

## EARLY DAYS OF THE PUTNAM DRIVE-IN THEATRE REMEMBERED

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Buster Bowen of Baxter walks along orange tape that now barricades the area where the Putnam Drive-in Theatre and marquee once stood. The marquee was torn down by accident last month. Several wooden posts (in the background) are the only remnants of the theater that stood for 55 years and that Bowen helped build.

Herald-Citizen Photo. Camille Fliss

**PUTNAM COUNTY** -- Buster Bowen was just 21-years-old when the Putnam Drive-in Theatre was first built.

It took about five months of construction during one of the hottest summers in 1952, and Buster -- now 76 years old -- helped dig post holes and build the screen that stood off Highway 70 for 55 years.

Although the theater has been closed now for years, its remains are now gone as well -- the screen and marquee were torn down last month -- Buster still remembers the good ole days, when it cost 50 cents a person to watch a movie and the drive-in was one of the most popular things in town.

"Cars used to be waiting at the ticket office for the first show to end," Buster said. "Kids in Baxter used to hitchhike to the show, sit in the grass and watch and then hitchhike back."

### THEATER'S HISTORY

The Putnam Theatre was actually Cookeville's second attempt at a drive-in, Buster said. The original opened in 1948 -- one of only 15 in the state at the time -- and was built behind the Dipsy Doodle off Peach Orchard Road, not far from where its newer version once operated.

Buster was an employee there, and says Benton Young -- the man who started the drive-in -- was approached a few years later by a man named Stacy Wilhite, then-president of Mid-South Theater, who planned on building a bigger and better theater in the area, with or without Young's support.

"Stacy's father owned a bunch of drive-in theaters in the South, and he wanted Benton to either sell it to him or he would build a new one and run him out of business," Buster said.



"Benton said he'd try to work out a deal. He owned some land, Stacy put up the money to build the screen, and Benton already had the projection equipment."

And so a new theater was built, and Buster and about 10 other men worked until it was completed in August 1952. Buster stayed on as the projection operator, running two shows each night.

*(Picture above taken on 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2007 by Audrey J. (Denny) Lambert)*

"I was already the projection operator at the old drive-in, so I moved over there and started to work," he said.



Herald-Citizen Photos/Camille Fless  
Ronnie Swift, left, vice president of Mid-South Machine, and company President Barry Wilson stand over a portion of the marquee to the old Putnam County drive-in theater that was torn down by mistake Thursday.

### **Putnam Drive-in marquee is accidentally destroyed**

Buster says he can't remember the very first movie he showed on that screen, but did remember the idea of a drive-in -- both new and old -- was a success in Cookeville.

"Everybody at first was thrilled over having a drive-in," Buster said. "People had never heard of a drive-in theater when Benton decided he wanted to build one."

Buster only worked at the new drive-in for two weeks, but said it eventually closed for a lack of business, which had seemed to

become a nationwide trend. Once a booming industry, more than drive-in 100 screens closed between 1978-1988 for various reasons, including the increase of land value for resale, aging of owners and the availability of new forms of entertainment, such as video, multiplexes, etc., according to the United Drive-in Theatre Owners Association.

And just last month, the county, and Buster, saw the theater disappear completely as both the screen and marquee were torn down -- the marquee by accident -- and only the wooden posts that once held up the screen remain at the site, scattered among the grounds.

"I hated to see it go. That's 55 years of Putnam County history," Buster said. "It just doesn't look the same."

<http://www.ajlambert.com>



**Demolition crews worked Thursday and Friday to tear down portions of the old movie screen at the Putnam Drive-in Theatre. A lack of communication resulted in the historic marquee being torn down as well.**