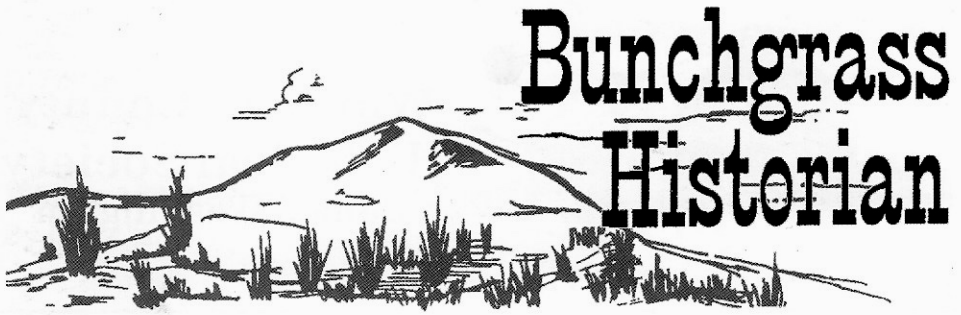


Bunchgrass Historian



**Whitman County Historical Society
Colfax, Washington**

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- **Drive-In Movie Theaters of the Palouse**
 - **Whelan and the Nearby Opal Mines**
-



Whitman County Historical Society Colfax, Washington

The *Bunchgrass Historian* is published by the Whitman Country Historical Society. Its purpose is to further interest in the rich past of Whitman County.

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Pullman Drive-In (1952-54)
Photograph courtesy of WSU MASC Hutchison Collection

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Both authors are native to Pullman and well known to our readers because of their previously published articles in the *Bunchgrass Historian*. **Bob King**, who currently works in Fairbanks, Alaska, is an avid collector of Pullman memorabilia and loves to do research on diverse topics of Pullman's past. He has his own memories of the drive-in theater experience from his high school years in Pullman. **Don Clarke** has long been fascinated by Pullman history. His library is well respected for its completeness, and his clipping collection – now indexed by him – is a part of our WCHS Archives.

The illustrations for Bob King's article all come from the *Pullman Herald*, WSU MASC, or James W. Ayling; we appreciate their allowing us to publish them. Don Clarke was able to provide us with the illustrations for his article on the not-so-well-known area of Whelan, although most people have seen the "new" Whelan Grange hall on Highway 27 north of Pullman.



SUNDAY through WEDNESDAY

NOW! SEE **CINEMASCOPE**
YOU SEE IT WITHOUT SPECIAL GLASSES!

ON OUR GIANT NEW SCREEN

AT OUR REGULAR ADMISSION PRICES!

**THE FIRST OUTDOOR CINEMASCOPE
IN THE NORTHWEST**

Pullman Herald, July 8, 1954, sec. 2, p. 1
CinemaScope at the Big Sky, 1954

The BIG SKY MOTOR MOVIE

PHONE 5301

Take Colfax
Hiway out
of Pullman
and Turn
Left at
Lodge Motel



Sun.-Mon.-Tues.
OCTOBER 3-4-5

CINEMASCOPE
OF THE
KHYBER RIFLES
POWER - Terry MOORE - Richard BENTLEY

Wed.-Thurs.
OCTOBER 6-7

BETTE DAVIS
TWO TIME ACADEMY AWARD WINNER
"THE STAR"
Bargain Nites! 75c a Car
— Co-Feature —
Mitzie Gaynor
★
David Wayne
The
"I Don't Care Girl"
Technicolor

Fri.-Sat.
OCTOBER 8-9

"Passage West"
John Payne Arlene Whalen
Technicolor
— Science Fiction Hit —
WAR OF THE WORLDS
Gene Barry
Alec Robinson
Technicolor

OCTOBER 10-11-12

CINEMASCOPE
In Glorious COLOR!
NEW FACES
Eartha KITT
Rommy GRAHAM
A 20th CENTURY-FOX RELEASE

OCTOBER 13-14

Susan HAYWARD • Charlton HESTON
the **PRESIDENT'S LADY**
Bargain Nites! 75c a Car
— Also —
Glenn FORD
Ann SHERIDAN
Zachary SCOTT
APPOINTMENT IN HONOLULU
— Color —

OCTOBER 15-16

CLIFTON WEBB
as "Mister Scoutmaster"
LONDON OWEN
GARAGE WINSTON
FRANCES DIXE
— 2nd Feature —
KANGAROO
Color by TECHNICOLOR
Maureen O'HARA • Peter LAWFORD

CINEMASCOPE At Our REGULAR PRICES!

OCTOBER 17-18-19

CINEMASCOPE
TECHNICOLOR
Gary Cooper
Susan Hayward Richard Widmark
Color by Technicolor
"Garden of Evil"

OCTOBER 20-21

Robert Mitchum • Jean Simmons
"SHE COULDN'T SAY NO"
Bargain Nites! 75c a Car
— Western Co-Hit —
FLAMING FEATHER
Technicolor
Charles HAYDEN • Kasey WHELAN • Forrest TUCKER

OCTOBER 22-23

"Lydia Bailey"
DALE ROBERTSON
ANNE FRANCIS
Color by TECHNICOLOR
— Plus —
DANGEROUS MISSION
Vivian MATURE
Tina LAURIE
Vivian PRICE
Technicolor

OCTOBER 24-25-26

IRVING BERLIN'S **"CALL ME MADAM"**
Eliot MERMAN • Donald O'CONNOR • VERA ELLEN • SANDERS
GARY
— Co-Feature —
TENNESSEE CHAMP
Shelley WINTERS
Jeffrey HYMAN
Doree MORGAN
Doris MARTIN
Anasco Color

OCTOBER 27-28

LANA TURNER
RICHARDO MONTALBAN
"Latin Lovers"
TECHNICOLOR
— And —
CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON
RICHARD CARLSON • JULIA ADAMS

OCTOBER 29-30

BETTY GRABLE The FARMER
TECHNICOLOR TAKES A WIFE
— For Action —
"WAY of a GAUCHO"
Gene Tierney Rory Calhoun
TECHNICOLOR

★ — ALWAYS 2 CARTOONS — ★

Pullman Herald, Sept. 30, 1954, Sec. 3, p. 2

A typical one-month ad for the Big Sky Motor Movie

DRIVE-IN MOVIE THEATERS OF THE PALOUSE

By Robert E. King

Drive-in movie theaters, where people in their cars viewed motion pictures projected on large outdoor screens, were an American phenomenon that began in the 1930s. However, they did not reach Whitman County until 1950. This article traces the history over the four decades of existence of the three Pullman area drive-ins: the Auto Theater (later called the Varsity), the Pullman Drive-In, and the Big Sky.

The first drive-in theater in the United States was built in Camden, New Jersey, in 1933 on 10 acres, with room for 400 cars. The inventor of the drive-in theater, Richard M. Hollingshead, patented the novel idea, including specifications for the proper spacing of cars and how high the front wheels had to be elevated on built-up ridges for proper viewing of the outdoor movie screen. By the late 1930s, the first drive-ins appeared in the West, but their numbers were limited. Their spread was even slower during World War II, with only six built during 1942-1945, resulting in a nationwide total of around 100 by the end of the war. Yet by 1948, that figure had mushroomed to over 800. By the end of the 1950s when the craze peaked, around 4,000 more had been built nationwide, including three in Whitman County.

The reason for the rapid expansion of this form of entertainment in the later 1940s and 1950s was that it fit in perfectly with what was happening in the nation. When the baby boom began after World War II, new parents wanted to attend movies but had to accommodate their growing families – including crying babies. Also, starting in the late 1940s, families were finally able to buy new cars unavailable during the war, and gasoline was no longer rationed. Further, the cost of building drive-ins was less than constructing and maintaining indoor theaters, with their lobbies and hundreds of theater seats. Consequently, the prices charged at drive-ins most often were less than in regular theaters. Finally, technological developments worked in favor of America's rising fad, the drive-in. Car speakers and in-car heaters were perfected, so drive-in patrons could enjoy movies in the relative comfort and privacy of their cars while small children slept in the back seat. Also, the dominance of television was not yet established, so drive-ins added new opportunities for fun not otherwise widely available prior to the mid-1950s. Television didn't reach Pullman until the winter of 1952-53, when a television signal relay station was built on Mount Spokane, enabling reception of the three pioneer TV stations of Spokane (KHQ, KXLY, and KREM) in the Palouse.¹

The Start of the The Auto Theatre (later called the Varsity)

The first drive-ins in the greater Palouse area were built in Spokane and Lewiston by the late 1940s,² with plans for the first in Whitman County made in 1949. It opened on August 4, 1950, under the simple name of “Auto Theatre,” with the earliest newspaper ads reporting it as the “Drive-In Theatre.” It was located

on the Pullman-Moscow highway, about a mile west of the Idaho line where the Airport Road joins this road. Its location was strategically placed to accommodate both Pullman and Moscow residents, especially students attending Washington State College (later University) and the University of Idaho.

The first owner and operator of the Auto Theatre was Edward (“Ed”) Metzgar, also then proprietor of Pullman’s Washington Hotel. Metzgar, a University of Idaho student in the 1930s, left college in the late 1930s to join an uncle in Juneau, Alaska, who was then general superintendent for the famous Alaska-Juneau Mine.³ Subsequently, Ed worked in the mine for a time and, in 1939, married Mary Simpkins of Juneau. For less than a year, he was a partner in a short-lived Juneau newspaper before being drafted into World War II. In the early 1940s, the Metzgars decided to return to Kellogg, Idaho, with Ed later building the Milo Theatre in Smelterville, Idaho. That taste of the movie business led to his entry into the emerging outdoor movie theater craze.

Subsequently, Metzgar bought the site of what would become the first drive-in on the Palouse. Moscow movie theater businessman Milburn Kenworthy also had some financial involvement in the enterprise, although Metzgar was the prime player. Eventually, he built four other drive-ins in other locations, including Clarkston, Lewiston, Grangeville, and Richland. Later he and his family moved to Alaska, where he built a hotel in downtown Kodiak, following the great 1964 Alaska Earthquake’s destruction of much of the town.

Metzgar’s pioneer “Auto Theatre” was ambitiously designed for 466 cars and offered indoor rest rooms as well as a place to buy food in a well-advertised “snack bar” that charged relatively high prices typical of all movie theaters of the period. From the start, profits

AUTO THEATRE
PULLMAN-MOSCOW HIGHWAY

Friday, Saturday, Aug. 4-5

HEROES ONE TRAITORS THE NEXT!
COLOR BY TECHNICOLOR
South of St. Louis
JOEL MCCREA
ALEXIS SMITH ZACHARY SCOTT

CARTOON AND SHORTS

Sunday, Monday, Aug. 6-7

SKY-ADVENTURES III
SCREAMING
FIGHTER SQUADRON
COLOR BY TECHNICOLOR
EDMOND O'BRIEN
ROBERT STACK JOHN RODNEY

CARTOON AND SHORTS

Tues., Wed., Thurs.
Aug. 8-9-10

One of the few really great pictures in history!
GARY COOPER
SERGEANT YORK
WALTER BRENNAN
LUCILLE

COLOR CARTOON ADDED

Pullman Herald.

Aug. 4, 1950, sec. 2, p. 1

The first ad for Pullman’s first drive-in theater

VARSAITY

Drive-in Theater

Moscow Pullman Hwy. Ph. 882-3125

Not On Theatre Billboard

F. A. Dodd & Son

Open Weekends

"TOM JONES"

In Color

This picture is to be withdrawn from use. Your last chance to see it.

"IRMA LA DOUCE"

Shirley Maclane

FREE Pony rides for the kiddies — Saturday night only.

Pullman Herald, Sept. 28, 1967, p. 2
The Auto Theater later became the Varsity. Note the free pony rides for children on Saturday nights.

from the snack bar were a substantial part of the theater's revenue and would become critical in its later years.

At its start in 1950, movies at the new drive-in were scheduled to run nightly and change three times a week.⁴ The first picture shown was *South of St. Louis*, a western starring Joel McCrea, Alexis Smith, and Zachary Scott. Preceding the picture, there were one or more cartoons and brief news stories called "shorts," with the latter dropped in later years as an unneeded expense as the public interest in such films declined. Also shown at the Auto Theatre in the early years and in the later Pullman area drive-ins were clever ads for food being sold in the drive-in's concession stand. The colorful ads shamelessly targeted children who would then pester their parents to buy treats. It was a rare child who didn't want popcorn, hot dogs, candy, soft drinks, and ice cream bars that were projected 40 feet high, with animated versions of these items sometimes shown literally dancing across the screen.

The success of the Auto Theatre was immediate, and area residents kept coming. Outdoor movies played as long as the weather would allow, with a little snow not even deterring eager attendees. In the fall, movies were cut back to fewer nights. In late November of 1951, for instance, the theater operated Friday though Monday only, with two movies shown for the price of one on Friday and Saturday nights.⁵ These "double features" also helped explain the success of the drive-ins, as the four indoor theaters of Pullman and Moscow at this time only showed one picture per admission.

In a 2004 interview Ed Metzgar's son George recalled that his father was quite busy with his various business enterprises in the early 1950s: "While Dad was all over the country, on the weekends Mom would load us kids up and drive down to ... run the theater because it was so busy."⁶ By this time, Metzgar also operated Struppler's Restaurant in Pullman.⁷

In the mid-1950s, the Metzgars, with their increasing number of business ventures, transferred operation of the Auto Theater, now called the Varsity Drive-In, to Donald Boyd and his wife Ellen. On Dec. 5, 1957, a lease was signed among the parties, with the Boyds then operating the theater until Metzgar sold it in 1960.⁸ Reportedly,⁹ Don Boyd was the main projectionist and operated almost everything except the concession stand which Ellen ran. Also assisting were their three daughters, Sharon, Kay, and Janice. One of their tasks was helping maintain the grounds,

including picking up the great volumes of litter that people thoughtlessly dumped out of their car windows. Janice, the youngest daughter, often found paper money accidentally left behind (she later enjoyed a successful career as a bank manager in Moscow). Middle daughter, Kay, helped her father mow the grounds, while

Kay and Sharon both kept an eye out for people who snuck in without paying, including inside car trunks.

Many Boyd family memories were made during their time operating the Varsity. In the late 1950s, Sharon, around age 16, was learning to drive, and in doing so hit and knocked the Varsity ticket booth sideways and almost over. It became a funny family story in later years, but not at the time. Another story was about the time Ellen Boyd thought she would paint part of the Varsity screen but froze due to height midway while climbing up the tall structure. Dick Devoe, who worked occasionally as the projectionist, married Sharon Boyd.

The Establishment of The Pullman Drive-In

With the success of Auto Theatre on the Pullman-Moscow Highway, other drive-ins soon appeared in the Pullman area. In the summer of 1952, the first of two competing drive-ins was built. It was the result of a partnership between G. Russell "Russ" Tate¹⁰ and Jack M. Hutchison. Tate was operator of an appliance business on Main

PULLMAN DRIVE-IN THEATRE
LOCATED DOWNTOWN PULLMAN

ADULTS 50c
Children FREE

Now Playing - Thru Saturday
Both in Technicolor



JAMAICA RUN
RAY MILLAND · ARLENE DAHL · WENDELL COREY
COLOR BY **TECHNICOLOR** · A Paramount Picture



"SINGIN' IN THE RAIN"
MGM'S SINGIN' SWINGIN' MUSICAL
IN RAINBOW **TECHNICOLOR**
STARRING GENE KELLY
DONALD O'CONNOR
DEBBIE REYNOLDS

Sun., Mon., Tues., Oct. 3-4-5
Both in Technicolor



SAVAGE THRILLS!
DEVIL'S CANYON
HOWARD HUGHES PRESENTS
VIRGINIA MAYO · DALE ROBERTSON
STEPHEN McNALLY · ARTHUR HUNNICUTT
BY **TECHNICOLOR**
AN EDMUND GRAINGER PRODUCTION

— And —

"THE BIG TREES"
With KIRK DOUGLAS

Wed. Thru Sat., Oct. 6-9
DANNY KAY . . . in
"HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSON"

— Plus —

"Water Birds"

Pullman Herald, Sept. 30, 1954, Sec. 3, p. 1

This was the last ad for this short-lived theater.

Street in downtown Pullman in the same store where his brother Harold Tate sold paint.¹¹ Hutchison was the son of long-time local photographer, Ralph Raymond Hutchison.¹² In 1952, Tate and Hutchison leased land for the drive-in from Loyd A. Bury, who worked in the 1930s for Washington State College, but later became an investment broker in Pullman with Murphy Favre.¹³

The new drive-in was simply named the “Pullman Drive-In.” It was located on low-lying land on the north side of the South Palouse River, south of two sets of railroad tracks. It was the former site of the Pullman Trailer Court, which had been badly damaged in the February 1948 flood. Neighboring businesses were Koppel’s Dairy and Doten Transit Mix Company, with the City Playfield bordering the site on the north and west.¹⁴ In 2007, the location is partly occupied by the University Mobile Home Park and various businesses around Riverview and Benewah streets, including Al’s Auto Body, Deda Auto Repair, and Renaissance Fine Woodworking. The old Koppel home was still there in 2007.

The grand opening of the Pullman Drive-In on Friday night, October 17, 1952, was preceded by a full-page ad on page 8 of the October 16, 1952, *Pullman Herald*. Besides telling the upcoming features, it included a list of congratulations by various firms that had been involved in its construction: Dillon Electric of Pullman, Tate’s Paints of Pullman, and Merle P. Songstad of Moscow, the general contractor. “Modern Theatre Supply” of Seattle also ran ads welcoming the new drive-in.

This full-page ad also encouraged everyone to come and enjoy the 300-car facility: “Plan now to attend Pullman’s own Drive-In Theater on Opening Night. Enjoy a movie with family, even the small ones. Save the price of a baby sitter, the children can sleep while you enjoy the movie.” Also significant was the new drive-in’s special features: “Latest RCA Sound Equipment specially designed for outdoor theatres” and “largest screen in the entire area – 62 ft. high by 60 ft. in width, providing a clear and sharp image.” Further, the drive-in, possibly due to limited space, had something “new to outdoor movie fans in the area ... a combination of single and double ramping to enable more cars to view the screen from closer range.”¹⁵

In effect, the new Pullman Drive-In was an upgrade to the area’s first drive-in, with its pictures shown on a screen the height of a 6-story building! The first offering was a double feature starting with *The Half-Breed*, starring Robert Young, Janis Carter, and Jack Buetel, and filmed in Technicolor. It was advertised as a western potboiler where “jealousy and revenge light the fuse that sets the frontier aflame.” It was followed by a second, even more forgettable offering: an unquestioned “B” film entitled *The Jungle of Chang*. It was billed as filmed in “wildest Siam” and featured the taming of a “man-killing elephant” and a “girl treed by [a] killer cat.” In addition, a cartoon was played. The cost for the event was the same as the Auto Theatre: 50 cents per adult, with children free. This was yet another incentive to patronize drive-ins – parents could bring their youngsters without extra charge.

Local area residents again made the opening of this new drive-in an initial



Photo courtesy of WSU-MASC Hutchison Collection

The Pullman Drive-In Theater on what is currently the City Play Field

success. Only winter's snows shut down the venture, which like its competition, reopened the next spring to new crowds. Yet only two years later the Pullman Drive-In would shut its doors and never reopen. The last ad for its movies was printed in the *Pullman Herald* on Sept. 30, 1954, with the last showing on Oct. 9, 1954.¹⁶

Perhaps the location of the Pullman Drive-In contributed to its demise. While having the advantage of being inside Pullman, it was located on the flood plain of the South Palouse River. Periodically, the area flooded, as it had in 1948; such a flood was only a matter of time.¹⁷ While convenient to Pullman, its in-town location also may have made it relatively less profitable, due to higher taxes than the out in the county Auto Theatre. Its in-town location may also have enabled some college students to sit on the hillsides above the theater and watch pictures for free while hearing some of the audio that escaped from car speakers in the drive-in.¹⁸

Its in-town location may have made expansion impossible or too costly and thus made it impossible to add new features being developed for the coming generation of drive-ins in what was becoming a very competitive, fast-changing industry in the Pullman area. Indeed, within a year of the Pullman Drive-In's opening, a third Pullman area drive-in started up: the Big Sky Motor Movie, known locally as the "Big Sky."

The Big Sky Begins

Tonight's the Night, Folks!
Come on out, early—
Special Doin's 7:00 p.m.

The Palouse Country's Newest
and finest drive-in theatre

The BIG SKY

MOTOR MOVIE

1/4 MILE WEST OF PULLMAN

Grand Opening

Tonight Thursday, July 9th

SPECIAL! ON THE SPOT LIVE RADIO BROADCAST
7:15 P.M.

2 On The Screen! 2

FIRST RUN FEATURES

Hit No. 1

A TEMPEST OF FURY, EXCITEMENT AND SAVAGE LOVE!

FAIR WIND TO JAVA

FRED MacMURRAY
VERA RALSTON
ROBERT DOUGLAS
VICTOR MCGLAGHER

TRUCOLOR

Easy to Find...

Hit No. 2

THE RAILROAD THAT RIPPED THE WEST WIDE OPEN!

KANSAS PACIFIC

in brilliant COLOR!

STARRING
STERLING HAYDEN
Eve MILLER - Reed HADLEY
ALLIED ARTISTS PRODUCTIONS

Plus —
Tom & Jerry
Cartoon

Plans for the Big Sky were evidently in the works even when the Pullman Drive-In opened in the fall of 1952. This third drive-in commenced business on July 9, 1953, on the outskirts of Pullman.¹⁹ It was located just beyond the city limits on the old Colfax Highway, now Wawawai Road, on land leased from Flourine W. Gray and his wife Agnes C. Gray.²⁰ Its premier showing was a double feature of two popular recent movies: *Fair Wind to Java*, an adventure story starring Fred MacMurray and Vera Ralston, and *Kansas Pacific*, a western featuring Sterling Hayden, Eve Miller, and Reedy Hadley.

The original owner of the Big Sky was LaVance "Vance" Weskil. Jim Hone briefly served as the manager,²¹ although Hugh Abegglen²² soon replaced him and remained as manager until it closed in 1983. Weskil had the Big Sky built and Abegglen also worked on its construction.²³ Abegglen was formerly the manager of the Rose and Roxie movie theaters in Colfax owned by Weskil's father. As the Big Sky neared completion, Abegglen moved to Pullman in August of 1953

Pullman Herald, July 9, 1953, p. 5
The first ad for the Big Sky Motor Movie

to begin working for his former boss' son, Vance Weskil. There, Hugh Abegglen managed not only the Big Sky but also the two downtown theaters, the Audian and Cordova, which were then owned by Weskil.²⁴ Following a heart attack in December 1957, Weskil sold all three theaters to Milburn Kenworthy and his son Milburn "Judd" Kenworthy.²⁵ Abegglen continued as manager of all three into the 1980s.

At this time the elder Kenworthy had already owned the Kenworthy and Nuart downtown movie theaters in Moscow, Idaho, since the 1930s. According to the *Pullman Herald*,²⁶ he was "a showman of long standing, having managed his own road show in which he played the leading man for years before he got into the movie business in Moscow about 40 years ago." His son, Judd, was a 1953 graduate of the University of Idaho and had only recently joined his father in his movie theater business prior to their purchase of Weskil's three theaters at Pullman. With their expanded business, the Kenworthys were pleased to keep Hugh Abegglen as manager of their Pullman theaters after their takeover effective January 1, 1958.²⁷

Hugh Abegglen's family recalls that it was quite an effort at times to keep all three businesses going simultaneously, and at first it was even more difficult as Mrs. Hugh Abegglen (Lois) continued operating the two Colfax theaters until new managers were found.²⁸ All members of the Abegglen family, including their daughters and son, worked at the Big Sky and the two downtown theaters. Their jobs included popping several tons of popcorn each year, not only for all three Pullman theaters, but also for all the Colfax and even Moscow movie businesses after the Kenworthys bought out Weskil.²⁹ Hugh Abegglen's daughter Diane recalled that at age nine she was put to work popping corn, with her younger siblings, Linda and Walt, later doing the task when she was old enough to sell concessions. Also, many Pullman high school students over the years found employment at these businesses. The Big Sky's main projectionist was Frank Koberstein, who worked there for many years, also helping Hugh Abegglen with occasional repairs. Koberstein helped maintain the Pullman city street lights at this time.

When it opened, the Big Sky had a capacity for 475 cars. An article in the Pullman paper reported that it had been "laid out to provide easy access to incoming cars, without [the] necessity of backing the cars."³⁰ Of further note, the new theater featured a cartoonish cowboy on its entry sign, with the western theme carried into the snack bar that was trimmed with natural cowhide; kids, including the author as a child, couldn't resist stroking the hide, which after many years and too many kids became rather ratty looking. Also, an impressively large set of long horns was centered on the wall behind the concession stand.

With the opening of the Big Sky in 1953, the Pullman area had three drive-ins with a combined car capacity of over 1,000 spaces. Intensified competition soon reduced the number of drive-ins to two. Only the original Auto Theatre near Moscow and the Big Sky survived. Their success was probably due to their willingness to adopt still newer technologies, while the Pullman Drive-In did not. Foremost was

the construction of new wider movie screens to accommodate the latest pictures being filmed in CinemaScope,³¹ where movies were nearly 100 percent wider and shown on slightly curved screens to achieve more of a 3-D effect. In part, this was the industry's short-lived answer to even wider films that were drawing crowds to special Cinerama theaters, and also to the rising popularity of television.

CinemaScope Comes to the Palouse

Leading the change for the Pullman area drive-ins was the Big Sky. The July 8, 1954, *Pullman Herald* front-page story reported that the Big Sky's new wider screen under construction was a pioneer in this upgrade, preceded by "only three or four such installations now in operation in out-door theatres in the Northwest." Vance Weskil, the Big Sky owner who was interviewed for the article, added; "I made a special trip to the Midwest recently to see one in operation." It was that experience that helped him decide to bring one to the Palouse. The first picture shown in CinemaScope on July 25, 1954, at the Big Sky was *Hell and High Water*, a mixed romance-espionage film starring Richard Widmark, Bella Darvi, Cameron Mitchell, and David Wayne. Soon the original Auto Theatre would meet the challenge, and would raise the stakes further.

While the Big Sky was rebuilding its movie screen, hammers were also flying at the Auto Theatre. Not only was the area's first drive-in installing an improved outdoor screen to show the trendy new wide-screen pictures (in part made to lure people away from their small-screen TVs that threatened movie attendance), but it was adding an indoor theater as well! On November 14, 1954, the newly rebuilt indoor and outdoor theater complex opened for business. And when it did, a new name was unveiled: the "Varsity Theater," so chosen to reference the two nearby universities. Subsequently, the drive-in portion remained in business into the 1970s, although the indoor theater closed after only a few years in operation.

Ads for the opening of the rejuvenated drive-in and new indoor theater announced the changes. The indoor portion held "518 foam rubber chairs and lots of leg room" set in a "beautiful new air conditioned auditorium."³² Further, movie goers would be treated to a "huge new indoor 41-foot screen" and hear "the latest R.C.A. hi-fidelity stereophonic sound." What's more, there were "acres of lighted free parking." The new theater was joined to the back of the original drive-in snack bar, which was able to serve both the indoor and drive-in theaters, with both showing the same pictures. As a child, the author recalls attending the theater at this time and being able to go in and out of the indoor theater and noting both screens playing the same film simultaneously. The opening picture was a blockbuster for its time: John Wayne in *The High and the Mighty*, a movie that kicked off a succession of airborne disaster films popular in later years. The original owner, Ed Metzgar, funded this new development and planned for the indoor theater to operate year-round after the drive-in portion closed for the winter.³³

Further underscoring the competition for movie viewers in the Pullman area was the rebuilding of the downtown indoor theaters at this same time to show CinemaScope pictures. In late 1954, less than a month before the Varsity adopted the new technology, both the Cordova, in September, and the Audian, in October, were already showing new widescreen pictures. With its failure to keep up, the Pullman Drive-In closed its doors forever in October of 1954.

Years of Decline

In the fall of 1959, the Varsity Drive-In was sold by Ed Metzgar to Fred A. Dodd, originally in the theater business in Salt Lake City before moving to Spokane in the early 1950s.³⁴ They had come to know each other when Metzgar bought the Garland Movie Theater in Spokane that Dodd had been managing. Subsequently, Dodd left Spokane and moved into a mobile home placed on the Varsity property. For about a decade, Dodd, his wife Phyllis, and their son Fred operated the theater. As profits were declining, the Dodds turned to various gimmicks to attract customers. They tried offering “free pony rides for the kiddies – Saturday night only.”³⁵ All-night shows were offered during the summer and early fall, with four full-length pictures played starting at dusk and ending at dawn. Both failed to stop the continuing erosion of the business; years earlier the indoor theater had closed and was used only for storage.

July 1, 1970, Dodd leased the Varsity to Jack C. Lee and his wife Linda of Ephrata, Washington. Lee, who operated several theaters, then subleased it on July 17, 1970, to Marvin Dickson who ran it for Lee. By now profits had severely declined and first-rate films had become increasingly expensive and hard to procure. The drive-in was forced to show mostly adult films to attract business. By the early 1970s, even these films failed to bring in enough revenue to pay expenses. It was only a matter of time before the Varsity would fold; yet Dodd’s lease with Lee, and the sublease to Dickson, would undergo still one more change. On March 30, 1973, the drive-in passed to one final operator, James W. Ayling, who made a final thirteen-month attempt to operate the Varsity.³⁶

In 1973, Ayling, a veteran Pullman high school math teacher, formed a partnership to develop a new business project with WSU professor Leroy Johnson and a third partner, “Ernie,” a Moscow businessman and an amateur pilot. The three decided that a potentially lucrative venture was to construct a roller skating rink, something that would appeal to university students from both Pullman and Moscow. The cost was estimated to be around \$125,000, but a good location was needed and the best site they could find was the then nearly comatose Varsity Drive-In.

It fell to Ayling, as the prospective rink manager, to obtain a ten-year lease of the property owned by Dodd. This he did by buying out the sublease held by Dickson, with Ayling’s two partners funding the deal.³⁷ However, soon after Ayling

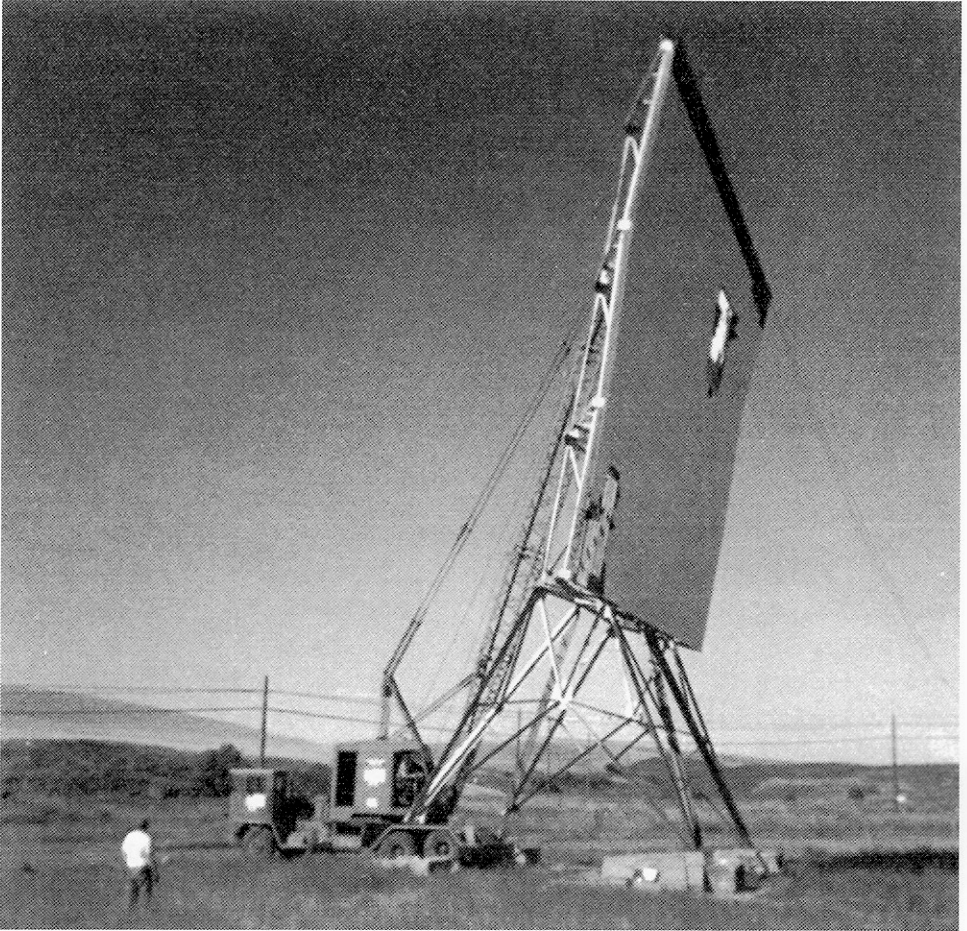


Photo courtesy of James W. Ayling

Varsity Drive-In screen being demolished, July, 1974

signed, “Ernie,” who was to provide the majority of the funding to construct the new business, died in an air crash of his private plane. With his death, there was no way to continue development of the hoped-for skating rink. Instead, Ayling was stuck with an aging drive-in barely paying expenses by showing adult features. Although troubled by the nature of the business, rather than close it down Ayling reluctantly continued operating the drive-in during his summer break from high school teaching in 1973. He hoped to break even on expenses and gain time to find a way out of his financial predicament.

Ayling recalled personally repairing the long-neglected theater’s fence and cutting the seven acres of the grass weekly in and around the drive-in. During the summer evenings of 1973, Ayling sold tickets and ran the projector, with his wife operating the snack bar when not tending their young children, who were put to bed before the



Abegglen begins 30th year at drive-in

Pullman Herald, April 27, 1983, p. 1

Hugh Abegglen managed the Big Sky Motor Movie through the thirty years of its existence. Note the Big Sky cowboy sign behind Mr. Abegglen.

show began. Ayling reported that eight customers paying \$3 each for a showing was just enough to make expenses, as the royalties on films were on a sliding scale. Only once did the aging drive-in achieve a full house. It was during a week's showing of the controversial but critically acclaimed 1972 film, *Last Tango in Paris*, starring Marlon Brando. Though Ayling had to pay 90 percent of the gross as royalty,

he still pulled in about \$1,000 per night profit, more than he earned otherwise for the entire time he operated the theater. His pictures were advertised in local papers in a small ad³⁸ that told hardly more than the name of the picture and when it was showing.

Ayling was forced to keep the drive-in operating through the winter snows of 1973-74 due to the continuing expenses associated with the lease. The firm of Garrett Freightlines, Inc. approached Fred Dodd, still owner, about buying this strategic business site. In April 1974, Ayling readily agreed to break the ten-year lease with Dodd repaying \$12,000 to Ayling, the amount still owed by him to his partner.³⁹ Consequently, Ayling's only profit was what he could net from the sale of certain property Dodd assigned to him under the original lease, and under the new agreement. Ayling was given 55 days to sell various items that had been part of the lease: car speakers, popcorn machine, the hotdog and hamburger bun warmers, and other fixtures and equipment. Most went to other theaters. Ayling also sold a large quantity of plywood on the property including the large movie screen. Ayling, his son Tim, and three others removed the movie screen in the summer of 1974. At first they attempted to lower it using a crane, but when it proved too small for the

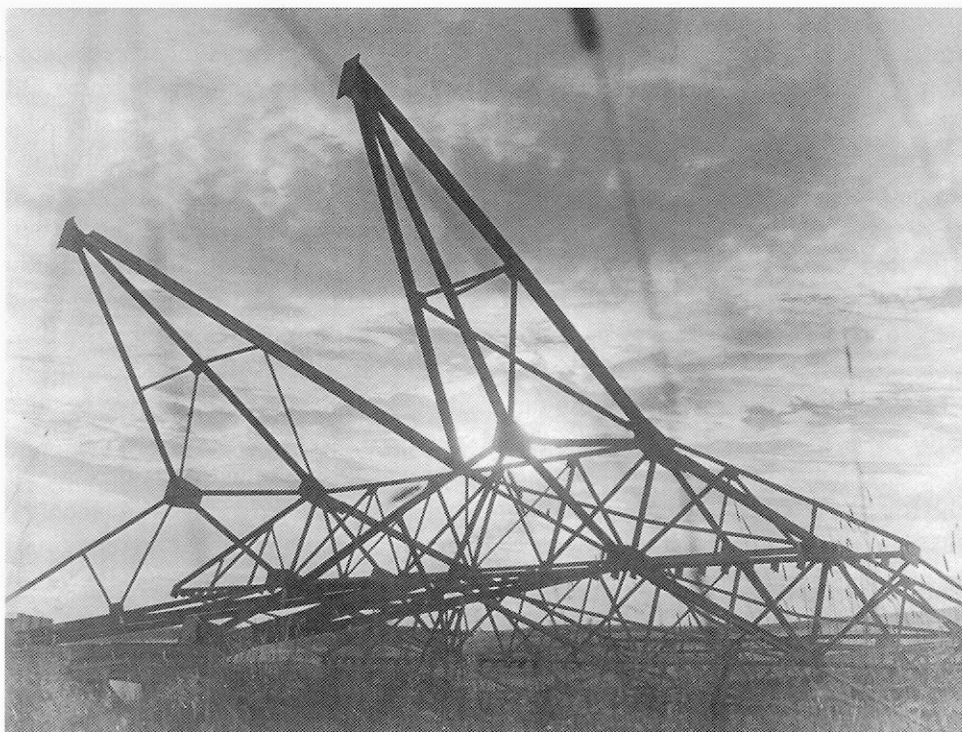


Photo courtesy of James W. Ayling

Varsity Drive-In screen demolition, July, 1974. This photo appeared in the July 18, 1974, Idahonian.

job, the screen was allowed to free-fall to the ground. Consequently, some of the steel beams were twisted and the prospective buyer was not too happy, although he still agreed to receive the property. As it turned out, however, the buyer never paid any of the \$500 promised to Ayling for it, making Ayling even less happy with the entire affair.

Sensing the historic nature of the toppling of the Varsity Drive-In's movie screen, the Moscow *Idahonian* newspaper carried a picture of it collapsed on the ground, July 18, 1974. Soon, bulldozers leveled the parking area, and the theater building was extensively renovated to house the new concern. In later years, the site passed to Pre-mix Concrete and Champion Electric & Lighting. No trace of the Varsity remains in 2007.

The Big Sky, the last operating Pullman-area Drive-In

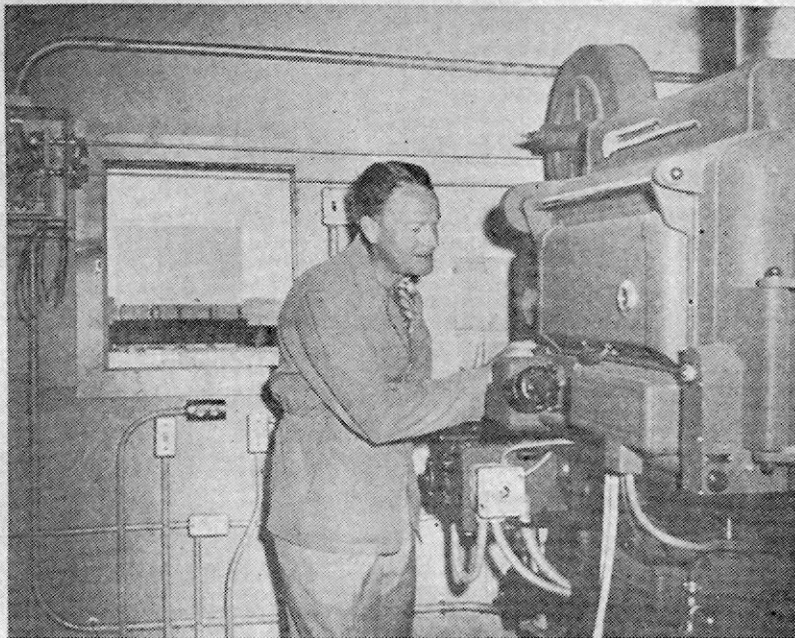
The last-surviving Pullman-area drive-in operated into the 1980s, although attendance slowly decreased during its later years. To pry folks away from their new color TVs, the Big Sky adopted various promotions. An area favorite was "Buck

Nite.” By the early 1960s, every Wednesday the admission price was a flat \$1 per car, despite the number of people in it. This led to an amusing situation where a large number of Washington State University fraternity brothers, hanging on to an old fire truck, were admitted for a single dollar, just pennies per person. After sundown and the arrival of cooler evening temperatures, some without jackets probably had second thoughts about coming in the open-air vehicle!

The Abegglen family recalls other amusing incidents while running the theater. Sometimes they received phone calls from the owners or staff at the nearby Hilltop Motel and Restaurant tipping them off that a certain car had been seen loading people into the trunk as a way to save on per-person admission fees at the Big Sky. In those cases, the person at the ticket booth would casually ask the visible occupants of the car about paying for those in the trunk. This never failed to mystify, besides embarrass, those involved with the failed scheme.⁴⁰

Another way the problem was addressed was through the efforts of some of the Big Sky’s temporary employees who otherwise happened to be Pullman police officers. These officers, starting with Harland Gilland, moonlighted there at times to supplement their daytime salaries. Their main job initially was to wash the windshields of cars coming to the drive-in while dressed in white overalls. But they also

New Motor Theatre Has Grand Opening



Pullman Herald, July 9, 1953, p. 8

Manager Jim Hone inspects one of the big new projection machines for the new Big Sky Motor Movie.

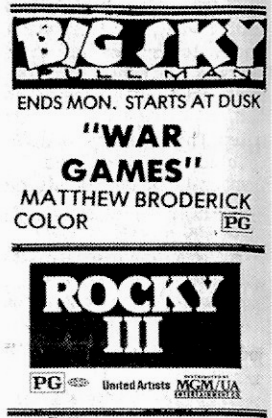
got involved with deterring non-payers from coming into the Big Sky in car trunks. If they suspected someone was sneaking in, the officers would put their feet on the rear car bumpers and stand there until the stowaway would begin banging from the inside to be let out. Hearing that, the officer would casually walk around to the flustered driver and say that “someone is in your trunk.” When the trunk was popped open, the much embarrassed occupant was marched up to the office to pay.⁴¹

The presence of police officers was also helpful in curbing the occasional theft of speakers removed from hangers on poles between cars and then hung inside cars windows for use. For that, the officers took down license plate numbers of cars and tracked where they parked so the Abeggens could tell who stole the speakers. In addition, the family felt fairly safe in having policemen frequently at the theater. It helped allay their concern about being robbed of their nightly influx of cash.⁴² The Abegglen family also recalled that as Pullman grew and residences were erected closer and closer to the Big Sky, sometimes people would complain about the noise. They were reminded that the Big Sky was there first.

The Big Sky ads of the mid-1960s printed in the *Pullman Herald* sometimes included all the pictures to be shown for a month, which could be clipped out and saved. Ads stated that drive-in attendees could “relax in comfort and privacy,” with “gates opening at 8:00 pm and the picture starting at dusk.”⁴³ During June with its long days, “dusk” was pushed as early as possible meaning that theater-goers watched some pretty pale cartoons and previews of coming attractions before darkness finally settled in for the main attractions.⁴⁴

In the spring of 1983, Hugh Abegglen, who also managed Pullman’s downtown Audian and Cordova theaters, opened the Big Sky for its last season. It had already downsized from a maximum 500-car capacity to just 300, but that was not enough to save the flagging outdoor theater. The *Pullman Herald* featured the 65-year-old Abegglen in a lengthy profile printed April 27, 1983. It was entitled “He started 10,000 movies ago.” The timing of the article also coincided with the 30th anniversary of the Big Sky’s opening. It included not only anecdotes from Abegglen’s long career, but his comments on the drive-in industry’s problems.

He discussed the advent of cable TV, which allowed people to see first-run pictures in their homes. He also cited sporting events as taking away potential drive-in viewers and pointed out timing for the release of first-run pictures no longer fit drive-in needs. He summarized the overall situation by saying: “Drive-ins have passed their peak, there’s no doubt about that, there are very few being built with the way land prices have skyrocketed.”⁴⁵ What Abegglen didn’t mention about the



Pullman Herald, Sept. 3, 1983,

p. 2

This was the last ad for the Big Sky.

Pullman movie business was the arrival of more Pullman area theaters and new forms of movie competition. By 1983, the town's old post office had been remodeled into an indoor theater, called the "Old Post Office Theater," while a new four-theater movie complex, the "University 4 Theatre," had opened in Moscow. In addition, movies could be rented on magnetic tape for home viewing.

The Big Sky limped through the 1983 season and closed after its final showing of the season on September 5, 1983. The offering was one last double feature: *War Games*, starring Matthew Broderick, and *Rocky III*, with Sylvester Stallone. After that, no other Big Sky movie ads appeared in the *Pullman Herald* or the WSU student newspaper, the *Daily Evergreen*. Thereafter, the Big Sky sat vacant and deteriorating for many years, with the outdoor speakers removed as well as some of the interior fixtures.

Abegglen's 1983 belief that skyrocketing land prices were linked to the decline of drive-ins was prophetic. Twenty years later his words would apply directly to the site of the Big Sky. While the entry sign for the Big Sky was still partially intact as recently as the late 1990s, the screen and much of the rest of the drive-in was long gone, having fallen victim over the years to weather, salvagers, and vandals. As the 21st century dawned, what remained would soon also disappear, gobbled up by Pullman's growth. On May 6, 2004, the heirs of the Grey family, who had originally leased the land to Vance Weskil in 1953, sold the property to Pullman developer, Earl J. Russell.⁴⁶

Subsequently, Russell petitioned the city of Pullman to annex the site. Undeveloped farm land across the road from the old Big Sky site was also proposed for annexation at the same time.⁴⁷ The annexations were approved, and by late 2005, the area where the Big Sky stood for 30 years was bulldozed and marked off as the "Wawawai Subdivision," with house lots for sale along three new streets: Marcia Drive, Hannah Street, and Sanna Court. In 2006, the first new homes were constructed on the site. Residents of nearby new houses interviewed by the author in early 2006 were surprised to learn that a drive-in had ever stood in the area.

In a broader perspective, the demise of the Pullman area drive-ins was typical of what was happening to drive-ins nationwide. In the 1950s, Washington State had 83 drive-ins, which are now nostalgically recalled in a special website on the Internet. By late 2005, only eight were still operating. The survivors are located in Auburn, Everett, Oak Harbor, Port Orchard, Port Townsend and Shelton in western Washington, and only Colville and Wenatchee in eastern Washington. Spokane, which once supported seven well-attended drive-ins, had none by the early 21st century. Looking to the future, it seems unlikely any new drive-ins will ever again be built in the Palouse country, with those that once brought entertainment to the region now only a fond memory from a past era.

¹ *Pullman Herald*, Oct. 2, 1952, p. 1.

² *Pullman Herald*, Aug. 4, 1950, p. 6.

³ *Juneau Empire*, Feb. 11, 2004. This article was based on an interview with Ed's son, George Metzgar.

⁴ *Pullman Herald*, Aug. 4, 1950, p. 6.

⁵ *Pullman Herald*, Nov. 23, 1951, Sec. 2, p. 1.

⁶ *Juneau Empire*, Feb. 11, 2004. An interview with Ed's son, George Metzgar.

⁷ Robert Smawley, Pullman, Wash., Jan. 2, 2007, telephone interview.

⁸ Whitman County, Wash. Deed Book 315, p. 348.

⁹ From November 2006 e-mail correspondence with Neal Brown of Fairbanks, Alaska, nephew of the Don Boyds, with his information supplemented by stories provided to him by his aunt Ellen Boyd and the two surviving Boyd daughters.

¹⁰ Russ Tate died April 21, 2002, in Portland, Oregon. Tate also set up a TV cable system in Pullman that his brother Harold Tate later operated. (Phone interview Jan. 30, 2007, with Harold's son, Danny N. Tate.)

¹¹ Carol (Tate) Collins (daughter of Russ Tate), Nov. 25, 2007, phone interview.

¹² *Pullman Herald*, Sept. 25, 1952, p. 1.

¹³ Polk's 1957 Moscow, Idaho – Pullman, Washington Directory, p. 136.

¹⁴ *Pullman Herald*, Oct. 16, 1952, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Pullman Herald*, Sept. 25, 1952, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Pullman Herald*, Sept. 30, 1954, Third Section, p. 1. The last pictures that night were *Hans Christian Anderson*, starring Danny Kay, and the *Water Birds*.

¹⁷ Carol (Tate) Collins in a Nov. 25, 2007, phone interview was uncertain of the reason for her father's drive-in business closing, but she thought that flooding may have been a factor.



Photo courtesy of James W. Ayling

This is the crew that tore down the Varsity Drive-In screen in July, 1974. James W. Ayling and his son are on the left.

- ¹⁸ Danny N. Tate (son of Harold Tate), Jan. 30, 2007, phone interview.
- ¹⁹ *Pullman Herald*, July 9, 1953, Sec. 2, p. 1.
- ²⁰ Records of the Pioneer Title Company, Pullman, Wash. They had purchased the property in 1940.
- ²¹ *Pullman Herald*, July 9, 1953, p. 8.
- ²² He died Dec. 31, 1998, in Spokane, Wash., with his obituary in the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News* on Jan. 5, 1999, recalling that he “managed the Pullman theaters for 35 years.”
- ²³ Jan. 1, 2007, interview with Lois Abegglen, widow of Hugh Abegglen, and her daughter Diane Berger. They supplied much information about Hugh Abegglen’s management of the Big Sky and his connection to Weskil.
- ²⁴ Weskil bought the Cordova in 1951 and the Audian in 1955 (*Pullman Herald*, Dec. 19, 1957, p. 1).
- ²⁵ *Pullman Herald*, Dec. 5, 1957, p. 1 and *Pullman Herald*, Dec. 19, 1957, p. 1.
- ²⁶ *Pullman Herald*, Dec. 19, 1957, p. 1.
- ²⁷ After purchasing the three Pullman movie theaters, Milburn Kenworthy in February 1958 purchased the Struppler building in Pullman that housed the Cordova Theater (*Pullman Herald*, Feb. 20, 1958, p. 1).
- ²⁸ Jan. 1, 2007, interview with Lois Abegglen and her daughter Diane (Abegglen) Berger.
- ²⁹ Linda Mulholland, Jan. 29, 2007, e-mail; and Diane Berger, Jan. 30, 2007 phone interview.
- ³⁰ *Pullman Herald*, July 9, 1953, p. 8.
- ³¹ CinemaScope motion pictures were made between 1953 and 1967. Some theaters did not rebuild their screens and showed the new wider movies “cropping” the edges, or compressing the image.
- ³² *Pullman Herald*, Nov. 11, 1954, Sec. 2, p. 1.
- ³³ *Pullman Herald*, July 1, 1954, p. 1.
- ³⁴ *Pullman Herald*, Feb. 4, 1960, p. 1. Fred Dodd died March 22, 2007, at age 99 in Perth, Ontario, Canada, obituary in the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, March 27, 2007, p. 4A).
- ³⁵ *Pullman Herald*, Sept. 28, 1967, p. 2
- ³⁶ Telephone interview with James W. Ayling of Grants Pass, Ore. on Jan. 15, 2006.
- ³⁷ Whitman County, Wash. Deed Book 350, pp. 742-743.
- ³⁸ Ayling paid \$8 for a standing advertisement in the Pullman and Moscow newspapers that was deductible from the royalties he paid for the films.
- ³⁹ The agreement was signed on July 15, 1974. Whitman County, Wash. Deed Book 355, p. 725.
- ⁴⁰ Jan. 1, 2007, interview with Lois Abegglen and her daughter Diane (Abegglen) Berger.
- ⁴¹ Diane (Abegglen) Berger, Jan. 30, 2007, phone interview.
- ⁴² Linda Mulholland, Jan. 29, 2007, e-mail; and Diane Berger, Jan. 30, 2007, phone interview.
- ⁴³ *Pullman Herald*, June 29, 1967, p. 4.
- ⁴⁴ Linda (Abegglen) Mulholland, Jan. 29, 2007, e-mail.
- ⁴⁵ *Pullman Herald*, April 27, 1983, pp. 1, 2.
- ⁴⁶ Records of the Pioneer Title Company, Pullman, Wash.
- ⁴⁷ *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, Aug. 18, 2004, pp. 1A, 10A.



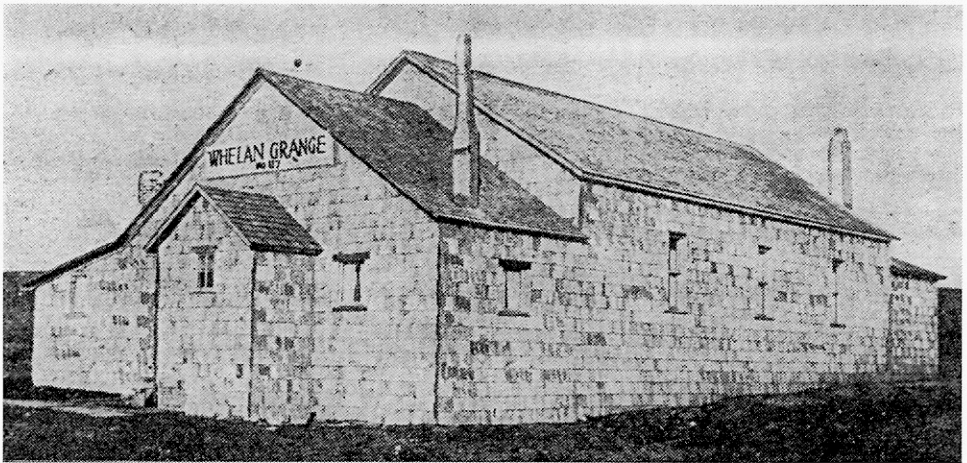
WHELAN AND THE NEARBY OPAL MINES

By Don Clarke

Whelan, located four miles north and east of Pullman, is today a railroad siding with grain elevators. There is no indication now of any early history about the locality; but there was once a city platted next to cemetery still there. No lots were ever sold. There is a railroad station building that was never used and an opal mine that was mined for a time but later was abandoned. The Whelan Grange hall was later moved to the Palouse highway three miles away and has retained the “town’s” name. A store and post office were built next to the railroad siding, but they only lasted five years; the post office moved to Pullman. Despite all of its failures, there is still a story to tell.

When the Northern Pacific Railroad from Palouse to Pullman was built in 1888, local homesteaders platted a city in 1889 called Branham for the early homesteader C. C. Branham. The town of Branham, however, was located on the George Grant homestead to the west of the Branham property and on the north side of the cemetery. The 1895 *Atlas of Whitman County* shows at least twenty acres platted. There never was a lot sold.

The same year the town was platted, the Northern Pacific built a railroad station 108 feet long across from Branham next to the railroad. The company expected Branham to be the large town in the area and ignored the small village where



Pullman Herald, June 15, 1934

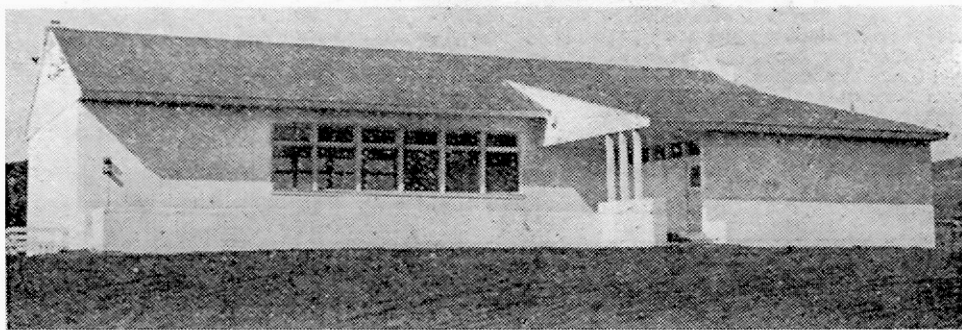
The Whelan Grange Hall as it appeared in 1934 after being rebuilt and resingled by volunteers.

Missouri Flat Creek and Dry Creek empty into the south fork of the Palouse River at a place then called Three Forks. There in 1881, Bolin Farr and Daniel McKenzie platted a new town called Pullman. In 1890, local Pullman businessmen offered the State 160 acres, and Mark C. True, while moving the Palace Hotel to Main Street, struck a large artesian well. These factors helped convince a committee to locate the Washington State Agricultural College in Pullman. This ended any hope for Branham. No lots were ever sold. The railroad station was never used, but sat there and deteriorated for thirty years. Sparks from a steam engine set it on fire and it burned down.

On the B. Judson place near the railroad station, Archie Loucks built a store and a post office. The railroad objected to it being named Branham because there was already a railroad siding in Whatcom County called Branham. Thus, to avoid confusion, they named it Whelan after the construction engineer who laid out the railroad from Spokane to Moscow. The post office was established September 14, 1893, with Arch Loucks as the first postmaster. He later sold the store to David Judson, who took over post office duties also. The post office closed July 1895. Whelan mail subsequently went to Pullman.

The first school in Whelan was built in the 1880s on the small creek called Branham Creek. This school, District 35, was one of the county's earliest schools. During its first years it was called the Branham School, but later it was known as the Whelan School. It consolidated with Pullman in May 1938. Families whose children attended it under the Branham name were S. Judson, G. Grant, R. Wright, G. Neighbor, A. Riley, V. Kitzmiller, T. Matthews, H. R. Mael, and C. Taylor, and those under the name Whelan School were Bert Pickle, Tom Pritchard, and C. Whitford.

Whelan Grange to Dedicate New Hall on 50th Anniversary



Pullman Herald, Sept. 30, 1949

The new Whelan Grange Hall of 1949

The Whelan Cemetery is located on the corners of four 160-acre quarter sections, once owned by G. Grant, R. J. Branham and D. R. Judson. The first known grave dates to 1879 and the next-to-last to 1946. In 2004 David Anzeltalcott was buried there. Although Whitman County cemetery records list only 20 graves in the Whelan Cemetery, it contains many unmarked graves. Sadly, the cemetery was vandalized many times in the 1950s and 1960s. Stones were overturned and some of the smaller stones were taken.

The Whelan Grange was originally chartered June 6, 1899. At first the Grange met on the old Cunningham place two miles from Whelan. The Grange acquired the old store owned by David Judson. It was used as the Grange Hall for a few years and then the Grange went dormant. In 1908, the Grange reorganized. It repaired the old store building, adding on to the make the hall larger and shingling the roof and sides. After its reorganization the average attendance at each meeting was 65 to 70.

In 1949, a new Grange Hall was built on the Palouse highway two miles north of Pullman. The new building was built on land donated by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Stirewalt with a cash donation of \$25,000 in memory of their daughter Ruth Schafer. The old building, on Stirewalt land, finally was becoming unstable. Mud and water washed through it most every spring. It burned down in the 1960s.



William H. Leasure, the farmer upon whose land the first opals were found in 1890.

Opal Mine

In mid-September of 1890 about four miles from Whelan just on the Washington side of the state line, two men were digging a well on the William H. Leasure homestead. Down at the thirty foot level they found a number of stones. A teenage son of Mr. Leasure took some of the stones to Moscow. He tried selling them but nobody was interested in them. Then he went to see James Allen, a jeweler in Moscow. He seemed to have little interest in them but gave the boy \$2 for the stones.

When the boy went home Allen followed him. The next day Allen staked a mining claim around the well site that was 600 feet long and 150 feet long.



*Moscow Opal Mines: The Hall family oversees the work.
Center, counterclockwise: sons Henry and Ralph, Edward C. and his wife
Margret, son Charles, son John's two daughters, sons John and George.*

When the discovery leaked out, a newspaper account on September 18 reported over 150 claims had been made on Leasure's farm. Two days later a newspaper reported nearly 200 claims some overlapping on Leasure's neighbor's property. The jeweler James Allen then sold an interest in his claim to three Moscow businessmen in a partnership agreement. It was reported that, when Allen first saw the boy's stones, he realized they were opals and sold the stones to a New York house for \$2000. Allen then formed a mining company. Leasure, however, had homesteaded the land and held a patent on the land dated September 11, 1889. He forced Allen off the land and went to court to evict all of the claim jumpers, as he called them. He filed a claim in Colfax to establish all rights to his property. He won his case in court: he had clear title and all mining claims were judged invalid. He kicked Allen and his mining partners off the land. The partners had paid Allen for a share and he refused to give them their money. This caused bad feelings against Allen.

Opals were also discovered on land owned by Mrs. Chlor Patterson, one of Leasure's neighbors. A Moscow insurance agent, Edward C. Hall, leased part of her property. He later bought the property for \$11,500. On June 17, 1891, E.C. Hall and some associates formed the North American Gem Opal Mining Company. They also leased part of the Leasure farm. The mines were called the Moscow Opal Mine. Probably most of the interest in the mines was from Moscow.

The first gems discovered were of good quality and sold for high prices. Fire opal rings made by a Tacoma jeweler were valued at \$125. Ruby Hults' *Lost Mines and Treasures in the Pacific Northwest* (1957) describes one gem of three and one half carats worth \$500. In one pocket, a rough mass of stones was found with a value of \$5000.

How many opals were mined or sold is unknown. There are no records available, only speculation from newspaper articles. The mines near Whelan were short lived. Although the first opals were of good quality, as miners dug deeper the gems became very hard and brittle. When they blasted or hit ore with a pick, the opals shattered. Thus, during the 1893 Depression, all the mines closed.



Edward C. Hall, the major owner of the opal mines near Whelan.

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PULLMAN DRIVE-IN THEATRE

**IT'S NEW . . . IT'S MODERN
IT'S ALL THE LATEST EQUIPMENT**

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Plan now to attend Pullman's own Drive-In Theater on Opening Night. Enjoy a movie with the family, even the small ones. Save the price of a baby sitter, the children can sleep while you enjoy the movie. Attend a movie often . . . if not at the Drive-In—then either of the other fine theatres downtown.

- ★ **Latest RCA Sound Equipment specially designed for outdoor theatres.**
- ★ **Largest Screen in the entire area . . . 62 ft. high by 60 ft. in width, providing a clear and sharp image.**
- ★ **Conveniently located Snack Bar offering snappy service on Sandwiches, Candy, Popcorn and Soft Drinks.**

Pullman Herald, Oct. 16, 1952, p. 8

The first ad for the Pullman Drive-In

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Nonprofit Org.
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Whitman County Historical Society
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