

## This Day in History... June 6, 1933

### First Drive-In Movie Theater

On June 6, 1933, the first drive-in movie theater opened in Camden, New Jersey. The number of drive-ins in the US would eventually grow to over 4,000, becoming a beloved pastime for millions.

Before the drive-in theater became popular in the 1950s, seeing a film was not usually a family activity. Children attended a matinee during the day, while adults got dressed up to go to the theater at night. During this time, the peak of the baby-boom years, families became more interested in doing things together.

Drive-ins reportedly existed as early as the 1910s, but Richard Hollingshead Jr. of New Jersey filed the first patent and is credited with inventing the drive-in theater in the 1930s. Reportedly, Hollingshead was inspired to develop the drive-in after his mother complained that the seats in the movie theater were less comfortable than those in her car.

Hollingshead drafted several layouts for the theater and experimented with them in his driveway. He mounted a 1928 Kodak projector to the top of his car and then duplicated a variety of weather conditions to test how the theater would hold up. Hollingshead then nailed a screen to trees in his back yard and lined up cars in front of it to work out how the cars would be parked, the best angles, and elevations. At one point, he built several ramps for drivers in the back rows to get a good view, but those ramps turned out to be too expensive and required too much maintenance.

Hollingshead continued his testing for several months before combing the ideas that worked best and applying for a patent. On May 16, 1933, his invention was assigned US patent number 1,909,537. Hollingshead, along with three investors, then began construction. After three weeks and a \$30,000 investment, it opened on June 6, 1933, to a sold-out crowd. The first movie he played was *Wives Beware*. Admission prices were 25¢ for the car, and 25¢ per person, with no car to pay more than \$1 total. Hollingshead originally called it a “park-in theater” and advertised it as a place where “the whole family is welcome, regardless of how noisy the children are.”



*Hollingshead's family ran the R.M. Hollingshead Corporation chemical plant in Camden.*

Hollingshead's theater, which had space for 500 cars, was an instant hit, and people from far and wide to enjoy his movie-going experience. During its first summer in operation, the theater's employees noted they had seen license plates from 43 different states! Despite the theater's popularity, its patrons had one major complaint – the sound. Hollingshead had mounted three RCA Victor speakers to the screen. The people parked closest to the screen complained the sound was too loud, while those in the back could barely hear it. Hollingshead was determined to keep his customers happy, so he visited the RCA Victory factory in Camden to look for an alternative. RCA then developed small speakers that could be mounted on each car.

Soon, drive-ins were springing up all over the country. However, these other theater owners ignored Hollingshead's patent. He spent a great deal in legal fees, but was unsuccessful in getting the royalties he sought. Hollingshead also struggled because he had to pay up to \$400 for each movie he played, many of which had already played at indoor theaters. Despite the 50¢ admission fee and additional earnings from the sale of drinks and snacks, he was unable to make a profit. Hollingshead sold his theater in 1935, and its new owner moved the operation to Union, New Jersey.

Drive-in theaters became especially popular after World War II, and at its peak, there were more than 4,000 drive-ins in the 1950s. One of the largest and most elaborate theaters was built in Copiague, New York. It had an indoor viewing area that was heated and air-conditioned, a playground, cafeteria, restaurant, and a shuttle train to cover the 28 acres.

However, drive-ins could only be operated during certain times of the year and required good weather. In the 1970s, the oil crisis led many to buy smaller cars, making the drive-in less comfortable. And the invention of the VCR made watching movies at home a comfortable option.

Today, there are about 300 drive-ins still in operation. Drive-ins enjoyed a resurgence during the COVID-19 pandemic – when indoor theaters closed, drive-ins offered families safe, socially-distanced entertainment.



*Celebrate the Century stamp honoring the drive-in boom of the 1950s.*



*Fins and Chrome stamps featuring five classic cars of the “Fabulous Fifties”*

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