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Colby College

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Recommended Citation

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Diners in America: An Evolutionary Process

Jill M. Gardner
Honors Project in American Studies
Completed: May 1, 1995

"Diners are uniquely American. They are a product of our culture, our energy, our tempo, and our style" (Jackson, p.95)

The diner, a narrow rectangle of a restaurant that has survived over a hundred years of American war and peace, depression and prosperity, is part of American culture in a way that probably no other commercial entity will ever be. The huge success of the diner from 1872 to the late 1950s, the decline in popularity through the 1960s and 1970s, and subsequent revival of the diner during the late 1980s encapsulates the interests of the ever-changing American identity. The diner is not so much a place as an evolutionary process. No diner, past or present, is truly unique because every diner carries with it the memory of all those that have come before, as well some similarity of characteristics to the others that exist on all sides.

The diner is an American tradition for all ages and all times because it is constantly in transition. Architecture and neon aside, what the diner is all about is being American. It is about knowing who you are and what you want and whether traditional meatloaf or pan-blackened tuna best fits your needs. A natural process of evolution has placed the diner where it is today. That today's diner often looks nothing like diners that came before indicates nothing less than two world wars, the shift from an industrial to a technological society, the development of a whole new American place--the suburb--and the acceptance of mass leisure

by large segment of the American population in the form of television.

Throughout its history, the diner has reflected the interests of the American population. From gilded portraits, mahogany, and marble; to art-deco designs, formica, and Naugahyde; to stainless steel, neon, and booth service; to linen napkins, fine china, and jazz music the diner has mirrored it all. It serves as an example of the land of opportunity at its best and the isolation in suburban communities at its worst. The diner originated, matured, and continues to evolve right here in the United States. Where the diner has been and where the diner will continue to go has been dictated by the changing population it serves.

The trendy diner nightclubs and the corporate diner chains of today are a far cry from the stainless steel beauties that served the developing industrial world of the first half of this century. They are perhaps even further from the roadside beacon, the "readable structure whose function was obvious from a moving automobile," that summoned motorists with gleaming neon during the post World War II automobile craze (Anderson: Mid Atlantic, p. 133). Yet perhaps it is to the diner's credit that an industry that began in 1872 has been able to grow and change, retaining the essence of the past at the same time it makes a place for itself in the very different world of the 1990s. It is the diner's ability to evolve, to fit itself to the needs of the American people in any era, that has allowed the institution to continue for over a hundred years.

No other country has embraced the diner as its own. No matter where in the world one chooses to visit a diner, (and in the last few years they have migrated to many parts of the globe including England, Australia, and Japan) the experience will always be uniquely American. This nationalism may be, in part, because it has only been in the last the last ten to fifteen years that diners have begun to appear as a backdrop for Hollywood productions; before its emergence on screen, the diner didn't travel too far from its home in the American northeast. Even those diners that now have been shipped overseas reflect their American origin. They have become the embodiments of the American 1950s. As trendy restaurants, they make a fortune because of their novel entertainment value. Their purpose is not to blend into the landscape but rather to scream nostalgia, to recreate the homey, if loud, feeling of *Happy Days*. This is a nostalgia for something that no other country experienced, but many want to share. It is nostalgia for a certain American dream.

Yet even this small movement of diners to London, Australia, and Japan has undoubtedly shaped the continued evolution of the diner in America today. Americans have learned that it is "neat" to appreciate their own past. What succeeded in the fashionable foreign world helped define what time period in diners' history Americans would honor. Though the diner evolved and changed dramatically through the 1960s and 1970s, these decades are all but forgotten by the image of the diner perpetuated today. The diner revival sweeping across the nation is

caught up in a representation of what the diner was and what it meant during it's heyday -- the late 1940s through the mid 1950s.

In order to understand how the diner has arrived at where it is today, it is important to look at where the diner came from. The history of the diner in America is more than just a collection of dates that reflect when each design change occurred. The diner came into existence during the rapid urbanization that characterized the years around the the turn of the century in the American northeast. It carved a niche for itself in the increasingly industrial American city because it filled a basic need. It provided food where and when the working or recreating man needed it, at a price he could afford.

The history of the diner reflects the major trends in American history. It grew and changed to suit the lives and personalities of the people who kept the dream of owning their own business alive through two world wars and the Great Depression. It symbolized opportunity for each wave of both immigration and returning veterans. It captured almost perfectly the subtle pressures that kept women out of public places and the forces that made their later movement out of the home possible. It was shaped by each new development in transportation and communication and adapted well to increases in American leisure time. The diner spoke of equality, community, isolation, entertainment and the acceptance of mass leisure and mass culture as America came to experience each in its own turn.

The origin of the American diner goes all the way back to 1872 and a man named Walter Scott. The very first diner was not a diner

at all but rather a pushcart from which he served cold-meat sandwiches. Scott built the cart after noticing that there was nowhere in Providence, Rhode Island, where a man could find a meal after 8:00 at night. Making sandwiches and pies at home, he set up shop each night outside of the The Providence Sun Journal. Though Scott did have a cold chicken plate intended for the "dude trade" at thirty cents, most sandwiches were five cents, with desert or coffee only a few cents more (Gutman: American Diner, p. 3). He found himself a lively business in late-night changing of the newspaper crews. Men coming in to work would stop for one last cup of hot coffee to start the night. Men heading home would stop for a bite to eat.

Scott soon found that he needed a bigger base of operation than his small pushcart. He placed a large wooden box on a horse drawn wagon and cut a window in its side. From inside the box, he could sell his precooked wares. Soon he began to attract theatergoers, men on their way home from the saloons, even police officers on a late-night beat. In taking advantage of this opportunity, Scott started the evolution of an American tradition--the diner.

The evolution of the lunch cart or wagon (they were called both) progressed at a fast and furious rate. Scott and those who followed closely behind him had an almost inexhaustible market, as wave after wave of displaced rural Americans and immigrants from other nations flocked to cities like Providence seeking the economic opportunities denied them at home. Most found work as unskilled laborers in the ever expanding network of factories. Shifts were long and frequently began early or ended late. As

cities grew and mass transit systems developed, men often worked at greater distances from their homes. Thus, they either had to content themselves with whatever meal they could carry with them, or stop off along the way. Increasing numbers of lunch carts came to be there to fill this need.

Among the first to claim his share of the market was Ruel B. Jones. Where Scott had simply improvised a structure to fit his need, Jones, also of Providence, created the first specifically designed horse pulled lunch wagon. Eventually Jones established a chain of lunch wagons operating at many locations across the city. In a single year just one of his diners went through "4,000 pounds of sugar, 1,400 pounds of coffee, 10,000 quarts of milk, 5,500 pounds of chicken, and 12,000 pounds of ham" (Gutman: American Diner Then And Now, p. 16).

Eventually, competition between the growing number of lunch wagons in Providence became fierce. As businesses have always done, owners of these wagons began offering incentive for customers to chose their wagon. These inducements often took the form of a free slice of onion with an egg sandwich or free ketchup or mustard. When Walter Scott retired in 1917, he complained about these extras, "if some of the early patrons were tough customers, few of them wanted the earth for every nickle they spent. If they bought an egg sandwich, they didn't demand a slice of onion to go with it. They didn't swamp their beans in catsup or slather mustard on a dog until you couldn't see the dog" (Gutman: Diners Then and Now , p. 16). He further complained about the money thrown away on wasted extras--onions tossed to the street, ketchup

spilled everywhere. Operators realized that there was not much profit in a five-cent sandwich that included all the extras.

This same competition drove some wagon owners to try their luck elsewhere and other cities of the northeast soon began to see the emergence of late-night lunch wagons. Worcester, Massachusetts, was one of the first of these cities. It was here, in 1887, that Samuel Messer-Jones took the design of the lunch wagon one step further with the creation of the first wagon that a customer could enter. One rainy night was all it took to assure the success of this venture. In 1891, with the idea of trying his luck in Springfield, Massachusetts, Messer-Jones sold his business to Charles H. Palmer. Palmer became the first to patent a design for manufacture. Palmer created two basic models. The *Owl* was a simple, straightforward lunch cart where customers were served through a window and had to eat outside. The *Star* by contrast was much more elaborate with a narrow eating shelf along the interior of the wagon's walls, where customers could eat out of the rain and wind.

Meanwhile in Springfield, Messer-Jones had enjoyed almost immediate success. In no time at all, he owned twenty-two of wagons in Springfield, which he willingly leased to other dinermen. Soon he gave up running the the wagons himself and confined himself to building them. Messer-Jones created a *Pioneer Lunch* model which sold for \$1,400 (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now , p. 21). Wilson Goodrich also established a manufacturing operation in Springfield, competing successfully with Messer-Jones, before branching off to new markets in Canada.

The nighttime streets of Springfield were alive with the lunch wagons manufactured by these two men and certainly by others. In the early years of the lunch wagon, cities allowed them to roam the streets from early evening, through the night, until mid-morning, free of charge and unregulated. Messer-Jones alone built forty wagons before residents of Springfield became upset with the sheer number of wagons cluttering their streets and lingering well after the night had turned to morning. Where they had once been welcomed, Springfield eventually banned the lunch wagons.

Recognition of a first lunch wagon "king", however, clearly goes to Thomas H. Buckley whose New England Lunch Wagon Company reached its peak in the late 1890s and the first few years of the 1900s. He, in fact, produced one of the first and only quick lunches, as they had come to be called, to be shipped any great distance to the west. There are records to show that a Buckley wagon made the journey, by rail, to Denver, Colorado, in 1890 (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 19).

Diners seldom were taken this far from the factory where they were constructed because of difficulty in transporting them. Though the wagons were occasionally lifted onto huge barges and taken by river to their destination, railroads were used almost exclusively to get the wagons from factory to site. The majority of manufacturing plants were located almost directly on some branch of the railroad. This dependence upon flatbed rail car for transport meant that the wagons could be no larger than the cars they traveled on, hence, the continuance of the narrow shape. Even as railroad cars got longer and slightly wider, lunch wagons and

later diners were restricted in size to about 30 ft. long by 10 1/2 ft. wide. Even those which fit perfectly on the flatbed could not be taken far because the motion of the train frequently produced enough stress over a long journey to rip apart the seams of a diner.

Buckley built his first wagon to aid in the sale of his oyster stew. He soon found that building the lunch wagons was more profitable. Though it took three to five weeks to build each wagon, his factory usually turned out eight to ten per month. Buckley was the first to install stoves as standard pieces of equipment and so expanded the possible menu to include food cooked on the spot. Hamburgers, baked beans, clam chowder, poached eggs, waffles, and corned beef hash eventually replaced cold-meat sandwiches as quick lunch fare. He also sold supplies such as dishes, urns, saboteur knives, french plate mirrors, decorated glass, linoleum, wagon jacks, and fire pails.

Buckley's *White House Cafe* line set a precedence for lunch wagon (and later diner) design to act as a mirror for artistic trends. The box shaped body was 16 feet by 7 feet and 10 feet high and sat upon a wagon base (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now , p. 19). To this simple body was added all the "gingerbread" trimmings that had first gained popularity in the prosperous years after the civil war. The box had extensive window work, most often with stained and etched glass. The simplest of the line stuck to a scroll pattern while the more elaborate featured goddesses of music, flowers, day, and night. Other had pictures of presidents or boxers of the day etched into the window glass. Local artists

and sign makers were called upon to paint hunting themes, landscapes, and seascapes on the outer walls. These were often surrounded by elaborate blue and gold scroll work as was popular at the time.

His *Tile Wagon* was even more elaborate and expensive to build. All the tile was done in a mosaic pattern and the ceiling was done entirely in opal tile. Ivory and gold statues held the lamps. The stools were made of nickel with glass tops. Even the cash register was of solid brass. The wagon cost approximately \$5,400 to build, but Buckley felt that it would pay for itself in advertisement (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 20). Had that diner been Buckley's only venture into the extremely elaborate, he might have proved right. He later lost \$25,000 when a cart equipped with an onyx soda fountain failed to draw in business (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p.20).

Buckley's wagons were the first to be introduced in New York City. This introduction came as a leap rather than a natural movement of diners into the area. The Church Temperance Society had several diners shipped to the city in 1893 (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 18). The first ones were set up near cab stands or street rail car stops to encourage drivers to drink coffee instead of liquor to stay warm.

The ultimate goal of these "temperance wagons" was to lure men away from the saloons. They offered an alternative to the free meals offered by many saloons with the purchase of a dime's worth of beer. For that same dime, the wagons offered a full meal of meat, vegetables, and coffee. They also offered pancakes and

coffee for three cents or soup and bread without butter for six (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 18). It was not exactly a profitable venture but it did to some degree accomplish its goal. By 1898, eight "temperance wagons" were operating in New York City, provided for largely by the endowment of prominent New Yorkers such as Cornelius Vanderbilt. The wagons offered not only a good meal for a reasonable price but also a place of companionship outside of the saloon. This early alliance also did much to ensure the support of diners by the champions of Prohibition who came slightly later.

Buckley himself did much to help the spread of the lunch wagon tradition throughout the New England and Mid-Atlantic States. He traveled extensively, meeting with town and city councils to discuss how a community would benefit from having one of his lunch wagons and where the best location for one might be (Anderson: Mid Atlantic States, p. 6-7). Often he would set up a lunch wagon himself in cities where he could not convince someone to either buy or lease one of his wagons. Once the lunch wagon had proved to be a success, someone usually came forward, anxious to take over the new business. Between 1893 and 1898 lunch wagons managed by his company were opened in 275 small towns and 25 cities (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 20).

He eventually wore himself out and disheartened by the loss he had taken on the onyx soda fountain, he died in 1903 at the age of 35. Buckley's New England Lunch Wagon Company struggled on for two years after his death before declaring bankruptcy in 1905. The company was reorganized as the T.H. Buckley Lunch Wagon and

Catering Company but never again found the huge success that had marked the company before Buckley's death. For a short time the new Company ventured into the arena of automobile construction before going completely out of business in 1909 (Anderson: Mid Atlantic States, p. 6-7).

A very important change occurred in the design of the diners produced by Buckley only shortly before his death: the company began to manufacture stationary carts. The high wheels needed for the wagons to trundle along the streets each night were replaced with low wheels adequate only for the getting the wagon from the railroad to its final destination. The removal of the high wheels allowed for the kitchen to be moved more toward the center and opened up. A u-shaped serving counter was added and the eating shelf along the inside perimeter of the of the cart was extended to allow for more stools. This change to the low wheels set the exterior standard of lunch wagons and eventually diners in the years to come.

The night lunch business was one of the most successful ventures for the working-class Americans who wanted to own their own business. The lunch wagons were for many years strictly a male domain. As a business with a very low overhead, they held considerable appeal for many immigrants. The early lunch wagons were frequently run by immigrants of Irish or French-Canadian birth. Later, in the mid 1900s according to the records of such companies as O'Mahoney, Swingle, and Mountain View, as many as 80% of all dinermen were of Greek descent (Manzo, p. 20). During the first decades of diner production, owners/leasers of these new

businesses had been shoemakers, carpenters, laborers, wire workers, stage managers, stone cutters, bakers, foremen, butchers, or janitors before they became dinermen. In 1900, most had not been running a lunch wagon even five years before. For this reason perhaps, it has been said that the the lunch wagons were a "step into the American dream" (Jackson, p. 96). The newness of the venture, the distance of the lunch wagon from family life, and the wide variety of backgrounds from which men came to run a lunch wagon, created a very democratic environment. Men from all walks of life rubbed shoulders over their coffee without concern for their reputations.

Lunch wagons were respectable for all men during, at least, the first twenty years of the business. Two factors, however, led to a temporary, if somewhat severe, setback in the acceptance of the lunch wagon as a suitable place for all classes of American men. The first was a sheer age factor. Wagons that were built at very beginning of the quick lunch craze were starting to look old and disreputable. Winters of the northeast were not kind to these wagons. The gaily painted exteriors faded and peeled. Some cars literally came apart at the seams with the stress of customers going in and out on a nightly basis.

A more serious problem came when cities began to switch from horse drawn trolleys to electric street cars. Though clearly an important advancement in American urban life, this change produced near disastrous side effect for the reputation of the lunch wagons. The old trolleys were snatched up, almost as fast as the

cities could discard them, by men wanting to open a lunch wagon but who could not afford to buy one from a manufacturing company.

Frequently these old trolleys were dark and drafty. Customers also had to put up with leaky roofs. Usually only a minimum of reconstruction was done to change the trolley from a street car to a food service location. A crude kitchen and cheap counter and stools were added, but otherwise the trolley lunches seemed too closely tied to the machine world of their origin. Where almost all lunch wagons served the needs of men employed in the factories, care in design and decoration of the manufactured wagons disguised the association with the machine side of the industrial world. The trolley lunches made it uncomfortable for doctors and lawyer to stand side by side with factory workers, waiting for a meal and discussing local politics. The trolley lunches with their obvious mechanical association defined a class line between men that the elaborateness of Buckley's wagons had succeeded in camouflaging. Additionally, the trolley lunches did not withstand the nightly traffic well at all, appearing worse and worse with age.

Cities, in response to citizens complaints, began to regulate the presence of the lunch wagons more closely. Many cities dictated locations where the carts could operate and the early morning hour by which they had to be off the streets. Other cities banned them all together. In order to maintain operation as they saw fit, many owners chose to move off the street entirely and into small vacant lots. This way, they avoided both the ordinances regulating lunch wagons and those regulating stationary

businesses--they still had their wheels. In the more permanent locations, wiring for electricity became an option. The hours and menu expanded to include breakfast, lunch and and dinner, in addition to the late-night fare.

It was during this time that several terms developed for the petty thievery accomplished by diner staff. Pearl diving referred to clearing change right off the counter along with the dishes and retrieving it from the dish-pan sometime later. Other techniques such a knocking change onto the floor where it could be swept up with the sawdust that usually lined the floor behind the counter were common. Another tactic was to line one's pockets with sawdust so that pilfered change wouldn't jingle. Playing the piano, not as frequent an occurrence, was stealing directly from the cash register.

In spite of these setbacks, the army of lunch wagons spreading across the cities of the northeast continued to advance. Three companies controlled the lion's share of all manufacturing done during the first three decades of the 1900s: The Worcester Lunch Company, Tierney Manufacturing Co., and Jerry O' Mahoney Co. As is demonstrated by the success of these three rival companies, as well as by a number of smaller companies that continued to open their doors even during World War I, lots of money could be made in the manufacture of lunch wagons.

Though not the first of the three to be established, (Worcester Lunch Co. started in 1906 preceded Tierney by 7 years) Tierney Manufacturing Co. clearly contributed much to the evolution of the diner. The energy and absolute love of lunch wagons demonstrated

by Patrick "Pop" Tierney gave stability to the industry at the time when old trolley's were giving it a bad name. Pop Tierney would have done almost anything to get more lunch cars out there. Just like Thomas Buckley a decade earlier, Tierney traveled extensively, selling the lunch wagons himself. Depending on how much he liked a man, he would sell him a wagon for little or no down-payment. If he really like someone he might give him a wagon for a mere promise to pay later. "Pop" is credited with many advances to the lunch car design, including bringing the toilet inside. Other improvements he is credited with include the addition of exhaust fans, skylights, electric lights, and improved ventilation and eventually, as the times demanded it, added tables for ladies.

The Worcester Lunch Car and Carriage Co. was started by Philip Duprey, an ex-insurance/real estate agent who bought out a local wagon builder. His first line was called the *American Eagle Cafe* and was numbered starting at two hundred rather than with one. This line featured a then unique monitor roof with raised clerestory (a windowed extension of several inches above the wagon's wall height, in the center of the ceiling, designed to let in light) and operable windows for ventilation. Though the barrel roof continued to be popular with other manufacturers for many years, this new design clearly borrowed from the passenger rail car, came to be associated with the classic image of what a diner should look like.

Early Worcester Lunch wagons were very elaborate. By the company's ninth design, however, the decoration had changed.

Except for the choice of roof, this model most clearly showed the effects of these changing designs. The *Buffet Lunch*, as it was called, was half again as long as any of the previous designs. It had two entrances, windows at one end of the car which could be opened, and a much simpler paint job. Most importantly, the kitchen was for the first time spread out along the length of the wagon with a counter down the middle of the car for both serving and eating.

Jerry O'Mahoney's original goal was to build Pullman cars for the railroad. Instead he bought a lunch wagon and then bigger and bigger wagons until he had a chain of seven operating in Bayonne, New Jersey. Eventually, he joined forces with John Hanf to build, not railroad cars, but the lunch wagons he had come to love. The two started building in a small garage, working on two wagons at once. One was sold before it could even be completed. Encouraged, the men continued, repeatedly moving to more spacious locations as their business grew. The fifth and final plant was located in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

The wagons built by the O'Mahoney Co. in between 1910 and 1920 were ten feet by twenty feet. They had a barrel roof and etched windows that opened only at one end of the wagon. From the very beginning, however, Mahoney wagons had a counter that ran the full length of the wagon. The kitchen was long and narrow using the full space behind the counter. The car was still made of wood, paneled with 3/4-inch bead pine paneling and still custom painted (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 57).

After World War I, an age of modernism pervaded American culture. Americans felt a need to break with the past, to find something new, to lose many of the styles dictated by the Victorian era. The design key was for the first time taken from machinery rather than nature. A functional appearance in all things was valued. Immediately following the war, there was an industrial building boom. More machines were manufactured than ever before. The automobile made up a huge part of this industrial building frenzy. In 1900 there had been only eight thousand registered automobiles in the United States; by 1920 there were just short of a million (Anderson: Mid Atlantic States, p. 3). Mass production of the automobile led to a movement of people away from the city center and to the creation of suburban residential communities adjacent to major cities. This construction boom dramatically increased the places where a diner could start a successful business. In fact, what "cinched the inevitability of diner growth was the invention of the automobile and the resulting vast network of highways" (Kittel, p. 10).

The lunch wagon did not escape either the building frenzy nor the influence of modernist design. The 1920s marked the beginning of a period of intensive development for the lunch wagon. The wagons with their low overhead and easy installment purchase plan were a perfect business for returning soldiers who wanted to own something of their own. More and more of these businesses were seen in the newly developing suburbs and along new motorist routes, as opposed to in the traditional downtown locations. These new business almost always were of a stationary design and served

breakfast, lunch, and dinner rather than roving about the streets in search of the late-night trade. Hence, they were no longer true lunch wagons, but, more suitably, dining cars. Somewhere between March of 1923 and 1924 lunch carts, quick lunches, and lunch wagons came to be known as diners.

This period of diner growth and design was significantly influenced by a movement in America toward a shorter work week and more leisure time. Both number of hours per day and number of days per week were on the decline. Since urban homes were often small and held little possibility for recreation, these extra hours were spent in public places. Americans more than ever before considered it their right to have fun. The popular term "The Roaring Twenties" says much about this spirit of fun that had invaded large segments of American society in the relative prosperity of the post war years.

During the Prohibition years, diners frequently drew customers from the many Americans on their way to or from speakeasies and other social establishments where alcohol was illegally served, who would stop for quick highly social meals at odd hours of the day and night. A search for social activity drove people into their cars and onto the streets that connected city and suburb. Since the turn of the century, a greater number of women had moved out of the home and into the work force. These women now expected to join in the entertainment as well. Diners became an easy alternative for the urban, suburban mix, as a growing population chose to eat out rather than devote hard won hours of leisure to food preparation. Robbed of the community of the saloon, men found

release in the social atmosphere of a diner's counter. Women too, as the home and family receded from their once all-encompassing importance, began to seek the company of other women at the new "tables for ladies."

These social changes inspired a period of intense competition among Tierney, Worcester Lunch, and O'Mahoney, as well as among new companies such as Kullman, Silk City, Brill Steel, Paramount, Mountain View, and others. Dinermen were encouraged to trade old lunch carts for the new diners and to keep trading up. Ever desirous of getting the most modern, the biggest, the best, many did--again and again. Changes occurred rapidly as each company strove to outdo the others, while at the same time trying to keep up. Spies were a common and an almost accepted part of the manufacturing process. The result was a great similarity in each new line of diners produced by the major manufacturing companies.

The diners produced by the Mahoney plant in the 1920s, for example, had expanded length wise so that the kitchen could keep up with the need for more seating. Metal was added to the construction and the design became more rounded. Soon other companies followed suit. The painting in the diners, an echo of the move toward functionality, became much more simple. Diner manufacturing companies began to shy away from elaborate scroll work and full paintings and began to move toward simple clean and colorful lines. White porcelain enamel came into favor and the use of stools covered with this material spread throughout the industry.

Diners sold in 1922 did not include such things as dishes and menus. By 1924 the increasing competition between the companies had forced the initiation of a package deal. Each company strove to include one more thing than the others so as to garner a larger share of the market. Catalogues detailing the huge selection of diners and diner accessories became popular. In these catalogues, companies often tried to sell their own diners by playing up the weaknesses of their competitors.

Newspapers of the day celebrated the new diners, making fun of the old lumbering carts. Modernism now favored the once unpopular trolley look, as an undisguised machine, though certainly not the drafts and leaks of the old trolley's themselves. The war had left Americans with a feeling that shiny and new was the equivalent of good. German silver alloys, the precursors to the stainless steel of the thirties, covered every possible piece of the diner. Built-in refrigerators, steam tables, gas stoves, grills, exhaust hoods were all done in the gleaming metal. By the late 1920s even the ceramic tile of the back wall had given way to the alloys. Because the metal was easy to clean, it was seen a synonymous with cleanliness.

Tierney was the largest manufacturer until 1926, when he lost the controlling interest in his own company. The company folded for good in the stock market crash that preceded the Great Depression. During the 1920s, however, his factory turned out almost a diner a day. His two hundred-fifty employees worked on different parts of forty-six diners, all at the same time. First, the frame, which had once been wooden but by the mid 1920s relied

increasingly on steel, was built right on the wheels. The wall panels, roof and wiring came next. Only when the counter, shelves and sheathing of side walls was complete could the marble, tile and stainless steel be put in place. Such details as installing the stools and applying the final coats of varnish completed the inside. At the same time, men are adding the finishing touches to the enamel exterior and another diner was done.

Though diners were almost always trucked from the railroad station to the actual site, only Tierney, whose factory was located away from the railroad, used trucking as an exclusive method for getting diners from factory to site. Professional diner haulers, George and Frank Parker, got their start as a result of the frequency with which Tierney trucks broke down. Even with professional haulers, however, the process was a slow one. A route had to be chosen with no obstacles which the diner would not be able to pass under. Ten miles an hour was a usual speed in order to minimize the vibration damage to the diner and to save on the iron wheels. Pneumatic tires, when they became available, helped somewhat. Still speed was limited and, while letting the air out of the tires might save backing the diner for miles to try another route, it only gave a couple inches of leeway for the trucker who had miscalculated the height of an overpass. Routes taken by the truckers were as much as ten times longer than usual simply to avoid low overpasses or sharp turns.

When he had at last placed 200 new diners in cities and towns across the northeast, Tierney held a huge celebration dinner, complete with fireworks. This display, with its infectious

excitement, brought new customers. Soon after, Tierney opened a training course for would-be diner operators. While waiting for their new diner to be built, men were instructed in the art of washing dishes, scrubbing floors, cooking, baking, ordering supplies, serving meals without waste. Since women had always done these things in the home, men frequently needed to be taught.

It was not until the mid to late 1920s that women were seen among the customers at diners in any real number. In part, this may have been as a result of the diner's nighttime origin. Where the lunch wagons had catered to the needs of the working man, providing good food cheap in a convenient location, women, when they had to work, tended to do so during daylight hours and so were more likely to eat in a cafeteria. Women of the middle classes who did not need to work seldom went to any public eating establishment except perhaps to a tea room, to the cafeteria in a department store, or to the dining room in a first class hotel.

Many owners did not want women in their diners because they felt women took too long to decide on what to order and then even longer to eat it. Simply put, they slowed down the turnover of customers. Added to this, the presence of a woman in a diner decreased the spirit of democracy between men. Men of different economic classes who thought nothing of sharing a meal with other men, would never have done so in the presence of a woman. To do so might somehow reflect upon the status of his family. Where any man, rich or poor, could and did frequent a diner alone, no man would have thought of bringing his wife. Diners were the home of conversation and *ladies* did not participate in discussion,

particularly on the popular male subjects of politics, sports, and worse still, sex.

Whatever the case, the diner, for most of its early years, was not a place for ladies. Diner operators finally realized that they were losing money by this exclusion. Many diner owners were now open round the clock and wanted business during all hours of operation. Consequently, they began adding small touches to make women feel more comfortable. Frosted glass to prevent women from being ogled by passers-by was popular, as were arrangements of fresh flowers. Many diners went to such lengths as to add stools with backs, or even booths and tables so that ladies, hindered by skirts, would not need to perch upon the traditional small stools. The most important trick to cultivating the patronage of women depended upon the ability of each diner owner to let women know that other women ate there. One story involves an O'Mahoney serviceman who sat his own wife and child near the open door of a diner he was servicing. Before he had finished his work, several other ladies, encouraged by the presence of his wife, stopped curiously outside the diner and finally, remarking with some surprise upon seeing a women in the diner, proceed to come in themselves.

The forward momentum gained after the World War I went along way toward the carrying the diner industry, both operation and manufacture, through the years of the Great Depression. Everyone tightened his belt, to be sure, but the very nature of the diner helped it survive where other restaurants failed. The diner's simple style of operation with low overhead served it well at a

time when the entire food industry was trying to gear down. Many fancy dining rooms were being replaced by simple lunch counters which patrons could afford. Meal prices in diners had always been inexpensive. To some degree, all restaurant patrons shifted down a notch. As diners lost their poorest patrons, they gained some who once had been better off.

The companionship of the counter community was an important aspect. Diner owners came from all professions and were not just former restaurateurs. As the homeyness of the diner was played up, this became an important selling point. Diners became microcosms of the community. Here men and women would gather to share the good and the bad of what happened to themselves and their families. Diners were a non-judgmental place where patrons were more likely to sympathize than to ridicule. More than one diner owner was known to give a free meal to a man truly down on his luck in return for sweeping off the front steps or some other small task.

The success of the diners themselves during these hard times kept the manufacturers building. A few companies, including the once great Tierney Company, closed their doors forever, but most made it through. In Worcester, the number of manufacturing companies actually doubled from eleven to twenty two during this time (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 63). Geared toward potential dinermen who could not afford to a new diner, most companies supplemented their income with a new tactic: the sale of reconditioned diners. These diner had been taken in trade and renovated by the company. The fixed-up older models were sold for

a greatly reduced price. During the Depression years, O'Mahoney couldn't keep one on the lot. There was a waiting list at other companies as well. Reconditioning meant work for the diner builders during these tough times.

The strict functionalism popular after the war continued. The diners of the 1930s began to have a futuristic design. Theirs was a forward looking image of an industry looking ahead to when times would be better. Stainless steel, glass blocks, and formica all came into existence during the 1930s. These new products enabled manufacturers to turn out a more appealing but less expensive product at a profit. Formica truly added to diner design as it replaced the more costly marble counters, tile ceilings and paneled walls. These things also contributed to the image of the diner as efficient and clean. Neon was another invention of the thirties and was used extensively in the creation of eye-catching signs.

The Depression influenced the continuation of the modernist trend. This was in part because the shelters erected by the government during these years were so very simple. A large number of Americans, by necessity were surrounded by pure functionality-- they could no longer afford to indulge in the elaborate. People simply did not have money for luxury activities as they had in the twenties; they were concerned with surviving from day to day. In order for the diner to maintain an everyday image rather than one of luxury, it needed to echo the simplicity of its patrons' lives while at the same time being a little bolder, a little brighter, and a little happier.

It was at this time that the image of both the locomotive and the airplane worked their way into American life and hence into diner design. These symbol of speed and power influenced the shapes of many new products including vacuum cleaners and irons. This exaggerated sense of function came to be known as streamlining.

The first diner to show evidence of this streamlining trend was built by Sterling Diners, a division of J.B. Judkins Co. of Merrimac, Massachusetts, in 1936. It came from a design bought from a Maine boat builder and paved the way for a whole new style of diner in the middle 1930s. The most important aspect of this design was its sectional construction. Though most of the early diners built by Sterling were still boxy, the flexibility of sectional construction spawned a host of new, original designs from other companies. While diners were still limited in width, this new sectional design lead to longer diners than ever before. With unlimited length to play with, designers could, for the first time, afford to waste some space on aesthetic design. Along with the usual claims of fastest service and best homemade food traditionally made by individual dinermen, each manufacturer began to advertise that it had the biggest and the most modern diner on the market. Many models closely echoed the lines of a locomotive engine with the rounded nose and roof mounted fin. Art-deco with its bright colors and simple geometric designs became the prominent element of interior decoration in almost all new diners, but complemented the streamliners particularly well.

Worcester Lunch Co. got into the act with two streamliner designs. Both models were rounded nose *and* tail. Though the company was successful with both of these models, the next design was not long in coming. This time, forward slanting walls made the diner always seem to be in motion. The roof line joined the walls on a slant. All the corners were rounded. All lines had a flowing quality which aided in the immobilization of mobility. Even the letters painted on the exterior of the diner slanted forward.

The Golden Age of the diner was this period of rapid design change just before World War II, followed by the almost phenomenal building spurt that occurred during the ten years after. The coming of World War II helped to cement a particular image of the diner because it all but halted the production of new diners. Previous fierce competition for the newest design stopped due to lack of materials and man power. Americans were faced with the same styles for most of a decade: rounded corners, end windows or block glass corners, both counter and booth service, and formica, stainless steel, chrome, and Naugahyde used extensively for interior finish work.

While individual diners themselves remained relatively unaffected, World War II threatened diner manufacturing as neither World War I nor the Depression had done. There was no demand for new diners, and even had there been, they simply could not have been built with the nation's supply of steel devoted almost entirely to the war effort and no manpower left at home. Sterling closed, as did Ward and Dickinson and a number of others. Worcester Lunch Co. stretched the building of a handful of diners

over the span of three years in order to survive. Jerry O' Mahoney resorted to building truck bodies for the war effort. Even the publication Diner, which for several years had kept owners abreast of all the current trends in manufacture, menus, customers relations, etc., feeling the effects of the war time paper shortage, stopped printing temporarily between 1941 and 1946.

World War II also had the important effect of bringing a large number of women behind the counter for the first time, as waitresses. Women had begun as customers in the late twenties and continued through the depression years, but it was not until the war, with so many men away from their homes and their jobs, that women were accepted as part of the diner's profession. Of course, other good reasons were given as to why women came to be accepted as waitresses: women belong around food, women clean better and therefore will keep the diner cleaner, women don't stay out all night drinking, women are always happy, women work for less, customers like women better. The fact was that with such a large segment of the male population at war, more and more of the customers were women. Women liked being served by women. This sisterhood kept much of the community spirit of the diner alive.

As soon as the war ended, the demand for new diners rose rapidly until it had exceeded the prewar period. Returning veterans had learned from the success of those who had come before them. Veterans of World War I had done enormously well in the diner business. Why not veterans of this war as well? Many of these men wanted to own their own business, and the diner seemed like a perfect opportunity. These diner manufacturers who had made

it through the war could not keep up with the demand; materials were still scarce, and the waiting lists were long.

It was at this time that homemade diners first appeared in large numbers. Would-be diner owners, who did not want to wait until they could buy a factory diner, built their own. Some copied the current trends so well that today it is difficult to tell their creations from the diners that emerged fresh from the factory at the same time. Often individuals who previously owned a diner or who wanted to expand their existing business chose to build themselves and tailored the design to exactly meet their needs. In more rural places, homemade diners seemed to fit into the landscape, but "regardless of who built it, there is more to a diner than its architecture" (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 143).

Business boomed for existing diners. Diner owners had worked very hard to increase the respectability of their establishment to such an extent that by the late 1940s the girls from the nearby bank had become just as much regular customers as the boys from the factory. As if unburdened by the end of the war, more and more people went out for meals. With women's place in the diners assured in all but the very roughest neighborhoods, families were often seen enjoying a meal at a local diner in the suburbs. Good homemade food at a reasonable price and quick service, the hallmarks of the diner, no doubt advanced its image as a family eatery. This increase in family popularity prompted a need for bigger diners, diners that could accommodate not only more customers but also booths and tables.

Diner size had always been complicated by the limited means of transporting the diner from factory to site. Transportation, in fact, was responsible for confining the diner's spread almost entirely to the northeastern states. A few diners made it to the South and the West, but by and large, prefabricated buildings simply could not withstand the trip. Until the late 1940s, when Paramount introduced a two-piece design, split lengthwise, which could be clipped together on location, diners could be no wider than flatbed cars they traveled on. This new convenience in design not only allowed diners to double in width, which they did, but also to be shipped much further from the factories without fear of splitting the seams.

This dispersion of diners farther afield complemented the escalating popularity of the automobile in American life. Instead of remaining within borders of cities and their suburbs or especially within the narrow borders of small towns, diners moved out to the roadside. New and better roads developed making it possible for a diner to exist outside the centers of business and residential life. The early fifties seemed to be a time of innocent adventure. Americans took to the road, exploring what lay beyond the the place where they had grown up. Leisure was at its peak, with a shortened work week, more vacation time, and the majority of women still choosing to remain at home after their children were born.

In these post-war years, the economy flourished. For those who had grown up in the Depression years, it seemed as if they had, for the first time in their lives, money to spend on anything they

wanted. The early fifties was an era of big cars, cheap gas, and the beginning of rock and roll. Families with young children vacationed together, driving "to the lakes, mountain peaks, historic homes, battle fields, and dozens of other places" (Oakely, p. 259). Teenagers sought greater freedom--freedom to get into the car and go somewhere on their own. Television was still in its infancy, but it had awakened Americans of all age groups to the possibilities that might exist just around the next bend in the road. Americans for perhaps the first time had the leisure time to travel and the money to buy things along the way.

In their heyday, diners provided a restful, fun-filled stop for motorists. The diner was associated with the freedom of the open road, the freedom not to worry about cooking meals because there would always be another just around the bend. Diners put up more elaborate signs, using neon in brighter colors and more imaginative ways. Signs became larger and were placed higher than eye level. Neon was intended to attract the attention of the passing motorist rather than the ambling pedestrian. For this same reason, flat enamel exterior sides with the name of the diner in huge letters with boldly contrasting colors became popular. Doorways were often dressed up as well, to give a feeling of welcome from the road. Frequently the diners' entrances were topped with a huge clock, proclaiming that it was time to eat. Vestibules were another popular addition. Mimicking the entry-way of a home, they promised warmth and companionship to the passing motorist.

Though the increasing leisure and prosperity of middle-class Americans had initially pushed the diner to its peak of popularity, by the late 1950s these same factors had also started the diner on the path of changes that eventually would lead to its near demise. A trip to the diner was not just for coffee between shift at the factory--though to be sure diners operating in the inner cities still catered to this need of the working man and woman. Diners in the suburbs and along the roadside, however, began catering more and more to the family trade. Going to a diner was a treat for the whole family; its informal atmosphere seemed perfect for children. Yet, the diner was inexpensive enough that it could become a habit for many middle-class families. As diners catered to a perceived need for more of the family atmosphere, with kid's menus, balloons, lollipops, more table than counter service, they lost the cozy, clubby atmosphere that had characterized the prewar years. This new family trade, complete with crying babies and screaming five year olds, sometimes drove regular adult customers completely away.

Diners, nevertheless, continued to increase in size, with some of the super diners seating as many as two hundred. Frequently the kitchen was moved out back into an addition, so that the ever-climbing number of meals could be prepared more easily. Space behind the counter began to be used only for the preparation of salads and the serving of deserts. Consequently, the counter was often made smaller or removed altogether. As a real counter community of regulars became harder to find, these new giant diner/restaurants took on an entirely different atmosphere. They

provided an increasingly more sterile dining experience. That community flavor that had kept the diner alive for so long, through good and bad, had depended heavily on the presence of the grill--upon seeing the food as it was cooking and upon chatter between the customers themselves, the waitresses, and the grillman. By 1960 that camaraderie was long gone.

Though America tends to associate the word diner with a particular style of establishment reminiscent of the early fifties, the diner kept evolving. Diners of even the late fifties were much different than the classic image America clings to today. By the sixties those diners trying to stay on the cutting edge of developing design, had moved even further away from this classic image. These new diners began to mirror America's progressive outlook toward technology and in particular, toward space travel. Existing diners were renovated; new diners took on a different shape. Roof lines became jagged, dipping suddenly to create dramatic angles before rising sharply skyward again. The exterior porcelain was frequently covered with beach or "moon" pebbles from Italy, and flying-saucer-shaped light fixtures became popular. Vestibules and entry-ways frequently flared skyward at the outer walls, and bamboo curtains were added to the windows.

One can point to five main reasons why, by the mid seventies, the diner was a dying breed. In general, the diner, in trying to keep up with all of the current trends in American culture, had become so mutated that it had no clear appeal for any of its former patrons. The exterior of older diners were frequently hidden under faux brick or marble, and a variety new roof lines

appeared, like the false mansard--a simple matter of a vertical shingled overhang constructed over the existing old-fashioned roof. The interior stainless steel and formica were covered by paneling or stucco and Colonial and Mediterranean became the prevailing styles. Wagon wheel light fixtures were common as were vertical blinds. The kitchen and grill were no longer visible to the customers. The counter (where it had not been removed) was often glassed in to become a display case for desserts. The diner had evolved visually into something that it was never meant to be.

At the same time, true leisure was becoming a mere memory. Though the work week for many remained the same, others, including those entering new professional fields, were forced to work longer to get ahead in a competitive job market. With a larger number of women employed outside of the home and child-care being turned over to baby-sitters or an increasing number of professional daycare facilities, many of the chores that had fallen to the housewife--grocery shopping, laundry, housecleaning, meal preparation, Christmas and Birthday gifts, doctor visits--now had to be accomplished in free-time. Little free time remained for leisure activities.

With both husband and wife working, families had more money to spend but less time to enjoy it, The American focus switched from *doing* things to *buying* things--better houses, more modern cars, home appliances, television, stereos. As Americans sought to move up in the world by virtue of their material possessions, they frequently moved out of the old neighborhoods where they had grown up.

Living in a new place and beside people one knew nothing about tended to diminish the importance of the community. During the weekdays, when adults were at work and children were at school, homes--whole blocks of homes--stood vacant. Families' evenings, the only time when everyone tended to be at home, were consumed by the little details of everyday life. Families often had as little inclination as they had time to meet their neighbors. The fear, perhaps an escalation on an individual level of the Cold War and McCarthyism, that a neighbor might be at worst a communist spy and at best a dangerous criminal or desperate illegal alien, did nothing to improve neighborhood relations. The perfect house became the substitute for the perfect neighborhood. The perfect neighbor was not the over-friendly individual who tried to recreate the neighborhood barbecues of the past, but rather the person who said only a brief but friendly "hello" before going on with his own business. Families became isolated within their homes depending on television and musical reproductions to complete their existence.

As families isolated themselves from one another, going to a small restaurant in a new place, where sheer proximity forced contact with strangers, was undoubtedly uncomfortable. Out of practice with leisure, people, when they did go out, wanted a table or booth to themselves, a fairly standard menu to choose from, and decoration similar to what they might have in their homes. Chain restaurants like Bonanza and York's Steak House became popular. Here food was ordered while the customer stood in line: steak; tinfoil-wrapped baked potato; and a pre-made salad of

lettuce, shredded carrots, red cabbage, and one slice each of cucumber and tomato. Trendier places might have a salad bar where patrons could make their own. Meals were prepared while patrons served themselves beverages and dessert, and then were placed on a tray carried by the patron. At the end of the line, the meal was paid for, and one was free to choose any table available with no further interaction.

Among the specific reasons why diners began to disappear, local zoning against diners in many of the suburbs and areas of new development that sprung up along the roadside was undoubtedly one of the more important. Many families did not want something as commercial looking as a porcelain enameled diner with a neon EAT sign in the middle of their neighborhoods. Diner owners and manufacturers did what they could to camouflage their origins. Eventually, in the seventies, diner companies started to produce other types of restaurants. As discussed earlier, owners of existing diners covered them with faux brick and marble, anything to hide the tell-tale porcelain enamel. City planning boards tried to legislate what was considered good taste in a commercial building. The flashiness of the fifties-style diner with its neon, stainless steel, and brightly colored porcelain or shiny metal exterior was no longer tolerated. A more residential look complete with mansard roof, the hallmark of roadside respectability, became the choice of many communities in dictating what businesses could operate within their borders.

In many places, even the word diner was banned as representative of an outmoded and undesirable culture. Old diners became grills,

cafes, eateries, or any of a variety of other names. Some diners even resurrected the term quick lunch. Diners had ceased to be diners. With all the changes dictated by new standards of community acceptability, owners saw no point in using the old narrow design. More conventionally shaped buildings had more to offer by way of kitchen space and seating capacity. Diners were little by little abandoned on the roadside and forced out of the suburbs.

The second and perhaps most significant reason for the decline was the movement of Americans toward fast food. McDonald's started its campaign to take over the world of eating in 1953, but not until the middle of the 1970s did the fast food chain become firmly entrenched in American life. Since one of the chief selling points of the diner had always been quick service, the fast food king had diners beat at their own game from the start. McDonald's also outdid the diner in the arena of cheap but tasty food. Diners have been, since conception, inexpensive restaurants, but here again, they could not beat the economy of mass production.

Familiarity of the McDonald's building and logo aided the elevation of the fast food chain above the diner. Before the late 1950s diners had a distinctive shape that most Americans, at least in the northeast, recognized instantly. As diners tried to keep up with the times, they lost that simplicity and boldness. Stucco and fake bricks melted the diner into the landscape of the sixties and seventies. Gas stations, motels, fast food restaurants, the American strip, grew up beside them, overshadowing the tiny buildings now dressed in neutral tones. Unlike the diner where

appearance was an individual distinction, McDonald's and other similar fast food restaurants were nationwide chains. Each enterprise had a uniform structure and logo adhered to by every franchise. Everything about these restaurants was new, and an extensive advertising plan taught America what to look for.

Not only did each of these chains develop a consistency of appearance, they relied upon a consistency of taste as well. Chains allowed for no regional specialties, no bad cooks. When Americans stopped at a McDonald's, no matter where in the country they were, they knew what they would get. A Big Mac in Maine is the same as a Big Mac in Louisiana and today is the same as a Big Mac in Japan. By contrast, a big difference existed in the regional specialties of diners. A biscuit with gravy is a long way from a blueberry muffin with butter and hash browns are not quite the same as grits.

This problem of consistency became especially important since diners were not then, nor are they now, spread evenly across the nation. Diners originated in the Northeast. From there they sent out feelers, creeping into the Great Lakes states. A few established themselves in Minnesota or down in Florida. Quite a few even made it all the way to California, but some states never saw a diner. As Americans drove across country on an ever-increasing network of interstate highways or flew from major city to major city, they needed an inexpensive, quick place to eat where they always knew what to expect, no matter where they were in the nation. The essential quality in a restaurant that offers no variety from day to day is dependability

The third major ingredient contributing to the decline of the diner is the changing system of roads in the United States. Diners had grown up along the main roads that led from city to city. Interstate highway systems rerouted that traffic to bypass the cities entirely and in the process bypassed the diners. On a local route, it was a simple maneuver for drivers to pull off for a cup of coffee and a piece of homemade pie or a quick lunch. Not so simple was the task of getting off the highway and driving into the city for a quick bite. Had the motorist even been willing to take the time to get to the diner, he may not have known that one existed. The drive back out of the city, and into the flow of traffic on the highway proved a deterrent as well.

The faster the speed limits became, the less likely drivers were to get off the highway just for a bite to eat. More and more a single neon sign, once the roadside beacon, would be ignored, bypassed in favor of the glow from a whole strip of hospitality oriented businesses. Motorists learned to wait until they got to a place where they could get gas, a meal at a McDonald's or some steak house, an evening's entertainment, and a room for the night. No longer the newest or the brightest on a road aglow with flashing lights of every color, the diner took a back seat in this trade. One-stop shopping became the mode of the American motorist, leaving the diners with seats as empty as the streets that passed by their doors.

When Americans chose to travel, the final destination became increasingly all important; people just wanted to get where they were going. Most took no pleasure in the trip itself. Traffic sped

by all that was not a final destination, and this diners have never been. Designed to cater to the average person who needed a quick meal or to chat with some friendly faces, the diner through most of the seventies and eighties could not draw people to its doors. Those who happened in were usually happy enough with what they found, but far more people walked right on by without ever knowing what they had missed.

The fourth factor that drove diners out of business was a gas shortage. The heyday of the diner, the late forties and early 1950s, had been an era of big cars and cruisin'. The automobile was more than just a means of transportation; it was entertainment. After World War II, "Americans went on a travel binge" (Oakley, p. 259). The late 1960s and early 1970s put an end to the era of the car as an American pastime. Drivers were forced to cut back drastically on gas consumption as the nation tried desperately to reduce dependence on foreign oil. With gas prices high, cruisin' as a local pastime that would move the public on to the roads where the diners awaited them, was a relic of the past. Thru-traffic was confined to the highways, and locals only went where they had to go.

Television, the fifth and final ingredient in the diners' decline, magnified the gas crisis by giving Americans something to do while they were at home saving gas. Television killed the desire to explore by allowing Americans to experience visually, in great detail, what lay beyond their own communities, without ever having to get up from their couches. Television showed exciting far away places--destinations for would-be travelers. When they

chose to go, people wanted to get to these places as quickly as possible with as few stops as possible along the way. Flying to Disney World, the Grand Canyon, or Hawaii promised much more excitement than a Sunday afternoon drive with a stop at the diner for a piece of pie.

As television sets made their way into almost every American home, people who before might have been sitting at the counter chatting with other locals were now sitting on their sofas, at home, watching their favorite programs on TV. Television catered to America's growing isolation within the private home. Television was the perfect alternative for middle-class people who had come from the rural small towns or inner city neighborhoods to the murky land of the suburb. Families tuning to their favorite programs became involved with the lives of the families in the television shows, just as people in the communities of the fifties had been involved with one another. Television was new and exciting, but most of all it required no effort, a definite plus for adults who had worked all day and for children who no longer had their parents' full attention even in the hours spent away from work.

Television also spread the word about fast food chains. Americans were constantly bombarded with images of Big Macs--two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese; most still remember the commercials. Kids were especially susceptible to this type of mass marketing and parents more often than not gave in to a "but please Mommy!"

Yet today, in spite of the continuation of many of the of the factors contributing to the its popularity, the diner is back, a little different at times than we remember it but flourishing nonetheless. And in a way nothing has changed. The new roads still by-pass the old diner locations. As more small towns imitate urban life, bypasses are now being created to get the driver to the highway without ever going on the old roads. Old roads that ran through the center of a community, whether city or small town, were frequently congested with traffic trying to get to the highway as well as to places of business in town. New bypasses restricted traffic flowing into the center of a community to those cars whose destination is that community's center. Fast food joints are doing better than ever, and cable has increased the television options at least twenty-fold. VCRs and entire businesses devoted to the renting and sale of video tapes that bring the world's most popular movies right into America's living room, have added to the mass leisure expected by the majority of Americans. The rising popularity of video games provide yet another reason for Americans to stay at home, glued to the screen. Something has changed, however.

Even in at the height of the diner decline, some old diners refused to give up. They refused to change completely to keep up with the times, so they continued to enjoy trade from their oldest and most loyal customers. These customers were made up of an assortment of regulars for whom a particular diner represented more than just a place to eat. It was a second home: a place to relax, chat with other regulars, and to catch up on local events.

It was a place where a regular customer felt completely at ease. Everyone knew his/her name and the coffee was already poured before the customer had even removed his/her coat.

The problem lay in the failure of these old diners to attract new customers. Travelers passing through a community and those who dine out only occasionally flocked to the familiar logos--the restaurants seen on every channel of every television in America. They are consistent and easy to find. Thus, with no new business, diners gradually faded from the American landscape. The regulars were not enough. Ten or twelve breakfasts did not pay the bills. Eventually, sad as it may be, even these regulars stopped coming. Perhaps they moved out of the area; more likely they simply got too old to come and eventually passed away.

Even the most loyal regulars could not keep the majority of diners alive. A few, however, survived, and these few kept the great heart of the American diner beating, faintly though it was, until a new generation began to revive the tradition. Good food, at modest prices, served fast with a friendly smile prevailed, and for the last ten years the diner has been making a comeback. As *Smithsonian Magazine* so eloquently put it, "Diners were dwindling because they failed to keep up with the times but don't worry hon, the times are now catching up with them" (Jackson, p. 94).

Diners of today are a very different breed from any that came before. They have transcended twenty-five years of evolutions, at least fifteen of which were a descent into non-existence. Today's diners reach all the way back to the glorious heyday of the industry and suggest a collection of images that remind Americans

of who they are. Even as they evoke these images of the past, the diner remains firmly entrenched in the present. Though clearly one of America's earlier experiences in public dining, the diner is also one of the most modern restaurant ventures.

Today diners are many different things to many different people. They are nostalgia come alive and at times a very smart business venture. They are clearly, however, coming back. It is said that "every age romanticizes the era immediately preceding it, from which it derives its guiding ideals and values; values which are inevitably obsolete" (Kando, p. 55). Americans of the 1990s have undoubtedly romanticized the fifties, our most recent era of peace, prosperity and above all a clearly defined image of home and community. While this nostalgia has clearly dictated growth for a once rapidly failing industry, it has left the chain of evolution open for future interpretation.

Currently three trends, as well as one path of continuance, dominate the diner revival of today. Each of these three trends capitalizes on America's collective memory of the fifties in a different way, but each freezes the diner at one place in history. These trends pick a moment in time and evolve back to it, ignoring the thirty, forty, even fifty years that came in between. The restored, mint-condition diner, the trendy elite diner, and the diner chains are the major components to these three trends. The path of continuance on the other hand, involves those diners that have somehow managed to keep plugging along, through good times and bad. Though they will profit by the resurrection of the

industry, for them the revival of the nineties is less of a revival and more of a period of better business.

Often these continuing diners are not the diners built in the late forties and fifties but are even older diners, diners more firmly established within a community. These were the diners not traded in for the very newest model or junked when they went out of date. They were less of a business venture to the people who own them and more a way of life. The diners somehow resisted mainstream evolution, their owners repairing but not renovating. Perhaps they did grow and change, redecorating as colors came in and out of popularity, added more space as business demanded, adjusting the menu as customers' tastes changed, replacing the worn, adding the new. Perhaps some even changed the exterior look of the diner somewhat as it moved down through the years from owner to owner and even was moved from place to place. These diners, whatever their final form, still have original heart; they still have a counter; they still have a collection of regulars who come in for simple food and good company.

Some of these remaining diners have merely been passed down from generation to generation within a family. At times employees or regulars have taken over the diners, but even then the diners have remained within their own extended family. They rarely have had extensive renovation or restoration for its own sake. Problems were fixed when they occurred. Additions were added when business demanded. When a new paint job was needed or equipment had to be replaced, it was in keeping with the times but not because of changing styles. These diners have evolved, at times paralleling

the evolution of the diner industry, at times fulfilling only their own needs. They are somewhat eclectic in decoration and construction as the useful has been kept and the impractical removed. Often faded and nondescript, marking no particular era as much as all eras through which they have lived, they are they product of the people inside instead of an architectural or artistic history.

Diners such as the A-1 in Gardiner, Maine, and the Miss Brunswick in Brunswick, Maine, are a part of this continuance. Though from the road, the A-1 looks exactly as it always did, a kitchen has been added. The diner sits upon stilts that lift it to the level of the road that acts as an over-pass for the old railroad beneath. The stilts have made it possible to extend the kitchen into the building that abuts the A-1 directly behind. The owners have tried to keep as much of the diner's history as possible. The counter and booths, if not original, are at least in keeping with the diner. The exterior still wears the yellow enamel of its past, emblazoned with the diner's original name, Hereald's Diner, in bold red script. The new name, A-1, comes from a large neon sign given to the current owner by a used car dealer. The sign which for many years hung in the kitchen, inoperable, has now been repaired and hung on an interior wall just behind the counter.

The menu here remains a collection of traditional diner fare: liver and onions, meatloaf, pork chops, corn beef hash. But the specials board includes a selection of exotic and gourmet creations. The dessert board includes still more elaborate

concoctions. Yet the counter attracts a definite regular crowd. The A-1 has changed in order to keep going, has become more modern to make money, but it is still a diner, heart and soul.

The Miss Brunswick once having operated in Norway, Maine, as the Norway Diner. When it was moved to Brunswick the diner's name was changed to become the Norwago Diner (meaning, so locals claim, Norway go!) Eventually it was sold and renamed the Miss Brunswick. The Miss in Miss Brunswick and many others like her resulted from an effort to attract ladies in the early part of this century. A kitchen was added on to the Miss Brunswick, and the menu was expanded to include Mexican specialties. It has changed as it has had to change. Yet this diner is still a diner, and the hash and eggs served at the well worn counter are still delicious.

All over the United States, especially in New England and the Middle Atlantic States, such diners can be found. Each has a history and remains to varying degrees the same as it was forty, fifty, sixty years ago. More importantly these diners *feel* the same. They still provide a sense of community to the people who go there. These customers are more than just another dollar bill. Wolfe's Diner in Dillsburg, New York, is typical of these. Owner Lillian Atkin says fondly of the customers that visit her 1954 O'Mahoney, "The friends I've made. Customers who become friends. We have people who come up here every day, twice a day. They're like family" (Anderson: Mid Atlantic Roadside Delights, p. 142). That is what the continuance of these old diners is all about. This is why they have not changed with the times. This is why they

have survived. The people and the diners themselves are one big family.

Into this same group of diners falls a collection of homemade diners that takes all shapes and sizes. Though a true diner is a prefabricated structure, made at a factory and hauled to its operating site, it is hard to say that a place like Moody's Diner in Waldoboro, Maine, is anything other than a diner. Originally opening in the 1920s, Moody's completed 22 additions before 1949. One last addition was undertaken in the winter of 1994. Though Moody's has the essential diner shape, long and narrow, and the requisite counter, it is more the sense of community that exists between the regulars, the quality of the homemade food, and the spirit of fun that mark Moody's as a "real" diner.

Other homemade diners often have an even less diner-like appearance. Springing up along rural roads and on the main-street sections of downtown nowhere, a whole new breed of so-called diners has been born. Many operate out of converted old houses or in the glass-fronted buildings of downtown. Others were constructed as restaurants but call themselves diners. About these, diner enthusiasts must make a case-by-case decision. Few live up to the name diner but just as some diners have evolved into something they are not, sometimes these restaurant-diners can become the real thing. If the place serves the function of a diner within a community, if the food is good, and the coffee plentiful, if the owners love what they do, and the regulars keep coming back, who is to say that any structure is not really a diner? After all, "just because a diner wasn't hauled to its site from a

factory didn't mean it wasn't a diner" (Gutman: American Diner Then and Now, p. 143).

Sometimes an old diner is purchased by a purist with the idea of restoring it to its former glory. These diners are part of the first real trend in the diner revival of the late eighties and nineties. In a small number of cases the goal has been complete restoration for the purpose of museum exhibit. In other cases, a restored diner such as the "historic" Village Diner in Red Hook, New York, has been included in one or more historic registers. The Village Diner was the first to be included in the New York register of Historic Buildings and one of four to be included in the National Register. The others include The Modern Diner in Pawtucket, Rhode Island; The Blue Moon in Gardiner, Massachusetts; and Mickey's Diner in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The "historic" Village Diner has had several lives. Built sometime before 1925, it was first opened by Louis Du Bois in Rhinebeck, New York, along the Astor Section of Route 9. When Du Bois died in 1928, the diner was purchased by Bart Coons and moved up the road to its present location. Just after World War II it was moved briefly to the intersection of the newly completed State Parkway and Route 199. Business was not as good in this location as had been hoped and in 1957 the diner was moved back to its present location for good. In 1984 the diner was purchased by Sam and Arleen Harkins. Sam, a Kraft Dairy Group Representative, had been a regular for years when the diner came up for sale. He and his wife "jumped at the chance" (Anderson: Mid Atlantic Roadside Delights, p. 133).

Though the car was in good condition to start with, the Harkins have carefully restored many of the small details that make the diner special. They carefully stripped the diner of nine coats of paint to reveal the original name, the Halfway Diner, emblazoned on the enamel band. The car with a monitor roof reflects the very beginnings of the interest in streamlined design popular in the thirties. The exterior features fluted stainless steel with a wide yellow and green band. A dramatic green sign that spells out DINER in red neon lettering sits on the roof. The interior is painted lime green with black tiling. The ceiling is bright yellow with stainless steel predominant. The original green and black Seth Thomas clock is still in place (Anderson: Mid Atlantic Roadside Delights, p. 133).

The historic significance of diners such as these has recently become of more concern as historians, archaeologists, architects, artists, and others realized that the roadside culture in American was rapidly disappearing. Artists such as John and Edward Hopper began painting these diners, from postcards of old and eventually from life. Organizations such as The Society of Commercial Archeology came into existence. Museums such as the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan, began using diners as part of their exhibits. Started by Randolph Garbin, Roadside, a journal "devoted to the appreciation of a truly American institution, the diner," has been published three times a year since 1991. In June of 1993 the Society for Commercial Archeology held its first national diner conference in celebration of "The Diner Experience: A Century of American Commercial Integrity" ("Pilgrims at Temples to Hash, p.

(6). Companies have been established for the reproduction of one tiny piece of diner equipment, for example porcelain enamel-covered stools. Others are geared toward professional reconditioning. The concern that diners might disappear entirely has clearly motivated the a great deal of interest in their preservation.

Why certain diners have been chosen for historic recognition is hard to say. In large part, it is because they represent a snapshot picture of roadside architecture, each from its own time and in its own area. Each has a distinct traceable history and has been either maintained in its original condition or restored with great accuracy to represent the detail of its manufacture and of its own period of operation. Probably the most significant fact in choosing these diners--the four recognized by the National Registry or others named by state and local historical societies--is simply that they were singled out by someone with a special interest. Undoubtedly, many diners of equal historic value remain unnoticed.

Unnoticed perhaps except by photo-realist artists like John Baeder who claims that going to the diner was a Saturday ritual for him as a child. He also notes, "I like suburban diners. Many are sweet. Most are friendly. Some of them remind me of little old ladies bending over in their front yards picking flowers or weeding, or replanting. Their backs are always facing you and shady trees surround them" (Baeder: Diners, p.24). Whatever his fascination, Baeder has captured hundreds of historic diners across the country on canvas.

In order to understand more about diners such as these, one must realize that though their appearance remains frozen in time, they are not under glass. They are usually fully functioning diners with homemade food and regular customers. A fairly large number of unrecognized diners have been carefully restored; their owners truly want to live the life of the diner of old. These diners exist on two planes. They are modern businesses, yet they try to keep an old fashioned atmosphere alive. As diners regained popularity many people purchased old diners and completed extensive renovations before reopening their own little piece of history. Most of these people created a restaurant that has a close resemblance to the diners they remember from when they were a kid or that they have seen on television or in the movies. Owners of this type of diner have worked very hard to capture the historical feeling and even the general dinerness of the particular time that interests them most.

The second trend in the diner revival has occurred because the diner image has become chic. Diners today are "marketable as a concept" (Jackson, p. 95). These diners proudly display a collection of neon, glitz, and glitter. These details are simply a back-drop for a very 1990s institution. The grillman has been replaced by a very professional chef. A full bar has replaced the coffee urn. Patrons come in for a drink or an elegant meal, and though the same people may be present on any given night, the atmosphere is different. Patrons do not know one another in the same way that people who sat side by side at a counter drinking coffee once did.

Yet that is not the function of diners like the Empire Diner in Manhattan or the Fog City Diner in San Francisco. These are meeting and relaxing places for professionals who want less to be part of a community than just to escape the grind of their daily lives. In the company of others like themselves, they absorb the past while remaining quite firmly anchored in their present corporate worlds. These diners succeed because in less than two hours they can achieve for their patrons the ultimate in escape: a retreat into another world.

Though the diner has become the home of exclusive trendy restaurants and night clubs, all of the familiar iconography is there. People feel at home because a diner is something that they have experienced before. Be it on the television or movie screen or somewhere in their childhood, they have been there before. The neon gleams into the night. Stainless steel covers everything, and there is sure to be a vintage clock. The polished juke box plays a selection of Elvis and other music of an earlier time. The counter while still structurally present, in many cases has been made into a bar.

The diner structure, the diner decoration, has been used to create an image of someplace fun, someplace different from the usual snobbiness of the most exclusive restaurants without compromising the successful image. These "now" diners attract a younger crowd, the newly successful doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers. They are trendy without being excessively expensive, and yet they provide contact with the right people. Some of the community of the diner has been lost, however, because people sit

at tables or booths, talking exclusively to the friends they they came in with. Some back slapping and hand shaking occurs on the way in or the way out, but by and large these diner patrons do not want to know one another outside of a professional setting. Couples or groups remain isolated at their own tables, within their own world of success and failure. Details of personal life are not shared; that is not the intent. The intent is to forget, to be social for a few hours.

The menu too has changed considerably. Many of these upscale diners do not rely on serving three meals a day. A large number of them specialize in brunch. Diners are to the "breakfast and lunch crowd what "Cheers" was to beer fans, a place where everybody knows your name" (Oleck, p. 73). Others are open only at night, serving cocktails and the best in *novelle cuisine*.

One new diner, Bogey's, is located in a Manhattan clothing boutique. Just a little way up from 57th Street, the diner is seen as the east side counter to the Hard Rock Cafe. The diner itself is not expensive, but it does not need to be: emphasis is on the clothing sold in the boutique. The novelty and convenience of the diner on the premises serves to lure people into the boutique where the average price per item is at least \$60. Patrons can pay as much as \$4000 for a Jeff Hamilton leather jacket. The diner specializes in "pre-fear-of-food meals" and is not for "the ladies who lunch" (Frumkin, p. 19).

Another New York diner, the former Market Street Diner, has now joined forces with a trendy night club. Once a place where the regulars, cabbies and truckers, occasionally shared their space

with such greats as Frank Sinatra, Alan Funt, and the band Supertramp, the diner, now called the Big City Diner, operates cabaret style with a bar/dance club above the first floor diner. Though the diner itself still serves less pricey food than does the upstairs club, the trendy Manhattan crowd is clearly the intended patrons. The food is still traditional, just fresher and frequently less fried. A Cajun blackened steak is much more likely to be seen on the menu than one fried in butter.

San Francisco's 19th Avenue Diner with its upstairs bar is similar. Once the diner and very posh bar operated separately. The diner was open to the masses, but the upstairs bar was a very exclusive club. Now the two have been united. The diner still serves simple food, available upstairs as well, but the prices are somewhat higher. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, huge hamburgers, and fresh fish are some of the choices. The diner, however, makes everything fresh from scratch. From pasta to mayonnaise, everything is made on the premises. The diner even corns its own corned beef for hash. Patrons can expect to pay more for this type of quality. Though a family feeling prevails in the kitchen dining room area downstairs, the upstairs with its big screen television and fine leather upholstery remains exclusive enough to dictate the clientele.

Even a place such as Camellia's Grill in New Orleans, where nothing on the menu is priced at over \$5.95, has fallen prey to the elaborate. The little twenty-nine stool former diner serves up a great turkey, ham, Swiss, coleslaw, and Thousand Island dressing sandwich on rye bread called *Camellia's Special* but accompanies it

with a fine linen napkin. The Elm City Diner on Chapel Street in New Haven, Connecticut, has gone posh as well. A sign appears in the window, "Proper Dress Required" and unlike Camellia's, the menu is made up of blackened chicken for \$14.95 and baked cheese tortellini marinara for \$11.95. Live jazz frequently accompanies the meal. These diners have been restored primarily as an amusing backdrop for the enjoyment of fine food.

The diner fever is spreading to Canada, England, and Australia as well. Patrons in Canada were at first unused to the gleaming stainless steel restaurants, but now they come in hordes to carefully redecorated diners. Classic refurbished diners are being shipped to England with increasing frequency. There seems to be a surprising nostalgia in Europe for the American past. Diners represent juke boxes and James Dean. Even where the actual physical structure of the diner is missing, the idea has been capitalized on.

London's Rock Island Diner, part of the Tower Records building, for example, is a living tribute to the American fifties. Six foot plastic hot dogs, hamburgers, and milk cartons are suspended from the ceiling of the Rock Island Diner. Booths line the outside walls of the room. Tall cylindrical sugar dispensers, pointy-tipped, red-and-yellow, squeeze, ketchup and mustard bottles, and chrome napkin holders sit on every table. The room fairly vibrates with the full melody of 1950s music. The DJ--with hair slicked back and t-shirt rolled around the pack of cigarettes in his sleeve--announces songs such as *Love Me Tender* and asks for any other requests. The menu includes the traditional: cheeseburgers,

fries, and chocolate *milkshakes* but unlike other restaurants, waitresses and bartenders here occasionally climb up on the bar to remind patrons of what the jitterbug is all about. All in all, the diner seems much more Americanized than are most Americans.

The last trend in the diner revival is the creation of new nation-wide diner chains. Even McDonald's has gotten into the act with the introduction of the new Golden Arch Cafe in Hartsville, Tennessee. Hartsville is the test site for what McDonald's hopes will be the answer for towns too small to support a full McDonald's Restaurant. Fifteen hundred small towns of 2500-4000 people are targeted across the United States if the "McDiner" venture proves a success (Hayes, p. 2). Only the Golden Arches themselves link the appearance of the new diner with the McDonald's image that America knows so well. The menu too bears only slight resemblance to the regular McDonald's menu. The breakfast biscuits and choices of beverages have remained the same. Otherwise the diner features "homey" fast food (Hayes, p. 2). The basic menu includes such things as barbecued ribs, fried chicken, Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, and green beans. The diner also features an eight-stool dairy bar that serves up 1950s style banana splits in hopes of catching some of the after-dinner-treat market.

Most of these prospective chains hope to rival places which serve more meals than fast food burgers, like Sizzler and Bonanza. McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and the other hamburger/fast-food chains will always remain competition, but these diners are trying to capitalize on the need for an alternative. The falling

economy of the late eighties and early nineties proved the perfect environment for the growth of these diners. Throughout history, the average restaurant has had as much as a 70% failure rate during tough times, but the diner has seen as low a failure rate as 10% (Manzo, p. 17). The moderate pricing of today's diner chains allow the majority of middle-class Americans to take their families out for dinner fairly frequently, yet to feel that they are doing something special.

The rebirth of the diner has been fueled by the growing nostalgia for what is familiar and comfortable. At the same time, legions of eaters are becoming dissatisfied with the anonymous experience of eating in a fast food restaurant. Many of these new chains play heavily on the nostalgic theme of the 1950s with old fashioned milkshakes and real meatloaf. The diners are appearing most frequently near big malls or other crowded shopping areas, in order to capitalize on the the lunch traffic. Long lines of customers often wait for a seat. At times these are shoppers who have been to the diners before and enjoyed the food. Other times, people come in who are curious and simply have to give diner cuisine a try.

A few--Musci, Kullman, Paramount--of the old diner manufacturing companies are still around and are enjoying increased prosperity. Kullman, started in 1927, for example, has for many years been building mainly restaurant equipment, but only an occasional diner. In 1990 diner production had risen to include 5% of the company's overall business. In 1992 the popularity of diners had driven that figure up to 20% ("Pilgrim's at Temple to Hash" p.

C6). Several new companies have recently come into existence as well. Companies such as Starlight Diners Inc. of Holly Hill, Florida started building these new diners in 1992. Others such as the 5 and Diner Co. concentrate on building new old style diners. Suntory Ltd. began building uptown diners in Japan in the late 1980s.

The first Silver Diner located in Laurel, Maryland, was built by Mount and Co., another modern company. It is by far the most elaborate plan for a chain style diner and if successful may well pave the way for diners of the future. According to an evaluation in *Forbes*, "at a time when growth is sluggish at fast food chains and expensive restaurants are diving into Chapter 11, the Silver Diner is on the forefront of what looks like a restaurant trend in the making" (Rudnitsky, p. 80-1). Wanting to open a new restaurant but anxious to ensure its success, Robert Giamo took the time to research what worked and what did not work for new restaurant owners across the nation. Eventually he found a restaurant called the Dining Car. He spent weeks there, watching every aspect of the place. His own Silver Diner, when it came to be built, was modeled after the successful parts of all the restaurants he had visited but most closely resembled the Dining Car.

The first Silver Diner, manufactured in New Jersey and shipped to its home in Laurel, cost \$2 million to design, build, and set up but grossed almost \$4 million the first year (Rudnitsky, p. 80). Another Silver Diner soon followed in Rockville, Maryland. Giamo is now hoping to expand further to two more locations, in Baltimore and in Washington D. C, both under the Silver Diner

name. Eventually, he hopes to create a franchise of Silver Diners all over the eastern half of the United States.

One of the important differences in the design of Giamo's diners is the visible kitchen. Although the cooking does not occur directly behind the counter as it did in the early diners, it does not happen behind closed doors. Giamo features full if compact kitchens built into the center of the diners and designed so that all customers would be able to see their food being prepared. In America's very commercialized society, people like to see what is going into their food. This little detail creates in the customers a feeling of trust--a feeling that they are not going to get cheated. Everyone can see that the kitchen is clean and that every dish is homemade and put together on the spot. No freezer to microwave here.

Today's family finds entertainment in going to a place like the Silver Diner--entertainment that can be had without spending a fortune. The stainless steel, the neon and the architectural qualities certainly are a big part of the entertainment because they take people back in time; the kids get to see somewhere they have never been, never will be able to go, and the adults are allowed to "remember when". The simple quality of the homemade food and how the waitresses relate to the customers are also a big part of it. The Silver Diner "has a certain feel about it," says owner Giamo (Festa, p. 147). That certain feel makes a meal at the Silver Diner more intimate, more satisfying than a meal at a fast food restaurant. A family leaves feeling like they have done something special not just grabbed a burger on the run. Yet the

prices are not a great deal higher, with an average cost of \$4 for breakfast, \$6.50 for lunch, and \$8.00 for dinner.

Giarno explains, "this is not a copy of an old diner but rather a translation of the elements and design of the forties rendered in today's materials for today's needs" (Festa, p. 148). The design of the new diners argues his point well. Much of the diner is done in stainless steel, with the addition of colorful baked enamel and a mosaic tile floor, and the grill is reversed so it faces two counters. While the menu is largely traditional, the food definitely has a modern touch. The meatloaf, for example, has a touch of rosemary added to the traditional recipe. The chicken is marinated before being baked and trendy Cajun blackened steaks and blackened tuna sandwiches are available as well. The gigantic clock, six feet high, proclaims in neon that "it's time to dine." People seem to be taking this evolution of the diner right in stride. As Giarno says, "This is what a diner would be like if it knew what we know today" (Festa, p. 148).

The best way to understand what the diner is today is to get to know the people inside. No amount of library research can substitute for the first-hand understanding that comes from sitting at the counter drinking coffee from a heavy porcelain mug or reminiscing over a vintage juke box while enjoying a charbroiled tuna steak. Until I started talking to the people who go to diners on a regular basis, I didn't understand what it was that enabled today's diners to be very different from what they once were and yet still be diners. Until I started going myself, I didn't understand that it's all about a certain feeling--a

feeling when I leave that I have been somewhere and that someday soon I will want to come back. I have found that whatever else a diner is--truckstop, take out joint, cafe, or high class restaurant--it still has this feeling.

It wasn't until I had drank at least a hundred cups of coffee and shared countless stories with Barbara, a regular who comes into Bonnie's Country Diner, in Winslow, Maine, every morning at quarter to eight, that I truly saw the impact that patrons have on the diners they frequent. The economic class, the special interests, particular likes and dislikes, and the successes and failures of every patron influence the atmospheres and menus of individual diners across the nation. At Bonnie's, local issues and family events dominate the conversation. At other diners, art, politics, sports, or economics may be the focus. Regardless, the customers are themselves a vital part of the diner experience. The menu changes at Bonnie's daily to suit the moods or favorite customers. If someone feels like spaghetti, Anna who runs the diner will make it for them. The conversation changes in tone and language at Anna's cue as well, depending on which of her regulars happens to be present.

When I put down my own coffee cup and instead began serving eggs and hash, I saw yet another side of the diner. I found myself pouring tea for Art before he was through the door, advising Willy on how to decorate his new house, and crying when a longtime regular died of cancer. I began to walk on tip-toe--the only way to squeeze between the crowded tables, to recognize who did and

Watergate

did not need a menu, and to take pride in asking regular customers if they wanted "the usual."

I began to see the diner as a continuation of the diner evolution that began over a hundred years ago. As I have learned more and more about the people who go to Bonnie's, the A-1, the Miss Brunswick and several others, I have come to accept that as one expert says "it's no accident that this Depression era jewel in the American cultural crown is being taken out and polished now," and to understand why today's diners look and feel the way they do ("Pilgrims at Temples to Hash p. C6). My own experiences feel like a natural progression of the long diner history I can only read about. Just as it always has, the pulse that gives life to the diners of today comes from the people who eat, drink, laugh, and cry inside their walls.

The overwhelming nostalgia that Americans today have for the late forties and early fifties is perhaps the most visible way in which people have shaped the diner of today. Putting on the black leather jacket, blue jeans, boots, and wearing a hair style similar to the once popular DA makes one suddenly feel tough and sexy. This is the image that characterizes the 1950s for many, including myself, who grew up twenty years later. These are the details, looked upon with nostalgic eyes, that help define the so-called fabulous fifties, the nifty fifties, the good old days. The simplicity of the styles emphasizes that the 1950s were the days before race riots, before John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated. The glorious fifties came before the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the energy crisis. It

was the time of peace, prosperity, rock and roll, 3-D movies, live television, Willy Mays, Mickey Mantle, James Dean, Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and Lucille Ball. From "I like Ike" to the greasers, sock hops, big cars, cheap gasoline, and even the first suburban homes, the late forties and early fifties are perceived by Americans today as a happy place.

"'It's funny,'" says Jack Panaica, "'cause I've seen so many of the young people who are pseudo dressing in the 50s mode and they're looking at it through eyes that never saw it the first time, so its very easy to romanticize it and to wear some of the clothing that they perceive was worn, when in reality the 50s to the people who were living in the 50s are just like the 80s to the people who were living in the 80s" (Hien, p. 33).

Whatever else the fifties may have been, they were an end of something. It was as if the atomic bomb had started the world anew. In the years just after World War II, Americans enjoyed a much deserved time of peace and prosperity and for the time being put aside fears of what atomic power might mean. A whole new set of problems waited in the wings, however, until the celebratory feeling brought on by the return of American troops had diminished. The period when the nation looked purely toward leisure and adventure was relatively short, and by the mid fifties, Americans had begun to dwell on new powers, new world associations, and new fears both in politics and in everyday life. The United States became a victim of doubts engendered by the awesome power of its own new weapon. This was the start of the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to

divide up the world, and whole families learned to look skyward, ever watchful and afraid of what might rain down upon them. Families also learned to look at their neighbors and wonder where they stood on issues such as communism, racial equality, and parity for the sexes.

Just as the fifties brought an end of innocence, however, the eighties brought an end to constant suspicion and fear. That the eighties finally brought an end to the Cold War, to the systematic division of the world, to thirty years of fear that any time the world might be destroyed by nuclear war; that the eighties saw increasing education on minority problems and women's rights; that the eighties saw the generation born in the fifties grow up and have children of their own all suggest why the diner revival began when it did.

Americans in the eighties were once again filled with a desire to enjoy life--the social, political, and even economic outlook was good. However, few informal social gathering places remained in a nation full of planned suburbs and housing developments. Americans of all ages found almost no opportunities to get together with friends from work, especially if the families of two co-workers did not prove compatible. Next door neighbors are seldom a perfect match of personalities and with no place in which to meet the family two blocks down, Americans, even with some of the suspicions relieved, were trapped in a self-made world of isolation.

The diner, in all its present forms, proves a near perfect solution. For the busy executive that wants to stop off for a

drink or a light meal with a co-workers after a long day at the office, the trendy diner nightclubs provide a perfect place. The historic diners bring those interested in vernacular art and architecture together. The chain restaurants act as a place where families can meet but are not forced to concentrate strictly on one another. All of these diners focus on the sound and texture of community, the clink of porcelain or crystal as the case may be, the rustle of newspapers, and most of all, the constant hum of conversation. True, these diners are a long way from the community-based cafes, taverns, and other third places (the first two being home and work) enjoyed by many in European nations, but it is a step back in the right direction for Americans. Diners today serve the ideal, the memory even, of community. There may never again be an absolute reality.

After years of people mistrusting one another, the diner and its friendly patrons seems reminiscent of a time when people cared. According to photographer/writer Christine Gordon, the diner "restores people's faith in humanity" ("Pilgrims at Temples to Hash, p. 6). Reviving the diner is embracing the ideal of community without actually committing to the fact. It is an opportunity to buy everything that was good about the "good ol' days," all for the price of a blue pate special, but without any future obligation. According to Dr. John Levine, professor of psychology at Harvard University, one of the diners most compelling characteristic is its ability to induce "a pleasant dreamlike state, evocative of memories and loss" ("Pilgrims at a Temple to Hash" p. 6). By unlocking the collective memories of

America, today's diners, of all kinds, replicate a feeling of community at the same time they remind us that the communities that they were once part of are a thing of the past.

Having been overwhelmed by the complications of technology at work and at home for years, Americans are ready for something simple. Even the tasks of producing the necessities of life have become almost too easy, even boring, thanks to technological advancement. Automation removed human involvement from both work and play. Not that most people are willing to give up their computers, VCRs, power everything cars. Rather, Americans are ready for an image that allows them to transcend the technological world they live and work in without giving up a thing. The diner is symbolic of an earlier time, of an industrial instead of technological world.

The diner reaffirms the American identity that technology has stolen away. The diner is concrete proof of the industrialism and opportunity that built this nation. The movement of America away from traditional industrialism toward automation and service industries has created a need for this reassurance. Automation has decreased the number of workers in a factory and made work much more regimented. The service professions are booming while industry is declining. Professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and engineers, along with middle class clerks, salesmen, foremen, and small proprietors work longer hours at increasingly stressful jobs in order to achieve higher incomes. No final product marks an end of their day, a job well done. Work is dictated by the consumers who need particular services.

Diners are a leftover from another time, but by reviving the tradition of the diner, by putting the diner in museums, by putting the diner in its mint condition back out on the corner where it used to serve the factory, Americans are remembering who they are. The diner provides a link to our industrial past even as we slip into a post-industrial future. At the same time it caters to the different needs of Americans today. Diners make the most of the leisure time afforded in a dinner out rather than a weekend road trip. They provide a feeling of participation that frequently has been removed from the automated working world. They serve the patron that spends his life serving others.

As the children of the Baby Boom generation grow up and have kids of their own, we see a trend to find a moderately price restaurant with a higher quality of food and a better atmosphere than McDonald's. Just as automatic transmission took the experience of the road out of driving, McDonald's has removed the experience of cooking from eating. Parents are looking for a place that can bring that experience alive for their children. Diners "exemplify many of the best American qualities: free enterprise, entrepreneurship, mobility, our love of gadgets and machines" (Jackson, p. 95). These are some of the very same qualities parents are looking to share with their kids. Diners, especially the new chain diners, truly fit the bill. Diners are, after all, ". . . personal. They're too compact to be otherwise. People listen or talk or yell. They eat, drink, fill the air with their perfume or their sweat. No pretenses. Everyone's on the same

level, workers and eaters. That's what a diner's all about" (Hien p. 27).

Americans are willing to embrace the representation of the fifties found in today's diners. Many have said that the fifties were actually "a dull, placid, and sterile age, a time of materialism, selfishness, conformity, apathy, conservatism, consensus, and security"(Oakely, p. 427). After two decades of reform and idealist zeal, some of these supposedly bland qualities may very well be exactly what a nation that had been dragged through the mud of Vietnam, appalled by race riots, watched presidents and great social leaders shot to death, and accepted the movement of the microchip into the home, needs. Today, "people are looking to the diner, not only for food but as a gauge of the times, America's times and its culture and its mentality" (Hien, p. 27). Diners, and the fifties they embody, are a convenient ruler by which to measure the trends of 1980-90s.

Largely as result of this nostalgia for the fifties, diners have been used as a backdrop for a whole host of movies, television shows, and commercials. Television, even as it has spread advertisements of every fast food chain to the far corners of the globe, has also inundated the American public with the image of what a diner is. Programs such as *Alice* with its famed diner, Mel's, have taught us about the camaraderie that is supposed to exist in a diner. Commercials for Bounty paper towels, the quicker picker upper, are set at Rosie's Diner and convey an image of enduring quality. *I Love Lucy* featured an episode during which Lucy decides to open a diner--what could be more fun than *I Love*

Lucy ? Diners even invaded cartoons, as in one episode of *Popeye*, Olive Oil and Brutus stage a war to sell the most hamburgers and Wimpy seems like the happiest man alive. Even *Happy Days* had it. The restaurant in this popular sit-com was not a diner, but it had the burgers, the Fonz's juke box, some neon signs, and a crew of lovable adolescents.

Films such as *Diner*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, and *The Manhattan Murder Mystery* which use the background of a diner in some important scenes, have further reinforced what we expect from a diner. I never have seen an unhappy ending set in a diner. What we get from these mass media productions are images of neon and stainless steel and Elvis music. These are the things we associate with good friends, good conversations, and good times. Recent commercials for Visa using the highly glamorous Fog City Diner do little to dispel this image. It is not surprising that these images are what we are putting into the diners that we are recreating today. The TV and movie diner is after all the diner most Americans remember best. The TV diner captures the visual image of something our taste buds remember from when we were just little kids.

Added to this is the fact that many of the television programs through which we relived the glory of the past for the last twenty years have gone off the air. *M*A*S*H* is gone. *Happy Days* has disappeared, as well as has *Lavern and Shirley* and many others. If Americans can no longer recall the past in the privacy of their own living rooms, they might just have to get off their couches and get back to the counter again. Television and movies are no

longer arenas of escape. These media displays bring issues to life--the issues we used to turn on the TV to forget. Now going out to dinner at a diner lets us do that. Our senses are soothed, and we remember, if not what we experienced ourselves, then what the media has taught us that our parents probably did, only in a happy way, without issues and unpleasant details. We value the images we have learned for what they represent, as well as for the images we have lost.

Even Americans who were fortunate to have lived during the heyday of the diner have been influenced by the images popular today. People tend to perceive events and places from the past in terms of what they have learned and shared with others. What is learned from the artist, the architect, and the historian exerts a great deal of influence upon even first hand viewers, who fit the specific details offered by such experts into the general framework of their own memories. According to a theory of collective memory put forth by Maurice Halbwachs in his book The Collective Memory, almost every memory comes from the reconstruction of shared data and impressions. Everything we see is somehow effected by who we are with at the time and who we discuss the experience with after. According to Dr. Desiree Rouston, any memory "is really ninety-nine percent reconstruction and one percent true evocation" (Halbwachs, p 35). This is certainly true of how Americans remember diners.

Images seen on television or in movies certainly contribute to this process of reconstructing memories. These images are sufficiently similar to those actually experienced or at least

heard about so that all Americans are able to weave a neat composite picture of what the diner actually was. If the diner visible to America today fits at all into the framework of old memories, then "the converse is also true, for these memories adapt to the mass of present perceptions. It is as if we were comparing the testimony of several witnesses. In spite of discrepancies, they agree on the essentials that permit us to reconstruct a body of remembrances that we recognize" (Halbwachs, p. 22). Television and film may not present a diner that is true on all the details but they don't need to. By keeping a basic image alive, Americans wallow in the details of the diner currently most available to them.

The diner of the 1990s is actually a collection of every diner that lives in the memory of all those who have had input into its construction. It is a composite picture that varies according to the interests of both the owners and the customers, hence the three distinct trends within the diner revival of today. For many of the middle generation of 1990s, the diner bears a resemblance to the earliest memories of childhood. Americans whose earliest years happened during the diner decline of the sixties and seventies, may well not have ever seen a diner in the full glory of its heyday. Like early childhood memories however, one can base his memory of a diner upon the stories of an earlier generation. The learned concept of the diner becomes ingrained to the point that it seems that it is actually remembered. The image presented by television and film adds to this and gives this American collective memory something to feed on.

That the diner has always been an accessible place to all people is to a great degree why diners have evolved in different directions. People from all walks of life have a diner in their background somewhere and have translated that image to meet their current needs. The needs of many different people are not easily met by one type of diner, so America has many. People, no matter who they are, have to be relaxed in a diner. They have to have fun. Diners are, above all, places to escape the stress of everyday life. An evening at the diner is a snapshot vacation for the busy executive who can't afford, not so much the money as the time to get away; is a priceless artifact to the popular culture historian; is a neat way to maximize the food and entertainment value for a middle-class family.

Diners pack every moment with entertainment because they bombard the senses with something far away from the working world: the past. The eye sees the neon, the ear hears the blare of the juke box, the hand caresses the vintage sugar dispenser, the chit-chat recalls "when I was a kid." Only the taste buds as they slide smoothly over a bite of Caribbean grilled orange roughly with kiwi pineapple salsa know that, in some cases, the diner has changed for good. For the elite crowd, the image of the diner with its working class-connection removes the weight of social position while the the correct choice of which diner to go to on which night adds consequence to it. The diner elevates the average family in that it gives them a public place to call their own.

The secret then that unites the three trends in the diner revival, be it the historically accurate, the trendy night clubs,

or the franchised chains lies in the ability to become a destination spot for its target consumer group. This is why diner owners have started serving more glamorous food, have tried to sell the idea of neon as art, have devoted months to stripping layers of paint from original baked enamel finishes, have researched all over the nation to find out just what sells. Diners can no longer turn a profit as just another business along the side of the road. They must become the end of the road. They must distinguish themselves to the point that customers will leave their homes already having decided to head for the diner. The American taste buds have been awakened. Home cooked traditional food with a regional twist is now a draw. We like to taste other cultures even while living firmly in our own. Show off the neon, glorify the stainless steel, find a vintage juke box, remove the faux bricks and bamboo shades, hire an actress to snap her gum and act the part of a sassy waitress, and serve, both in the form of steamed cheeseburgers and in the form of trendy gourmet dishes, something people can get nowhere else.

Another reason that diners have come back in the way that they have is that the American concept of leisure time is changing. Only in the 1950s did America see a shortening of the work week that resulted in more leisure time. Since then, wives have gone to work and no one is at home to do the shopping, the laundry, the cooking, and the housework. All of these activities cut into the free time that the shorter work week gave us. Fast food was once a convenient treat but, as more and more of these chores got pushed over into America's free time, it has now become a way of life.

The average consumer has less time and less money to go out to dinner at a "real" restaurant and to see a movie or engage in some other form of relaxing entertainment.

Yet, Americans have always wanted to be amused. Entertainment comes first. The first priority for many is to minimize the time spent on chores by buying convenience items. These items frequently cost more and thereby limit the amount of money available for leisure activity in the time saved. It is a vicious cycle that for years culminated in a stop by McDonald's for a cheap, quick burger. Then zoom off to a movie or out to a bar.

Even Ronald McDonald himself would get a little sick of cheeseburgers every night. Pizza and take out Chinese food get equally as tiring. Faced with empty refrigerators and no time to cook, Americans are turning back to the diner for a home-cooked meal at a reasonable price, with quick service. Diners, when restored correctly, also have the advantage of packing entertainment into the dining experience itself. It's a two-for-one shot. Going out to dinner at a diner is an escape. It is a mini vacation back to a time when supposedly life wasn't such a rat race. There is no laundry to pick up at the cleaners, no vacuuming to do at midnight. Mrs. Cleaver would have finished all of the chores hours before.

A diner is now, as it has always been, a restful spot. It is a restful spot that is currently branching out into chains to capitalize on this same sentiment all over the nation. It focuses on the caricature like qualities that people recognize in a diner. People are willing to pay a little more, not much more, but a

little more, to get away from McDonald's. These restaurants have been built with old memories but with new conveniences and some new menus.

Finally, with health food on the march, I have to ask--where else can you eat a big bleeding hamburger with lots of cheese and french fries and a chocolate milk shake made with real chocolate and unadulterated ice cream, fat and all, except in a diner? How else can we justify eating what our taste buds really crave? Diners are the only safe spots our hardening arteries and thickening waistlines have left. The health critics have attacked the Big Mac but they cannot prevent us from eating a memory. They cannot prevent the visitor to a new city from sneaking away from the well organized amusement centers to enjoy some real fried eggs--yolks and all--bacon--no turkey please--toast--with all the butter it will hold--and home fries--glorious greasy home fries dripping in ketchup--in a small diner where the true flavor and tempo of the city comes shining through.

This is what the diner in all its evolutionary forms represents to me and I think to many diner patrons all across America. It is a feeling and a flavor--a flavor of home cooked food and a flavor of people past and present. So if you really want to understand what American diners are all about, go visit one. While you're there, have a cup of coffee and absorb the subtle nuances of the world around you. But please, please, please, don't choose the decaf. It's un-American!

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