



Community rallies to keep nostalgic Manistique drive-in open

DIANNA STAMPFLER | WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 9, 2023



Photos courtesy of Highway 2 Community Drive-in Theater

The Highway 2 Community Drive-in Theater is the last drive-in theater in the Upper Peninsula.



The first patented drive-in theater opened in 1933 in New Jersey, launching a national trend for outdoor family entertainment fueled by the growing automotive industry.

Over time, as many as 5,000 drive-ins operated throughout the country.

Michigan was early to the game, with the first such theater opening on May 26, 1938, in Harper Woods (Wayne County), just in time for the Memorial Day holiday weekend. It would remain in operation for 39 years, closing in 1977.

During the heyday of drive-ins – the 1950s and 1960s – Michigan was home to more than 100 theaters with about a dozen scattered throughout the Upper Peninsula. Today, there are fewer than a dozen drive-ins operating in Michigan and just one of those is in the U.P. – the Highway 2 Community Drive-In Theater.

Early history

Local businessman Janiario L “JL” LeDuc (also known to locals as Duke), spent six weeks building his US-2 Drive-In east of Manistique. Schoolcraft County’s first outdoor theater opened on June 9, 1953, with the showing of “The Desert Song,” starring Kathryn Grayson.

The Escanaba Daily Press covered the exciting news: “Included in the theater are parking ramps for 350 cars, a large outdoor screen and a concession building containing projection booth, restrooms and vending facilities. Front part of the drive-in is fenced and a small ticket booth is located on the roadway leading to the ramp area. Each ramp section is provided with an amplifier and a subdued parking light. The theater is using the latest sound equipment, LeDuc said.”

The drive-in was LeDuc’s third theater. In 1937, he had purchased the 300-seat Cedar Theater (which was closed during the summer, starting in 1953, to help bolster attendance at the drive-in) and in 1942, he acquired the 600-seat Oak Theater, which had a history for both stage shows and films.

Outside of the theater business, LeDuc served as the chairman of the board for the First National Bank of Manistique and was an active member of several civic organizations like the Elks, Knights of Columbus and Rotary, as well as the Indian Lake Golf and Country Club and the Smith Creek Hunting Club.

One of LaDuc's long-time employees was a local boy named David J. Vaughan, who worked cleaning the Oak Theater starting at the age of 10. According to Vaughan's 2020 obituary, "He also worked cleaning the grounds at the US-2 Drive-In, where he was paid 50 cents a day, and a small pop and popcorn. It was his first 'behind a microphone' job, when he would announce, 'Please hang up your speakers, and have a good night'. And so began a lifelong career in the theater business, and at the age of 21, he took out a loan and purchased the Drive-In on US-2, with his partner David Kelly."

The 1972 Manistique Cinemas was their company, and after the purchase of the drive-in, they changed the name to Cinema Two on US-2. They also acquired the Cedar Theater from LaDuc; the Oak Theater – which had ceased operation in November 1970 – had been demolished.

In addition to his growing movie theater business, Vaughan worked as a news and operations director for WTIQ radio, a Manistique Broadcasting Company station established in 1964 by Kelly, using the radio name L. David Vaughan. He also served as a Manistique city councilman (1977-1987), including six years as mayor. He was active with the Manistique Downtown Development Authority, was president of the Manistique Merchants Association, served on the Thompson Township Board of Review, and was involved in other community organizations.

In 1995, William "Bill" Giles became the next owner of the two Manistique theaters, but the drive-in business was short-lived. When it closed in 2001, Cinema Two was the last U.P. drive-in theater.

For the next 15 years, the large screen at the US-2 drive-in remained dark and most gave it nothing more than a casual thought as they drove past the abandoned and aging site between Naubinway and Manistique.

Owned then by Jason Collins, the property had long been for sale, with one potential buyer – a local timber harvester – looking to purchase the vacant land to use as a storage yard for cut logs. Thankfully, that deal fell through because this historic site was destined for a movie reboot.

Community investment

Manistique resident Don Erickson had a vision – of creating an outdoor community event of epic proportions. In 2016, he mentioned this to Collins who offered his drive-in

site as the venue for this endeavor. About this time, Eric Sherbinow, a long-time fan of drive-in theaters, entered the scene and the wheels began to turn ...quickly.

Securing the venue was just the first step. The property had to be cleaned up and prepared to welcome guests after a 15-year hiatus, paperwork to broadcast a movie had to be secured, volunteers needed to be recruited and the event had to be marketed to the local community.

It was pedal to the metal to get things done, but they were able to host their inaugural event – an ironic showing of “Back to the Future” – on July 15. Three events were held that summer, including what has become a popular annual favorite, the Fright Night held the weekend before Halloween, featuring “Trunk or Treat” and spooky movies.

The wheels were now turning and with growing interest, Erickson and Sherbinow began the process of formally organizing the Upper Peninsula Film Union, a nonprofit with a mission of reopening the US-2 drive-in for special showings and events.

“We arranged a meeting with the president of Mbank to see what could be done in order to secure the theater and prevent it from being sold and destroyed,” notes Sherbinow. “He was so impressed with what we had going that he arranged financing for us right there on the spot. This presented a slight challenge since we had just started the paperwork to become an official non-profit so we had to pick up the pace and get everything in place.”

With the creation of the Film Union in 2018 came the addition of Kevin Knaffla, who joined Erickson and Sherbinow on the board, to lend his keen business mind to the organization. Today, this trio is the driving force behind what has been renamed the Highway 2 Community Drive-in Theater.

Thanks to local community sponsors, there is no charge to attend movies, although donations are happily accepted. This is one of only three known non-profit drive-in theaters in the United States, operated by volunteers with all funds raised going toward theater upkeep.

Other area non-profit groups are brought in to run the concession stand, generating much-needed funds for their own groups. To date, nearly \$30,000 has been raised for these smaller community organizations.