

# IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

## “Let’s All go to the Movies”: New Jersey and the Drive-In Movie Theater

Target Age: Elementary School (Grades 3-5)/  
Middle School  
Time Period: 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Featured County: Camden  
NJ 350<sup>th</sup> Theme: Innovation

### Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

S.L.CCR.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

S.L.CCR.5 Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

Social Studies Skills: 6.1.4.C.2, 6.1.4.C.15

Language Arts Literacy: 3.1 Reading, 3.5 Viewing and Media Literacy

Social Studies Skills: Chronological Thinking, Presentational Skills

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION:** Americans love their cars, and they love their movies. By combining the two, how did transportation impact the creation of the drive-in theater? How have subsequent technological innovations affected the industry?

### **BACKGROUND:**

Movie-goers in depression-ravaged Pennsauken made history on the night of June 6, 1933. As afternoon gave way to evening, residents hopped into their automobiles, drove to the local theater, and paid 25 cents to watch the new film “Wife Beware” starring matinee idol Adolphe Menjou. And they never left their cars. It was the beginning of a new entertainment phenomenon: the drive-in theater.

Park-In Theaters—the term “drive-in” came later—were the brainchild of Richard Hollingshead. He first experimented in the driveway of his home by mounting a 1928 Kodak projector on the hood of his car,



pinning a screen to some trees, and placing a radio behind the screen for sound. He also tested how best to protect against rain and other weather problems, and even devised the ideal spacing arrangement for a number of cars so that all would have a view of the screen.

Hollingsworth patented his idea in May of 1933 (Patent # 1,909,537) and opened Park-In Theaters, Inc. with an initial investment of \$30,000. Advertising it as entertainment for the whole family, he charged 25 cents per car and 25 cents per person, with no group paying more than one dollar. By the early 1960s there were 46 drive-ins across the state. The baby boom, the rise of car culture, and the rapid suburbanization in New Jersey combined to make these theaters a popular form of recreation, and after Hollingshead's patent was overturned in 1949, drive-in theaters appeared all over the country; at the height of the industry more than 5,000 such theaters were in operation.

Ironically, the same car culture and suburbanization that helped create drive-ins led to their demise. Land values escalated, making theaters too expensive to operate, and new technologies such as the television, DVD, and more recently live-streaming, Blue-ray, and mail order or internet services such as Netflix or Hulu, mean consumers now watch movies at home. In 1991 the last drive-in theater in New Jersey closed, ending an era. Today fewer than 500 drive-in theaters still operate in the United States, but in 2004 a drive-in opened in Vineland, NJ—offering a nostalgic return to a golden age of movies and automobiles.

#### **ACTIVITY:**

In preparation for this lesson, cut up the boxes in the table “Reasons for Success and Failure” on page 4, and print out the tables and graphs that appear on pages 5 and 6.

Begin with a group discussion. After reading the background information about the history of the drive-in movie theater, write two columns on the blackboard, one labeled “success” and one “failure,” and ask students to place the boxes from page 4 in the appropriate column (tape on the back of each box works well for this). Then ask students if they can think of other reasons why drive-in theaters did well and why they declined. Have them take turn writing these on the board (or on blank sheets of paper that can be taped to the board).

After a few minutes, pass out the charts on 1) the timeline of technological innovations, 2) number of U.S. drive-in theaters and 3) the number of New Jersey drive-in theaters. Use this information to prompt further brainstorming. Ask students if they have ever been to a drive-in movie theater. If so, what do they remember about the experience? Now ask students if they are familiar with the different kinds of technology listed on the Technological Innovation Timeline. How many such technologies do they have in their homes? And how might these shape people's interest in going out to movie theaters (including drive-in theaters)?

Now have students look more closely at two graphs—the number of drive-in theaters in the United States and in New Jersey over time —and work in pairs or small groups. How do these compare? What trends can students identify, and in which decades do changes seem to take place?

#### **FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY:**

The original advertisement for the first drive-in theater emphasized “A place where the whole family is welcome, regardless of how noisy the children are.” The following links feature several theater advertisements from the 1960s, most run as small segments during intermission. Can students identify

ideas or images intended to appeal to children or families? What other elements of this new experience were promoted in early advertising?

Let's all go to the Lobby (40 seconds):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHYgJyGoV9s&list=PL34E2541F3451F5F1>

Vintage Drive-in Intermission Films (4 min. 6 seconds):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW1VluGucyI&list=PLF382084ADC02F652>

Drive-in Movie Ads (largely snack shop advertisements; 6 min. 56 seconds):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26pQNKEOXjo>

If time permits, have students collect advertisements from current film technologies (such as sales for DVD players and Blue-ray, or services including Comcast On-Demand and Netflix, etc.). What features of the movie-watching experience do these tools and services promote? How do they compare with those from vintage drive-in theater advertisements? The class might choose to make a wall collage of advertisements organized either by technology or by advertising idea or slogan (ease of use, family friendly, immediate access, wide selection, etc.).

### **WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

#### Places You Can Visit

Drive-ins.Com (a listing of current New Jersey drive-in theaters: <http://www.drive-ins.com/theaters/nj>)

#### More Classroom Activities

Historical Society of Pennsylvania: <http://hsp.org/blogs/question-of-the-week/what-new-jersey-resident-invented-the-drive-in-movie-theater>

#### For More Information

Elizabeth McKeon and Linda Everett, *Cinema under the Stars: America's Love Affair with Drive-in Movie Theaters* (Nashville: Cumberland House Publishing, 1998).

*Drive-in Memories* (DVD, documentary special is a film celebration of America's greatest icon of youth, freedom and the automobile, 75 minutes, Jansen Media, 2006).

Kerry Selgrave, *Drive-in Theaters: A History from their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2006).

Drive-in Museum: (a website dedicated to the history of the industry): <http://www.drive-ins.com/museum.htm>

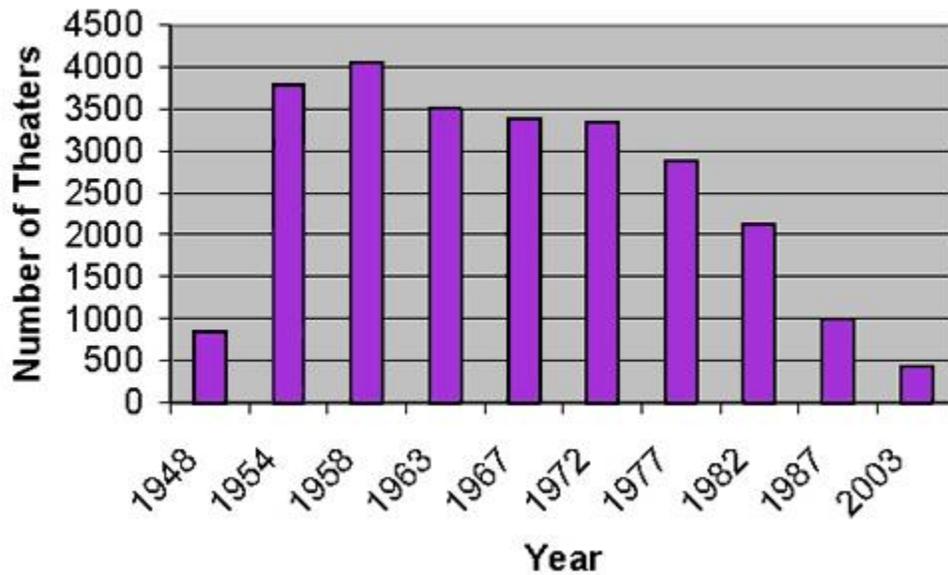
"The Rise and Fall of Drive-ins," March 2004, "The Hang-Out NJ: The Next Generation," a program developed by the State of New Jersey (available online at: [http://www.state.nj.us/hangout\\_nj/200403\\_driveins\\_p4.html](http://www.state.nj.us/hangout_nj/200403_driveins_p4.html)).

## Reasons for Success and Failure

<p>Advances in technology—such as better speakers and upgraded digital projectors-- improved the drive-in experience.</p>	<p>Going to the drive-in becomes an event, much like going to a concert or other outdoor entertainment.</p>
<p>The advent of technology—including cable TV, on-demand, DVRs, Netflix—offer more options for film entertainment to the twenty-first century audience, as compared to the 1950s and 1960s (the heyday of the drive in).</p>	<p>In contrast to the “B” movies that played in the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary drive-ins show new releases. There is also new interest in the old “B” movies.</p>
<p>Contemporary drive-in audiences can listen to the movies in the comfort of their own cars, enjoying the sounds on their own stereo systems, since many theaters now broadcast the sound on low frequency FM radio.</p>	<p>Real estate values have increased so that it is more profitable to sell land to a developer for some other kind of enterprise than to run a seasonal movie theater (most theaters are open only from April to October).</p>
<p>Competition with conventional theaters that have massive screens, hi-tech sound systems, comfortable chairs and a larger selection of movies.</p>	<p>Today’s multi-plex movie theaters are often attached to other attractions—especially shopping malls. This means that going to the movies can include other leisure activities such as shopping or dining.</p>
<p>Drive-in theatres operate at the mercy of weather. Most are only open from April to October, and even during these months, cold weather or rain affects attendance.</p>	<p>At the drive-in, there is more freedom to move around, to bring own food and beverages, to sit on lawn chairs and to play on swing sets.</p>
<p>The 1980s saw the rise of the multi-plex theater—larger movie theaters with 6, 8, 10 or even 12 screens. This allowed families with different interests to visit the same location, but not necessarily the same movie.</p>	<p>The price of automobiles and gasoline declined in the 1950s and 1960s, making car transportation more affordable for a wider range of families.</p>

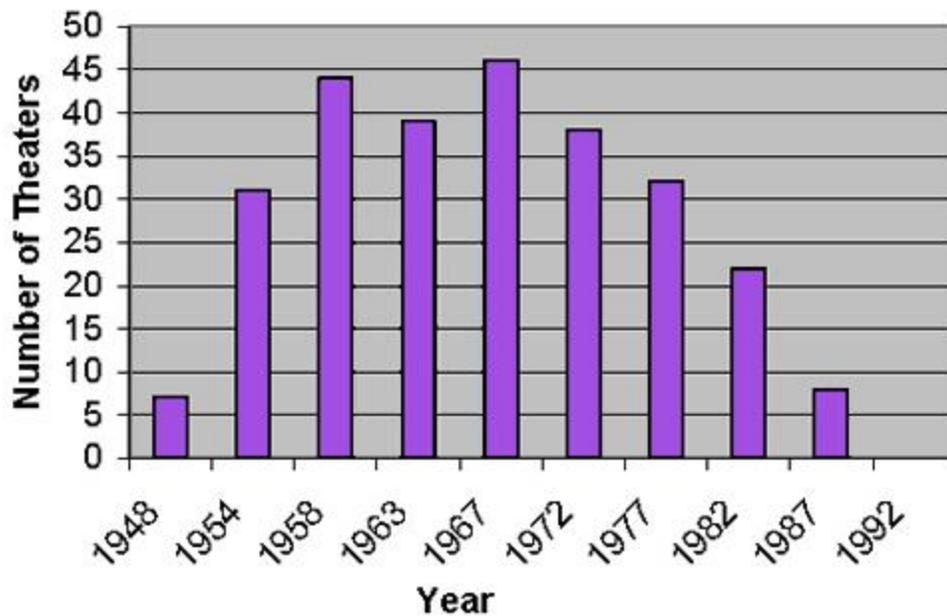
<b>Technological innovation</b>	<b>When this innovation became widely available to the U.S. market</b>
Blu-Ray	2006
Live-Streaming via the Internet	Late 1990s-early 2000s
VCR (video cassette recorder)	Invented in 1956; widely available in U.S. homes by the 1980s
Digital Video Disc (DVD)	Introduced in the U.S. in 1978, but not widely available until after 1995.
THX Surround Sound	Launched in 1983 by Lucasfilm, Inc.; more widely available in theaters after 2002.
Drive-in Movie Sound available in low FM frequency	1991
Cable Television	Invented in 1948; widely available in U.S. homes by the late 1970s, although the market continued to grow through the 1980s
Color Television	Invented in 1951; widely available in U.S. homes after introduction of GE's relatively compact and lightweight Porta-Color set in the spring of 1966.
Individual sound for cars in drive-in theaters	1950s
Camden-based company RCA Victor develops <i>Directional Sound</i> for the original drive in theater	1933
Television	Invented in 1925; widely available in U.S. homes by the 1950s (only 6 million televisions had been sold in the U.S. by 1950, but that number rose to 67 million by the end of the decade).

## U.S. Drive-in Theaters



This chart comes from "The Rise and Fall of Drive-ins," March 2004, "The Hang-Out NJ: The Next Generation," a program developed by the State of New Jersey (available online at: [http://www.state.nj.us/hangout\\_nj/200403\\_driveins\\_p4.html](http://www.state.nj.us/hangout_nj/200403_driveins_p4.html)).

## NJ Drive-in Theaters



This chart comes from "The Rise and Fall of Drive-ins," March 2004, "The Hang-Out NJ: The Next Generation," a program developed by the State of New Jersey (available online at: [http://www.state.nj.us/hangout\\_nj/200403\\_driveins\\_p5.html](http://www.state.nj.us/hangout_nj/200403_driveins_p5.html)).

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