meant that a bank, housing development, or shopping center was born on land that was more profitable for another use.

Who Dreamed Up the Drive-in?

It's an often-told tale of how drive-in theaters get their start. The story begins with a son wanting to do something nice for his mom. His mother didn't fit comfortably in standard indoor theater seats, but she did like to go to the movies. Her son was Richard Hollingshead, Jr., and he conceived a clever idea of watching movies from the comfort of your automobile with a movie projected on a sheet. He opened the world's first drive-in on June 6, 1933, in Camden, New Jersey. It was fitting that

the first movie shown at a drive-in turned out to be an odd, (not from Hollywood) British comedy called *Wife Beware*.

Richard must have realized he had something special because he applied for and received a patent for his invention.¹ Patent or not, the idea caught on quickly. According to *Film Daily*, by 1941 there were ninety-five theaters across twenty-seven states. However, World War II put the brakes on expansion plans. Still, by 1945, 102 theaters dotted the countryside. Once the post-war boom was underway from 1946-1956 the number of theaters soared, with 4,000 opening their gates.² Some of them were giants such as the Troy Drive-in Detroit, Michigan, which had space for 3,000 cars. Minnesota theaters were more modest, although one of the larger ones—the 100 Twin in Fridley—could accommodate an estimated 2,000 cars. The drive-in became a mainstay in the Twin Cities for the next fifty years.

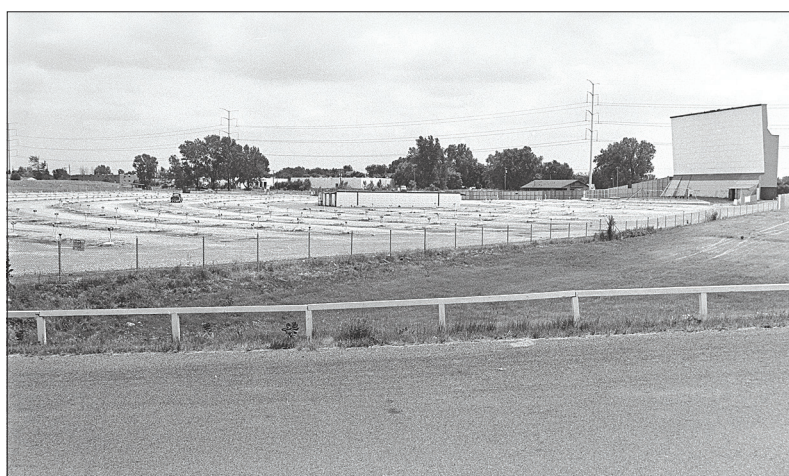
Drive-ins were slow to arrive in Minnesota and it was not just the weather. The local operators of the indoor theaters felt that the added outdoor features would sap away business. Fifteen years after the first drive-in theater was built in the country, the first one was built in Minnesota: The Bloomington by Flexer Drive-In Theaters, Inc. opened on August 26, 1947. It was located on East 78th Street between Portland and Cedar Avenues South. Owner David Flexer had his eyes on the north metro and had plans to build another theater.

In a “if you can’t beat them, join them” moment, a consortium of Minnesota theater owners called Minnesota Entertainment Enterprises, Inc., or MEE, dove into the drive-in business in the Twin Cities. Flexer sold the Bloomington to the group along with another site in Roseville (then Rose Township) that was slated to open in 1948, dubbed the Rose.³

The Rose—1948-1979

1525 West County Road C, Roseville MN 55113
In 2025: An Olive Garden restaurant and other businesses

At a cost of \$200,000 to build with an eye-catching thirty-six-foot neon rose on the back of the screen, the Rose provided splashiness and something novel to the citizens of Ramsey County. It had a capacity of 650 cars (plus another



The Rose Drive-in Theatre, circa 1976. Photos by Steven W. Plattner, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



An advertisement for the opening of the Rose Drive-in Theatre promised refreshments, movies under the stars, and a kid-friendly experience that “eliminates the baby-sitter problem.” In the *Minneapolis Star*, June 22, 1948.

In a composite image designed by the photographer, rows of cars take in a screening of *A Street Car Named Desire* at the Rose. Image created by Robert Murphy.



450 in a waiting area, hoping to get in). The manager William Sears announced to a *Minneapolis Tribune* reporter that the gates would open at 6 p.m. so families “may enjoy a picnic lunch before the first picture started at 8:15 p.m.”⁴ Note that this was in the days before daylight saving time. (The Uniform Time Act was passed in 1966, standardizing DST across the country.) Keeping with the family theme there was a bottle-warming service available to keep babies fed and happy during the show. The first fifty cars on opening night got a free 45 RPM vinyl record featuring a dreamy tune called “Blue Bird of Happiness” by Art Mooney and his Orchestra, with Mooney’s “Sunset to Sunrise” on the B-side. The first movie was the 1948 swashbuckling American film: *The Swordsman* (in Technicolor) starting Larry Parks and Ellen Drew. It was basically a western cowboy movie with swords.

An effort to add a second screen to the Rose in 1962 was denied by the village council, but the owners gave another try to expand capacity from 750 to 1,000 cars in 1964.

Bill Bruentrup, who grew up on a dairy farm in Maplewood, remembers going on a double date, bringing his future wife, Raydelle, for their first date in 1963. He had no idea what movie they saw but certainly remembered the car he

was in—a 1962 Pontiac Catalina. Bill hit on a key point about drive-ins: the movie was sometimes (and maybe often) not as important as simply “going” to the drive-in.⁵

While the Rose was the second drive-in movie theater in the state, it became the first to be robbed in a well-planned heist. The thieves waited until the end of a lucrative weekend showing had ended. Then, in the early morning hours of June 19, 1950, the bandits surprised the night watchman at gunpoint. He was tied up and locked in the projection room while the 750-pound safe containing \$500 in change and \$40 in bills was carried away. The watchman, Lee Hanson of St. Paul, was released and unharmed when a deliveryman arrived to pick up movie film at about 7:30 a.m.⁶

The Search for Schlock

Aside from speakers getting stolen at times—which was a real problem at the Twin 100 in Fridley, where three hundred speakers were stolen in 1961 at a cost of \$12 each—a pressing issue was the ongoing battle of the types of movies shown at drive-ins. The flickering screen could be seen by the peeping eyes of neighbors, and this posed a bit of a dilemma. During the summer of 1968, movies at the Rose, including opening sequences

from the latest James Bond movie, *You Only Live Twice*, attracted the unwanted attention of the Roseville Cinema Group. Father Vavra, the assistant pastor of St. Rose of Lima Church brought up the matter with the Roseville Village Council on July 8, 1968. Father Vavra lamented the lack of quality films at the Rose, compared to what was being shown at other drive-ins. Apparently, the council took no action, other than going on record with “moral support.”⁷ The issue did not go away, and on May 22, 1972, the Roseville Village Council passed an ordinance banning “nudity films.” The tipping point came when neighbors who lived within eyesight of a triple feature of *Cindy and Donna*, *The Young Graduate*, and *Fountain of Love* got an unwelcome free show. That was “the straw that broke the camel’s back.”⁸ An olive branch may have been offered by the management of the Rose, for an ad ran in the *Minneapolis Star*, announcing an outdoor worship service by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Bob Williams, a former Globe Trotter, was the keynote speaker on July 15, 1973.⁹

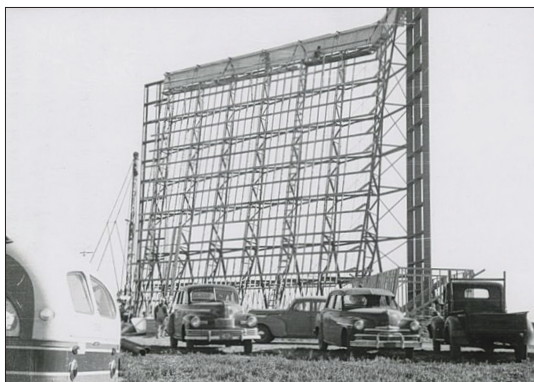
The threat of unsavory films was nothing compared to the firestorm of protest that erupted two years later. Zayre Shoppers City had its eyes on the thirty-three acres that the Rose was parked on. A petition opposing the project circulated, with 120 signatures.¹⁰ The Roseville City Council moved its meeting to the gymnasium of Alexander Ramsey School to hold the crowd, estimated at 350. The council rejected the development on a technicality. The lack of a dedicated traffic signal at a key intersection was the deal-breaker. Residents were also concerned about traffic, noise, and that “the additional shopping facility wasn’t needed.”¹¹

As land values continued to rise over the years, it was just a matter of time. The Rose showed its last movie, the truly dreadful *City on Fire*, and was closed by 1979. There is no trace of the theater today, but there are plenty of traffic signals and retail!

The Minnehaha—1949-1984

670 McKnight Rd N, St. Paul MN 55119
In 2025: Wells Fargo Bank

The Rose was not alone for long in Ramsey County. While the Minnehaha did not have the artistic flourish of the Rose, it caught folks’ attention with its art-deco marquee sign and screen



The Minnehaha’s screen was designed by theater architects Liebenberg and Kaplan. Photos in the University of Minnesota Libraries’ Northwest Architectural Archives.



designed by prominent Minneapolis theater architects Liebenberg & Kaplan. There were only a few drive-ins designed by this team. Maplewood was not a city yet in 1949, so the builders had to approach New Canada Township for permission to rezone the land. The board was a bit nervous about these newfangled drive-ins with the “large number of automobiles” they attracted. A set of resolutions was hammered out, and they tacked on a hefty annual fee of \$150—the equivalent of nearly \$2,000 today.

Maplewood Area Historical Society member Edna Ledo remembers taking the children to the show in the family station wagon. The small children loved the back seat, which could be straightened so they could lay down. Her daughter Cynthia (Ledo) Meier worked there as a ticket attendant in the summer of 1974. Because of her connection, the family saw many movies for free.¹² And the price was right—it cost \$2 per carload.

In a familiar pattern, the Minnehaha was accused of showing less-than-family-friendly fare. The biggest brouhaha was in April 1970 when the Minnehaha (along with the Coral Drive-in in West St. Paul) decided to show the



The Maple Leaf was the last drive-in to open in Ramsey County—and the last to close. Photo by Earl C. Leatherberry.

1968 Swedish version of *Fanny Hill*, based on the 1748 erotic novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, penned by John Cleland. Although the rating was technically “R,” ads in the papers proclaimed it “Rated X Naturally.” Protesters from Holy Cross Lutheran Church and Transfiguration Catholic Church showed up to the theater with signs that read “Stop Dirty Movies” and “Down with Filth.” In 1974, a theater owner in Verndale, Minnesota showed the movie *Deep Throat*, despite objections from other theater owners around the state. The rumor mill took it from there, with multiple theaters accused of showing the film, including the Minnehaha. A two-year campaign to ban adult film came to a head with testimony at the Minnesota State Capitol. John Markert, the executive director of the Minnesota Catholic Conference, told lawmakers that one of his children saw a screening of *Deep Throat* at the Minnehaha but quickly left. At the hearing, a telegram was read from Sylvester Price, general manager of Venture

Theaters, which ran the Minnehaha. He insisted that the film nor any other “X-rated” films were ever shown at the theater. With no proof of the showing, Markert apologized to the senate committee and the company.¹³

After surviving this battle, the Minnehaha proceeded to die a slow death. One way that theater tried to bring in a bit of extra income was to host “the world’s largest garage sale,” which transformed the parking area into a giant flea market every Sunday. Movies continued to be shown into the early ‘80s; advertisements for the movie *Meatballs* (rated PG) ran during the summer of 1980. By 1982, the back of the screen started to look a bit shabby. Chunks of the screen were missing, but the “Minnehaha” lettering was still as bold as ever.

The theater’s final gasp came with a liquidation sale in April 1984, which showcased playground equipment, a stainless-steel refrigerator, and a cash register. While the Minnehaha never lived up to the flashiness of the other two theaters in the county, it did get the last laugh. A Wells Fargo Bank complex was eventually built on the site. The shape of the parking lot and Margaret Street behind it echoes the footprint of the theater. One can stand looking toward the back of the building (roughly where the screen was) and visualize the setting. The Rose and the Maple Leaf sites were completely erased without a trace.

The Maple Leaf—1959-1994

2457 Maplewood Drive, Maplewood, MN 55109
In 2025: Acorn Mini Storage and homes

Times changed. Ten years after the Rose and the Minnehaha were built, Chet Herringer appeared before the new Village of Maplewood on September 4, 1958, petitioning to construct a drive-in just north of the intersection of Highways 36 and 61. There were no objections. The following spring, the massive concrete footings were poured for

An ad for the Maple Leaf included a map showing its location on Highway 36 and Highway 61. In the Minneapolis Star, July 31, 1959.



the sign, and the new drive-in rose up behind the “new and modern” Northern Aire Motel.

The Maple Leaf was a very standard drive-in. With a 630-car capacity, it was average size with a single screen. However, the screen was slightly curved for a better projection fit, and astute movie enthusiasts noted this upgrade from the traditional “flat” screens. In general, the Maple Leaf showed more first-run movies and had a better reputation than the Minnehaha. The Maple Leaf concession stand sat in the middle, with a projection booth in front of it and a playground behind it. The most distinctive feature was the wonderful neon and light marquee on the recently expanded Highway 61.

Former Maplewood Mayor George Rossbach was in the construction business and remembered talking to the site’s well-driller, who described the intentional grading so drivers could park their cars at slight angles for better screen viewing—a practice many drive-in theaters followed. He also remembered that mosquitoes were a problem, and before the movie, a big fogger on a truck drove up and down the lanes, spraying chemicals to keep them at bay. When that happened, it was important to keep your windows shut. Some movie-goers even made screens to insert in car windows to keep the pests away and still enjoy a breeze. Rossbach noted daylight saving time also posed problems because the first movie couldn’t be shown until the sky darkened—at 9:30 p.m. Of course, small children weren’t concerned with the darkness. They’d make a beeline to the playground with its swings and teeter-totters. These were still in place right up to the theater’s closure in 1994. George wasn’t impressed by the sound quality of the “little tin speakers,” and many times people forgot to take them off the window and would drive off with them still attached.¹⁴

Maplewood Area Historical Society member Kathy McCoy lived down the street from the Minnehaha. “We as children made friends with the caretaker, and he’d treat us to candy and allowed us to play in the playground for hours. Imagine our surprise in the evening when patrons would come in and we had to share the facilities,” she recalled. She couldn’t hear the movies from her house, but she remembers trying to read the lips of the movie actors from far away. Her habit of watching “silent” movies changed when, as a

teenager, she subbed at the concession stand for a vacationing friend at the Maple Leaf. McCoy said it wasn’t like working at all. The movie shown at the time was called *Grand Prix*. After listening to the dialogue from the same movie for two weeks, she got to know it well. Her friends would show up and would see the movie for free.¹⁵

The End of an Era

By the 1980s, drive-in theaters were on the decline nationwide. The industry peaked with 4,063 outdoor screens in 1958 and had dropped to 2,813 in 1986, according to the National Association of Theater Owners. The Twin Cities’ count fell to six, with just one left in Ramsey County—the Maple Leaf. In an interview for the *Star Tribune* in October 1986, the owner of the Maple Leaf, Gerry Herringer shared his insight on the world of drive-ins and their decline. He blamed smaller families, smaller cars, and the banning of DDT to combat mosquitoes among other factors. He guessed the Maple Leaf might have only a year or two left in it and the Cottage View in Cottage Grove a couple more after that.¹⁶ Instead, the Maple Leaf lasted for another eight years, and Cottage View held on for another quarter century, closing in 2012 with a final showing of *Spiderman*.

The Maple Leaf continued to show first-run movies and escaped much of the bad reputations some theaters developed. Although, many (most?) patrons did not bother to heed the “No Alcoholic Beverages Allowed on These Premises” sign. The warning on the sign was not strictly enforced, as this author can attest. I was once also coaxed to ride in the back of a trunk of an early ‘70s Camaro. I suddenly developed a bout of claustrophobia and demurred.

In the end, the land beneath the Maple Leaf became too valuable and the drive-in quietly closed at the end of the seasonal run in 1994. The old screen was torn down and the building demolished in June 1995. Acorn Mini Storage now occupies the site along with housing.

Paying Tribute

In the summer of 1994, I was taking a summer TV production course at St. Cloud State, and because of that I got a behind-the-scenes look at the operation of the Maple Leaf. I wanted to cover a “light news story” so I called Stephen

The Maple Leaf's Final Act

In order to get a degree in Mass Communications with the emphasis on television production at St. Cloud State, students had to take a required summer session and the entire class had to "run" a TV station for the summer. We came up with a good fake name: WINN TV.

We had to produce news stories for the station. Many hours go into a news story "package" that only lasts a few minutes. I had an idea to rent a video camera recorder

(also known as a camcorder) from the Learning Resources Library, an inferior way to produce a package even for school.

Nevertheless, I was able to craft a news story on my favorite drive-in theatre that I went to as a kid. These video stills show some of the B-roll that was captured for my package on the Maple Leaf in 1994, just a year before it was closed and torn down. *Images courtesy of the author.*



Mann, son of Mann Theatres founder Marvin Mann (and the nephew of another theater kingpin, Ted Mann), and had a friendly chat with him. He wondered aloud why the media always wanted to write stories on drive-in theaters. He noted that behind the “intrigue,” and good earnings throughout theater season, taxes are still due twelvemonths of the year. He said I could film all I wanted at the Maple Leaf, but I couldn’t interview any of the staff. I was unaware at the time that it was the last season for the theater.

A double feature of *The Lion King* and *Angels in the Outfield* was playing. The theater had changed very little since I had been there with my parents as one of those kids in pajamas. I felt like I’d traveled in a time machine back to the 1950s. About an hour before showtime, the staff were busy preparing concessions for the night. Warm, buttery popcorn filled big buckets and dozens of cheeseburgers fried on the grill. The night was clear and warm—a good night for a crowd. The phone on the wall of the projection room was constantly ringing, but I never saw anyone picking it up.

The projectionist had the nightly feature on two large spools ready to play. The trailers for other movies sat with their smaller spools on the shelf. Somewhere hidden from view was the strip of film with the animated fudgesicles, ice cream, and “assorted tasty candy” that tempted

patrons to visit the refreshment center. On the inside door of the projection booth I noticed a poster of the 1992 family-friendly flick *The Return to the Lost World*, with a (kind of) menacing T. rex on it.

The gates opened and a steady stream of cars and vans entered the open lot dotted with speakers on poles. The flashing sign flickered in the twilight, with its bright green and red maple leaf. Almost like magic, a horde of kids appeared at the “Candy Cane City” playground with its old squeaky swings and its black asphalt jungle of animal-themed slides. The sky dimmed, and the manager asked, “Would you like to stay and watch the show for free?” I politely declined. In retrospect, I wish I had stayed. Instead, I packed up my camcorder as dusk turned to night not realizing that the end was near for the last Ramsey County drive-in.

Pete Boulay was born in St. Paul and was raised in Maplewood. He caught the history bug when he took a Minnesota History class in college and the final project was to write a report on his hometown. He turned the report into a book, The Lost City of Gladstone. He was part of the group that formed the Maplewood Area Historical Society and served on the Maplewood Heritage Preservation Commission. He previously wrote “A Roof Over Their Heads” for Ramsey County History, Summer 2000.

NOTES

1. R.M. Hollingshead, Jr., “Drive-In Theater” patent application No. 1,909,537, filed August 6, 1932, and patented May 16, 1933, U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

2. Phillips, W. D. “A Cinema Under the Stars (and Stripes): David Milgram’s Boulevard Drive-In Theatre and the Political-Economic Landscape of America’s Post-War Drive-In Boom.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 40, no. 2 (June 2020), 275–296.

3. “Drive-in Theater Changes Hands,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, April 11, 1948.

4. “Rose Drive-In Unveiling Scheduled Thursday Night,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, June 20, 1948.

5. Bill Bruentrup, interview with the author, March 14, 2024.

6. “Drive-in Safe Carried Away; Watchman Tied,” *Minneapolis Star*, June 19, 1950.

7. “Priest Protests Drive-In’s Films,” *Minneapolis Star*, July 9, 1968.

8. “Drive-in Nudity Films Banned in Roseville,” *Minneapolis Star*, May 23, 1972.

9. Rose Drive-in Theater advertisement in the *Minneapolis Star*, July 14, 1973.

10. “City Council in Roseville moves meeting,” *Minneapolis Star*, March 21, 1974.

11. “Development for Roseville site rejected,” *Minneapolis Star*, March 28, 1974.

12. Edna Ledo, interview with the author, November 2002.

13. “One incident may have led to move to bar X-rated films,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 10, 1979.

14. George Rossbach, interview with the author, November 2002.

15. Kathy McCoy, interview with the author, November 2002.

16. “Statistics, other signs show drive-in theaters are in their twilight,” *Star Tribune*, October 26, 1986.