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Drive-Ins

Recently, several drive-in hamburger stands called Sonics and Bullets have opened in Richmond, in an effort to bring to the 1990's a phenomenon a lot of us grew up with. At least in Dallas, the early prototypes of those drive-ins were successful around town in the twenties and thirties. They were very popular with young people, either dating or in groups. Come to think of it, cars filled with young families were not uncommon either.



Long before I reached a dating age, I found a visit to the local Weber's Root Beer Stand one of the most pleasant things that our family did not do often enough as a part of our Sunday afternoon drive. The parking lot around the Oak Lawn Weber's would be filled with parked cars containing families or couples, maybe even a stray car with a single occupant. The lure at Weber's was the ice-cold root beer served in thick, ice-frosted glass mugs. Just the sight of an ice-covered mug was enough to cool me off. I loved to place one finger on the outside of the mug for as long as I could stand the cold. When I removed the finger, its image remained on the glass, melted into the surrounding frost. The anticipation of the cold root beer was a summer's dream; the first taste was the height of pleasurable fulfillment of that anticipated thrill. And the taste of the frigid, golden-brown liquid was so pleasing that we sometimes failed to drink slowly and savor the flavor. Drinking too hastily usually resulted in a brief, sharp headache right between the eyes. I was triumphant when I graduated from the child's size small mug to the adult mug, for several years unmanageable with just one hand. We used to spend time speculating how the mugs were frosted; no matter how many people were crowding the drive-in lot, the mugs were always fully frosted. Not only that, no matter how crowded the Weber's lot was, we were always waited on quickly. All that was needed was for the driver to extend his arm with the proper number of fingers pointing upward. Almost immediately, the car-hop would materialize by the driver's window to attach a tray holding the requisite number of mugs. What a treat. It was fast. Weber's sold nothing but mugs of root beer.



Once when I was six or seven, I was lured by an ad in a magazine to order directions for brewing root beer at home. Mother and Daddy humored me in the attempt. I carefully read the directions, assembled the necessary ingredients, including some glass bottles and some corks, and started the slow process of duplicating at home that wonderful, cold Weber's root beer. The stuff fermented, erupted from the bottles, smelled awful, and never became drinkable. Later, I discovered that *no* bottled root beer could approach the taste of Weber's in a frosted mug.



The Pig Stand was another drive-in in Dallas; the stands were scattered throughout every suburban neighborhood and were what we might call "full service" drive ins, more nearly like the fast-food stands of today. These eateries took their name from their trademarked barbecued pork sandwich (not in any way like Bill's barbecue in Richmond). Hamburgers and other sandwiches were also on the menu, along with bottled Coca Cola, Dr. Pepper, and Hire's Root Beer. Hire's didn't satisfy our Weber-educated palates any more than my failed brew did - the brown bottle just could not compete with the heavy, clear frosted mug. There probably were desserts at the Pig Stand, perhaps even something like a chocolate pie that many people found irresistible. However, our family didn't recognize that Pig Stand food existed beyond sandwiches and bottled drinks. But of course, the big

difference in the Pig Stand of those days and the McDonalds and Hardees of today was that the customers stayed in their cars to eat.

Early on, I became aware, on the rare occasions when our family went to the Pig Stand after dark - eating out was not something that our family often did - that the lot was usually occupied by dating couples. One of my proudest dating moments came the first time my date (was it Billy Brundidge, perhaps?) took me to a Pig Stand after we had been to a movie. That was a real date! Outside, with your windows rolled down and the metal tray attached to the driver's window, you could enjoy the company of your date with occasional bonus conversations with one of the adjacent cars.



The deciding factor seemed to be the weather which never seemed to be too hot in the summertime, especially after dark. Most of the drive-in lots had wooden canopies over the parking spaces, protecting the diners from an overhead sun. A car had a higher roof then, and its cloth composition didn't radiate heat into the passenger compartment with the force that we enjoy today. Not only that, we didn't have air conditioning to use as a standard to judge by. I do remember times when Paul and I would go inside the Pig Stand for a post-basketball game hot chocolate because the car was too cold. On those occasions we had no need for other people to talk to.

We haven't tried Sonics or Bullets yet and probably won't. Too many other people didn't try Sonics, it seems, and the one near us closed before hot weather arrived this year. The attraction at Sonics, in addition to the car-hop service, was the fact that the car hops skated between the kitchen and the cars. The nostalgia value of a drive-in wasn't sufficient to survive the nineties' desire for the comfort of air conditioning plus the ultra-fast service to be found inside McDonald's or Hardee's.