



Hartford Historical Society

The Garipay House • 1461 Maple Street
Hartford Village, Vermont 05047

HARTFORD • QUECHEE • WEST HARTFORD • WHITE RIVER JUNCTION • WILDER

Volume 17, No. 1

SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

July-August 2004

Reminiscing About The White River Drive-In

by James M. Kenison

When people are asked about their memories of the White River Drive-in Theater, the responses evoked are very different from person to person. Many people share their memories only under the condition of anonymity. For some, the reason is shame. Even though their actions mirrored those of many Upper Valley residents during the 34-year history of our drive-in, memories of their youthful escapades are often accompanied by a bit of guilt.

Allard Graves opened the White River Drive-in Theater on Thursday, June 12, 1952, on Sykes Avenue in White River Junction. The only remains today include the theater's sign, in front of McDonald's on the corner of Sykes Mountain Ave. and Route 5, and several scattered speaker posts found amongst the grass and brush that has grown up on sections of the former lot.

Upon opening, Graves touted the many conveniences of the new theater. Such conveniences included the elimination of the parking and babysitting worries that accompanied many indoor theatres, a free bottle warming service, the modern cafeteria style snack bar, and individual in-car speakers. Early ads also encouraged people to come as they were and to smoke if they liked. While these conveniences were new to us in the Upper Valley, drive-ins had actually been selling these very benefits to appreciative audiences since 1933. In fact Fairlee, VT's drive-in opened in 1950, two years before White River's. Mr. Graves had been in the theater business for several years by this time as owner

of Graves Theaters – a chain that included the Lyric in White River Jct. Graves had a good understanding of the theater industry and saw a good thing in outdoor theaters, so he ran with it.

The White River Drive-in was a popular attraction for area families and teens. Families enjoyed bringing all the children without having to dress up for an evening out. Teens enjoyed hanging out with friends. The theater was also a popular spot for dating couples – some of whom would be hard pressed to recite the major points of the evening's feature film.

One anonymous fan of the theater recalls bringing relatives to the theater during their younger years and hiding as many as would fit into the trunk to avoid paying the price of admission. Many others shared similar memories.

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The drive-in entrance so well remembered by local patrons.

White River Drive-In — continued

One person remembers his ride in the trunk as a 20-year old in 1976. He remembers is as if it were yesterday because when his brother came around to unlock the trunk, he dropped the keys in the grass and allegedly took 35 or 40 minutes to find them.

While some theaters turned to showing adult films during their declining years, the White River Drive-in had a reputation of being somewhat strict regarding their admission policy. Gordon Gribble of Norwich recalls an experience he had at the theater in the fall of 1969. "My in-laws were visiting us from California to see my wife and me and our new son, age about 3 months. The five of us went to see a movie at the Drive-In that was "R" (or the equivalent) rated. And, much to our astonishment and dismay, even though our infant son was asleep in his car bed, they would not let us in since he was under aged!"

Anna Mary (Casey) Page shared some more pleasant memories from the theater. "When I was little, my family lived in Calais, Maine. My Grampa and Gramma Frank and Florence Littlefield and my Aunt Kay Littlefield lived on 9 Beswick Drive in WRJ, Vermont, where Satellite Video is now. My Grandfather built that house and refused to move it when the interstates came in (I89 and I91). My family would visit WRJ in the summers and my sisters and



Mystery photo showing Allard Graves, a reporter from the Claremont Eagle, and an unknown individual in front of the screen at the White River Drive-in, circa 1952. Please contact us if you can identify these men.

brother and I would run down the grassy lawn of my Grampy's back yard and enter the gravel parking lot of the White River Drive-In Theater. My Aunt Kay would pack us up with lots of snacks (I really wanted

some French fries from the concession stand but they cost a lot). We brought blankets and pillows and laid on the grassy front row of the parking lot. The speakers were always clumsy with a high-pitched, tinny sound and we loved every minute of the noise. We would stay for both movies and I actually do not even remember seeing cars there. The front row was ours and ours alone. A different world."

I personally remember my visit to the drive-in to see the film "E.T." I also have memories of lying on a blanket in front of the car as a young boy and especially at least

once, when it started raining. I remember trying to outlast my brother by staying outside longer than him while we both ended up soaked before my mother made us get back in the car. As a Boy Scout, during the theater's last years of operation, I remember raising money for summer camp by washing windshields in the lot before the movie started.

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GRAND OPENING

WHITE RIVER DRIVE - IN FAMILY THEATRE

(ONE MILE SOUTH OF WHITE RIVER ON ROUTE 5)


TOMORROW NIGHT THURSDAY, JUNE 12th

FREE FLOWERS TO THE FIRST 500 WOMEN ATTENDING OUR GRAND OPENING PERFORMANCE


- Shows Every Evening Rain or Clear
- Individual In-Car Speakers
- Modern Cafeteria Style Snack Bar
- Free Bottle Warming Service
- No Parking Worries
- No Baby Sitting Worries
- Come Dressed As You Are
- Smoke If You Like
- Children In Cars Always Free

You Will
Enjoy Movies under the stars... a new and pleasant form of entertainment... You will find it a delightful experience and wonderful for the whole family!

— Opening Attraction —



Plus —



BOX OFFICE OPENS AT 7 P.M. SHOW STARTS AT DUSK

ADMISSION: ADULTS 60c (Tax Included)



Hartford Historical Society

Post Office Box 547, Hartford, VT 05047-0547

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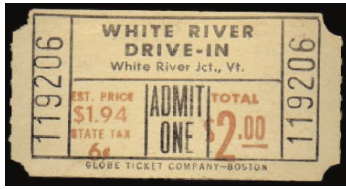
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Newsletter Printing and Mailing: John Lutz

The White River Drive-in Theater ran an ad in September 1986 announcing its “Last Big Weekend”. This statement was more prophetic than originally thought. The theater did not open the following year. Instead, patrons were greeted with an article in the Valley News announcing the closing and the planned commercial development for the theater property (which never came to pass). The screen stood for several more years, but eventually it was torn down, leaving only the sign.



Several things led to the closing of the White River Drive-in, including uncooperative weather and increased property values. Nothing hurt as much, however, as the introduction of VCR’s in the 1980s. All the same benefits once very profitable for drive-in owners were now available in the privacy of one’s own home. The White River Drive-in, in the end had

been purchased by a group of individuals who foresaw the potential value of the land on which the White River Theater stood. While they ran the theater for several years, eventually closing the theater was the only reasonable course of action.



While I regret the closing of our hometown theater, I am also quite thankful for the several area outdoor theaters that

remain open. The Fairlee Drive-in and the Randall Drive-in in Randolph both afford patrons a step back in time and the opportunity to reminisce. Whether your own memories are fond or the cause of some personal embarrassment, the fact remains that our local drive-in was a favorite night-spot for families and teens for many summers.

Drive-in Origins

The Drive-in theatre is an icon of 50’s and 60’s America. They were as American as apple pie – and for good reason.

The first drive-in theater, crude as it may have been, used the side wall of an automotive parts machine shop and its parking lot in Camden, New Jersey. Richard Hollingshead received inspiration not from above, but from his mother. Emma Hollingshead was a large woman who had difficulty fitting into the small seats typical of indoor theaters of the time. She remarked to her son one day, “Wouldn’t it be nice if you could sit in your car and watch a movie?”

Hollingshead went to work and developed plans for a nine-row, 500-car “automobile movie theater”. On May 16, 1933, he was granted Patent No. 1,909,537. The theater was built on a 250,000 square foot



parcel of land for a cost of about \$60,000. The theater opened on June 6, 1933 to a reported audience of 600 motorists. Originally, there were three shows and admission was 25 cents for one arriving on foot, 75 cents for two people in a car, and \$1 for a family.

Hollingshead’s patent was meant to be his key to success, but things didn’t go as planned. Drive-ins were being built

and Hollingshead was so burdened by the legal fight to collect his royalties that he eventually gave up. The patent was overturned in 1949, at which time drive-ins started to spread and grow in popularity. At their peak in the 1950’s, there were about 5,000 drive-in theaters in operation. Today, only about 800 remain.

The conveniences of drive-in theaters were many. The low admission price drew many to drive-ins. The ability to sit together as a family without dressing up for an evening out, and being able to smoke were also keys to their popularity. These weren’t enough, in the end, to overcome things like rising property values and the introduction of VCR’s, which eventually brought an end to many drive-in theaters.

Since the late 1990’s, drive-ins have been making a bit of a comeback. Closed theaters have been reopened and new theaters have been built. A drive-in theater owners’ association has also been formed. Though they probably will never again reach the level of popularity they attained in the 1950’s and 60’s, the drive-in theater industry lives on.

References:

Kerry Segrave (October 2001) Reprint Edition, *Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933*, McFerland & Company.

Elizabeth McKeon, Linda Everett, Liz McKeon (December 1998), *Cinema Under the Stars: America’s Love Affair with the Drive-In Movie Theater*, Cumberland House.

R. Cohen (May 2001), *History: The ‘Park-In’ Movie Theatre*, article in *South Jersey Magazine*.



Mary's Message

By Mary Nadeau, *Chairman, HHS Board of Directors*

The Hartford Historical Society was represented at two recent local events.

On May 8, 2004, the Thomas Chittenden Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution commemorated its one hundredth anniversary at the Greater Hartford United Church of Christ. Following the program ritual, which has remained largely unchanged over the years, the president read a brief history of the chapter's activities. I noted with interest the familiar name of Hartford Village's Kate Morris Cone as one of the group's charter members and the fact that the gavel used to conduct meetings is made of wood from Mount Vernon.

The DAR continues to mark the graves of Revolutionary War veterans and their families and maintains the Center of Town memorial that marks the place where Hartford's Revolutionary War soldiers drilled, town meetings were held and the town clerk's office was located until 1840.

Members of the General John Stark Camp of Masons, a side group of the Green Mountain Chapter of National Sojourners, arrived in colorful military uniforms of the period. Using a large prop similar to a flannel board, they performed the "Building of the Flag" ceremony, while explaining the history and significance of each star and bar of our American flag. Perhaps we could persuade them to put on a program at one of our future meetings.

The Lebanon Historical Society approached our board of directors with the suggestion that the two groups establish a working relationship that would include inviting one another's members to its programs. With that in mind, David Fairbanks Ford and I attended a

Lebanon program that was held on May 17, 2004, at the Old Soldier's Memorial Building on North Park Street.

The featured speakers were Joe Citro and Diane Foulds who co-authored "Curious New England". According to Mr. Citro, the book attempts to chronicle "all the oddities about the six New England states that AAA wouldn't even touch." He pointed out that many of these "oddities" are right under our feet, but most of us never knew they existed.

The authors took turns reading samples from the book, and members of the audience had to guess in which of the New England states the oddity could be found. Correct answers were rewarded with what would be best described as "funky" prizes. The very first excerpt concerned a certain Main Street Museum of Art. Do you know which state is home to this curious institution?

After the program, David and I took advantage of the offer to tour the building with a knowledgeable guide. We were fascinated by the Nineteenth-Century architecture and the array of Civil War photos and memorabilia in the large upstairs hall.

Upcoming events at Lebanon's Historical Society will be listed along with Hartford's in our newsletter. We hope that you will attend them to be educated and entertained!

In closing, it should be mentioned that I was re-elected to another term as chairman of the board of directors at our last board meeting. I look forward to working together with everyone once again as we move into another year.



Future Issues: Upcoming Newsletter Topics and Submission Deadlines

The following topics will be covered in upcoming issues of the Hartford Historical Society Newsletter. Anyone wishing to share information, memories, stories, or photos is encouraged to do so by the deadline listed. Please contact Jim Kenison, newsletter editor, by calling (802) 457-9988, or by e-mail (hartfordhistory@yahoo.com). Any photos will be scanned and returned to their owner.

Issue Date	Feature Topic	Submission Deadline
September 2004	Back To School	8/20/2004
November 2004	Thanksgiving Memories	10/22/2004
January 2005	White River Junction Firehouse	12/10/2004

“By Hook or By Crook”

May Program and Business Meeting

On May 12th, with about thirty-five in attendance, Randy Dickson presented a program on expressions and words of the past, and their possible origins and meanings. After minor technical difficulties, Mr. Dickson was able to present a multi-media explanation of several common expressions that many of us take for granted. Shared were expressions derived from nautical terms, farming, business, and other life experiences. Members of the audience were invited to share expressions of unsure origin in an effort to determine their histories. Mr. Dickson works as an Industrial Arts teacher at Hartford High School.

After the program, Mary Nadeau called the business meeting to order. Dot Jones presided over the meeting, during which the following officers were elected:

Dot Jones, *President*; Norman Lyman, *Vice-President*; Peggy McDerment, *Treasurer*; and David Ford, *Secretary*. In addition, four board members were elected to three year terms: Fred Bradley, Bob Follensbee, and Jim Kenison.



Randy Dixon explains the origins of several popular expressions that are in wide use today at the Hartford Historical Society Meeting on May 12, 2004.



Curator's Corner

By Pat Stark, *HHS Archivist*

Some of the donations this year have been:

David F. Ford – a canning jar full of silt from the 1927 flood found in the old Firehouse

Charlotte Lahar – a 1911 medallion struck for the town's 150th anniversary

Bruce Dudley – a 1949 program for St. Paul's Old Time Country Fair

Marion Adams – photograph of the Wilder Dam excavation in 1949

Thomas Stanley – 1936 photographs of the flood in various parts of town

Dot Jones – early water colored photograph of a steam train on the West Hartford Bridge

Jim Kenison – large collection of school artifacts, etc., and a State Fair Banner

Lester Gibbs – Grange information

Stanley Malcolm – post card of White River Jct. in the future

Judy Barwood – 1880 post office correspondence, 1927 WRJ graduation program, 1897 Ladies

Reading Club [WRJct] program, 1927 flood booklets, among other items

Mary Nadeau – Post Office receipts, etc. – 1878 – 1994

Rebecca Book – 1935 photographs of the Old Post Office newly constructed by WPA

Jere Smith – Ivory soap from the Hotel Coolidge

Henry Pallmarine – scans of photographs of road paving projects, laying RR tracks near the CV Roundhouse and other views around town

Don't forget the **Old Photo Day on Sunday, July 11** [this will also be the Sunday Open House as the regularly scheduled date falls on July 4].

Come look at some of old photos that are now part of the Hartford Historical Society collection – maybe you can help identify some! OR, if you have treasured photos, bring them and they will be scanned 'while you wait'.

If you have any questions about this event, please give me a call at 295-3077 [M-F 9-4].



Then & Now...

Summer is upon us. Other than enjoying a night out at the drive-in, there were several other ways people from Hartford could occupy their time during the warm summer months. One of those ways was swimming at the Hartford pool. When you think of the Hartford pool, most people think of the pool by the high school as we know it today.



Collamer Abbott, 1957.

From 1957 through most of the 1960's, however, the Hartford pool was a swimming hole located alongside where Bugbee Street connects Christian Street to Taft Ave. At left, a 1957 photo by Collamer Abbott shows local children enjoying the pool. At right, you can see that not much remains of the former favorite hang-out spot of many.



Jim Kenison, 2004.



A Look Back

Events that made the news in Hartford

30 Years Ago (*July/August 1974 - Valley News*)

- Summer features at the **White River Drive-in** included: American Graffiti, The Groundstar Conspiracy, Born Losers, Box Car Bertha, and Macon County Line. Other drive-in theaters in the area included the Midway in Ascutney, Starlite in Orford, Hi-Way 5 in Fairlee, and the Claremont Drive-in.
- President Nixon resigns, Ford sworn in as 38th president on August 8th.

60 Years Ago (*July/August 1944 - The Landmark*)

- **Twin State Airport** reports that “[w]e are now prepared to make essential flights into the vital defense area where the trip or business is an aid to the war effort. Portland, Boston, New York, Hartford, and various cities along the coast which have been closed to flying since the start of the war can now be reached by plane from the Twin State Airport.”
- **Interstate Tire Company** is now under the management of Henry D. Nelson who came here from Brooklyn, N.Y., to take the place made vacant by the resignation of Kenneth Langley who has gone to Newburyport, Mass., to take over the supervision of the Merrimac Sales Co.

Depression and War Stories at Garipay House

The Garipay House hosted about 40 sophomores from Rebecca Kurzweil's U.S. History classes on Wednesday, April 28. Dot Jones, president of the Historical Society, spoke to the students about her experiences growing up during the Great Depression. Dot also had the opportunity to share about her family's experiences during both world wars.

Ms. Kurzweil, a first year teacher at Hartford High School, appreciated not only the opportunity to hear Dot's stories and memories, but also being able to introduce so many students to the Garipay House and the collections on display – a new experience in itself for many of the students.

Student Letters of Appreciation

Dear Mrs. Jones,

I am one of the students who came to the historical society with Ms. Kurzweil on April 28th. I would like to thank you for letting all of us in and for giving us a little description of how Vermont life was back in the Depression. I only wish that we had more than twenty minutes for you to tell your story. I am always very interested in learning about history and I may come by again one of these days. Thank you again.

Sincerely,
Rob Mariani

Mrs. Jones:

You are a treasure. Thank you for sharing your knowledge with us. We all greatly appreciate it.

Sincerely,
Brooke



Your Society at Work

Letters to the Hartford Historical Society Staff and Volunteers:

Tuesday, April 27, 2004

Pat,

I can't even begin to thank you. This was the information that I have been looking for! It ties me directly back to the oldest family line which dates back to Scotland in the 1200's. I was so glad to get a response, I couldn't think of where to look next so I threw out the e-mail to you kind of in desperation, and I am thrilled that it turned out. Thank you for using your personal time to research this for me, my family and I truly appreciate it. If you happen to turn up anything else, I would love to hear it. You have done so much more than you can understand already. Thank you again.

Sincerely,
Brian Kneeland

Fri., April 30, 2004

Jim:

Thank you for the information. As the oldest of the Gees in Wilder and elsewhere I have taken on the assignment of doing the history of the Stone (LaRoche) and the Gee (Guy) families. I would welcome the newsletter and would become a member of the Historical Society. Let me know what the dues structure is for the Society.

Thanks again.
Joe Gee

Progress Report on *The Book Project*:

Plans are underway to publish an updated and revised edition John St. Croix's *Pictorial History of Hartford, Vermont*. The original book was released in three separate editions, the last of which was published in 1974. The Historical Society has accepted the challenge of updating this essential town history and hopes to release the new volume within three years.

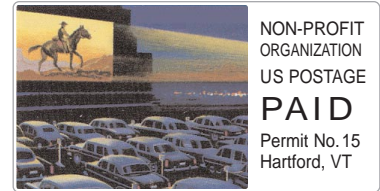
Two meetings for this project have already been held. Those attending the initial May 14, 2004 session heard a description of the project and the editorial and production processes that are planned. Volunteers were accepted for many of the identified tasks and our work has begun.

A quarterly meeting will be held for all those participating. The first of these follow-up meetings took place on June 6th. It was exciting to learn that more than 25 volunteers are ready to serve and the first assignments were made. Now groups for each village are identifying the new information or photos that should be part of edition number four.

If you know of photos or information that you feel should be part of this new edition, please contact John Lutz, the project leader, at 802 295-5467. Assure those who have old photos, that after the objects they are willing to share are scanned, they would be promptly returned to their possession.

Hartford Historical Society

POST OFFICE BOX 547
HARTFORD, VERMONT 05047



Coming Events:

12th Annual Glory Days of the Railroad Festival

Saturday, September 11, 2004
10 - 5, White River Junction

Mailing Label



HHS Calendar

- Tue., July 6** Open House – Garipay House, 1461 Maple Street/Route 14, Hartford, VT, 6:00-8:00pm. Come and see our collection.
- Sun., July 11** Open House/Old Photo Day – Garipay House, 1:30-4:00pm. Come see our collection. Society staff and volunteers will be on site to collect and scan photos related to Hartford history, including all five villages. Photos may be used in the society’s revision of John St. Croix’s *Historical Highlights of Hartford*, which was published in 1974.
- Sun., Aug. 1** Open House – Garipay House, 1:30-4:00pm.
- Tue., Aug. 3** Open House – Garipay House, 6:00-8:00pm.
- Sat., Aug. 7** French & Indian War Program – Quechee State Park, Rte. 4, Quechee, VT. A special program commemorating the 250th anniversary of the war’s beginning.
- Wed., Sept. 8** September Historical Society Program - Greater Hartford Church of Christ, Route 14, Hartford Village , 7:00 pm
- Sat., Sept. 11** 12th Annual Glory Days of the Railroad Festival, Junction Railroad Station Park, 10 am-5
- Sun., Sept. 12** Book Committee Meeting – Garipay House, 2:00 pm. Quarterly meeting for progress reports on the Society’s book preparation project.