

DRIVE-INS

After much prodding from my family, we recently paid a visit to the Saco Drive-In along Route One. I couldn't remember the last time I had actually been to a drive-in, but it didn't take long for me to remember why they are so much fun. Where else besides your own home can you watch your favorite action hero and talk, laugh or sneeze as loud as you want without someone behind you going "Ssshhh!"? The only problem I see is the spilled soda and dropped popcorn travels home with you.

Conjuring up memories from years ago, I thought back to the too-many-to-count balmy Saturday nights that I spent at the local drive-in near my hometown. Like a modern-day wagon train, a group of us would meet up in the theatre parking lot and plop ourselves down on top of flimsy, plastic milk crates in the back of old pick-up trucks. Before, during, and after the show, we'd swap stories about girls, cars, future aspirations and ... girls. We had little to worry about back then except whose turn it was to buy refreshments and who would jump first during one of those B-rated horror flicks that permeated the 70s era. Talk about scary—little did we know that in practically a blink of an eye, our hair would start turning as white as that colossal movie screen.

We'd watch superstars like the small, but mighty, Bruce Lee kick butt and the oversized, but funny-talking, Arnold Schwarzenegger wow us with not only his muscles, but his brain as well. Of course, we can't leave out Mr. Clint "go ahead, make my day" Eastwood as he .44 magnum'd his way through numerous *Dirty Harry* flicks on the mean streets of San Francisco.

This was before the entire place was torn down for more important venues like cheap shoe outlets, fast food restaurants and coin-op Laundromats.

I was pleasantly surprised to learn that for the first

time since the peak days of drive-in theatres (4,043 in 1958), more outdoor screens have been built over the past few years than have been torn down. It's nice to know that some good things from the past (other than peace symbols, lava lamps, and the rock group Aerosmith) can indeed make a comeback. Approximately eight more are scheduled for summer openings and many more are being refurbished. After near extinction, we're back up to 433 operating drive-ins nationwide with many reporting a revenue boom. It's quite a startling trend when you consider the country's skyrocketing real estate prices.

Maybe people have tired of strip malls with the puny parking spaces or noisy industrial parks. Perhaps we're simply craving more open space nowadays and just need a place to throw down an old blanket and chill out under a canopy full of twinkling stars on a hot summer night.

Of course, if you're a teenager, going to the drive-in means you're finally old enough to drive which can also bring some pretty hefty car insurance premiums. This, unfortunately, also translates into worrying about a small thing called a paycheck to replace those bald tires and keep gas in the tank.

Faced with a similar financial crisis years back, I was forced to decide between either continuing my movie going or breaking up with my girlfriend (which kind of defeated the purpose of having a set of wheels in the first place). But breaking up was a hard thing to do (even though it promised plenty of fodder for the weekend wagon train gabfest), so I compromised and got a part-time job at the very same drive-in. That way I got to keep the girl and free admission to boot.

Time marches on though, and sadly, some of our superstar icons have either passed on, become politicians or grown too old to be chasing around bad guys in anything but a well-oiled wheelchair. As for me, I'm still waiting for the day when they tear down a strip-mall and put up a drive-in theatre. It may be a cold day in Maine when that happens, but

you can bet your super-sized bucket of popcorn I'll be the first car in line when it does. Who knows, maybe I'll consider getting my old job back, because if this latest drive-in revival proves anything—it's never too late to make a comeback.

Arnold's catchphrase in *Terminator 3* never sounded better....

“I'm back!”