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PREVIEW

**SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY**

**THE RISE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN DINER**

**1920 – 1960**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO**

**THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES**

**IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**BY**

**DANIEL R. VIVEIROS**

**NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND**

**May, 2000**

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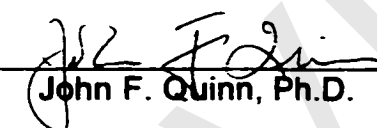
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# **SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY**

## **GRADUATE SCHOOL**

The dissertation of Daniel R. Viveiros entitled "The Rise and Fall of the American Diner: 1920-1960" submitted to the Ph.D. Department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the Committee:

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## **To Mom**

**This dissertation is dedicated to you with love and gratitude. The faith, encouragement, generosity and pride you have shown provided me with the fortitude to continue my education and earn this degree. Thanks for all you have sacrificed for me.**

PREVIEW

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This dissertation will demonstrate that changing technology and culture played an important role in the rise and fall of the American diner. The lunch wagon that evolved into the diner was created to fill a void in late-night dining during the American Industrial Revolution. The expanding industrial base of New England created fertile ground for the birth of a new food-service industry.**

**The primary research methods employed in the study consisted of historical examinations, site visitations and interviews. Diners throughout the Northeast were visited as a mechanism for verifying historical data concerning construction techniques and materials. Interviews were conducted to investigate the reasons customers patronized diners.**

**The principal findings indicate that technology wielded a double-edged sword. It was used to transform the horse-drawn lunch wagon into the modern diner. State-of-the-art construction techniques and materials were liberally used to enhance the efficiency of the diner, while making the eatery more physically attractive to its patrons.**

**Technology had a negative influence on the diner also. As the fast-food concept spread across the country, diner operators were unable to meet the challenges that confronted them. Technological advances also affected the eating behavior and service expectation of society in general. These factors led to the decline of diners in the 1960s. Preservationists have embarked on a campaign to save this American icon by placing several diners on the National Register. This dissertation will elaborate on these and other topics.**



## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Diner Defined.....	3
The Early Lunch Wagon .....	6
The Lunch Wagon Industry.....	7
The Influence of Technology.....	9
Social Influence of the Diner.....	13
Preservation.....	16
Methodology .....	17
Major Thesis .....	18
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	19
Books.....	19
Articles.....	24
3. FOOD AND DRINK IN AMERICA .....	30
Social Aspects of Eating .....	38
4. FROM LUNCH WAGONS TO DINERS: 1872 – 1920.....	43
Founding Father of the Modern Diner – Walter Scott .....	43
The Lunch Wagon King – Thomas H. Buckley .....	49
The Temperance Movement and Lunch Wagons .....	55
Patrick J. Tierney .....	63

Jerry O'Mahony .....	67
The Mills Provide Hungry Workers for Lunch Wagons.....	71
Characteristics of Diner Operators and Employees .....	75
Diner Patrons.....	79
The Diner Menu .....	82
<b>5. THE DINER'S GLORY DAYS: 1920 – 1950s.....</b>	<b>86</b>
Diner Management .....	106
A Sign of the Times: <i>Ladies Invited</i> .....	121
Transportation of Diners .....	123
Sanitation Technology .....	128
The Age of the Classic Diner .....	130
<b>6. THE DINER'S DECLINE: 1960 – 1970s.....</b>	<b>144</b>
The Fast-Food Influence.....	145
Changing Times .....	164
<b>7. EXAMINATION OF THE WORCESTER LUNCH CAR     COMPANY .....</b>	<b>167</b>
Historical Background .....	167
Construction Materials and Methods.....	170
The Streamline Diner .....	180
Wilfred Bernard.....	181
Cecile Krantz .....	184
The End of a Worcester Landmark .....	188

<b>8. FROM EYESORE TO LANDMARK.....</b>	<b>190</b>
City Ordinances and Urban Renewal Banish Lunch Wagons .....	190
Diner Preservation .....	200
The Allure of the Diner .....	215
<b>9. CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>220</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	
<b>1. DINER MANUFACTURERS.....</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>2. DINER PHOTOS .....</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>SOURCES CONSULTED.....</b>	<b>241</b>

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**This study will examine the social influence of a unique American institution – the diner. While other countries had long established small restaurants and portable food carts, the diner with its characteristic appearance, menu, and clientele was to become a common feature of both small-town and big-city American life.**

**Diners have had a particular impact on the eating habits of many Americans. Because of their convenient locations, long opening hours, and simple fare, they became the regular meeting place for busy citizens. They developed a social atmosphere such as was found in eighteenth-century English coffeehouses. Unlike barrooms or other drinking establishments, diners attracted all classes and types of people who were equally in search of quick nourishment. It was to become one of the most democratic gathering centers in the country.**

**Diners were a significant social force among blue-collar workers during the turn of the twentieth century. From its humble beginnings with horse-drawn wagons, the diner served the culinary convenience of society at large as well as the special appetite of the factory worker. Since the lunch wagon and later the diner originated in the Northeast, the focus of the study will be an historical overview of the diner in this region.**

**Diners could be easily recognized by their general shape and integral construction that resembled a railroad dining car. Factory-built diners were**

constructed to be moved from location to location. This mobility allowed the owner to comply with local building ordinances and serve the local populace. Diners could be moved to better locations, replaced by more modern designs, or simply sold to other aspiring entrepreneurs. This mobility has made it difficult to trace the history of some individual diners. Today, formerly famous diners like *Eddie's Diner*, the last one in Quincy, Massachusetts, sit abandoned in remote sites waiting to be rediscovered and restored to service.

Both the interiors and exteriors of other diners have been refurbished. This transformation has further complicated the search for surviving diners because of their numerous disguises. Alternate uses have been found for some diners. They have been converted into storage containers, barber shops, antique shops, ice-cream parlors, concession stands, ticket booths and cocktail lounges. Recently some diners have been sold and shipped abroad to England, Germany, Japan, and Spain.

The American diner was a significant cultural force among blue-collar workers during the early twentieth century. Coinciding with the United States Industrial Revolution of the mid-nineteenth century, the lunch wagon enterprise prospered as it catered not only to the culinary needs of the industrial worker but also to his appetite for conversation. The lunch wagon and eventually the diner became the archetypal workingman's meeting place. Factory workers were receptive to the hot, nourishing, reasonably priced meals, and in many ways it became a second home where friends and strangers dined together. The lunch

wagon pioneers were not cognizant of the social significance that their business enterprise was about to engender.

The diner represents, then, a vanishing American artifact that should be documented for future generations. This documentation will preserve a piece of history that is uniquely American. According to the American Diner Museum about 6,000 diners have been manufactured. Today the surviving diners number approximately 2,000. Diners are presently being demolished in the name of technological progress. Like the drive-in theater and the local amusement park, the diner is on the *endangered* list of American roadside architecture. This research will provide insights into this disappearing institution.

### **Diner Defined**

Prior to the invention of the lunch wagon people did have the option of dining outside their homes. Public dining rooms were not an invention of the United States. As with many technological innovations the restaurant concept was borrowed and adapted from a foreign culture. The public dining room that came ultimately to be known as the restaurant originated in France. The first restaurant proprietor is believed to have been a soup vendor who opened his business in Paris in 1765. The term *restaurant* came from the restoratives served – soups and broths. Inns and hostelries often served guests meals; however, this Paris restaurant was probably the first public place where any patron might order a meal from a menu offering a choice of entrees.

Other food and drink establishments contributed to the evolution of the restaurant. The coffee shop originated in Venice, Italy during the sixteenth

century. Only coffee was served at first, then snacks were added to the fare. The first café is said to have opened in 1550 in Constantinople. The English term *café* derives ultimately from the Turkish *kahve*, meaning coffee. One of America's oldest inns, *The White Horse Tavern*, was originally constructed as the two-room, two-story residence of Francis Brinley of Newport, Rhode Island. The house was sold and converted into a tavern in 1673. The cafeteria, an American contribution to the restaurant's evolution, originated in San Francisco during the 1849 gold rush. Featuring self-service, it offered a wide variety of foods displayed on counters for selection. The principle of seeing and selecting one's food became popular accounting for the expansion of the cafeteria concept.

Railroad companies promoted speed and efficiency. People on the move had to eat on the move. A more refined form of dining was established to satisfy the needs of a diverse public. George Mortimer Pullman designed the first modern railroad sleeping car and later the dining car, serving full-course meals to long-distance railroad travelers. Both the dining car and riverboat dining were original American conceptions.

One person's diner is another person's restaurant. The term *diner* is frequently used to describe a variety of eating establishments ranging from small family owned and operated restaurants to chain eateries. Some insist that in order for an eatery to qualify as a diner, it must be a prefabricated structure that incorporates the judicious use of stainless steel, inside and outside. Others assign diner status based on the menu and reasonable prices. If it doesn't serve breakfast twenty-four hours a day, it can't be called a diner according to some.

*Webster's Dictionary* defines a diner as "a railroad dining car; a restaurant built like such a car" (*Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 1992 ed., s.v. "Diner"). To the aficionado, however, a diner has a precise meaning. The term *diner* as used in this study approximates the definition by the American Diner Museum: "Technically, a diner is a prefabricated structure, built in a factory and transported to its site for installation. The interior includes food service at a counter with stools and more often than not, booth seating" (Zilka and Thomas 1999, 1).

Another distinguishing feature of the diner is the placement of the cooking area. Older diners located their grilling area within sight of the customers seated at a counter. This strategic location fostered interaction between the cook/owner and the patrons. The distinctive shape of diners distinguished them from other restaurants. They resembled railroad dining cars in shape, and some even imitated the streamline design of trains built since the nineteen thirties.

Distinctions exist between diners and other eateries. The original lunch wagon was very small compared to the diner, and it was built to be mobile. The diner was constructed to be moved from the factory to a permanent site, and only occasionally relocated in response to changing demographics or zoning restrictions. The coffee shop and hamburger joint catered to a clientele seeking specific limited food items. The diner provided an expanded menu selection that could include coffee and hamburgers. The diner provided a homespun dining environment not supplied by other eateries.



Essential qualities of a diner still include indoor seating at stools facing a counter and separate dining tables. Long opening hours are the norm, usually twenty-four hours, or open at least for three meals – breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Regular patrons stop in frequently for nourishment and conversation. Menus contain simple fare supplemented by the daily special or regional cuisine. As a convenience to customers and in response to changing demographics, diners are usually located in urban neighborhoods adjacent to the business district. Ownership is generally in the form of a sole proprietorship or family business, and is customarily limited to a single unit that is nonunionized.

### **The Early Lunch Wagon**

The emergence of our modern-day diner can be traced to the invention of the lunch wagon. As the predecessor to the diner, the lunch wagon had traditionally filled a provender vacuum in towns and cities. In the late nineteenth century small restaurants routinely closed for business by 8:00 p.m. Late night workers and travelers looking for a meal were often thwarted, and forced to bring their own food or wait to eat until they returned home. In one New England city a local businessman recognized the need for a convenient supply of late night meals, and he decided to try his entrepreneurial talent by creating the first lunch wagon. In 1872 Walter Scott used a converted horse-drawn wagon, and set out to feed the working populace and passersby in the center of Providence, Rhode Island. He parked his lunch wagon downtown in front of the largest newspaper building, and in doing so he was the first person in the United States to initiate a food-service industry that survives to the present.

The lunch-wagon concept had certain advantages. The mobile food dispenser could go in search of customers and required no expensive land site for its transitory business. The wagon was small and easily maneuvered requiring little space and effort to set up shop. Patrons did not enter the wagon because there were no seats or counter. They were served food from a window on the side of the wagon. This fast and efficient method of food delivery was the forerunner of the modern *take out* window. The success of Scott and other early pioneers inspired a host of entrepreneurs to launch similar businesses. Some began to establish chains of lunch wagons by hiring managers to operate them.

The compactness of the lunch wagon and the lack of refrigeration affected the food selection offered to patrons. The typical lunch-wagon menu was limited, but it featured such popular and affordable items as coffee, sandwiches, soup, and slices of pie. Some early lunch wagons were also known as *dog carts* because they specialized in hot dogs.

### **The Lunch Wagon Industry**

The success of the first lunch wagon led to the construction by several manufacturers of special wagons designed specifically for food service. This study will focus on one of these major manufacturers in Massachusetts – The Worcester Lunch Car and Carriage Manufacturing Company. Entrepreneurs in nearby communities tried to imitate the success of lunch wagons by constructing their own, but the largest number of early manufacturers were located in Worcester. Numerous local mills provided lunch wagon operators with eager employees in search of hot meals during their lunch breaks. Eventually,

Massachusetts became a center for the manufacture of lunch wagons, and it would subsequently concentrate on building diners. By the early nineteen hundreds, thirteen diner manufacturers were constructing diners in Massachusetts.

By the start of the twentieth century lunch wagons began to expand in width and length as they became more complex. New marketing ideas were instituted to increase business. To attract more customers lunch wagons expanded their menu selection while catering to their ethnic sphere. The *Blue Plate Special* was an elaborate set meal that attracted hungry patrons. Daily specials were rotated to offer the customer a reason to visit routinely. Diners became more consumer friendly and booths were eventually added to attract female customers. Eventually females were hired as servers to introduce a homey, domestic atmosphere to the dining experience.

By 1913 municipal governments started to regulate this expanding enterprise. Lunch wagon owners were now required to obtain permits to operate, and they were often accused of staying open into the early morning hours in violation of the law. Some acrimonious citizens voiced their opposition to these eyesores on city streets. Creative entrepreneurs, however, discovered a way to circumvent the legal restrictions. They simply located a bustling off-road site to purchase or lease and set up their wagons permanently. This fixed location was the harbinger of things to come – the stationary diner as recognized today.

## **The Influence of Technology**

As with other realms of modern life, the food industry has been changed by science. Modern restaurants are the beneficiaries of improved technologies in food delivery systems, and innovative uses of new building materials that were first utilized by horse-drawn food wagons. The technologies of modular design and rail transport were applied as diners grew in size. Stainless steel, mahogany wood trim, porcelain panels, and Formica laminate were used extensively in the manufacturing of modern diners. Eventually other innovations such as basements, separate kitchen areas, refrigeration, air conditioning and neon signage were added.

Technology can be characterized in diverse ways. *Webster's Dictionary* defined *technology* as the sum of the ways in which a social group provides itself with the material objects of its civilization (*Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 1992 ed., s.v. "Technology"). Numerous scholars have characterized technology in various ways depending on the author's locus. Larry A. Hickman noted that technology "has come to have so many meanings that those who speak and write about 'it' often seem to have no common vocabulary" (Hickman 1990, 1). Robert E. McGinn treats technology as a form of human activity, and characterizes it as fabricative, material product-making, purposive, knowledge-based, resource-employing, methodical, embedded in a sociocultural-environment influence field, and informed by its practitioners' mental sets (Hickman 1990, 11-18). Langdon Winner argues that technology consists of *apparatus* (objects), *technique* (skills, procedures, routines), *organizations*

(factories, workshops, bureaucracies) and *network* (large-scale systems that combine people and apparatus linked across great distances) (Winner 1977, 11-12). Jacques Ellul defines the term *technique* as the “totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity (Ellul 1964, xxv). Lynn White Jr. defines technology broadly as the “systematic modification of the physical environment for human ends” (Hickman 1990, 274). Carl Mitcham suggests a definition that stresses four aspects of technology: knowledge, volition, activity, and products (Mitcham 1994, 160). Because the word *technology* encompasses so much, plural definitions could be applied to a discussion of the term. This study uses John Kenneth Galbraith's sociological definition of technology: “the systematic application of scientific or other organized knowledge to practical tasks” (Galbraith 1985, 11). According to Galbraith's definition technology is the most pervasive and dominating feature of modern society.

The diner was not only constructed off site, but was totally equipped and ready for immediate use – a true turnkey operation. Additionally, the diner has the distinction of being a prefabricated structure. When the diner reached its location, it included all cooking and storage facilities; all kitchen equipment, dinnerware, and utensils needed to begin operations. The diner was the original *Complete Building System*.

Diners through the years reflected the technological advances of their day. When materials like stainless steel, Naugahyde, and Formica became available

and affordable, diner manufacturers quickly found uses for them. The present *classic* diner was actually *state-of-the-art* in its time.

The original lunch wagons were fabricated of wood both inside and outside, but during the 1920s the factory-constructed diner's exterior was covered with decorated porcelain enamel sheets. When stainless steel became popular in the 1930s, diner designers made full use of this attractive metal on both interior and exterior surfaces. Stainless steel diners were both sturdy and easy to maintain. Steel was also more malleable than wood. This new flexibility allowed manufacturers to experiment with new shapes and designs. Diners also employed glass blocks, ceramic tile floors and Formica laminate as construction material. When these diners grew too large to be moved intact to their site, modular construction was developed to transport the larger diners via railroad flat cars. Modular design also aided in relocation if a new site was required because of changing demographics, urban renewal, or increasing real estate rent.

Efficiency was also applied to the inside of the diner. The interior layout of the new diner was carefully planned to adapt to limited space. To expedite the delivery of food, diner manufacturers placed the cooking facilities directly behind the counter. This strategic placement allowed a cook to serve the customers seated at the counter while supervising the entire food service operation. Few wait staff requirements reduced overhead costs. The menu was displayed on signboards over the grill area. They could be changed daily to keep current with rotating foodstuffs and local customer preferences. These innovations contributed to operational efficiency and profitability.

Technology had both a positive and negative influence on the diner.

Edward Tenner wrote in *Why Things Bite Back* that our cleverness can work against us. We face the unintended consequences of our technology. He called them the *revenge effects*. Neil Postman defines *technopoly* as the submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technology. Technology helped create the diner, but advancing technology also threatened it. The concept of fast food was introduced at the 1939 New York World's Fair. The *White Mana* restaurant was a round, white-tiled hamburger stand built as the nation's first fast-food eatery. The round shape was designed so the cook/server would not have to walk more than a few steps in any direction to cook a hamburger, draw a soda, and serve a customer. The *White Mana* was appropriately located near the Town of Tomorrow at the fair.

Soon after the introduction of the *White Mana*, Richard and Maurice McDonald introduced their own brand of fast food in 1948 in San Bernardino, California. The first *McDonald's* offered a minimum in service and menu. The restaurant was self-service with a limited selection of food and beverage. It became the assembly line prototype for legions of fast-food units that later would expand across the country. From this first establishment the McDonald brothers sold fifteen-cent hamburgers and ten-cent French fries by the bag. Fast food and take-out service would prove formidable obstacles for diner owners to overcome.

Other technologies such as frozen food and the microwave oven were integrated into fast-food chain operations. Diners also added these features in an effort to compete. Technology was promoted as a godsend; however, it was

not a panacea. Diners had one major advantage over fast-food eateries that technology could not master – comradeship among patrons. Fast-food chains operated in an impersonal atmosphere and lacked the food freshness provided by diners. Technology turned customers into numbers, and diner owners sought to capitalize on this negative consequence of technology.

### **Social Influence of the Diner**

Diners played an important cultural role in society. They served as places to sustain the body by providing simple, nourishing, economical food. Additionally they served as places to feed the soul through conversation, comradeship, and the convergence of social classes. As noted earlier, visiting a diner could be like going to a friend's house for dinner. The atmosphere tends to be warm and friendly, and the food is fresh and plentiful. It is a place that welcomes the visitor. The impact of the diner on the social life and comradeship of ordinary citizens and especially of blue-collar workers was significant. What began as a solution to the factory workers' culinary needs was soon perceived as indispensable for a mobile society.

The fast pace of modern life accompanied by the depersonalization of society has benefited the diner business in general. Some members of society are searching for diners to patronize because they provide more personal service and fresh home-cooked meals than chain establishments. Many diners are experiencing increasing numbers of patrons. This boom is illustrated by long waiting lines at numerous diners. The public's desire for diners has been rekindled perhaps as a response to our modern, impersonal, technological