

The Lost New Jersey Drive Ins

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New Jersey has a rich history of drive-in theaters, and what you maybe didn't know is that drive-ins actually started in New Jersey. Yes, it even amazed us! We love Jersey history but we wanted to take you back to the days when you had a car, a Saturday night, and a nearby drive-in to go to with either your date or your friends. Let's go take a look at what we call "History with a Social Twist," the experience at a Jersey Drive-In.

When you arrived at the drive-in, you would usually enter a large parking lot or field where the movies were shown. There were designated parking spaces for each car, usually marked by poles or lines on the ground. Attendees would often try to arrive early to get a good spot, especially on busy nights or for popular movies.

Once parked, you first had to get your friends out of the trunk. Fortunately, I had a 1966 Chrysler Newport with a truck that could hold at least six non-paying friends. Next, you would tune your car radio to a specific frequency to listen to the movie's audio. In the past, drive-ins used large speakers that you would hang on your car window, but nowadays, most drive-ins broadcast the audio through FM radio, allowing attendees to enjoy the sound from the comfort of their vehicles. Many drive-ins had concession stands or snack bars where you could purchase traditional movie theater snacks like popcorn, candy, soda, and hot dogs. Some drive-ins even had picnic areas where you could bring your own food and drinks to enjoy during the movie. Remember, the drinking age back then was 18, so many had the luxury of having an older brother or sister grab them a few six-packs for the evening.



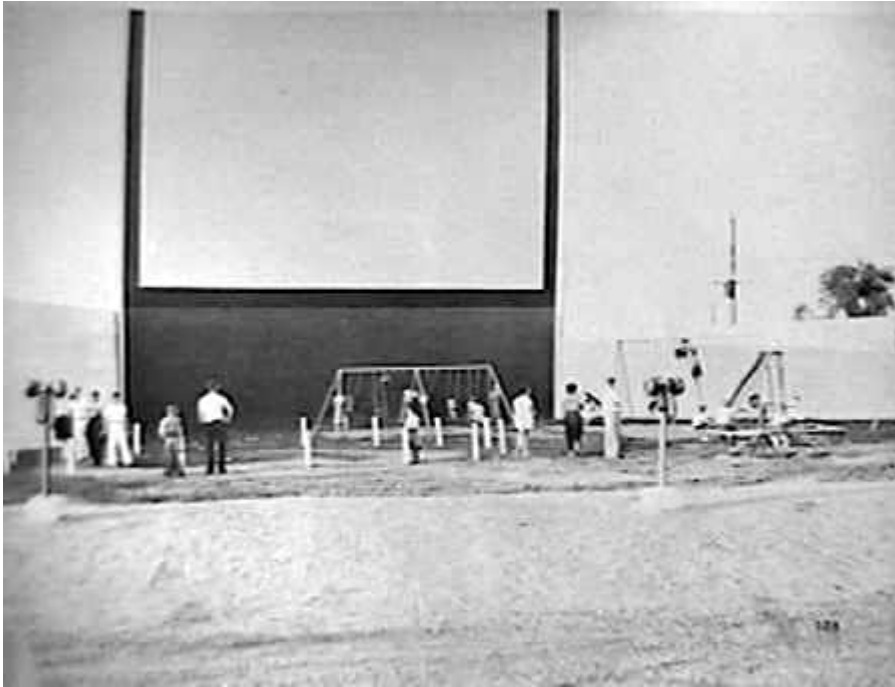


Take out that tire in a 66 Newport and you had room for six non-paying friends, until you got caught (and we all did).

The movie would begin once the sunset and it was dark enough. Since you were watching the movie from your car, you could adjust your seating position, recline your seats, or even bring pillows and blankets for added comfort. Drive-ins also made for a great date night if you know what I mean.

Most drive-ins had an intermission between double features, giving attendees a chance to stretch their legs, visit the restroom, or grab more snacks from the concession stand. While watching the movie was the main attraction, going to a drive-in also provided an opportunity for socializing with friends and family. You could chat with the people in the cars parked nearby, play games, or even walk around the area during intermission.





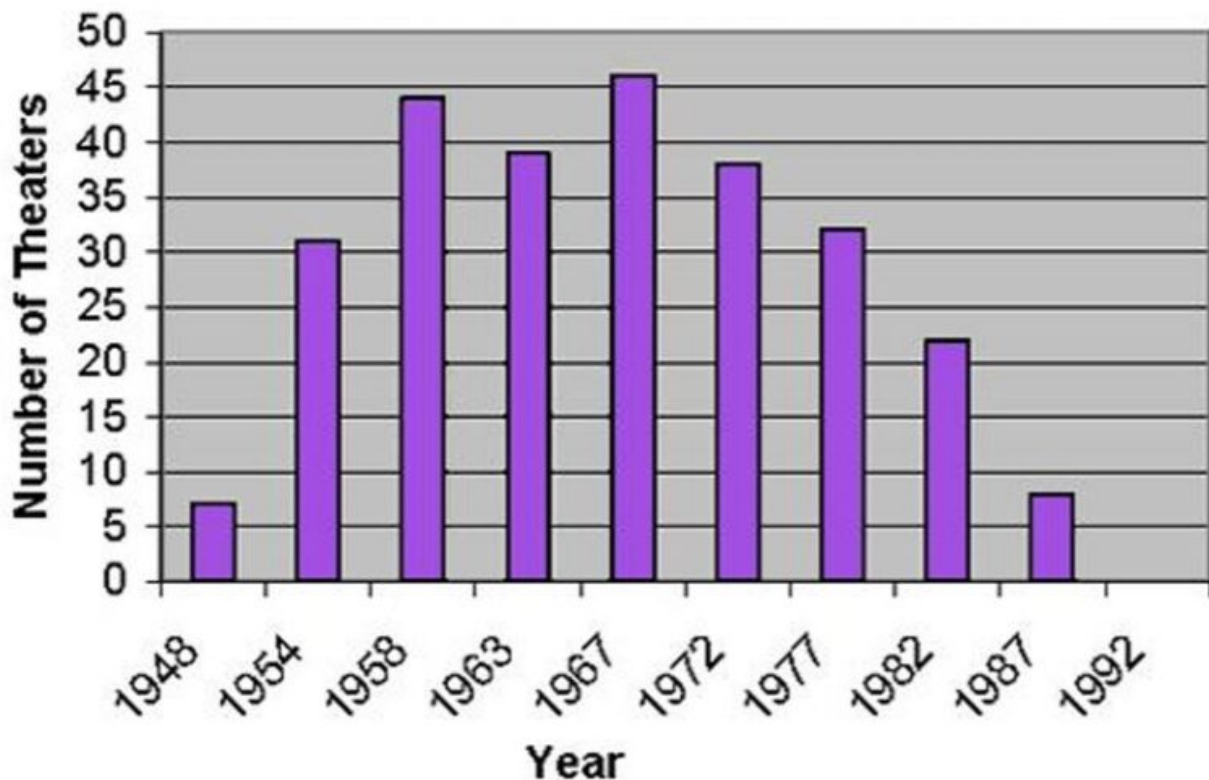
Happy Times: Not to forget the great concession stand and the “free playground.” Boy weren’t those the days!

Going to a drive-in movie theater offered a relaxed and casual way to enjoy a film, combining the comfort of your own vehicle with the excitement of a night out at the movies. It’s an experience that many people remember fondly and continue to cherish as part of their cultural heritage.

Why the Drive-In Died

Drive-ins often occupied large parcels of land that were valuable for commercial or residential development. As urban and suburban areas expanded, the land that drive-ins occupied became more valuable for other purposes, leading to closures and redevelopment. Also, property taxes and operating costs for drive-in theaters increased as property values increased. This made it increasingly difficult for drive-ins to remain financially viable, especially as attendance declined.

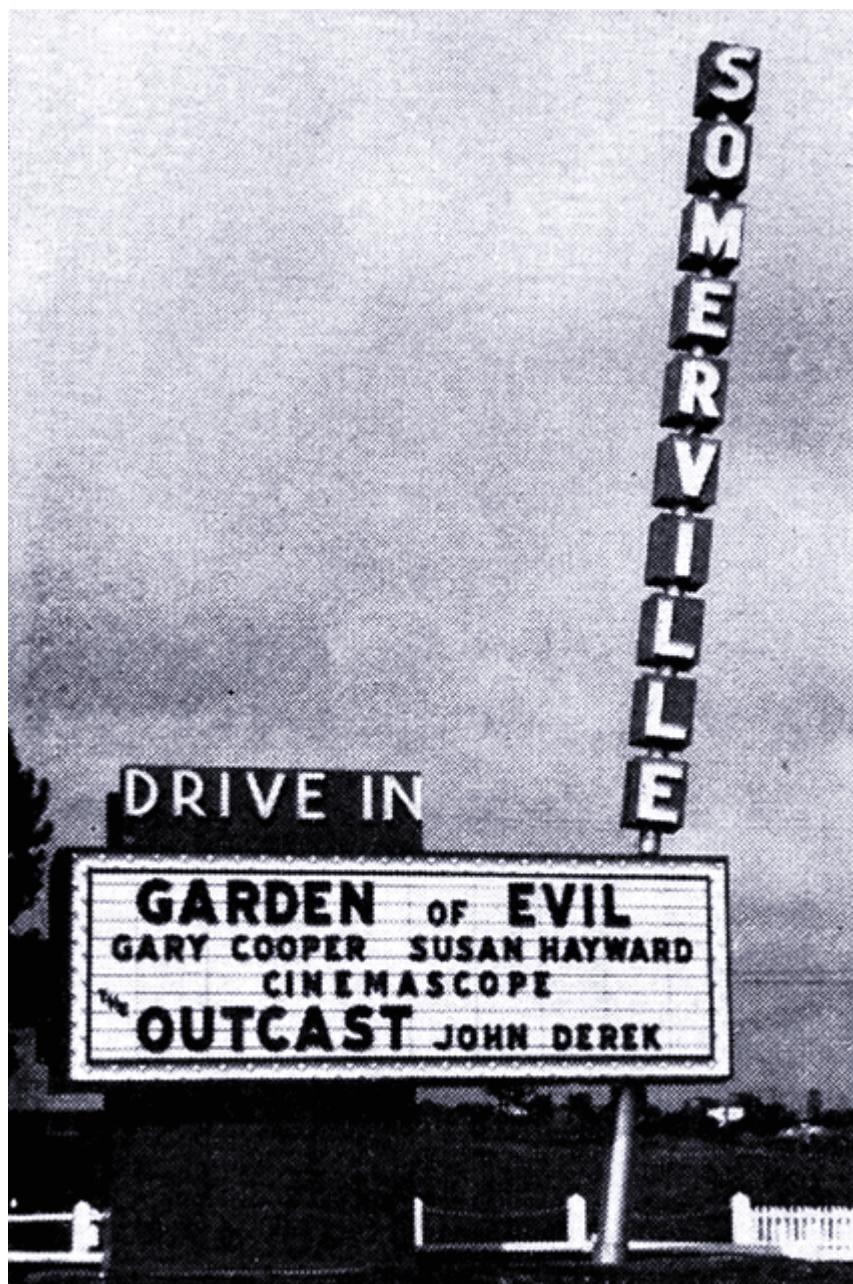
NJ Drive-in Theaters



This chart comes from “The Rise and Fall of Drive-ins,” March 2004, “The Hang-Out NJ:

With the rise of multiplex cinemas and home entertainment options like VHS tapes, DVDs, and streaming services, the appeal of drive-in theaters waned. Many moviegoers preferred the convenience and comfort of indoor theaters or watching movies at home. The transition from analog to digital projection technology also posed challenges for drive-ins. Converting to digital projection systems was costly, and many smaller drive-ins couldn’t afford the upgrade. This led to closures for those unable to adapt to the changing technological landscape.

Some municipalities enacted zoning regulations that restricted or prohibited outdoor theaters due to concerns about noise, light pollution, and traffic congestion. These regulations made it difficult for existing drive-ins to operate or for new ones to open. Also, Drive-ins were often seasonal businesses, operating primarily during the warmer months. Inclement weather could impact attendance, and drive-ins faced additional challenges during the off-season in regions with harsh winters.





One of our favorite drive-ins was the Somerville Drive-In on Route 22. Loved it so much that we added it to the [MLH Jersey retro collection](#) in its honor.

Finally, economic recessions and industry consolidation in the entertainment sector also contributed to the drive-ins' decline. Smaller, independently owned theaters struggled to compete with larger chains and faced financial difficulties during periods of economic uncertainty.

Where Was Your Favorite Drive-In?

Did you have a favorite drive-in as a kid or teen? Our researchers went digging in the archives to find some of the most popular drive-ins that dotted our Jersey landscape. If we missed one, please let us know one you loved and where it was in the comments section below. Our list is in no particular order as our sit down became a "shout-out session" so we just let the list grow as we remembered.

New Jersey Drive- In Locator Interactive Map

- **First Run: Camden's Claim As Birthplace Of The Drive-in Theater:** Although not a drive-in theater itself, Camden, New Jersey, holds a special place in drive-in history. The concept of the drive-in theater was first tested in Camden by Richard Hollingshead Jr. in 1933. His idea of watching movies from the comfort of a car led to the birth of the drive-in theater phenomenon. While the original drive-in in Camden no longer exists, its legacy lives on in the countless drive-ins that followed.
- **Somerville Drive-In** (Somerville, NJ): The Somerville Drive-In, located in Somerville, New Jersey, operated for several decades before closing. It was a place where families and moviegoers gathered to enjoy cinematic experiences in the open air. Although it is no longer in operation, its legacy lives on as part of New Jersey's entertainment history.
- **Union Drive-In** (Union, NJ): The Union Drive-In was once a popular outdoor movie theater in Union, New Jersey. Could handle 1400 cars. Unfortunately, like many other drive-ins, it has closed its gates. However, it remains a nostalgic memory for those who enjoyed watching films under the stars in their cars. Condos now sit on the Route 22 site.





Late 1950s- Union Drive In.

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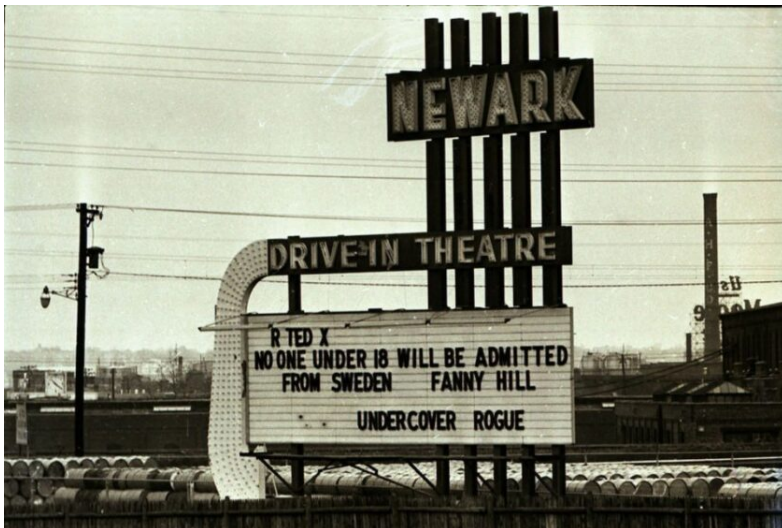
NO CHARGE FOR YOUR CAR

REST ROOMS and DRINKING FOUNTAIN ARE LOCATED
IN PROJECTION BOOTH IN CENTER OF RAMP No. 3

ALSO REST ROOMS IN CENTER OF RAMP NO. 9



- **Hazlet 35 Drive-In:** The Hazlet 35 Drive-In, located in Hazlet, New Jersey, closed for good on September 5, 1991. It was one of the last drive-ins at the Jersey Shore, and its closure marked the end of an era for outdoor movie theaters in the area.
- **Newark Drive-In (Newark, New Jersey):** While Newark had a regular drive-in, it was one of the first to convert to a Rated X over-18 drive-in.



Would love to hear anyone who made it to the Newark Drive-In during its X-Rated phase. Source: cinematreasures.org

- **Fly-in Drive-In** (Wall, NJ): Wall Township had two drive-ins, including the Fly-in Drive-In. This unique drive-in catered to airplanes, allowing pilots to taxi their planes to the last row for a view of the screen. It opened in 1947 and was the first of its kind but eventually closed.
- **Route 3 Drive-In** (Rutherford, NJ): The Route 3 Drive-In was a popular spot for families and moviegoers. It was located in Rutherford and operated for several decades before closing its gates. Many fond memories were made here as people enjoyed films under the open sky.
- **Laurelton Motor Vue Drive-In** (Located in Brick, New Jersey) opened on June 18, 1958. It closed after 1973. The site is now a Wal-Mart Supercenter.
- **Belleville Drive-In** (Belleville, New Jersey): This drive-in was operational for several decades but closed in the late 1980s or early 1990s. The site has since been redeveloped.
- **Brielle Drive-In** (Lakewood, New Jersey) Opened September 23, 1949, as the Brielle Motor Vue Outdoor Theatre. Independent Theater Service Inc. was operated by Jack Nicholson, who would hang out here during his teen years (early 1950s). The circle for which it was named has even disappeared (intersection of Routes 34/35/70).
- **Eatontown Drive-In** – (Eatontown, New Jersey) Opened on April 21, 1950, with Mickey Rooney in “The Big Wheel” & Rod Cameron in “Stampede”. It offered “Free in-car heaters...Visit the Monkey Village”. The Eatontown Drive-In was a Walter Reade Theatre. It was closed in 1982.
- **Manahawkin Drive-In** (Manahawkin, NJ): This iconic drive-in theater offered a nostalgic movie experience under the stars.
- **Cherry Hill Drive-In**– (Cherry Hill, New Jersey) operated for many years before closing in the 1980s. The land was later repurposed for commercial use.
- **Ledgewood Drive-In** (Ledgewood, New Jersey): This drive-in was a popular destination for moviegoers until it closed in the early 1980s. The property has been transformed into a shopping center.
- **Moonbeam Drive-In** – (Forked River, New Jersey) The Moonbeam Drive-In entertained audiences for years before shutting down. The exact date of its closure and subsequent land use changes are not



readily available.

- **Toms River Drive-In—(Toms River, New Jersey)** The Toms River Drive-In was opened around 1949 by Walter Reade Theatres. At the opening, the theatre had a capacity of 400 cars. In the early 1950s, the drive-in was moved beside the first location. The second location held a capacity of 792 vehicles.
- **Newton Drive-In** – (Newton, New Jersey) operated for many years before closing. The property has since been redeveloped.
- **Wall Speedway Drive-In:** Wall Speedway on Route 34 planned to bring back a drive-in movie theater to Wall Township. However, the Board of Adjustment turned them away by one vote. The idea was met with mixed reactions, and ultimately, the drive-in did not reopen.

Unfortunately, they all gradually closed due to declining revenue, competition from cable TV, and other factors.

New Jersey's Last Standing Drive-In

While most Jersey drive-ins have closed over the years, only one continues to operate. In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we remember regular indoor theaters like the Cranford, NJ Theater holding special Drive-in sessions in town. It actually became a big draw for a few years.

Like many exhibitors in the age of COVID-19, Cranford Theater owner Doreen Sayegh reinvented the drive-in model, giving many customers their first taste of the resurgent moviegoing format.



Only ONE Jersey Drive-In is still showing films, and that's the Delsea Drive-In in Vineland. This iconic drive-in theater offers a nostalgic movie experience under the stars. It's a great place to catch flicks in the comfort of your car. The Delsea Drive-In was built in 1949, closed in 1987, and reopened in 2004. Located in Vineland, New Jersey, it is New Jersey's only drive-in movie theatre. It is less than a one-hour drive from Atlantic City, Philadelphia, and Delaware.



The Delsea Drive In in Vineland, New Jersey is still serving up the drive in experience in New Jersey. Source: cinematreasures.org



Delsea Drive In: Source: newjerseyisntboring.com

It's also interesting to note that New Jersey has been featured on the popular TV show "Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives." Celebrity chef Guy Fieri has visited 36 Garden State restaurants during his culinary adventures. Although not drive-ins per se, these local eateries offer delicious food and unique flavors worth exploring. The only drive-in he visited? The Manahawkin Drive-In.





The Fly-In Drive-In #2 was opened by Walter Reade Theatres in 1958. By 1966, it had been renamed Manahawkin Drive-In. It operated into the early 1980s. Source: cinematreasures.org

Whether you're craving a movie night or a tasty meal, New Jersey has something to offer everyone! So when the weather warms, go out there and hit a drive-in—it's history with a social twist!

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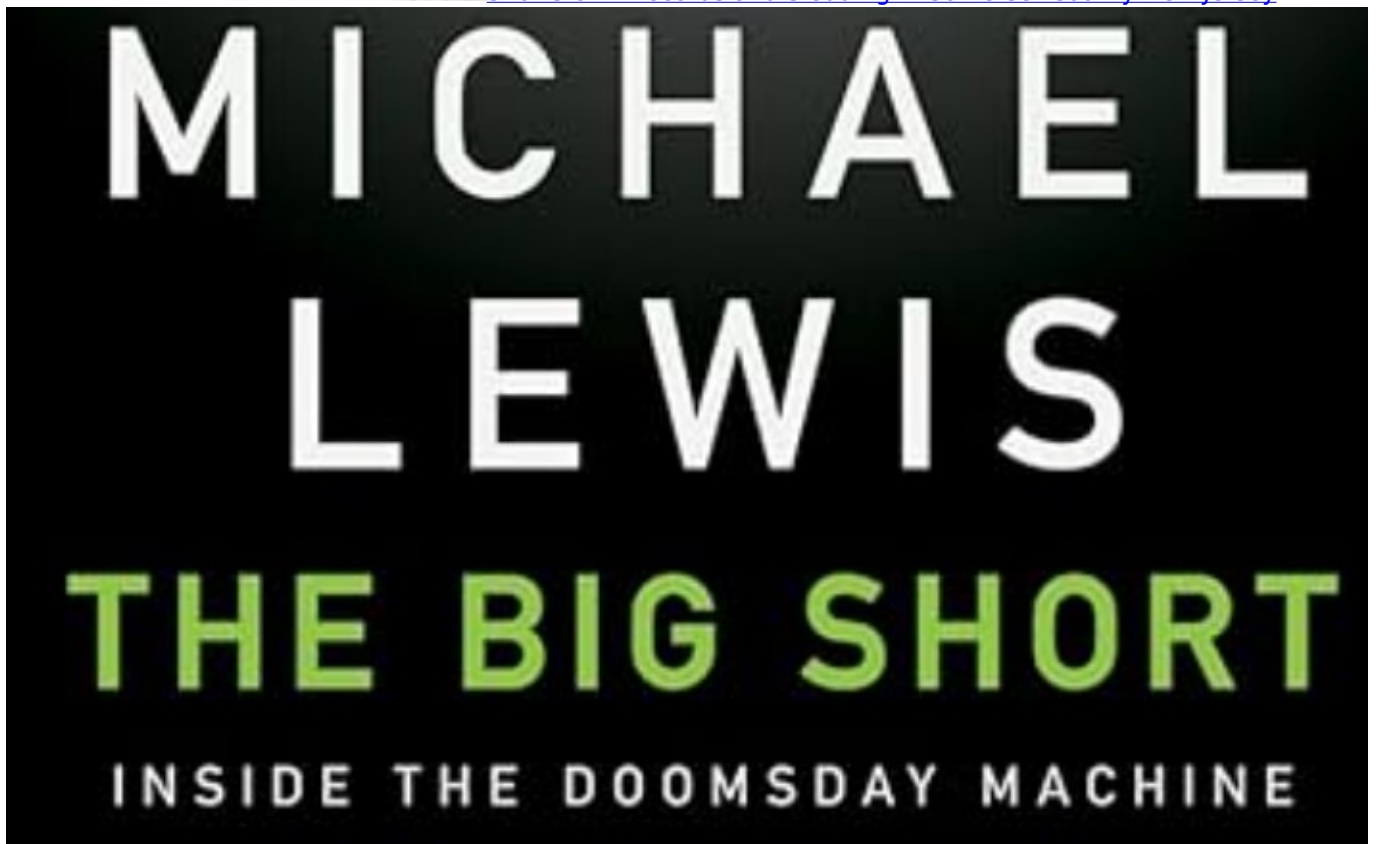
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