The recently resurrected Twin Hi-Way Drive-In represents a labor of love for its owners, a social hub for the community, and an iconic landmark for roadside historians.

In the 1950s, America was crazy for cars, and therefore crazy for drive-ins, too. The U.S. boasted 4,063 of them by 1958 when the Twin Hi-Way was born; among the nation’s first were Shankweiler’s in Orefield, Pennsylvania, and South Park Drive-In on Route 88.1 The Twin Hi-Way shares a legacy with dozens of other nearby drive-ins that once made Western Pennsylvania “the drive-in capital of the world.”

In June 1958, a Pittsburgh Press ad promoted the Twin Hi-Way’s “gala opening” and included a photograph of the theater’s sign, as well as nearby “twin” highway signs for U.S. 22 and 30, a thoroughfare for travelers along what is now PA Route 60.2 Yet, 38 years later—after an impressive run that survived the region’s economic downturn in the mid-’80s—the drive-in’s screen was dark. Its playground served as a volleyball court for the adjacent tavern, and the lot itself was used for military-themed Halloween scare-fests.

Ten years after the Twin Hi-Way’s closure, enter theater veteran Jim Torcasi, contractor Jerry Salnoris, and police officer Dan Tice. By December 2006, with Torcasi’s construction expertise and Salnoris’ lifelong career as a theater projectionist and manager, the partners were ready to revamp the Twin Hi-Way.

A priority for Salnoris—who has worked everywhere from the Roxanne in McKees Rocks to the Denis in Mt. Lebanon—was restoring the drive-in’s two iconic signs—a roadside neon sign and a painted screen tower.

An exhaustive search led to sign maker David Bates at Neon Doctor on Brownsville Road. Bates recreated the neon sign as a replica of the original, which Salnoris believes was installed before the theater’s 1950 opening.
The 25-foot sign features much of its original steel, including corrugated metal facing. “The metal of yesterday will outlive you and me,” says Torcasi. Illuminated from within by neon, 3-D sectional letters stand out against a white backdrop. A playful star dots the “I,” while upper- and lowercase letters spelling “TWIN” sport a Tiki-like typeface. Researching the sign’s vintage palette, Salnoris and Torcasi even located matching high-gloss oil-based paint in West Virginia.

On a cold, rainy day in March 2007, the sign was again aglow. The buzz was instant, says Salnoris. “I was there working 14-hour days. People driving by blew their horns, yelled, and gave a thumbs-up.” The neon remains lit from 8:00 p.m. until midnight. “That sign is a key to our success,” says Salnoris. “It’s a landmark that’s come back to life like a beacon on the highway.” Featured on popular websites such as Roadside Peek, the sign draws Americana enthusiasts from around the globe.

One of the country’s largest drive-in screen towers (125-by-75-foot) presented a second sign restoration opportunity. Salnoris and Torcasi repointed brickwork, applied white primer, and matched colors to replicate the original pink, red, and green color scheme. “Spotlights from our box office give it that Hollywood effect,” notes Salnoris. “As you approach Greater Pittsburgh International, you can see it from the air.” In fact, TWA’s in-flight magazine has featured the drive-in.7

The Twin Hi-Way has drawn robust crowds since reopening. “We have letters from people saying this is where their kids were conceived, and that it’s like stepping back in time,” adds Salnoris. “I never envisioned that opening a local drive-in would go national over the AP wire. It’s the biggest possible salute to our efforts.” With land at a premium in that fast-growing airport corridor, let’s hope this “ozoner” can hold on another 58 years.

The Twin Hi-Way (seen here in 1990) sports one of the largest screen towers at 125 x 75 feet. Brian Butko.