

HULL'S
DRIVE-IN
DOUBLE
FEATURE

2367 N. LEE HIGHWAY
 LEXINGTON, VA 24450

MOVIE PHONE
540.463.2621

www.HullsDriveIn.com

When the sun goes down... **"STARS"**
 the **"STARS"** come out!

GATES OPEN AT SEVEN
 & YOU CAN **CM46**

\$6 per person - Kids 11 and under are FREE!

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MANY STORIES, ONE NATION

Hull's Drive-in: Preserving a piece of Americana
 Submitted by Pete Marovich on Friday, February 6, 2009



By Jenny Jones/American Journal
 Photography by Pete Marovich/American Journal

It was a hot sticky August evening. The sun still hung high, but folks eagerly anticipated the thrill that the darkness would bring as they pulled into Hull's Drive-In Theatre, outside of Lexington in Rockbridge County, Va. It was just after 5:30 p.m., and even though the outdoor theater didn't technically open until 7, vehicles filled with families lined up at the ticket booth and along the stone drive that meets U.S. 11. Everyone wanted to get a good spot on the theater's tiered lawn.

To keep the guests from parking along the busy highway, theater staff began selling tickets early, \$5 for adults and children 11 and younger free. One-by-one the vehicles made it up the gravel path and moviegoers staked out parking places in front of the big screen. Knowing the movie wouldn't start until at least 9 p.m., theater patrons set up camps in front of their vehicles. Some sat on blankets on the ground, while others eased into folding lawn chairs. The adults chatted among themselves, while children tossed balls to one another and ran about in the slowly cooling air.

"We like to come early so the kids can come out and play before" the movie starts, said Diana Desper, 45, of Staunton, Va. "It's a family atmosphere."



Drive-in fans line up early to get a good spot at Hull's Drive-in in Lexington, Va. Although the gates don't officially open until 7:00 p.m., many carloads start to arrive at about 5:30.

Nation's Only Nonprofit Drive-In

The picnic scene was like a flashback to the '50s, when more than 4,000 drive-in theaters dotted the American landscape. These days, only about 400 such theaters exist throughout the nation as many have gone under due to low profitability – a fate that almost took down Hull's.

In the summer of 2000, Hull's Drive-In stopped showing movies, putting the folks who live near the theater in mourning. They'd lost a community fixture that had continually shown films since opening as Lee Drive-In in 1950 and assuming the name Hull's Drive-In in 1957, when Mr. and Mrs. Sebert Hull purchased it. Without the theater, things just weren't the same.

All those years, when Hull's opened for the season, "it was sort of like a sign of spring," said Peggy Payne, who sells tickets at the theater. "[When] there was nothing on the marquee ... we thought, 'We can't have that.'"



Children play in front of the big screen before the double-feature begins at about 9:00.

Instead of letting the movie screen go permanently black and allowing the lawn to grow over with weeds, community members banded together.

They formed a nonprofit group called Hull's Angels in 1999 and began collecting donations to save the drive-in from doom. It didn't take long for the group to raise enough support to open the theater for the latter half of the 2000 season and for a full first season in 2001.

Since then, Hull's has operated as the country's only nonprofit drive-in, showing double features of second-run movies every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from April to October on the original wide screen. "It's been a part of the Rockbridge way of life," said Hull's Executive Director Frank Kulesza. "We're carrying on a piece of Americana."



Hull's Executive Director and projectionist Frank Kulesza starts up the first offering of the double feature.

'Evening Under The Stars'

A couple hours before show time, the concession stand opened and in no time, a line stretched out of the door. Customers ordered freshly made hamburgers, hotdogs, corndogs, French fries, snow cones, sodas and, of course, popcorn with real butter.

Oldies music played from speakers as snack bar attendants called up orders and Kulesza began feeding film through an old projector.

"The number one rule is that everybody has fun," Kulesza broadcasted over the loud speaker in between songs. "We appreciate you coming out tonight."

At a table near the concessions, members of Hull's Angels sold T-shirts, glow-in-the-dark toys and raffle tickets as part of their fundraising efforts.



Two children are silhouetted against the screen as the credits for the first movie begin to roll.

When the sky turned black with night, Kulesza announced, "We'll play one more song and then we'll start the show."

As they prepared for the movie to begin, children settled in near their parents and young people on dates snuggled in close together. Then, when the song was done, movie patrons laid on their horns – a traditional cue to let the projectionist know they were ready for the show.

With a flicker, the movie appeared on the screen and the audience fell quiet for another "evening under the stars."