

Back in 1946, the original screen had two wings. A storm damaged the screen and was since replaced with the one that stands today.



Alice Beck with her fresh cut French fries.



The Beck family in 1974.

BLUE MOUNTAIN'S BEST

Meet the Becky's Drive-In family

Nominated by Town & Country Gazette staff

By Danielle S. Tepper

Nothing beats a summer night watching movies under the stars. According to their 27,000+ Facebook fans, the best place to go in the Valley is Becky's Drive-In.

The history of long-running Becky's traces all the way back to a chance win. When he was younger, William Beck won a projector and used it to begin showing movies on a bed sheet on the living room wall.

"Winning that got him started," said Cindy Beck-Deppe. Deppe is one of the Becks' five siblings who now helps run the drive-in. "Slatington had an indoor theater and he would go; he was fascinated by it."

William Beck would travel to schools and fire halls, toting his projector, to show movies. He and his wife Alice operated an indoor theater and were therefore already familiar with the movie business when they purchased the land at present-day Becky's and opened the Route 45 Drive-In in 1946. They charged a quarter per car and before moving to the old fashioned speaker posts, the sound came through two loudspeakers for the whole place.

"Someone stole a Bart Simpson head. To this day, we don't know where it went."

"Around 1981, he put in the radio transmitters in AM, so people couldn't steal or damage the speakers," said their son, Darrell Beck. "Then it went to FM and it's done that way still today."

In 1971, the highway number changed and the drive-in re-branded itself as Becky's.

The five Beck siblings bought the business in the early '80s, around 1982-3. "Our parents owned the business, so we were born into it," said Deppe. "Eventually, Dad wanted to retire."

The five of them (three boys, two girls) grew up helping out around the drive-in when they were younger. Deppe and her sister, Mary Mayberry, would sell tickets.

"I hung out every night because my parents were always over here," said Deppe. "Last night I saw lightning bugs and it reminded me of how we would go out and chase them as kids."

Their mother Alice was known for her French fries. "She'd spend all day peeling potatoes and slicing them. They used to be fried in lard," said Deppe. "Now they just come in bags."

When it came time to pass the drive-in down, the siblings all had full-time jobs of their own. Cindy Deppe worked at the post office. Mary Mayberry is a teacher in Lancaster. Dale Beck passed away in 1997. Dennis Beck runs his own electrical business. Darrell Beck retired from Bethlehem Steel in 1993 and has spent every year since helping the business thrive.

"If we hadn't had our own full-time jobs at that time, we might've thought it was crazy and let it go," said Beck. "But it evolved into us buying and running it and here we are how many years later and we're still here. It evolved into a business that kept us going."

Pennsylvania currently has the highest number of operating drive-ins; some are even open year-round. There was a time when there were drive-ins all over the Lehigh Valley, before shopping centers started buying their land right out from under them. Now there are three left and Becky's is arguably the most popular. They've been voted the Best Drive-In in the Morning Call Readers' Choice Awards every year since the category was introduced in 2009. They've landed in Road Trip magazine and USA Today's Top Ten Drive-Ins list. So what's their advantage?

Beck explained, "First, we're cheaper than most indoor houses with reasonable prices both for tickets and food. Then you're getting two movies for the price of one. And I also think it's nice that kids can come in their PJs. During the first movie, they might be a little rambunctious, but by the second one, they're passed out and Mom and Dad can enjoy some quiet time."

He continued, "We try to keep the place clean and neat. We have a good product, quality sound and equipment. Friendly employees. We've updated where we had to. It's a battle to keep it in shape because of rain and the run-out. But we try to keep it comfortable for people, by keeping the smaller cars in front and big trucks in back. We get more positive than negative feedback; people understand that it's virtually impossible to get lines moving fast when 200 people all want to eat at the same time."



The Beck family in 2003.

Becky's is open May through October and Deppe said that they get regular new-timers from out of state almost every weekend. Capacity for their two screens combined is approximately 800 cars. It's not uncommon for them to sell out on weekends, and even still, people will find a way in.

"People will park anywhere just to see the movie. Or they'll park somewhere else and just walk in with chairs and blankets and sit in between the cars," laughed Deppe. "Sometimes at the end of the night, we have to walk around and wake people up."

As can be expected, people also try to sneak in. "We get calls from businesses nearby and they'll say, hey, we just saw some kids climbing into a trunk, they're headed your way," said Deppe. "Or we'll get kids that obviously look older than 12 trying to buy a kids ticket."

The more common thing people sneak in, however, is food. "Some drive-ins don't allow outside food or they charge extra for it," said Beck. "We tried to steer away from that, although there's times we think maybe we should. Like when a woman pulls up and has three pizza boxes in her lap! But we just hope that they'll also buy something from us, like soda or ice cream."

The Beck kids believe a lot of people come for the memories. They know of a few people who met at the drive-in and ended up getting married. Deppe said just last month, they projected a proposal onto the screen. When she said yes, everyone in the lot honked their horns for them. They've also projected birthday messages.

Kids are guaranteed a good time at Becky's. They've had moon bounces and pony rides, a mini fire engine makes the rounds before showtime, and sometimes even characters from the kids movies will pop up on the grounds. While this is usually a fun extra, problems always arise when you least expect them. "Someone stole a Bart Simpson head," laughed Deppe. "To this day, we don't know where it went. We expected it to show up in a parade somewhere."

Local schools will also sometimes receive free passes and there are report card nights, not to mention the occasional fireworks display.

Another big hit is their Dusk-to-Dawn marathons on Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends. Five movies play all night long and it only costs one dollar extra. "People bring tents and sofas and just camp out. They get pretty creative with the beds of pick-up trucks. Then they just try to stay awake. A lot of them do it, too," Deppe said.

Before they know it, it will be time for the Beck siblings to pass the drive-in down again. Darrell says he's already ready to retire, "My eyes are going, my hearing's going, everything's going!" he joked. "Pretty soon it'll be time to just say, who wants it?" They all want to see the place continue to thrive, for their parents' sake.

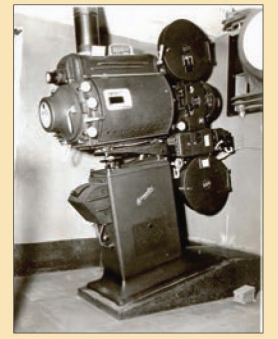
As their sister Mary wrote in a historical piece a few years ago, "Owning a drive-in is a labor of love. We all seem to love it."

Fun Fact

You can bring your pets to Becky's! Dogs receive a treat upon arrival from the ticket booth and Deppe said "the regulars" have grown to expect it.

How does it work?

Cindy Deppe's son, Christopher, explains film projection in the digital age. Becky's converted to digital in 2012.







"Before the new digital projector, this whole room was full. There were gigantic platters that held each movie. The movies came in on reels and we would have to put them together. It would take about an hour and a half to assemble a movie, now it only takes about a half hour to ingest it.

The new previews come in on a flash drive that you feed through the server. They ship the movies on hard drives and you ingest them through the projector. This is 2K resolution. They go up to 4K, but I don't know how it could get much better. Our 35mm projectors lasted all the way from the '50s, but these are built to be obsolete in about five years. From what I hear, there's a light engine in here. They're now developing a laser engine, so they'll last longer.

Everything you see now is digital. The projector holds about four terabytes. Each movie is about 150 gigabytes and the projector can hold up to ten movies. They come in encrypted files and there are keys to unlock them that are only good for the amount of time they allow. There are digital watermarks displayed for about a fraction of a second. The audience would never notice them, but the film companies can track where they're being viewed. They cover all their bases [for anti-piracy]."