

preserve our local history, promote the history of the Norwin Community and embrace the opportunity to educate the Community about the people, places and events that comprise the history of Irwin, North Irwin, and North Huntingdon Township.

## **2021 SPRING NEWSLETTER**

Did You Know?

# Remembering Norwin's Drive-In Theaters

BY BOB CUPP

Pennsylvania was a pioneer in the drive-in movie theater business. It was host to America's second drive-in, Shankweiler's Drive-in, which opened April, 1934 in Orefield, Pa. Remarkably, it remains open today, giving Pennsylvania the added distinction of being home to the oldest operating drive-in in the United States.

By 1944, another 50 drive-ins had opened in the state. During the late 1950's, the industry peaked with more than 180 drive-ins operating in Pennsylvania.



Since then, over 85% of them have closed, which is still better than the national average of well over 90%.

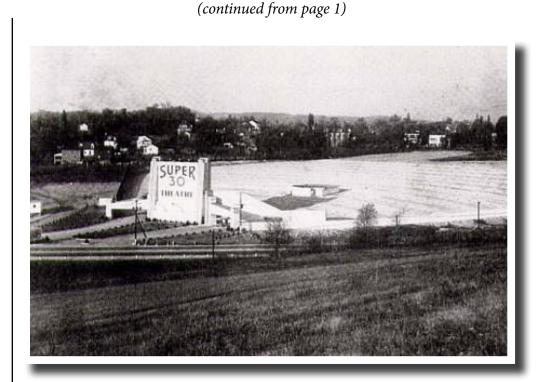
Over the years, four different drive-in theaters operated along Route 30 in the Norwin area: Super 30, Maple, Blue Dell and Belle-Aire. Thousands of movie-goers were entertained here during the outdoor movie season every year.

## **SUPER 30 DRIVE-IN**

The Super 30 outdoor theater was built on part of the former Clohessy Farm where Arabian horses and Clydesdale draft horses were raised. The theater opened on Friday, September 19, 1947 on property now occupied by a shopping center where the Irwin Giant Eagle and Target are located. At the time, it was believed to be the "second largest outdoor movie theater in the world." Super 30's screen loomed above the Lincoln Highway, about a quarter-mile west of the Pennsylvania Turnpike entrance.

Boasting of being the finest outdoor movie theater in the country, the Super 30 had a very large screen which housed an apartment below, and it featured a 700-car lot. The day before the opening, the Jeannette News Dispatch advertised: "You'll hear the perfect RCA sound with the latest in-the-car

*(continued on page 2)* 





speakers. Note how easily you can control the volume." The box office opened at 6:30 p.m. and played two shows nightly, rain or shine. On opening night, the cost of admission was 60 cents to see Ronald Reagan, Alexis Smith and Zachary Scott in "Stallion Road."

The original owners were Andrew Battiston and Grance Theaters. Later, it was briefly owned by the Warren family, who also owned and operated several other drive-ins in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

The Super 30 closed in 1970 when Associated Theaters was running it.



## **MAPLE DRIVE-IN**

The Maple Drive-In opened May 25, 1949 with Robert Taylor in "The Bribe." It was located in North Huntingdon, west of Norwin Towne Square Shopping Center. It was one of several drive-ins located along this stretch of the Lincoln Highway (Route 30). It's neighboring drive-ins were the Blue Dell and the Belle Aire to the west, and the Super 30 to the east. They were all on the north side of the highway.

The movie screen was down the hill quite a distance from the entrance in a tree-

*(continued on page 3)* 

## *(continued from page 2)*



lined valley that sometimes became foggy on balmy summer nights. The fog resulted in a unique atmosphere for watching horror movies. Patrons reached the 700-car lot by descending a long, steep driveway.

The Maple was owned by Associated Theaters. It featured an open-air patio and offered patrons free dancing before the opening feature and during intermission. According to Pittsburgh newspaper listings, the last night of operation was October 19, 1986. North Huntingdon Township Public Works now occupies this former drive-in site.

## **BLUE DELL & BELLE-AIRE DRIVE-INS...AND POOL**

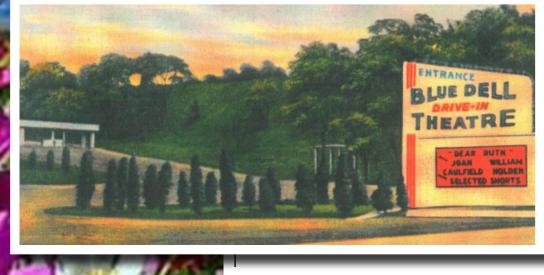


West of the Maple Drive-In, the Warrens' Blue Dell Enterprises became a popular hangout during the summer, with people enjoying a meal at the Blue Dell Diner, going for a swim or showing off on the diving board at the Blue Dell Pool, and staying for the double feature at the Blue Dell or Belle-Air Drive-In.



A JAC

Initially operated by Norbert and Earnest Stern of Associated Drive-Ins, The Blue Dell Drive-In opened in



1949 and could fit 600 cars in front of its single screen. It was situated next to the Blue Dell Pool.

The Blue Dell was so popular that the Warrens eventually built the Belle Aire Drive-In behind the swimming pool. The Belle-Aire also had one screen, as well as a "balcony," where cars sat on an inclined level. The Belle-Aire was short-lived, opening July 2, 1957 and

(continued on page 4)



After That Swim and Snack Enjoy our Drive In Theater With the Largest Screen Tower

ON LINCOLN HIGHWAY-ROUTE 30

## (continued from page 4)

closing November 23, 1958.

The Blue Dell closed in 1984. For years after closing, the drive-in screen and sign, as well as the pool sign, and even the empty, deteriorating pool, remained standing. The Vangura plant now occupies the former Blue Dell Drive-In complex.

The Warrens, led by brothers, Ernie and Marty, owned five Westmoreland County drive-ins - Blue Dell, Belle Aire, Super 30, The Rose (named after Ernie's wife, Rose Warren) and Evergreen.

## TODAY

Many Norwin residents have fond memories of attending drive-in movies with their dates or their families. Can you still hear the manager's announcements: "Come to the refreshment stand for your favorite movie snacks and beverages?" On nights when the cost of admission was on a per person basis, some may have memories of packing the trunk with their friends. A few may even recall driving away with the speaker still



attached to their car. Gee, those were the days!

With the passing of time, the Norwin area has changed substantially. Most of the farms the old-timers remember from their youth have become shopping centers and housing developments. Construction of the modern-day Lincoln Highway and the Pennsylvania Turnpike also replaced some beautiful Norwin landscapes in the name of progress.

Today people have so many entertainment options. When I was a child, we only had a handful of TV stations to watch. Later, there were numerous businesses where you could rent a movie for a reasonable price. Today there are only a few of those companies still in business, but now there's Cable TV with seemingly limitless channels, "streaming video" capabilities and Play Station. The possibilities are endless and so are the costs!

The land once occupied by drive-in theaters became more valuable as commercial developments along our highways, and drive-ins began to close. As of 2019, only 26 active Pennsylvania drive-in theaters remained.

(continued on page 5)

#### *(continued from page 4)*



Page

The Blue Dell Drive-in was located off Route 30 on the hill where the Vanguard Surfacing Products building now stands. The pool was located just to the West of the Drive-in.







Mt. Pleasant's Evergreen Drive-In Theatre is the only one that continues to operate in Westmoreland County today. It's owned by Joe Warren, Marty Warren's son. Hopefully, the Evergreen will continue to entertain Westmoreland County families for many years to come and will remain a lasting tribute to those simpler/bygone times.

#### Sources:

- 1) In Celebration: Irwin 1864-1989
- 2) Who We Are: Year 2000 Commemorative Collection Norwin Area
- 3) cinematreasures.org
- *4)* Westmoreland History Magazine Movies, Motors and Memories: Westmoreland County's Drive-In Theaters, By Jennifer Sopko
- 5) Driveinmovie.com/PA.htm
- 6) Westmoreland Presents: A Guide to Pennsylvania Drive-In Theaters, 2019

7) Norwin Star, November 2, 2005 By Anne Cloonan, "Trips to stores and theaters a memorable experience"



PO Box 623 304 Main Street Irwin, PA 15642 724-309-1161

TO:



2021 SPRING NEWSLETTER

BOARD OF DIRECTORS Carl Huszar, President Tom Witman, Vice President Geralyn DeFelice, Secretary Diane Holderbaum, Treasurer Sandy Carlson Robert Cupp Bill Hawley Regis Holecko Brian Jovan Sharon Lunn David Sinclair Richard Siniawski

Noreen Turkowski

Written by Bob Cupp, designed and produced by Sandy Carlson.



Your gift to the Norwin Historical Society helps to preserve our history!