

# Screen fades to black at the Starlite Drive-in

By JAMIE MARKS  
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The last picture show faded from the screen Sunday at the Starlite Drive-in Theatre on Pennsylvania Avenue.

An elementary school will be built on the site, named after the theater but spelled the more traditional way — Starlight Elementary School.

With a trace of nostalgia in his voice, owner Hank Garcia of Aptos said, "We started in 1975 with a Walt Disney feature and we closed with a Walt Disney feature. I kind of liked that touch."

"Bambi," the Walt Disney classic about a young deer who grows up to be king of the forest, drew large crowds to the Starlite in its final week, despite the \$7 per car charge, according to Garcia. The price of admission was a little higher than the usual ticket price.

Garcia said, try as he might, he couldn't remember what played on the screen the first day he owned the Starlite.

The drive-in opened in 1949 with 600 spaces, but Garcia reduced the number when he bought it in 1975. "I thought 600 was too big. The cars were too far apart," Garcia said.

Through the years, it had become a favorite hangout with teen-agers, yet the Starlite still drew a more established crowd of older couples and young families.

The Starlite's closing is more than the end of an era in

Watsonville. It reduces the number of drive-in theaters in Santa Cruz County to just one — the Skyview on Soquel Drive. That, too, is facing the wrecking ball if plans for an auto plaza are realized.

Garcia has ambitious plans for the future. He owns the Fox Theatre in downtown Watsonville and several theaters "down south," he said. One of his goals is to convert the historic Fox Theatre into a quality movie theater for second-run movies.

"I'd like to keep the prices moderate and run it like that woman does in Capitola (the Capitola Theater)," Garcia said. Because of the proximity of the competing Pajaro Valley Showplace on East Lake Avenue to the Fox, Garcia said he won't be able to show first-run movies.

A group of civic leaders is also hoping to generate citywide support for buying the Fox Theatre from Garcia for a civic center.

Garcia said he's also "still thinking about" building a four-screen theater at the Crossroads Shopping Center on Main Street near Green Valley Road. The shopping center is under construction by C/D/M Corp. of Watsonville.

But seeing a movie in a theater isn't quite the same as snuggling up in a car with a loved one while simultaneously fidgeting with the sound box and defogging the windshield.

Maybe movie critic Joe Bob Briggs is right. There's a conspiracy to rid this great nation of ours of drive-in theaters.