

Sky-Vue

When Sam Kirkland was ten years old, he went to work at the Sky-Vue Drive-In out on Highway 87, picking up trash, serving up Cokes, doing whatever needed to be done. He loved the place. He worked there all through high school. Then he went off to college for a while, then worked on jobs here and there around West Texas.

By the time he moved back to Lamesa in 1979, Sam had a wife and four kids and a job pumping wells for an oil company. The Sky-Vue was closed. People from Lamesa and the smaller towns around it had been going to the picture show there since 1948, but now it was a wreck. Weeds stood as high as the speaker poles. The asphalt ramps were cracked and crumbling. The snack bar was filthy and full of junk.

Sam couldn't stand it. He went and had a talk with Skeet Noret, who had built the Sky-Vue and still owned it. "I asked him if I could clean it up," Sam says. "I didn't want to see it looking the way it did. I had worked there all those years. Some things just grow on you."

Skeet gave his permission. So every day after he got home from the oil fields, Sam would take his lawnmower out to the theater and mow the ramps and try to tidy up the place. Sometimes his wife, Carolyn, and the kids would help him. It took sixteen weeks.

Then Skeet came out and had a look. "Hey, Sam," he said. "Why don't you open it up for the summer?"

"That was the summer of 1980," Sam says. "We were poor as church mice back then. Carolyn and I figured if we could make \$50 a weekend, it would really help our family. We opened it up. Our kids helped us, and we had two hired help. That summer has lasted for twenty-one years. We're still here. Business gets better and better."

In 1987, Sam and Carolyn bought the Sky-Vue from Skeet. They show first-run movies on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights all year,

and on Wednesday nights in the summer. Normally, they change the movie every week. But sometimes the distributor requires them to keep a big movie like Planet of the Apes or Jurassic Park III for two weeks. When that happens, Sam shows a double feature during the second week.

“You can’t expect people to come back the second week to see the same movie again,” Sam says. “But, if I add a second feature, a lot of them will return. Tonight we’re giving them a John Wayne movie on top of Jurassic Park III. We just throw that in. Big Jake. There’s no cost to it.”

Three-quarters of the crowd on this Saturday night will be from out of town, Sam says. They’ll drive fifty miles from Midland, sixty miles from Lubbock, seventy from Odessa, and from all the little towns between.

“They do it for nostalgia,” Sam says. “They’re trying to get back something they used to have or something they wish they had. They could see Jurassic Park III in Lubbock or Odessa or Midland. But they would have to go to one of them multiplexes and spend \$7.25 a head and a whole bunch of money for popcorn and Cokes. Here we charge \$4 to get in. Our snack bar has great food at great prices. Mom and Dad don’t have to hire a babysitter. Kids under six get in free. We want them to bring the kids. And we give them Big Jake for nothing.”

At a drive-in theater, he says, freedom is the number-one thing. “You can sit there in your lawn chair and gab all you want to. You can smoke if you want to. The kids can go to the playground and play during the movie. You can move around and visit with your neighbors. You can’t do any of that at a multiplex.”

In 1954, there were 388 drive-in theaters in Texas. Even the small towns had them. Now about a dozen remain. Lubbock and Midland and Odessa don’t have one. Lamesa, population 12,000, does.

It’s the only place on the South Plains where you can watch John Wayne and eat a Chihuahua at the same time.

The Chihuahua is a sandwich. Skeet Noret’s daddy invented it in 1951. “He was a good cook and liked to experiment with food,” Sam says. “He made this unusual new sandwich, and him and Skeet was

standing there tasting it and trying to think of a name for it. They thought they might call it the Monterrey. Then some Spanish girls walked by. One of them had on some real tight jeans. Two Spanish boys was walking behind them, and one of them looked at that girl and said, ‘Aaii, Chihuahua!’”

“Skeet’s dad said, ‘That’s it! That’s what we’ll name this sandwich!’”

The Norets liked the name so much they registered it as a trademark. The Chihuahua is served in a special sack with a picture of a pretty girl wearing a sombrero. The only place on earth you can buy one is at the Sky-Vue.

“We have specially made corn tortillas,” Sam says. “We fry them hard and crisp and flat. Then we put our special chili on one of them, and onions, if you like onions. Then we take raw cabbage and grate it and put it on there. Then we take our special pimento cheese and spread it on the other tortilla. Then we put the tortillas together. And we put a jalapeno pepper in the sack with it.”

“You keep it in the sack while you’re eating it,” Carolyn says. “If you don’t, it falls apart and grease slides down your arms.”

The regulars usually buy a side order of jalapeno corn fritters or poppers—jalapeno peppers stuffed with cheese and fried in a batter—to fill out their meal.

The Chihuahua has long been the most popular item at the snack bar. It sells for \$1.95. Carolyn and her ten snack bar helpers move about 500 of them a night. Sometimes they sell 100,000 in a year. “When Sam and I reopened the drive-in,” Carolyn says, “everybody asked us, ‘Are y’all going to have Chihuahuas again?’ It’s the Lamesa crowd that loves them. The out-of-town people don’t eat Chihuahuas much.”

They go for the box dinners of chicken strips, steak fingers, fried cod, or shrimp, served with fries, a corn fritter, toast, and a pickle. Or corn dogs or nachos or cheese sticks or giant dill pickles or funnel cakes or char burgers. Plus popcorn and soft drinks and candy. Nothing on the menu costs more than \$4.75 (the cod or shrimp box lunch), and some of the gum is a nickel.

Sam leaves the house at six-forty-five A.M. for his day job in the oil fields. At about nine-thirty, Carolyn drives to the Sky-Vue and puts the chili on the stove. She lights the steam table, cuts the cabbage for the Chihuahuas, then goes to the store for the corn fritter and funnel cake ingredients.

“The next thing you know, it’s two-thirty,” she says. “I get my char patties started and set things up. Sam gets here about three-thirty and helps with the cooking and or whatever else needs to be done.” That includes running the projector, patrolling the crowd, and mopping the snack bar floor at closing time. On double-feature nights, he doesn’t get home till twelve-thirty or one A.M.

At six P.M. in the summertime there’s still three hours of daylight left on the South Plains, but one of the hired help opens the box office. Sky-Vue Drive-In food is so popular that some people come to eat and don’t stay for the movie. Sam doesn’t charge them admission, so they have to enter the theater via a special lane and park in a designated fenced-in spot in front of the snack bar, isolated from the movie area. Sam keeps a watchful eye. They have to leave the theater as soon as they get their food.

By seven, the movie crowd is arriving. Drivers back their pickups onto the ramps and arrange folding aluminum lawn chairs and chaise longues in the beds. Others set up their chairs on the ground with their ice chests and food sacks alongside. Others sit inside their cars, doors open, chatting with their neighbors. A small brown dog moves among them, greeting all.

Justin Wood and Tara Bynum have come down from Lubbock in the new red Dodge pickup that Justin got for high school graduation last spring. He and Tara are students at Texas Tech and thought a night at the old drive-in would be a fun date. But they forgot that the movie can’t start until the sun is down.

“We arrived in Lamesa way too early,” Tara says. “We drove all around town, but there isn’t much to see. So we found the Dollar General Store and bought some coloring books and crayons to occupy our time.”

She shows off her work. She's one of those people who colors within the lines.

Juanice Hirst, Janie New, and Kay Sherill are sitting in the bed of the pickup next to Justin's. Garry Smith is standing beside the truck. Kay is Janie's sister, and Juanice is Garry's sister. They've come down from Lubbock, too, Garry's treat.

"When we was young," Janie says, "the greatest thing was seeing how many people we could get in the trunk of our car and sneak them into the drive-in."

"Why, we would have them in the trunk and down on the floor," Juanice says. "We could get a whole crew in for the price of two or three people."

"Lots of good memories," Garry says.

The sun is sinking. Rays beam through purple clouds. A cool breeze has sprung up. Fifty kids or more are on the old steel-and-wood merry-go-round and the swings and the jungle gym, their reedy voices distinct and sweet in the fading light. Adults stand and sit in little bunches, visiting, as if they're at a huge family reunion. Jerry and Brenda Randall and their friend Amber Appleton arrive from Lubbock on their big Harleys and park on the back row. Eric and Melissa Price have come in from their farm to celebrate their second wedding anniversary at the Sky-View. They recently moved back to the Plains from North Carolina and are happy to be home. "North Carolina's nice," Eric says, "but it's got so many trees you can't see anything." The food line inside the snack bar already stretches to the door. It won't shorten for hours.

Jackie and Darla Stidham have driven over from O'Donnell in a perfect black 1955 Ford Crown Victoria that belongs to Darla's dad. Their son Gary and his wife, Teresa, and Jackie's mother, Katherine, have come along. Jackie and Darla have been married for twenty-seven years. They've been coming to the Sky-View since they were teenagers.

"When we was dating, we parked on the back row and didn't watch the movies," Jackie says. "Now we park up here on the front and we watch them."

Darla smiles.

"They used to have double features here all the time," Jackie says,

“and in between the movies we would play bingo for money. And a long time ago, they used to get a band up on top of the snack bar and have live music.”

Sometimes the music was supplied by a skinny high school kid from Lubbock named Buddy Holly and a couple of friends he called the Crickets.

At eleven minutes before nine o’clock, Sam cranks up the projector, and Jurassic Park III begins. A bigger, badder dinosaur chases people through the jungle. It’s a short movie. By ten-fifteen it’s done. Early leavers start their engines and steer toward the exit. Car lights flicker across the screen.

By ten-thirty the intermission crowd is thinning out of the snack bar, but Sam Lujan still waits his turn at the counter. He’s from Seminole. The opening credits of Big Jake are moving on the screen. Sam Lujan is watching them through the door.

“I never thought I’d get to see John Wayne on the big screen at a drive-in theater,” he says. “This is the reason I came tonight.”

An older man looks at him in amazement. It’s true. At thirty-five, Sam Lujan is too young to have seen the Duke on anything bigger than a TV tube. The older man shakes his head. This is probably why the world has gone to hell.

On the screen, a rancher and his cowhands are about to lynch a humble sheepherder. They’ve laid the noose around the man’s neck. But Big Jake is riding. He’s coming to the rescue.

“I love John Wayne,” Sam Lujan says. “My boys love John Wayne, too.”

Big Jake is riding. He’s a big man. His horse is big. The theme music is big western music with lots of French horns. The Sky-View screen is eighty feet tall and 120 feet long. Tonight Big Jake is as big as he was meant to be.