

Former Skyline Drive-In was an integral part of Parkstown

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People entered and exited the former Skyline Drive-In from Old Youngstown Road.

Still, the stretch of Route 224 just around the corner from it is just as much a part of the history of the facility and the Warren family, which owned it from 1949-77.

Start with the former Parkstown roller skating rink at the northeast corner of Old Youngstown Road and Route 224, now home to Yesco Electrical Supply. That was built by the Warrens around 1960 and family operated until it closed.]

"That was pretty neat," recalled John Warren, a Vietnam veteran and grandson of the drive-in owners, John and Elma Warren. "We had wrestling in there, wrestlers from Pittsburgh. We had an AKC dog show there. Bingo was there."

Nellie Warren, John's aunt, recalled that the rink would send a bus out to various areas on the weekend to bring youngsters in to skate.

"But they had to be gone by 10 o'clock, because then it would be senior night," she said, "just older people until midnight."

John, an electrical contractor, was tabbed to do much of the electrical work when Yesco moved in, after the former rink served briefly as a bingo and community hall.

"You walk in there, and you have to wipe away a little tear," he said. "The floor's still there. Every time I go in there, I can still see Dale Spears at the organ and the big disco ball in the middle."

About a mile farther east sat the Super Castle Drive-In, where Wal-Mart is today. The Super Castle was bigger (800-car capacity vs. Skyline's 400) and provided patrons with in-car heaters, giving it a longer season than the Skyline. It also offered one-price-per-carload admission, which the Skyline did not.

Still, the facility with the turrets on the screen was never seen as a competitor.

"People would go to both," John Warren said. "Drive-ins were big then. The nice thing about the guy at the Super Castle and my grandfather, they'd work together and help each other. They'd write me a pass, and I'd go see a movie there."

"Not only that," Nellie Warren added, "if we would run out of things in our concession stand, I can remember many times going to get boxes for popcorn or whatever, and they would do the same with us. It wasn't a competitive thing."

Over the years, the Skyline sometimes complemented its films with added attractions. Smiley Burnette, best known as Gene Autry's sidekick and later as Cannonball engineer Charley Pratt on "Petticoat Junction," once made a personal appearance, as did an expert hula dancer from Florida (for Elvis Presley film "Blue Hawaii.")

Still, it was one night when viewers' cars began lining up along the shoulder of Route 224 – from which the Skyline screen was visible – that John recalls with a laugh.

It was 1972, and the Skyline was showing what John called "its first risqué movie," a hillbilly-centric work called "Tobacco Roody."

"It's probably like a Disney film now," he said. "They show worse today on TV."

Nonetheless, he recalled, "you could look over to 224, and cars were stopping," John said. "They were pulling into the Parkstown bowling alley lot to watch. They couldn't hear the sound, but they didn't care."

"And there was a church there," Nellie added, "and the preacher got upset over it and he called the district attorney (Tom Andrews, at the time. He came out and wanted to close the theater down."

Such films, Nellie continued, were an aberration from the family fare her in-laws showed throughout most of Skyline's history. Toward the end, though, when families weren't coming any longer because "there was too much else for them to do," she said, "they started to play some of these movies, because they figured since they weren't getting many families anyway, they could get away with it."

The crowds of the 1950s and '60s, though, never returned, and the Warrens sold the Skyline in 1977 to Cinemette Theaters, which operated it for its final few seasons.

"Grandpa was getting old, he was in his 70s, and it took its toll," John said. "He put in a lot of hours there. And no one else in the family was interested in taking it over. Other theaters were closing, and I think everyone saw the handwriting on the wall."

Although the Skyline's screen was removed, the projection house and the concession stand were left to crumble and be overtaken by weeds, its projector, popcorn machine and other items still inside. It was only in the last few years that those remnants were taken out as well.

"That was heartbreak," Nellie said. "You missed it, you missed the people. But to look over and see the weeds and the grass, and the driveway not even there it's all grass – that was sad."

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