

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!

SEE YOU AT THE MOVIES

by Don Harrison
Photography by Douglas Miller
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And not just any movies. Here's your guide for heading out this summer to that bastion of the American past, the drive-in.



The Hull's projection room. The monstrous device is housed in a booth the size of a storage closet.

Frank Kulesza stands perfectly calm while ribbons of thick celluloid travel precarious pathways around his head.

"I'm having trouble right now," the manager of Lexington's Hull Drive-In Theatre says matter-of-factly, showing me the destination of tonight's first feature as it travels into a lighted metal shutter.

"Right now I've got a paper clip holding it all together."

"Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle" unfurls through various wobbly spindles and around corners, twisting and re-spooling onto a large dish that looks like a yo-yo turned on its side.

This is occurring in a cramped projection booth no bigger than your Aunt Deborah's old storage closet. The Hull's monstrous Brenkert-RCA movie projector, which has been with the theater since it first opened in 1950, takes up a large portion of the space; the flickering beast seems more like something out of "Forbidden Planet" – Robby the Robot's older brother – than the sleek and sophisticated digital equipment we're used to fiddling with at home.

The nation's only nonprofit drive-in, the legendary Hull still does it the old-fashioned way, with a paper clip if necessary; keeping alive that peculiar American small-town phenomenon – watching movies in the car. Many of the outdoor moviehouses originally erected during the CinemaScope boom of the '50's still attract traffic and seize the imagination on weekend nights in Virginia locales

such as Lexington, Rural Retreat, Christiansburg, Abingdon and Stephens City, according to Jennifer Sherer, co-founder of www.drive-ins.com.

The website is devoted to promoting and documenting surviving big screens across North American.

Sherer has visited and photographed the Hull, which was saved in 2000 when a group of Lexington community leaders lobbied for its nonprofit status. "[The theater's] reputation preceded it," she says. "So did the community efforts to get it back up and running." The drive-in historian loves the fact that it is nestled in the scenic Shenandoah Valley.

In the heyday of the drive-in fad, the late '50's, there were thousands of drive-ins like the Hull scattered across the country. That number has dwindled down to a mere 400. But in many small towns in the region, dashboard viewing under the summer stars never went out of style. Virginia, notes Sherer, is lucky to have preserved so many. Currently, there are no theatres in New Jersey, for example, where the dashboard screening fad first started in the early '30s.

Frank Kulesza's projection booth is surrounded by memories of double-features past: old serial ads on the wall, barely functioning Tube-Amp equipment, a very alien-looking microphone, rusting film canisters.

Westerns were indeed the fare of choice when this place first opened, as the Lee Drive-In, in August 1950. The first cinematic oaters shown included "The Man From Colorado," "The Red Pony," "Laramie" and "Rusty Leads the Way." Admission was \$1 per car and the slogan was "Drive in – Keep Cool!"



The fare at Hull's. The theater used to specialize in Westerns; these days it's a blend of family and B-films.



According to the Hull's official history, the first owner was Waddey C. Watkins of Roanoke, but the screen got its lasting name when Sebert Hull bought the place in 1957 and helped make it a community meeting spot for generations. There were nightly shows throughout the hot summer months, and weekends were often sellouts.

After "Mr. Hull's death in 1998, the 50 x 90-foot screen eventually went dark. A group of business leaders and longtime community patrons, dubbing themselves "Hull's Angels," refused to see the moviehouse close down. They leased the property and lobbied for nonprofit status. Several hundred area supporters now pay \$5 annual dues to belong to the Angels to help keep the drive-in alive.

(The Hull's Angels effort has spurred other communities across the nation. Jennifer Sherer notes. "Community members are coming together to try to raise funds to rebuild the Starlite Drive-In in North Carolina, which was burned down then flooded due to severe storms. For more, click here www.drive-ins.com/theater/nctstar

FOR TO READ ABOUT THE WESTERN VIRGINIA DRIVE-IN TOUR
www.theroanoker.com/favoritearticles/drivein/wva_mj05.cfm

Old place, old context.

The drive-in has always been about more than the movies.

These days, the former home of western serials programs everything from family favorites like "Shrek 2" to tonight's double feature of a teenage stoner b-flick and big-budget Hollywood remake. Patrons can still hook up big metal speakers if they choose. Many prefer to listen through their

radios via the Hull's low-power audio frequency, to catch the full Surroundsound Hollywood effect.

Area native Sam Newcomer, the smiling man in the ticket booth, has been haunting this particular screen for decades. "I think the important thing has been to retain the flavor that the theatre had, with no drastic changes."

"Hull Theatre," Kulesza says, answering another call into the theatre's hotline.

It takes about three hours to prepare each weekend's double-feature. Manager Kulesza has to splice together two full-length movies, inserting next week's movie trailers and vintage intermission advertisements. It can be hard work. I don't dare ask him what he does when this daunting whirl of film spooling around the room decides to tangle up.

"Yes... and 'The Manchurian Candidate' is our second feature. \$5 admission," he tells the caller. "See you at the movies!"



Welcome to Hull's.

Note the collection bucket for Hull's Angels, the theater's support group.



Classic spot, classic car.

Hull's patrons include VMI students, farmers and visitors from Europe.

Right now, as dusklight disappears on a sleepy Sunday evening, the phone is busier than the 319-car lot. Only a few vehicles sit to view Harold and Kumar start their adventure. Some teenagers lay on the hood of a truck, not laughing yet; a family spreads out a blanket... the kids want popcorn with lots of butter.

Who still comes to the drive-in?

"We see the VMI cadets at the beginning of the summer but they are usually gone by the time we open," the manager explains. "It's a variety of people. From dirt farmers and people from other parts of Virginia to tourists from Australia and Germany." Concerning the latter, perhaps the Hull can thank the interest generated by Internet spots such as Jennifer Sherer's www.drive-ins.com or the regional "Drive-in Theatres of the Mid-Atlantic" site at www.driveins.4t.com – maps, photos, memories and links. Sherer explains that the web "has enabled people from around the world to easily share, relive, and even study the drive-in experience. The fond memories and funny anecdotes that people have about drive-ins can be entertaining and even educational... sometimes you get a window into an earlier time in history."

There have even been signs of revival in the urban setting. A new screen was recently installed inside the minor league baseball home of the Baysox in Bowie, Md., making it the first time in over a decade that Washington D.C.-area moviegoers have access to a drive-in. It is a new contraption, with digital

projection, worlds away from the retro earthiness of Lexington's cinematic throwback. Sherer says the Bowie installation is an interesting rarity.

"Although urban drive-in revival is not unheard of, most of the recent activity tends to be in more rural areas," she says. "This is most likely due to the high cost of real estate and the fact that drive-ins work better with less ambient light nearby."

From hiding in the trunks of cars to a teenager's first kiss in the dark, the drive-in experience has always been about more than just the movies. "We've had people of all ages write to us and thank us for enabling them to tap into this online drive-in enthusiast community. Ultimately we think it encourages people to go out and support their local drive-in."

The Hull's ticket taker, Sam Newcomer, recalls one memorable event at the theater that had nothing to do with pictures. It was something that happened when he was a teenager.

"One day I called in to the drive-in to see what was playing and Mr. Hull answered. 'Is this Newcomer from Rockbridge?' (Laughs.) 'He knew my name! Mr. Hull knew my name. That gave me a good feeling, a feeling like I belonged in the community, that I belonged here in this place.'"

The Hull's Drive-In, U.S. 11, Lexington 540/463-2621. For The Hulls Drive-In Website visit www.HullsDriveIn.com Admission: \$5 per adult, children under 12 free with adult admission.



Working to save a treasure. The Hull's Angels have kept the Lexington drive-in alive.



Picnic! It's happening at Hull's.



Back seat!
Build your own little world.



Football!
There's lots to do before the movie starts.