

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

May 2017, Issue 259

Greenville Drive-in

In contrast to April's spectacularly May-like weather, our May meeting felt more like March – sub-50ish and windy, and would have felt chillier if we had actually met at the Drive-In as planned. Instead, the warmth of the Library beckoned the month's attendees: Marge Donohue, Donna Willard, Stephanie Ingalls, Edna Huffman, Lew Knott, Marv Smith, Al Hulick, Flip Flach, Bette Welter, Kathy Smith, Audrey Matott, Dave Tschinkel, Mary Heisinger, myself, as well as guest presenters **Dwight Grimm and Leigh Van Swall** along with friend Kelly, as well as the usual few more that escaped signing in and my memory.

I suppose the thought of the **Greenville Drive-In** becoming a local historical artifact would have been underestimated a few decades ago. However, its rebirth has caused us to reconsider its past and its meaning for our town, along with a slew of entertaining stories to accompany.

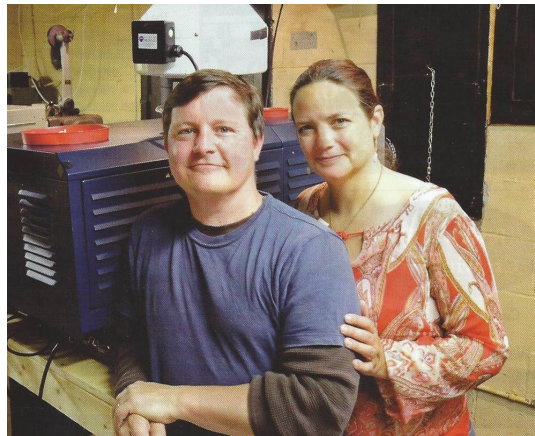
Dwight and Leigh have concocted a business niche seldom seen in the area, perhaps in the nation. Many of us remember the block-building concession stand, with rows of posts holding speakers, first showing at dusk, with a second movie after a concession break.

Fast forward the number of years since your presence last graced the drive-in.

The same building stands, as well as the posts (minus the speakers). Add a covered pavilion/snack shack/beer garden with benches and picnic table seating, with beer and liquor served.

Seating under the covered area during the movie is allowed. Entry into the drive-in can start two hours ahead, in fact encouraged – to socialize, listen to the music, etc.

Much of the food and drink is locally sourced, and Dwight and Leigh detailed the number of local connections they have made. A major goal of their project is to connect with the community.



They gave a short bio, with some of Dwight's ancestors eight generations ago located in Schoharie County, with the next generation heading for the City area. His family lived in different areas of the country before he and Leigh found a place in... Preston Hollow, with Dwight explaining how that happened.

They came partially to start a vermouth/herbal spirits/hops/bitters/tonics enterprise, ran into an obstacle or two, before accepting the offer of a commercial kitchen (the key component) at the drive-in. One thing led to another, and voila. (Of course, there were a few steps in between.)

Dwight noted the **switchover to digital projectors**, a transition that drove many former operators out of business, with the switch

costing \$100,000 or more. He had worked in the video producing field, had some knowledge and connections, and somehow managed to be part of the new wave.

Another element of Dwight's presentation included the typical drive-in business today, the short turn-around from block-buster release to Netflix and other "lesser" theaters.

Another short side topic of the evening was the force of character Pete Carelas was – the businesses he started, family connections, etc.

Drive-In history between Carelas and the current scene was briefly raised. I have scanned an older article about the Gang of 11. I also have a 2009 Daily Mail article about then new manager Don Brown and the economics of drive-ins.

Dwight also posts a column in our *Greenville Pioneer: Cinema with a Twist*, a journey into cinema history, usually finishing with the recipe of an appropriate cocktail. He also does a live hour on radio WIOX 91.3 FM on Wednesdays from 1-2 pm.

Much more about the current operation can be found online at drivein32.com, including some background history, answers to questions, upcoming schedule, etc.

Although the ostensible focus was on the Greenville operation, Dwight and Leigh spent a major chunk of the evening about an *interesting centennial* – that of the first on-street/outdoor drive-in in the US, at *Schoharie*, NY. Projected onto an enormous screen/sheet on the façade of the Schoharie Courthouse, the movie was seen by thousands of people who would flood into Schoharie for this entertainment. The village of a thousand people could swell to ten thousand for all the festivities during the day of the showing – usually a Thursday.



1959 Poster
(courtesy Dave Tschinkel)

Dwight showed a documentary video of interviews, background, photographs, and history of that time. Some of this video can be watched on the website. There is much more than I can relate here of this fascinating period. If you are interested, contact Dwight.

This *centennial will be celebrated with a re-enactment on June 8*, a Thursday, of course, in Schoharie, with a repeat two days later on Saturday the 10th. Just as it happened in the early days, Route 30 in Schoharie will be closed to traffic, this time for two hours only. (In the early days,

traffic was re-routed for most of the day, as there was some claim as to who actually had Route 30 paved in Schoharie.)

Wonderfully interesting history. I hope you get a chance to experience Schoharie in June, as well as to support our Greenville Drive-In in 2017! Keep an eye out for details.

Thank you, Dwight and Leigh, for such an entertaining and informative piece of local history. We wish you success in your business venture and in the pursuit of local history.

Attached is a scan of a poster that Dave Tschinkel brought in, seeking the year. An hour after our meeting, Dwight emailed that he believes the year must be 1959, the very first year of operation.

Other notes:

At the top of my list is the 2017 *Greene County Historical Society Home Tour – in Greenville on June 3*, from 10-4. I will email a reminder about a week before. I do not have to remind you Tour veterans what to expect. For you possible first timers, tickets are available at the North Barn on June 3, you are given a map, and then your drive yourself at your pace to as many of the houses on the tour as you want or have time for. It will be a



chance to view some of our local treasures that you ordinarily would not see. C'mon out and support a worthwhile cause.

Also at the top of my list is the **June 12 GLHG meeting, featuring artist Virginia Cantarella**. Her life work is a varied one, with scenes of horses, landscapes, flowers and plants, and abstractions. Cantarella earned her living as a medical illustrator, working with some of the nation's most famous doctors. She illustrated some 25 major texts in the fields of ophthalmology, plastic surgery, and surgery for dermatology. Virginia will bring selections of her work; demonstrate how she prepares a canvas for painting, based on her studying fresco painting when in art school; and share a sampling of her books she has either authored or illustrated.

The previous paragraph understates Virginia's accomplishments, more of which will be detailed at the meeting.

I'll put in a plug for **Community Partners**, who is working with Greene County Historical Society on the Home Tour this year. Community Partners is our local organization that tries to harness the efforts of anyone who is interested in their mission statement: commitment to the protection, preservation and development of natural and historic resources of the Greenville area. Their website: <http://www.communitypartnersofgreenville.org>. And if you would like to contribute financially, send to: Community Partners, P.O. Box 252, Greenville, NY 12083.

The Drive-In's 2017 opener was a combination of a viewing of *Casablanca*, jazz music from that period, and Moroccan style food. Deb and I attended, the first time we have been to a drive-in since, well, we have forgotten how long it has been. We will be back, and urge you to support local.

I cannot help but note three deaths close to local history hearts. **Pearl Capone** passed in December and the Quilters's Club held a one day retrospective this past month at the library featuring Pearl's quilting efforts over the decades. And then there was **Marie Shaw** (Bob's wife) who was my Greenville Center Baptist Church go-to person. And then **Phyllis Beechert**, one of our original 1990 start-up members who attended more GLHG meetings than almost anyone, a collector of brochures from local events for my files, a teller of Cooksburgh and Greenville stories, and more. Of course, there was much more than local history to tie these three with us, and they pass into our memory.

Happy Early Summer!

Don

Greenville Family Drive-In

BY MARTIN DAVIS

For a summer of Blockbuster movie escape and great eats the Greenville Family Drive-In is now open and will stay open and continue to be a family traditional weekend get away despite economic pressures which have closed many Drive-Ins in the past.

Although Drive-In Movies have been an American tradition since the 1950's and 60's, they are fast becoming obsolete. In 1960 there were 6,200 of them now there's only 800 remaining. Mark Wilcox manager of the Greenville Family Drive-In, and member of the Greenville 11 corporation, said that after the Second World War America was on the move and about to begin a long love affair with the automobile, hence the construction of many drive-in type facilities such as Motels, Fast-food Restaurants, and yes, Drive-In Movies. Of the three however, Drive-Ins were destined to have the toughest time surviving; this due, primarily, to land development opportunities and rising operating costs.

In 1988 Wilcox and 10 others "Baby Boomers" were at a restaurant discussing the merits of jointly buying the Greenville Drive-In and preserving it for the community. They knew it was up for sale, but also in need of serious repair. Individually it was beyond their financial grasp, but jointly obtainable. They had to act quickly though because a land developer had other plans for the property, yet lady luck was on the side of the Greenville 11 and Drive-In fans. Today 11 years or later, although operating costs are steeper than ever, there seems to be little danger that this Drive-In will close down anytime soon.

Part of this Drive-In's success can apparently be attributed to

the entrepreneurial determination of manager Mark Wilcox and his love for the movies. Wilcox was more than eager to explain all aspects of his fascination with the movies. He said "Yes, I'm an old movie buff; mainly, I like Clark Gable and Cary Grant films". He also told of a producer who used the Greenville Drive-In for a scene from the film "Victoria's Pool" evidently there are nostalgic 50's and 60's type stuff in that film. He said they tried to get the film "American Graffiti", but now it only exists on tape. When asked, about the importance of Science Fiction genre for today's teen audience; he made the distinction of special effects as to what is actually paramount to modern minds. He said, "Special effects are more important than the genre of Science Fiction, but Sci-Fi gives the opportunity for most special effects." That Friday their presentation of "The Mummy" gave plenty of room for special effects, however as an old movie buff I've always liked Karloff's performance as the Mummy and Zita Johann's portrayal of Princess Ankh-Samen.

While Manager Wilcox was explaining the ins and outs of the business he stopped and said, "Look at that"; referring to the distant mountains, "Aren't they beautiful? No one could say this is not a place for a family evening out" and coincidentally a friend of mine Mrs. Katherine Muro of Hunter echoed this sentiment perfectly when she said, "I used to love to go to the Drive-In it was so peaceful and beautiful on warm summer nights, you could bring food back from the snack bar and sit on your car or spread a blanket on the ground-it was so nice."

(See Drive-In on Page B-7)

Drive-In

(Continued from Page B-1)

The Greenville Drive-In Snack Bar offers some unique healthy food dishes from cook Bob Sweeney of Big Guys in Greenville. One of the other members of the Greenville 11 thought to include these somewhat exotic vegetarian dishes which are cooked while you wait. I tried the Falafel; it was tasty. Of course they have

the traditional. I crave them, junk foods and refreshments and they even offer a free 12 oz. soda with a large popcorn which by the way is less costly than what's available at an indoor theater and looking at their price list I would have to say this is generally true across the board.

The Greenville Family Drive-In is located on Route 32 in Greenville it will be open all summer; Friday-Monday nights for information call 518-239-4833.



Works of Virginia Cantarella:

Eye: one of her thousands of illustrations for medical texts;

and along **Creek Off Ingalside Road**