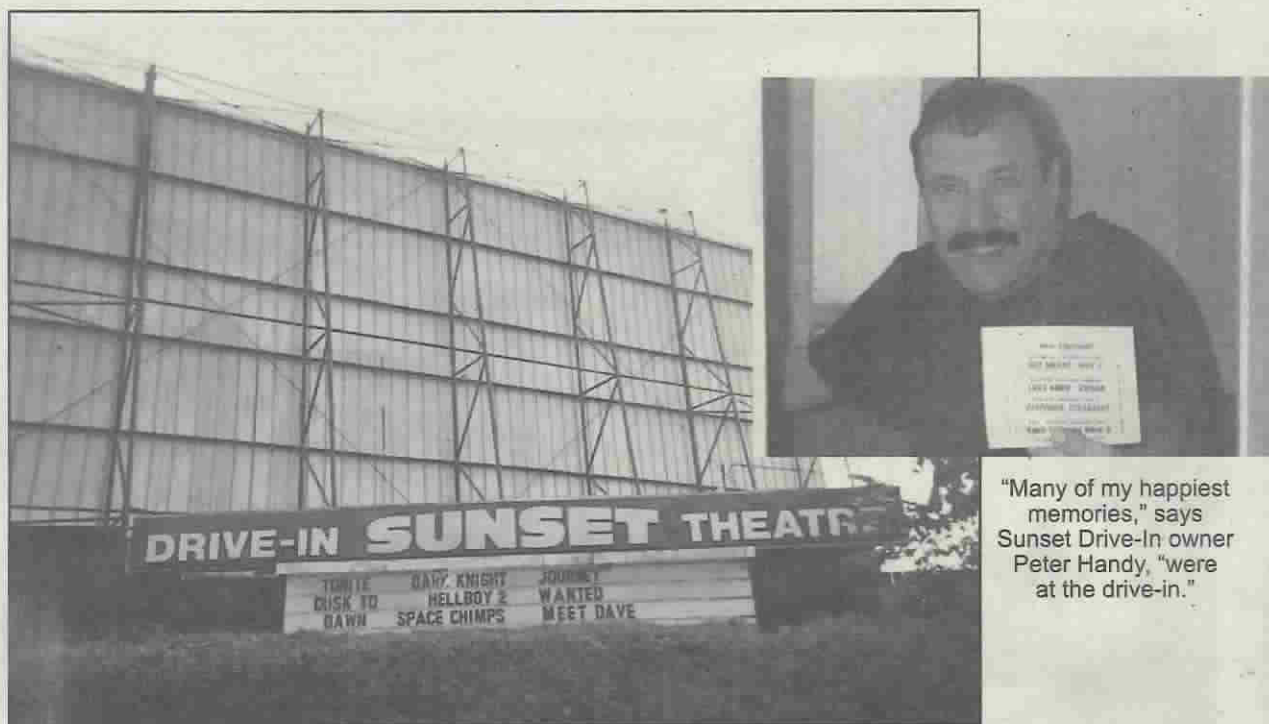


Home Sweet Home

Benjamin Pomerance
talks to Peter Handy,
one of the vanishing
breed of Drive-In
Theatre owners.

HOME Sweet HOME



"Many of my happiest memories," says Sunset Drive-In owner Peter Handy, "were at the drive-in."

Story and Photos by Benjamin Pomerance

SUNSET RISING

COLCHESTER (VT) - The gunman wasn't going away. Peter Handy knew that much. Growing up with a family who owned a drive-in movie theatre, the 11-year-old boy had seen enough action flicks to comprehend the danger of his situation. Now, trapped inside the box office of Sunset Drive-In, the boy was playing a thriller sequence without a script, a plot twist that had leapt from the giant screen and landed in a loaded gun pointed at his temple. And just like his silver screen heroes, young Peter Handy knew what he had to do.

The robber was demanding money, all the money the drive-in had. Fork over the cash, he told the boy, and nobody will be hurt. Staring down the barrel of the gun, Handy was tempted to do exactly as the intruder asked. Yet even with a weapon cocked inches from his face, the youngster knew he had the upper hand. The gunman had stayed outside the cramped ticket booth, unable to see through the window. Unable, Handy hoped, to see the bag with the night's proceeds stuffed beneath the cash register.

Opening the cash drawer, the boy locked eyes with the thief. "That's all we have," he said, removing the \$40 that lay inside. The man stared. Handy held his breath, fearing the robber didn't believe him. Then, with a slight gesture, the gunman motioned for Handy to hand him the money. Positioning his body to block the hidden cash bag, Handy slid the bills and change over to the man. Scooping the money, the bandit disappeared into the night, leaving the young star to revel in his story's happy ending.

"I had a full house that night, and I didn't give him our money," Handy remembers. "I never told him about the bag." He pauses, still clearly proud of this feat. "My father was very proud of me."

Which explains why, decades later, Handy remains more than a little protective of the drive-in theatre he now owns. After putting his life on the line for Sunset Drive-In, Handy decided to invest his life in the iconic family business. Before long, taking his father's place in drive-in's di-

rector's chair wasn't even an option. It was, as Handy describes it, an expectation, a hereditary obligation passed down like kingship and welcomed with open arms by the heir to the throne.

"I couldn't imagine not doing it," Handy says of running the drive-in. "I couldn't imagine life without it. It's like a member of the family now."

As family members go, it's been the favorite relative for Handy, the kind kinfolk whose legacy lights up the mental scrapbook. "Many of my happiest memories," Handy says, "were at the drive-in." Memories of family picnics beneath the main screen — the only screen, Handy points out, when his father opened the place in 1948. Memories of late-night double-features and the even later-night cleanup afterward. Memories of working the box office and the snack bar as a boy, summer nights when the only gunmen disturbing the open-air paradise were the ones on the screen. Memories of taking over as owner in 1979, of building two new screens in 1980 and adding another due to popular demand in 1994. Memories that could fill a book or, at the very least, make for one fascinating movie.

And after 60 years, the movie seems to be featuring a happy ending for the Handy family's drive-in. Their mere existence in the new millennium remains something of an oddity, a tale of survival against the elements.

Drive-in theatres, an institution created in 1928 by New Jersey businessman Richard Hollingshead, Jr., rapidly gained popularity as both family fun and teen date haven from Maine to California throughout the 1930s and '40s. The industry's boom came in the 1950s and '60s, with drive-in attendance actually surpassing the crowds at "traditional" indoor cinemas in 1952. By 1958, more than 4,000 drive-ins dotted the American landscape, with some boasting capacity for more than 2,500 cars.

continued on page 6

HSH...continued from page 4

In early-1980s, however, the outdoor bubble burst. Cable TV and VCRs supplanted drive-ins as the hottest way to see the latest films, and the most loyal group of patrons — young families with small children — began seeking entertainment elsewhere. By 1998, the Motion Picture Producers Association listed only 847 drive-in movie theatres operating in the entire United States.

Yet even in these barren years, the sun never set on Sunset. In fact, Handy recalls, Sunset Drive-In remained a popular night spot even while larger, more high-tech indoor cinemas appeared in surrounding communities. "We even have some people who won't go to the indoor theatres," Handy says. "They like our experience better. I mean, you can toss a Frisbee around, play mini golf for a buck, kids can play on the playground — you can just hang out with your friends until showtime."

Tina Bessette thinks she may understand the phenomenon of Sunset's success. In the '60s, Bessette and her husband were hired by Handy's father to work in the Sunset snack bar, where Bessette's husband in-

tainly we plan on keeping it the same," he declares. "I take pride in providing the people with one of the greatest forms of entertainment." He hopes to pass it on to his children, who join Handy's wife in pitching in with drive-in chores, although he admits they will be able to do whatever they want "because when the time comes, I won't be around to stop them." As long as Handy is around, however, the public can count on Sunset's existence. "It's not a question," he says. "It's assumed that I'm going to keep it there."

On this particular June evening, Sunset Drive-In is the place to be. Cars stream in from Porter's Point Road, most of them filled with families or friends revved up for an evening of fun. All four screens are set to go, but long before the stars come out, the star of the show is holding court inside the ticket booth. Sticking his head out of the window, as much at home as he was as an 11-year-old boy, Peter Handy is his own theatre's opening act. "Love Guru," he insists to a family unsure of what film to see. "Come on — it's got Mike Myers, our Austin Powers friend." He stops, raises his eyebrows until his eyes bulge. "Oh, be-



The Sunset Drive-In of Colchester, VT.

roduced the "famous hand-cut French fry" recipe still used at the drive-in today. Today, after a brief hiatus caused by a move to New Hampshire, Bessette is back behind the counter, the voice of experience behind the cash register she runs with her daughter-in-law. "It's always been popular," Bessette says of the drive-in. "People can come here and be outdoors and just enjoy the summertime. It's a great experience no matter what your age is."

Not that this experience is easy to provide. Those looking to get rich quick have no business running drive-ins, as Handy bluntly explains. The mere prediction of rain can eliminate between 75 and 90 percent of potential customers on any given night; an actual downpour can force him to cancel and take a total loss for the night. "It's a labor of love," Handy says. "It's not for the profit. As I said, it's like a member of the family now."

A member of the family...with no plans for disownment on Handy's horizon. "Cer-

haves!" he bellows in his best imitation of the Canadian actor.

When the family ultimately vetoes the film in favor of *Kung Fu Panda*, Handy shrugs in mock horror. "Fine — don't believe me," he smirks. "But don't worry. You won't go away disappointed." The full lot of cars, many carrying passengers who will remain until the wee hours of the morning, seem to underscore his promise. On this night, 60 years after its incredible journey began, the Sunset only seems to be rising.

Sunset Drive-In is located on Porter's Point Road, just off Route 127 in Colchester, Vt. Admission for all double-features is \$7.50 for adults, \$2.50 for children under 12 and free for children under 4. Movies are shown on all four screens every day of the week from April to October. For information on current screenings, call (802) 862-1800 (no recorded message means that weather has canceled that evening's showings) or visit www.sunsetdrivein.com.