

NewsWorthy

Drive-In Fun for the Whole Family

The 1958 Ruskin theater maintains family values and appeal.

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At the height of their popularity in 1958, there were 4,053 drive-in movie theaters scattered across the United States with 150 right here in Florida.

Today there are 538 still in operation and only 10 in the Sunshine State.

Even though none of them are located in Manatee County, residents can still get a nostalgic movie experience by taking a short jaunt up US Highway 41, over the Little Manatee River and into Hillsborough County.

That's where you will find the Ruskin Family Drive-In where, according to the theater's longtime owner/operator Ted Freiwald, 'It's always 1955.' To illustrate that point, a sign hangs in the concession stand that states — 'We had family values when family values were the rule. We still have family values, although some were not considered cool.'

The historic theater does contain something that is considered cool — low prices. While most multi-screen, indoor movie theaters charge up to \$7.50 per person, admission to the Ruskin Family Drive-In is just \$4.50 per person; kids under the age of eight get in free.

Most of the movies shown at the drive-in are the same films that are being shown in the first-run, more expensive theaters. Freiwald also books family films whenever possible.

"There are few places a family can go anymore for entertainment where they can feel totally safe. We strive to make the Ruskin Family Drive-In one of those places," says Freiwald, who has worked in the theater business for over 50 years.

In order to ensure his patrons safety, he has a few rules to follow.

"No alcohol, no drugs and no excessive rowdiness," Freiwald adds. "These are simple and steadfast rules with no exceptions. If you can't follow them, we don't want or need your business."

Freiwald, with some assistance from his wife Karen and several other part-time employees, keeps the theater open 365 days a year, rain or shine, hot or cold.

Recently, a Palmetto resident by the name of Michelle brought her family to the theater for the first time. She had attended drive-in movie theaters with her family while growing up in Michigan, but her three children had never enjoyed such an experience.

"We had heard that they were showing King Kong and decided to come up and give the theater a try," she said. "To take my family to an indoor theater to see this movie and get some snacks would cost well over \$30. So far tonight I've spent less than \$20 and we are all full."

The Ruskin Family Drive-In, which opened for business in 1952, has a fully functional concession stand that features

the same popular snack foods that the megaplex snack bars have, and the prices are a little more reasonable.

The Hillsborough County Health Department gives the concession stand a five-star rating.

Freiwald's menu features pizza, hamburgers, hot dogs, cheese dogs, soft drinks, candy bars, nachos and everybody's favorite, popcorn. The walls of the concession stand are decorated with posters from movies from days gone by, including one from a popular Elvis Presley feature.

Worried about the mosquitoes? You can purchase one of those funky looking coils that keep away those pesky, biting bugs for just 50 cents.

Rex is a 53-year-old Ellenton man who has been coming to the drive-in since he discovered it still existed about 10 years ago. He recalls watching Elvis Presley movies at a similar theater in his Alabama hometown when he was just a kid.

"I loved the place. Me and my brothers used to go all the time when we were in high school," he said. "It was sort of a gathering place, but we always watched the movies and hung out. Couldn't beat the price either and two or more movies for the price of one."

If it's the weekend and the kids don't have to get up early, many families stay late for the second feature. This week, two recent box-office hits are featured: 'Hoodwinked,' and 'Glory Road.'

Gary lives in Ruskin and attends the theater a couple times a month. He likes the convenience and says two movies for the price of one is a bargain.

"If I went up to Tampa at some indoor theater to see them it's going to cost me a whole lot more," he says. "And if I don't have time to eat after work, I can just pick up something here and the food is real good."

Freiwald says the theater has an extensive group of regulars but lately, a lot of folks have been coming up from Manatee and even Sarasota counties.

Some just come out of curiosity and are often surprised by the experience.

"I think sitting out under the stars and watching a movie with your kids is an attraction when the weather is good," Freiwald said. "Needless to say, we do our best business when we get the family films."

Coming soon to the Ruskin Family Drive-In — The Shaggy Dog, Eight Below, Curious George, Ice Age II and Garfield 2 — all movies the whole family can enjoy.

Stan Cochrane is a 43-year-old father of three who has lived near Lakewood Ranch for three years. A neighbor told him about the theater last summer and he's been back three times since. His kids



were amazed when they could watch a movie on a huge screen and hear the sound on the radio.

"I went to drive-ins when I was a kid and I wanted to share this with my children," Cochrane said. "They love it now. They are always asking me what's playing at the drive-ins and the last time we brought some of their friends. It's fun."

And kids can be kids, although Freiwald keeps rowdiness to a minimum — you don't have to worry about your young ones blurting out something while the movie's running.

"That's true," Cochrane adds. "It's well worth the trip for quality family time."

For Freiwald, running the theater is a labor of love. His dad was a farmer and because he couldn't envision himself following in those footsteps, he used a fascination with motion pictures to make a career choice.

He opened his first drive-in theater in 1948 in West Palm Beach and spent a majority of his time working for Floyd Theaters. In 1978, Freiwald settled in Ruskin and has been there ever since.

Although a lot of things have changed for the movie theater industry over the years with the advent of VCRs and DVD players, the philosophy Freiwald has employed has remained the same.

"The reason the drive-in theaters thrived during the 50s, 60s and 70s was because of families," he says. "It worked for me back then and it still works for me now. I am still doing this because I love seeing the families out for a night at the movies."

Four years ago when Tropical Storm Gabrielle swept through the area, Freiwald did something he hated to do. He had to close the drive-in.

"I was awakened by the sound of heavy rains and swirling winds, it was pretty nasty," he recalled. "I looked out the window and I could see the plywood that makes up our movie screen flying by."

Freiwald simply called on a friend who had access to one of those trucks utility crews use to fix broken power lines, put the plywood back and repainted it.

The theater opened back up a few weeks later. The box office opens at 7 p.m.

The players want to replace the 238-seat Riverfront Theatre on Old Main Street with a 400-seat Mediterranean-style theater with a 100-seat black box for experimental plays and youth theater.

Sarasota Officer Arrested for DUI

A Sarasota police officer was arrested and charged with driving under the influence after police say he caused an accident on I-75 in Manatee County. Florida Highway Patrol says Officer Ryan Stimpert, 33, caused a crash just before 1 p.m. Sunday about two miles north of the US 301 exit ramp. Troopers said Stimpert was staggering and acting dazed when they arrived at the scene. Stimpert told troopers he was taking Soma, a muscle relaxant, Lortab, a painkiller, and an unidentified anti-seizure medication.

Body of 16-Year-Old Found

A passing vehicle found the body of a 16-year-old who had been reported missing by her family off State Road 62 in northeast Manatee County Saturday morning. Amber Woods, of Bowling Green in Hardee County, was found around 7:30 a.m. Police said she suffered a gunshot to the back of the neck. She was last seen alive by her aunt in her home at approximately 12:30 a.m. Saturday morning. Detectives believe she may have left the house on her own early Saturday morning as there is no evidence that she was forcibly taken from the residence.

When the body was found, it appeared Amber had been dead for up to six hours before being discovered. Her family says Amber was playing cards with her aunt until about midnight. She lived with her aunt and uncle on SR-62.

County Looks to Restrict Homeless

Manatee County is looking into enacting rules to deal with the growing homeless situation. The county attorneys are researching three ordinances that would ban lodging outdoors, vagrancy and panhandling. Officials say they want to allow local law enforcement to have options in addressing the growing number of complaints from business and property owners about the homeless.

Sarasota is often called the "meanest city in the nation" for its ordinances dealing with homeless. It is believed that the number of homeless in Manatee has grown from the homeless being ousted from Sarasota.

The City of Bradenton is also looking into new rules that would restrict homeless from sleeping on private or public property without permission.

Ice Cream Truck Kills Baby

A 15-month-old baby died after being hit by an ice cream truck and dragged behind the vehicle in a Manatee County mobile home park. Police said the boy, Raymundo Aguirre, was dragged about 900 feet before neighbors in Wayside Glen Mobile Home Park were able to stop the truck. Neighbors saw the child after the driver backed up.

The boy was being cared for by a babysitter, who had taken him and two other children to the truck for ice cream. When they returned to their mobile home, the boy was missing.

The boy died in transport to Manatee Memorial Hospital.

The driver of the truck will not be charged, but did receive a citation for improper signage on the truck. Deputies considered possible child negligence charges against the babysitter but determined the death was an accident.

Woman Releases Church Settlement

A Manatee County woman has released copies of a \$125,000 settlement she reached with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago in 2004. Linda Lee Burke, 56, accused three priests of sexual misconduct. She claimed a priest molested her 40 years ago when she was 16 and two priests had sexual relations with her when she was a young adult.

She says she wanted to make the settlement public after seeing how the church has handled recent allegations of sexual abuse by another priest.

Rev. Daniel McCormack is accused of molesting three boys between September 2001 and January 2005. McCormack remained at the Chicago parish until he was charged Jan. 21 with aggravated criminal sexual abuse.

Deputies Suspended for Misconduct

Three Manatee County Sheriff's depu-

ties have been suspended for having sex on duty or during off-duty assignments in uniform. Two male deputies, Christopher Folds and Gregory Bass, were suspended for 30 days without pay. Dep. April Dugan was suspended for 15 days without pay.

Investigations began after the office received an anonymous letter. The letter claimed that Folds, 37, a school resource officer at Lakewood Ranch High School, had sex with at least two students. Folds denied the accusation, but said he did exchange cell phone numbers and chatted with two former Lakewood students. The sheriff's office says Folds admitted to having sex in his uniform in his patrol car "a couple of years ago" with a woman who was not a minor. This confession violated the Sheriff's office policy. Folds was transferred to road patrol in November

2005 when the allegations surfaced.

In the other case, investigators said Dugan, 32, and Bass, 36 had sex after an off-duty assignment in Parrish in 2003.

Players May Hit Stage in Palmetto

The Manatee Players may soon be making its new stage debut in Palmetto after 52 years of curtain calls in the Riverfront Theatre in downtown Bradenton. The acting troupe may be moving as early as the beginning of the 2007-2008 theater season, opening in September 2007.

The group is considering the move north of the river after the theater troupe's board of directors voted recently to negotiate with Palmetto officials to possibly build a \$6.5 million Manatee Players Performing Arts Center in downtown Palmetto.