



## *HE IS RISEN*

### **SUNRISE SERVICES AT THE DRIVE-IN**

Christians everywhere have long enjoyed special Easter sunrise services to celebrate the Risen Christ. Among the more notable in America are large outdoor public services at the Theater of the Red Rocks near Denver, the Hollywood Bowl in California, and the Hawaiian Punch Bowl near Honolulu. The most popular and publicized Easter sunrise service in Illinois takes place near Alto Pass, a tiny town in southern Illinois. There, beneath the large Bald Knob porcelain cross which can be seen for miles around, many thousands greet the rising sun and worship each year on Easter morn.

Outdoor sunrise services were popular in the Springfield area during the fifties. The city's Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Council of Churches sponsored outdoor services at Lake Springfield for several years; a floating barge served as the stage, and local public high schools provided the Easter choir music.

It was during the same era that Trinity and other area Missouri

Synod congregations embarked on a unique concept - Easter Sunrise Services at the local drive-in. Other central Illinois churches followed the practice and both Jacksonville and Peoria held drive-in Easter sunrise services.

The Springfield Drive-In Theater was used for our Easter sunrise services. It was a large drive-in located at By-Pass 66 and East Cook Street (now Dirksen Parkway and Singer Avenue). Its use was donated by the Frisina Amusement Company with the provision that we pay the wages of the employees who helped with the parking. Beginning in 1951 Trinity provided the leadership and most of the volunteer efforts to make these services big successes during the 1950's. In addition to Springfield's four Missouri Synod churches (Trinity, Immanuel, Holy Trinity, and Concordia), congregations from Athens, Auburn, Chatham, Edinburg, Farmingdale, New Berlin, Newmansville, Petersburg, Pleasant Plains, Riverton, and Taylorville co-sponsored the services. When Our Savior's began

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*“Tell of all his wonderful acts!”*

PSALMS 105:2

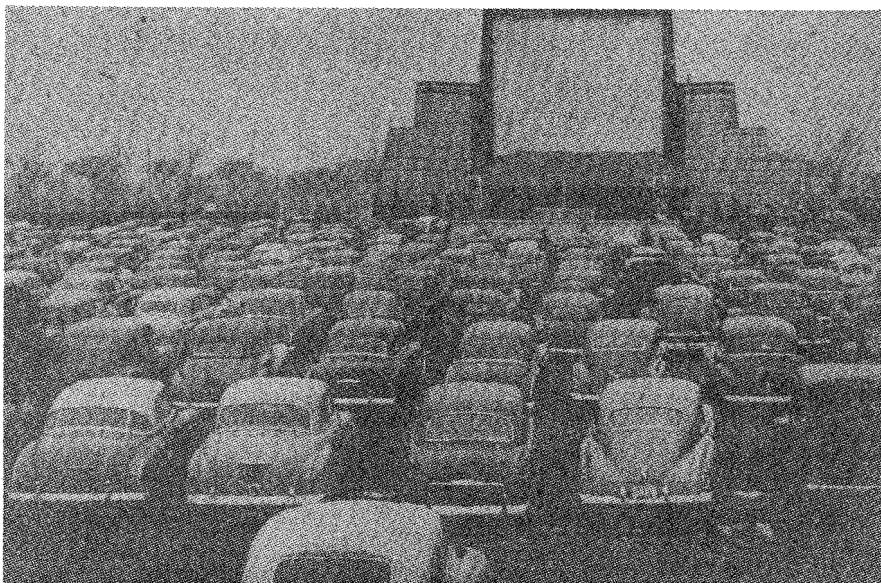
services, they also joined.

The weather was always a major concern, and fair mornings seemed to be the exception. On at least one occasion a wet heavy snowfall had to be contended with. Windy weather was a major problem for the hardy crew of volunteer men who would arrive at 2:00 AM to help erect the tent. The tent, rented from Armbrusters each year for \$100, was provided to protect the participants from the elements. It was open in front and covered the stage, which was really the roof of the concession building. No nails or spikes could be used on the roof, so sandbags were used to hold the poles in place, and considerable ingenuity was used to keep the tent up. It was taken down immediately after the services.

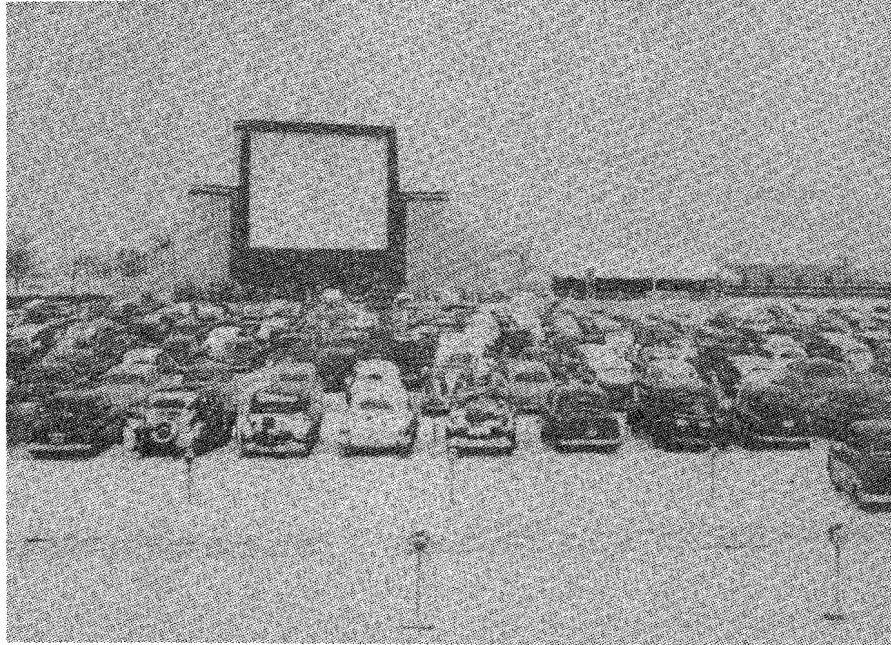
Considerable imagination also went into decorating the stage. Although it varied over the years, it usually consisted of a large white

cross fronted by a "HE IS RISEN" sign. Two large panels of plywood, painted to resemble Gothic stained glass windows, were placed on each side of the stage to give it a "churchly" touch. Chairs for the choir, the assisting clergy, and the main speaker were placed on the roof along with a lectern and microphone. Easter lilies were sometimes added.

At 5:00 AM the choir members and other participants would arrive, gather in the concession area, and would shiver, stamp their feet, and sip on hot coffee and chocolate to ward off the cold. A final short rehearsal would be held before all the participants climbed the wooden stairs to the stage on the roof. In the first years the microphones proved to be inadequate and the choir, often competing with a howling wind, could barely be heard in the cars. Later the quality improved considerably. The organ music for the prelude and to accompany the



The Drive-In Sunrise services were well attended.



Even a heavy snowfall failed to dampen Easter spirits.

hymns was pre-recorded.

Trinity's principal, *William Wittmer*, was the chief organist and choir director although the role was shared by others over the years. In the sixties, Trinity's *Milo Lombard* performed the duties. The choir was a combined adult choir from the participating churches. Trinity's school choir pre-recorded Easter anthems to be used as pre-service music. Also, Mr. Wittmer found that if he had the children sing along when he recorded the organ music for the hymns, the people in the cars found it easier to join in.

The clergy came from the participating churches, and both *Pastors Sommerfeld and Niemoeller*

participated. Seminary professors *Clarence Spiegel* and *Martin Steege*, who were Trinity members, also assisted. The main speakers were chosen carefully and included synodical figures, campus ministers, Seminary professors, and other notables.

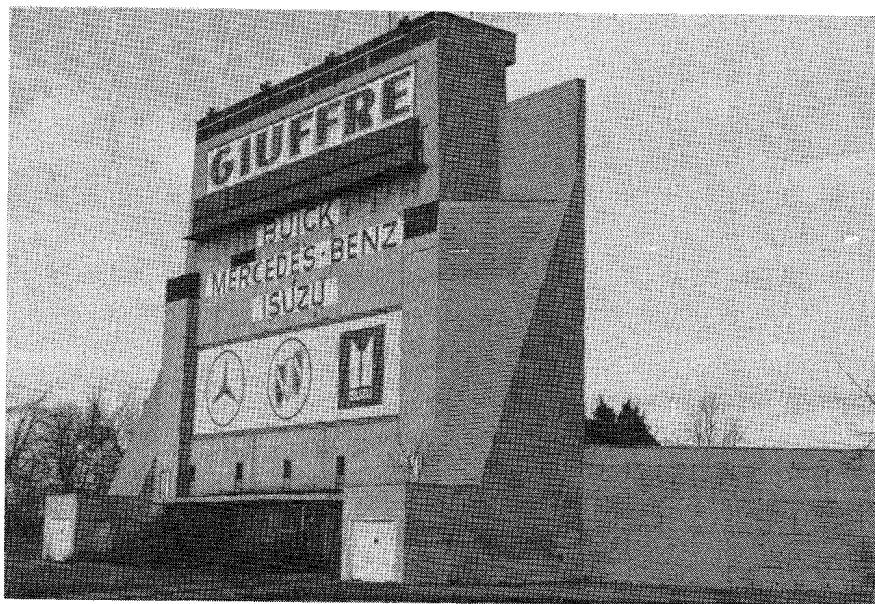
Depending on the date Easter would fall, it might still be dark when the worshipers would begin to stream into the theater in their autos. Directed to a spot by theater personnel, they would hang the individual speakers in their cars. Warm and comfortable, they could enjoy the service - it was truly a unique experience. While the stage was in view from the individual autos, only those very near could actually discern the details of the action on the stage.

Many Trinity lay people worked hard for the Easter sunrise services. To get the initial impetus going, the efforts of *Lee Chapman* proved to be the driving force. Our archives contains a complete file on the correspondence Lee carried on to get every last detail taken care of. *Mart Wallner* was in charge of all the physical details that had to be tended to; and *Ed Kruegar*, a carpenter by trade, built the sturdy stairway to the roof. *Charles "Chic" Beatty* faithfully took care of the recordings while *Fred and Bob Volle* took care of all electrical concerns. *Joe and Lloyd Taylor* worked to provide ushers to pass out programs before the service and to collect questionnaires after the service. *Mrs. Walter Baepler* diligently took care of the publicity program.

Frisina also helped the publicity by including the sunrise service in their advertising. One bold ad proclaimed - TOMORROW 6 AM

EASTER SUNRISE SERVICE. It followed an ad for "Halls of Montezuma" with Richard Widmark and "Bedtime for Bonzo" starring Ronald Reagan. The movie was described as a "laff riot."

The Drive-In Easter Sunrise Service enjoyed several very successful years. 3850 people attended in 1952, and for several years the service was carried on the air waves. Slowly interest declined. When the drive-in theaters of America began to experience difficulties in their operations, the Missouri Synod churches felt it was time to discontinue the program, and they came to an end but not before establishing many firm and fond memories in the hearts of many Trinitarians. And who knows that after Judgment Day we may meet some souls who came to know Christ through the Easter Sunday Sunrise Drive-In Services.



The marquee of the Drive-In today