

SHOWCASE



AN EVENING AT THE STARLITE

People eager to get out of the house take in a drive-in movie

By Carolyn Lange
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LITCHFIELD

On a stunningly beautiful Minnesota spring evening cars and trucks were lined up Friday along state Highway 22 on the edge of Litchfield waiting for the gates to open at the Starlite Drive-In movie theater for a double-feature that doesn't start for another 2½ hours.

Vehicles with teenagers, parents with young children and older couples on a date night were all part of the mix during the season's opening night of the Starlite.

With car windows rolled down it was easy to see the toothy grins of people eager to watch a movie and just plain eager to be someplace — anyplace — other than stuck at home because of the COVID-19 stay-at-home order.

Bethanie Hinkley, 18, of Zimmerman drove about 1½ hours with her friend Veronica Lee, 17, of Elk River to come to the movie. "I think the drive-in is a really authentic experience and this is one of the only things we can do right now with quarantine happening," said Hinkley. "And I was really excited to find out it was opening, period, and it's the only one open in the state right now," she said.

They didn't know what was showing on the big screen before they came and they didn't care. They were just happy to be there.

Jason Schmitz, drove about 1 hour from his home in Forest Lake with his two young kids, ages 10 and 7.

"It's something else to do and the kids enjoy it," he said.



Bored with staying home because of COVID-19, Mitchell and Lonette Dubois drove from their home in Shakopee to the Starlite Drive-In Friday in Litchfield. They didn't care what was showing. They were just looking for something fun to do.

When asked if it was worth the long drive — even if the kids didn't stay awake to the end — Schmitz had a quick response. "Heck yeah, it's worth it."

That kind of response is exactly what theater owner Dave Quincer likes to hear.

Quincer not only owns the Starlite Drive-In theater in Litchfield but also the indoor movie theaters in Wadena and Perham.

Being closed because of the pandemic has been extremely difficult for the family, which has been in the movie theater business for 97 years with hopes that a fifth generation will carry it on.

Quincer said every business he owns has been shut down for two months but he still has bills to pay. "We've wiped out our savings account," he said. "Am I supposed to lose my business over this?"

Quincer typically opens the drive-in at the end of April or first of May. Even though the stay-at-

home order wasn't set to be relaxed until this week, Quincer said he made numerous attempts to get

guidance from the state and communicated with local authorities before taking a chance to open



Vehicles were parked at least six feet apart Friday during the opening night of the Starlite Drive-In movie theater in Litchfield.

Photos by Carolyn Lange / West Central Tribune

Above: The marquee at the Starlite Drive-In in Litchfield was lit up Friday for the first time this year.

last Friday. Quincer said he wasn't trying to "defy the governor's orders" but was trying to save his business. "Our season is so short. We only have four to five months to make any money," said Quincer. "And we're out of money right now."

Quincer said he's following the CDC guidelines used by other drive-in theaters in the country and asked people to park six feet from each other and to stay in their vehicles.

"All the people who came did exactly what they were supposed to do," he said. "Everybody knows what to do."

The space restriction means they can only fit half as many vehicles as usual in front of the two separate screens. But he's OK with having fewer people as long as he's generating some revenue.

"We feel we're keeping our employees and our customers safe and still providing an option for entertainment for them," he said.

Kim Rotert and Mark Fogel, of Litchfield, typically go to the Starlite at least once a month to watch movies. They'd been eagerly waiting for it to open so they could get out of the house. "We had to have something to do," said Fogel, who readily admitted to being very bored during the stay-at-home order.

Mitchell and Lonette Dubois drove to Litchfield from their home in Shakopee for the opening night.

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More than popcorn popping at the Millennium Theater

Drive-in movies in parking lot the next step

By Tom Cherveney
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MONTEVIDEO — Hollywood heroes and heroines routinely take on adversity to make possible happy endings.

It's exactly the script the owners of the Millennium Theater in Montevideo have decided to write for themselves.

Ever since the coronavirus pandemic forced them to temporarily close their three-screen theater, Jayme and Erich Winter and theater staff have devoted their Friday and Saturday nights to selling fresh-made theater popcorn and mini-doughnuts.

They gave it the first try on Friday, March 20. By the next night, they

were selling more popcorn than they would on most movie nights. "Help," said Erich Winter of his reaction on night two of the popcorn sales in March. He had orders for 160 large bags of buttered popcorn. He filled orders for 200 dozen mini-doughnuts the first weekend they were added to the mix as well.

The best is yet to come. The theater is preparing to offer drive-in movies in the parking lot of its location in the Southtown Plaza.

The Winters are hoping they can begin offering the drive-in movies as early as this weekend. They have a full-sized screen, portable projector and an FM transmitter to broadcast the audio to radios all at the ready.

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Tom Cherveney / West Central Tribune

The Millennium Theater in Montevideo has been offering curbside sales of fresh theater popcorn and mini-doughnuts on Friday and Saturday evenings since the directive closing movie theaters. The community has been very supportive, said Erich Winter, shown above. Erich and Jayme Winter are now preparing to offer drive-in movies in the parking lot of the theater in the Southtown Plaza.



West Central Tribune file photo

Organizers have canceled the 2020 New London to New Brighton Antique Car Run that would have been held Aug. 6-8.

Virus stops 2020 Antique Car Run

By Tom Cherveney tcherveney@wctrib.com NEW LONDON - The New London to New Brighton Antique Car Run is the latest victim of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The organization's board of directors planned to announce on its website this week that the 34th annual run scheduled for Aug. 6-8 is canceled. Eric Hylen, board member, said the decision was made due to concerns about the coronavirus and a host of other challenges: Community events along the route are no longer being held, and the group could not get permits to gather in parks and other locations.

event, and many of the helpers, as well as drivers, are senior citizens who are vulnerable to the virus. The group delayed its decision in hopes of holding the August event, but faced challenges from start to finish. The New London-Spicer High School parking lot serves as the staging area for the run, but state guidelines do not allow gatherings on school property. The final straw came with the decision by New Brighton to cancel this year's Stockyard Days. The run finishes in New Brighton as part of that community's summer celebration. Hylen called the cancellation a big disappointment, but said board members are committed to holding a bigger and better version in 2021.



West Central Tribune file photo

A huge crowd took in The Fabulous Armadillos at the final Rockin' Robbins concerts in 2018 and 2019. The band was scheduled to perform again in 2020, but the popular concert series has been canceled due to the pandemic.

Rockin' Robbins concert series canceled for 2020

WILLMAR - Rockin' Robbins, the Willmar Rotary Club's series of four free summer concerts at Robbins Island Regional Park in Willmar, has been canceled due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The organizing committee made a decision Monday to cancel the 2020 series. The "difficult" decision was made after much discussion with city, health and public safety partners, according to organizers. At the same time, organizers announced the steering committee has confirmed the same band schedule for the 2021 Rockin' Robbins season, according to an email. Bands previously scheduled for this summer, now on tap for next summer include: Mason Dixon Line; Chase & Ovation with a salute to Prince; Wild Angels and their "Women of Rock, Pop & Country" show; and The Fabulous Armadillos. Local bands perform as the opening act prior to each performance.

- Kelly Boldan

PIONEER PUBLIC TV

Pioneer Public TV broadcasts several original shows. All are available on the website after the original showing. The TV studio is located at One Pioneer Drive in Granite Falls. For more information call 1-800-726-3178 or email yourtv@pioneer.org.

It has launched two initiatives designed to discover and lift up the stories of everyday people in the small towns and farming communities served by the television station.

"Postcards": 7 p.m. Thursday and repeats at 7:30 p.m. Sunday and 1:30 p.m. Monday; featuring stories about Dawson including "GnometownUSA" and the story of a 1930's bank robbery where bank employees were forced into the vault and almost suffocated. Robert Millsaps, 96, originally of Tennessee, now living in Lake Lillian, tells his story of service in WWII.

"Compass": 9 p.m. Thursday and repeats at 10 p.m. Wednesday; Pioneer PBS retooled this public affairs program to include Zoom interviews with thought leaders, government workers and news media professionals who can add a rural perspective to what is happening with the COVID-19 response. If you have topics that you would like to see covered, contact Amanda Anderson at 1-800-726-3178 or aanderson@pioneer.org.

Historical group awarded national award for traveling exhibit

The West Central Minnesota Historical Association received an Award of Excellence from the American Association for State and Local History for its exhibit "How the Great War Hit Home in West Central Minnesota: World War I Traveling Exhibit."

In presenting the award, it was stated that the WCMHA traveling exhibit project's use of primary sources collectively in the 10-county west central region in Minnesota "demonstrated the use of good history."

The counties include Big Stone, Chippewa, Kandiyohi, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Redwood, Renville, Swift and Yellow Medicine.

The primary sources used in this exhibit showcased each county and at the same time show the connection of the World War I story throughout the west central Minnesota region.

This was said to be a new approach for the WCMHA to tackle and collaborate with neighbors and create new resources for each organization to learn from and lean on. This exhibit "demonstrates the relevance of local history by showcasing the local stories in the greater context of World War I history."

The WCMHA's goal was to help communities better understand how west central Minnesota played an important role in such a large event in the nation and world's history. The WCMHA wanted visitors to the exhibit to go home with a sense of how their own history fit



Erica Dischino / West Central Tribune file photo

The World War I traveling exhibit is shown on display at the Kandiyohi Historical Society in Willmar. Right: The World War I Traveling Exhibit is on display in Renville County.

into a larger picture and hopefully would understand more in depth about World War I history.

The exhibit has been displayed in each of the counties of the WCHMA.

The AASLH Leadership in History Awards, now in its 75th year, is the most prestigious recognition for achievement in the preservation and interpretation of state and local history.



Veronia Lee, left, of Elk River, and Bethanie Hinkley, of Zimmerman, drove nearly two hours to get to the Starlite Drive-In Friday in Litchfield.



Jason Schmitz, of Forest Lake, took his 10-year-old and 7-year-old children to the Starlite Drive-in Friday in Litchfield.

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"We've been waiting to go to the drive-in and just wanted to get out of the house and figured this would be something nice," said Lonette Dubois, as the couple sat in lawn chairs in the bed of their red pickup that was parked with a good view of the screen. They had blankets and a cooler nearby. The couple didn't mind the travel miles and didn't care what was showing. They were just looking to "get out and relieve some of the stress" and "enjoy the three days of summer in

Minnesota," said Mitchell Dubois. Quincer said he's been pleased with the support he's received about opening and was happy with the turnout over the weekend, even though they weren't sold out. Rain Saturday and Sunday didn't help. "Hopefully the restrictions will get loosened more in the coming weeks and hopefully we can get back to somewhat normal," he said. "But I think all summer long we're going to be practicing some forms of social distancing of some kind." Quincer said he's happy the drive-in is back in business for the year and hopes it will

VIDEO

See video online at wctrib.com.



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Both ideas - selling popcorn for curbside customers and hosting drive-in movies - had been in the back of the owners' minds long before the coronavirus pandemic struck. Erich Winter said the pandemic prompted them to give the popcorn sales a try, in part as an opportunity for the theater's staff to work some hours. The community response has been so supportive, Erich and Jayme said. There are a number of popcorn lovers who have been coming every Friday and Saturday since it started, they

said. When one of the regulars missed a night, they called them to make sure they were OK. They were. The best part of it, they said, is the popcorn sales give them an opportunity to see the customers they have come to know so well in their three years of owning the theater. "Our customers aren't our customers," said Erich. "They are our guests." He said he and Jayme were thinking about occasionally offering drive-in movies - for the fun of it - months ago. He had an extra, full-sized screen as the result of the extensive renovation and remodeling they completed when opening the theater in May of 2017. He was planning to rent a portable projector to

give it a try. Last February, he spotted a portable projector for sale at a very good price and jumped on it. Now they have been going through the licensing requirements with the city to open up the drive-in operation. The city has been very supportive, they said. The parking lot should allow for 55 to 60 vehicles with appropriate distance between them. Movie-goers will be able to use their phones to order popcorn and other concessions delivered to their vehicle. Or, the treats can be ordered outside the the-

ater's entrance and picked up at the exit door a short distance away. Plans call for showing two movies each night, with a 9:15 starting time for the first. The owners said they do not know yet if theaters will be allowed to reopen on June 1. They are taking a cautious approach. Erich said they want to be socially responsible and are awaiting for safe guidelines before making a decision on reopening. He also pointed out that new Hollywood releases aren't expected until late June or early July.

Advertisement for VFW Post 1639 with text: 'With all due respect, we will suspend operations until further notice to comply with Gov. Walz order to close down bars and dine-in restaurants. May we all remain healthy, we will see you soon!' and contact information.

Advertisement for New London Legion with menu items like 'Wednesday - \$11 chicken Alfredo w/ garlic toast' and contact information.