WHAT THE FIRE TOOK

Travis Burkett

By late November in Lamesa, the chill of autumn has already anchored itself into the landscape. Scattered trees have turned gangly and leafless. Thousands upon thousands of acres of cotton stalks are being stripped by heavy green equipment. The mornings are cold enough for a person's breath to billow out like cigarette smoke in the early dawn light. The sporadic snowfalls are tuning up, though the first won't fall for another week or so at least. West Texas is one of the windiest areas in the country, and it can make a middling chill slice like a straight razor.

On November 27, 2015, the morning after Thanksgiving, the streaky cloud cover matched the gray walls of the Sky-Vue Drive-In Theatre. Its large metal screen, painted white, looked like the sole remaining wall of a warehouse that fell in on itself long ago. If the movie showing was set at nighttime, like a dark horror flick, it was hard to see details on the screen.

Behind the gray snack bar building with the maroon trim was a gravel lot. It had seven contoured rows where cars would park. Its listed capacity was three hundred and fifty vehicles, though it once fit a record four hundred and eleven for a charity event where they showed old Elvis movies. The trashcans on the ends of the rows were old oil drums.

To the north and south of the lot were dirt patches with row after row of ruddy brown cotton stalks. The rains cut off in early July and the resulting crops were merely passable. The bare stalks reached upwards in a horde of feeble claws. It was Friday, equivalent to a Monday for places only open on the weekends, and Sam Kirkland pulled up to the business he'd been involved with for almost sixty years.

Kirkland, owner of the Sky-Vue, got to the theater at nine that morning, same as always. He lit the grill and went into the back room to cut the cabbage and get the chili going. A normal day, more or less. Then from the placid, overcast morning came Sam's

shout, realizing what was happening.

"Oh no!"

He ran to the kitchen and saw the mounting inferno lash at the walls and climb into the vent hood. The wild grease fire spread and soon overtook the whole interior of the kitchen. Sam dashed for the fire extinguisher and attempted to stifle the blaze, but it was like fighting a bonfire with a wet blanket. Too little and too late.

He realized that he had to get out of the building before he was trapped. He blasted the doorway to the kitchen with the white foam and made his way to the checkout counter. The flames leapt across the walkway, preventing an easy exit. He pointed the nozzle towards them and rolled over the countertop, a nimble move that astonished the sixty-nine year old man (and his family) after the fact. On the other side, he was able to extinguish his way to the side door and escape the burning building unharmed.

He called the fire department and his wife in rapid succession. Then he had nothing to do but stand there and wait, and watch the fire devour the thing he had devoted more than half of his life to. He later said that he knew within thirty seconds of seeing the grease fire that he'd burned his business down. The cinder block walls and metal roof trapped the heat and thick black smoke. The flames gutted the interior. A firefighter on the scene told Sam it was the hottest fire he'd ever seen. The Sky-Vue was a total loss.

~~~

By that evening, word had spread about the fire. My mother learned about it on Facebook and broke it to me the way usually reserved for a death in the extended family. We knew and loved the Sky-Vue, same as almost everyone in the area. It was hard to process an immediate future without it. Several days later I got a chance to go see it for myself.

An aluminum vent on the roof had been mangled so that it resembled something a large junkyard magnet might collect from a trash pile. Black smoke stains marked the entrances and along the line where the walls met the roof. It still looked like the Sky-Vue
~~~

though. The snack bar's frame was still intact. I could still walk up and touch the cool gray walls. I could hop on the same roof where a young Buddy Holly had once performed and look over the empty lot. The screen was unscathed as well as the shed that contained the projector. I had come expecting a desecrated corpse, but found it oddly alive and familiar. It didn't seem fitting to call the place a total loss.

The gravel grinded and popped underneath my boots as I walked down the slope toward the building. I made it to the main entrance, once a pair of clean glass doors. From a distance, it seemed dark inside and not much else. For a moment then, I saw it the way I remembered it: full of excited people, smelling of grease in the best possible way, pictures of famous guests and varsity football teams on the wall.

I took a deep breath and looked inside: boundless ash and the melted carcasses of a cash register and popcorn machine. The photographs on the wall, the ones that remained, were blackened and curled. The shapes on them were visible but neither color nor detail remained, almost as if the pictures had become their own negatives. I searched out another memory, but the ash had been stirred. I coughed and when the particles settled, it was all gone.

~~~

If anyone knew the Sky-Vue in its entirety, it was Sam Kirkland. I spoke with him in March 2016, almost four months after the fire. Sitting at his kitchen counter with folded hands, he was candid about the business he began working at in 1957 at age 11, filling Cokes at the snack bar. He wore a polo shirt with the Sky-Vue's logo sewn on the breast and occasionally thwacked his wedding ring on the hard counter to punctuate a sentence. I asked him about the origins of the Sky-Vue.

R.A. "Skeet" Noret—a Michigan native whose family moved to West Texas to wildcat when he was a child— opened the place in 1948 after returning from service in World War II. He tried his hand at farming, but quickly discovered it wasn't for him. After attending a drive-in theater in Lubbock he realized what he wanted to do. He and
~~~

his wife, Sarah, along with his parents, got the Sky-Vue up and running. Skeet became the voice of the drive-in, announcing specials and welcoming patrons through the speakers hanging on each car. Drive-in theaters were on the rise. Word spread and the crowds grew.

Sam was technically too young to be hired, but Noret let him work as a favor to his father, who had done construction work for him. Kirkland recalled two things about his first night on the job: Elvis' *Jailhouse Rock* on the screen and a local cowboy by the name of "Sucker Rod" Smith in the audience. The cowboy rode his horse into the lot and tied him to one of the speaker poles. He performed a song on the roof of the snack bar in exchange for supper. Kirkland remembered seeing Sucker Rod come every Saturday night until he was found dead in a stock tank three years later at the age of thirty-five.

"I was a kid. I was in awe of everything," Kirkland said. "We had huge crowds in those days because there wasn't satellite, wasn't cable, and all those things. The Sky-Vue was a big deal."

But it wasn't immune to hard times. By the late seventies, the drive-in boom had been reduced to a few ripples. The Sky-Vue fared better than most, but attendance dipped. At that point Skeet was involved in other business ventures, including several more theaters, and decided to close the place. It collected dust for over a year until Sam started cleaning.

"I wasn't intending on opening it up. That was before I bought it. I just hated to see it look that way," he said.

He and his wife spent sixteen weeks restoring the place and soon after they agreed to buy the drive-in from Noret. Noret would keep the land the Sky-Vue sat on, but would lease it out to the Kirklands to run the theater. By 1980, the Sky-Vue was back to serving customers. The theater began to thrive once again.

Only part of the business's success was attributable to the movies it showed. The "Chihuahua" sandwich, invented by Skeet Noret and his father, still holds more significance than any other dish in town. There's nothing meek about a helping of secret-recipe chili, pimiento cheese, and fresh cabbage slapped between a pair of fried corn

tortillas with a pickled jalapeño garnish. A half-Mexican, half-Southern concoction that sums up the duality of West Texas cuisine better than any words could.

It was a rite of passage to bring a new love to the Sky-Vue to try the prominent sandwich—even a sort of litmus test for relationships. Many a person has watched his or her significant other take their first bite with anticipation. It has been suggested, during the leaner years at the business, that the Sky-Vue showed movies as an excuse to keep peddling the much-desired Chihuahuas more so than the other way around.

While the food and movies split the bill for main attraction, music at the Sky-Vue was a fascinating sideshow. Saturday night mini-shows, which took place during the intermission between features, were sporadic and highly anticipated. Buddy Holly and the Crickets played their first paid gig on the roof of the snack bar when they were just an upstart band of high schoolers from Lubbock. Don Walser, a Lamesa native whose traditional Texan music led him to become an Austin mainstay and (oddly enough) occasional opening act for the Butthole Surfers, played the Sky-Vue on several occasions. Mac Davis played a set there as well. Other entertainers, including Roy Rogers, Don Williams, and at least one Miss Texas, visited and had their pictures on the wall.

My own picture was there, as a member of the 2009 Golden Tornado football team. We won two whole games that year. The walls were covered with pictures: black and whites of the theater in the old days, shots of local sports teams, the Kirklands' kids and grandkids and their friends' grandkids as well. Those were his hardest losses from the fire.

"The things that were going through my mind were stupid because I wasn't thinking about saving the cash register or nothing. It was all the stuff on those walls," Sam said. "The stuff I can never replace."

Sam told me that when the firefighters first showed up that morning of the fire, they made him go sit by the playground while they attempted to quell the blaze. They ended up trying to pull his stuff off the wall and bring it out, putting themselves in danger. When Sam realized he told them to stop, that it wasn't worth someone getting hurt. Several of the firefighters were Sam's customers. One of them was crying. They knew

how much the memorabilia meant to Sam, and how many of their own memories lived in that building.

~~~

My friends and I were at the Sky-Vue almost every Saturday night in high school. My girlfriend never complained, but she probably got sick of the weekly routine: I picked her up, we drove to the drive-in, ate food so greasy it turned paper bags translucent, talked to friends, then went back to my truck and either watched the movie or found another way to pass the time. When the screen went blank and the lights came on, it was time to go home.

There was usually a large congregation of teenagers on the back two rows, especially on Sunday nights. As a child I thought there was no better spot than near the front, close to the screen and the playground and the snack bar. By the time I was seventeen I gravitated to the back, ideally with something stronger than Coca-Cola in my cup. Though the occasional fistfight led to some kids getting kicked out, the back rows were mostly left to their own confused hormonal devices. Sam once joked to a reporter out of Lubbock that he figured more children had been conceived in the Sky-Vue parking lot than any other location in town. I wouldn't care to challenge that assertion.

I became a Sky-Vue regular, just like my father and his parents before him. At least three generations went—and our family tradition wasn't even all that remarkable in those parts. My best friend, E.J. Ambriz, was both a third-generation American and third-generation Sky-Vue customer. I know families that counted four generations as regulars.

"We saw them when they were a year old and saw them grow up," Sam said. "We followed the steps of their lives. Saw them when they visited from college. Then when those kids had kids. It was a progression of the customers instead of a progression of the business."

Several times in our conversation Kirkland referred to the Sky-Vue, the way it was, in present tense before catching himself mid-sentence. He told me that he and his wife
~~~

missed the place, but enjoyed the time off to do other things, seeing grandchildren and going to ballgames.

"Carolyn and I have worked steady all these years. We missed twelve weekends in thirty-five years," he said. "That was the only drawback to it. It was only a weekend business. My kids were good athletes and it was hard not getting to watch them play ball."

Sam wondered aloud if it was too late to rebuild the business and keep it running with Carolyn. He told me with a chuckle that they planned on retiring one of these days, probably. I couldn't help but think that each time he alluded to the possibility that he might be done with the business that he wasn't really prepared to let it go. He told me he didn't know what would become of it, but the bright red polo shirt with the embroidered Sky-Vue logo told me that it would not simply fade from his life. The shirt was immaculate, without wrinkle or stain. The Sky-Vue hadn't been open for months at that point, but there he was in uniform. It could have been an old habit, or just laundry day, but it was something.

~~~

Sam and Carolyn said they couldn't go anywhere without people asking how they were and: "When are y'all gonna build it back?" We all wanted to believe the Sky-Vue's absence was temporary. We hoped it was a short blip in which we tried—unsuccessfully—to make our own Chihuahuas at home and attended the walk-in movie theater—uncomfortably—in our comfortable sweatpants. The answer the Kirklands most often gave: "We're going to try."

Sam mocked up plans for a larger, modernized snack bar with more booths and extra cooking room to expand the menu. He had been signing one-year leases for the land but wanted a five-year lease before investing the money to rebuild. He was told that wasn't an option.

After prayer and deliberation, he and Carolyn decided to sell the business. The
~~~

familiar blue, red, and yellow neon sign out front, which used to list the weekend's movies, read "For Sale" with Sam's number underneath.

Skeet Noret passed away that October at the age of 94. His three daughters and some of his grandchildren had already begun to take care of his various properties, including the Sky-Vue land. Sam sold his equipment and the remaining buildings back to the Noret family. He was informed that they were considering rebuilding it themselves. Nancy Noret-Moore, Skeet's oldest daughter, told me the family declined to comment.

~~~

Part of me still thinks that I'll never get a clear picture of the Sky-Vue because, like everyone else in town under the age of eighty, I grew up with the place. It seemed eternal in a way that I now recognize is impossible. Everything goes away in time. Perhaps, even if it is rebuilt someday, this is where the split happens from the Sky-Vue of my memories. I can come to peace with that. What's harder to swallow is the thought that I won't be able to bring my children to the place that I, and so many others, experienced. The tradition ends here.

Four years later the Sky-Vue still sits vacant and I've moved three states away. When I visit back home I watch it come and go from my windshield. I see that the sign is blank. Each time the white backing is a little more yellowed and the sun has faded the yellow paint another shade. It will all meet in the middle one of these days.

~~~

After we finished speaking on that crisp morning back in 2016, months after losing his business, Sam walked with me out the door. We stood in the shade on his front porch and spent a few minutes talking about the state of Lamesa football. I reminded him we only won two games my senior year, and he told me it was better than the one and

twenty-nine record they had accumulated over the last three seasons. We chuckled and I thanked him for answering my questions.

"You know, it makes us feel good that people still care enough to ask about the place," he said. "We don't have a social life outside of that drive-in. We know everybody in town, but we don't do stuff with people."

His eyes, which had made contact with mine, slid past me towards the lawn. He crossed his arms and looked out across his yard. It was warming up nicely for early spring. The grass was light green but not yet lush and the honeysuckles had just begun to blossom over town. A bobwhite quail tweeted its selfsame two-note song.

"We miss that. We miss those people."