

What you should know

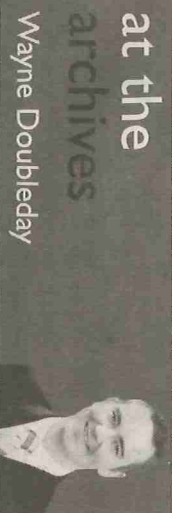
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At the drive-in

Wagga's landmark for entertainment



at the archives
Wayne Doubleday

A

t its inception the Sturt Drive-In Theatre was a thriving centre for entertainment in Wagga. Although the site was completely transformed a few years ago, the drive-in remains a landmark in the memory of many Wagga locals.

Located just off the Sturt Highway in Gungahlin, the drive-in was originally owned by Hoyts Country Theatres Pty Ltd; it was one of three theatres that were operated by Hoyts in Wagga.

The drive-in officially opened to the public on Wednesday, February 11, 1959.

The debut screening was *How to Marry a Millionaire*, the 1953 classic starring Lauren Bacall, Marilyn Munroe and Betty Grable.

The opening night was described as a great success, with about 300 cars rolling up for the event.

The construction cost totalled \$80,000 and was completed in 18 weeks.

The principal contractor for the build was HC Buckman and Son Pty Ltd.

Situated on a 15-acre area, the drive-in had an initial capacity for 400 cars with room to expand.

At the time of its opening, the Sturt Drive-In was considered ultra-modern, with state-of-the-art facilities to match all the metropolitan drive-in theatres.

At every parking space there was a special speaker system, with an inbuilt volume controller, that would attach to the side window of the car.

The screen was a massive 100 by 48 feet (30.48 by 14.63 meters) with a viewing surface of 4800 square feet (446 square meters).

The screen was mounted on a steel framework that was said to be strong enough to withstand 128 knot winds (237km/h). The structure stood at about 89ft (25.9 meters) off the ground, which is equivalent to a seven-storey building.

The drive-in experience at Wagga was designed for a range of audiences, but possibly none more obvious than that of the young family with children.

Hoyts went to great lengths to provide a well-equipped playground, and also supplied supervision so that parents could enjoy a night out without the need of hiring an individual babysitter.

The drive-in was also popular among teenagers and courting couples. The great advantage of the drive-in over regular theatres was that the car was the theatre.

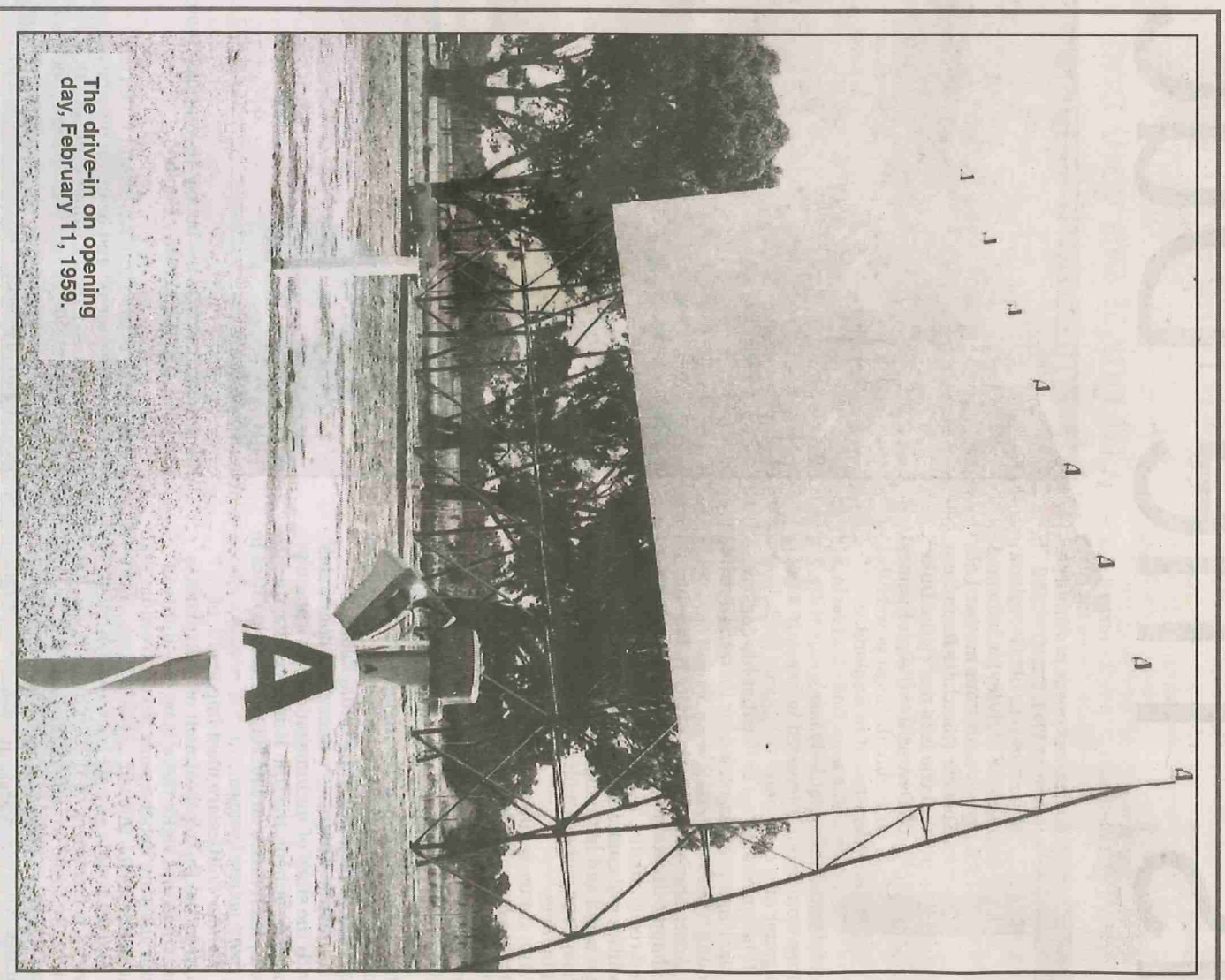
This meant that gossipers, noisy kids, or any kind of distracting activity would be kept within the confines of the car.

Also at the drive-in, people were free to dress as formally or informally as they liked, there was no negotiating with stairs to find a seat, and it was certainly no problem finding a park. Going to the drive-in was more than just seeing a film.

There was a real sense of occasion about it, and in the early days Hoyts tried to generate a carnival-like atmosphere to heighten the open-air movie experience.

The attendants were dressed in white overalls with red belts, ties and berets; music was played over the loud speakers as the cars were arriving, and the cafeteria/snack bar was gaily decked out with colourful tables and beach umbrellas laid out like a sidewalk cafe.

The cafeteria was managed by Mrs M Briggs. The gates opened at 6:30pm ready for a 7.45pm screening. In the beginning the drive-in operated six nights a week. Monday was "Ranch Night", Tuesday to



The drive-in on opening day, February 11, 1959.

Friday nights featured a new program, and on Saturdays they ran two sessions of a new program, the second starting at 9.45pm.

The original manager for the drive-in was Mr Douglas Cook, a Sydney man who had spent his entire working life in the entertainment industry.

He started out in live theatre and then switched to movies in the late 1920s.

Mr Cook was in charge of all three Hoyts cinemas in Wagga.

The other essential person in the installation of the drive-in theatre was head projectionist and Wagga man, Peter Wilkins. Peter underwent his training at the Capitol Theatre and was the head operator there before moving out to the drive-in at Gungahlin.

Mr Wilkins was assisted by Barry Hart and Les Miller.

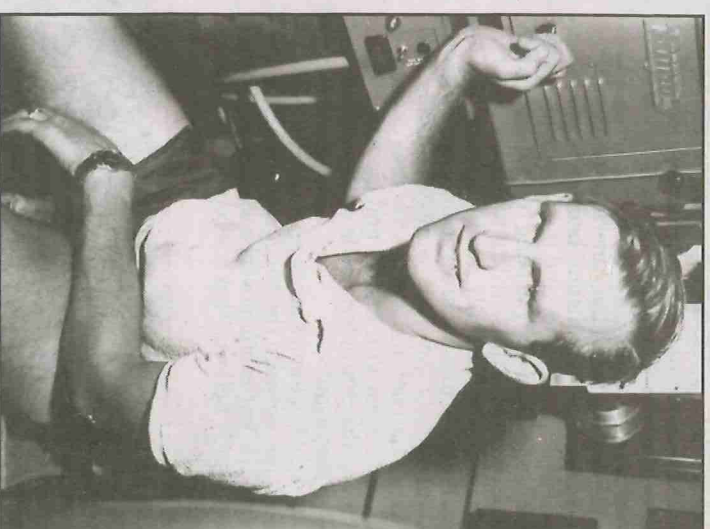
Although once a flourishing social scene, the drive-in has now been non-operational for roughly 20 years. It has been said the demise of the drive-in theatre was brought on by the success of VHS (Video Home System).

Although attempts were made to revitalise the outdoor theatre, the drive-in was ultimately left stranded and is now the site for the Drive-In Leisure Centre.

References: *Daily Advertiser* 30.07.1958, 11.02.1959, 12.02.1959

Correction

IN THE previous *At the Archives* entitled "Battle of the Plough Kings" a photograph was incorrectly identified as Charles Pacey Pratt



Projectionist Peter Wilkins, from the Tom Lennon Photographic Collection RW1574/16.

and his wife Caroline Ann. We have since been given new information stating that the photograph is in fact of Mr. George Hopkins and his sister.