

# MACHINES FOR EATING: THE AMERICAN DINER

by

ASHLEY MARIA BERRY

(Under the Direction of Mark Reinberger)

## ABSTRACT

This thesis was written to celebrate and encourage the preservation of the American diner. The diner is a uniquely American cultural and architectural icon that will soon be lost without the intervention of historic preservation. Current diner preservation and restoration is typically performed by amateurs and enthusiasts who lack formal preservation education or training, which demonstrates a clear need for professional preservation assistance. As the diner regains a second wind in popularity, the need for formalized preservation strategies for diners will become apparent, and perhaps spark a movement in diner preservation. This thesis will examine the architectural and social histories of the diner, its need for historic preservation, and existing diners that have dealt with preservation in different ways.

INDEX WORDS: Diner, Lunch Cart, Streamlined, Northeast, American

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*“The diner is an institution whose psychological function follows from its form. As an ideal type, it is a miniature restaurant, compact in arrangement, where customers rub shoulders with waitresses and with each other. Food is prepared and served while you watch. The food is familiar, distinctively prepared, and often excellent in quality. Prices are reasonable. The diner is non-elite, tolerant of ‘respectful strangers’ but like a small town, it can be a closed society. ...It is the American analogue of the British pub, the Greek taverna, the French café.”*

*John B. Levine, M.D.*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As a relatively young nation America has created an identity for itself that sets it apart from other countries. Apple pie, baseball, and hot dogs are things that stereotypically define America, as well as Americana, the nation's unique blend of culture spawned by Westward expansion. Historic Route 66, cowboys and Indians, and Rockabilly music are all elements of Americana, as are roadside diners. As an entity that is uniquely American the diner represents the hard-working, entrepreneurial spirit of the American people that ate under its roof for so many years. The architectural features and social importance that became associated with the diner during the twentieth century have solidified its place on the American cultural landscape.

The term *diner* means many things to many people. Some people consider the diner to be the local "Mom-and-Pop" restaurant downtown; for others, it's the shiny, neon beacon that harkens from the highway. Judith Siegel Lief has assigned four criteria to the diner:

(1) The structure must be prefabricated and hauled to a site; (2) It must have a counter and stools (regardless of whether it also has tables and/or booths; (3) It must offer "home-cooking at reasonable prices"; and (4) The cooking should take place behind the counter (this is especially true of pre-1950 diners.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lief, Judith Siegel, "The American Diner: A Meeting Place of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Building Materials," *Clem Labine's Traditional Building* 8, no. 1 (January/February 1995): 49.



For the purpose of this thesis *diner* refers to the distinctive architectural form that has influenced nearly all aspects of American life from cooking to popular culture, design, and more.<sup>2,3</sup> The diner is one of the few restaurant types that has been able to impact America to such an extent.

Before the roadside diner became an ultimate example of American indigenous architecture, it was literally *on* the roads – city streets, to be exact – pacing up and down the avenues for business.<sup>4</sup> The diner’s progenitor was the lunch cart, a horse-drawn wagon spacious enough for a driver and his home-cooked food, which he would peddle to the factory workers of the Industrial Revolution. By the 1920s those simple wooden wagons had evolved into metal “machines for eating,” recalling the shape and details of an industrial railcar or speeding bullet.<sup>5</sup> The diner’s form has always evoked a sense of motion, from the mobility of the lunch wagon’s wheels to the streamlined shape of the pre-World War II diner. The notion of speed and mobility is also carried inside with the fast-pace of the restaurant itself; short-order cooks dancing around to prepare a bevy of orders; waitresses scurrying about to take orders and serve customers. Everything within the diner works together like a fine-tuned machine – a machine that nutritionally and socially supports America.

Beginning in the 1950s the attention and taste of the American people shifted to fast-food giants like McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken. These restaurants that built their empires on the values the diner had worked so hard to establish were able to

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<sup>2</sup> John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle. *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 36.

<sup>3</sup> American Diner Museum. <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/history.php>; Internet, accessed 12 April 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, “Diner Design: Overlooked Sophistication,” *Perspecta* 15, (1975): 41.

<sup>5</sup> John B. Levine, M.D. “Chrome Home: The lasting Appeal of the Diner.” *Society for Commercial Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 1993-1994): 23.

undermine the diner's success by providing extra convenience and predictability to customers. The standardization of menus, architecture, and image were more appealing to mid-century Americans than the industrial image of the diner. No matter what changes the diner industry made to keep up with the competition the fast-food giants prevailed. The diner's prime coincided with the height of industry in America, and by the 1950s blue-collar America had peaked and the cookie-cutter suburbs were taking over.<sup>6</sup> By the 1970s the diner was outdated, a thing of the past.

Today the diner has proved that it is a resilient entity, a restaurant that has been able to bounce back after an agonizing defeat. Though not as prosperous as it was in the pre- and post-World War II eras, the diner has once again captured the hearts of Americans and is proving that it is worthy of being a part of Americana. Diner enthusiasts and people with nostalgia are slowly but surely resurrecting the diner business, restoring and reviving diners that have fallen by the wayside to once again become roadside icons. With such resources as the National Register for Historic Places the diner has the opportunity to be nationally recognized as an important architectural and social icon as it played (and continues to play) a vital role in the lives of so many Americans.

This thesis has been written to demonstrate the neglect of such an important American historic resource, the diner, and in such demonstration, show the need for the diner's preservation. The research process for this thesis further emphasizes the lack of information on diners and their preservation. Though many books and articles have been written on the diner, the information available on the restaurant type has not advanced

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph T. Manzo, "From Pushcart to Modular Restaurant: The Diner on the Landscape." *Journal of American Culture* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 14.

much in that timeframe. This clearly reflects a lack of knowledge and education among preservationists and diner enthusiasts alike, further proving that diners are, on the whole, endangered, and are in need of specialized preservation treatments.

The diners examined for the case studies chapter in this thesis demonstrate the wide array of diner preservation in the United States, whether good or bad. These examples also demonstrate the immense social importance of the diner and the sometimes inevitable changes that must occur to the diner's architecture to support its business. The diner is a unique entity that must be treated differently than traditional buildings, as it most often puts its social needs above its architectural heritage.

The diner is one of the rare places in America where anyone from bureaucrats to blue-collar workers, natives and immigrants, can rub elbows and forget the social boundaries of the outside world. It is in the diner where people from every background find solace in stainless steel and vinyl and bond over a cup of coffee or a slice of pie. The profound social and architectural impacts of the diner on the American cultural landscape can not be ignored and should be celebrated. Preserving one of the nation's unique and defining elements should not be taken lightly and must be considered before the shiny diner rusts away with neglect.

## CHAPTER 2

### ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

#### **The Lunch Cart as the Early Diner**

Before the diner became a shiny chrome American icon, it began as a meager wooden horse-drawn cart. In 1872 a paperboy named Walter Scott recognized an opportunity for business growth on the city streets of Providence, Rhode Island. (*Figure 2-1*) Men who worked the night shift at factories around Providence demanded some sort of eatery where food could be purchased since all of the city's restaurants were closed at night. Working late hours himself, Scott witnessed first-hand the lack of late-night vendors in the city and took it upon himself to start what would become a dining revolution. By selling quick, cheap food in convenient locations to the working class, Scott simultaneously filled their stomachs and his wallet. This opportunity made him the only entrepreneur in town that sold food at all hours of the night, giving him a monopoly on the trade. Little did Scott know, he had just created what would become an American architectural and social icon.



**Figure 2-1. Walter Scott, the man behind the diner.** (Source: *Providence Journal*)

To house his new business Walter Scott converted a freight wagon into a horse-drawn cart. This allowed him to take his business to the streets – literally – and target a specific audience and location. The mobility of the cart made it possible for him to drive up to a particular mill or factory when he knew many of its workers would be taking a break or ending a shift.<sup>7</sup> His cart could be strategically placed to take advantage of the most business, a smart marketing strategy that was essential to its success. This concept of strategic placement and importance of location remained a crucial element to the diner’s success through the years.

Inside he placed a wooden box on which to sit while he drove the cart through the city. He cut windows on both sides of the wagon so that customers could pay and receive food at the same time.<sup>8</sup> Men on break from the factory lined up outside Scott’s cart and waited patiently for cheap, home-cooked delicacies like sandwiches, pies, and sliced chicken platters. These were the foods that working-class men would likely eat in their own homes, adding to the popularity of Scott’s business. The quality and economic value of Scott’s menu made the lunch cart a success. Even in the diner’s humble beginnings the “home-cooked meal” was a large part of its success.

Because the food served at Scott’s cart was geared toward men on break from the night shift the cart earned the nickname “night lunch cart.” Over time the name was shortened to “lunch cart,” but the change in name did not affect the time of day at which the food was served.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, “Diner Design: Overlooked Sophistication,” *Perspecta* 15, (1975): 42

<sup>8</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, *American Diner: Then and Now* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 14.

## **The Lunch Wagon Gets Rolling**

Scott's original design for the cart was successful in as much as the operator had enough space to store and prepare food in a compact structure, but the cart lacked space for customers to come inside. In this aspect of its design it was similar to that of the modern-day ice-cream truck; the driver of the truck also operates the business, serving customers as they stand outside of the vehicle. Rain, snow, and cold winds characteristic of the Northeast did not prove this design to be practical. A customer was less likely to wait in line outside the lunch cart during the harsh winter to partake of a meal rather than in the more temperate months. Despite the lack of interior space Scott's business venture thrived, quickly encouraging other men to follow suit and build their own lunch carts. (*Figure 2-2*)



**Figure 2-2. Lunch wagon.** (Source: Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village)

The news of Scott's lunch wagon prosperity spread across New England. Other men seeking similar economic success followed suit and set out to make their own lunch wagon dreams come true. New lunch wagon entrepreneurs wanted to outdo Scott's

original makeshift cart and many “contracted local wagon builders and blacksmiths to build wagons specifically made as lunch carts.”<sup>9</sup> Owners attempted to perfect the design and efficiency of the lunch wagon, adding different amenities and gimmicks such as painted scenes on the exterior.<sup>10</sup> Each man gave his creation a creative name like the “Night Owl” and adorned them with lavish decorations and materials to draw in as many customers as possible.

By the 1880s typical lunch wagons measured six feet by sixteen feet with a kitchen apartment for the operator and standing room for customers.<sup>11</sup> They were constructed with wood frames and had painted exteriors that displayed the wagon’s name. Some owners made their wagons fancier, incorporating fancifully-painted landscapes and stained glass windows onto their carts.<sup>12</sup> Each wagon owner tried to outdo the other by making his cart flashier and more ornamented than the next, both exterior and interior. Interior materials included wood, marble, porcelain, and metal, which included copper and nickel.<sup>13</sup> These materials were easy to clean and were implemented in diner design to give the interior a clean and sanitary appearance. (*Figure 2-3*)

Some men devoted their careers to designing and building lunch wagons rather than operating them. Samuel Messer Jones, a mechanical engineer by trade, was one such man. Jones moved from Providence to Worcester, Massachusetts where he introduced the lunch cart to the city. He is thought to have created the first wagon in which the customer could step inside, and also designed the first “mobile building

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<sup>9</sup> Gutman, “Diner Design”, 41

<sup>10</sup> Gutman, *American Diner*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, *The Worcester Lunch Car Company* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Gutman, *American Diner*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Gutman, *Worcester Lunch*, 15.

constructed especially as a lunch cart.”<sup>14</sup> The cart had a colorful glass window with the menu incorporated into its decorations. This design feature was normative in lunch wagon design for the next twenty years.<sup>15</sup> (Figure 2-3)



**Figure 2-3. American Eagle Café. The bill of fare is part of the window decoration.**  
(Photo Courtesy of E.B. Luce)

The success of Jones’ lunch wagons prompted another hopeful entrepreneur named Charles Palmer, also of Worcester, to purchase all but one of Jones’ carts to start his own wagon empire. In 1891 Palmer received the first patent for lunch wagon design which, subsequently, became the standard wagon design for the next twenty-five years. Palmer’s design called for an “enclosed body with the forward portion extending over a

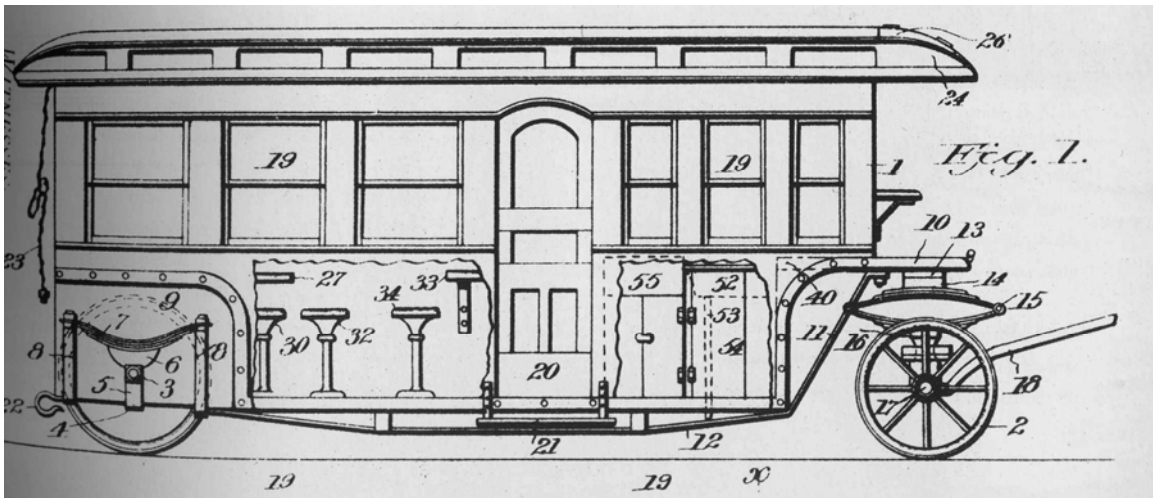
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<sup>14</sup> Gutman, *American Diner*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Gutman, *American Diner*, 18.



set of small front wheels, and the rear made narrower to stand between the tops of the high back wheels.”<sup>16</sup> The kitchen was in the rear and was separated from the dining space by a counter. Though there was space for customers to eat inside, windows were still cut out of the wagon’s frame for walk-up customers. The efficient design made it possible for the person working inside to serve both dine-in and dine-out customers. This design ensured that business would not be hindered due to lack of space. (Figure 2-4)



**Figure 2-4. Drawing of a lunch cart.** (Source: Don and Newly Preziosi)

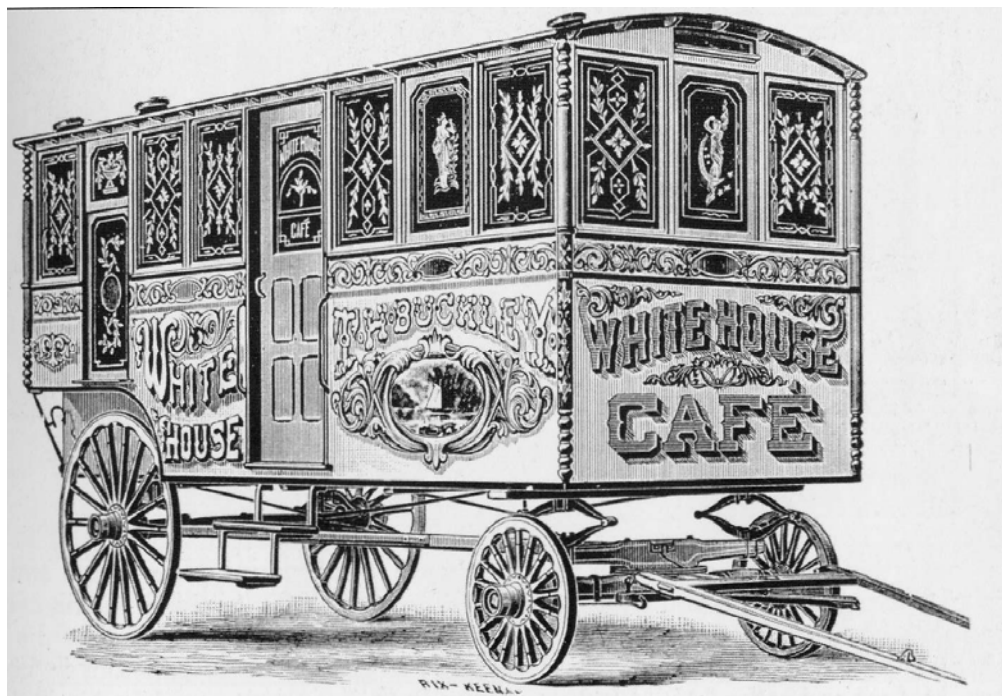
Samuel Messer Jones and Charles Palmer may have been the first men to dedicate their work to the design and construction of lunch carts, but the T.H. Buckley Lunch Wagon Manufacturing and Catering Company of Worcester, Massachusetts is the first known company to devote its mission these structures. In the late 1880s and into the 1890s Thomas H. Buckley and his workers had their lunch wagons in over 275 American towns.<sup>17</sup> (Figure 2-5) One of the company’s most popular wagons was the White House Café, a highly-decorated cart. (Figure 2-6) Buckley was dubbed “the Original Lunch Wagon King” because of his entrepreneurial expertise in the lunch wagon business. In

<sup>16</sup> Gutman, *American Diner*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Gutman, *Worcester Lunch*, 9.



**Figure 2-5. T.H. Buckley, the “Original Lunch Wagon King.”**  
 (Source: The Worcester Historical Museum)



**Figure 2-6. The White House Café by T.H. Buckley**  
 (Source: The Worcester Historical Museum)

essence, Buckley is responsible for creating the first nationwide chain; if he couldn't sell a wagon he would own it but appoint a manager to run it like a franchise.<sup>18</sup> In 1903 Buckley's life was claimed by peritonitis and his successors took over the company, calling it the Worcester Lunch Car Company.

The Worcester Lunch Car Company was a leader in lunch car design and standardization. A manufacturer could provide the design knowledge and equipment in one place, making it easier for owners and operators to acquire a wagon. Working with a manufacturer was also beneficial in that the equipment, materials, and design of the wagon would have a professional aesthetic and, were there any issues with the products, all problems could be addressed by the manufacturer. As Worcester Lunch wagons, with their ornate windows and paint jobs, infiltrated city streets more men were intrigued by the wagon business and sought to join in. (*Figure 2-7*)



**Figure 2-7. Lunch wagon interior.** (Photo Courtesy of E.B. Luce)

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Two of these men were Patrick J. Tierney and Jerry O'Mahony. Their companies – The Patrick J. Tierney Company, and The Jerry O'Mahony company, respectively – and Worcester Lunch became the three most influential lunch wagon businesses in the industry.

In the 1890s Patrick Tierney, of New Rochelle, New York, actually began his business with Buckley wagons, but by 1905 he started building and selling his own wagons. Eventually he was selling more lunch cars than his competition, making him the biggest name in the business.<sup>19</sup> Tierney is credited with many diner design advances, including tile, exhaust fans, skylights, and the ever-important toilet.<sup>20</sup> Like Buckley, Patrick Tierney had a sudden, unexpected death. His business was taken over by his sons, Edward and Edgar, who continued to run the company successfully.<sup>21</sup>

Jerry O'Mahony of Bayonne, New Jersey did not enter the diner business until 1913.<sup>22</sup> O'Mahony's first diner – a Tierney creation – was so popular that he began purchasing other cars to run. Teaming up with John J. Hanf, the two men began building their own deluxe wagons with “every conceivable modern convenience.”<sup>23</sup> Like Worcester Lunch's wagons O'Mahony's were fancifully decorated, including painted scenes on the exterior and etched glass windows. O'Mahony's wagons quickly outsold the competition's, making his business the most successful of the 1920s.

### **Paradigm Shift**

It did not take long before many entrepreneurs flocked to the lunch wagon business. City blocks in Northeast cities were loaded with lunch wagons, angering many

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<sup>19</sup> Gutman, *American Diner*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

residents as traffic ensued. “All of those ‘two frankforts and a cup o’ coffee for a nickel’ wagons just became an eyesore to residents and visitors”<sup>24</sup> and compelled people to revolt. Residents and city authorities of Springfield, Massachusetts were so displeased with the plethora of wagons that lawmakers began to place bans on them. Though some owners became discouraged with the ban and closed down business, many more of them found their way around the law and made their lunch wagons permanent structures. Achieving permanency was as simple as purchasing or renting a small lot of land and decommissioning the wagon’s wheels. Some owners kept their wheels but simply covered them up with boards or bricks to keep the wheels from being visible. Wagons that took this approach of covering their wheels set the precedent for the streamlined iconic American diner. (*Figure 2-8*)



**Figure 2-8. A stationary diner with wheels.**  
(Photo Courtesy of Norma N. Holmes)

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<sup>24</sup> Gutman, “Diner Design”, 42

Transitioning from a mobile unit to a stationary structure was a significant turning point in the evolution of the diner. Location was essential to the diner's success; operators could no longer take their carts to their customer and therefore had to make sure that the customer could easily reach their cart's new site.<sup>25</sup> If the owner set up shop in a bad part of town, customers would be reluctant to travel to it. Likewise, if the owner placed his wagon on a property that was simply too inconvenient to reach by foot it would be impossible for many people to visit, regardless of whether or not they wanted to do so.

By remaining stationary, diners could take advantage of gas and electric power, allowing them to stay open for twenty-four hours, which became another defining characteristic of diners. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner could be prepared and served at any hour of the day which was a big hit with customers. The addition of extra meals – not just the “night lunch” – meant that a wider variety of people would be interested in the diner. Though the clientele began to expand somewhat, the main customer base continued to be the blue-collar working man.

Another byproduct of this permanency was the opportunity to change the wagon's design. Early wagons were designed with larger rear wheels and smaller front wheels, but over time the wagon took on a more car-like form.<sup>26</sup> Since owners now had a piece of property they could afford to expand their wagons to accommodate more customers, food, and equipment, causing the wagon to naturally grow into its familiar long, narrow form.<sup>27</sup> Taking a cue from the typical railroad car, the redesigned carts were long and

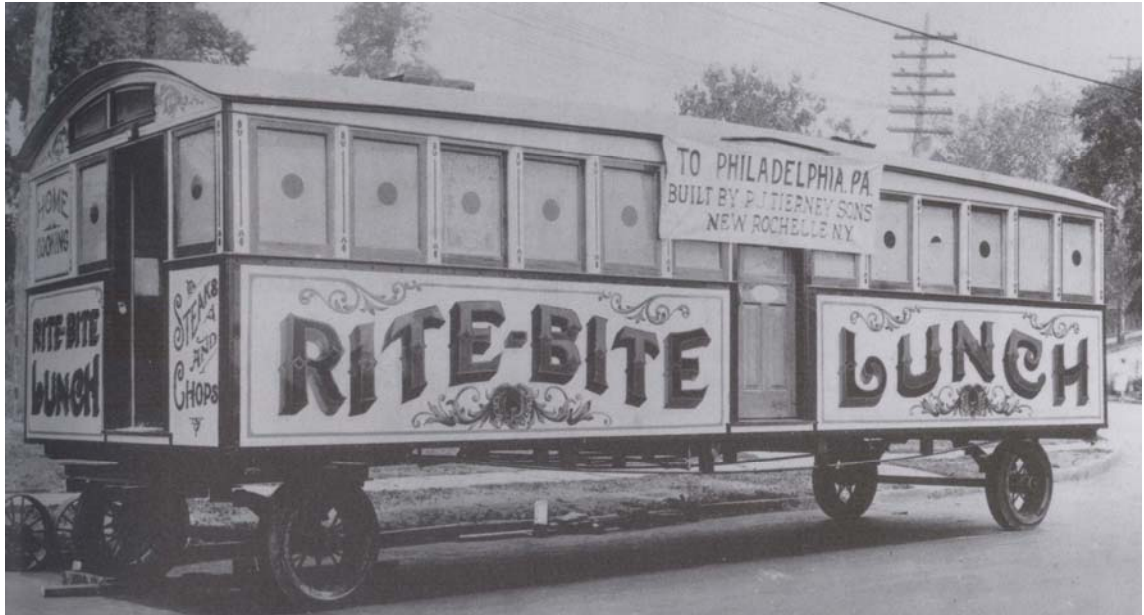
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<sup>25</sup> Joseph T. Manzo, “From Pushcart to Modular Restaurant: The Diner on the Landscape,” *Journal of American Culture* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 13.

<sup>26</sup> Gutman, “Diner Design”, 42

<sup>27</sup> Gutman, “Diner Design”, 43

rectangular, often with a barrel roof or clerestories. (Figures 2-9, 2-10) Earlier carts had a food preparation area on one end and a counter running the perimeter of the other sides. Carts on sizeable lots became longer and had room to place the food preparation area along the length of the wagon; this became the “back bar.” The counter and stools ran parallel to the back bar, a setup that continued to be standard in dining car design as it



**Figure 2-9. Rite-Bite Lunch wagon. This diner has railcar characteristics, such as a barrel roof. (Source: Atwater Kent Museum)**



**Figure 2-10. Stationary diner with clerestory windows. (Source: Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village)**



proved to be efficient, economical, and practical.<sup>28</sup> Food could be quickly prepared in front of the customer, and the number of employees could be kept at a minimum. Customers liked the fact that they could see their food being prepared, which was one of the reasons they kept returning to their local diner. The repeat business helped owners continue to profit while allowing them to maintain low overhead costs. Value and efficiency, two characteristics for which the diner is known, were made possible with this layout. This simple change in design ultimately contributed to the diner's overall success.

As the lunch wagon evolved into the diner in the 1920s more manufacturing companies came out of the wood work. The Wason Manufacturing Company of Philadelphia, owned by the J.G. Brill Company, opened a division of diners named Brill Steel Diners.<sup>29</sup> Brill diners were usually outfitted with boxy shapes, monitor roofs, and interiors with porcelain enamel walls and tile floors. Brill Steel Diners is also credited with the creation of glass countertops constructed as refrigerated display cases.<sup>30</sup> In 1927 Samuel J. Kullman founded the Kullman Dining Car Company of New Jersey.<sup>31</sup> Though he built many types of diners, one of Kullman's most successful was the "dinette," a small diner which was designed for the short-order trade. Specifically Kullman designed the "Kullman Junior" model, a diner that was compact but still had the necessary features of a regular-sized diner.<sup>32</sup> The Kullman Dining Car Company is now Kullman Industries and continues to make diners as well as other modular structures.

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<sup>28</sup> Gutman, "Diner Design", 43

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>31</sup> Kullman Industries, "The Original Diner;" Available from <http://www.kullman.com/diners.html>. Internet; accessed 8 June 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Gutman, *American Diner*, 105.



Exteriors were still painted but not to the extent of their mobile counterparts. At this point most diners did not have elaborate painted landscapes or portraits; rather, the artwork was often no more than the diner's name. The names were derived from many sources, such as the owner's name, the diner's location, or a historical figure. The name gave the restaurant a unique character, something the owner hoped would set his diner apart from the others.

These few physical changes turned the wagon into a diner, giving the restaurant type more credibility. It was at this point that the diner became a roadside structure that projected a personality all its own.<sup>33</sup>

### **Streamlined Design**

In the 1920s and 1930s American architecture and design took on a smooth, streamlined appearance, characterized by rounded corners, bullet shapes, and other features that “evoked an image of gliding through the wind.”<sup>34</sup> Automobiles and trains were becoming more popular as modes of transit and were some of the first objects to engage in streamlined design due to their industrial nature. In the wake of the Great Depression manufacturers turned to industrial designers to help with product design in hopes that they would be able to create products that could “telegraph... such positive thoughts as ‘up-to-date,’ ‘technologically advanced,’ [and] ‘the shape of things to come’ into the mind of a buying public beset with [economic] uncertainty.”<sup>35</sup> The idea was that if customers found these objects attractive and modern they would continue purchasing them, despite economic conditions. The characteristics of streamlined design emanated

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Karl Witzel, *The American Diner* (St. Paul: MBI, 2006), 75.

<sup>34</sup> Witzel, *The American Diner*, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 56

all of these qualities, so industrial designers began applying this design aesthetic to all sorts of objects. The power of this “visual idiom” could surpass usage boundaries and be applied to a wide variety of products, from refrigerators to trolley cars.<sup>36</sup> Fortunately this aesthetic was pleasing to the general public and proved so successful that even household items such as dishware, water pitchers, and light fixtures adopted streamlined qualities.

Stainless steel and chrome helped achieve the look because of their inherent smoothness, industrial character, and malleability. When molded to resemble speeding bullets or teardrops these metals evoked a sense of movement and efficiency, like a fine-tuned machine “ready to lift off, hit the road, and join the other traffic.”<sup>37</sup> (*Figure 2-11*)

The visual appeal of streamlined design, in conjunction with its functionality, made it a perfect design strategy for diners. Influenced by modern railroad cars and their streamlined design, typical diners of the 1920s and 1930s were sheathed in stainless steel to project the notions of modernity and efficiency. The concept of speed and efficiency that was characteristic of train cars was also applicable to the mission of diners. From its beginning as a lunch wagon the purpose of the diner was to provide a quick, cheap, and tasty meal; thus, efficiency and value were imperative. Exemplifying those qualities through architecture and interior design further depicted the diner’s efficiency and good service, enticing customers to partake of the food inside the streamlined shell. The diner’s steel construction, bullet shape, and wrap-around windows defined “motion technology” and symbolized modernity on the American cultural landscape.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 56

<sup>37</sup> Witzel, *The American Diner*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Hurley, “From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no.4 (1997): 14

In the 1930s, the diner industry's prime, several new manufacturing companies were formed, many by employees of established companies. Paramount Diners, based out of Haledon, New Jersey, was started by Arthur E. Sieber who had worked for Silk City Diners.<sup>39</sup> Paramount Diners is credited as being the first diner manufacturer to incorporate stainless steel into the backsplash, an element that would become a design standard in the diner industry.<sup>40</sup> A former Tierney employee, Joseph Fodero, founded the Fodero Dining Car Company in Newark, New Jersey.<sup>41</sup> Fodero's diners were typically built in one of four designs: "terra cotta;" "fluted porcelain;" "streamlined;" and "modernistic." The "terra cotta" diner had flat porcelain panels, rounded corners, and rounded corner windows; the "fluted porcelain" style had vertical semicircular flutes of colored porcelain with thin strips of stainless trim between; the "streamlined" had alternating horizontal strips of stainless and one color of porcelain which banded the entire diner; and the "modernistic" design was almost the same as the "fluted porcelain" but used two colors of porcelain rather than one.<sup>42</sup> Fodero's designs most closely resemble the stereotypical iconic diner.

### **Defining Materials**

A variety of new materials could be found inside the diner. Expensive materials such as marble, porcelain, and wood were replaced with mass-produced and cost-effective finishes. Chrome and stainless steel, glass block, Naugahyde, and Formica were economical alternatives that were widely used in diner interiors. Chrome and stainless steel were obvious choices because they cleaned easily and brought the attractive exterior

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 124.



**Figure 2-11. Early streamlined diner.** (Source: Preziosi Postcards)

inside. (Figure 2-12) Glass block served many purposes, from partition walls to display shelves and decoration. The material could also be backlit with different colors to provide an exciting glow and ambience to the diner's interior.



**Figure 2-12. Stainless steel backsplash** (Photo Courtesy of Robert O. Williams)

Naugahyde substituted for vinyl because it was inexpensive, durable, and easy to clean. It also came in a plethora of colors to suit any color palette which gave owners creative license with their restaurant's design. Formica was chosen as a perfect finish for these

high-traffic establishments; it was easy to install, extremely durable, and had a smooth, attractive, water-resistant finish. Originally it was used as a ceiling material in the 1920s but quickly began to replace other surface materials such as wood, porcelain enamel, and metal. When Formica produced a new version that resisted cigarette burns it became the diner industry's countertop and tabletop material. It also appealed to diner owners because a "quick wipe-down" was all it took to clean "a year's accumulation of grease and nicotine."<sup>43</sup> Like porcelain enamel, Formica was available in a myriad of colors as well as silk-screened and inlaid patterns.<sup>44</sup> When these materials were used in tandem they gave the restaurant an ambience that was unique and reflected the personality and mission of the diner. (*Figure 2-13*)



**Figure 2-13. Diner interior shows typical finishes, materials, and layout.**  
(Source: Preziosi Postcards)

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Karl Witzel, *The American Diner* (St. Paul: MBI, 2006), 73.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Stainless steel was not the only material to clad diners, but it was the most common because it gave the diner “the appearance of enduring permanence and a feeling of cleanliness.”<sup>45</sup> Although Formica replaced porcelain enamel for many interior surfaces, the latter still had an important role on the diner’s exterior. Porcelain enamel was a popular exterior material because of its strength, smoothness, and ability to hold color. The Fodero Dining Company is credited as the first diner manufacturing company to use fluted porcelain enamel, “semicircular strips of colored porcelain panels interlaced with stainless [steel]” which ran vertically around the diner’s perimeter.<sup>46</sup> Other diner manufacturers such as DeRaffele, Mountain View, and Silk City added fluted porcelain enamel to their design repertoires, making fluted porcelain a staple of diner architecture everywhere. (*Figures 2-14 – 2-16*)



**Figure 2-14. Fluted porcelain** (Photo Courtesy of Robert O. Williams)

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 74, 75.



**Figure 2-15. Fluted porcelain on a diner exterior** (Source: Pedar Ness).



**Figure 2-16. Fluted porcelain on a curved corner**

(Photo Courtesy of Robert O. Williams)

Another staple of diner architecture was neon lighting. Neon tube lighting was crucial in the diner's efforts to capture customer attention from the roadside as motels and gas stations had done.<sup>47</sup> The “glowing rays of light that bathed the exterior of the all-stainless steel restaurant”<sup>48</sup> offered a kaleidoscope of color to attract customers out of their cars and into the diner. Ultimately these colorful, electrified “roadside beacons” served as welcome mats to customers, signaling that “good food and friendly service” waited for them inside.<sup>49</sup> (*Figure 2-17*)

Over a span of about thirty years the diner had gone from a wooden lunch cart to a steel and neon dining machine. By the end of the 1940s the lunch wagon was no longer

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 2-17. Neon Diner Sign Encouraging Patrons to “Eat Heavy.”**  
(Source: Robert O. Williams )

a wagon at all, “but a pretentious, semi-permanent, bijou restaurant, designed by engineers familiar with Pullman-car and ship architecture.”<sup>50</sup> The stereotypical, iconic American diner had come to fruition.

### **Design “Advances”**

After World War II the American socio-cultural landscape was evolving faster than roadside architecture could keep up with it. Suburbs and interstate highways were constructed at alarming rates, changing the physical landscape of the diner. In an effort to maintain a strong customer base owners moved their diners to the suburbs to cater to families. With the construction of more highways many owners took their business to the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 72.

off-ramps of the interstates to attract the growing number of motorists. The diner was no longer just a fixture of the city but was making itself at home among postwar families.

Aesthetic preferences were another changing element of the socio-cultural landscape that heavily impacted the diner's design. Streamlining was no longer popular; the focus was on more practical design concepts of durability and lasting beauty. The overall look of the diner was more open with large picture windows, which contrasted with the previous "railroad look."<sup>51</sup> The idea of openness and grandeur did not stop with windows, however. "Bigger is better" was the message that began to infiltrate the country. Quantity became the focus rather than quality. Diner manufacturers and owners jumped at the chance to expand diner structures in hopes that the industry would grow, too.

"The architectural Godzilla tactic" was beneficial to the industry at first. There was room for more stools and seats; "more customers meant more food sales."<sup>52,53</sup> A lot of these "behemoth" structures were being sold to owners of smaller diners that found it too economically detrimental to operate diners that had only a few booths and counter stools.<sup>54</sup> Fortunately not every diner operator agreed with the "bigger is better" approach. The larger and more grandiose the diner became, the further it moved from its roots. It was as if diners were ashamed of being diners; they abandoned their traditional elements to become more like any other restaurant of the day.<sup>55</sup> In efforts to look like other restaurants some diners were "renovated with such dross as mansard roofs,

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<sup>51</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, *American Diner: Then and Now* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 149.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Karl Witzel, *The American Diner* (St. Paul: MBI, 2006), 110.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 115.

shingling, and a hideous frosting of concrete mixed with gumdrop-colored pebbles.”<sup>56</sup>

Architecture of the 1950s and 1960s was also inspired by space travel and the future.

These “Space Age” details carried over into new diner design, making them resemble space craft rather than trains or speeding bullets. (*Figure 2-18*)



**Figure 2-18. A “Space-Age” Diner** (Source: Richard J.S. Gutman).

By the 1960s and 1970s many diners lost touch with their stainless-steel, streamlined ancestors. Many owners thought it best to brick over their diners in the trendy Colonial Revival style that was resurfacing due to the Bicentennial. (*Figure 2-19*) Others clad their structures in materials that would represent an ethnic theme, like Spanish or Mediterranean.<sup>57</sup> (*Figure 2-20*) These efforts to assimilate were in vain; the diner’s reign was over.

<sup>56</sup> Gerd Kittel, *Diners: People and Places* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1998), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Genovese, *Jersey Diners* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 26.



**Figure 2-19. Colonial Revival Diner by Kullman Industries**  
(Source: Richard J.S. Gutman)



**Figure 2-20. The Brooklawn Diner, Brooklawn, New Jersey, with Mediterranean Design Details.** (Source: Richard J.S. Gutman)

## **Summary**

Walter Scott's lunch wagon, though quite different aesthetically and structurally, is the ultimate progenitor of the iconic American diner in nearly every aspect. Though the shiny steel diner of the pre-war era is not on wheels it evokes a sense of movement, a concept that has always been essential to the industry's operation. Scott was able to capitalize on location due to his mobility, whereas stationary diners had to predict where the influx of customers would be. Regardless, location has always been a factor in the diner's success. The third major element that Scott set as precedent was the quality and value of the food served. The diner's goal has always been to provide home-cooked meals at low prices so that anyone could afford to eat there. Throughout its history, whether as a wooden, horse-drawn cart, or a shiny, streamlined car, "the features that guaranteed the success of the [diner] were apparent cleanliness, speedy service, food made before the patron, novelty of the Car, economy of operation, portable facilities, and the wide range of meal types."<sup>58</sup>

As the diner's design evolved, it maintained its goal of catering to changing social climates. In fact, it was the heavy influence of the diner's customer base that dictated material choices, seating capacity and types, size, and location. Ultimately it was this customer influence that led the diner to ignore its heritage and become something altogether different, nearly causing a near annihilation of the diner industry.

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<sup>58</sup> Gutman, "Diner Design", 43.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

Along with its distinctive architectural style, the character and culture of the diner have solidified its place in American history. The social importance of the diner superseded its aesthetic value, which led to the construction of diners in structures that do not resemble the traditional diner form. Some forty years after the diner's heyday people across the United States – and even the world – make attempts to capture the diner's essence without the diner form to create a piece of Americana. Even artists and filmmakers have immortalized the diner in print and film because they recognize its social importance. What is it about the diner experience that sets it apart from other restaurants? A combination of setting, service, and sensory appeal are crucial to the success of the diner.

#### **The Impact of the Lunch Wagon**

Since its inception as a lunch wagon the diner appealed to the blue-collar laborer, due to several factors including its location, appearance, and menu – elements that continue to define the diner. Lunch wagons – ironically named, as lunch was the one meal never served – were strategically placed in industrial areas near factories to attract the men that worked overnight shifts.<sup>59, 60</sup> No other restaurants were open overnight which meant the lunch wagon had a monopoly on late-night and early-morning fare.

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<sup>59</sup> Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 28.

<sup>60</sup> Gerd Kittel, *Diners: People and Places* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1998), 6.

Because of their trademark business hours Charles Palmer even nicknamed his lunch wagon the “Night Owl Cafe.”<sup>61</sup>

Men who were finishing their overnight shifts lined up outside of the lunch wagon to purchase cheap, yet filling foods such as sandwiches, soups, and pies to satiate their hunger. For just pennies the customer could have a meal of home-cooked quality. The affordability of the cuisine made the lunch wagon that much more popular to the blue-collar worker, causing an increase in the number of carts on city streets.

As factories became permanent fixtures of the urban landscape, lunch wagons did as well.<sup>62</sup> Eventually cities were seeing too many lunch wagons – one on every corner – and public officials and citizens became displeased with them. Cleverly avoiding the law, owners resolved to decommission the wheels of their wagons and rent small patches of land on which they could make them permanent structures.<sup>63</sup> Operators could continue to serve the blue-collar worker in industrial areas; they just could not be mobile.<sup>64</sup>

By the time diners became immobilized there were three well-known diner manufacturing companies: Worcester Lunch Car Company; P.J. Tierney and Sons; and Jerry O’Mahony. Talent and competition between these companies raised the bar in lunch wagon design. New design standards aided in its transition to the “dining car.” The caliber of lunch wagon design prompted it to take on the classier name of “dining car, an allusion to the fine dining experience of the railway.”<sup>65</sup> “Dining car” was quickly

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<sup>61</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, *American Diner: Then and Now* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>62</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 28.

<sup>63</sup> Kittel, *Diners: People and Places*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> Gutman, *The American Diner*, 61.

shortened to “diner,” a moniker with staying power. The advances in diner design gave the structure a new sophistication that increased its popularity, but it remained a predominantly working-class establishment.

### **Diners Find Their Place**

The end of World War I brought a sense of patriotism and optimism to Americans that sparked an increase in construction. This prosperous period helped the diner business because men – and the occasional woman – across the country wanted to take a stab at entrepreneurship.<sup>66</sup> Diner ownership was considered a means of emerging from the working class into the middle class, a notion that was attractive and tempting to many.<sup>67</sup> To encourage men to start their own diner business (and, of course, buy their product) diner manufacturing companies capitalized on the optimism of the blue-collar worker and heavily advertised to this audience. P.J. Tierney and Sons advertised that even “the man with no business experience and minimal capital could climb the ladder of success” and obtain the “good things of life for his family,” an attractive offer to the blue-collar worker.<sup>68</sup> The Kullman Dining Car Company enticed prospective owners by promising a “pleasant, profitable business.”<sup>69</sup> In essence, the dining car companies were marketing the American Dream by selling the idea that men could start a successful diner business with little money and a lot of determination.<sup>70</sup> These advertising schemes were successful and more diners appeared across the country as men left their previous professions as bookkeepers, salesmen, and garage workers to own a piece of the American Dream.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 61, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 38.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



Diners fit in well near the newly-constructed national highways of the 1920s as they could serve families and truckers who wanted to stop for a quick meal. Particularly interested in the diner was the trucker. These men who drove tractor-trailers for hours on end needed places of respite, and the diner became such a place. Truckers were a great match for the diner environment. Though they did not spend their time in factories, truckers were still considered blue-collar workers. Since the diner had already carved a substantial niche for the blue-collar man, the trucker fit into its environment quite nicely. As a result of the patronization of truckers and families the diner's clientele began to expand, but still attracted a predominantly blue-collar male audience.

Surprisingly, the diner prospered throughout the Depression. The diner already emphasized low prices, making it easier for cash-strapped customers to continue dining. Manufacturers like Jerry O'Mahony pointed out that many traditional restaurants in America were failing, but the diner managed to stay afloat.<sup>71</sup> Through the testing times of the Depression the diner proved it was an industry with staying power.

The diner continued to thrive as it maintained a steady business from the working class, often staying open twenty-four hours a day to accommodate the schedules of truckers and factory workers. However, this schedule and some of the clientele inevitably attracted vagrants and other socially undesirable people which sullied the diner's reputation.<sup>72</sup> Though designed to be aesthetically pleasing, diners sometimes became dingy due to factory pollution and the class of clientele. Occasionally someone of a higher social class, like a passing motorist or clerk, would visit the diner, but this hardly changed the diner's social status; they were still "firmly in the hash house

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 95

<sup>72</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 31.

category.”<sup>73</sup> These “greasy spoons” were generally not suitable for women or children; most lacked toilet facilities, not to mention etiquette and formality.<sup>74</sup> The sometimes dingy exteriors, rude countermen, and uncomfortable stools further deterred women from partaking in the diner experience.<sup>75</sup> In some cases their reputation became so negative that magazines and radio shows depicted diners as “hovels, gambling dens, and magnets for the criminal element.”<sup>76</sup>

Other diner owners saw women as an untapped financial resource. By the end of the 1920s some diner owners began to advertise with signs announcing “Ladies Invited” to encourage their patronization and increase business. (Figure 3-1) Women slowly began to infiltrate the diner and in the process stimulated improvements by the diner operator.



**Figure 3-1. Diner advertising female patronization.** (Source: John Baeder).

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew Hurley, “From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture.” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (Mar. 1997): 1286.

<sup>74</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 37.

<sup>75</sup> Hurley, “From Hash House,” 1287

<sup>76</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 37.

The addition of feminine touches, like flower boxes and shrubs, softened the exterior of the diner, making it seem less seedy. The interior appearance had to change a bit as well. It was no longer acceptable for counter men to wear food-soiled clothing; now the men were expected to wear all white and maintain spotless interiors. These small details appeased many women, but a lot of men did not see the point. Some diner owners were reluctant to entice women since the diner had always been a male establishment, but it was apparent that the future of business depended on feeding both sexes.<sup>77</sup>

World War II was a significant social turning point for the diner. By the time the 1940s came around the diner had become a staple of the American landscape, not just in industrial areas but also along highways and downtown areas.<sup>78</sup> The “hash house” reputation the diner gained in the 1920s and 30s would be shed by the war’s end as American social paradigms evolved. A new light was cast on the diner that began to make it acceptable to a wider variety of people.

Most notably it was the woman’s shifting role in the home that brought a second wind to the diner. Women left their positions as housewives to become members of the workforce, serving as machine operators, office workers, and retail clerks. Consequently, these women were forced to look for a quick and cheap meal between shifts, and the diner was an obvious choice.<sup>79</sup> Families also frequented the diner because busy work schedules and food rationing made dining at home difficult. The convenience and cost-effectiveness of the diner persuaded families to become regular diner patrons.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Gutman, *The American Diner*, 91.

<sup>78</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 42.

## **The Postwar Diner**

When World War II ended the American landscape was no longer simply about the dialogue between urban and rural. Transitional neighborhoods, indeed suburban sprawl, became the middle ground between city and country. These residential communities were located on the outskirts of cities and experienced an influx of working and middle-class families.<sup>81</sup> Many new diner operators were encouraged to set up shop in the suburbs because it was thought that the working-class patrons of these communities would become loyal patrons of the diner.<sup>82</sup> Owners were also encouraged to place diners in dense areas “proximal to railroad stations, ferryboat or steamship landing piers, freight stations, factory districts, apartment house districts or suburban traffic lines.”<sup>83</sup> Placing diners at these busy nodes would ensure a steady business and prosperity.

Such transitional neighborhoods expanded further into the country, eventually becoming the American suburbs. Here, the American Dream could be achieved with the purchase of a single-family home and a small plot of land. Men fresh from the war brought their young families to the safe-havens of the suburbs, keeping them at a reasonable distance from the city. Diner owners paid attention to this trend. Middle-class families were not going to be satisfied eating at a “greasy spoon,” so dingy diners had to clean up a bit in order to meet the needs and tastes of their more sophisticated clientele.<sup>84</sup> Whether they liked it or not, many owners packed up and left the city for the sprawling tree-lined streets of suburbia to keep businesses thriving. Families were no

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph T. Manzo, “From Pushcart to Modular Restaurant: The Diner on the Landscape.” *Journal of American Culture* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 14.

<sup>84</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 24.

longer interested in traveling to the city for a meal at the diner; it was not convenient.

Thus, diners soon became a fixture of the post-war suburban sprawl landscape.

Diners had experienced an industry transformation from a strictly working-class male eatery to a middle-income family establishment.<sup>85,86</sup> As a result of suburban sprawl the diner's clientele expanded to include people from all walks of life, a far cry from the one-dimensional patronization at the lunch wagon. This increased the diner's popularity and, subsequently, its cultural status. It offered a cheap meal for factory workers on break, "coffee and pie for the women on the second shift from the dress factory," but was a refuge for traveling salesmen looking for a home-cooked meal.<sup>87</sup> The diner remained a haven for the working man but had managed to accrue a diversified clientele. As a result it experienced a popularity not seen before the war.

By the 1940s the diner industry was thriving, with an estimated 7,000 diners built right before World War II began.<sup>88</sup> It was not until after the War that the diner reached its prime, with several more diners in operation across the country. With the patronization of truckers, industrial laborers, busy executives, women, couples, teenagers, and families, the diner was truly in its prime.<sup>89</sup> The diversification of clientele had diner operators seeing the market change right before their eyes.<sup>90</sup> "

Why were so many people attracted to the diner? What made it so popular? A quick, cheap bite to eat could always be had; but there was something more. A visit to the diner included a theatrical performance with food, staff, and customers playing

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Hurley, "From Hash House," 1285.

<sup>87</sup> Manzo, "From Pushcart," 14

<sup>88</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 29.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 42, 43.

entertaining roles. “A cacophony of sounds, smells and sights” of conversation, dishes and cups rattling, and food cooking set the stage for a dining experience unlike any other.<sup>91</sup> The combination of the diner’s appearance, menu, and social atmosphere created an ambiance that was casual and comforting, making it attractive to working Americans.<sup>92</sup> Eating at the diner was like eating at the ultimate dinner table; it was a place that fostered camaraderie and a sense of community.<sup>93</sup> Amidst the clanking of coffee cups on the counter and the witty banter of a waitress and her customers was a place where people came together for a common purpose. On the surface it was to enjoy a good meal, but for many it was to find a sense of belonging, to commune and relate. The diner was not good just for food, but had social benefits as well.<sup>94</sup>

Unlike many other establishments the diner had the ability to provide an escape for its customers - “a relaxing trip, a restful vacation,”<sup>95</sup> in large part because diners had an innate ability to create a home-like atmosphere. It is in the diner where individuals from differing backgrounds met, shared trivia and playfully bantered with one another, “providing closeness without excessive intimacy.”<sup>96</sup> The closeness of quarters within the diner played a part in fostering this social aspect, but so did the dynamic between customers and staff. The cook, waitresses, and owner generated an environment within the diner that made the customer feel as if he or she had stepped into the family kitchen, a comfortable place where everyone was welcome.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Manzo, “From Pushcart,” 19.

<sup>92</sup> Manzo, “From Pushcart,” 14.

<sup>93</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, “Diner Design: Overlooked Sophistication,” *Perspecta* 15, (1975): 47.

<sup>94</sup> John B. Levine, M.D., “Chrome Home: The lasting Appeal of the Diner.” *Society for Commercial Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 1993-1994): 22.

<sup>95</sup> Gutman, “Diner Design,” 47

<sup>96</sup> Levine, M.D., “Chrome Home,” 22

<sup>97</sup> Cultrera, Larry. “The Diner as an Art Form.” *SCA Journal* 13, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1995): 20.

## **The Diner Family**

Before the addition of waitresses at the diner the cook was the main face of customer service. Smaller diners, especially those with only counters, did not have the need for a server since the cook could simply turn around and place the food in front of the customer. The cook played an important role in the success of the diner “as he provided a show of culinary artistry for the customers, usually while carrying on a conversation with one or more individuals seated at the counter.”<sup>98</sup> Customers also liked the cook because they could offer him “advice” on how they wanted their food prepared.<sup>99</sup> The cook often wore many hats, from chef, to server, to manager, and was indeed the backbone of the diner.

In 1948 the cook at the Cutchogue Diner in Long Island, New York, nicknamed “Big Al,” was one short-order chef that understood the art of diner service.<sup>100</sup> Though he may have had a crusty exterior complete with a cigarette in his mouth, Big Al was sincerely concerned with the culinary satisfaction of his customers.<sup>101</sup> His attention to detail and quality played a large part in the overall success of the Cutchogue Diner, giving it steady business until 1965 when Big Al sold it.<sup>102</sup> This example is a testament to the importance of the short-order cook and demonstrates that this particular role is crucial to diner success.

Over time some diners relocated the grill to the back, and many added booths and tables to the space. This change in design sparked a need for female labor for food

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<sup>98</sup> Manzo, “From Pushcart,” 19.

<sup>99</sup> Manzo, “From Pushcart,” 19.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Karl Witzel, *The American Diner* (St. Paul: MBI, 2006), 24.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

delivery to patrons.<sup>103</sup> Women as servers “not only solved a practical problem but went a long way toward domesticating the diner experience.”<sup>104</sup> The presence of the waitress completed the association of the diner with home in customer’s minds.<sup>105</sup> Waitresses went beyond their basic duty of taking orders and socialized with the customer about matters great and small.<sup>106</sup> In this manner the waitress became a surrogate mother or wife to the customer, adding that special home-style element to the diner for which it is so well-known today.<sup>107</sup> After establishing relationships with the customers many waitresses found it difficult to leave the diner, so they often continued to wait tables not just for years, but decades. Their permanence helped keep the diner family together.<sup>108</sup>

Further enhancing the family atmosphere of the diner was the manager. Many diners were owned by European immigrants, particularly Greeks in the Northeast, who had their own management style which proved to be successful. The Greek manager took seriously the business that he owned and operated, ensuring a high standard of quality to the food and dining environment. It was also common for family members of the owner to be employees, adding to the “hominess” of the diner because they brought a true family dynamic to the workplace. The openness with which the owner shared his feelings and philosophy on life added to the comfortable, home-like atmosphere for which the diner became known.<sup>109</sup> No matter the manager’s ethnicity, diners reflected the personalities of the people who ran them, adding to their appeal.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 70.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Manzo, “From Pushcart,” 19.

<sup>107</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 70.

<sup>108</sup> Guedon, Christine. “Diner Aesthetics: A Woman’s Perspective.” *Society for Commercial Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 1993-1994): 7.

<sup>109</sup> Manzo, “From Pushcart,” 20.

<sup>110</sup> Guedon, “Diner Aesthetics,” 6.



Like the waitress and the cook, managers found themselves multi-tasking around the diner. Managers often helped staff out during peak hours or walked around the dining area just “kibitzing” with customers.<sup>111</sup> Building and maintaining a strong client base was so important to the manager that even some diner manufacturers encouraged socializing with clients.<sup>112</sup> This tactic paid off; many diners saw the same faces every week or everyday.

George Yonko, the son of a Romanian immigrant, was the owner of the Chuck Wagon Diner in Gary, Indiana.<sup>113</sup> As the owner he diligently paid attention to his customer’s needs which resulted in increasingly steady business for his diner. Ever since he purchased the diner in the 1940s Yonko was constantly improving and upgrading the menu and diner structure to more comfortably accommodate his guests. For example, salads and other light fare that appealed to women were added to the menu to increase the clientele base for his business. To appease his growing client base of families and couples Yonko also added “several dining room annexes that featured table service.”<sup>114</sup> Yonko was an example of a diner owner who understood the importance of interacting and listening to his clients in order to improve his business.

The triple threat of the cook, waitress, and manager established the diner as an inviting place where everyone was welcome. The diner would not have been as successful if only its food and appearance were pleasing; the personnel contributed

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<sup>111</sup> Manzo, “From Pushcart,” 20.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>113</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 22.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 24.

considerably to its success.<sup>115</sup> The diner's unique dynamic between its staff, customer, and structure made it an American icon worthy of recognition.

### **The Diner's Role in Art**

The diner's social impacts travel well beyond its walls. One does not have to eat in the diner to get a taste of its culture; rather, the diner's essence can be found in books, portraits, and even furniture. Artists of all media – paint, photography, film, etc. – have taken it upon themselves to immortalize the diner through their art to share with the world so that everyone may enjoy the diner's charm. Through the variety of diner art available to the masses it is possible to grasp the diner experience without setting foot inside the structure.

Before the diner became a stainless steel structure it was still recognized as an integral part of American culture, especially within cities. The Ashcan School, an early twentieth century style of art based out of New York City, was comprised of artists that depicted authentic city life, no matter how gritty or sophisticated. Ashcan artists aimed to portray city life as it truly was, often composing their scenes as if the viewer was in the painting.<sup>116</sup> Edward Hopper, a member of the Ashcan School, was one artist that recognized the importance of the diner within the city. The focus of one of his most renowned paintings, *Nighthawks*, was the city diner. (*Figure 3-2*) The context within which the diner was painted – against a black night sky, in the late hours of the evening – strips the diner down to its fundamental values as a place of refuge where one can ponder life over a cup of coffee. This simple portrait is able to convey the personality of the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>116</sup> Zurier, Rebecca, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, 32.

diner and make the viewer feel as if he or she is standing outside the diner and has the opportunity to join the customers already inside.

John Baeder is another New-York-City-based artist whose main focus is the diner. Born during its prime in the 1930s, Baeder's interest in the diner is based on life experiences and profound emotional connection. Described as a "knowledgeable and deeply committed chronicler of that rapidly disappearing facet of American vernacular architecture" Baeder has photographed and painted hundreds of diners for personal enjoyment as well as to commemorate the endangered restaurant type.<sup>117</sup>

His photorealist approach to the diner produces a clear and authentic image that highlights and enhances the individual architectural personalities of each structure. (Figure 3-3) His quality of work and artistic vision has made his artwork so popular that his portraits are often reproduced on posters, calendars, postcards, and even plates.<sup>118</sup> Baeder's talent has served as a proponent for diners; because people appreciate the quality of his work they appreciate what it is he is depicting.

In addition to artist-commissioned portraits, diner art is also commonly digitized. Clip art, typically used in electronic documents, is full of various diner-inspired images from waitresses to signs to inspired typefaces. Stock photography websites such as Getty Images and Veer also offer photographs and illustrations of diner-related images.<sup>119, 120</sup> These genres of art are often available for free which allows virtually everyone on earth to partake in diner artwork for any purpose.

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<sup>117</sup> Baeder, John, *Diners*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995, 7.

<sup>118</sup> John Baeder, "A Few Interesting Words About Me..."; available from <http://www.johnbaeder.com/Bio.htm>; Internet; accessed 13 June 2009.

<sup>119</sup> Getty Images, "Stock Photography, Editorial Photos, Footage & Music"; available from <http://www.gettyimages.com>; Internet; accessed 13 June 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Veer, "Veer: Elements for Creativity"; available from <http://www.veer.com>; Internet; accessed 13 June 2009.



**Figure 3-2. *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper** (Source: Walter Wells).



**Figure 3-3. Painting of Sisson's Diner by John Baeder.** (Source: John Baeder).

In addition to artist-commissioned portraits diner art is also commonly digitized. Clip art, typically used in electronic documents, is full of various diner-inspired images from waitresses to signs to inspired typefaces. Stock photography websites such as Getty

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Postcards, both photograph and linen, also depict diners. A lost art, “photocards” (photograph postcards) and linen postcards are rare and in high demand. The photos of diners that appear on these cards were taken by just about anyone, from freelance photographers to souvenir companies. Linen card production, popular in the early- to mid-twentieth century, was actually a fine science; artists and photographers took the extra step and often removed objects that interfered with the diner, such as shadows and trees, with an airbrush.<sup>123</sup> (*Figure 3-4*) By depicting diners on postcards everyone had the opportunity to have a small piece of diner artwork. Their popularity today reinforces the diner’s impact on popular culture.



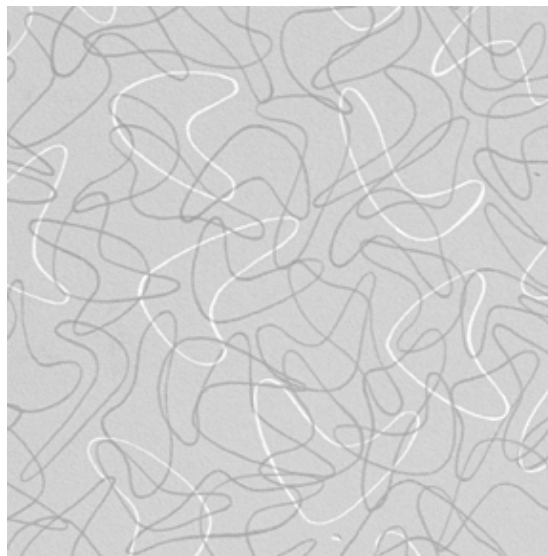
**Figure 3-4. Linen postcard featuring The Burlington Diner.** (Source: John Baeder).

<sup>121</sup> Getty Images, “Stock Photography, Editorial Photos, Footage & Music”; available from <http://www.gettyimages.com>; Internet; accessed 13 June 2009.

<sup>122</sup> Veer, “Veer: Elements for Creativity”; available from <http://www.veer.com>; Internet; accessed 13 June 2009.

<sup>123</sup> Baeder, John, *Gas, Food, and Lodging*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1982, 20.

The diner aesthetic has also made its way into the furniture market. Kitchen furniture is most often inspired by diners given their inherent culinary natures but it is not uncommon to see sofas or lamps inspired by the iconic eatery as well. With a diner-inspired kitchen table and chairs the owner can feel as if he or she is eating in a diner within the comforts of home. Furniture forms, materials, and colors are often replicated from original pieces to give a more authentic feel. Dining chairs are often covered with vinyl in a two-tone print, and tables have chrome detailing with Formica “Skylark Boomerang” laminate tops to create an “authentic” diner vignette.<sup>124</sup> (Figure 3-5)



**Figure 3-5. Formica “Skylark Boomerang” Laminate countertop surface.**  
(Source: Formica)

It is not difficult to find diner-inspired artwork. Although the original diner restaurants may be scarce, the artwork inspired by these structures is continuously produced. The plethora of diner art that is available is a testament to its social impact.

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<sup>124</sup> Formica, “Skylark Boomerang”; Available from [http://www.formica.com/publish/site/na/us/en/index/laminate/colors\\_collections/patterns.detail.6940.0001.html](http://www.formica.com/publish/site/na/us/en/index/laminate/colors_collections/patterns.detail.6940.0001.html); Internet; accessed 12 June 2009.

## **Summary**

Price, people, and place were all contributing factors to the overwhelming, longstanding success of the diner. Low prices on good food attracted the blue-collar worker to the lunch wagons of cities in the late nineteenth century. As the lunch wagon evolved into the diner it maintained the same quality of food and economic value but added an element of comfort with the waitress. Architectural and aesthetic changes in conjunction with social advances made the diner an American icon. The amount of diner-inspired artwork available is also indicative of the diner's iconic status. Though it eventually fell prey to the fast-food chains of the 1960s the diner has solidified its place in American history and has made a recent comeback. The diner is proving that it is an entity with staying power.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE DINER'S DEMISE**

On the eve of World War II there were approximately 7,000 diners in operation, averaging about 140 per state in America.<sup>125</sup> The majority of these diners were located in Northeastern cities; some states, particularly out West, never had a diner. The quantity of diners at this time shows how remarkably popular they were to Americans, not just the working class, although the diner remained a crucial element of the blue-collar worker's lifestyle. The diner became a unique place that could provide a social backdrop for anyone, no matter what age, ethnicity, income, or gender.

For almost a century the diner sat as an important fixture on the American cultural landscape. The familiar forms it took on throughout its history – from a wooden wagon to a magnificent steel car – became symbols of comfort and hope to Americans everywhere as these structures represented a quality and value for which the diner became known. By the time World War II ended the diner seemed to work out any of its past architectural or operating kinks and had created a solid identity for itself. The postwar diner had it all – good food at great prices, a clean, family atmosphere, and a welcoming reputation that was unsurpassed. At no other time in its history was it so popular and widely accepted as citizens from nearly every social class patronized the diner. This was the height of the diner's existence.

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<sup>125</sup> Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 29.



However, like all good things, the diner's culinary reign came to an end. This is not to say that all diners closed; in fact, about one-fifth of all diners built remain.<sup>126</sup> Many cities, towns, and interstates still depend on the services offered by the diner, whether nutritional or social. However, the vast majority of diners that were in operation in the 1960s and 70s were forced to close their doors because of the amount of business lost to fast-food restaurants.<sup>127</sup>

After a long, drawn-out competition between diners, drive-ins, and, ultimately, fast-food empires, the diner could no longer appease the American people. The entity that had worked so hard for the working man had been quickly disregarded in favor of greater convenience, standardization, and economic value. Perhaps the hardest pill to swallow for the diner was that the fast-food restaurant was essentially a diner, but repackaged in a way that Americans found more suitable to their needs. The strategic marketing tactics of major restaurant corporations were so successful that diners, most of them independently-owned and operated, could not compete with the volume and quality of advertisements. The diner simply could not keep up with the advances of the competition.

### **Competition**

With the exception of the night lunch wagons, the diner has always had to compete with other restaurant types.<sup>128</sup> Saloons that offered alcohol in addition to cheap food took business away from the early diners until Prohibition. "Mom-and-Pop" restaurants that featured home-cooked meals at good prices always competed with the

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<sup>126</sup> Joseph T. Manzo, "From Pushcart to Modular Restaurant: The Diner on the Landscape." *Journal of American Culture* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 19.

<sup>127</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 102.

<sup>128</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, "Diner Design: Overlooked Sophistication," *Perspecta* 15, (1975): 51.

diner for business. However, the diner had an edge over many other restaurants because of its atmosphere, hours of operation, convenient roadside location, and economic value. Rarely did a customer have an unsatisfying meal or social experience at the local diner. It seemed that everything the diner had to offer was sufficient and well-received, but lacked amenities and novelty presented by new establishments.

### **The Drive-In**

In addition to the changing American postwar mentality the diner also had to compete with already-established regional dining preferences. The diner industry had conquered the eastern seaboard, particularly the Northeast, but had yet to infiltrate the West. When the diner made the journey to its new frontier in the 1950s it had already been beat out by another type of eatery, the drive-in.<sup>129</sup> Drive-ins were popular because they allowed the family to dine out for a quick, cheap, and tasty meal without ever having to leave the car. Established in the 1920s in California the drive-in had “effectively sealed off diner proprietors from the market for middle-income customers and prevented their establishments from ever gaining a foothold.”<sup>130,131</sup> Taking their business elsewhere diner owners attempted to go “head to head with drive-ins in the South and Midwest, but it was a losing battle.”<sup>132</sup> The defeat by drive-ins was so detrimental that some diner manufacturing companies went bankrupt.<sup>133</sup> The possibility for diners to succeed anywhere but the East was grim.

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<sup>129</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 45.

<sup>130</sup> Jim Heimann, *Car Hops and Curb Service: A History of American Drive-In Restaurants 1920-1960*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996, 24.

<sup>131</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 46.

<sup>132</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 46.

<sup>133</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 47.

The drive-in was like a glorified diner with added bells and whistles the diner simply could not match. The drive-in offered “gleaming tile, ‘sanitized’ counters, open front service areas for speedy access, a brilliant light display, and signs” – elements similar to what the diner offered – but due to the drive-in’s size these elements were magnified and more eye-catching.<sup>134</sup> Over time drive-ins took on various shapes from octagons to circles for “greater efficiency, visibility, and economy of site” which gave them a unique aesthetic and allowed them to accommodate more customers, both inside and out.<sup>135</sup> (Figure 4-1) Another distinctive architectural feature was “fantasy architecture,” so-called because of its eclectic and unrealistic design.<sup>136</sup> Oversized animals, food, and other objects were incorporated into drive-in design – typically on the roof – to display the particular theme of the restaurant and be more visible to the passing



**Figure 4-1. Carpenter’s Drive-In with an octagonal form.** (Source: Jim Heimann).

<sup>134</sup> Heimann, *Car Hops*, 26.

<sup>135</sup> Heimann, *Car Hops*, 28.

<sup>136</sup> Heimann, *Car Hops*, 30.

motorist. The brazenness of the sign was crucial for the “ever-important task of customer-baiting.”<sup>137</sup> Diners could use neon signs and shimmering steel to bring in business, but to add this bizarre architecture would mean changing the diner’s form completely.

The drive-in was also able to take advantage of modern design in a way the diner couldn’t because of its size. In the 1930s diners adopted streamline design by taking on a general tear-drop shape, but drive-ins took the sleek design characteristics further. Because of space drive-ins could incorporate more Art Deco and Moderne details such as intricate signs, columns, and windows that made the drive-in look more like an architectural masterpiece than a common restaurant. (*Figure 4-2*) Though diners were flashy because of shiny materials, the drive-in was even more so because of size, materials, and details.

Drive-ins also differed from the diner because of services they offered. After the Prohibition ended drive-ins added cocktail lounges.<sup>138</sup> Diners did not often sell alcohol, and if they did it was rare to have a full-service bar, let alone an entire room dedicated to the consumption of alcohol. The car hop, inherent to the drive-in industry, was a unique feature the diner did not have. These servers were typically well-dressed, uniformed men, but were soon replaced by attractive women in fancier attire, earning them the moniker “Glamburger Girls.”<sup>139</sup> Some drive-ins required their car hops to dress in costumes to match the restaurant’s theme, such as majorettes or Mexicans donning sombreros which added a theatrical appeal to the drive-in experience. (*Figures 4-3, 4-4*)

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<sup>137</sup> Heimann, *Car Hops*, 30.

<sup>138</sup> Heimann, *Car Hops*, 38.

<sup>139</sup> Heimann, *Car Hops*, 58.

The glitz and glamour of Hollywood and Los Angeles heavily influenced this tactic. It was no wonder that the diner could not successfully infiltrate the West; the diner was too simple for the Westerners who had been used to the luxury of the drive-in.



**Figure 4-2. McDonnell's Drive-In with Art Deco detailing.** (Source: Jim Heimann)



**Figures 4-3, 4-4. Car hops dressed in costume.** (Source: Jim Heimann).

As the 1950s came to an end drive-ins were entering the height of their popularity. The drive-in, unlike the diner, became a franchised entity, resulting in chain operations owned by large corporations. These big businesses were willing and able to sell franchises to “inexperienced operators” who wanted “to cash in on the drive-in craze with very little risk.”<sup>140</sup> Drive-ins, like diners, afforded men who had little money and experience the chance to achieve the American Dream by becoming business owners. Because they were so popular at the time, the new drive-in owners believed that they would profit considerably and find long-lasting success. To their chagrin, the drive-in industry fizzled out almost as quickly as it came in.

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<sup>140</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 46.

At this time diners were rarely, if ever, franchised. Diner operators did not answer to a conglomerate in another city for rules about how to cook the food and run the business. One of the inherent attributes of the diner business was that each restaurant was independently owned and operated which allowed for variety within menu choices (although, by nature, all diners seemed to serve the same type of fare) and an inviting atmosphere that could only come from a locally-run business. However, postwar Americans were losing interest in communing with strangers and even neighbors; rather, they preferred to socialize within family boundaries. As families became more inclusive they found it less desirable to dine out in an environment that encouraged socializing beyond the familial bounds. Drive-ins accommodated this desire because families only had to interact with a waitress as they sat within the confines of their personal cars.

The benefits that franchised businesses could provide to consumers were well-liked. In actuality the goals of franchised restaurants were taken straight from the diner – “fast service, rock-bottom prices, [and] informality.”<sup>141</sup> The man power, creativity, and funding available to the corporations behind the franchises afforded them the ability to focus on the needs of families as well as provide a consistency that the diner could not replicate. By standardizing food, service, and architecture, franchised restaurants could offer “an experience that was acceptable and familiar to patrons of diverse class backgrounds and, above all, identical everywhere from Maine to California.”<sup>142</sup>

If the diner thought the drive-in was its biggest enemy, it was in for a rude awakening. The fast-food giants were riding in on the coat tails of the drive-in, ready to pummel the diner out of business.

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<sup>141</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 103.

<sup>142</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 103.

## The Fast-Food Empires

The businesses that ultimately demolished the diner industry are still enjoying their now worldwide success some fifty years later, and not looking to stop anytime soon. The strategic and scientific marketing methodology behind the hamburgers, french fries, and sodas has proved to be on point with the wants and needs of the American public. Had it not been for the diner's precedent this genre of restaurant may not even exist. Ironically, the values on which these fast-food giants were built – convenience, uniformity, and dependability – were the forces that ultimately put the diner industry in shambles.

The standardization of architecture was possibly the greatest thing that the fast-food restaurants copied from the diner. Not all diners were of the same design, but the diner manufacturing companies certainly helped create a sense of architectural continuity among the diner landscape. This stability helped increase the diner's popularity because of the mental associations tied to a distinctive architectural design.<sup>143</sup> Franchised restaurants had a leg-up on the diner:

The motorist who passed a stainless-steel diner along the roadside had a fair notion of what he or she would find on the inside: what kind of food, what kind of seating arrangements, what kind of prices, and what kind of clientele. But the motorist who passes a Howard Johnson's or a McDonald's had an even clearer idea and ran a smaller risk of being unpleasantly surprised by the food, service, or premises. For in addition to standardizing the architecture of their restaurants, the franchised chains imposed uniformity on their menus, recipes, and prices.<sup>144</sup>

The soft glow of a neon sign or the reflection of light off the rounded corner of a diner evoked a sense of comfort and familiarity, but a standard, familiar building gave the customer a solid answer as to what could be expected. Fast-food corporations capitalized

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<sup>143</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 100.

<sup>144</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 100.



on the psychological ties between architecture and food, taking what the diner had created and finding ways to perfect it. Going the extra mile and achieving true standardization across the board to include food preparation and selection, employee uniforms, and architecture imposed a greater psychological association between food and architecture on the American people. Customers were satisfied knowing that the guesswork had been eliminated from the menu.

Like diners, fast-food restaurants began in cities and gradually made their way to the suburbs.<sup>145</sup> In metropolitan areas fast-food restaurants could reach a broad range of people, especially those for whom time and money were of the essence. A major difference – and blatant strategy – between diners and fast-food restaurants was that the fast-food restaurants were located on the fringes of the urban fabric “as much in anticipation of suburban growth as in response to it.”<sup>146</sup> Ray Kroc, the mastermind behind McDonald’s, hand-picked such locations for his business because they “tended to attract families with above-average incomes and very young children, precisely the clientele that [he] wanted.”<sup>147</sup> Sure enough, suburbanites flocked to the franchised restaurants, encouraging these eateries to open within the suburbs for even greater customer satisfaction.

As suburbs developed, the young families that resided within them were eager to take advantage of the convenience and economic value offered by the fast-food restaurants. The vast majority of families in the suburbs would be considered middle class, not wealthy enough to dine out every evening but also of an economic status that they could afford a cheap, filling meal a few times a week. Fast-food outlets also became

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<sup>145</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 92.

<sup>146</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 96.

<sup>147</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 96.

popular among the suburbanites – as the diner had some years earlier – because families could spend less time in a restaurant and more time in the comforts of their own homes. It was clear that fast-food restaurants combined the most successful aspects of the diner and the drive-in and enhanced them; the consumer had the benefit of visiting a restaurant that had a standardized appearance and menu, regardless of city or state, as well as the efficiency of driving up to a restaurant and receiving cheap food virtually instantaneously without leaving the car. Add to this operation carefully-planned marketing strategies and the diner did not stand a chance.

Franchised restaurants quickly exploded across the metropolitan landscape, penetrating suburban markets everywhere and cutting deeply into the diner's trade.<sup>148</sup> Chains like McDonald's, Bob's Big Boy, and Kentucky Fried Chicken enticed customers who otherwise would have patronized the diner, to their cookie-cutter boxes with employees who dressed in the same uniform and served a menu of predictable food choices. The repetition and dependability of food options was more comforting than anything the diner could offer. After a period of international instability postwar Americans craved consistency. The fast-food empire was not about to disappoint Americans.

The diner did not go down without a fight. Diner owners everywhere began adopting and imitating the methods of fast-food restaurants into their own businesses in hopes that they would stay abreast of the competition. A popular tactic to "secure the loyalty of children" was to offer children's menus and toys to keep families in the diner rather than at a fast-food restaurant.<sup>149</sup> Not surprisingly, the fast-food competitors, with

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<sup>148</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 92.

<sup>149</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 97.

their marketing executives and scientific research, were able to offer something even more attractive than toys – characters. Perhaps the most iconic of these fast-food mascots was Ronald McDonald, the “cheerful clown” that “dominated television advertisements” for McDonald’s.<sup>150</sup> Appearing in homes on televisions nationwide as well as making public appearances at parades and other events, Ronald McDonald infiltrated the minds, hearts, and stomachs of children. This clown was so popular that he actually “attained a higher name recognition among American children than any other public figure save for Santa Claus.”<sup>151</sup> With such a profound effect on Americans it was not surprising that by 1970 McDonald’s had 1,500 restaurants in the United States.<sup>152</sup> Through careful advertising, low prices, and dependability, those numbers continued to grow exponentially.

What diner could afford to nationally advertise, let alone have a mascot that could gain nationwide acclaim? It simply was not in the diner’s nature to appeal to such a wide audience. To become as popular as the competition, diners would have to *become* the competition and abandon what made them diners. Desperate to stay in business some diners attempted to do just that. By implementing new materials and design elements to look like the competition, the diner began to shed its trademark stainless steel shell for brick-clad facades that appealed to modern Americans, especially the suburbanites.

### **Changes in Design**

The success of restaurants like Howard Johnson’s, Burger King, and Denny’s could not be ignored, especially by competing restaurants. For many restaurants it was beneficial to study and adopt some key aspects of these fast-food giants to keep up with

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<sup>150</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 97.

<sup>151</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 97.

<sup>152</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 97.

the competition. The diner was one such restaurant that could not match the competition, despite any imitations. Diners tried to replicate the architecture and interior design of the fast-food giants, incorporating design schemes that were foreign and irrelevant to the diner culture. Design cues were also taken from suburban design preferences, especially for color palettes and materials. Stone and brick were two materials that infiltrated mid-century suburban design, and were subsequently found on new diners. (*Figures 4-5, 4-6*)



**Figure 4-5. Diner with fake stone** (Photo Courtesy of Robert O. Williams).



**Figure 4-6. Diner with “Space Age” Detail.** (Photo Courtesy of Robert O. Williams)

All of these changes went against the grain of the diner's traditional design scheme and shunned the stainless steel, neon, and brightly-colored porcelain details that had made the diner stand out just a few years earlier. As the diner tried harder to stray from its roots it essentially moved itself closer to its ultimate failure.

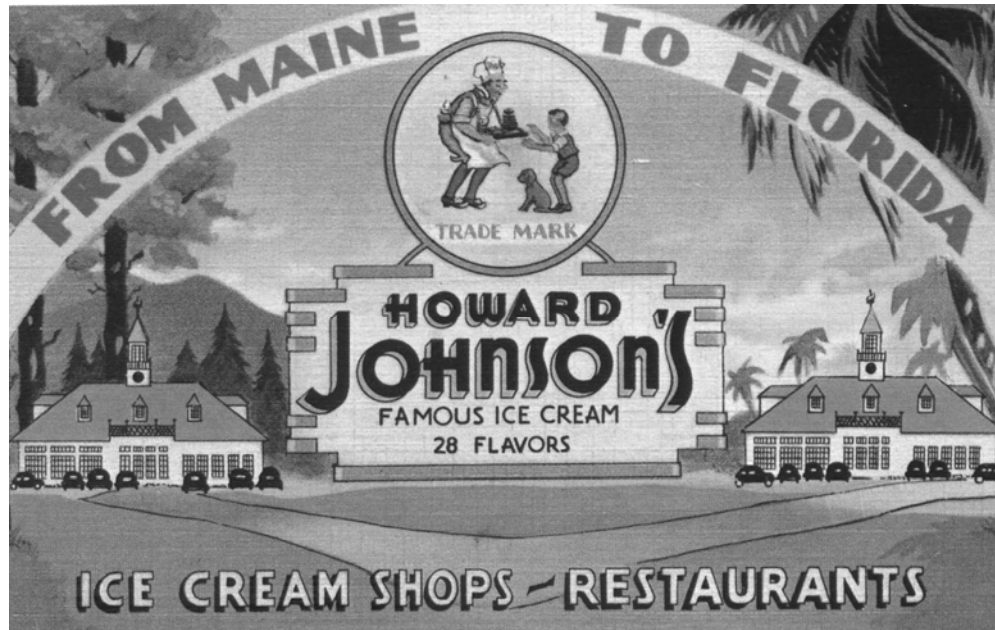
Howard Johnson's, a franchised restaurant that came about in the 1930s gained much of its popularity from its architectural design. In its early days Howard Johnson's were located in New England and ventured down the Eastern Seaboard as it gained popularity. Influenced by its Northeastern heritage Howard Johnson's were designed to resemble Colonial houses with white clapboard siding, multi-paned windows, dormers, and a cupola.<sup>153</sup> Like the diner's neon signs, Howard Johnson's restaurants featured bright orange roofs to serve as beacons for the hungry road warrior. (*Figure 4-7*) Inside the restaurants resembled a typical "middle-class living room" with "knotty-pine wall paneling, window curtains, and small table lamps."<sup>154</sup> Families traveling through towns and on the interstates found solace in this environment because it portrayed a "homey yet dignified atmosphere."<sup>155</sup> Dining in a Howard Johnson's was, for many, like sitting down to eat a home-cooked meal at the dining room table. The stainless steel, vinyl, and neon décor of the diner probably was not similar to what the typical suburban family had in its home. This is not to say that eating in a diner was no longer an enjoyable experience; however, when it came down to choosing between the diner and a homey Howard Johnson's, most families would opt for the more familiar of the two.

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<sup>153</sup> Roadside Fans, "Howard Johnson's;" Available from <http://www.roadsidefans.com/hojo.html>; Internet, accessed 20 June 2009.

<sup>154</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 94.

<sup>155</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 94.



**Figure 4-7. Postcard advertisement for Howard Johnson's restaurant.**  
(Source: John Baeder).

To bridge the gap between diner design and that of the competition diner builders got creative. Instead of tearing down diners and rebuilding them, it was common to build annexes onto diners that had the attributes customers wanted, such as knotty-pine wall paneling.<sup>156</sup> On the exterior some owners added brick or stucco veneer, and even Greco-Roman statuary and columns.<sup>157</sup> The diner was looking less like a diner and more like a restaurant with an identity crisis. Only a fraction of these converted diners survived through the changes. Sadly the diner industry continued to suffer, causing “most of the major postwar diner builders [to go] out of business by the 1970s.”<sup>158</sup>

### **Summary**

The diner's losing fight against the stiff competition of the fast-food empire should not go unnoticed or unappreciated. In fact, the diner's performance during this

<sup>156</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 95.

<sup>157</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 102.

<sup>158</sup> Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*, 102.

hardship should be used as an example to other restaurant types, as well as other industries where competition is involved. To cope with the competition many diner owners were faced with the decision of abandoning their operation styles in favor of assimilation or staying true to their roots and continuing operation as a traditional diner. In the end both of these methods were not enough to appease the American people and keep the diner industry afloat.

Whether or not a diner changed its architectural and operational features did not seem to have an impact on its longevity. In the short run the changes made to help assimilate diners into the mainstream American dining experience of the 1960s and 1970s kept some diners in business, but few, if any, were able to ride out the end of the decade. The same was true for diners that did not change their method of operation or architectural features for the sake of pleasing the general public. The survival rate of a diner during the rise of the fast-food empire was unpredictable, regardless of changing factors. If a diner was able to ride out the tumultuous times of the 1970s it was because of luck.

Today the diner is truly a recipient of luck and good fortune. In a society where the fast-food empire continues to dominate the diner is making a comeback amidst the competitors that put it to shame only a few decades ago. Its current resurgence is proof that the diner is an entity with a character far more substantial than fast-food restaurants. For various reasons people around the United States – and even in other countries – are showing interest in diner restoration and resurrection, and in doing so, are slowly bringing the diner industry back to life.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DINER CASE STUDIES**

There are an estimated 2,100 diners that remain on the American landscape today; however, that number is ever-changing. Only a small fraction of remaining diners can be found historically intact. As discussed in previous chapters diners often found themselves shunned for their once celebrated shiny, steel exteriors and were often subjects of insensitive face-lifts and overhauls, all in the name of progress. In 2009 a diner is lucky to be existing at all, after so many were demolished in the wake of the fast-food take-over of the 1960s and 1970s. If the diner is still clad in its original materials it is a rare gem and should be appreciated for its survival through the most trying of times.

The case studies in this chapter serve as a representative sampling of diner preservation strategies in America. The three diners chosen for this study are the Virginia Diner in Wakefield, Virginia; the New Ideal Diner in Aberdeen, Maryland; and the L&S Diner in Harrisonburg, Virginia. These diners were selected based on location and various levels of historic integrity. At the time these studies were performed these diners were the most conveniently located to the author and demonstrated a broad range of preservation strategies. Each diner shows a different approach to historic preservation, from maintaining little or no historic fabric to preservation intact. The purpose of selecting these three different diners is to show examples of typical changes that may occur in diner architecture over time, as well as to analyze and assess different



preservation methods for diners. Each diner is examined for its background and history of ownership, menu, social impact, and preservation strategy.

Although the preservation strategies differ between the three selected diners they do share some important commonalities, another reason why these diners were chosen for this study. For instance, all of the diners were manufactured prior to 1950, which is an important constant for assessing when and why certain changes may have been made to the diner's architecture. Each of the three diners, like so many others in America, at one point served as its town's social keystone, driving home the notion that diners have more than just architectural significance. Elaborating on the social importance of each is the fact that the menus for these three diners have remained relatively the same since each diner's opening, illustrating that the food served is an important social factor in the existence of diners; so much so that it is one of the aspects that is rarely changed.

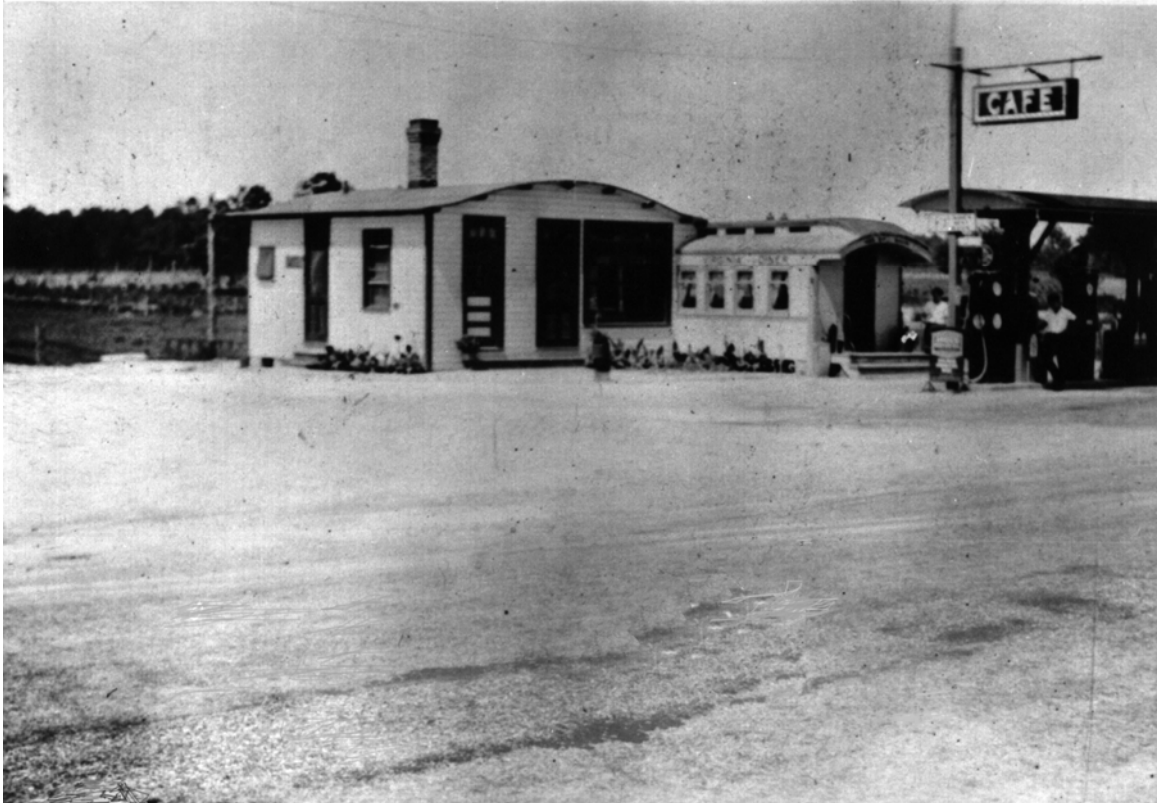
### **The Virginia Diner, Wakefield, Virginia**

The Virginia Diner exemplifies a diner that has evolved architecturally from a single railcar to a large facility that has expanded to meet the needs of the business. This is not atypical; like other businesses, many diners have grown to accommodate an increasing customer base. The Virginia Diner differs from most other diners in that it has a gift shop and a peanut factory housed in the same facility. Although it began as a standard diner the Virginia Diner has evolved into a unique entity in its class.

### **Background and Historical Appearance**

The diner sits on Main Street in Wakefield, about a half mile west of Virginia Route 460, a major gateway to Norfolk and Virginia Beach. The business was originally housed in an old railcar built in 1929 by the Surry, Sussex & South Hampton Lumber

Company of Surry County, Virginia.<sup>159</sup> When the lumber company went bankrupt in 1930 there came to be an abundance of empty railcars in the Surry County area sitting on vacant lots. Several were bought and used for various businesses such as barbershops and restaurants within Surry County. One of these abandoned cars was purchased and used to house the Virginia Diner in Wakefield. (*Figure 5-1*)



**Figure 5-1. The Original Virginia Diner, 1929.** (Source: Christine Epperson)

D.P. Davis, an entrepreneur saw an opportunity for a restaurant on the highway, and placed the railcar on the property at Main Street where the diner sits today.

Lawrence Monahan, traveling through Wakefield by bus in 1945, saw the opportunity to run the diner. He spoke with the Davis family and decided to purchase the diner from them to run as his business.

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<sup>159</sup> The following information about the Virginia Diner was obtained on March 9, 2009 by the author through an interview with Mr. William Galloway and Ms. Christine Epperson.

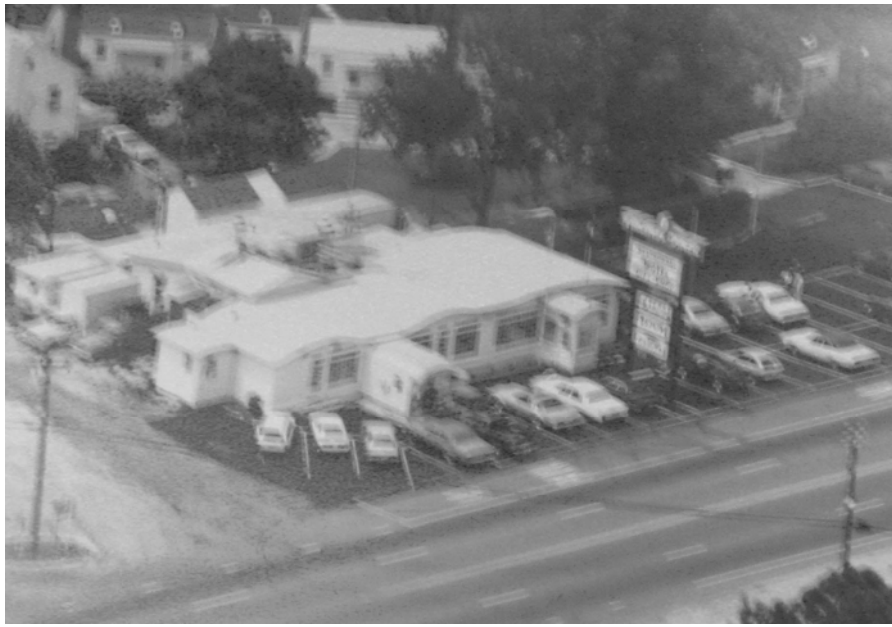
After Mr. Monahan purchased the diner he recruited a man named Chuck Smith as a junior partner in the business. Mr. Monahan and Mr. Smith were the only managers of the business; waitresses bussed their own tables, hosted, and served customers; cooks prepared the food. To accommodate for a growing customer base, Mr. Monahan built three additions onto the diner in different phases. (*Figure 5-2*)



**Figure 5-2. The Virginia Diner in 1933-35 with Additions.**  
(Source: Christine Epperson)

In 1976 Bill Galloway and his wife Mary Ann purchased the diner from the Monahans. In 1989 the diner structure was completely demolished. The lot was cleared and the diner was rebuilt at a slightly larger scale. The current diner is clad in vinyl siding with a standing seam metal roof. It sits on a concrete foundation and incorporates a ramp for accessibility into the building. The windows are all fixed with several panes

on each. The larger diner, although built on the same lot, was set back several feet from Main Street to accommodate more parking spaces. (*Figures 5-3, 5-4*) Prior to this move the parking lot was right behind the Virginia Diner's road sign, making entrance and exit to the diner difficult due to adjacent highway traffic.



**Figure 5-3. The Virginia Diner Prior to its Demolition in 1989**  
(Photo Courtesy of The Virginia Diner)



**Figure 5-4. The Original Virginia Diner (Left) and the Current Virginia Diner (Right) During Construction** (Photo Courtesy of The Virginia Diner)

## **Menu**

The bill of fare at the Virginia Diner has always consisted of traditional “country” foods. (*Figure 5-5*) Part of the Virginia Diner’s success came from Mr. Monahan’s menu selections during his ownership in the mid-twentieth century. Through a contract with the federal government Monahan was able to acquire a variety of meats that other restaurants could not access such as ham, sausage, and bacon. By offering a selection of foods that could not be purchased anywhere else the Virginia Diner was able to attract customers. Biscuits, vegetables rendered in pork fat, and Virginia ham are just a sampling of the diner’s cuisine. The restaurant offers combination dinners such as fried chicken with baked ham, as well as homemade pies and fresh country eggs. Because the diner is located in Wakefield, the “Peanut Capital of the World,” it offers a homemade peanut pie on its menu, which is unique to the Virginia Diner. To keep customers intrigued and returning to the restaurant the Virginia Diner offers various weekend buffets, such as a Friday night seafood buffet, and breakfast buffets on Saturday and Sunday. These special meals help turn tables at the restaurant and keep business steady.

On the outside the Virginia Diner may have changed, but the menu is something that has remained relatively constant over its lifetime. The reliability of the menu is partially responsible for the diner’s success because returning patrons can depend on the food that has comforted them over the years.

## **Social Impact**

Prior to the construction of Interstate 64 through the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, the diner saw much business from military families because Wakefield was on the way to the ships in Norfolk. Additionally, a Skywatch/airplane spotter program ran in

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>VIRGINIA DINER</b><br/> <b>ROUTE 52</b><br/> <b>WAKEFIELD, VA.</b></p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>- MENU -</b></p> <hr/> |     |
| Spring Chicken Dinner.....  | 65c |
| Virginia Ham and Eggs.....  | 45c |
| Oysters Half Fry or Stew.....   | 35c |
| Shad Dinner.....  | 50c |
| Home Cooked Soup.....   | 15c |
| <b>SANDWICHES</b>   |     |
| Virginia Ham, Toasted.....  | 15c |
| Ham and Egg.....  | 20c |
| Cheese, Toasted.....  | 10c |
| Barbecue.....   | 15c |
| Tomato and Lettuce.....   | 10c |
| Club.....   | 20c |
| Egg.....  | 10c |
| Coffee.....   | 5c  |
| Tea.....  | 5c  |
| Milk.....   | 10c |
| Grape Fruit.....  | 10c |
| Ice Cream.....  | 10c |
| Home Made Pie.....  | 10c |
| Hot Rolls Served With All Regular Meals.  |     |
| Fountain Drinks, Candies, Cakes, Fruits.  |     |
| (Wakefield Printing Co., Inc.)  |     |

**Figure 5-5. The Virginia Diner's Menu from the 1930s.** (Source: Christine Epperson)

Wakefield, and many of the men ate meals at the Virginia Diner, which helped keep the diner busy. (*Figure 5-6*)



**Figure 5-6. Male customers outside the Virginia Diner, 1940s.**  
(Source: Christine Epperson)

In the summers of the mid-twentieth century the Virginia Diner stayed busy with families traveling to and from Norfolk and Virginia Beach for vacations. In 1957 Interstate 64 became the major route to the beaches of Virginia which decreased the number of patrons to the diner in the summer months. However, the diner has become a summer tradition to many travelers, so vacationers en route to the beaches go out of their way to visit the Virginia Diner as part of their vacation. The Virginia Diner gets most of its business from summer travelers but fares well in the off-season, especially on Sundays. If the weather is nice the Virginia Diner often sees more customers, especially motorcyclists passing through town.

The Galloways and their daughter, Christine Epperson, own the diner today. The diner is an extremely successful entity, even through the current recession. Seeing the success and integrity of the Virginia Diner other restaurants have asked to use the “Virginia Diner” name, but the Galloways and Ms. Epperson are against it. They feel that the charm and character of the diner will be lost if it relocates somewhere else, and they do not want to jeopardize that. The owners do, however, sell their Virginia Diner peanuts at three locations throughout Virginia, but that is as much franchising as they will do. There is also concern among the owners because the state of Virginia is planning to construct a Route 460 bypass, which would reroute traffic around Wakefield, significantly impacting business. Should this happen, the owners have discussed the idea of constructing a second Virginia Diner on this bypass.

### **Preservation Strategy**

The Virginia Diner is deeply rooted in its history as a roadside eatery. The various owners of the restaurant have been able to keep the Virginia Diner prosperous through outstanding customer service, high-quality meals, and environmental ambience, true characteristics of successful diners. Over its lifespan the Virginia Diner has created a large customer base that would be impossible to fit inside its original railcar. Soon after it opened in the 1930s the diner needed an expansion to accommodate for its growing clientele. Throughout the next four decades the diner required two more additions that eventually made its original railcar form unrecognizable. The historic fabric of the original railcar remained in this structure but was severely compromised by the various additions and alterations the building received over its lifespan.



In 1989 the original railcar structure that had morphed into a larger diner complex was demolished. The different additions attached to the building over the years created some overall construction and operation issues that affected ventilation and environmental comfort. Most importantly, the amount of parking required for the larger diner could not be provided on the lot as the diner was then positioned. It was necessary to the diner's business to rebuild a slightly-larger-scaled replica of the Virginia Diner, as it looked at the time of its demolition, and set it back further from the road. This solution allowed for more parking and more customers. (Figures 5-7, 5-8)



**Figure 5-7. Roadside Sign for the Virginia Diner.** (Photo by Author).



**Figure 5-8. Present Appearance of The Virginia Diner** (Photo by Author)

To restore the Virginia Diner back to its original railcar design would be detrimental to its business. The number of customers that visit the diner on a daily basis could not be contained in such a small space. The idea to replicate the diner structure in 1989, rather than build a newly-designed building that would be insensitive to the Virginia Diner's history, was a thoughtful approach that recalls some of the diner's history. The Virginia Diner is an example of a diner that has preserved its social atmosphere to the best of its ability, but at the expense of its original structure.

Though there is no longer any actual historic fabric of the Virginia Diner, its appearance and character remain. To further keep its history alive the Galloways have placed different photographs of the Virginia Diner in its various stages of operation inside the diner for customers to see its architectural progression.

### **The New Ideal Diner, Aberdeen, Maryland**

A diner aficionado has to look no further than the New Ideal Diner for an authentic diner experience. This diner has been preserved intact with minimal

restoration. With the exception of venetian blinds and tabletop jukeboxes, the interior and exterior of the New Ideal Diner are original, reflecting the diner's 1931 manufacturing date. (*Figure 5-9*)

### **Background and Historical Appearance**

The New Ideal Diner was manufactured by the Jerry O'Mahony Company of Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1931; however, it was not until 1952 that the diner was transported from New Jersey to its current site in Aberdeen, Maryland.<sup>160</sup> The diner was shipped in four sections by truck from New Jersey, a typical method for transporting diners. Due to its size it could not be shipped by train. Its size also impacted its route from New Jersey to Maryland; it had to be shipped through Lancaster, Pennsylvania because there was a bridge there that was large enough to handle the diner. Once the structure reached Aberdeen it was assembled on site.



**Figure 5-9. Present Appearance of the New Ideal Diner** (Photo by Author)

<sup>160</sup> The following information about the New Ideal Diner was obtained on March 12, 2009 by the author through an interview with Mr. George Engelsson.

Prior to the New Ideal's residency three other diners sat on the same lot but were not successful enough to stay put. In 1930 the Haas family from Pennsylvania moved one of their diners to the site at Aberdeen, opening in 1931. The Haas' owned several diners in Philadelphia but were forced to move them elsewhere in the 1930s due to the Depression. The second diner came in 1936; the third in the early 1940s. The last diner to sit on the property was the New Ideal.

The New Ideal Diner was originally owned by George Engelsson's aunt and uncle in 1952. In 1955 Engelsson joined the New Ideal's staff to run the diner while his aunt and uncle were on vacation. The family decided for various reasons not to return to the diner business, and Engelsson took on the responsibility of running the New Ideal. In 1978 Engelsson officially purchased the diner and made it his own. Engelsson owned it until 2006 when he sold it to Nick Batsis, the current owner.

The diner has a rectangular form sheathed on three sides in stainless steel of varying patterns, from vertical stripes, to horizontal stripes, to a diamond print. The rear elevation is of an unknown material that has been painted gray. (*Figure 5-10*) The diner is above grade and sits on a brick foundation. A stoop is located on the front center of the diner with a brick double-staircase that leads to the two front doors which are steel with large, single lights. The porch roof is clad in stainless steel with recessed lighting and rounded corners that echo the corners of the overall structure. (*Figure 5-11*) The front half of the diner houses the dining area; the back half holds the kitchen. A continuous horizontal strip of windows lines the front façade which gives every customer a view of the outside. There are even windows on the rounded corners of the façade which gives the diner a seamless and streamlined appearance. (*Figure 5-12*) The neon sign that sits

atop the diner is a defining characteristic of the iconic American diner and is a reflection of the time in which the diner was built.



**Figure 5-10. Rear Elevation of The New Ideal Diner.** (Photo by Author)



**Figure 5-11. Stoop on Façade of The New Ideal Diner.** (Photo by Author)



**Figure 5-12. Rounded Corner with Window.** (Photo by Author)

The diner sits on a concrete basement that houses a butcher shop, which was originally used to prepare everything except the desserts for the diner (it was too busy to accommodate a bakery). The diner still prepares much of its own food but does not rely on the butcher shop as it did in the mid-twentieth century.

### **Menu**

The New Ideal Diner features a standard diner menu that has changed minimally over its lifespan. Standard diner fare such as cheeseburgers, melts, french fries, and milkshakes are available. Customers can order big breakfasts that include eggs, meat, and pancakes, among other items. Because of its proximity to Baltimore and the Chesapeake Bay the New Ideal Diner acquires fresh seafood at any time, which is a big selling point that sets it apart from many other diners. Today the majority of the original menu items are available, along with Greek specialties such as gyros.

## **Social Impact**

The New Ideal is located near U.S. Route 40 which was the main route from New York to Washington, DC. Because of its location the diner thrived in the years prior to the construction of Interstate 95. When travelers relied on Route 40 they often stopped at the New Ideal for meals between cities. Customers included families, business people (including people from the UN), and teenagers. The time of day would dictate what crowd would come to the diner: for instance, teenagers would flock to the diner on weekends late at night; adults would come by the diner even later at night (after the teenagers) when their dances were over. Workers from the adjacent Aberdeen Proving Ground frequented the diner for lunch, which helped the diner thrive as well as the local economy. After I-95 was built the traffic at the diner decreased. By 1969 the amount of customers made it necessary to close the diner at night rather than continue to keep it open for 24 hours.

## **Preservation Strategy**

The New Ideal has been able to maintain the vast majority of its historic fabric over the past 60 years. Stepping inside the New Ideal is like taking a trip back to the 1950s; the customer has the chance to sit on the original counter stools or booths and take in the sights of the glittering chrome back bar with its dessert display cases. Both Mr. Engelsson and Mr. Batsis have taken great care in the on-going preservation and restoration of the diner.

Any material replacement has been done in-kind. The vinyl on the stools and booth seats is the same color and from the same manufacturer as the original seating



**Figure 5-13. Present Appearance of Counter, Stools, and Flooring (Photo by Author)**



**Figure 5-14. Photo of the Interior Facing the East Wall of the Diner  
(Photo by Author)**





**Figure 5-15. Photo of the Interior Facing the West Wall of the Diner**  
(Photo by Author)

material from 1931. The floor pattern and materials are also original. Some modern additions like appliances, jukeboxes, and auxiliary seating have been added to the diner, but, if necessary, can be removed without damaging the historic fabric. (*Figures 5-13 – 5-15*)

The New Ideal Diner is an example of how architecture and interior design directly affect the social activities that occur inside of it. The furniture plan, which includes a counter and stools, tables, and booths, sets the stage for a dynamic dining atmosphere. Individuals can sit at the counter and keep to themselves or strike up a friendly conversation with the waitresses getting coffee at the back bar or whoever may be seated next to them. Parents and their children can interact in booths or at tables. A thoughtfully-planned layout of the diner essentially dictates who will be seated where and

with whom they may converse, and is necessary to provide the ambience that makes the social environment thrive.

### **The L&S Diner, Harrisonburg, Virginia**

The L&S is a prime example of the social importance of the diner. The structure itself has not deviated much from its original design, although some of the interior finishes have changed. Additionally, the types of restaurants housed in the diner have changed slightly over the years, but today it is being operated as a family-style country fare diner. The L&S Diner is in the process of a social restoration. Its new owner is determined to bring the diner back to its original thriving state.

### **Background and Historical Appearance**

The L & S Diner was built in 1947 in Virginia.<sup>161</sup> It was modeled after a food car designed for the Shenandoah Valley Train Company, but the manufacturer of the diner is unknown. It was the first of its kind, later to become a staple of Virginia diner design in the 1950s. The structure is a long, narrow car with a counter and stools for seating. The diner is not wide enough to accommodate booths or tables. In traditional diner fashion the grill is behind the counter for the customer to watch his or her food being prepared by the cook. A kitchen behind the grill is hidden from the customer and provides space for prep work and food storage. Some of the kitchen equipment has been updated over the years which has changed the arrangement and interior plan slightly.

The exterior of the L&S remains intact, including signage, although there is an additional modern sign on the right roofline of the building. It is sheathed in steel and with red panels of an unknown material. The red panels cover almost the entire front

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<sup>161</sup> The following information about the L&S Diner was obtained on March 13, 2009 by the author through an interview with Ms. Linda Raines.

façade and continue onto the left façade. (*Figure 5-16*) There are two doors on the diner's front façade, each with small red awnings that project over the sidewalk, as the property sits on the sidewalk. A horizontal band of windows along the front façade provides natural light into the small space and emphasizes the horizontality of the structure. (*Figure 5-17*)



**Figure 5-16. Left and Front Elevations.** (Photo by Author)



**Figure 5-17. Front Elevation with Horizontal Band of Windows.** (Photo by Author)

Inside the L&S Diner the original flooring material is unknown, but today is a red and black checkerboard pattern of linoleum tile. The original countertop was wood, but due to wear and tear over the years needed to be replaced. Ms. Raines recalls that the original countertop was so worn down that there were impressions on the edge from customers' arms as they rested them on the counter while eating. The current countertop is a synthetic material that resembles Corian. The stools are covered in red vinyl; it is unknown if they are original to the diner or not.

The L & S was built for Frank Lee and Ike Simmons who planned to open the restaurant as a steak house and tavern. Lee and Simmons sold it to Ward and Lucille Van Pelt. In 1975 Mervin Lambert purchased the diner and banned the sale of alcohol in the restaurant to make it more of a family establishment. In 1989 Mr. Lambert gave the diner to his three children, Samuel and Jeff Lambert and Joyce Graves. Next in the chain of ownership were Harold Dickey and Miriam Crawford. Mr. Dickey and Ms. Crawford set out to change the menu from serving American fare to Cajun cuisine, which was not true to the diner's history. Many of the L&S' regular patrons did not welcome the change; some vowed never to return to the diner again. The change in staff and menu proved detrimental to the diner's success, and in 2008 the owners decided to sell the business. In November 2008 Linda Raines bought the L&S and has been steadily restoring the diner physically and, more importantly, socially. (*Figure 5-18*)

## **Menu**

Located in Harrisonburg, Virginia, the L&S caters to the local palette, offering traditional country dishes such as pan-fried chicken with gravy and biscuits, potato salad, and salt fish. Almost everything the diner sells is made from scratch except for desserts.

A wide variety of soups, baked macaroni and cheese, chicken pot pie, and breakfast dishes are prepared fresh everyday on site. Customers are pleased with the selection and quality of food which keeps business steady.



**Figure 5-18. Present Appearance of the L&S Diner** (Photo by Author)

### **Social Impact**

After the L&S closed in 2008 it left a social void in the Harrisonburg community. Prior to its menu shift from country cooking to Cajun cuisine in the mid 2000s the L&S evoked a family atmosphere that welcomed people from all walks of life, a major contributing factor to its success. The diner functioned as a community center in Harrisonburg, attracting local residents, college students, and travelers from Maryland and West Virginia passing through on Interstate 81. The shift in fare affected the morale among patrons to a point that business slowed and Mr. Dickey and Ms. Crawford decided to sell the restaurant. Hoping to revive the spirit of the L&S, Linda Raines purchased the diner in November 2008 and has begun restoring it physically and socially.

Within five months of its reopening the L&S was well on its way to becoming socially restored. Ms. Raines hopes to revive the spirit of the L&S that was lost through the years, putting back everything she remembers from her trips to the L&S as a little girl. By replicating her personal memories of the L&S Diner Ms. Raines will restore the social environment that is so crucial to its operation. Slowly but surely customers are trickling back in to the diner – even those that said they would never return. The L&S is returning to its former glory.

### **Preservation Strategy**

The exterior of the L&S has remained intact, perhaps due to factors out of its control. It is located on a small lot in downtown Harrisonburg and surrounded on either side by buildings, making expansion difficult. The L&S has about thirty stools, so at any given time it can only accommodate a handful of groups and customers that come in by themselves. (*Figures 5-19, 5-20*)



**Figure 5-19. Photo of the Interior Facing the East Wall** (Photo by Author)



**Figure 5-20. Photo of the Interior Facing the West Wall** (Photo by Author)

This is an example of a diner that might need to expand due to customer demand but has not. From an architectural preservation standpoint this is good; any addition to the building would compromise its architectural integrity. Preservation aside, it may be beneficial to expand the building to provide for more customers. However, if the L&S grew to a larger facility it may lose its social intimacy and closeness that can only be fostered in a small space.

### **Analysis and Conclusions**

The three diners assessed for this case study are rare in that they are still in operation many years after their respective openings. Though there has been a bit of a “diner resurrection” in the past few decades, with many diners being reclaimed, relocated, and reopened, diners are still scarce on the American cultural landscape. However, this limited quantity of diners in America is beneficial. If every diner ever

constructed was still standing, regardless of whether or not it was in operation, people might view diners as commonplace structures and take them for granted. Because diners are scarce they have become revered as rare gems, pieces of Americana that should be treasured.

Each diner discussed in this section presents different scenarios and needs for preservation; it is not appropriate to assign the same preservation strategies to all diners. Not every diner should undergo an architectural restoration, as the original structure may not suit the current needs of the business (true for the Virginia Diner). If the Virginia Diner was to be restored to its original railcar structure it would lose a significant amount of business as it has grown to rely on high traffic. On the other hand, it may be completely appropriate to restore a diner back to its original state. Both the New Ideal Diner as well as the L&S Diner depend on their respective structures to induce community connectivity which attracts patrons to these businesses. Each diner is unique and requires careful consideration when selecting a preservation method.

These three diners have illustrated that it is ultimately the social element of the diner that determines its success. The architecture is not necessarily the most important factor to the diner business but does provide an atmosphere conducive to social closeness; for example, the famous counter and stools, and booths for coziness and social intimacy. Diners rely on thoughtful interior design to produce spaces that encourage bonding over the comfort foods served inside its walls. Space planning, furniture layout, and even finishes and materials determine the overall ambience of the diner which affects the customer's perception of the business. Furthermore, successful interior design puts



customers at ease and encourages them to linger within the diner, often resulting in establishing relationships among other patrons.

### **Summary**

The Virginia Diner, The New Ideal Diner, and the L&S Diner present very different approaches to diner preservation. Although all three restaurants are run as diners they each have responsibilities that have required them to take different preservation approaches to their respective buildings. The challenges faced by these three diners are realistic in diner preservation today. As entities that rely on customer patronization, diners need to be able to accommodate a certain number of people in order to maintain their businesses. If the diner is constantly turning away customers due to lack of space, then the diner is essentially losing money. However, if the diner were expanded to accommodate the overflow, then more money would be made and the business would grow. Unfortunately, the increase in space often comes at a cost to the diner's architecture. Historic diners were built in an era when dining out was not as common as it is in the twenty-first century; therefore many diners were built to hold a small capacity. Today, a thirty-seat diner from the 1940s may be popular enough to accommodate 100 seats. This presents the owner with the issue of expansion. Is it worth it to the business to expand the building? Most owners would say yes, and therefore risk the architectural integrity of the diner.

Ultimately each diner in this chapter has done what is best for its business. To hold an expanding number of customers, the Virginia Diner was altered, demolished and ultimately rebuilt, leaving only photographic evidence of its historic architecture. The New Ideal Diner has had success in keeping its original historic fabric, and has no plans

to expand. The L&S Diner has upgraded some of its interior finishes but has kept its original exterior intact. If the L&S Diner were to expand it would ultimately have to relocate; its lot size is far too small for expansion. A move like this would not just damage the diner's historic fabric but take it out of its historic context as well.

The Virginia Diner, The New Ideal Diner, and the L&S Diner have successfully maintained their respective businesses, though sometimes at the expense of their respective buildings. Their various architectural preservation treatments reflect the changing needs of their respective businesses. Although their buildings may change, their missions will not. Customers will continue to flock to these restaurants because of their traditions of good food, service, and social atmosphere, which will always be key elements of the diner.

## CHAPTER 6

### TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY OPTIONS

The society of the early twenty-first century is quite different in comparison with that of the early twentieth century. In the past 100 years social and technological advances have made life more convenient and exciting, yet people still crave the past, wishing to return to yesteryear. Technology has not yet brought about the time machine so it remains difficult to physically revisit the past. Books, television re-runs, and old photos are means of transporting oneself to a previous time, but only through one's imagination. Historic buildings and landscapes are the closest means to being in the past physically which is why these properties are popular tourist attractions. Every year millions of people from all over the world who are searching for historical fulfillment visit historic properties to get a taste of the past. The diner is one such property.

The historic diner serves as a relic, a physical space in which patrons can interact with history. They are portals to the past, if only for a short time. Crossing the threshold into the historic diner is like entering a time machine, transporting the customer back fifty years or so to a time that is often glorified despite international wars and harsh economic times. The charm of historic materials, traditional diner fare, and “the homey, almost Andy Griffith, catch-up-on-the-news atmosphere” of the diner is refreshing and inviting.<sup>162</sup> Diners have always been able to “provide a sanctuary for those who need a

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<sup>162</sup> Peter Genovese, *Jersey Diners*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996, 218.

brief escape,” and that is exactly why people are returning to these structures and giving them new life.<sup>163</sup>

Many efforts have been made to restore the diner as a fixture on the American cultural landscape and give it the recognition it deserves. Diner enthusiasts from across the globe have purchased old diners with the intent to restore and reopen them as functioning restaurants. Linda Raines of the L&S Diner has successfully restored her diner to be a thriving hub for social and culinary nourishment. Nick Batsis of The New Ideal Diner recently purchased the restaurant from longtime owner George Engelsson and continues to run the business as an authentic 1950s diner. Museums, such as the Henry Ford Museum and the American Diner Museum, have opened exhibits on the diner or even dedicated their sole mission to the diner. Written publications are filled with articles about the diner. Diners are also becoming a part of popular culture with the advent of television shows such as the Food Network’s *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives*. There is even discussion of including an image of a diner on the back of the Massachusetts quarter.<sup>164</sup> It is clear that Americans are rekindling their love for this national icon.

### **Remembering**

Museums, organizations, and written publications are responsible for the ongoing remembrance of the diner. By immortalizing the diner through text and preserved artifacts these organizations can spread the news about the diner across the world and create networks of information on the historic resource.

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<sup>163</sup> Christine Guedon. “Diner Aesthetics: A Woman’s Perspective.” *Society for Commercial Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 1993-1994): 7.

<sup>164</sup> American Diner Museum, <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/newsblog/index.php?id=5>; Internet, accessed 12 April 2008.

## The American Diner Museum

Further demonstrating the diner's impact on American history is the American Diner Museum (ADM) in Rhode Island. Founded in 1996 and directed by preservationist Daniel Zilke, the ADM "has been focused on celebrating and preserving the cultural and historical significance of the American diner" and recognizes it as "a unique American institution."<sup>165</sup> A large part of its mission is to "save the vintage diners that are in danger of extinction from, among other things, redevelopment of property and unnecessary demolition."<sup>166</sup> The ADM "works like a revolving fund acquiring diners to restore and resell" for its Annual Fund and the Diner Rescue Fund.<sup>167</sup>

Incidentally the Museum does not yet have an independent structure but rather is an organization that treats every diner as a living museum.<sup>168</sup> The diners from the ADM's collection are lent to "other organizations for their respective diner exhibits," which gives the Museum, as well as the diner industry, publicity and well-deserved recognition.<sup>169</sup> If the American Diner Museum did have a building to house its collection, people from around the world could not only learn about diners, but become inspired to preserve them. However, the mere fact that an organization exists that focuses on the diner is a step in the right direction for diner preservation.

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<sup>165</sup> American Diner Museum; Available from <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/aboutadm.php>; Internet, accessed 12 April 2008.

<sup>166</sup> American Diner Museum; Available from <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/aboutadm.php>; Internet, accessed 12 April 2008.

<sup>167</sup> American Diner Museum; Available from <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/preservation.php>; Internet, accessed 12 April 2008.

<sup>168</sup> American Diner Museum; Available from <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/aboutadm.php>; Internet, accessed 12 April 2008.

<sup>169</sup> American Diner Museum; Available from <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/aboutadm.php>; Internet, accessed 12 April 2008.

## **Society for Commercial Archaeology**

The Society for Commercial Archaeology (SCA) is a non-profit organization that focuses on the preservation of roadside architecture.<sup>170</sup> Founded in 1977, the SCA has produced books, journals, and holds annual conferences that educate its members on preservation of roadside buildings. The *SCA Journal* is the organizations' quarterly magazine with articles on various roadside preservation issues. *The Diner Hotline*, a column by Larry Cultrera, is a staple of the magazine and provides insight and updates on diner-related happenings across the country. Topics of the column include diners listed in the National Register, endangered diners, and personal accounts of diner history. *The Diner Hotline* is a useful resource for those who are interested in the diner as a national entity, not just a single unit.

The Society for Commercial Archaeology serves as a bank of information for anyone interested in roadside preservation; however, membership is required to access the most valuable material. The *SCA Journal* is an important resource for diner enthusiasts and preservation professionals and should be referenced often.

## **Diners and the Media**

Cable television networks such as the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, and the Food Network have recognized the diner on various television specials which has given the eatery immense publicity. In 2006 the Food Network began airing an entire series dedicated to the diner, naming it Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives. The show profiles

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<sup>170</sup> Society for Commercial Archaeology; Available from <http://www.sca-roadside.org/>; Internet, accessed 20 March 2008.

the namesake restaurant types, focusing on their individual culinary styles and history, and even portrays interviews of loyal customers that keep the restaurants in business.

The show has been steadily popular which reflects the American people's interest in diners. The Food Network's website recognizes that "*Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* are popular again thanks to faithful baby boomers, a slew of younger fans and a whole new generation of owners."<sup>171</sup> The fact that a show based predominantly on diners has maintained a captive audience speaks volumes about the diner's importance socially, architecturally, and on a culinary level. The American diner is a valuable resource of the American cultural landscape that should be recognized for its many historical contributions to the nation, and with the help of television and other media sources this importance can be relayed to the world.

### **Restoring and Recreating**

Prior to the diner's recent resurgence "the more modern and up-to-date [it was], the better."<sup>172</sup> In an effort to keep up with the competition diner owners did away with historic fabric, deeming it unsuitable for modern tastes. Materials and finishes that were insensitive to the diner's history began to cover the diner's interior and exterior. Some diners were bricked over, hiding the gleaming stainless steel and chrome exteriors that were once the pinnacle of their design. Interior color schemes shifted from colorful pastels to mediocre neutrals or then modern color palettes. If any part of the diner decor had vintage appeal, chances are it was replaced with something new to keep the diner abreast of the competition.

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<sup>171</sup> Food Network, "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives"; Available from <http://www.foodnetwork.com/diners-drive-ins-and-dives/index.html>; Internet; accessed 8 June 2009.

<sup>172</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman, "New Faces on Old Places." *Society for Commercial Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 1993-1994): 25.

Many of these changes are irreversible and have damaged the diner landscape. However, there is hope for the diners that remain, as people are continuously searching for the authentic. The revived interest in diners is inspiring people to preserve, restore, and replicate their diners.

### **Restoration and Relocation**

Aging diner owners are finding it difficult to keep up with the business and are often forced to sell or demolish their beloved restaurants. Developers are quick to purchase the diners because of the valuable land on which they sit rather than the valuable asset that is the diner. Fortunately there are plenty of diner enthusiasts that are also buying diners. Adults who patronized these historic diners as children restore and maintain them as a tribute to their childhood. A growing trend in the diner industry is to sell the diner to a customer who plans to transport the diner to another city, state, or even country with the intent of restoring and operating it, keeping the diner from rusting in place or being discarded. This method may not be preferred by preservationists as it removes the diner from its site and historical context; however, sacrifices must often be made in the name of preservation. The number of diners in America continues to dwindle and it may not be the most feasible option to keep the diner on its original site. Selling diners to purchasers in other states often means that the diner will be rescued and given a second chance to be appreciated and remembered.

George Engelsson of The New Ideal Diner set a firm foundation upon which his successor, Nick Batsis, could continue to run the diner in a preserved fashion. Because The New Ideal has been recognized as a local institution in the Aberdeen, Maryland area for decades it has not been difficult for Mr. Batsis to keep the diner in its original shape.



Patrons of the diner expect it to look as it always has; therefore Mr. Batsis does not have to worry about changing the diner's aesthetic to please customers.

### **Restoration and Repair**

From a historic preservation standpoint it is ideal to restore and preserve in-kind all of the diner's original elements when possible. Though it may be necessary to make some design changes to fit the needs of the business, any alterations and change in materials should be kept to a minimum in order to ensure the historical accuracy of the diner.

Someone who is restoring a diner should rely heavily on photo documentation to take the diner back to its original appearance. Original surfaces and furniture in diners can be easily removed and replaced without leaving an indication of their presence. If a surface has been painted multiple times or painted at one time and then covered with a solid material such as Formica the original paint color could be determined by paint analysis. Unfortunately tile or Formica analysis does not yet exist; therefore it is very difficult to pinpoint original materials in the diner without photographs or oral history. It is also possible to determine original finishes by referencing the manufacturer's literature, such as a brochure or work order, but that may be difficult since many of those companies are now defunct. Research may also be performed to find identical diners that exist with the original finishes intact. Again, given the limited number of remaining diners, this is a rare option and not always successful. The lack of information for diner restoration is obvious and has thus determined a need for diner preservationists.

Diversified Diners, based in Cleveland, Ohio, is arguably the only company in the world that focuses solely on diner restoration and repair.<sup>173</sup> A small business, Diversified Diners purchases diners that are in danger of demolition and restores them to sell to potential diner operators. The company also produces its own stainless steel panels and carries stools and exterior trim which are available to the public. To help expedite the restoration process Diversified Diners offers assistance with rigging and transporting diners, a feat that requires expertise since many diners are too large for standard roads and bridges.

Throughout its business Diversified Diners has seen many different stages of diner disrepair. Oftentimes the company is forced to renovate portions of the acquired diners as they have decayed or been damaged by typical restaurant wear-and-tear. For example the Short Stop Diner from Bellville, New Jersey, had accumulated so much grease inside that a shovel was needed to remove it.<sup>174</sup> (*Figure 6-1*) The Brandywine Diner from Wilmington, Delaware required intense renovation as wild animals had been living inside its deteriorating shell for some time.<sup>175</sup> (*Figure 6-2*) All of the porous materials in that diner had to be removed and replaced due to poor maintenance and damage over time. Although not all diners are in such disrepair these two examples show the harsh reality of diner neglect.

As Diversified Diners is seemingly the only company in the world that performs diner restoration, it is indicative of the nation's lack of knowledge and resources for

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<sup>173</sup> Diversified Diners, available from <http://www.oh-diners.com/divers/>; Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

<sup>174</sup> Diversified Diners, available from [http://www.oh-diners.com/shortstop/ss\\_interior.htm](http://www.oh-diners.com/shortstop/ss_interior.htm); Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

<sup>175</sup> Diversified Diners, available from <http://www.oh-diners.com/brandywine/index.htm>; Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

maintaining these cultural icons. There is a need for diner restoration education or else more diners will be improperly restored or left to deteriorate.



**Figure 6-1: Interior of Short Stop Diner During Restoration.** (Photo Courtesy of Diversified Diners).



**Figure 6-2: Exterior of Brandywine Diner Prior to Restoration.** (Photo Courtesy of Diversified Diners.)

## **Recreation**

Recreating diners is also a popular method for diner resurrection. The Galloways at the Virginia Diner essentially recreated (through demolition and reconstruction) their structure to perform in a way that better suits its business and clientele. Although their new diner is a larger replica it still embodies the atmosphere of the former Virginia Diner structure which keeps the business strong. Reconstructing and replicating the building also ensures that the business can continue for several years. The newer building, constructed all at once, will most likely stand longer than the original building would have, as it was built with modern materials and better craftsmanship.

Diners are also being recreated en masse. This section highlights two companies that have replicated the diner image to make it applicable to today's society.

## *Replication*

Diner manufacturers and restaurants are replicating diner design elements from the early- to mid-twentieth century for modern restaurants as a way to keep diners relevant to today's society. Diners are viewed as a novelty; a restaurant that resembles the iconic institution gives the customer a sense of adventure and excitement.

Restaurants such as the Silver Diner have found this method of design successful.

The Silver Diner, a franchise located in the Mid-Atlantic United States, has been replicating the diner experience for nearly twenty years. Its founders, Robert Giamo and Ype Von Hengst, set out in the late 1980s to "start an American family cuisine restaurant that bridge[d] the gap between tablecloth restaurants and fast food, [and found that] the

old-time diner was the perfect answer.”<sup>176</sup> The standard Silver Diner design is from the Kullman Industries of Avenel, New Jersey, a company that has been building diners since 1927.<sup>177</sup> (*Figure 6-3*) By employing a veteran diner design team Giamo and Von Hengst could ensure that the traditional diner atmosphere would be achieved for their restaurant. The Silver Diner boasts glass block walls, curved corners, a predominantly stainless-steel exterior, a counter with stools, and ceramic tile flooring characteristic of the historic diner. Essentially the main difference between the Silver Diner and a diner from the 1940s is size; décor and even the fare offered at the Silver Diner recall the historic diner. (*Figure 6-4*)

Part of the Silver Diner’s success is due to the fact that its restaurants are predominantly located where historic diners are scarce. Though diners exist in the Mid-Atlantic they are few (excluding New Jersey). Building Silver Diner restaurants in the suburbs of cities like Washington, DC and Baltimore allows patrons to have a nearly authentic diner experience without having to travel more than a few minutes. Melts, milkshakes, and Blueplate Specials make this restaurant stand out from its competition. However, the Silver Diner does offer “modern” selections, including some Asian and Cajun inspired dishes that set it apart from historic diners. Adding another element to the traditional diner menu is a way to keep the diner relevant to modern society without completely abandoning its roots.

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<sup>176</sup> The Silver Diner, “Birth of the Concept”; Available from [http://www.silverdiner.com/about\\_the\\_diner/birthoftheconcept.html](http://www.silverdiner.com/about_the_diner/birthoftheconcept.html); Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

<sup>177</sup> Kullman Industries, “The Original Diner”; Available from <http://www.kullman.com/diners.html>; Internet; accessed 8 June 2009.



**Figure 6-3. Typical Silver Diner exterior.** (Source: The Silver Diner).



**Figure 6-4. Interior photo of the Silver Diner.** (Source: The Silver Diner).

The Silver Diner franchise has shown that, in general, Americans are interested in the architectural, social, and culinary charms the diner has to offer, but prefer the diner to be modernized as far as size and cuisine are concerned.

### *Modular Manufacturing*

Modular manufacturing companies are also taking advantage of the recent resurgence in diner popularity by designing and building diner-inspired structures. By definition, diners are prefabricated modular structures, so it is fitting that modular manufacturing companies of today are applying diner design elements to their products.

Dinermite Diners is a modular diner manufacturing company that has been designing and building diners since the late 1950s. By targeting non-traditional audiences such as the government and large corporations Dinermite Diners was able to survive the industry-wide demise of the 1970s. The company has also found success with international markets including the United Kingdom, Japan, and the Philippines. Dinermite Diners has also been able to stay in business because of the variety of diner inspired structures it sells. In addition to its fleet of 1950s inspired stainless-steel diners Dinermite Diners offers models such as the “Fast Food Drive Thru Diner” and “Drive Thru Coffee Shop” to give other restaurant types a diner character.<sup>178</sup>

The diners are constructed with modern techniques for durability, longevity, and economic feasibility. Dinermite’s diners come fully furnished with all equipment and furniture and are customizable based on the customer’s preferences. Floor plans and

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<sup>178</sup> Dinermite Diners, “New Diners and Restaurants for Sale”; Available from <http://www.mini-diner.com/>; Internet; accessed 8 June 2009.

furniture layouts can also be tailored to the customer's needs. All national, state, and local codes are met based on the customer's location, including accessibility codes.

Dinermite has taken the historic diner and evolved it to meet the needs of various businesses and a modern society without compromising the traditional character. By continuously redesigning and updating the diner, Dinermite Diners is continuing the design evolution of the diner, keeping it relevant to today's society and therefore helping to ensure the diner will be around longer.

### **Recognition and Protection**

The National Park Service, within the Department of the Interior, is the administrator for federal historic preservation programs in the United States. Its National Register of Historic Places lists historically-significant properties that have met the Secretary of the Interior's Standards Criteria for Evaluation, a highly-regarded honor. Properties listed on the National Register qualify for Investment Tax Credits. Those who need financial assistance with their buildings need only to follow the Secretary's Standards to receive benefits. On the local level, Historic Preservation Commissions designate historically-significant properties and regulate change to them in an effort to protect their design integrity. Local designation can occur for single properties or entire districts, with both options offering different benefits. These three methods of recognition and protection can and should be applied to diners to ensure their proper preservation so that they may be celebrated as national icons for future generations.



## The Diner and the National Register

The National Register of Historic Places is “the official list of the Nation's historic places worthy of preservation.”<sup>179</sup> Listing a property in the National Register “provides recognition and assists in promoting our nation’s heritage.”<sup>180</sup> Properties that are nominated for inclusion in the National Register must meet strict criteria that deem them historically significant. One of the two most important criterion of the National Register is Age, commonly known as the “fifty-year rule,” which states that a property must be at least fifty-years old to be considered for nomination. Since the majority of diners were built before 1950 it is safe to say that most diners meet the age requirement for the nomination process.

The other most important criterion is Integrity, which is the “ability of a property to convey its significance.”<sup>181</sup> The National Park Service lists seven aspects of Integrity, including location, design, setting, and association.<sup>182</sup> Should the property lack the identity for which it is significant, it may not be eligible for inclusion in the National Register. Diners that have been relocated may have lost their integrity; however, if another aspect, such as significant workmanship or design is present, the diner may still be eligible.

In addition to national recognition, properties that are listed in the National Register can take advantage of special state and federal tax incentives that aid in the restoration and preservation process. Property owners are also given access to National

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<sup>179</sup> National Park Service, “National Register of Historic Places Official Website”; available from <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/>; Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

<sup>180</sup> Larry Cultrera, “Diner Hotline.” *SCA Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 28.

<sup>181</sup> National Park Service, “Section VIII: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation”; available from [http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb15/nrb15\\_8.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb15/nrb15_8.htm); Internet, accessed 7 July 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

Park Service Preservation Briefs and Tech Notes that can give tips and pointers for successful preservation. Listing in the National Register does not place “restrictions on the use, treatment, transfer, or disposition of private property,” nor does it “lead to public acquisition or require public access,” although it would be assumed that the owner of a historic diner would want public access in the form of patronization for their restaurant business.<sup>183</sup>

Significance, whether related to an important person or event, is another major criterion for nomination to the National Register. Diners arguably have significance on local, state, and national levels, as is true with many historic properties. Locally, diners may be significant as a hub for community connectivity and sustenance, as well as other reasons. States in which the diner is significant statewide are New Jersey, which has the most diners of any state, and Rhode Island, where the diner was conceived. The diner is also important nationally as it is uniquely American and has become a defining element of Americana. The streamlined stainless steel diner also has national significance because it represents a design style that had a strong impact on the United States, if not the world. Based on these criteria alone it would be very difficult to find a diner that was not eligible for inclusion on the National Register.

As with all historic properties a caveat exists for diners and their potential for inclusion in the National Register. Diners that have been altered to a point that they are unrecognizable or compromised in another way that makes their integrity questionable may not qualify for the National Register listing. Where there is no documentation

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<sup>183</sup> National Park Service, “National Register of Historic Places Fundamentals”; available from [http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/national\\_register\\_fundamentals.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/national_register_fundamentals.htm); Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

available, restoring the property to a date of historical significance may increase the diner's chance of being listed.

As of June 2009 there were thirty-four diners listed in the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>184</sup> (Figure 6-5) That is not even a sampling of the estimated 2,100 diners that still exist in America.<sup>185</sup> As more diners are listed they will become recognized as culturally and architecturally important properties, hopefully encouraging other diner owners to preserve their restaurants as well.



**Figure 6-5. Miss Worcester Diner, listed in the National Register of Historic Places.**  
(Photo Courtesy of Ronald C. Saari)

<sup>184</sup> National Park Service, "National Register of Historic Places Research Page"; Available from <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/research/index.htm>; Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

<sup>185</sup> American Diner Museum, "A Report on the American Diner Museum by 'Your Morning' CN8..."; Available from <http://www.americandinermuseum.org/site/>; Internet, accessed 8 June 2009.

## Investment Tax Credits

A major benefit to listing a property in the National Register is the eligibility of investment tax credits to be used toward restoration. Tax credits and other financial incentives are offered on both Federal and statewide bases.

The Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program, administered by the National Park Service, Internal Revenue Service, and State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs), is geared toward private sector rehabilitation of historic properties.<sup>186</sup> It is one of the most successful and cost-effective revitalization programs in America, and generates jobs in the process. A 20% Federal investment tax credit is available “for the certified rehabilitation of income-producing certified historic structures such as commercial, industrial, or rental residential buildings,” of which a diner most certainly applies.<sup>187</sup> The credit does not apply to all projects, however; the rehabilitation must be considered “substantial” in that expenditures must exceed \$5,000 in a 24-month period.<sup>188</sup> Diner owners who wished to rehabilitate their structures would find this credit useful if they were doing a complete restoration of their diner, or another project that required considerable rehabilitation.

Another Federal tax credit that could apply to some diners is the 10% Rehabilitation Tax Credit.<sup>189</sup> This credit is available for non-historic buildings that have been in service since before 1936. Like the 20% Rehabilitation Tax Credit, this credit

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<sup>186</sup> National Park Service, “Historic Preservation Tax Incentives”; Available from <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/index.htm>; Internet, accessed 7 July 2009.

<sup>187</sup> National Park Service, “What are the Results of Listing?”; Available from <http://www.nps.gov/nr/results.htm>; Internet, accessed 8 July 2009.

<sup>188</sup> National Park Service, “20% Rehabilitation Tax Credit”; Available from <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/brochure1.htm#20>; Internet, accessed 8 July 2009.

<sup>189</sup> National Park Service, “10% Rehabilitation Tax Credit”; Available from <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/brochure1.htm#10>; Internet, accessed 8 July 2009.

only applies to projects that require substantial rehabilitation. Owners of diners from 1935 and years prior may find this credit useful, particularly if the diner's integrity has been compromised to a point where it is not eligible for inclusion in the National Register. A non-historic diner that was moved after 1935 is not eligible for this credit, which may be a problem for those who have or plan to purchase a diner with the intent to relocate it.<sup>190</sup>

Many states also offer tax incentives for preservation. They include "tax credits for rehabilitation, tax deductions for easement donations, and property tax abatements or moratoriums."<sup>191</sup> The variety of incentives and tax credits offered on both state and Federal levels makes it worthwhile for owners to seek rehabilitation for their diners.

### **Local Designation**

Diner owners may find it feasible to have their diners locally designated, either in tandem with National Register status or on its own. Local designations are determined by Historic Preservation Commissions, locally-governing bodies that protect the historic character of a city or town. This type of recognition and protection ensures that the local historic fabric will stay intact, and therefore have a cohesive character. Tax incentives may be available, such as property tax reductions; these are based solely on the discretion of the Historic Preservation Commission.

Unlike National Register listing, locally-designated properties will often face repercussions should there be any alterations that damage the integrity of the property. Prior to any changes on the building's exterior (and sometimes the interior if it is also designated) the owner must apply for and receive a Certificate of Appropriateness from

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> National Park Service, "State Tax Incentives"; available from [http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/brochure1.htm#Other\\_Tax](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/brochure1.htm#Other_Tax); Internet, accessed 8 July 2009.

the Commission, which will allow or disallow any proposed changes to the property. Should a locally-designated diner need to be expanded by means of an addition for the purpose of increasing seating capacity, the owner must fill out a Certificate of Appropriateness with the proposed changes and receive permission from the Commission to follow through with any alterations. If the proposed changes are considered detrimental to the property's historic fabric, the Commission may reject the application.

Overall, rules and regulations are stricter regarding local designation than with National Register designation; however, with local designation the financial benefits may be more rewarding.

### **Summary**

Diners are benefiting most from grassroots preservation which is inherent to their nature as they serve a predominantly local purpose. Although diners have national and sometimes state historical significance it is their local significance that has made them influential. The Virginia Diner, The New Ideal Diner, and the L&S Diner all play significant social roles in their respective cities, which is a reason that each of these diners is still in business today. It makes sense for the patrons of the local diner to be the ones to fight to save it from demolition because it is to them the most significant. The more people that rally together around the local diner, the more people in the nation will see how important diners are, and perhaps more people will be inspired and encouraged to preserve diners.

Inclusion in the National Register also displays the importance diners have both locally and on a national level. Diners are an integral part of the American cultural landscape because they are uniquely American. They were built to serve the blue-collar

American worker, and later served the postwar American family. They have become a fixture of American history and should not be forgotten.

Today, people from all over the world are searching for historic diners for one reason or another. Perhaps it is the comfort and familiarity of eating in old restaurants.<sup>192</sup> Maybe it is the sense of community diners have been known to radiate.<sup>193</sup> It could be the authenticity and security that only a diner can provide – something that seems to have been lost in modernity. Whatever the reason, it is once again the diner's time to shine in American culture.

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<sup>192</sup> John B. Levine, M.D, "Chrome Home: The Lasting Appeal of the Diner," *Society for Commercial Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 1993-1994): 22.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The story of the American diner is similar to the stories of other great heroes, filled with times of defeat and ultimate triumph. In many ways the diner is a great American hero: it has persistently operated with honorable values; it has served as a refuge for the tired and hungry; and has never forgotten where it came from. Though its journey has been filled with ups and downs the diner is back on track with a renewed vision and sense of self.

Beginning with an honest and thoughtful mission, the lunch wagon, the progenitor of the diner, became the saving grace of blue-collar workers who needed a decent meal to sustain them through the long nights at the factory. The first setback of the lunch wagon came when government officials demanded they lose mobility; however, the quick-thinking masterminds behind the wagons were not about to let these new laws get them down. The solution to this problem was to simply decommission the lunch wagon's wheels and set them as permanent fixtures on lots of land. With some ingenuity the wagon was back in business.

By continuing to provide quality service at a fair price wagons evolved into diners, a more acceptable institution that was not just for the blue-collar worker. The sustenance received at the diner – both culinary and social – was a defining element of the diner as it became a place of refuge for the stomachs and souls of Americans.



The diner was good to its customers, and its customers were loyal to it in return. By the 1940s the diner was a fixture on the American culinary and cultural landscapes and did not appear to be leaving anytime soon.

Sadly, the diner's reign did not last forever. Corporate fast-food giants of the 1950s built restaurants upon the diner's values to become the overnight sensations that would eventually put the diner industry to shame. It was the very principles on which the diner was built that became the catalyst for closing it down. However, the diner did not go down without a fight. Diners put up a valiant effort to keep their clientele – some copied the architecture and gimmicks of the fast-food restaurants while others firmly stayed put in their diner heritage – but ultimately could not compete with the freshness of the fast-food restaurant. The American people were blinded by the convenience, uniformity, and consistency of fast-food restaurants and could no longer see the beauty of the diner, choosing to dine at McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken rather than their tried-and-true local diner.

After a few years the novelty of the fast-food restaurant began to fade. This is not to say that the fast-food industry failed; on the contrary, fast-food restaurants continue to grow some fifty years after their inception. However, the eyes of the American people were reopened to the glory of the diner and a newfound interest was sparked. People began to remember all the good times that were had in the diner: as children eating at the diner with their families; as teenagers hanging out with friends late at night; as couples going on dates for a milkshake. Top off those memories with the service of a familiar waitress and cook and the experience of the diner could not be beat by a uniformed staff

at the neighborhood fast-food joint. The charm of the diner simply could not be replicated.

Today diners across the country are being dusted off, shined up, and reopened to serve the hardworking American people that are breathing new life into them. The diner may never again return to the height of popularity it once had, but it will always continue to be an icon of the American cultural landscape. To ensure the diner will stay around for future generations it is imperative that proper precautions are taken to restore and preserve this precious cultural resource.

As preservation continues to expand, the number of diners that are restored will increase. Because the diner is a unique architectural form it requires specialized preservation techniques. A diner cannot be approached in the same manner as a house or commercial brick building for several reasons including materials, construction techniques, and use. Buildings are not typically sheathed in stainless steel, glass block, or porcelain enamel, materials that require different approaches to preservation than brick or masonry. Diners are often rehabbed and restored to be used as they were originally; however updated codes and building standards can make diner restoration a bit challenging and can damage some of the historic fabric.

An example of a code that may be damaging to the diner's historic fabric would be the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. Many diners were built long before this law was enacted and their designs reflect it. Diners built with entrances above grade would now require an accessibility ramp to reach the entrance which may interfere with the historic visage. Another accessibility issue lies in the diner's compact size. Accessibility laws require passageways and doors to be at least three feet in width and

turning areas with diameters of at least five feet. This can pose an issue, especially with restrooms, since the given space inside the diner may not be large enough. Some diners may need to sacrifice a booth or table to allocate the required turning radius or even expand the structure's overall width or depth to add extra space. These are all issues to consider in diner restoration.

### **Recommendations**

Because the majority of diner restorations today are performed by amateur enthusiasts that do not have proper preservation education, it is important that literature or other information be made available to them so that their restorations may be as accurate as possible. Perhaps preservation briefs offered by the National Park Service that focus on diners and other similar structures could be devised to help in the preservation of this important cultural resource. Currently there are some related briefs such as brief 25, "The Preservation of Historic Signs;" brief 46, "The Preservation and Reuse of Historic Gas Stations;" and brief 13, "The Repair and Thermal Upgrading of Historic Steel Windows."<sup>194</sup> However, there currently is not a brief that focuses solely on the diner or many of its related materials such as stainless steel, ceramic tile, or porcelain enamel. The lack of such briefs reflects the lack of knowledge on diners and their restoration.

It is the duty of preservation professionals to recognize the importance of the diner and take the necessary steps to ensure proper preservation of this significant cultural resource. Preservationists have the ability to set the standard in diner preservation and play a significant role in the restoration of not just the diner but the

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<sup>194</sup> National Park Service, "Preservation Briefs"; Available from <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/TPS/briefs/presbhom.htm>; Internet, accessed 15 June 2009.

American cultural landscape as a whole. As more diners are restored, America's highways, city blocks, and neighborhoods will regain a sense of character and self, and therefore renew a sense of pride and individuality to a country that has become generic in the name of progress.

Preservation professionals have the knowledge and skills to educate the public about diner preservation, as well as start a movement for the protection of this iconic cultural resource. On local, state, and national levels, historic resource surveys can be performed to determine the number of diners that still exist and may be eligible for inclusion in the National Register. Upon gathering this information preservation agencies can nominate diners to the National Register or locally designate them as individual landmarks or historic districts. In Massachusetts, a Multiple Property Submission (MPS) was completed for several diners in 1999; ten years later, this remains the only MPS in the National Register for diners. Encouragement of similar submissions in other parts of the country would further diner preservation. The National Park Service should also strive to publish information on the basics and standards of diner preservation, as well as create a preservation brief that focuses solely on the diner. As most diners are reaching the fifty-year point, this is the time to seriously analyze the state of diner preservation in America and strengthen it so that diners will be rightfully celebrated as the cultural icons they are.

### **Summary**

The diner is a rare institution that embodies the American Dream. From its trademark steel exterior that recalls the Industrial Revolution to its streamlined shape that evokes the automobile, the diner emanates ingenuity and success. It is uniquely

American and should be celebrated for its architectural, technological, and social advances that enhanced the life of a nation. It is up to the preservation professionals, the diner enthusiasts, and diner owners of America to do their part to make sure diners will be around for future generations. The current lack of organized knowledge and resources may make the task of preserving diners daunting at first; however, the hardworking, persistent, and inventive nature of Americans is more than enough to make successful diner preservation a reality. After all, it was out of that spirit of hard work and ingenuity that the diner was born.

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