

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Ripon Outdoor Theatre provided memories in '50s & '60s

Sixty-nine years ago, in May 1954, an outdoor movie theater opened just outside of Ripon.

Located four miles west of Ripon on the north side of Highway 23 near the intersection of Highway 49, the Ripon Outdoor "Drive-In" Theatre held its grand opening from May 20-22.

The concept for a drive-in theater began in 1928, and after World War II the idea spread rapidly. By 1954, when the Ripon Outdoor Theatre had its grand opening, almost 4,000 drive-in theaters could be found across America.

In December 1952, 13.2 acres of land was purchased to build the Ripon Outdoor Theatre and construction started in the fall of 1953. The company planning the theater was the S&M Theatre Corp. (now known as Marcus Corp.) Ben Marcus (1911-2000), the company's president, had opened the first of this theater chain, named the "Campus Theatre," in Ripon in 1935.

It truly was a grand opening

An advertisement for the new theater in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* proclaimed: "Just come as you are," "No need to dress up" and "You may smoke if you like" in effort to appeal to large audiences. The outdoor theater boasted room for more than 400 cars on a paved inclined surface, a large 2,400-square-foot silver screen and RCA in-car speakers for listening.

In the middle of the paved area, 240 feet from the screen, was a projection room and refreshment building which sold soft drinks, popcorn, coffee, ice cream, candy and hot dogs.

The snack bar also had free



THE RIPON OUTDOOR Theatre offered a popular family activity in the 1950s and 1960s. The movie "Ben Hur" was shown in 1959.

submitted photo

bottle warmers for mothers to warm bottles for their babies.

The grounds were brightly lit before the movies and during intermissions, and "a subdued moonlight blue beam" illuminated the area during the showing of movies.

Advertisements encouraged people to "bring the whole family. Even the baby will enjoy a sleep in the cool, fresh summer night air."

A playground with a play set with slides and swings for children to enjoy before movies started playing also was offered.

Those people attending the grand opening celebration received the gift of a "free cigarette lighter for car, home or office."

A surprise gift also was given to every child under the age of 12. The admission price was \$0.60 per person (approximately \$7 today) and free for children with their parents.

The grand-opening movies were the western "Tumbleweed" with actor Audie Murphy and the comedy "Clipped Wings" with actor Leo Gorcey.

Pat Martin of Ripon was the manager of the new theater. He also had been the manager of the Campus and Ripon Theatres for a year-and-a-half before the outdoor theater opened. Martin noted in a May 1954 interview in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* that "at the new drive-in, the policy will be to provide pictures which are suitable for the entire family." He went on to state, "we will endeavor to give Ripon area theater-goers good entertainment at all times and to provide many happy summer night programs."

Martin had a staff of 12 people.

Memories for movie goers of all ages

Nedra Martz, past archivist for the Ripon Historical Society, wrote about the theater in 2011 saying, "Ripon's new drive-in theater experienced only a few changes in its structure and schedule over its first 5 years of its existence." She noted that "by 1959, the season began a bit earlier, opening on the weekends starting the third week in April.

"A daily showing began on May 29. The tradition of holding a grand-opening weekend continued with each car receiving a gift of two gallons of free gas."

She added that the ticket office always opened at 6:45 p.m., but this was changed to 7:30 p.m. in later years as movies always began at dusk.

Martz also wrote that, "in the late 1960s and 1970s, teenagers became an important part of the dwindling "family audience."

Although teenage attendance



THIS 1954 RIPON Commonwealth Press advertisement informed readers about the Ripon Outdoor Theater grand opening.

submitted photo

was welcomed, they sometimes tried to sneak in their friends by having them ride on the floor or in the trunk of the car.

Former Ripon Mayor John Reinsch remembered that theater employees at the ticket office used flashlights to detect hidden people in cars attempting to sneak in.

An ad in the April 10, 1970 *Commonwealth Press* announced that with the "18th Great Season!" a name change would be announced for the outdoor theater. The Ripon Outdoor Theatre then became the "23 Ripon." Name changes such as this helped travelers know the highway number as well as the town location in order for individuals to better find the theater.

Times Changed

Interest in movies and drive-in theaters waned when almost every house had television sets, cable TV subscription channels, along with VCR players,

providing more in the way of home entertainment. After 27 seasons, the 23 Ripon closed Sept. 7, 1981.

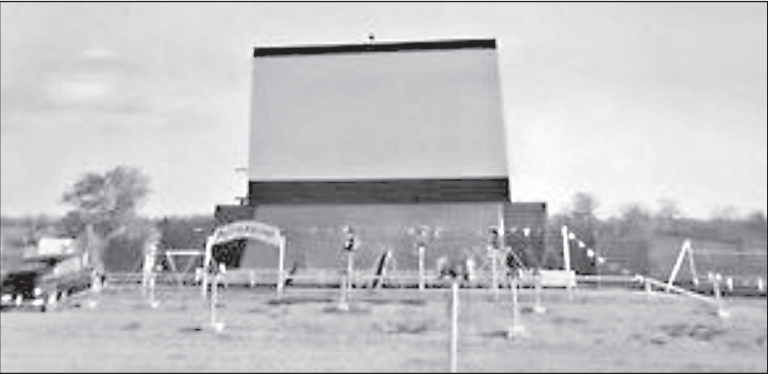
"The movies shown on the final weekend were Student Bodies and Blood Beach (rated R) — quite a change from the family entertainment films of its first season," Martz wrote.

The final blow to the theater occurred in 1982, when a wind-storm demolished the outdoor viewing screen. Today, only the land that the Ripon Outdoor Theatre sat on and memories remain.

Only approximately 300 outdoor theaters are left in the United States, with 10 of them being located in Wisconsin.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.



THE RIPON OUTDOOR Theatre was located on the north side of Highway 23, east of Highway 49. There was parking space for 400-plus cars and movies always started at dusk.

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Answers to the Crossword Puzzle from the May 10th issue of The Commonwealth Express

BATHGATE	ISOBAR	CUPID
FLOORWAX	SHARPE	ANIME
LINCOLN	MEMORIAL	TREAT
ATEUP	SEW	DCIV
TOSS	MESSIAH	COMPLEX
	APB	SABLE
JULIAN	LENNON	RDS
OLORD	ARE	FBI
UNDEALT	EMPIRE	BUILDER
RAE	IDI	ARNAZ
	DULUTH	MINNESOTA
ATWILL	SUEME	LEA
CREATION	STORY	ATHLETE
HULL	DOH	ETH
EEL	BBS	BURRHAM
	PSAT	BEANE
HOLLYWOOD	HILLS	SEDATE
ACAI	ORBE	ETC
THYME	GOREVIDA	NOVELS
CREEP	ALLSET	NUISANCE
HEDDA	NIECES	DEPENDON

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