

Western Drive-in Theatre, Seventeen Mile Rocks

For over 21 years, from November 1966 until June 1988, western Brisbane residents enjoyed seeing



movies at the Western Drive-in Theatre on Seventeen Mile Rocks Road.

The theatre was situated on 473-513 Seventeen Mile Rocks Road, between Argyle St, whose houses backed onto the precinct, and Fremont St., on original land portion 198, Parish of Oxley. During the period of operation of the theatre, it was often described as being the Oxley drive-in theatre, but it was actually west of Fort Rd (the Oxley boundary) in the then still developing Seventeen Mile Rocks suburb.

Sign near entrance. All photos courtesy of Mr Paul Stenholm, a former manager.

Ownership

Western Drive-in Pty Ltd, which was registered as an Australian proprietary company, limited by shares on 25 February 1965, was recorded on the land title deed as the owner of the land in June 1965. The land title deed records no change of ownership throughout the theatre's operating period. The licenses issued by Brisbane City Council were also in the company name.

However, the company appears to have been a subsidiary company of Birch, Carroll & Coyle. From Feb. 1977, Birch, Carroll & Coyle Ltd letterhead was used in records on the Brisbane City Council licensing file on the theatre, and subsequent Council documentation referred to 'Western Drive-in Theatre, Birch, Carroll & Coyle'. The Birch, Carroll & Coyle administration office advised CSHSoc member Pat Rosenthal that they had the Western Drive-in Theatre listed as having been owned by Birch Carroll & Coyle.

Opening

Well over 12 months after Western Drive-in Pty Ltd acquired the land, the theatre opened in November 1966. An article in *Inala News* of 16 November 1966 described the opening: "*Over 100 people were guests of the management when the Western Drive-in Theatre opened its gates at Oxley last Thursday. The Minister for Local Government, Mr Richter, officially opened the new Drive-in which is the 6th in Brisbane. Supper was served on the patio and the Inala Marching Girls and the Brisbane Federal Band staged a display. The manager for the Western Drive-in Theatre told Inala News that the theatre will fill a long needed want in the area. He added that there was space for 500 cars with more space for expansion if needed.*"

Licensing requirements

Separate licenses were required for operation of the cafe and for the theatre, each subject to an annual fee (at time of first opening, \$30 for theatres, \$12.50 for cafe). The license was annually renewable and an inspection of facilities was conducted each year. The only evidence on Brisbane City Council files of any threat to either license was associated with complaints about noise (see below).

Size, Facilities and Management

The theatre started with 500 car spaces but with provision for up to 642, the maximum allowed. From late 1967 the company was making application to expand the car spaces. In 1968 the company applied for a license with increased car spaces to 609 vehicles and this was granted. And in 1971 the license was increased to the maximum allowable car spaces 642.

Facilities onsite included a cafe, a children's playground and toilets. The latter comprised:

- for ladies: 9 WCs, 3 wash hand basins.
- for gents: 4 WCs, 20 SS urinals, 2 wash hand basins.

The children's playground proved to be useful for families who arrived early to obtain prime viewing places. One informant told us that his father was always keen to get there early for that purpose. They were often second or third in the queue so the children would fill in time in the playground.



There was also a manager's residence onsite. It is understood that there were at least three successive managers, possibly more, during the period that the Western Drive-in operated. Mr RJ Beasley was an early manager, his name being on the Council file as manager in early 1971. He held the position until

1977 when Mr Paul Stenholm took over. Mr Stenholm remained in the position until 1985, living onsite with his wife and family. Mr Phillip Heburn (possibly Hebron) is named as manager on the Council file from January 1987 but he could have been in the position earlier.

Opening Hours/Screening Times

For the theatre, the original licence was for Monday-Saturday evening screenings, 7.30-11.30 with gates open at 6.30pm. In early 1971 the manager applied for and was granted permission to screen on Sunday evenings. Permission for both continued to be stated separately in the annual approval by Council for the theatre to continue operating.



In early January 1974, the manager applied for a licence to run midnight to dawn screenings, to commence 12.01 am 19 January. Council required that application be made on an event by event basis to run late night screenings, it did not give 'blanket' approval for a whole year. An exception to this occurred in December 1978 when approval was given for a block of 6 proposed late night screenings, 2 in December 1978 and 4 in January 1979. Such late night screenings continued to be run, it seemed about 4-6 times a year, from 1974 until the theatre closed.



Operational Issues

Advertising and attracting customers. Screenings were advertised in the media including attention being drawn to special/popular films and the late night screenings. During the school holidays of January 1982, two activities designed to attract families with children were advertised in the *Western Advertiser* (see the newspaper extract). One involved an article about a giant fluffy toy dog on display in the entrance, to be given away to a lucky child. The other, next to the article in the same issue of the paper, was an advertisement for the film 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' at the Western Drive-in Theatre together with announcement to the effect that the *Western Advertiser* had 10 children's and two adults double passes to give away to people who rang up and stated who is the male star in 'Raiders'.

THE WESTERN ADVERTISER Thursday, January 21, 1982. PAGE 5

GONE TO THE DOGS

Drive-in theatres have seen some pretty strange sights over the years, but the sight to meet cafeteria patrons recently at the Oxley Drive-In must have surprised many.

Stacked inside was the biggest pile of dog food you could imagine, dozens and dozens of all shapes and varieties.

No, the Drive-In hadn't gone into the supermarket business, but was running a promotion giving a great big fluffy toy dog away to some lucky child who was there to see the new Disney movie "The Fox and The Hound".

Afterwards the dog food from the three Birch, Carroll and Coyle Drive-Ins participating was donated to the Yeronga Pet Refuge.

Pictured are Glenn and Tania Stenholm at the Western Drive-In with the giant fluffy dog.

Ring for our free passes and enter the competition while you are at the Western.



Western Drive-In Phone Competition

OXLEY WESTERN 17 MILE ROCKS RD. NOW SHOWING

GATES & CAFES 6:30 MOVIES 7:00



RAIDERS of the LOST ARK
BILL MURRAY. NRC
MEATBALLS

44 2443

On Monday and tell us who is the male star in "Raiders".

NEXT WEEK:
COMMENCING Thurs. **Jan 28**

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK
SCREENING FOR SECOND WEEK SUPPORTED BY THE HUNTER 

Local community complaints related to noise. A resident recalls taking his family to the Drive-in Theatre once and that there were 'young hoons riding around the area on motorbikes'. From 1977

there were successive complaints by local residents about noise. These can be traced on Council files. The complaints recorded on Council files related mostly to the late night screenings. Residents living close by complained variously, and in response to different screenings over the next 11 years until closure, of -

- noise created by persons in cars lining up quite early (e.g.
- 9pm for late night screenings) waiting for the gates to open: would arrive early [presumably to get good places], and proceed to 'party', often showing signs of already being 'under the influence', using unacceptable language
- speakers onsite being left turned on from the earlier evening screening even though replaced on stands when earlier patrons left
- rubbish thrown around on street, lack of bins
- car radios - through which the speakers operated, in the later years of the theatre's operation - being turned up too loudly during screenings.

It is apparent in the text of letters from residents that the demography of the area - primarily families with young children - contributed significantly to the tensions. For example, one resident commented that her young children were fearful of and resistant to going to bed after a noisy late night screening; and she was still struggling to deal with the children's resistance to going to bed during the next week.

Council responses included sending an inspector to negotiate management strategies with the Theatre manager and, on a few occasions, issuing a warning that the license for late night screenings would not be renewed unless action was taken. In the Council records there are time periods when no complaints were received, then complaints would start again. It is possible that steps taken by Theatre management to address the concerns were not ongoing, perhaps presuming that the issues would no longer arise.

Such strategies, varying over time, included: paying for a policeman to be on duty at the entrance from at least 10.30pm; paying for a policeman to be on duty at the end of the midnight to dawn screening, to direct and supervise departing traffic; having paid attendants circulating throughout the theatre during late night screenings to act as a monitor and constraint on inappropriate behaviour; having a policeman present throughout (this was after the Council, in early April 1983, did not give approval for a midnight screening).

Closure

At the time of the last complaint, in December 1987, the manager advised Council that the theatre would not stay open longer than 12 months. This was not represented (on the file) as having anything to do with the complaints about the midnight-dawn screenings. The theatre closed on 22 June 1988.

Former manager Paul Stenholm advised CSHSoc member Pat Rosenthal that by 1985, patronage of the Drive-In Theatres was losing popularity due to the resurgence of the hard top cinemas and the beginning of the video era. This also affected many of the other Brisbane Drive-Ins with most of them closing down after this time.

Sale of property

The Land Title Deed indicates that the property was sold to Sunshine State Developments Pty Ltd in June 1989. A caveat by Delapine Pty Ltd was registered in August 1990 and the ownership transfer to Delapine Pty Ltd was registered on 13 November 1990. This company developed one of the more recent housing estates in the current Seventeen Mile Rocks suburb.

Western Drive-in Pty Ltd was deregistered on 3 July 1991, three years after the theatre's closure.



Aerial image of the Drive-in Theatre precinct and surrounding suburb.

SOURCES

Licensing file on Western Drive-in Theatre, Brisbane City Council Archives is the primary source.

Land title deeds, portion 198.

Information provided by former manager Paul Stenholm to Pat Rosenthal

Article in *Inala News* 16 Nov. 1966 (received from Marion Mackenzie, originally from Andrew Darbyshire)

Article in *Western Advertiser* 21 Jan. 1982 (received from Pat Rosenthal, originally from Paul Stenholm)

Australian Securities & Investment Commission website: company search and resultant information about Western Drive-in Theatre

Anecdotal information from Bruce Sinclair and Bernhard Landmann

Photographs provided by Paul Stenholm

Written by Meg Gordon, Nov. 2018 based on research undertaken by CSHSoc members.

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