

The Forest Drive-In

by JS Pearson

Anyone who grew up in North Raleigh in the last few generations must at least know of the Forest Drive-In, once on Downtown Blvd at New Hope Church Road. Many will remember fond times either watching movies, hanging out with friends, betting on pig races or making out in your parents' car. But I will leave it to others to celebrate this legacy, because my own experience was very different.



In the 60s, everyone in my Brentwood neighborhood was excited because a big outdoor theater was being built by highway US 1 North. Once complete, people drove in from all over Wake County to see major films like Hair, The Towering Inferno, Jaws, The Poseidon Adventure and other blockbusters - all viewed from the comfort of heavy gas guzzling sedans.

It was well known that neighbors could easily check out the movies for free by tramping through the back woods and peeping through the corrugated metal fence that surrounded the drive-in. I was introduced to the secret by a neighbor kid, but somehow my parents never got wind of it.

A hidden screening room in the woods was set up behind the tall metal barricade in the far corner of the parking lot. Rusty lawn chairs were set up at a crevasse in the fence where kids

(and a few adults) would take turns checking out the films. *'Le Cinema Gratis'* was remarkably civil for a criminal activity, there was no fighting or fussing and no one stayed through the whole film.

The problem was the sound - which at over a thousand feet per second still arrived too late and too faint for a decent moviegoing experience. Silent gunshots and soundless screams were more annoying than funny, and the delayed dialogue made lip-flapping idiots of even the biggest stars.

It took residents some time to adjust to the nightly echoes of garbled monologues and ghostly lights flickering up behind the Forest tree line. The result was a weird soundtrack for the neighborhood - an endless ambient tone poem with traffic sound effects added by Brian Eno that settled on our block like a fog after dusk. But then 'Somebody', and I know exactly who, got clever...

Over Christmas, *somebody* took wires from one of the many ripped off drive-in auto speakers and spliced them into a 100 yd spool of 22-gauge Radio Shack speaker cable. *Somebody* then procured a power edger (*from Mr. Iverson at the United Rent-All on New Hope Church Road*) and cut a deep groove in the dirt parking lot of the theater while it was closed for the winter. Then, *somebody* ran that cable under the gravel lot into the woods - all buried without a trace.



Later, these wires were hooked up to an extracted car stereo with a heavy battery connected to it. An old Civil Defense speaker was acquired, and once it was powered up and the sun was down, it chirped out scratchy dialogue and bass-free 70s music for all to enjoy.

When the movies returned in the spring, the neighbors could now hear glorious, synchronized sound! For several months, this cinematic speakeasy became a hot spot with parents and kids alike. But as its popularity increased, so did the problems. Gaps in the fence, ripped open by folding back the sheet metal, were too obvious and required repair. Garbage, porn and beer cans trashed the clearing quickly, but people didn't care. They were too busy grilling, drinking, playing cards, smoking pot and whatever else one imagines - all without judgement, or tickets.

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Of course, nothing lasts forever and eventually someone stole the stereo. Kids destroyed the furniture; vandals tore down the speaker and bullies burned the place with a small brush fire.

After the late seventies building boom started, the area behind the Forest Drive-In began to change. Developers came in and constructed single family homes bordering the same woods we once had so much fun in. The theater's old aluminum fence was well repaired, reinforced with pine timbers and the many cracks were filled. Bright industrial lights were installed to blind voyeurs from free screenings of over-rated blockbusters. And there were rumors of a security guard, which I never saw but heard about time and again.

When the new homes were completed, it became much harder to meet at the 'critic's corner' for a late night show. One homeowner fenced his backyard all the way through the forest to the rear barricade, closing a vital access route to our nightly free forest film festival. Worse yet, this enclosure often contained a vicious hellhound that served as a vigilant watchdog against would-be freeloaders. The owner was no pushover either – a tattooed 'tough guy' that lifted weights on his front lawn between cigarettes...classy.

Except for one, the remaining homes on the block were sold, each presenting a different challenge.

One housed a super Christian family with a God fish on their car and a mailbox mounted on an old, wooden cross. The motion detectors in their yard triggered a bright, penetrating ray of religious light which flooded their blessed porch with goodness at the slightest provocation of evil.

Next door lived these overfit seniors, who obsessed over their garden and hedges to the point of madness – a minefield of monogrammed steppingstones, corny gnomes, clichéd statues, and an ugly sundial in the shadiest spot in the yard. Go figure.

The last house on the block simply had a big sign that said "No Trespassing" and a gigantic Ford F150 with a double gunrack in the cab – this was deterrent enough.

Combined, these obstacles dissuaded most members of our Free Film Society from attending anymore clandestine movie nights. And in time, more 'No Trespassing' signs popped up and more fences appeared. Eventually the novelty wore off, and the drive-in became just another local business. Over the years that business ebbed and flowed with the times, but the global home video craze would be the end of the American drive-in.

And it is at this point our Norman Rockwell dreamscape turns into a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare.

Sometime in the late 70s, the struggling Forest Drive-in movie theater started showing skin flicks at night. Soon, their marquee glowed with cheesy adult titles, sometimes at odds with their regular offerings. Think *Jaws 2* and *Deep Throat* on the same signage – and eventually they did away with the mainstream films altogether.



The Forest Drive-In's pornography wasn't a secret, they even advertised it in the paper – yet for some reason no one in the neighborhood was talking about it. It was weird, as even my close friends didn't seem nearly as curious as I was about this, except one – Greg.

Enter: "Greg Kandee", the lanky kid who moved into the last new house on Saratoga Drive, right behind the dying theater. You see where this is going.

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I originally met Greg at Brentwood Elementary in sixth grade, but really got to know him at Millbrook Middle School where we both endured a savage seventh grade together. It was springtime until I was invited to his house for a Lego project, but I already knew where it was. When we finally had a rendezvous I was gifted an astonishing secret in his bedroom. It was revealed behind two dark, heavy curtains, opposite his cluttered bunkbed and a wrinkled Mark Spitz poster.

Turns out that Greg's second floor bedroom window perfectly overlooked the recently perverted Forest Drive-In! From his back window you could clearly see the movie screen through the bare winter trees – I was stunned at the possibilities.

Then, when Greg produced a high-powered Edmund Scientific telescope from his closet, I lost my sanity – giggling and pacing around his room. This was a life changing discovery for a horny teenager, and my mind was spinning with ideas.

Yet Greg was unmoved, showing only mild interest in the remote viewing of mid 70s soft core pornography, and seemed surprisingly apathetic to the situation. He also seemed completely unaware of the erotic possibilities here - perhaps puberty had not visited him yet.

I, on the other hand, was busy using my other hand - to count the masturbation potential on my erect fingers. I formed an intricate plan that would ultimately reveal a lot more than grainy nudity or sexist plotlines to me.

In May when the Forest cranked up their crank yanking machine for another season, I was ready to take Greg's screening room to the next level. I remembered where 'somebody' had buried the speaker cable and mercifully it was still there! Unfortunately, it came out under the barricade several backyards away and biting close to the angriest dog in the neighborhood I mentioned before.

How was I going to get sound into Greg's bedroom 200 feet away behind four households without permission, witnesses or discovery? This was a real problem - until a bad Christmas gift became an unlikely solution.

My still-thinks-I'm-nine grandmother had given me a Sears Walkie-Talkie set which had remained unopened since Christmas. My idea was to wire up one walkie in eternal 'talk' mode, then use the other to receive the broadcast. It didn't work immediately and I won't bore you about the many visits to Radio Shack at King's Plaza it took to get it going, but it came down to power. I got ten hours out of every 9-volt, so I had to set things up in the afternoon (without the dog around) to hear each night's naughty performance.

Saturday evening before Mother's Day I was 'playing chess' again at Greg's house. We had pizza and watched Star Trek with his parents. After dinner we went to his room to 'play chess' and there I revealed my plan to Greg and tuned up the walkie. The speaker would crackle occasionally while we waited for nightfall and the movies to start.

Greg and I were actually playing chess a half-hour later when the walkie exploded with a distorted voice making a noisy announcement. It was way too loud and we scrambled to turn it down, upsetting the chessboard and earning a holler of concern from his parents. We heard some guy spelling out the house rules for the drive-in, and we giggled that my gizmo even worked. Greg seemed impressed enough that he set up the telescope to check out the show. It was hard to contain my excitement.

The first looks into the telescope were disappointing though. Springtime had brought May flowers but also a lush, leafy tree canopy to the city. What was clear in the winter, was obscured in the

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spring. Our movie was reduced to flashes of blurry lights with the wind, and stilted dialogue over porn music from the walkie. The disembodied voices were funny at first, but we got bored quickly and bagged it for the night.

My next opportunity came a few weeks later when Greg's family left for the beach. I was prepared, replacing the broadcast radio battery with an alkaline one and a plan to return that night.

It was a Friday, so my parents were up later than normal and I couldn't sneak out until after 11 pm. I was not suspicious in the least wearing all black clothing with a walkie-talkie, binoculars and an earpiece. But no one reported a midget ninja slinking around, so far so good.

Hiding from shadow to shadow was strangely fun, and the thrill of getting caught kept my awareness high. Finally, I arrived and sprinted across the street into Greg's backyard through an unlocked gate. I saw the film was onscreen already so I rushed over. In my excitement, I scaled their modest wooden fence too quickly and tumbled over into a world of bright lights, big movements and bouncing automobiles – I scrambled to hide while I found a safe peeping spot.

But it was too late, a big man in a uniform headed straight towards me from the concession house. I laid on the ground in the shadows thinking I could evade him, but he absolutely saw me and started calling for me as he drew near. Once he got too close, I panicked, jumped back over the fence and ran home without stopping. Along the way dropping my radio with the earpiece attached somewhere in the neighborhood.

You would think this skirmish would've taught me a lesson, but no, I simply redoubled my efforts to see hot, girl-on-boy action from the woods. With sound damn it.

But first, I needed to take out those rear security lights. Saturday morning I went to the weekly flea market in the parking lot of the drive-in. I cased out which fixtures to take out and returned on Sunday afternoon to shoot them out with an air pistol. It took a while, I'm not a great shot.

Next, I went back to Greg's rear fence and set up a box of paver stones so I could stand behind the wall and peep over. Surprise - I found my walkie nearby in the grass, unbroken, but the battery was dead. I had to go all the way back to the store for another battery to replace it, but I got a second for free with the Radio Shack battery card.

By late Sunday night I was kinda burned out with all these activities at all hours, but I was excited that this time I'd finally get to see a triple X film – scandalous!

Since Greg wasn't due back until Tuesday, I once again escaped from Fort Parents and made my way to his backyard Sunday late. I peeped over the wall and something was already playing, so I turned on my walkie to listen in. But to my horror, there was no sound. I tried all the buttons. Silence. A whack on the side? Nothing.

I had a silent temper tantrum, whispering vulgarities and jumping up and down like an angry troll. Out pops the new Radio Shack 9-volt - I never installed it. Duh. I put it in and I switched it on. Nothing but static. What?!! More tantrums, then another realization - Oh yeah, channel nine. Click.

Sound erupted out of my earpiece and *Voilà!* - distorted adult movie trailer music filled my head.

I tamped down the volume and propped up my binoculars on Greg's fence. As I waited through the skin flick's opening credits and early scenes, I noticed a few odd things about the fine patrons of the 'new' Forest Drive-In.

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First, unlike the busy concession stand and chatty families I experienced in the beforetimes; the parking lot was now a zombie-land, with the dead in their cars except for an occasional 'walker' to the bathrooms. The whole vibe was dark, secretive and weird.

Second, about those bathrooms. There seemed to be an awful lot of activity in that area, especially at the fence around the dumpsters, and behind the ice machine near the lavatories. Men would wait there forever just to piss; I could see their cigarettes glow in the shadows like fireflies. (I'd just pee in the woods but maybe the security dude would chase you).

Third, I was not alone. Even with an earpiece, my right ear was exposed and a few of times I heard a 'cough' that wasn't from a squirrel. Then, the Christians motion detector triggered a bright porchlight that caused some commotion. I also detected some 'giggling' a couple backyards away and soon the neighborhood Cujo was going crazy. When the smell of the 'wacky tobackey' drifted over, I was about to leave. But then...

Titties!

Onscreen, a nice-looking girl from Pasadena was removing her top, and then everything else. Before long, a graphic scene of physical love played out before my bulging teenage eyes. I was completely transfixed by the scene. And while I can't recall any plot details, I remember exactly how it made me feel. *(It's ironic how much trouble it took in my day to get to this point, when today, any 13-year-old can watch their streaming VR porn 24/7 undisturbed).*

The effect on me, however, was unique and dramatic and I had to wonder if it was healthy; it felt kinda wrong. But as I pondered this, the spell was broken by a blue light searching through the forest with bright, focused beam; the cops had arrived.

A Raleigh Police cruiser had silently crawled down the street before activating it's lightbars, cutting rays of red and blue rhythmically through the forest. A high intensity beam mounted on the squad car illuminated a trio of startled voyeurs near the senior's garden, now shamed into perp walking backwards out of the woods with their hands up, just like TV!

I was frozen for a moment and watched it like an episode of Adam-12, but the loud moans of a woman's fake orgasm in my left ear brought me back to reality. I tucked away my radio and escaped the situation via the busy New Hope Church Road, where I stayed in the shadows, dodging headlights and people. It was a long way to get home and past midnight, but when I returned to my house, the lights were on. All the lights were on.

I crept in to find my mother hopping mad at my disappearance, but with my binoculars in hand and my nerdy nature, she bought my 'meteor shower' excuse after a *woe-is-me* tongue lashing. I'm kinda surprised she didn't notice I was dressed like a teenage ninja, but at that time of night we were all ready for bed – just for very different reasons!