HOME Sweet HOME

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SUNSET RISING

Colchester (VT) - The gunman wasn’t going away. Peter Handy knew that much. Growing up with a family who owned a drive-in movie theatre, the 11-year-old boy had seen enough action flicks to comprehend the danger of his situation. Now, trapped inside the box office of Sunset Drive-In, the boy was playing a thriller sequence without a script, a plot twist that had leapt from the giant screen and landed in a loaded gun pointed at his temple. And just like his silver screen heroes, young Peter Handy knew what he had to do.

The robber was demanding money, all the money the drive-in had. Fear over the cash, he told the boy, and nobody will be hurt. Staring down the barrel of the gun, Handy was tempted to give in. Before the intruder asked. Yet even with a weaponcocked inches from his face, the youngster knew he had the upper hand. The gunman had stayed outside the cramped ticket booth, unable to see through the window. Unable. Handy, hoping to see the bag with the night’s proceeds stuffed beneath the cash register.

Opening the cash drawer, the boy locked eyes with the thief. “That’s all we have,” he said, removing the $40 that lay inside. The man stared. Handy held his breath, fearing the robber didn’t believe him. Then, with a slight gesture, the gunman motioned for Handy to hand him the money. Positioning his body to block the hidden cash bag. Handy slid the bills and change over to the man. Scooping up the money, the bandit disappeared into the night, leaving the young star to revel in his story’s happy ending.

“I had a full house that night, and I didn’t give him our money,” Handy remembers. “I never told him about the bag.” He pauses, still clearly proud of this fact. “My father was very proud of me.”

Which explains why, decades later, Handy remains more than a little protective of the drive-in theatre he now owns. After putting his life on the line for Sunset Drive-In, Handy decided to invest his life in the iconic family business. Before long, taking his father’s place in drive-in’s director’s chair wasn’t even an option. It was, as Handy describes it, an expectation, a hereditary obligation passed down like kingship and welcomed with open arms by the heir to the throne.

“I didn’t imagine not doing it,” Handy says of running the drive-in. “I couldn’t imagine life without it. It’s like a member of the family now.”

As family members, they’ve been the favorite relative for Handy, the kind folks whose legacy lights up the mental scrapbook. “Many of my happiest memories,” Handy says, “were at the drive-in.” Memories of family picnics beneath the main screen — the only screen. Handy points out, when his father opened the place in 1948, Memories of late-night double-features and the even later-night cleanup afterward. Memories of working the box office and the snack bar as a boy, summer nights when the only gimmick disturbing the open-air paradise were the ones on the screen. Memories of taking over as owner in 1979, of building two new screens in 1980 and adding another due to popular demand in 1994. Memories that could fill a book or, at the very least, make for one fascinating movie.

And after 60 years, the movie seems to be featuring a happy ending for the Handy family’s drive-in. Their mere existence in the new millennium remains something of an oddity, a tale of survival against the elements.

Drive-in theatres, an institution created in 1928 by New Jersey businessman Richard Hollingshead, Jr., rapidly gained popularity as both family fun and teen date haven from Maine to California throughout the 1930s and 40s. The industry’s boom came in the 1950s and 60s, with drive-in attendance actually surpassing the crowds at “traditional” indoor cinemas in 1952. By 1958, more than 4,000 drive-ins dotted the American landscape, with some boasting capacity for more than 2,500 cars.

In early-1980s, however, the outdoor bubble burst. Cable TV and VCRs supplanted the drive-in as the hottest way to see the latest films, and the most loyal group of patrons — young families with small children — began seeking entertainment elsewhere. By 1998, the Motion Picture Producers Association listed only 847 drive-in movie theatres operating in the entire United States.

Yet even in these barren years, the sun never set on Sunset. In fact, Handy recalls, Sunset Drive-In remained a popular night spot even while larger, more high-tech indoor cinemas appeared in surrounding communities. “We even have some people who won’t go to the indoor theatres,” Handy says. “They like our experience better. I mean, you can toss a Frisbee around, play mini golf for a big kid, kids can play on the playground — you can just hang out with your friends until showtime.”

The family thinks they may understand the phenomenon of Sunset’s success. In the ’60s, Bessette and her husband were hired by Handy’s father to work in the Sunset snack bar, where Bessette’s husband in-