



## **WHERE'S THE MAJORETTE?**

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"Where's the Majorette?" That's the question I was asked in the spring of 2018 when I took my mother through the Missouri History Museum, part of a belated day out that I had been promising as a birthday present for weeks. Her question came while touring one of the permanent exhibitions upstairs, one that featured a small, walk-through model of the city of St. Ann circa mid-20th century. I was confused at first, but she quickly explained that no depiction of St. Ann could be considered complete without the locally famous drum majorette that had guarded the entrance to the drive-in movie theater she remembered patronizing as a child.

I was forced to admit that I had never heard of such a thing, and had no idea as to the fate of her beloved baton twirling childhood friend. Worse yet, I got busy and failed to get back to her with any of the information that she asked me for that day. Since this weekend was Mother's Day, and we are all technically still sheltering in place, I decided that the best gift I could give her under the circumstances was an answer to her query.

Although the first patented drive-in movie theater debuted in New Jersey in 1933, the height of their popularity did not occur until the 1950s and 1960s, primarily because they were such a good entertainment option for families and for young people who were dating. In fact, in their infancy, drive-ins charged only 25 cents per car. At the peak of the drive-in era, there were approximately 4,000 of the outdoor theaters scattered throughout the country.

St. Louis was home to at least seven successful drive-in theaters during the 1950s and 1960s, but the one Mom was referring to that day is St. Ann's Airway Drive-In. Operated at first by General Cinema, and later by Wehrenberg, the four-screen theater was located at 10634 Saint Charles Rock Road. The venue was large enough to accommodate nearly 1,000 cars in its heyday, and is still remembered fondly by long-time St. Ann residents, as well as those who left the area years ago, like my mother.

“As a child, I was fascinated by her baton twirling,” Mom told me. “I never grew tired of watching her perform. I can still see her in my mind’s eye, repeating the same movements over and over again.”

St. Ann said goodbye to the theater in 1984, by which time the drive-in craze had pretty much come to an end all across the country. In fact, there are only about 300-400 of them remaining in the country today. The theater itself became a shopping center, and it passed through the hands of various owners during the ensuing decades. What matters more than what happened to the space itself is that the treasured majorette, famous not only for her twirling baton, but also for her moving legs, was preserved in her traditional spot out of respect and sentiment. While more people than Mom have asked about her location over the years, and this isn’t the first time the question or its answer have appeared in print, there still seems to be this underlying suspicion among those not in the know, or who no longer visit the area, that the figure has disappeared, or that the one currently in place is not the original. Consider those theories dispelled.



I didn’t know it then, but mom’s question was a timely one, as 2018 marked a year of transition for the majorette, one that found locals nervous about her future. Having rested safely atop the Shop’n Save sign at the Airway Centre in St. Ann for some time, it looked as though the icon might finally have to pack her bags when Schnucks purchased many of the Shop ‘n Save locations in the area. Amid such concern from the residents, however, Schnucks promised to keep the majorette firmly in place, no matter what other changes the shopping center might experience. Two years later, that promise still stands, as does the majorette, which is often confused with a similar figure that still adorns the site of the former Campus Drive-In Theater in San Diego.

This may not be news to those who still reside in the area. Regardless, I hope it comes as welcome relief to people like Mom, people who have spent the majority of their adult lives elsewhere, but from time to time look back with nostalgia on their days in St. Louis and wonder if any of the images they remember from childhood have managed to endure, or if all that remains are the memories themselves.

Happy Mother’s Day, Mom! Your majorette is safe and sound.