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Youth in the act of customizing a car. (Photo courtesy of Bob Stover)

Youth standing proud in front of two fine autos. (Photo courtesy of Bob Stover)

Mobile Youth: Cars and Teens in the 1950s

By Kim Lindemann*

Automobiles have become one of the most important aspects in many young people's lives. Teenagers' cars crowd the parking lots of high schools, malls, movie theaters, and many other places. They serve as symbols of status, individuality, and freedom. Cars became important to young people of the Grand Valley in the early 1950s. Between the end of World War II and the close of the 1950s, young people began buying and using cars, and as a result, their social rituals changed dramatically. The car became a cultural catalyst impacting the way young people dealt with courtship, entertainment, responsibility, and freedom. In Grand Junction and the rest of nation, postwar prosperity brought the automobile into the lives of teenagers.

The focus of this article is on cars and culture in the 1950s; however, the changes which occurred in the 1950s can not be fully understood without first considering the unique conditions of the 1940s which made those changes possible. Family or group oriented and supervised activities for teens characterized the prewar years. Parents did most of the driving so teens depended on them for mobility. Teens began using cars in the early forties, but World War II interrupted this development. The decline in production of cars, gas rationing, and lower speed limits all contributed to an atmosphere of anxiousness during the late forties. Following the war, people met increased production of goods

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with great enthusiasm. As incomes rose and the nation's economy shifted from wartime to peacetime production, Americans found themselves in an enviable position; they had money to spend in a marketplace brimming with products. People who had suffered through the shortages and rationing of the war years eagerly began spending, and cars were often a priority. More people began driving, and businesses began to cater to a nation on wheels. Drive-in theaters and restaurants became popular, and teens in particular were drawn to these places. Large numbers of used cars became available to young people as adults traded in their old autos for new ones. Acquiring secondhand cars changed many aspects of young people's lives. As a result, teen culture in the 1950s differed from that of the early 1940s.

During the 1940s, people in Grand Junction learned to live with restrictions on items such as gas, coffee, sugar, and even shoes.[1] The speed limit fell to thirty-five miles per hour in an effort to preserve gas, and people in Grand Junction seldom drove past the city limits. Most families owned only one car, and every mile on the odometer shortened the life expectancy of the vehicle. Jim Fuoco, now the owner of Fuoco Motors, told of his family's attempt to take a fishing trip to Glenwood Springs during the war:

> I went down to Gay Johnsons, and we got four tires that Gay had capped up with what they called during the war, reclaimed rubber. I don't know where this rubber came from, but even at 35 miles an hour, I think at Grand Valley we turned around and came back because we didn't think we would make it all the way![2]

During World War II, the people of Grand Junction experienced a severe shortage of cars which continued for several years after the war. When the war began, the American automobile industry shifted its focus from consumer autos to the production of war machinery. Consequently, people could not buy new cars, and replacement parts and accessories like tires became scarce. As a young boy during the war, Fuoco remembers his father and other local car dealers struggling to keep their businesses going. For most car dealers, business became a "process of making salable used cars."[3] There were very few used cars available; "about the only thing you could come up with were well worn-out cars to begin

with,"[4] and those that could be found needed work to make them marketable. In addition, parts were scarce and most mechanics left the Grand Valley to join the war effort.[5]

Fuoco recalled: "A lot of times I went out to an old pile of junk and found a bolt for my dad." They did their best to improvise and "give the public some kind of wheels."[6] According to Fuoco, dealers did not advertise because "for every five cars that you could buy, you would probably have one-hundred-fifty people here in Grand Junction wanting to buy them. The demand was so much greater than the supply of cars that you didn't have to advertise because people were coming in every day begging for a car from you."[7] Used vehicles were such a rarity that no listings for used car dealerships appeared in the local city directory until 1949.[8]

Due to the lack of surplus cars, they could not be an integral part of life for teens. Entertainment consisted mostly of weekend activities which seldom lasted later than midnight. Few teenagers had jobs, and most stayed at home and went to bed early in preparation for school the next day.[9] During the 1940s young people spent little time unchaperoned. Instead of driving cars, youths walked, biked, rode the bus, or were driven by their parents to and from activities which tended to be group-oriented, sponsored by social organizations, churches, or schools and attended by adults. Local fraternal organizations such as the Elks, Masons, Rainbow Girls, Job's Daughters, and Demolay offered activities throughout the week.[10] Young people and their parents from all over the Grand Valley attended lodge dances where local performers played Big Band music.[11] Dances were the activity of choice for young people on dates, and if a boy had a car or could borrow his parents' he could take a girl out on a date alone. However, most parents insisted that their youngsters double-date.

Teenagers also congregated at high school sporting events, and at local hangouts such as the Snack Bar, located close to the high school on Twelfth and Gunnison, and Mesa Drug on Main Street. According to Grace Kabele, who graduated from Grand Junction High School in 1948 and later taught at Fruita Union High, the forties were a time of closely supervised social activities. She stated: "Kids were very involved in group activities; the city recreation department held classes in first aid, which we all took. The YMCA offered square dancing classes, dances, and craft classes...we were very active in Girl Scouts and then the Masonic things like Rainbow Girls and Job's Daughters."[12] According to

Grace, the car made organized, supervised activities less attractive to teens.[13] In fact, structured social activities did decline when cars became more available to teens.

World War II finally ended, and the nation left behind the wartime economy of rationing, labor shortages, and production which focused on supplying the war effort. America prospered as incomes rose, production increased, and the United States became a nation of producers and consumers. Historian John Diggins neatly sums up the mood in *The Proud Decades*: "The generation that had borne the depression and the war was now eager to put politics behind and move into a bountiful new world."[14] And bountiful it was.

The United States economy shifted from war production to one which catered to the demands of an increasingly affluent society characterized by low unemployment, higher wages, and wartime savings. Newer and more advanced products saturated the market. Goods bought one year often became obsolete the next, creating an escalating cycle of supply and demand which stimulated production and kept consumer spending high throughout the fifties. In *The Glory and the Dream*, William Manchester states that by the mid-fifties, "America was producing half of the world's goods." He goes on to describe how "American technologists were making life more comfortable...little by little practical innovations altered everyday existence." While the larger cities and towns enjoyed access to new products and inventions sooner than rural areas, "evidence of a surge to abundance was everywhere."[15]

When the war ended, the automobile industry quickly responded to the national demand for transportation. Development and production in the industry grew rapidly, ushering in the Golden Age of the automobile in America. Cars got bigger, more efficient, more stylish, and people turned out by the thousands to buy them. Historian Diggins writes: "In the fifties, car was king. Freeways, multilevel parking lots, shopping centers, motels, and drive-in restaurants and theaters all catered to the person behind the wheel."[16] The automobile ensconced itself in the American way of life and became a status symbol.

Fuoco explains that "[D]uring the war years there was a pent-up demand by the population to become more mobile. Cars meant a release from staying at home where there was little to do. People wanted to go places and the car meant freedom of mobility."[17] As a result, when cars became available again, people bought them enthusiastically. Advertisements pushed everyone to replace old cars with new ones, and many

people eagerly complied. According to Diggins, "Americans junked almost as many cars as Detroit manufactured."[18] These discards appealed to young people with limited amounts of money to spend. Consequently, across the nation youths entered the automobile age, and this changed forever the way they lived and related to society.

As Grand Junction grew in size and prosperity, and the number of cars on the road grew, the number of teens driving also increased. By the end of the forties, gas rationing ended, speed limits were raised, and a record number of cars crowded the roads. During 1949, the number of cars licensed in Mesa County increased by 1,900[19] and by 1950, that number had risen by another 1,500.[20] The availability of cars combined with greater prosperity enabled a larger portion of the population to become mobile. Many people bought a second car and allowed their son or daughter to borrow their old one. Others bought new autos and sold the old one. All this meant that young people found themselves in a buyer's market.

Few youths in town owned new cars; most bought used ones, usually inexpensive models that had already seen quite a bit of use. Jesse Jordan, who graduated from Montrose High School in the late 1940s, remembers that his friends drove cars from the 1920s and 1930s.[21] Owning one required more responsibility than teens had previously known. Buying the car and paying for gas, maintenance, and sometimes insurance all required money. Consequently, teenagers began working regular jobs in the late forties, and this increased in the fifties. Bob Johnson, now a Professor of English at Mesa State College, recalls acquiring his first vehicle and learning to drive. At fifteen he bought a "little black pickup" with money he had earned by raising sheep. He practiced by driving in circles around his father's property: "I must have made ten thousand loops around that property."[22] Dave Sundal, who graduated from Grand Junction High School in 1947, first learned to operate a tractor, so when it came time to drive a car he "already knew how to shift gears and go around curves so [he] just got in and drove away."[23]

By 1948 the community had become concerned about the increasing number of young drivers. After four local youths were killed and one permanently injured while returning from a picnic on the Monument, J.B. Wooten was asked by principal Hyde Bowles to begin a driver's education course. Wooten felt that he had no choice in the matter. As a result, a driver's education course was brought to Grand Junction High School in 1948.[24]

By 1950 the number of students in the class reached seventy-eight.[25] Each student received eight hours behind the wheel during the day, and one night driving lesson. By the time Mr. Wooten finished his career as the Driver Education teacher, he calculated that he had made enough trips with students to "circle the world three times at the equator."[26]

It was during the late forties that the groundwork was laid for a time when cars would be an integral part of youth culture. Teenage driving had increased greatly, but young people followed familiar patterns by continuing to go to the same places they had gone during the war years. This would change during the fifties. When teens began driving cars and had money in their pockets, several new businesses specifically designed for automobile drivers opened in Grand Junction. In 1947, for example, the first drive-in movie theater, the Starlite, opened and two more followed. Local drive-in restaurants also became popular. These places and the streets between them would become some of the most popular teen hangouts in the fifties.

In the 1950s, young people began a love affair with automobiles and developed a complex set of attitudes and rituals involving them. Driving a car represented more than simply a means of transportation. It involved status, which came from being able to take a girl on a date or a group of friends out for the night without depending on or being supervised by parents. Dating with a car meant that a couple could have privacy and experience the exhilaration of independence. Driving symbolized maturity and showed the community that one had entered the adult world and attained freedom.

Getting a driver's license at the age of sixteen became a rite of passage from childhood to young adulthood, and young people found various methods to show that change. They tested limits by driving fast, resisting authority, or mimicking adult behavior— proving that they had entered a stage when the lines blurred between adult and childhood activities. In Delta, Bob Johnson felt grown up at the age of sixteen after buying a little black Ford two-door, a used sporty model with electric windows and seats. He still considers that car his favorite among all the cars he has ever owned. He vividly remembers driving by the high school in his little black Ford with a cigarette in his mouth, blatantly letting one of his teachers see what he was up to "now that [he] was grown up!"[27]

Having a car did not guarantee instant popularity, but it certainly helped. Elsie Norris remembers her date to the high school prom

in the early fifties driving a big Packard convertible. Even though they knew it probably belonged to her date's father, the car impressed her and her friends. According to Mrs. Norris, "The guys who had the neat cars were the ones who picked up the girls."[28] Mr. Sundal agreed that you did not have to have a car to be popular, but "you would be admired if you had a 'hot car.'"[29] Since many teenagers drove older models, and nice cars were so admired, it became a popular pastime among boys to fix up or customize cars.

Customizing was the process of making an old car look "hot." The hobby progressed practically into a full-time job and attained a prominent position in the culture of teen life by the 1950s. The object of customizing was not to restore, but rather to modify the car and make it as showy and as loud as possible. There were many ways to spruce up a car, and some could be quite original. Interiors were redone, the car was lowered, the front window was reduced in size, and the front headlights were "frenched" to give the car a sleeker look. In a 1959 *Daily Sentinel* article discussing cars and high school students, four of the six students interviewed owned customized cars. Included in this article is a detailed description of a young man's car which reveales the amount of work such projects required:

> "I guess I like my car because I have paid for it. I made up my own ideas for the customizing which I had done on it...a candy apple red 1954 Chevy Bel-Air with 1955 Cadillac headlight rims and 1946 reflectors with dual aerials. It has a stock Chevy grill with more teeth added. The taillights are frenched and it has been nosed and decked. [All chrome trim has been removed]." He also plans to put in a new engine and interior.[30]

Jack Cobb, another young interviewee, owned a 1951 red Chevy with pleated and rolled naugahyde interior and "frenched" headlights. He planned to lower it all the way around, add Lake pipes and put in different taillights.[31] Mr. Cobb, who still lives in Grand Junction, recalled: "When it came to our cars, we were perfectionists; we worked on them all the time." He worked at a gas station, and used his earnings to pay for the car, insurance, gas, and even a trip to Tijuana, Mexico to have the upholstery done.[32]

The most popular way to make a car "hot" was to make it loud,

Photos demonstrate pride in ownership of and association with autos.

(Photos courtesy of Bob Stover)

which was often done by replacing regular mufflers with a glass pack muffler, called a "Smitty." They were extremely noisy and gave cars what Jim Fuoco referred to as a "pop" rather than a "purr" sound.[33] Teens could attract a lot of attention with "wolf whistlers" which issued a shrill whistling noise as the car sped down the road. In short, anything that made the car louder was considered an improvement.

The showplace for these customized cars was Main Street, and the best way to show them was to "drag Main." Some drove back and forth revving the engine, while others raced to see who could get up the most speed between stop signs. Later, North Avenue would become the more popular place to cruise and drag race because of its wider streets and higher speed limit. Teens followed an established route: a loop from the A&W on North Avenue back to Main Street and the hangouts there. Mrs. Norris remembers that in 1954, "Main Street was the place to go if you wanted to catch up with the guys, or if you wanted to be out with the girls."[34]

Young people gathered at Harvey's Top Hat drive-in restaurant. Called The Top Hat by some and Harvey's by others, it was open until midnight on weeknights and two A.M. on the weekend. Norma Jones, a carhop at Harvey's in the mid-fifties, explains that most teens did not have showy cars. Instead, young people drove "old clunkers, but it didn't matter to them," there was a lot of "drag racing and peeling out." She saw a lot of "drinking and being loud and boisterous," but it was not destructive. "The kids really respected the owner, Harvey McGinnis," and did not cause any serious trouble. Some kids engaged in mischief like hiding the glasses until the carhop asked for them. Teenagers were testing their limits, not breaking them.[35]

Drive-in movies were popular because they offered a place where young people could have privacy on a date, or get together in a group. There was some single dating, but groups and double dates were more common. In many cases, not a lot of movie watching took place; often kids mingled with those from other cars. Drive-in movies charged admission by the head or by the carload.[36] On "dollar nights," as many people as possible would cram into the car and sometimes a few would even crawl in the trunk.

During the 1950s, dance halls in the area increased in number and acquired a more boisterous character. Nearly every community in the valley had a dance hall of some kind, including the smaller towns like Mack, Loma, and Clifton. Teenagers and adults alike attended them on a regular basis. Most halls held dances weekly, and some were busy

every night. Dance halls were generally considered adult places, but many admitted minors. Most of them served no liquor; they functioned instead as a place where people could dance and enjoy themselves. However, there was drinking, driving, and carousing.

Mr. Jordan remembers that as early as the late forties adults brought liquor and left it in their cars, going out periodically for a drink. In between the adults' trips to their cars, teenagers would occasionally sneak out and steal a sip or two. As a result, fistfights sometimes erupted in the parking lot.[37] By the early 1950s, rowdiness outside the dance halls had escalated, and there was more fighting and drinking. By this time young people were not just borrowing liquor from adults, but bringing their own. The most notorious local dance halls were Kopekas, The Mileaway, and The Bucket of Blood.[38] Jim Fuoco, who drove a wrecker for his father's business in the summer while he was home from college, remembers that every Saturday night the wreckers hauled in cars, many of which had been driven by teenagers. According to Fuoco, "you could go out to Kopeka and you could get drunk, dance, and get in a fight, all in the same night and wreck the car too."[39] However, most young people who went to dance halls behaved themselves. Elsie Norris, a freshman at Appleton High School in 1954, spoke of going to the dances simply for the love of dancing, and the kids she knew "just liked to stay in and dance."[40] However, she does remember a fight in the parking lot at nearly every dance.

For the most part, parents and the police knew where kids were and what they were doing. Grand Junction was still a small community and police officers recognized most of the kids. Some teenagers did lose their driver's licenses but not usually on the first infraction. When the police did stop someone for driving too fast, or being boisterous, it usually resulted in some fatherly advice and a warning. Young people who had been drinking were told to get some coffee. If their cars were noisy, the noisemaker was removed, or if it was a loud muffler, they were told to quit revving the engine. Jack Cobb remembers being stopped a few times, one of which did result in the loss of his license for drag racing.

By the end of the 1950s, teenage social life had changed dramatically. The rules that governed their behavior had become less restrictive. Going out every night became more common, drinking increased, and kids stayed out later. When Mr. Johnson was driving his little black Ford, it was nearly a nightly occurrence for his group of friends to drag main in Delta and hang out at the local A & W.[41] Cobb and his friends drove to Glenwood Springs nearly every weekend to swim

at the Glenwood Hot Springs Pool, then returned to Grand Junction late at night to attend the midnight movie at the Cooper Theater. After this, they would go to Harvey's for something to eat and later go out into the field behind Harvey's to drink beer and listen to the radio.[42]

As the fifties came to a close, Grand Junction was a different place for teenagers than it had been during the war years and the early fifties. Automobiles gave teenagers more places to go and things to do. As youths began using cars, their worlds expanded from a restricted life of adult supervision to a new life-style which included responsibility, mobility, and freedom from parental control. Cars came to symbolize maturity, popularity, and freedom. At drive-in movies and restaurants, local hangouts, parking lots, and drag strips, teens were taking part in new types of entertainment which had little to do with parental guidance and supervision which were so much a part of teen life in the 1940s.

NOTES

[1]David Sundal, interview by author, 14 January 1997, Grand Junction, CO.
[2]Jim Fuoco, interview by author, 23 January 1997, Grand Junction, CO.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Ibid.
[7]Ibid.
[8]Grand Junction City Directory, 1943-1960.
[9]Sundal interview, 14 January 1997.
[10]Ibid.
[11]Jessie Jordan, interview by author, 15 January 1997, Grand Junction, CO.
[12]Grace Kabele, interview by author, 9 November 1997, Grand Junction, CO.
[13]Ibid.
[14]Diggins, John, Patrick. *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 181.
[15]Manchester, William. *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972.* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 773.
[16]Diggins, 184.
[17]Jim Fuoco, interview by author, 26 November 1996, Grand Junction, CO
[18]Diggins, 185.
[19]*Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*, 3 January 1949. Hereafter cited as Daily Sentinel.
[20]*Daily Sentinel*, 2 January 1950.
[21]Jordan interview, 15 January 1997.
[22]Bob Johnson, interview by author, 11 October 1996, Grand Junction, CO.
[23]Sundal interview, 14 January 1997.
[24]J.B. Wooten, interview by author, 15 January 1997, Grand Junction, CO.
[25]*Daily Sentinel*, 8 January 1950.
[26]Wooten interview, 15 January 1997.
[27]Johnson interview, 11 October 1996.
[28]Elsie Norris, interview by author, 15 January 1997, Grand Junction, CO.

The Rise and Fall of Drive-ins in Grand Junction, Colorado

by Michol Brammer*

Drive-in movies became a significant aspect of social life for Americans in the 1950s. This phenomenon resulted from the commingling of social trends from the prewar period and the new conditions that emerged after the war. Beginning in the 1920s, Americans had fallen in love with movies and during the Great Depression and World War II, Americans somehow found the cash for admission to movies which offered escape from nearly impossible economic conditions and a world at war. When the war ended, a booming economy enabled Americans to go on a spending binge unprecedented in the nation's history. Automobiles emerged as a significant feature in American life. Drive-in theaters prospered in this time when Americans wanted to use their cars for everything, including entertainment. This article discusses how three drive-in movie theaters—the Starlite, the Rocket, and the Chief—came to Grand Junction.

Although the great era of drive-in movies was the 1950s, their roots extended back nearly two decades. In 1933, the first drive-in opened in Camden, New Jersey. Richard Hollingshead Jr. first envisioned drive-

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ins while pumping gas at his deluxe service station. Hollingshead thought that people should have some type of entertainment while they waited in line, so he installed a screen on his driveway and started showing movies for his customers. The idea flopped. Despite his failure in 1932, Hollingshead patented the idea and called it "The Park-In Theater." In 1933 Hollingshead and his partner Willis Warren Smith opened their business on Admiral Wilson Boulevard and called it the "Drive-in Theater." The drive-in movie started a movement toward "drive-in" services such as drive-in restaurants, churches, Photomats, and banks.

The number of drive-in movie theaters peaked nationally in 1958 with more than four thousand in operation. In 1948 Texas had the most drive-ins—seventy-nine in all—followed by Texas, California, Ohio, North Carolina and Florida. New Jersey, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico also had significant numbers of drive-in theaters. Throughout their history, drive-in theaters underwent technological change. For example, when it became apparent that groups of speakers mounted under the screen did not produce sound with sufficient volume and clarity, poles with miniature car speakers appeared. Beginning in 1946, patrons pulled their cars beside these poles and maneuvered the speakers inside their cars. Not until 1948 did the knob to control the volume and turn the speaker off and on appear. [1]

Due to budget restraints, drive-ins faced a problem getting good movies from the big studios. Finally, in 1949, Warner Brothers released *Colorado Territory,* which starred Joel McCrea and Virginia Mayo, to the East drive-in theater in Denver.[2] This was the first new release to play at a drive-in theater. Twenty years later, in 1969, John Wayne made a guest star appearance at the Gemini in Dallas where his movie *True Grit* was playing. He impressed the audience as he stood on top of the concession stand and fired his pistols into the air.

Grand Junction joined the drive-in trend with the Starlite movie theater which Lloyd Files built in 1947. Having heard about the new drive-ins, he took his family to Salt Lake City to see *The Boy With Green Hair.* Files observed and learned everything possible while there and returned to Grand Junction where he hoped to establish Colorado's first drive-in theater. Unfortunately, Denver won the race, and on August 2, 1947, Files opened the second drive-in theater in Colorado.[3] Files chose the name Starlite because people came to the drive-in during the "starlite" hours.

Clarence, Lloyd's brother, Mr. French and Stanley Seigenthaler

were all partners in this business venture. Stanley Seigenthaler later left the partnership due to financial difficulties. Lloyd Files and his brother maintained a partnership; Lloyd ran the Starlite and his brother ran their wrecking yard.[4]

Completion of the Starlite took three months. After renting equipment from a local citizen, Files plowed and bulldozed the soft ground himself and applied gravel to reduce the mud. He guessed at the angle of the ramps which would elevate the front of the cars in the theater, and measured the distance between each ramp so that cars could maneuver between the ramps. He built a bridge across the canal that ran along North Avenue so people could get to the theater lot. Wartime rationing and government restrictions on raw materials made it difficult to obtain the materials to build this outdoor theater. Consequently, Files found innovative ways to get the necessary materials. Hiring workers, however, was easy. Files made a deal with Roy Fleming, a housing contractor who supplied carpenters. Fleming explained that the project was difficult because there were no blueprints.

The screen, which faced away from North Avenue, took one full day to lift into place. With a crane on each side, the screen was slowly lifted until it stood in an upright position with a slight forward slant. The original screen was thirty feet by forty feet and anchored to a frame supported by telephone poles purchased at the local lumber yard and braces fabricated in a local blacksmith shop. The plywood screen was painted white and had to be repainted every season. It was later replaced with corrugated metal which better withstood the weather. Due to the introduction of the Cinemascope, a wide-angle lens that fit on a single standard projector, the screen was later expanded to forty feet by sixty feet. This allowed for a fairly wide and slightly curved image to be projected on the screen. A speaker rested on each side of a pole between the ramps with electrical wires running under the ramps and up into each pole. Ted Knox, who supplied the equipment for the Denver theater, also supplied the electrical and theater equipment for the Starlite.[5]

The opening of the Starlite was a big event in Grand Junction. To advertise the grand opening, Files ran an ad in the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel,* used the marquee outside the drive-in, and rented a small airplane to pull a banner. On opening night, moviegoers backed up along North Avenue all the way to the Veterans Hospital and pulled off to the side of the road to avoid blocking traffic.[6] The Starlight played two movies that night, including *Bedside Manner,* with John Carroll and Ruth

Hussey, and *Dark Alibi*.

People could now watch a movie from the comfort of their own cars, enjoy the outdoors, relish their privacy, carry on conversations, and not worry about interrupting others. They could come in their work clothes, and young families could bring their children to enjoy an affordable night of entertainment.[8] Parents filled the family cars with blankets, pillows, and pajamas, and packed their picnic baskets with dinner. They took their children, who played on the swing sets in front of the screen, then put on their pajamas and fell asleep with their stomachs full of popcorn, soda, candy and hot dogs.[9] People without cars could still go to the drive-in and sit on the bleachers in front of the projection building.[10] Disabled people who could not leave their cars could also attend this kind of theater.[11]

Employees did their best to make everyone comfortable. "Ramp boys" made sure that cars were parked properly and showed people how to operate the speakers. "Ticket girls" in the box office sold tickets to cars as they entered the drive-in, handed out flyers listing the movies for the entire month, and took orders for the concession stand for viewers unable to leave their cars.[12] A single building stood near the center of the drive-in, housing the projection room, rest rooms and a concession stand which offered soft drinks, candy, ice cream, hamburgers, and coffee.[13]

The most industrious employees at the Starlite were Files' two daughters, Janis and Joann. They began working at the Starlite on opening night when Janis was eleven and Joann was nine. They cleaned bathrooms, picked up trash, popped popcorn, took tickets, and fixed speakers. When Joann first started popping popcorn, she had to stand on crates in order to reach the popper. The girls' favorite activity was to catch people who tried to sneak in. Janis would wait for them to park, then tap on their window and ask to see their ticket stub. If they did not have one, she would sell them one, and her father let her keep the money from these sales.[14] Mr. Files and his wife traveled twice a month to Denver to select the movies for the following month. The movies were then delivered bimonthly to the Starlite.[15]

The Starlite remained the only drive-in theater in Grand Junction until Westland Theaters opened the Chief on March 20, 1952. Located East of the Starlite, the Chief was a new and improved drive-in, with a larger variety of movies than the Starlite because the Westland Theater Company had better buying power in Denver where the films were rented. The Chief also had a lot which could accommodate four

hundred and sixty cars, a curved screen which provided perfect vision to all viewers, and a complete refreshment stand.[16]

A third drive-in theater, the Rocket, opened April 16, 1955. It was located at 2881 North Avenue and also offered a wide panoramic screen and a fully stocked refreshment stand.[17] The opening of the Chief and the Rocket meant competition for the Starlite, which in the beginning only competed with the indoor theaters downtown. To remain competitive in a divided market the Starlite began "dollar night": every Tuesday admission cost only one dollar per car load. Young people in particular attended the movies on "dollar night." Often they crammed as many people as they could into their cars and trucks.

Admission to drive-ins was cheaper than for indoor theaters. When the Starlite first opened, it cost thirty-five cents for adults and children were admitted for free. However, when the film rental prices increased, the admission rose to fifty cents, but children were still admitted for free. The Rocket and Chief had the same prices.[18]

Drive-ins opened as soon as the weather permitted and closed when it got too cold. During the summer when kids were out of school they were open every night of the week. Movies started at dusk: 8:00 P.M. in the summer and 7:00 P.M. in the fall.[19] Shows began with cartoons, followed by a news reel, and then the featured movies. [20]

People of all ages attended the drive-ins, but they were most popular with young families and teenagers. Grand Junction was a small town with little to do on weekend nights. Boys saved their money all month and got advances so they could attend drive-ins. Dinner, a movie, and a snack afterwards cost five dollars.[21] Teens often arrived at drive-ins early so they could get their vehicle situated and purchase snacks at the concession stand. Any spare time could be spent with friends. Some teenage boys pooled their money and gave it to an eighteen-year old who would buy beer for them. Tailgate parties where teens gathered around one car, visited, and then moved onto the next car were popular.

Movie stars in the 1950s added to the allure of drive-in theaters. Hollywood stars appealed to teenagers in the fifties because they touched on major issues in their lives. James Dean, for instance, reflected the confusion and loneliness many young people experienced. He "communicated the emotions of a crippled romantic, a moody idealist whose dreams about the world had already been destroyed by his resentment toward it."[22] His lonely eyes and scornful lips called out to young girls everywhere while his picture adorned their rooms and his image occupied their thoughts.

Actresses such as Marilyn Monroe possessed an unmistakable appeal. On screen, Monroe conveyed sexuality combined with a childlike image which aroused a protective instinct on the part of the audience. *The Seven Year Itch* captured Monroe standing on a subway grate as air lifted her skirt up and revealed her legs. This became her trademark and led to the end of her marriage to the sports hero Joe DiMaggio who resented the world seeing so much of his wife's anatomy.[23] Her sexual image, which was too risque for television, made money for Hollywood.

John Wayne, Rock Hudson, and Clark Gable portrayed strong characters who always defeated the villain. Americans were drawn to John Wayne because he symbolized the values of the old West: chivalry, honesty, integrity and toughness. Gary Cooper was a hit in *High Noon*, a classic western film where one man was left alone to save a town from the forces of evil.[24]

Drive-ins were a good place to get acquainted with members of the opposite sex and so were often referred to as "passion pits." A towel, especially a white one, hanging on the inside of the window was a sure sign that the couple inside was "making out." It was common for boys to play games on the couple inside.

People often honked their car horns to signal the start of the movie.[25] During intermission, lights around the screen would go on, and people went to the concession stand to purchase snacks and talk with friends.[26]

Extended curfews allowed teens to watch a movie, then stop for a snack at drive-in restaurants like the Top Hat.[27] Women attending Mesa State Junior College who lived in the Mary Rait dorm had to abide by the 10:00 P.M. curfew. Those willing to take a risk would sneak out one of the "exit only" doors and, because the main door was locked for the evening, they would throw rocks at the window of a friend who had agreed ahead of time to let them back in.[28] Parents usually accepted their children going on dates to the drive-ins unchaperoned, since dating was natural, and most often the parents knew the date's family.[29]

Just as Files was wise enough to sense a need for drive-in entertainment, he too knew when it was time to move on. After ten years of ownership, Files sold the screen, sign, and marquee to his brother who moved them to Fruita. Following the Starlite, The Rocket closed later and a Wal-mart store was built on the lot. The Chief was the sole remain-

The end of an era. (Photo courtesy of Daryll Lynne Evans)

Chief's snack-bar, 1989. (Photo courtesy of Daryll Lynne Evans)

ing drive-in until 1988 when it too closed. In its last years, the Chief targeted the high school age group by playing movies that appealed to them and scheduled its opening and closing dates around high school summer vacation.[30] Located in Montrose, the Star is one of the only remaining drive-in theaters in operation on the Western Slope.

Many people assume that the television caused the decline of the drive-in. However, television did not offer a wide selection of movies. The drive-in theater was actually more impacted by the introduction of cable television and the video cassette recorder. These two inventions offered the public a wider variety of programming in the convenience of their own homes.[31] Drive-ins also suffered because they often did not offer the most popular movies. Drive-in theaters had always received second-class shows and the new multiplex theaters had a large selection of movies showing all year and at all times of the day. However, the biggest obstacle for the owners of drive-ins was the cost of land. Drive-ins were traditionally built on the outskirts of town, and as cities expanded outward the land occupied by drive-ins became valuable real estate. Instead of paying higher property taxes many owners of drive-ins sold the land. In addition, insurance costs regarding playgrounds rose and lawsuits forced many owners out of business.[32]

Few drive-ins still exist today; most have been torn down and replaced with shopping centers, super stores, and baseball fields. Others are silent graveyards overgrown with wildflowers and weeds, and some have been stripped down leaving only the metal supports that once held the screens.

Today, some drive-in theaters are used for other purposes. For instance, during the summer in Houlton, Maine a drive-in theater, which has not played a movie in seventeen years, is now used as a church where people drive in, attend service, and drive away without ever leaving their cars. However, there are a few survivors with flashing sign boards, scratchy sounding metal boxes for speakers, and the smell of freshly popped popcorn filling the air. The second drive-in ever built, Skankwellers, opened in Orefield, Pennsylvania in 1934. It is the oldest operating drive-in theater in the world and is a family-owned operation that survives by attracting families who want a chance to relive history.[32]

NOTES

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[2]Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters A History from Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1992), 15.
[3]Lloyd Files interview, Grand Junction Colorado, 17 September 1996.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Files interviews, September 17, 1996 and January 15, 1997.
[6]Files interview.
[7]*Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*, 2 August 1947. Hereafter cited as *Daily Sentinel.*
[8]*Daily Sentinel*, 3 August 1947.
[9]Phillis Brownson, interview with author, Grand Junction Colorado, 10 November 1996.
[10]Joann Bell and Janis Miller, interview with author, Grand Junction Colorado, 20 November 1996.
[11]*Daily Sentinel*, 3 August 1947.
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[16]*Daily Sentinel*, 20 March 1952.
[17]*Daily Sentinel*, 16 April 1955.
[18]*Daily Sentinel*, 2 August 1947- 16 May 1955.
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[22]Diggins, John Patrick. *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 197.
[23]Hablerstam, David. *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 568.
[24]Diggins, 196.
[25]Emerson interview.

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[27]Emerson interview.
[28]Caroline Retolaza, interview with author, Grand Junction Colorado, 30 October 1996.
[29]Emerson interview.
[30]Bell and Miller interview.
[31]Retolaza interview.
[32]Richard Jackson, "The Demise of the Drive In Theater: A Small Town Landscape Feature Slowly Disappears," *Small Towns Institute* (July 1993), 8-13.
[33]Constance Bond, "Remembering the Days—and Nights—of Drive-ins," *Smithsonian* (25 May 1994), 109-113.

Book Review

A Spirit of Charity: St Mary's Hospital Celebrating a Century of Caring, 1896-1996. by Dave Fishell (Grand Junction: St. Mary's Hospital, 1996. 164 Pp. Paperback $29.95.)

A Spirit of Charity celebrates the first century of St. Mary's Hospital, Grand Junction's largest health care facility. In it, the author focuses on those persons who "helped 'tame' the West in their own quiet ways" (p. 11). The book is not a comprehensive history of local hospitals and medical care, but spotlights St. Mary's and its relationship with the community. The volume details fund drives, technical advances, volunteerism, and demonstrates how the hospital reflected local conditions on a decade-by-decade basis.

Fishell begins his story in seventeenth century France where the Sisters of Charity (originally Daughters of Charity) began their work. The author chronicles the order's arrival in the New World, its movement west, and finally the decision to expand its work to a raw frontier settlement called Grand Junction. The need for permanent facilities led to the construction of the first St. Mary's on Colorado Avenue. In this location, St. Mary's struggled to survive in the early twentieth century, prospered in the 1920s, and suffered economic hardship during the Great

Depression. By the 1940s the Colorado Avenue structure became too small, so the Sisters of Charity sought larger facilities. These were opened at Seventh and Patterson in 1951. Since then St. Mary's has grown, modernized, expanded its services, and become the recognized health care facility in western Colorado.

A Spirit of Charity links the history of St. Mary's with local and national events. Always, Fishell shows that fund drives and volunteerism fueled a partnership which reflected Grand Junction's willingness to serve the hospital because the hospital served the city so well. Those who led the fund drives form a social register of community leaders.

Fishell adds significantly to the social history of Grand Junction in a number of ways. Readers learn that "lungers" (or those suffering from respiratory problems) came to early Grand Junction, and that settlers suffered from illnesses because they drank directly from the Colorado River. Fishell captures the spirit of early-day doctoring with a lively description of Dr. Herman Bull who cared deeply for his patents, traveled great distances to care for them, and often administered slugs of whiskey as the anesthetic before amputating limbs. The tragedy and pathos of the flu epidemic following World War I receives excellent treatment. Fishell shows that during the 1920s, the Klan chose to ignore the fact that the Sisters of Charity were Catholic and that their hospital represented a conspicuous memorial to their faith.

Fishell demonstrates that World War II changed attitudes about hospitals. Prior to this conflagration, many regarded hospitals as a place to go to die. However, during the war, those in the armed services learned that hospitals were a place to be treated and cured of afflictions of all kinds. That attitude carried over to places like St. Mary's. In the 1950s, the word "polio" left many terror stricken, and Fishell conveys the anxieties about that and the feeling of relief when a vaccine for it became available. Bringing the narrative closer to the present, the author discusses the uranium and oil shale booms and busts, and shows how they impacted the hospital and the community in general.

The book is well written and peppered with enough anecdotes to keep readers smiling. While specialists in the field appreciate the importance of "radioactive isotopes" and "portable scales," most people do not experience an adrenaline rush while learning about them. General readers keep turning pages because of passages about a "circus man" from New York "bitten in a certain place by a rattlesnake," a patient diagnosed with "brain leakage," and indomitable Dick McCoy from Fruita

who chaffed at filling out all those forms and listed "Socialist" as his religion and "bootlegger" as his profession (p. 43). Discovering that the sisters raised some of their food in a garden and kept chickens and cows makes them seem more human. Who would not be interested to know that the legendary Ute woman Chipeta had a cataract operation at St. Mary's? Seeing the names and pictures of local luminaries like Herb Bacon, Pat Gormley, Dr. Aaron Long, Dr. Geno Saccomanno, and Leland Schmidt help to tie the hospital to the community.

The lavish book includes over two-hundred-and-sixty photographs, with many of those in color. Vignettes, set apart from the text, personalize the book and add human interest. Who could miss the one in black on the Spanish flu epidemic, or fail to be interested in the "Miracle Bath Tub Baby" or volunteer Sabrina Veronica Lally O'Malley?

Scholars would have appreciated a more lengthy bibliography and an index. But these criticisms are minor. Dave Fishell has made a significant contribution to the historiography of Grand Junction. *A Spirit of Charity* will remain the standard work on St. Mary's and health care in the Grand Valley for many years.

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Book Review

Discoveries: Short Stories of the San Juans. By Kent Nelson (Ouray: Western Reflections, Inc., 1998, Pp. 152, Hardback, $24.95).

Award-winning author Kent Nelson lives in Ouray, and has published three novels, two collections of short stories, and numerous short pieces. Judging from *Discoveries*, he has two passions in life: people and nature. *Discoveries* is a collection of eleven short stories focusing on the interplay of human emotions unfolding against the backdrop of the rugged San Juan Mountains.

The stories involve the dynamics of human relationships—or, the question of what happens when people come together or distance themselves from one another. Nelson's stories begin with familiar Western Slope activities, such as ranching, tourism, hunting, fishing, hiking, and skiing. Then a situation triggers protagonists to ponder their own motivations, or that of another person, and ultimately to "discover" something about themselves and the way they view the world. In the end, the reader comes to know intriguing characters complicated and flawed by paranoia, deception, insensitivity, loneliness, or other emotions. The author closes each story with an openended situation designed to force readers to evaluate what they have "discovered" about the characters in the story, and to contemplate what must have happened after the narra-

tive itself ended.

In addition to the enigmas of motivation and the human psyche, *Discoveries* explores what happens when people and nature come together. To draw readers into the narratives, Nelson fills his stories with familiar places which cause residents of the Western Slope to nod approvingly and form mental pictures. In this regard, his description of an auto trip across Lizard Head Pass is excellent. When characters leave their cars, they visit places like City Market, Ouray Hot Springs, the Animas, Fly Me To The Moon Saloon, and a "plastic Texaco" in Cortez. To heighten this sense of place, Nelson connects readers to nature with descriptions of the appearance, sounds, and smells of animals, storms, and forest fires.

Nelson takes his readers beyond the physical and familiar by raising a question that many people have pondered while contemplating the rugged San Juans: what happens to the human spirit when it connects with the raw energy, mystery, and power of wilderness? With this query in mind, Nelson creates a number of intriguing characters. In "Wilderness" a man must choose between his admiration for a Chesapeake Retriever that has returned to the wild and the danger that animal poses to civilization. "Spirits of Animals" features a mystical Indian woman intent on enforcing her belief that killing animals for sport and love of wild things are not the same. Other stories feature a recluse who spends a lifetime panning gold, only to return it all to the water before he dies, and a man who fulfills his dream of running with a herd of elk.

After reading the eleven stories in *Discoveries*, it is not surprising to learn that Kent Nelson earned the Edward Abbey Prize for Ecofiction. He conveys powerful ideas about the relationship between people and nature. Although *Discoveries* is not a historically based book, subscribers to the *Journal of the Western Slope* will appreciate the book's unmistakable roots in the San Juan Mountains, and its exploration of the psychological impact that this wondrous place has on thoughtful humans.

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Book Review

Historic Leadville in Rare Photographs and Drawings. By Christian J. Buys. (Ouray: Western Reflections, Inc., 1997. Pp. 244. Hardback $29.95).

As the title suggests, *Historic Leadville in Rare Photographs and Drawings* documents the evolution of this Colorado mining town through pictures. As the first comprehensive picture history of Leadville, it fills a important niche in regional history with its nearly two-hundred-and-fifty drawings and photographs gleaned from about fifteen different sources. The book traces the history of the city back to the first mineral discoveries in the 1860s, and proceeds from there with a decade-by-decade chronicling of Leadville from its boom in the 1870s to its eventual decline in the 1920s and 1930s. Each chapter begins with a short introduction, followed by a number of images, all with thoughtful captions.

Professor Buys explains that he compiled this book to complement—not to replace or compete with—the written histories of Leadville. In fact, he suggests that readers consult works like Don and Jean Griswold's *The History of Leadville and Lake County* for the rest of the story. Picture histories, according to Buys, add richness, detail, and texture to the past because they show what the world and people at that time actually looked like, thereby making it possible for viewers to experience vicariously life in the past.

Six chapters document the tumultuous history of Leadville. An underlying theme is the town's split personality: devotion to hard work and the American Dream, on one hand, and pursuit of sensuous pleasure on the other. The first chapter on the 1870s, depicts the raw energy of a chaotic boom town nestled in some of the most rugged terrain in the United States. This section, more than any source this reviewer has seen, reveals the worldwide attention which Leadville attracted. Chapter two on the 1880s pictures a more settled and businesslike town, but one marked by strikes, smelters, railroads, and inhabited by such legendary persons as H.A.W. and "Baby Doe" Tabor. The 1890s brought the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act and a silver crash which eliminated ninety percent of the jobs in Leadville. To combat tough times, the citizenry pinned their hopes on a "Crystal Carnival" and a palace made of ice to attract tourists. Strikes and the arrival of troops to keep order reflected a town struggling to survive financially and keep its identity as a mining town.

Chapter four, on the first decade of the new century, shows that about four-thousand miners still worked in Leadville and seventy-three saloons and a red-light district flourished there. The next decade brought World War I, the Spanish Flu epidemic, and unduly optimistic predictions that zinc would restore magic to Leadville. Given its propensity for pleasure-seeking, the townspeople largely ignored prohibition and restrictions on gambling. Chapter Six, the last of the book, documents the decline of Leadville in the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1930s Leadville had no bank, and the images of the city in *Historic Leadville* show nearly deserted streets. This chapter is the shortest of the six, containing only twenty-one images.

With this volume, Buys proves his contention that picture books do add richness to the historical panorama by providing a look at myriad aspects of Leadville's past. He documents the day-to-day life of the common people with illustrations of lunch boxes, iron candle holders used in mines, policemen's saps (blackjacks) and manacles, and interiors of Victorian homes. He illustrates the business aspects of the town with pictures of banks, assay offices, stock certificates, advertisements, and receipts. He demonstrates the political side with pictures of Leadville's Jesse Fuller who became governor of the state, a union member's badge, and medals commemorating those who broke strikes while serving in Colorado's militia. Pictures from Finntown and the Slovenes attest to the city's ethnic diversity. Buys brings the past to life by proving that

people in the past joked and enjoyed human foibles. Who would not smile when reading about Ben Loeb, his "Hot Beef Tea," and his enthusiastic promotion of bawdy entertainments in his novelty hall? Most readers will appreciate the explanation that one mine's official name was the RAM, initials which stood for "Ragged Ass Mine," so named because it stood on a hill so steep that only way to descend to the road below was to scoot along on the seat of one's pants.

Some images and stories are poignant. The reproduction of Baby Doe's handwritten note about a vision in which she saw a small bird visit her cabin makes readers contemplate the fate and state of mind of this woman who exiled herself to poverty and isolation to guard the Matchless Mine in accordance with the wishes of her late husband. Pictures of women and youngsters wearing surgical masks in a futile attempt to arrest the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 make a strong statement about the impact of that illness. The commingling of faces filled with youthfulness innocence and the grizzled countenances of older ones in mining crews speak volumes about the harshness of the world underground. Who can forget the ghost stories about the twelve victims of a cave-in whose skeletons still lie buried in the Moyer Mine, and the "plaintive voices" of long dead "soiled doves" who call out at night from the cribs on State Street?

The book radiates the author's enthusiasm for his subject. He urges readers to "scrutinize" the "photographs and drawings", so "we, too, can become a part of the action." The book promotes this kind of involvement because the photographs are carefully selected, big enough to be studied, and the pages are not crowded with too many images. Photographs showing artifacts from the author's personal collection prove that Chris Buys has more than a passing interest in Leadville, its history, and memorabilia. Scholars will appreciate the fact that he took the time to compile a good index and a serviceable bibliography.

The author's writing style is as vigorous as his subject matter. The second paragraph of the Preface sets a exuberant tone which Buys maintains throughout the book. After describing the physical setting, Buys introduces the town and its glory days:

> There was a time, however, when Leadville neither stopped to admire its surroundings in nor shivered as the sunset, even in the depth of winter. Those were the boom days. Frenetic, bawdy times in the 1870s and

> 1880s when thousands upon thousands of miners and entrepreneurs of almost every description and ethical inclination transformed this portion of the pristine valley into what looked like a giant gopher colony. Massive mounds of bright-colored earth were churned up and spit out helter-skelter. Magnificent stands of trees became seas of stumps. Hundreds of tents, cabins, and ramshackle buildings seemingly sprang up overnight and everywhere. Masses of fortune seekers jammed the muddy streets and paths twenty-four hours a day. Everyone in America—or so it seemed—wanted a piece of the action. After all, this was Leadville. This was the boom town of boom towns.

Paragraphs like this filled with images of a rambunctious and polyglot population, a "pristine valley" transformed into a "giant gopher colony" with "Massive mounds of bright colored earth...churned up and spit out helter-skelter" and "Masses of fortune seekers" jamming "muddy streets and paths twenty-four hours a day" stick in the reader's mind. It is good to read vigorous prose in this time when so many who write western history seem determined to take all the dash and color from it.

Historic Leadville is the first publication from Western Reflections of Ouray, a press devoted to the history and imaginative literature about Colorado's Western Slope. *Historic Leadville* gives this press an auspicious start. This reviewer wonders how Western Reflections can sell such a lavish book for only $29.95. Enthusiasts of Western Colorado's history will be pleased to learn that Western Reflections and Chris Buys have teamed up to produce another volume, *Historic Telluride in Rare Photographs* due in September of 1998.

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