

# Round Up

Cuddy home, the large black book is spread open on his dining room table and the covered bridges of the featured county are clearly marked.

"I was hooked, right there," John says, smiling at the memory of the first time he saw all the covered bridge symbols in the book. The bridges beckoned, and with Shirley reading the maps and directing him, John set out to see them.

Bridges opened a new world for the Cuddys. "Here we were, going all over the state, even to other states, meeting people and finding bridges we never knew existed," he says.

John's photos of covered bridges have often been published in *Pennsylvania Magazine*, and they cover the walls of his home. A photo of his favorite bridge, the Rudolph Arthur Covered Bridge over Big Elk Creek in Chester County, holds a special place of honor above his kitchen table.

Over the years, John has gathered a library of books detailing the history and locations of bridges throughout the world, and he has developed a reputation as a local authority on the topic. Recently, since Shirley's illness has curtailed their travels, John has concentrated on doing research and speaking to groups in the area.

When he speaks, John dips into the history of the bridges, drops in some interesting statistics, and describes what dangers the bridges face. "The first thing I am asked is, 'Why did they cover the bridges?' I tell them it was to protect the wood," he says.

When asked why most bridges are red, John explains that the color is probably a common choice since many barns are painted red. "I learned that the barns were painted red because farmers made their own paint from a mixture of red clay and cow's milk," he says. "The ingredients were available and cheap."

John belongs to the Theodore Burr Covered Bridge Society of Pennsylvania, named for the man who developed the arched truss used in bridges throughout the state. "Bridge people are a tough group," John says. "They watch out for their bridges and raise money to rebuild them if they are taken out by fire or

floods."

As he closes up his books, John smiles and reveals another reason he likes covered bridges. "There is usually a nice deep fishing hole under those bridges," he says, "and in the summer a cool place to swim."

Bette McDevitt of Pittsburgh is a frequent contributor.

## Bridge Facts

Pennsylvania has more covered bridges than any other state. At one time, there were more than 1,500 bridges throughout the commonwealth. Today, there are 212, according to Tom Walczak, president of the Theodore Burr Covered Bridge Society of Pennsylvania, Inc., and approximately 153 are still open to traffic. Every bridge over 50 years old is registered and has an identifying number.

With 29 covered bridges within its borders, Lancaster County has the most covered bridges of any county in the state. Washington County is second with 22 bridges.

The first covered bridge in the country spanned the Schuylkill River. The first cornerstone was laid in 1800, and the bridge was opened to traffic on January 1, 1805. It was designed by Timothy Palmer as a stone bridge, but as the builders ran out of money, they turned to cheap and readily available lumber. The bridge lasted 50 years, when it was rebuilt to accommodate train tracks. It then survived another 25 years.

Vandalism, fire and flooding are the biggest threats to covered bridges. When bridges are destroyed, sometimes the timbers can be saved and the bridge rebuilt. Otherwise, it is difficult to secure the large timbers necessary to build the wooden structures.

For more information about the Theodore Burr Covered Bridge Society of Pennsylvania, Inc., contact Bob Kuether, 1080 Fifth Ave., Steelton 17113 or visit the society's website at [www.tbcbpspa.com](http://www.tbcbpspa.com). ■

Bucks County



## The Comeback of Drive-ins

After decades of ups and downs, Pennsylvania's drive-in theaters prove that the silver screen still shines best under a starry sky

by Heather Davis

**Y**OU'VE MOST LIKELY SEEN ONE OR two of them as you drive along the highway: towering white ghosts plagued by weeds and neglected remnants of an age gone by. The screens that once danced with light have long ago gone dark, and although dilapidated ticket booths still stand as if guarding the memories, the lots haven't seen cars in years.

The drive-in theater may not seem to belong in today's world, but fortunately there are still those who believe in the excitement and romance of a moonlit movie. In fact, our hurried pace of life often leaves us longing for the simple pleasures of yesteryear.

Nationwide, drive-ins have made a comeback in recent years with old theaters reopening and new ones under construction, and nowhere is the spirit of these living legends more contagious than in Pennsylvania. While the national average hovers around nine drive-ins per state, Pennsylvania boasts a whopping 33—the second highest in the country. Not surprising for a state that in 1934 welcomed Shankweiler's as America's second drive-in—and now the oldest in operation.

## The Birth of an American Icon

Richard Hollingshead Jr. created the first drive-in theater in Camden, N.J., in



Becky's, then called Rt. 45 Drive-in, opened at its current location in Walnutport, about 11 miles north of Allentown in 1946. The theater held 450 cars and featured entertainment before the movie. Photographs courtesy of Shankweiler's and Becky's.

1933, but it didn't take long for Pennsylvania entrepreneur Wilson Shankweiler to catch on to the idea that pairing America's favorite pastimes—cars and movies—was a recipe for success.

In April 1934, he opened his own outdoor theater to attract customers to his hotel in Orefield, Lehigh County. The setup was rudimentary: a sheet was stretched between two flagpoles, and a 16-mm projector was placed in the middle of a field. Patrons sat on benches and listened to the soundtrack by way of a horn-speaker.

But the outdoor movies were a hit, and soon the facility boasted a new screen and projector housing. Later, vehicle ramps were installed so patrons could watch the show from their cars.

Meanwhile, in Northampton County in 1936, William "Becky" Beck began showing free movies at Uncle Charlie's Restaurant in Walnutport with the idea to make his profit on concessions only. His plan succeeded, and three years later, he opened Rt. 45 Drive-In

Theater—later renamed Becky's.

"I recently spoke to an elderly man who used to go there as a young lad," says Cindy Deppe, one of the Beck children who now run the drive-in. "He lived four miles away and would hitchhike to the show. He remembers paying a dollar for a whole flatbed of people."

With demand to see movies at his drive-in growing, Becky opened the theater's present-day facility in 1946. The drive-in held 450 cars and featured in-car speakers. Becky also added entertainment before the movie began.

"He built a stage in front of the screen," Deppe says. "Hillbilly bands would sing before the feature started. My father had his own ponies and would give rides to the kids while the band played."

### The Fabulous Fifties

The mid-1950s in America ushered in an era of fast cars, good times and rock-n-roll—all of which could be found at

drive-ins. Hollywood legends such as Marilyn Monroe and James Dean dominated the screen, and drive-in theaters became flooded with star-struck patrons.

"I'll never forget one night in 1960," Deppe says. "Elvis was popular, and we were showing *Love Me Tender*. Barbara Finley, our neighbor, started going into labor, but she refused to leave until the movie was over! She barely made it to the hospital in time."

The near-birth of her baby at a drive-in would have completed the circle for Finley who met her husband, Edgar, a few years earlier at the theater's concession stand—a popular hangout at the time, according to Deppe.

"My mother, Alice, made homemade French fries," she recalls. "She'd spend entire days peeling and chopping potatoes. Sometimes people came just to eat her fries, even if they weren't staying for the movie."

During this era, booming business swept Shankweiler's drive-in, too—but unfortunately, so did Hurricane Diane. The 1955 storm destroyed the screen and projection booth, but Shankweiler used this setback as an opportunity to build a better theater. He installed a larger screen that could accommodate Cinemascope films and added a building



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that housed a new projection booth, a snack bar and restrooms. The cars were lining up again in no time.

## Drive-Ins Go Dark

The 1970s took a drastic toll on drive-ins. With a new generation turning to more convenient movie outlets, the novelty of starlit theater quickly dissipated. More than 1,000 theaters across the country were forced to close.

"I really want to forget about those years," says Deppe. "My father decided to show adult films to bring in business. Looking back, it was something he had to do because the drive-in was our sole income. If he hadn't done that, we'd be history now."

In 1976, Becky's took another hard hit when a twister ripped through Walnutport and demolished the screen and the storage sheds that held the theater's supplies. It might have easily been the end of Becky's if the family hadn't pushed on. Determined to keep the theater alive, they spent the next month rebuilding.

Meanwhile, Shankweiler's adjusted to the decline in drive-in popularity without much worry, despite three

changes in ownership.

"The owners were all wealthy individuals," explains Paul Geissinger, who purchased the theater in 1984 with his wife, Susan. "They ran the drive-in as a hobby, more or less. I started working here in 1971 and saw many a lean year but never what appeared to be a final season by any means."

## Making a Comeback

When William Beck passed away in 1987, the drive-in's glory days appeared to have come and gone. Despite the odds, his children assumed responsibility for the theater and began showing family movies again.

"I worked hard to get the theater back to how it was when I was growing up," says Deppe. "I didn't care if we made money. I just wanted to make a nice name for the drive-in again."



The mid-1950s in America ushered in an era of fast cars, good times and rock-n-roll—all of which could be found at drive-ins. Hollywood legends such as Marilyn Monroe and James Dean dominated the screen, and drive-in theaters became flooded with star-struck patrons.

Her diligence paid off. By the mid-1990s, drive-ins were reclaiming their place on the list of favorite American pastimes.

"I think drive-ins got their second chance thanks to parents and grandparents who want their children to experience the things they did when they were

## A Drive-in Near You?

Want to experience a movie under the stars this summer? Then discover one of these 33 drive-in theaters throughout Pennsylvania.

**Allegheny County**, Dependable Drive-In (Coraopolis), 412-264-7011

**Beaver County**, Kane Road Drive-In (Aliquippa), 724-378-1970

**Butler County**, Pioneer Drive-In (Butler), 724-284-5003

**Cambria County**, Bar Ann Drive-In (Portage), 814-736-9450

Hiway Drive-In (Carrolltown), 814-344-8684

**Carbon County**, Mahoning Drive-In (Lehighton), 570-645-6204

**Centre County**, Starlite Drive-In (State College), 814-237-0001

**Clearfield County**, Super 322 Drive-In (Clearfield), 814-857-7821

**Cumberland County**, Cumberland Drive-In (Newville), 717-776-5212

**Dauphin County**, Sky-Vu Drive-In (Gratz), 717-365-3816

**Erie County**, Corry Drive-In (Corry), 814-664-2894



Sunset Drive-In (Waterford), 814-796-4883

**Fayette County**, Brownsville Drive-In (Brownsville), 724-785-7190,

Comet Drive-In (Connellsville), 724-628-6160

Malden Drive-In (Brownsville), 724-785-5310

**Greene County**, Sky View Twin Drive-In (Carmichaels), 724-966-2364

**Indiana County**, Palace Gardens Drive-In (Indiana), 724-465-9032

**Jefferson County**, Moonlite Drive-In (Brookville), 814-849-5588

**Juniata County**, Midway Drive-In (Mifflintown), 717-436-6011

**Lackawanna County**, Circle Drive-In (Dickson City), 570-489-5731

**Lancaster County**, Columbia Drive-In (Columbia), 717-684-7759

**Lehigh County**, Shankweiler's Drive-In (Orefield), 610-481-0800

**Luzerne County**, Garden Drive-In (Hunlock Creek), 570-735-5933

Laurel Drive-In (Hazleton), 570-455-2924

**Lycoming County**, Pike Drive-In (Montgomery), 570-547-7232

Port Drive-In (Linden), 570-398-1574

**McKean County**, Family Drive-In (Kane), 814-837-9760

**Mercer County**, Reynolds Drive-In (Transfer), 724-646-2786

**Montour County**, Point 3 Drive-In (Danville), 570-275-9926

**Northampton County**, Becky's Drive-In (Walnutport), 610-767-2249

**Westmoreland County**, Evergreen Drive-In (Mt. Pleasant), 724-547-2632

Hi-Way Drive-In (Latrobe), 724-537-7418

**York County**, Haar's Drive-In (Dillsburg), 717-432-3011 ■

young,” Deppe says. “I know I don’t want to let go of it. That’s why this is so important to me.” Although she manages the theater with her husband, Dean, the effort to keep her father’s dream alive is shared by the entire clan of siblings, children and grandchildren.

Things have inevitably changed at Becky’s over time, but the founder’s spirit remains unaltered. Alice may no longer serve up homemade fries, but Dean pleases the crowd with funnel cake and deep-fried Oreos. Patrons may listen to the show via their FM radios rather than in-car speakers, but pony rides are still offered.

“It’s amazing how people drive here from other cities and states to see a movie under the stars,” Deppe says. Becky’s lineup of events may have something to do with that: it hosts Hollingshead Night—featuring fireworks and costumed 1930s movie stars—on the first Saturday in June and the annual Lehigh Township Benefit Festival and Car Show in October.

And over at Shankweiler’s, the passion the Geissingers share for movies has helped them to continue their founder’s legacy. Like the Becks, they, too, make running the theater a family affair. “Our children, Jennifer and Paul, help out,” says Geissinger. “We have a great time.”

And they intend on keeping alive Shankweiler’s title as America’s oldest operating drive-in. “Business is good,” Geissinger says. “You never know what tomorrow may bring, but I plan on doing this for as long as I can.”

Fortunately for moviegoers, our passion for movies, cars and nostalgia has brought a revival in drive-in theaters that allows the thrill to continue for new generations in Pennsylvania. And with 33 drive-ins in our state to choose from, why not take your family on a nostalgic journey this summer and watch a movie together under a starry sky? You’ll be glad you did. ▼

Heather Davis writes from Romeoville, Ill., where she enjoys watching an occasional movie under the stars.



Chester County



## 100 Years of Horticultural Wonders

Longwood Gardens renovates the East Conservatory among other improvements

by Sharon Hernes Silverman

**T**HIS YEAR, LONGWOOD GARDENS, THE Brandywine Valley’s horticultural jewel in Chester County, celebrates its centennial. What better way to acknowledge this occasion than with a visit to the recently renovated East Conservatory. Part of a 20-year, \$150 million restoration of the gardens currently under way, the new space in this 1920s-style building acknowledges the past, leaps into the future, and presents the kind of breathtaking experience that visitors have come to expect of Longwood Gardens.

In 1906, Pierre S. du Pont, grandson of DuPont Company founder Eleuthère

The East Conservatory at Longwood recently underwent roof to basement changes that are part of a 20-year, \$150 million restoration effort at the gardens.

Irénée du Pont, purchased 202 acres of land (over the years, it’s been enlarged to 1,050 acres) to save a collection of trees from the sawmill. As a youngster, Pierre had been enthralled with horticulture, architecture and technology, and he had traveled to gardens and expositions in the United States and Europe. These childhood inspirations influenced the way he developed Longwood Gardens. du Pont’s unique blend of engineer-