

*Extra Tasty and Fried the Way You Like It!:
Butte's Historic Drive-in Restaurants*

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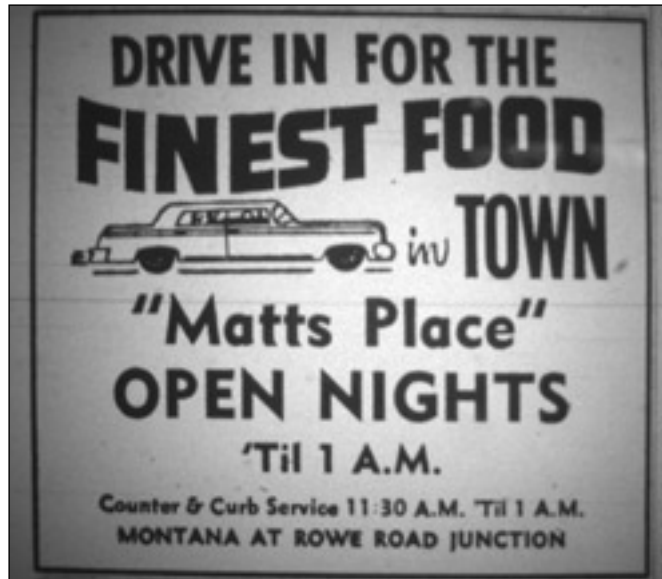
Butte displays some stunning examples of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century architecture, but sometimes the least imposing building houses the best treasure. Just south of the junction of South Montana Avenue and Interstate 90 on Placer Street stands a white, two-story, vernacular Craftsman-style building with green trim and large picture windows; a menu attached to the wall is outlined by neon tubing, which also graces the eaves of the place. A neon sign and lighted star on the roof announce it as Matt's Place, a certifiable Montana treasure that hearkens back to a different time when, as one man grumbled, "people with cars are so lazy that they don't want to get out of them to eat."¹ In this particular case, though, you'd be crazy not to get out of the car and walk a few feet to eat inside. Everything about Matt's suggests the 1950s, the golden age of the drive-in restaurant in Montana.

Walking in the door of Matt's Place is like taking a step back in time. Not much has changed, including its menu, since it opened in 1931. More than seventy years ago, Butte residents enjoyed Matt's famous Nutburger, its better-than-sex French fries, and the milkshakes thick enough to walk on just as much as their descendants savor them today. Customers sit on stools around a short,



Matt's Place, a certifiable Montana treasure. Photograph by Jon Axline.

U-shaped Formica counter with chrome trim, which is presided over by a chrome-finished, backlit soda fountain and Coca-Cola dispenser from the early 1950s. The fountain is the center attraction for patrons fortunate to find a place to sit during the busy noon-hour rush. Knotty pine paneling that was installed in 1950 and two large backlit photographs of Montana scenery provide additional ambiance. Presiding over the lunch crowd is ninety-four-year old Mae Laurence, who went to work as a waitress for the establishment's first owner, Matt Korn, in 1936. Seven years later, in 1943, Mae and her late husband, Louis, purchased the business from Korn and moved into the second-floor apartment over the business. She's been there ever since, preserving the quality of the



Matt's Place ran this ad in the June 5, 1965 Montana Standard-Post. Courtesy Montana Historical Society Research Center.

place, its traditions, and the best food in Montana.²

Upon entering Matt's, the aroma of frying burgers, homemade French fries, the 1950s decor, and the excitement in the voices of the patrons make you want to try everything on the menu. The last time I had the great fortune to eat there, I wolfed down a hamburger with a fried egg on it and relished each and every French fry to the point where I wrapped some of them up in a napkin to take home to my wife; they didn't make it past Elk Park. To be honest, I don't think I've ever had a bad meal

in Butte, but Matt's was exceptional. If all the drive-in restaurants in Butte were this good, then no wonder the Mining City had so many of them back in the day.

The first modern drive-in restaurant in the United States opened in Dallas, Texas, in 1921. The Pig Stand was the first restaurant built specifically to serve meals to motorists in their cars. The roadside eatery was the brainchild of Dallas physician Reuben W. Jackson and entrepreneur Jessie Kirby. The restaurant was an immediate success, and the number of Pig Stands mushroomed throughout Texas. Although the drive-in restaurant was a Texas innovation, it reached its penultimate form in California and became strongly associated with the freewheeling lifestyle of that state's citizens.³

The relatively mild climate and informal Southern California lifestyle proved ideal for the drive-in restaurant. In 1922, Lawrence Frank, Joe Montgomery, and Walter Van deKamp opened the first California drive-in near Griffith Park in Los Angeles. The first Montgomery Country Inn was followed by the Tam O'Shanter, A & W, Big Boy, Carpenter's Sandwiches, and Chicken in the Rough automobile-oriented eateries. To attract customers and build a readily identifiable business, drive-ins began sporting whimsical and streamlined modern architectural designs that would characterize this type of business all over Southern California and eventually throughout the United States.



An advertisement for Truzzollino's famous tamales. From the 1909 Butte City Directory. Courtesy Montana Historical Society Research Center.

For many on-the-go Texans and Californians, drive-ins ideally suited their lifestyles. Consequently, the number of drive-ins boomed, becoming a firmly entrenched part of the American popular culture. By 1927, drive-ins based on the California models had spread throughout the United States, catering to both regional and national tastes in food.

Interestingly, the first drive-ins catered mostly to families and offered a full-range of menu items tailored specifically to what middle-class families usually ate for dinner. Chicken and pork dinners were the primary fare, but all-American hamburgers were the hot menu items that drew many to the roadside eateries. It wasn't until the post-World War II years that drive-ins became indelibly associated with teenage cruisers—much to the chagrin of many of the establishments' owners.⁴

The appearance of the drive-in restaurant coincided with the rise of the American car culture after World War I. As Americans made the transition from the horse to the car, the switch opened the field to new businesses that catered specifically to motorists. In addition to the drive-in, other business opportunities included service stations, convenience stores, and tourist cabin camps, like those made famous in Frank Capra's classic 1934 Oscar-winning film *It Happened One Night*. Drive-in restaurants certainly filled a need and quickly became part of America's popular culture. Interestingly, in the days before the national franchise chains, drive-ins catered to local gastronomical tastes. In the South, roadside pig and fried chicken stands were popular, while in the Northeast motorists stopped to order cuisine popular in that region. It was in the West, though, that drive-ins became inextricably associated with hamburgers, hotdogs, chicken, French fries, and milk shakes. Montana's drive-ins did not buck the regional trend.

It is difficult to determine when the first drive-in restaurant opened in Montana, but Matt's was certainly among the first. Bud Ferrat operated a curb service near the Northern Pacific Railway depot in Helena in 1933. Billings may have had a drive-in, the Black & White Hamburger Stand, as early as 1932, while Missoula's first roadside eatery, the aptly named Drive-Inn, didn't appear until 1945. Before World War II, all of Montana's drive-ins were small, privately owned outfits, but after

the war the roadside landscape changed dramatically. Some communities had mostly mom-and-pop drive-ins, whereas others were dominated by a fair number of franchise restaurants, especially in Billings, Great Falls, and Missoula.

I vividly remember Sandy's on Grand Avenue in Billings, with its brilliantly lighted space-age building design, as well as the Frostop's huge spinning root beer mug in Billings Heights. All of the restaurants featured an abundance of neon, lighted menu boards, and various styles of canopy roofs covering patrons' automobiles. Some restaurants, such as A & W, relied on speaker boxes at individual stalls; others had drive-up ramps, as at the Tenth Avenue South Burgermaster in Great Falls and Big Boy Drive-in on Broadwater in Billings; and at Matt's in Butte and Gertie's in Helena, carhops took orders and brought food out to the car.⁵

The Mining City, along with other Montana communities, has had a taste for takeaway food since at least the early 1900s. Considering the size and ethnicity of Butte's population, street vendors undoubtedly peddled food in the Uptown during the early twentieth century. In many communities, including Butte and Havre, tamales seemed to be a popular fast food. Interestingly, though, the tamale vendors were Italians and emigrants from the Middle East. In 1905, two businesses peddled tamales in uptown Butte, including Salvator Truzzolino on Mercury Street. By 1910, the

number of tamale hawkers in Butte had grown to five, including Truzzolino, Shadad Khan, and Marif Khari.

Within a few years, however, Butte's eateries began to stretch south down Montana and Harrison avenues toward the highway, where a new, mobile clientele also demanded good food at a reasonable cost. Most of Butte's tourist camps and, later, motels were located south of Butte on Harrison and Montana avenues. Fortunately, Matt's Place was located on U.S. Highway 10 South just across the road from the Montana Tourist Park, which later became the Kozy Korner Motel. Other Butte drive-ins were also located near motels, which greatly benefited the already thriving businesses.

Matt's fulfilled a need in the new automobile age, and it appears to have been the first drive-in in 1933, but that fact can't be confirmed from the information provided in the city directories. By 1941, only one other restaurant, Whimpy's Palace, advertised itself as a drive-in. While drive-in restaurants and roadside stands were common on the West Coast and in the South in the 1930s, the craze didn't really hit Montana until the postwar years. By 1952, Butte had five drive-ins, including Matt's, Bill's (the renamed Whimpy's Palace), the Copper Hill, Kingsburgers, and Scotty's.

From there, the number of establishments steadily mushroomed, reaching a peak of eleven restaurants in 1966. Most of Butte's drive-ins were family or individually owned; other than A & W Root Beer

Drive-in, there were no franchise joints in the city. Most were located along Harrison Avenue, with others scattered on Montana Avenue, Placer Street (which was old U.S. Highway 10 until the construction of Interstate 90 in the early 1960s), and Front Street. They went by the colorful names of Copper Hill, Kingsburgers, Leon & Eddie's, Robie's In & Out, Merry Jane's, Sully's, and Tinkerbelle's, to name just a few. In 1939, Bill Sebena opened Whimpy's Palace at 2101 Harrison Avenue. He changed the name to Bill's Drive-in in the late 1940s and then went on to open other drive-ins in Three Forks and Manhattan. All of the Butte-based eateries depended on good home-cooked food, clean conditions, and friendly service to bring customers back again and again.

Besides Matt's, one other drive-in sparks a resonance in the memories of the people who patronized it: the Donnabelle Drive-In.⁶ Owned by Butte entrepreneur Park Davis, the Donnabelle opened at 3301 Harrison Avenue in 1956. Like Matt's, it was a relatively small place, with two-thirds of the building occupied by the kitchen and the remaining space open for seating—a few tables and a counter. Hungry Butte residents drove up to the building on the Harrison side of the establishment and used an intercom to order food, perhaps one of the delicious hamburgers, a “killer milk shake,” and French fries smothered in dark gravy, a favorite among teenagers in the Mining City. Davis and later owner Jeannie Davis hired youngsters to peel

potatoes in the basement for the fries. One patron, Bob Lubick, remembers that the owners strove to create at the Donnabelle the same atmosphere as at Matt's Place. An advertisement in the March 2, 1958, *Montana Standard* boasted that “when it comes to food . . . all kinds of delicious food, the Donnabelle Drive-In is the place. Everything from tea to T-bones expertly boxed to go!” The roadside eatery also specialized in sandwiches and “acronized” chicken, with a sixteen-piece sack selling for only \$3.50. By the late 1970s, the restaurant was owned by Jack Hanley and was the “Home of the Wottaburger.”⁷

Unfortunately, by the 1980s, changes in family lifestyles that required faster food delivery, an increase in juvenile delinquency, and changes in food preparation technology contributed to a decline in the number of traditional drive-in restaurants. Some franchise companies, such as Sandy's, were absorbed by national fast food conglomerates, while others, such as Frostop, simply disappeared from the roadside landscape. The locally owned establishments fared a little better and were able to hold out longer against McDonald's, Burger King, and Hardee's. The number of drive-ins in Butte peaked in 1966 at eleven drive-ins, located mostly on Harrison Avenue. But a little over a decade later, there were only four still operating in the Mining City, including the venerable Matt's Place, the model for all the Butte drive-ins. Donnabelle's closed in 1977. In the late 1980s, I had the great fortune of becoming addicted

to the barbecue beef sandwiches at the Red and White Dairy on South Montana across from the old Milwaukee Road Railroad depot. But, alas, by 1993 even it was gone.⁸

Today, Matt's Place is still open, serving the same excellent fare it always has. It is living history at its best. To step in the front door, plop down on a chrome-

trimmed stool, and order anything from the menu is truly an experience, one that many have enjoyed over the years. Unlike the sterile interiors of McDonald's, Burger King, and Arby's and their assembly-line food, Matt's is a step back into a time when drive-ins were new, the food was excellent, and the customer service was genuine.

¹ Michael Karl Witzel, *The American Drive-in* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International, 1994), 25.

² Jon Axline and Ellen Baumler, Matt's Place (24SB624), National Register of Historic Places Nomination, March 29, 2001; Andrea McCormick, "Drive-in Serves Up Morsels of Yesterday," (Butte) *Montana Standard*, July 27, 1980.

³ Witzel, *American Drive-in*, 25–26; Jim Heiman, *Car Hops and Curb Service: A History of American Drive-in Restaurants, 1920–1960* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1996), 12, 14, 16.

⁴ Witzel, *American Drive-in*, 73, 78–79; Heiman, *Car Hops*, 16, 17–18, 20, 104–7.

⁵ Ellen Baumler and Dave Shors, *Lost Places, Hidden Treasures: Rare Photographs of Helena, Montana*

(Helena: Farcountry, 2002), 60; R. L. Polk and Co., Billings, Butte, Great Falls, and Missoula City Directories, 1930–1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁶ Polk, Butte City Directories, 1930–1980; Obituary: William J. "Bill" Sebena Sr., *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, July 8, 2008.

⁷ Polk, Butte City Directories, 1956–1980; interview of Bub Lubick by Jon Axline, July 31, 2008; advertisements, (Butte) *Montana Standard*, July 4, 1957; March 2, 1958, February 11, 1977.

⁸ By the mid-1950s, the advent of the post-World War II youth culture and the youngsters' access to automobiles became a significant problem for owners of family-oriented drive-in restaurants. Teenagers hung out at

drive-ins, took up valuable parking space, and didn't spend much money. Add to that situation litter, brawls, loud music, and cruising, and it took a toll on the drive-ins as families began to stay away and to patronize establishments that didn't cater as much to teens. Although the media suggests that the 1950s and 1960s were the golden age of the drive-in, the problems with teenagers and juvenile delinquency actually contributed to the decline of the drive-in. The vacuum left by the demise of those establishments was filled by McDonald's, Burger King, Arby's, and a host of other franchise places. Heiman, *Car Hops*, 104–10; Polk, Butte City Directories, 1960–2000.