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Old Huntsville Drive-In Movies & Radio Shops

By

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I came to Huntsville from Birmingham shortly after the purchase of WAAY Radio in 1959. Being a teenager, I was anxious to meet girls, which I did meet quite a few beginning with those in the neighborhood and friends of their friends. Some blind dates that I had were Drive-In Movie dates. This was an informal and good way to meet and chat with your date, even as the movie was playing, particularly if it was not a great movie. Load the speaker on the window, and you were ready to watch the movie, or turn down the sound and enjoy conversation or more.

It was great to have such a good choice of movies to attend in Huntsville. Actually, it was more Drive-Ins than I was used to in the Mt. Brook area of Birmingham where I had lived since I was born. We normally just had to choose from the Shades Mountain Drive-In or the Vestavia Drive-In. Here in Huntsville we had the Whitesburg Drive-In on Whitesburg drive at Airport road (where Public Supermarket is today), Woody's was out on Meridian Street (where the Coca-Cola Plant is today), The Parkway Drive-In with two screens back-to-back for entertainment that you could access from either the Parkway or Meridian Street (in the Byers Nursery area today) and the 72 Drive-In on highway 72 going towards Athens (University Boulevard today). It's almost sad there is no trace of them today except in our memories.

<http://www.midwaydrivein.com/>
shows a recent photo of patrons with
their "old" cars at the Midway
Drive-In of Oswego, NY.



It is too bad young people today don't have the opportunity to attend these movies, or perhaps they are too accustomed to air conditioning. In the summer it could get quite warm just after the sun had gone down, even though you rolled down all the windows to let the cooling night air in. The opposite was the early spring and late fall where you'd usually keep the windows up because of the cold night air. Things could steam up inside, and you might have to clean the moisture from the front window if you wanted to see the movie. Not everyone was always watching the movie, and if you had a hot date and were smooching in the car, ALL the windows would fog up, but you left them that way, for privacy. In the summer when the windows were down, you could look into almost any car at the people inside as you traversed the distance from your car to the concession stand in the center of the lot. It was the center of the complex from which the movies shown on one side, and the large concession stand in the rear of the building. Some innovative theatre owners even installed a couple of pinball machines for further

entertainment and to make more money. In the late 50's, some Drive-Ins like Lufkin, Texas, and Detroit, Michigan could handle 3,000 cars. That was a BIG Drive-In Theatre. In Huntsville when air conditioning was coming on the scene, the concession stand was a very "cool" place to be, and you could stay a while and watch the movie out of large plate glass windows. You usually bought more concessions that way, also.

If it was a double feature night, they always had a long intermission, so you had plenty of time (as well as before the first movie started) to stock up on popcorn, cokes, and candy.

They had a kiddie playground area in front of the screen with swings and things to occupy the kids if you came before the movie started to get a good parking slot near the middle, or closer to the front and not far away from the concession stand (and bathrooms). This area was also lighted between movies when there was a double feature. A most interesting and not typical problem teens faced while "dating" in the car, was the "monitor man." This was a man, perhaps even the owner or manager, that would take occasional trips around some drive-ins during the movie and if he spotted a couple "making out" too intensely, he'd wrap on the car door (a real surprise) and say something like, "you'll have to stop that while you are here." It sure would get your attention and take the edge off a hot make-out session. A final note about the movies, I learned NOT to take a date to see "King Kong" or "The Blob" if you wanted to "make out."



While most drive-ins have closed, there are a few still open in Alabama and around the U.S., like this one in Milford, NH that features hi-fi sound through your FM radio in the car. No more speaker boxes on the window. Just tune in a specific FM channel on the dial. And it's a good value for a car full of family or friends. Find out more about this remaining great Drive-In at <http://www.milforddrivein.com/> on the internet.

Another great Drive-In that's still around and showing Mission Impossible III the weekend of May 5th is the "49er." Check it out at <http://www.49erdrivein.com/> for all about this theatre in Valparaiso, Indiana.

I met my future wife, Judy, shortly after I came to Huntsville, but oddly enough we met in Birmingham. Her cousin Mickey had come up from Birmingham to take her to a Sigma fraternity dance one evening in December 1959 (she didn't want to miss a day of wrapping presents at Rode Jewelry where she worked that holiday). I was a Sigma attending with a date that I broke up with that same night. We met there as Mickey introduced me to his cousin, knowing I had recently moved to Huntsville. I got her phone number, and the relationship went on when we both returned to town. Judy still has that great, sexy black velvet dress she wore that night, and she can still get into it, even after having eight children over three decades. That dress has some very special memories attached to it. She bought it at the Town & Country shop on North Side Square owned by the McAnallys. We went to quite a few drive-in movies while we were dating.



After the drive-in movies, there were always a few good places to go before you went home. The Sno-White Restaurant on Whitesburg Drive about where the Burger King is today was a favorite spot. While their hamburgers cost more, probably as much as thirty-five cents, they were a masterpiece and certainly would fill you up, as a big Sonic Hamburger will today (albeit at a much higher price). The big advantage of the Sno-White was the great jukebox. It was really neat to put a nickel for a favorite hit 45 to be played right from your booth. You thumbed through the menu of hit songs and then pressed the two keys that matched the song you wanted to be played. "E8" was one of my favorites by the Drifters. The rich bass throb that accompanied the wonderful music was usually much better than you had on your home record player and certainly much better than your car. It was worth the money. The old Sebring Rock-Ola was quite a machine.

Mullins drive in took your order from the car, and it was only 10 cents in the mid 50's, and even the Krystal in town cost 12 cents, according to Judy. You never had to go inside for anything. They had the typical metal tray that hooked on the window, almost all the way down but not completely, so that the rubber clamps would catch about one inch of the open window, and the rubber brace would lock and hold it at the correct angle so you could eat off the tray and put your trash and drinks back on the try when you were ready to leave.

Fast forward to 1961. That sounds like a modern term, but "Fast Forward" has been around since the early days of reel-to-reel tape recorders. It has not been in the vernacular to mean skipping ahead in time until much more recently. As I was saying, Judy and I were married and lived in the University of Alabama student apartments in Riverside (demolished many years ago), and I had recently gotten my Novice Amateur Radio License. It was such a thrill to talk via Morse code to people all over the U.S. and occasionally in other countries. I longed to talk on AM with real speech, but you had to have a "General" license to do that. I studied and got my code speed up to 13 words per minute, and I was ready to take the test. I was told that "Bull" Durham at Curle Radio Store, on a small street just off Meridian (near the Furniture Factory restaurant) would give me the test. I had already been there some times to buy electronic parts, tubes, and other items. Charlie E. Curle owned Curle Radio, amateur call AD4F, and he was licensed in 1951 in Tennessee. Charlie owned stores in Nashville, Chattanooga, and Huntsville. Charlie is still doing well at 75 and active in "Ham" radio in Ooltewah, TN.

Well, I got my test and passed it with flying colors, but "Bull" was most imposing in stature and manner and scared me so much, I had a very hard time concentrating on the Morse code that he was sending to me. I had to copy it correctly with only five errors to pass. Shortly after passing the code test, WN4DXP became WA4DXP, and I was no longer a novice.

A short side note about Morse code: Wives usually didn't like the beep-de-beep-beep sounds and hams knew if you could get the wives to join them with an amateur license it was much smoother operating around the house. Judy and I had recently gotten a washer for our apartment, but she still had to hang the clothes on a line outside. I promised her if she would learn the Morse code and pass the Novice written and code test, then I'd buy her a new (used) dryer. She learned the code in a bit over a week, took the test and to my

amazement had the new dryer. I still won because now WN4KUO and later WA4KUO would understand about my antennas, bigger and more powerful radios and all that stuff in the cars. It sure was worth the \$50 I spent for the dryer.

I already had an “FCC First Phone Radiotelephone” license to be able to be a disk jockey at WAAAY Radio during times at night that it was using a directional antenna pattern and had started building my own electronic sets from scratch and parts. As a teenager, I had built hi-fi amplifiers from Knight-Kits, Dyna-Kits, and Heath-Kits. I still have a pair of huge Acrosound Ultra Linear power amplifiers that used the “sexy” (well they are to a ham radio person) EL34 output tubes in the finals. I frequented the electronic stores like Curle and Mock Electronics during these years for all kinds of parts, boxes, knobs, labels and much more. Mock Electronics is still open today.

Mock Radio & Electronics has quite a history. The Mocks first store was in Decatur in 1946. The first Huntsville store was originally located on Pratt Avenue, somewhere between Church and Washington in the mid-fifties. In 1961 Mr. Mock and Arnold Hornbuckle built the current strip of stores on the Parkway. Hornbuckle owned all the buildings and his record shop, but the Mocks owned their store. Mrs. Mock took over running the new store after she and her husband divorced in 1961. She continued to drive over from her home in Decatur every single day until she turned over the management of the store to her daughter, Barbara, around 1996. Mrs. Mock’s health continued to decline and she died in May 2000. Now her daughter runs the store, but Mr. Mock is still living and continues to own the store. Barbara makes the same drive from Decatur every day that her mother made for so many years. The short little road that runs in front of the store off the Parkway is Mock Road. Barbara said the store looks, operates and customers say it smells the same as it did 40 years ago. For small electronic parts, wires, resistors, capacitors, volume controls, and more, this is still the best place to come for those electronic needs.

A lot of the original reasons to visit the radio stores were to buy replacement tubes for your TV, Radio or music amplifier. Originally only the big radio stores had a tube tester, and often you’d take many or all of the tubes out of your radio or TV, put them in a bag and take them down to the radio store to test and buy the tube(s) that was bad. In later years, you could find tube testers and replacement tubes in convenience stores. Most of the chassis in the TV’s had the number of the tube etched on the metal, so you knew where each tube went, or it had a printed label on the back cover of the enclosure that showed which tubes went where. This made it possible for the average person to test their own tubes and get them all back in the right place, which was important if you ever wanted your set to work again.

Mock Electronics certainly did their share of the tube selling in those years, and today they are open just as they always have been and you can still take your old tubes in to be tested on one of the testers in the store and buy new replacement tubes for the ones that are bad. Mock Electronics still stocks not only the tubes that work in TV, Radio, and stereos of years gone by, but also tubes for the old tube car radios where many antique car restorers want to make the original equipment AM radio work again. The have come to the right place with Mock.

The alternative to doing it yourself was for the TV service man to come pick up your set, fix it and return it in a week or two. This was fairly expensive if it was only a single tube that needed replacing. But if replacing tubes didn't solve the problem, it was likely a bad component such as a capacitor, resistor, flyback transformer or another part that had to be unsoldered and replaced. A picture tube needing replacement was sometimes a death sentence for a small table set, but not a console. Some sets cost several hundred dollars to the big consoles that might be almost a thousand dollars, and you sure didn't discard it when it stopped working. The mahogany cases themselves were fine pieces of furniture and an attractive part of your home furnishing, which lasted for many years. Can you imagine it being like today when a stereo stops working; you find it cheaper to buy a new one than to get it fixed?

Barbara Mock said there are still a few antique electronic repair businesses that someone can take a tube set to have repaired. These people buy most of their tubes from Mock. Barbara said that recently a man came in and was in awe and wonder that the store he had not been inside for over 30 years, still looked the same, smelled the same and stocked many of the same parts he came in with his father to get so long ago. He said it was like a trip back in time. It is that for certain. Barbara said not only that, but they still do business the same old way, pretty much by hand. They handwrite out your receipt when you pay for parts and don't have to rely on any type of computer to do business. They do take charge cards, as it was a necessary part of continuing to do business in these days and times. "But," Barbara said, "when the power goes out, we just bring out our flashlights and battery lanterns and keep on doing business when other stores have to lock the doors." That's one of the benefits of doing business the way you did 40 years ago.

That was the fifties and early sixties in Huntsville from drive-in entertainment to television and radio shops which certainly have changed over the years. Drive-in movies are gone, replaced by the mega-multi-cinema centers, but TV, Radio and stereos are still with us, without the tubes to replace.

Times were certainly different forty-five years ago, weren't they?