

Seen any good diners lately?

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By Brian A. Butko



FOR better or worse, diners are “in.” Once the bane of planning commissions and town beautification programs, many diners are being restored to satisfy an upwardly mobile clientele’s taste for nostalgia. In less trendy cities and towns, diner owners continue to serve the local “regulars.” But everywhere, it seems, they’re being researched and romanticized as pop culture artifacts. Books and articles featuring splashy color photos and catchy phrases celebrate what are simply restaurants. We love them...but it’s hard to say why.¹

There is disagreement about what a diner is. Although the label “diner” can be applied to any small eatery, there is actually an industry that makes prefabricated diners. Many people think diners are

simply old railroad or trolley cars, but the real thing is specifically made as a restaurant and shipped to its site, complete with counters and stools. Diner shapes have reflected contemporary trends in the larger society, resembling train cars in the early years and evolving by the late 1950s to look like space stations. The decorative materials used during the diner’s golden age, from the 1920s to the 1960s, also evolved, from porcelain, mahogany and marble to chrome, stainless steel and Formica.

After years of prosperity, many diners gave way to fast food restaurants where a similar investment could produce a lot more money. But a chain restaurant lacks heart — it has little personality other than the most recent ad campaign. Perhaps the democratizing influence of the diner counter, where truck driver sits next to grey-suited businessman who sits next to spikey-haired punkers, is part of the secret to our love of them. Perhaps it’s the

Brian A. Butko is Editorial Assistant at *Pittsburgh History*.
Above: The 1950s at the Club Car Diner, McKeesport, Pa.

burnished metal or speckled terrazzo floors — natural materials that are somehow twisted, made surreal, with the seeming intention to dazzle and impress us. Or maybe it's just the friendly atmosphere, where you can sit and enjoy a warm mug of coffee, a high stack of pancakes, or a big slice of pie, all to the tune of lively conversation and a sizzling grill. Whatever the reasons, a diner is often a place where we feel at home, among friends, even among strangers. And though many corner cafes have a similar hominess, each diner has its own personality while offering the familiarity of resembling one another.

Unfortunately, diners, like neighborhood bars, have often been seen as eyesores in the community. In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg examines the role of informal gathering places in society. Oldenburg sees such spots as the lifeblood of a community promoting individual and societal well-being. He notes that recently, "American planners and developers have shown a great disdain for those earlier arrangements in which there was life beyond home and work...." Few modern counterparts remain for the "once-familiar gathering places. The grist mill or grain elevator, soda fountain, malt shops, candy stores, and cigar stores — places that did not reduce a human being to a mere customer, have not been replaced."² Diners surely fit that description.

Western Pennsylvania has seen a great many diners, though not nearly as many as New Jersey and the East coast, where most were, and continue to be, manufactured. I've spent the past year searching for area diners, from Johnstown to Erie, and over the border into Ohio.³ At one time, nearly every medium size town had a diner, but many have vanished or were remodeled beyond recognition. I found a few diners still doing good business, some in downtown areas, others skimming customers from the highways. But the modern dictates for speed and profit make the future of nearly everything with individual flavor seem uncertain today. Without more customers, these places will disappear.

After realizing that a diner is a restaurant made in a factory and shipped to its site, someone might ask, "Why do they do that?" The history of diners is rich in fact and legend, and a closer look will show why diner lore has become part of the diner's lure.

The earliest ancestors of diners were horse



The original Dean's Diner, opened in 1927 in Indiana, Pa., suggests a hybrid of the earlier mobile lunch wagon and the railroad car look popular by the 1920s. Appeals for female customers were popular, too: note "Ladies? Yes" on the diner's side.

drawn wagons in which the proprietor made the food and served it to customers over a counter. Walter Scott was appar-

ently the first in America; in 1872, he began selling sandwiches, eggs, chicken, and pies to the insomniacs of Providence, Rhode Island.⁴ Industrialization brought more people out on the streets at night and also created an urban middle class that needed affordable places to eat. Because most restaurants in Providence closed at 8 p.m., Scott loaded his converted express wagon with food every night and parked on the street until 2 a.m. He continued to serve customers for the next 45 years until competition, especially those wagons offering free onions, ketchup, and mustard, proved too much.

Another Providence man, Samuel Jones, has also been called the inventor of the modern lunch wagon, for he was the first to realize the advantage of bringing the customers inside the wagon.⁵ He began by selling lunch through his wagon window to mill workers in 1884, much like other vendors that had sprung up. He soon moved to Worcester, Massachusetts, perhaps to escape the competition. While experimenting with his lunch wagon setup, he realized, as one observer noted, that the cold and rain discouraged business, so "he closed the window, cut in a door, and put up a small counter with stools so his customers could come in out of the cold."⁶ Business thrived, according to other accounts, and Jones enjoyed a monopoly until another Worcester man, Charlie Palmer, "bought an identical wagon. When Sam Jones would quit for the day, Palmer would take over, clop-clopping through the night until Jones' equipage appeared on the streets again in the morning. Palmer's outfit had a name painted on it, 'The Night Owl,' and his menu included one item: hot dogs. We still call them, in some parts of the country, 'Owl Cars' and 'Dog Wagons.'"⁷

Jones's success lead him to open other wagons, but in October 1889 he sold them all to Palmer.⁸ Two years later, Palmer received the first patent for a lunch wagon, though his design differed little from what others were already manufacturing. His basic enclosed wagon included the stools and kitchen equipment, and had two small front wheels and a narrow back end to accommodate the larger

rear wheels necessary for the typical muddy streets of the late nineteenth century. With the kitchen in the back, food could be served out the side window to the curb or the street-side window for drive-up carriages, and across the counter to people on stools in the front of the wagon. He also made fancier wagons with elaborate paint jobs and stained glass windows.⁹

The first large-scale manufacturing operation was started by Thomas Buckley in Worcester. His most famous series of lunch wagons, called White House Cafes, sported white bodies with gold scrolls and were embellished with elaborate murals and etched, tinted windows.¹⁰ His company also sold supplies for the wagons such as dishes and wagon jacks. By the turn of the century, many hundreds of the company's wagons had been sold.¹¹ Their best customer was the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who bought the lunch wagons in hopes of luring away customers from the saloons that offered free lunches.¹²

The move away from formal dining also gave rise to "quick lunch" restaurants, where the emphasis was on customer turnover. The atmosphere of lunch wagons differed from those spots because, though never promoting loitering, wagons had an atmosphere that encouraged customer interaction. One author in the 1920s noted that a patron would find "formality ceased when he had pushed back the sliding door, sidled up to a stool and given his order. The lunch wagons were redolent with the atmosphere of good fellowship."¹³ The counterman, meanwhile, "acted as Chairman, kept order and saw, on the one hand, that the proprieties of debate were not disregarded and, on the other, that conversation did not languish for lack of suitable suggestion or incitement."¹⁴ Equally attractive was the fact that lunch wagons "reduced culinary mysteries to a minimum,"¹⁵ for a customer could watch his food being prepared.

Around the turn of the century, two developments transformed the lunch wagon business into the diner business we are familiar with today. City licensing rules restricted owners from operating 24 hours a day, and the constantly mobile business also wore out the horses and wagons. Owners began to pick permanent off-street spots, and the long, thin structure could be placed on small and odd plots, where rents were low. Lunch wagon owners could now improve their structure and their plot, yet the wagon could still be moved if business fell off. No longer navigating muddy streets,

wagons didn't need large rear wheels, and being less mobile, wagons could be made larger. The counter was repositioned lengthwise to accommodate a larger kitchen and more stools, while more elaborate interiors featured marble counters, tiled walls and floors, and skylights.¹⁶

The other development came because cities began discarding horse-drawn trolleys for new electric ones. A trolley car could be bought for \$15 to \$25, its wheels removed, and converted into a make-shift lunch wagon.¹⁷ Dilapidated trolley cars would leave a long-lasting stigma on the diner business. A 1922 *New York Times Magazine* quoted a bank clerk declaring, "Now, there's my mother. She's old-fashioned, you know. When I told her I ate in a lunch wagon she nearly had a fit.... 'Why mother,' I told her, 'the butter and eggs in that wagon — you can't get 'em any better anywhere.'" Mom wasn't convinced: "It's degrading!"¹⁸

It was Patrick J. Tierney's innovations that rescued lunch wagons from their bad reputation. He began manufacturing quality wagons in 1905 in New Rochelle, New York, and was the first to sell them on credit. He was also the first to bring the toilet indoors — a welcome improvement.¹⁹ Soon after, the Worcester Lunch Car Company and the Jerry O'Mahony Company of Bayonne, New Jersey, also opened for business. O'Mahony sold lunch wagons for \$300 a piece when he started in 1913.²⁰

The changing work and social structure of urban America continued to affect the diner business. By the early twentieth century, women were becoming more socially and politically active as they entered the workforce in larger numbers. Once the sole turf of men, lunch cars of the 1920s began soliciting women customers by incorporating booths and high back stools, and even by painting appeals on the outsides of diners. This also led to a change in design from that resembling a wagon to that of a railroad dining car. The trend seems somewhat odd, considering the bad reputation of similarly styled trolley-lunches, but the change most likely was done to capitalize on the mystique of rail travel, the dominant long-distance travel mode of the day. Most noticeably, lunch wagons adopted

monitor roofs, a raised center portion running lengthwise with a strip of small ventilation windows that were common in railroad cars. Lunch wagons also adopted the dining car



Scotty's Diner, formerly at Penn Avenue and 15th Street in Pittsburgh, was typical of look-alike models offered by diner manufacturers in the 1920s. Skylights were forerunners of the railroad-type ventilation windows.

name, and eventually were called just diners.

Established as the moderately priced restaurants of choice in an increasingly mobile society, most diners managed to prosper and the industry grew during the Depression.²¹ A 1932 magazine article estimated that 4,000 diners were in business.²² But not all communities welcomed them. For example, the citizens of Scarsdale, New York, were outraged over a bright yellow railroad car-style diner being placed amid their English-style houses.²³ But by 1937, an estimated 6,000 diners — their size ranged from 10 to 80 seats — were feeding some 2 million customers daily, approximately 25 percent of those being women and children.²⁴

While the number of diners was increasing dramatically, so were their prices. In 1937, top-of-the-line diners cost about \$30,000.²⁵ By 1941, just before production stopped for the war, top diner prices were edging toward \$60,000, with an average price of \$15,000.²⁶ Although old diners could be traded in or reconditioned, the cost of full-size diners prompted some diner manufacturers and independent contractors to begin manufacturing “dinettes” in the 1930s and ’40s. (These were scaled-down versions of the big diners that catered mainly to the short-order trade.) Construction was expensive because diners were hand-built by craftsmen, with nothing precast or stamped. The rising cost of diners was also partly due to their ever-increasing size, and partly because of new materials being used. Glass block, chrome, stainless steel, neon, and Formica transformed diners from the old railroad look to a shiny Art Deco/streamlined appearance. Air conditioning, indirect lighting, and giant menus were also employed to attract a wider clientele. Diners were becoming more like full-scale restaurants and less like lunch counters. The grill was even moved behind the kitchen doors.

By 1948, diner prices were reaching \$80,000 with an average at \$36,000,²⁷ but demand remained high because of the stop in production during the war. In addition, the post-war automobile-building and -buying boom was transforming America at a rapid pace, placing even more emphasis on businesses dependent on the car for customers. Diners were not only lucrative: they were assessed as “personal property,” at tax rates lower than permanent restaurants;²⁸ little experience was required to open one; and the diner manufacturers would carry the loans. Typically, diner builders required one-third cash down, with the rest payable in three years at 6 percent interest.²⁹ This included only the diner and its basic equipment; transporting the diner, buying or leasing land, building a foundation and kitchen, hooking up the utilities, hiring a staff and buying supplies all cost extra.

By the late 1940s, Art Deco styles looked dated. In diner design, the streamlined railroad car look was abandoned for a more angular look. Flat roofs replaced the monitor ones, corners were squared-off, and glass block gave way to large windows. The late 1950s brought styles emphasizing America’s preoccupation with rockets and outer space. Diners began sporting canopies with star-like spotlights, pilasters slanting toward the sky, and other space-age motifs.

More and more, diners were locating along the thousands of miles of new highways built during the period. But the shift of traffic from city to highway was also an ominous change for diners. The fast-food chain outlets that catered to the transient trade became the rage of the 1950s, and a major threat to the diner industry.³⁰ Various diner companies began manufacturing “diner drive-ins”³¹ in the hopes of cashing in on this new trend. Even the industry’s trade magazine, *Diner & Restaurant*, found it necessary to switch its name to *Diner, Drive-In, and Restaurant* in 1954. Articles on fast-food chains and related advertisements began to fill its pages. As the 1950s ended, so did the reign of the diner.

Diner companies tried to respond by adopting the look of family-style restaurants. All vestiges of the past were abandoned in favor of an earth tone “environmental look” that connoted permanence and respectability. The stainless steel was relegated to trim surfaces and kitchen duty. Wagon wheel lamps replaced fluorescent lighting. Tinted mirrors gave way to wood paneling.

Little has changed in the diner’s outward appearance: mediterranean and colonial themes have dominated diner styling for the past 25 years. Of course, diners continue to keep up with trends, moving from zig-zag canopies and pebble-stone walls in the 1960s to wooden arches and brick facades in the 1970s to unadorned surfaces and monochrome color schemes in the 1980s. Perhaps the biggest change since the 1960s is the rekindled interest in diners of the past.



Beginning in the 1970s, a trickle of books and articles began to sing the praises of the disappearing American roadside culture. A national organization, the Society for Commercial Archeology, was founded in 1978 by those with a common interest in diners and the roadside. Dozens of stories about diners and roadside culture appeared in books and national magazines in the 1980s, many featuring diner photographs and paintings.³² A diner and cafe newsletter, *Counter Culture*, started publishing in 1987, and Christine Guedon and her husband, Steven Lintner, have just finished writing their yet-

unpublished *American Diner Guide*, which will help travellers find diners. They hope "to assist in keeping these little out-of-the-way places in business...." The book will include a section on diner history and identification, tracing diner manufacturers through words and pictures.

As America experiences a diner revival, some are now being restored as museum pieces. The Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, has a diner in its "Automobile in American Life" permanent exhibit and the Smithsonian also plans on saving one, despite rejecting the idea a few years ago due to restoration expense. A common problem for preservationists is that some people see diners as historically and/or aesthetically significant, while others see neither.

The commercial sector is also saving diners. Sculptor Jerry Berta made headlines last year when he bought Rosie's Diner (of TV advertising fame) because people kept stopping to eat at his Rockford, Michigan, showroom — a 1947 diner. Berta is opening Rosie's as a restaurant right next to his showroom. Along with authentic restorations, many "yuppie" diners have appeared, serving exotic dishes at exotic prices. Some of these are restored diners and some are a conglomeration of "period materials" meant to evoke a certain era.³³ Kullman Industries, the oldest remaining diner manufacturer, has recently built two "retro-diners," using original craftsmen and authentic materials combined with state-of-the-art equipment to create period diners slathered in chrome, neon, and glass block.³⁴ Another company, 24-year-old Module Mobile, Inc. of Atlanta, recently began selling its relatively low priced "Happy Days" stainless steel diners, which range from the standard 20-seater for \$139,500 to the "Superb" 108-seater for \$295,000. This turn-key package even includes neon lighting. President David Bernstein says that demand and response are tremendous and their diners are being shipped across the country.

As a diner fan, I have mixed feelings about these recent trends. It's both sad and encouraging to see something you love, something that was disappearing, become commercialized and exploited. But then, the original owners were no idealists. Whether they were lunch wagon owners or streamliner proprietors, they had no intention of owning a museum piece, a relic. Even most of today's owners are somewhat overwhelmed by the attention their humble business commands. The diner fit their business needs when they bought it, and they'll leave it when it no longer does. One especially striking part of the history of area diners is how many people owned several different diners,



devoting entire careers to buying diners, selling and upgrading old ones, or moving on to diners in more lucrative spots.

Luckily, I found the diners I stopped at to be like visiting someone's home. They were all family-oriented, with three generations often working side by side. They all

had a steady local clientele even if near a highway. All the diners had quality operations, and most of them still made *everything* from scratch. Finally, the diners had a core of loyal employees, many staying with their job for decades, and some even passing their jobs down to their children.

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One diner with three generations behind the counter is the **Venus Diner** in Gibsonia, north of Pittsburgh on Route 8 near the Turnpike. Nicholas Verner Sr. has operated the diner since 1982, using his 25 years of experience as an Air Force and hotel chef; his son and grandson help in the kitchen. Bill Platt opened the diner in 1958, naming it after a New Jersey diner, but the cosmic connection was strengthened by the diner's proximity to Mars, Pennsylvania. (They still sell a Satellite Burger.) Speckled white Formica contrasts with the avocado curtains and seats and with the pink-tinted mirrors. A mirrored ceiling, with fluorescent light emanating from the two terraced recessions, provides a way to keep an eye on customers' coffee. The diner seats 72, and though many trucks still stop, lunch hour has a strong business clientele.

When **Dean's Diner** on Route 22 just outside of Blairsville opened in 1954, a trade magazine noted the "aqua, lime, and pink diner seats 54 and features a built-in vestibule."³⁵ It is still in beautiful shape, although its owner, Darrell Dean, claims he's made no conscious effort to keep it that way. (His brother, Gwynne Dean, who spends a lot of time at the diner, said simply that it's cheaper to take care of an old diner than it would be to buy a new one.) At one time, there were several diners in Western Pennsylvania called Dean's. Darrell proudly recalls that the business began in August 1927 when his grandfather, H. P. Dean, opened a diner in Indiana, Pennsylvania. Darrell's uncle, Rodney Dean, later opened one on Route 30 in Forest Hills, a suburb of Pittsburgh.

Darrell's father, Emerson Dean, opened a diner in 1934 in downtown Blairsville. It came in on wheels from its manufacturer in Silver Springs, New York, and went through various additions and remodelings until its closing in 1960, when only the original roof was left. In 1953, when the Route 22 bypass was built around downtown Blairsville,

the elder Dean opened the family's present diner. Darrell remembers visiting the Fodero Dining Car Company plant in Bloomfield, New Jersey, with his father to buy the diner. The owner estimates half of his business is from local customers, half from the highway.

Just south of Blairsville, on Route 217, sits a forlorn looking, abandoned diner. No one seemed to know much about it; one lady told me a farmer owned the diner and had hopes of selling it for lots of money. Although its former beauty shone through, I felt the only money the diner would bring would be at the junkyard. I had little hope of learning its history until I was handed a 1953 photo of **Dick's Diner** in McKeesport, one of the largest mill towns up the Monongahela River from Pittsburgh. None of these towns had a diner except McKeesport, and it had two. Dick's Diner sat on Lysle (formerly Jerome) Boulevard until December 1971, when the local redevelopment authority bought the property. Bill Platt (of Venus Diner distinction) had brought the diner to McKeesport in about 1940.³⁶ Apparently it was a 1930s Kullman brand diner that had been refurbished at the factory before Platt bought it.³⁷ Joe Dick bought the diner with yellow fluted siding in Fall 1945 and ran it for 26 years.

Jean Dick, Joe's daughter-in-law, was a waitress there from 1957 until its closing. When she handed me photos, I knew they were of the abandoned diner I had seen on Route 217. Joe, 87, was repairing a stereo when I explained my project; I worried for a while that my diner quest made no sense to him, or that he didn't wish to recall his diner days. But when I left four hours later, we were the best of friends. At first, only the bad memories came — the constant stealing by customers and waitresses, the harassment by police, the shortage of employees and supplies, especially meat, during wartime. But then lighter moments came back, like when a young short order cook made eggs; he'd throw the broken shells up the vent, and they would be sucked onto the roof.

Truck drivers, mill workers, and railroad men



Owners Forrest and Virginia Early outside Pittsburgh's Hilltop Diner, 1952; Virginia worked as a waitress, while Forrest also operated the gas station next door, at Brown's Hill on Hazelwood Avenue.

were Dick's bread and butter. Nights brought a string of drunks who, when not passing food out the bathroom window, would play the jukebox all night long. "The song they played was 'Nickelodeon;' you know..." — he sings — "Put another nickel in..." That song drove me crazy!" Joe leased his

land, but because he still owed on his diner, he passed when adjacent land went up for sale. Within a year Eat'N'Park opened on that spot, but the restaurant didn't bother him much; their workers even ate in his place. Still, he regrets not having bought the land.

Down the street from Dick's sat the red-trimmed **Club Car Diner**. Fred and Elsie Jamison opened this diner about 1945³⁸ and called it the B & O Club Car, for it sat across from the Baltimore & Ohio train station. When the city eliminated the railroad tracks through town, the diner fell to redevelopment plans, being scrapped shortly after it closed in May 1972. An urban mall now sits where the diner once thrived.

Doris Topolnak was a waitress at the Club Car from 1948 to 1962, starting when she was 17; she also worked a while at two other area diners. Her fond memories of the Club Car include many humorous moments. When one customer didn't drink his coffee, she asked if there was a problem, and he replied it was too hot for Mandy to taste. She asked, "Who's Mandy?" He replied, "It's my dog sitting here on the floor, I don't put anything in my mouth until she okays it." The man and Mandy had to leave.

Mary Grace Garofolo Morrell was also a waitress at the Club Car, starting when she was 18, from 1948 to 1959. Although the diner had only 16 stools and four booths, she often served 200 checks in an eight-hour shift, which brought her, as late as 1959, \$16 to \$21 a week, not counting tips. The diner had nine waitresses. Her sister and Doris Topolnak's cousin also worked there, as did many

other workers' relatives. There was no time clock; rather the whistle at U.S. Steel's National Tube Works signaled the 11-to-7, the 7-to-3, and 3-to-11 shifts. The diner was across the street from the main mill gate.

Morrell remembered the daily course at the diner so well that she can break the typical day down according to who came in and when: 11 p.m. — National Tube workers coming off the night shift; 12 midnight — movie and dance crowd; 1-2:30 a.m. — bar and club crowd — ("At 2 in the morning, we were packed," Morrell said.); by 4 a.m. — men headed to work on early morning shifts, mostly gas company workers; 6 a.m. — National Tube workers headed to the day shift; 7 a.m. — National Tube's overnight shift, leaving work, and day office workers; 8-9 a.m. — retail store clerks and workers; 10 a.m.-noon — a big mix of people taking early lunches; noon-1 p.m. — packed for lunch — ("The only lull we had was from 1-2, after lunch."); 2 p.m. — National Tube workers headed to the night shift; 3-4 p.m. — mill men coming off the day shift; 5 p.m. — people out and about for night meetings, and "lots of bowlers." Dinner and evening hours were fast and furious with all kinds of people.

To this day, decades after leaving the diner, Morrell still sees customers on the street. She often can't remember their names, but she remembers what they liked to eat. Her immigrant mother had a hard time believing it when Morrell worked the late shift. "It's a no true," she would tell me. She thought all people went to bed at 8 p.m. When we walked together downtown on my day off, people would say hello and my mother would say, 'You no gonna tell me these all customers!'"

Until the early 1960s, however, blacks were not served. "We would have to ask them, 'Would you like to take that out?'" Morrell recalls a black serviceman with his family coming into the diner. Having come off the train at the nearby B & O station, the family had no place to take their food out to, Morrell said. She remembers going to the back room crying over the incident. Workers at other diners also mentioned not serving blacks until the 1960s.

The Jamisons opened another red-trimmed place, the **Parkway Diner**, in Monroeville in 1951 on Route 22, across from where the Miracle Mile Shopping Center stands today. Soon after, an investment group formed to run the Jamisons' diners; the Parkway's name was changed to the **Red Coach Diner**, and it remained until January 1977, when

the land proved more valuable for other uses. The demise of the Red Coach illustrates some of the business pressures that have helped to undermine the diner business. A Red Lobster and a Chi-Chi's now occupy the land where the diner sat, and as one investor said, there's more money to be made, with less hassle, renting the property to franchise restaurant chains than operating a single diner there.

In July 1956, the same investment group opened the **Gateway Diner** in Wilkins Township on Route 22, about a mile west of the Red Coach. Really a showcase diner, it had an elaborate color scheme of green and yellow stripes outside, and pink and gray inside. The Gateway eventually closed in December 1978, in favor of a Burger King. After its contents were auctioned, the shell was sold for \$100. The once fancy diner is now a video store south of Vandergrift on Route 66.

The investment group's last entry, the fabulous **Summit Diner** in Somerset, opened in July 1960 and has operated 24 hours a day ever since, except for a couple of years in the late 1960s when management shut it down at night after repeated run-ins with late-night rowdies from surrounding towns. The Summit exemplifies the styling transition from futuristic to environmental, for along with all its tile, chrome and stainless steel are wooden beams, wagon wheel lamps, and stone work. The diner has 14 stools, 17 booths, and a Seeburg Consolette jukebox at each table. The famous neon sign was just recently repaired and its shape embellishes all the Summit's advertising. You can even buy a cap at the diner with the sign logo on it.

One of my biggest disappointments was finding that Johnstown, once home to three diners with the same name, now has none. Johnstown, in Cambria County, lies at a crossroads connecting the William Penn and Lincoln highways. Louis Segal in 1948 opened the first **Tops Diner**, a 52-seater with maroon trim built by Fodero Dining Car Co. of Newark, New Jersey.³⁹ Adjacent to the Walnut Street Bridge, the diner proved so popular that Segal decided to build a second one. He

wished to take out the bottom floor of an existing building and install a diner in the hole, even though local contractors and at first, the Fodero company's owner, said reinforcing the building would be too difficult. The city even took Segal to court over the safety of the old building. But Segal persevered, and he's proud of the fact that he beat City Hall. Fodero built **Tops #2**



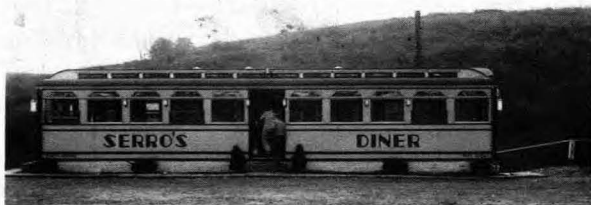
Virginia Early (second from right) with waitress crew at the Hilltop, 1952.

at Main and Market streets in 1952, at almost twice the price of the original diner. Fodero featured it in an advertisement, and *Diner & Restaurant* put the unusual diner on its June 1952 cover. Segal later bought the old **Airmont Diner**, making it **Tops #3**, on the Johnstown-Windber Road.

The original Tops was packed around the clock, using, for example, five tons of french fries and 750 dozen eggs per week. Segal remembers all sorts of weird food orders such as cannibal sandwiches (raw ground meat) and a fellow who ordered 24 breakfasts — for himself! (He even lived to order it again.) By the late 1960s, business had tailed off — Segal wasn't explicit about the reasons — and the diners shut down.

In Pittsburgh, Terry and Alice Feiler opened the **Feiler Diner** in 1949 in the 6300 block of Penn Avenue, where Rizenstein Middle School is now. The diner had a blue-fluted exterior, a barrel roof and a salmon pink, yellow and light blue interior. Alice Feiler remembers Fels-Naptha soap being used to slide the diner down the planks from the truck. The diner did good business, with its side door facing Penn Avenue and its back against a hotel. When an adjacent gas station wanted to enlarge, however, the Feilers had to move the diner off of its leased lot. They reopened it in 1957 in the 4900 block of Baum Boulevard, and sold it in 1963, opening a used car lot on the land.

Terry Feiler and his brother, Nicholas, had opened their first diner in Cleveland. Then they



Top: A hint of streamlining had started to affect the railroad car look when Serro's Diner was delivered to Irwin, Pa., in 1938. Note the sliding front door and advertising for "booth service" and "rest rooms." Now the Willow Diner near Greensburg, the diner's old skin is under a modern exterior. *Bottom:* This view of Dean's Diner, Route 22 near Blairsville, shows off its matching dining room addition from 1957 (removed in 1989) and its colorful sign, also gone.

Major Diner Manufacturers Whose Diners Reached the Western Pennsylvania Region

THERE have been dozens of diner manufacturers through the years. Their offerings have resembled each other in each period. The cost of shipping by rail or truck, charged on a per-mile basis, is what kept most diners in the area of their manufacture, the Northeast — particularly in New Jersey. The desire to expand led many manufacturers to eye midwestern factory sites, but by the time the industry had progressed that far, the diner boom was ending.

Besides the Module Mobile Co. of Atlanta, which makes its Happy Days Diners (discussed in the main article), four old-line diner companies still exist: DeRaffele Manufacturing Co., Kullman Industries, Paramount Modular Concepts, and the relative newcomer, Musi Dining Car Co.*

DeRaffele — 1933 to present, New Rochelle, N.Y. Originally the Tierney company (from 1905), DeRaffele makes modern diners, but company people declined comment for this article. The Summit Diner near Butler is a 1949 DeRaffele and first opened for business in Pittsburgh. Three Pittsburgh families went to the factory together to buy diners in 1949; all had been told that DeRaffele models were the biggest and best.

Fodero — 1930s to 1985, Newark, N.J., later in Bloomfield, N.J. Joseph Fodero had been the metal shop foreman at Tierney. He started his own business, shortly called the National Dining Car Company. This name can be seen as a decal on the woodwork above the doors at Scotty's Diner, showing that it's quite a rare diner. Known for making large diners, Fodero also built the Venus and Dean's. In Johnstown, former Tops Diner owner Louis Segal fondly recalled his trip to the Fodero factory. After Joe Fodero showed him their diners, the sales manager — the only person at Fodero who could speak clear English — took Segal to two nearby competitors!

Kullman — 1927 to present, Harrison, N.J., now in Avenel, N.J. Robert Kullman took time to speak about the company his grandfather started. They made only diners from 1927 until 1969, when they branched into other structures. By the early 1980s, only 20 percent of the company's output was in diners; the percentage is now only 7 percent. They recently built two "classic" diners, but the rest are all modern (the big Norwin Diner is a 1976 example)

and cost \$300,000 or more. Their other modular structures include convenience stores, banks, schools, prisons, and even an airport terminal.

Mountain View — 1940 to 1957, Singac, N.J. Many Mountain View diners reached the Midwest just before the company folded. There are two in this area: the Eastland Diner (originally Serro's,) and the former Serro's from Greensburg that now sits for sale near there in a lot beside the Turnpike. Mountain View diners can be identified by the scroll-type designs on the top corners. Their earlier offerings had pointy "cow-catcher" corners. Paramount reportedly bought this defunct company's old designs.

Musi — 1966 to present, Carteret, N.J. I don't believe any reached this area, but owner Ralph Musi says they still produce eight to 10 diners per year. Alterations of their old models are increasingly popular, with customers now favoring designs that use gray, peach, and light blue paint, and even some chrome, over the 1960s-style dark colonial and mediterranean themes.

O'Mahony — 1913 to 1959, Bayonne, N.J., later in Elizabethtown, N.J. Their slogan was, "In Our Line We Lead The World," and they sent more diners to Western PA than any other company. O'Mahony was one of the longest running companies and, therefore, went through many design changes. With their New Jersey plant only capable of building 30 diners a year, O'Mahony acquired a seven-acre plant site in St. Louis in 1952 to build diners for that region. There is much confusion over the company's financially troubled final years. Supposedly only four diners were made in St. Louis before bankruptcy; a resurrected Mahony Company made four more. In this area, the Steel Trolley Diner and the former Gateway Diner were two of O'Mahony's last diners. Earlier models include the Mercer, Willow, and the decomposing Digger's.

Paramount — 1930s to present, Haledon, N.J., and now in Oakland, N.J. None are in this area. Paramount declined comment.

Silk City — 1927 to 1968, Paterson, N.J. Made by the Patterson Vehicle Company in the famous silk-producing town. This area's example is Laverne's Diner, the former Blue Dell, which has a pink color scheme but is otherwise not very ornate. Many Silk Citys remain elsewhere.

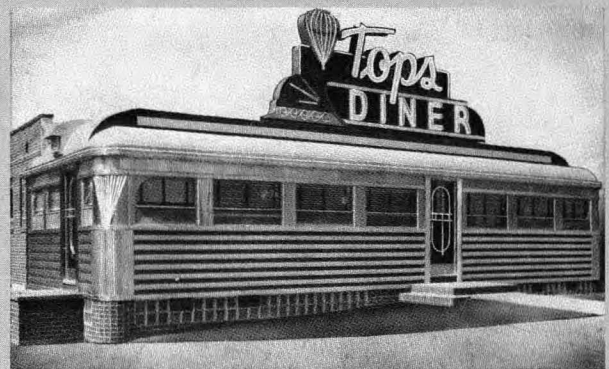
Sterling — 1935 to 1942, Merrimac, Mass. Although best known for Streamliners that resembled sleek train cars, Sterling built all styles. A local example is the Crosser Diner, a typical dinette of the period,

economical and intended for short-order operation. The Crosser still has "DINETTE" baked into its white siding. There was a Streamliner in Ellwood City until a few years ago, when it was put in storage in Cleveland to await restoration.

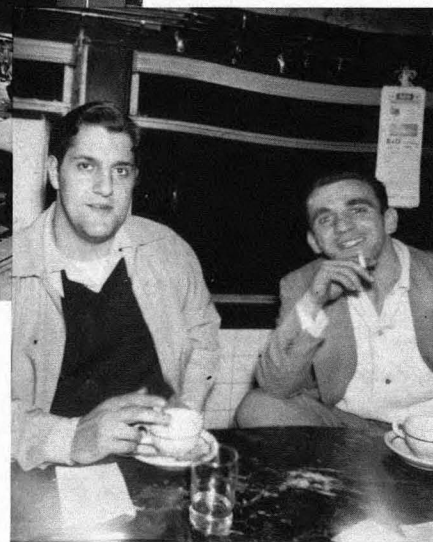
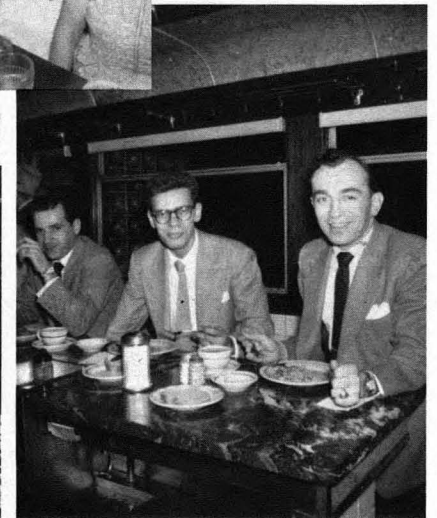
Swingle — 1958 to 1988, Middlesex, N.J. Joseph Swingle worked for O'Mahony before starting his own business. The factory had one of the largest graveyards of used diners. The Summit in Somerset was an early effort, and its earthtone interior touches predicted a new design trend. Scotty's in Monroeville is a modern Swingle.

Ward and Dickinson — 1923 to 1940s, Silver Creek, N.Y. Lee Dickinson and Charles Ward made their first dining car under a tree, 40 miles northeast of Erie. By 1925, about 50 employees were producing roughly one diner per month. The original Standard model had 12 stools and four small booths on the end; a grill sat behind the counter, whereas the larger Deluxe model included a kitchen. Green was the dominant inside color, and the diners came fully equipped for about \$5,000. Their success spawned six other Silver Creek dining car operations, and one in nearby Dunkirk, but none outlasted Ward and Dickinson. In this area, the original Dean's Diner, the Dixie Diner in East Liverpool, Ohio, and the Greenville Dining Car probably were all W & Ds. ■

*Sources include the unpublished *American Diner Guide*, by Christine Guedon and Steven Lintner; personal correspondence with diner expert Richard Gutman, of Massachusetts; *Diner* magazine and its later incarnations; and individual diner owners. Ward and Dickinson information courtesy of Agnes Pfeuger, Silver Creek historian. Some dates are approximate. Many diners in other parts of the country were made by Campora, Manno, Master, Valentine, Worcester, and a host of smaller manufacturers.



Tops #1 on a period postcard. The downtown Johnstown landmark advertised itself as "TOPS In Food, TOPS In Service," and also as "New — Up To The Minute."



McKeesport's Club Car Diner (foreground) and the B&O train depot await the wrecking ball in 1972. The diner was a popular eatery for 27 years — and a good place to work, former employees say — until claimed by a massive urban renewal project that locals still lament.

moved to Wilkinsburg around 1930 and started a diner at Penn Avenue and Wood Street, serving liquor for a short time after Prohibition. In 1940, they opened another diner nearby at Penn Avenue and Lexington Street. I could not find out what happened to either of those diners, but the Feiler's blue-fluted diner wound up in the Butler area under a new name. This is discussed below.

Another diner duo, Forrest and Virginia Early, met at the Feiler Diner in Wilkinsburg. After World War II, Forrest and his brother-in-law, Al Pinkerton, leased land for a service station in Greenfield at the top of Brown's Hill on Hazelwood Avenue. The **Hilltop Diner** they decided to add on the property had red horizontal stripes on its stainless steel exterior, and similar to the Feilers', was salmon, yellow and blue inside. (The Feilers and Earlys bought their diners on the same junket to DeRaffe Diner Company in New Rochelle, New York.) The Hilltop opened on July 17, 1949, and according to Virginia Early, it never had a slow day, attracting both mill workers and professionals. The diner had a grill up front, with seating for 43 on six booths and 19 stools. In 1973, the diner was auctioned because the Texaco station next door wanted to expand and the diner was on leased land. (The Earlys had sold the station some years before.) Virginia Early remembers last seeing the diner on Route 19, near Erie, where it once again looked at home.

It was a long time before I discovered the other diner in the region called the **Summit Diner** (no relation to Somerset's Summit). Off the beaten track, five miles east of Butler on Route 422, this is a definite stop for diner fans who like a good dose of local atmosphere. School bus drivers, cement finishers, railroaders, car repairmen, and retired folks looking for good conversation hang out there. When I stopped one afternoon in March, the place was packed and everyone obviously knew each other. My questioning got me included in all the good-natured bantering — it took a while to even find Roy! This proved especially hard since owner Roy Widenhofer spends most of his time at the gas station he owns next door. Widenhofer first caught the diner bug while working in Butler, where he often ate at the Shell Diner, which coincidentally closed when Roy opened his. (I could not learn anything more about the Shell, or even confirm that it was a real diner.) When Widenhofer decided he wanted a diner, Bill Platt (again, of Venus Diner fame) took him to New Jersey to look at new and



Another day at the Club Car, c. 1958, for waitress Mary Grace Garofolo Morrell.

used ones, but Widenhofer settled on the blue-fluted Feiler diner. He opened in November 1963. Now he would like to find a bigger, newer one, but I don't think this diner could find a better home.

Many people remember the diners owned by the Serros on Route 30 east of Pittsburgh. Actually there had been three different diners and all still exist but in different locations. The first **Serro's** was a 1938 diner that Joseph and Louis Serro, Sr. opened along Route 30 in Norwin. This car had sliding doors on the front and left side, a marble counter, and orange tile on the floor and walls. Business was good enough that they replaced it with a large new diner in 1957.

One waitress who had worked at these two diners the longest, about 40 years, was Ann Martin. Her daughter, Gloria Hathaway, grew up around the diners:

I amused myself sweeping the floor. The people who sat at the counter would casually 'drop' pennies and nickles on the floor where I was going to be sweeping under their feet. It didn't take much to make me happy. I thought I was rich! I knew all the people who worked on my mom's shift — they were like family. That's how the Serro's treated their employees.

Hathaway recalls that her mother loved her job, and often told the family about regular customers identified only as "pork chop special" or "club sandwich." When the Serro's new diner arrived by truck in 1957, her mom persuaded the driver to let her ride into town with it. Hathaway also recalls her mother commenting on her job, "I love it. I'll probably die there." On June 21, 1978, at age 64, Ann Martin had a heart attack and died — "while serving the dinner crowd, being with the people," said her daughter.

Louis Serro, Jr. began as a potato peeler at his father's diner, and eventually came to manage the business. When the family sold its diner in 1968, he bought a similar one, on East Pittsburgh Street in Greensburg. Serro Jr. ran this diner, of stainless steel with gold horizontal stripes and a turquoise interior, until May 1985, when the land he leased was sold to the bank next door for expansion. The diner was moved away in two sections, each 12 feet by 50 feet. The back section sits abandoned in a field on Route 22 north of Greensburg; the front section has puzzled millions at its new location by

the side of the Turnpike in Irwin, under tarps and a "For Sale" sign. Many inquire about it, but diners are hard to sell in Pittsburgh and expensive to move.

Amazingly, the earliest Serro's Diner (the 1938 model) still exists, a few miles south of Greensburg on Route 119. Now called the **Willow Diner**, John and Lillian Rolka have run it since May 1961. Although the outside has been remodeled to resemble a train station, the old skin remains below it and the interior has changed little over the past 50 years.

John Rolka came from Blairsville in the early 1940s to work at the old Ritter's Diner near Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, and worked for some 20 years at other diners in the area. He also tried out barbering on Pittsburgh's South Side, before settling on the Willow. The morning I spoke with him he was cooking on the grill. (The only other worker was a waitress.) Rolka, in his late 60s, seemed as happy at that grill as most workers are on their first day at a new job. Says Lillian Rolka: "The atmosphere is like none other. Everyone has something to say, whether it is about family, trucks, pets, hunting or just good-natured razzing of John about his cooking." She said they've thought about retiring, but the only people showing interest in their diner wish to knock it down for the land. They'd rather keep working.

The man who bought the Serro's diner in 1968 (the 1957 model) was Zigmund Barton, who kept it at the same location but renamed it the **Norwin Diner**. In 1976, he replaced it with a new diner, and Barton feels the new three-section Norwin Diner improved business because its subdued decorating made it a more acceptable dinner spot. He's still quite a diner fan, but as a businessman, he realizes the advantages of a more modern, spacious structure. The basement is overwhelming, resembling a giant warehouse with a high ceiling, well-stocked shelves, specialty rooms, such as the meat-cutters', and even laundry facilities. Barton is proud to announce on his menu, "If you don't see it on the menu, ask your waitress. If we have the



Waitress Ann Martin, at Serro's 1938 diner in Irwin, Pa.

ingredients, we'll make it."

The diner that Barton sold to make way for his new building was trucked to the north edge of Butler on Route 422, where it became the **Eastland Diner**. Gene Houllion now leases this big red-trimmed diner and, like Barton, says everything is still done the old-fashioned way, from boiling soup bones to baking right on site.

Butler lost its downtown diner a few years ago with the closing of **Digger's Diner**. Herman Dight, after running a diner for a short time in Grove City, opened this Butler diner in January 1947. He sold it in 1955 to an employee, William Morgan, who enlarged it and called it **Morgan's Diner**. (At one point, it also was a Ken-

tucky Fried Chicken franchise, the fifth one to open in America.) William "Digger" Young, so nicknamed because of his adjacent funeral home, bought the diner in 1981 — he painted it yellow and brown to match the funeral home — and ran it as Digger's until 1983. He sold it, according to a 1988 newspaper article, because he could no longer run a diner *and* be a mortician, the Butler County Coroner, and the "Clown on Roller Skates" at hospitals and nursing homes.⁴⁰

Others operated the site as the **Butler Diner** from 1983 until 1986, when Young bought the diner and the land with intentions to expand his funeral home. Although he tried for three years to give the diner away, he found no takers. He ended up selling interior parts and selling the shell for \$1. It now sits lifeless a few blocks east.

The **Mercer Diner**, opened in 1953 on Route 19 in Mercer, was recently renamed **Lucky's Diner** to accommodate the script of a film shot there. A new roof and vestibule, added a few years ago, are all that hide this 1953 model, with its brown (originally green) striped exterior and red, white, pink, and grey interior.⁴¹

The **Middlesex Diner**, over in West Middlesex, was the original Mercer Diner, and has been around since 1952. There are plans to demolish it in favor of a newer structure. On the back of his menu, owner Demetrios Vournous tells of leaving

his post as chief officer on a Greek cargo ship in 1972 and setting foot in America with \$120 to his name and speaking no English. By 1980 he was married and had three restaurants, the diner among them. The menu says it all: "Only in America, Can a kid who washes dishes, Take a giant step, And reach up and touch the stars."

In Greenville, I had lunch at my first *dinor* — the **Greenville Dinor**. It seems that dinors are unique to northwestern Pennsylvania: Erie's 1958 city directory lists 19 dinors compared to two *diners*. After asking as many people as possible to explain the spelling, I still have no satisfactory explanation. It seems to have begun after these restaurants arrived in the area. Some of the current owners feel the odd spelling probably originated as an attention-getter. Perhaps it's because some of them had the same owner at one time.

David "Doc" Sankey, former owner of the Greenville Dinor, told me the original was a 1924 diner from Silver Creek, New York.⁴² It came by rail and then was pulled on its wheels by a team of horses. Known then as the Greenville Dining Car, the structure was scrapped in August 1966 for a diner only a few years newer. It has been expanded a few times until today, the only evidence of its diner origins is one of its original old wheels displayed by the owners on the sidewalk.

Union City also has a dinor, and it, too, no longer looks like a factory built diner.⁴³ When it opened in 1926, it was called the **Corner Dinor**, with its seats and doors located differently. A plaque found during a 1974 remodelling read "Mulholland Diners — Dunkirk, N.Y." (Dunkirk is south of Buffalo and Silver Creek. The company started with carriages and automotive bodies around the turn of the century and switched to diners from 1920 to 1940.) The eighth and present owners are Jim and Betty Shepard who call it by the name it has gone by most of its years, the **Union City Dinor**. Jim theorizes that dinor served to differentiate between the building and the patron, but that still fails to explain why dinors are particular to this area. The Shepards bought the diner out of their love for the town — neither had restaurant experience. However, they're the best kind of owners, for they truly love their diner (sorry...dinor!).

Over the border in Ohio, the small towns have held on to their diners a bit longer. My favorite town is Lisbon, small enough to be charming, large enough to have two diners! The **Crosser Diner** is the oldest, dating from about 1940, when the

Hannas put it next to their gas station. This small white diner originally had "Hanna's Dinette" baked into the enamel panels on front. The Crossers bought it in 1948 and painted their name on the outside. Two owners later it still retains that name. Owner Barbara Phillips has had it nine years, and despite frustrations, she loves the diner. She's there seven days a week where the workers and customers are like family. Employees sling good-natured insults around as fast as they sling your food. And for all the joking, the food is fast and good. The diner is very original, though new booths recently eliminated the jukeboxes. The yellow panels on the arched roof and walls are trimmed with wood, and the counter still has a glass front displaying cigars and mints for sale. Make sure you get one of the 10 counter stools, where you're three feet from the grill.

Two blocks east, past the bandstand in the middle of town, Shirley Davis's **Steel Trolley Diner** snuggles onto a corner piece of land. Davis brought the diner from nearby Salem, Ohio, in May 1979. Her nephew named it for what the diner looked like coming down the hill from Salem. Although the gray booths are new (and again, the jukeboxes gone) the diner is in amazingly good shape — everything looks new and shiny.

Pittsburgh's first recorded diner was Nixon's Dining Car, on Penn Avenue in 1927, moving the next year to West Liberty Avenue (which became home to many diners.) There's no evidence of any horse-drawn lunch wagons in the area. Peg and Keith Pippi have owned the city's oldest diner, **Pip's Diner** in the West End, for the past two years, although it's only been at 1900 Woodville Avenue since 1954. That's when former Woolworth's waitress Evelyn Koltz brought it from West Liberty Avenue (where it was possibly Ginny's Diner) and opened it as Eve's Diner. It has also been called Franny's, Bell's, Bell-Ray, Marie's, Palumbo, and Irene's. Although the outside is covered and a small room has been added on, some of this 1920s vintage diner can be seen inside, including the barrel ceiling, marble counter, sliding door, and nice tile pattern. Past owner Irene Marpes said when she bought the diner, it still had the old round-top windows and a marble counter inside, under the windows. The Pippis are trying to fix up the place and to retain the diner atmosphere.

A few blocks from Pip's is **Laverne's Diner**. Its location on South Main Street in the West End was first home to a different diner called

The caption on this postcard of Serro's 1957 diner in Irwin proclaimed it the largest in Western Pennsylvania. That's owner Lou Serro, Jr. at the front door.



Lester's, in 1938. Jane Laun bought the 15-seater the next year and called it Launie's until 1970, when it became Hatt's. Laverne Yorkgitis left her job at the downtown Stouffer's to waitress at this diner, and by 1973, she was running it. A new diner was found in 1978, when loyal truck-driving customers found and moved the former Blue Dell Diner in Irwin to the West End for her. One week before opening in October 1978, arsonists burned the diner, setting Yorkgitis back one long year. The pink, grey, and white tile was cleaned with acid but the ceiling and windows were ruined, hence the modern ceiling and windows there today. Laverne's is a good place for breakfast and lunch — no dinners, with a 3 p.m. closing time. Yorkgitis thinks of quitting but refuses to let her diner be destroyed and would hate to see her "home" of 20 years go to someone new.

Originally the **Blue Dell Diner** sat in front of the Blue Dell Pool and Drive-In Theater on Route 30 in North Huntingdon. It was put there by three brothers in the mid-1950s. The business wasn't doing so well, so the brothers leased it to Jerry Athans for two years in the early 1960s. Athans said business was disappointing for him, too: \$80 in a 24-hour period was typical of the first year. Things improved to the point that Athans asked for a third year, but when he wanted a fourth, the brothers told him to buy or leave. To their surprise, Athans decided instead to lease the Plaza Restaurant in Forest Hills, a place still reminiscent of a diner. Athans said his biggest success was his "All The Fish U-Can Eat Special" on Fridays: french fries, cole slaw, and rolls and butter, all for \$1!

Ritter and Scott are two names long associated with diners in Pittsburgh and their stories intertwine in the early years. The present **Ritter's Diner** is at 5221 Baum Blvd. William Ritter's first diner was in the 7600 block of Penn Ave., near Braddock Avenue. He owned it from 1934 until he sold it in 1942. In 1939, Ritter put up his second diner, across from Forbes Field, and sold it in 1945. Ritter then took over the Feiler Diner on Penn Avenue for two years. Next, he helped manage the Hilltop Diner on Hazelwood Avenue before placing another new diner on Baum Boulevard in 1951, across the street from the present one. He sold that diner, his third, in 1964. Five years later, Art, George, and Pete Velisaris took it over, operating it until 1975, when they replaced it with a modern new one — the present-day Ritter's. The Velisaris family donated the old diner to Pittsburgh History



The Silver Diner in Rockville, Md., is Kullman Industries' recent re-creation of the classic diner.

and Landmarks Foundation. It now sits at Pittsburgh's Station Square, where it was a cooking school and is now a jewelry store.

The Ritter and Scott stories overlap because Thomas A. Scott was the guy who bought the first two diners that Ritter owned

— the first at 7619 1/2 Penn Avenue, and the one near Forbes Field — although Scott eventually brought newer diners to each location.⁴⁴ The Penn Avenue location is the site of the modern-day **Scotty's Diner**. The building was first put into service on Strawberry Way downtown, where it was called the Downtown Diner. The Scotts ran it from 1945 to '47, then moved the building to Penn Avenue. The Scotts replaced the Forbes Field Scotty's with a newer diner, and moved the old one in 1952 to Penn Avenue and 15th Street in the Strip District. This old yellow diner had racks in the skylights where ice was placed — an early form of air conditioning. Scotty's remained a fixture in the ballpark neighborhood until Forbes Field was demolished for the University of Pittsburgh to expand its campus. The Scott family moved this diner to Route 8 in the Glenshaw area; it closed in 1985.

The family also runs a **Scotty's Diner** on Route 22 in Monroeville which opened in 1980 but took some doing. When Thomas Scott, Jr. said he wanted to build a diner there, Monroeville council thought he meant an old-fashioned railroad car. Council worried that a diner would blight what we all know is a highway free of eyesores, so they withheld approval. The go-ahead wasn't given until a council member took a trip to the New Jersey diner factory to see the five-section modern diner.

Scott Jr., son of the founder, abhors fast food and feels he serves the best meals possible. Scotty's on Penn is now Pittsburgh's best known diner, having been in television commercials several times. The chrome rims on the 15 original stools were recently hidden with new upholstery and the five original wooden booths were replaced by generic booths — the jukeboxes at each booth were also yanked — but in all fairness, Thomas Scott Jr. deserves credit for keeping the diner in business. The rest of the interior is beautiful blue Formica, with a white and red design, and is trimmed in chrome and wood. There's still no other local diner quite like Scotty's, where you can watch the grill up front or choose from a wide variety of daily specials prepared in the back.

Area Diners You Can Still Visit

Diner	Place	Year, Make, Comments
Coach Diner	Fredonia	'10s trolley car, real small town
Crosser Diner	Lisbon, Ohio	'40 Sterling, small, cute, fun place
Crossroads Dinor	Edinboro	'13 trolley, now a full restaurant
Dean's Diner	Blairsville	'54 Fodero, still green in & out
Dick's Diner	Murrysville	'46 O'Mahony hidden, famous pies
Diner's Delight	Franklin	'20s, partly original but enlarged
Eastland Diner	Butler	'57 Mountainview, red beauty
Elite Diner	E. Liverpool, Ohio	'20s, worn, hitch shows, good food
Gateway Diner	Vandergrift	'55 O'Mahony, now a video store
Greenville Dinor	Greenville	'30s, hidden, full restaurant
Grove City Diner	Grove City	'38 hidden, always busy
Hi-Way Diner	Ebensburg	'20s, remodeled, small town flavor
LaVerne's Diner	Pgh., West End	'55 Silk City, part remodeled, pink
Mercer Diner	Mercer	'53 O'Mahony, pink, gray, red int.
Middlesex Diner	West Middlesex	'20s, hidden, may soon go
Norwin Diner	Irwin	'76 Kullman, big operation
Pip's Diner	Pgh., West End	'20s Tierney(?), bit of original int.
Ritter's Diner	Pgh., Shadyside	'76 Fodero, packed after midnight
Ritter's Diner	Pgh., Station Sq.	'51 DeRaffele, now jewelry store
Scotty's Diner	Monroeville	'80 Swingle, full restaurant
Scotty's Diner	Wilkinsburg	'40 National, worn but classic
Steel Trolley Diner	Lisbon, Ohio	'56 O'Mahony, grays but beautiful
Summit Diner	Butler	'40s DeRaffele, pink & bl., locals
Summit Diner	Somerset, at T'pike	'60 Swingle, chrome, some wood
Union City Dinor	Union City	'24 Mulholland, hidden, locals
Venus Diner	Gibsonia, at T'pike	'58 Fodero, avacado & pink gem
Willow Diner	Greensburg	'38 O'Mahony, interior still good



Crosser Diner, Lisbon, Ohio, 1989. Lisbon has two diners, both on the Lincoln Highway, which still brings much business their way.

Scotty's also has my favorite diner dish — lyonnaise potatoes (home fries with onions) with melted cheese. Mmmm...I think I'll go eat! ■

■ ■ ■

¹Everyone likes diners for different reasons, but recent articles about them usually address the tension between those who want diners to remain slow-paced local places or to be updated for a modern, affluent clientele. The diner newsletter *Counter Culture*, for instance, continually addresses this argument, siding with the local-atmosphere fans.

²Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York: 1989), 18.

³I documented every existing diner I could find in Western Pennsylvania, but I did not visit all of them in the northern part of the region. Information about those — ones for which I did not have extensive information — were edited out of this article due to space limitations. The documentation

methods varied widely, although the vast majority of information came from hundreds of personal interviews, telephone calls, and letters. Because of the necessarily informal nature of this process, it was not practical to provide the customary footnotes for each interview.

⁴Richard J. S. Gutman, Elliott Kaufman, and David Slovic, *American Diner* (New York: 1979), 2.

⁵"The Diner Puts on Airs," *Saturday Evening Post* (June 19, 1948), 131 (hereafter, *SEP* article); and "When The Lunch Wagon Made Its Bow," *New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 7, 1926), section IV, 20.

⁶"The Roadside Diners Are Rolling," *Coronet* (Sep. 1953), 132.

⁷*SEP* article, 131.

⁸Gutman, Kaufman, and Slovic, 5.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*SEP* article, 131.

¹¹Gutman, Kaufman, and Slovic, 9.

¹²*SEP* article, 131.

A Name in Neon

Jim Fedasz has been making neon signs in McKeesport since the 1940s. Originally with the Stanley Neon Sign Co., Fedasz now has his own business. He installed neon at most of the area diners, including the Club Car and Parkway, and designed the Dick's Diner sign, a coffee pot pouring coffee into a cup with wavy neon tubes that blinked to simulate motion. In addition to a sign, most diners wanted their roofs and ceilings outlined. The most common method of doing the interiors in the old diners was to use cold cathode tubes, larger than neon tubing and smaller than fluorescent. Although they burned out more quickly, they used a much smaller transformer and gave off more light. Fluorescent lights, however, eventually displaced them. Most orders today are for neon that backlights plastic letters.

¹³ "Lunch Wagon, After An Eclipse, Is Back Again Well Disguised," *New York Times* (Feb. 20, 1927), section VII, 15.

¹⁴ *New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 7, 1926), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Gutman, Kaufman, and Slovic, 14, 22.

¹⁷ *SEP* article, 131.

¹⁸ "The Thousand and One Night Owls," *New York Times Magazine* (Dec. 24, 1922), 8.

¹⁹ *SEP* article, 131; and Gutman, Kaufman, and Slovic, 19.

²⁰ "The Diner Business," *Fortune* (July 1952), 167.

²¹ According to "Lunch Wagons Streamline — Customers Stream In," *Nation's Business* (Sept. 1937), 107, "The percentage of failures in this business is said to be small — eight per cent against 20 per cent in newly established restaurants." The dramatic rise in the number of diners in the period also attests to the business being recession-proof. Their popularity apparently stemmed from the niche diners filled between hot dog stands and fancy restaurants.

²² "Coffee and' in the Doggy Dog-Wagon," *Literary Digest* (Feb. 20, 1932), 42.

²³ "Scarsdale Up In Arms Again For a New Lunch-Wagon Battle," *New York Times* (Apr. 23, 1934), 1.

²⁴ *Nation's Business*, 74.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁶ "The Lunch Wagon Settles Down," *New York Times Magazine* (Oct. 19, 1941), 20.

²⁷ *SEP* article, 133.

²⁸ *Coronet*, 132.

²⁹ *SEP* article, 133.

³⁰ See, for example, Philip Langdon, *Orange Roofs, Golden Arches* (New York: 1986), and Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile* (Boston: 1985).

³¹ One of the first advertisements was for O'Mahony's DINER-DRIVE-IN, which the firm promised "skims off the best features of both..." *Diner, Drive-In and Restaurant* (May 1954), 41. One year later, a Kullman advertisement showed "the adaptability of KULLMAN Drive-In Diners to today's eating habits." *Diner, Drive-In and Restaurant* (May 1955).

³² Articles on diners have appeared in such diverse magazines as *Smithsonian*, *Yankee*, *House and Garden*, *American Photographer*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. Books by artist John Baeder and photographer Gerd Kittel, among others, have also concentrated solely on diners.

³³ See, for example, "Hey, Dottie — Diners Are Back: But what's with all this 'nouvelle chow'?" *Newsweek* (March 3, 1986), 54.

³⁴ Much of my information on Kullman came from Amy Delman, Kullman's director of marketing, who prepared a manuscript for me entitled, "Kullman Industries, Inc.: A Retrospective of the Dining Car Industry."

³⁵ From "Over the Counter," a section listing diner openings in *Diner, Drive-In, and Restaurant* (Feb. 1954), 32.

³⁶ *Polk's McKeesport City Directory*, 1940. Directories of other cities were helpful for their diners as well.

³⁷ Confirmed by author's correspondence with Richard Gutman, Apr. 3, 1990.

³⁸ *Polk's McKeesport City Directory*, 1940. I also received much help from Don Bailey and Frank Rinella, two of the many men involved with these diners.

³⁹ "Over the Counter," *The Diner* (Oct. 1948), 24.

⁴⁰ "Free to mover: Butler's vintage diner to go," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Aug. 11, 1988), 12.

⁴¹ "Over the Counter," *Diner & Restaurant* (Sept. 1953), 22.

⁴² Sankey also sent "Greenville Dinor Acquires Glass Bar, Plans Expansion," *The Record-Argus* (March 19, 1969), and a full-page ad with the diner's history from the same paper, (Sept. 25, 1972), 5.

⁴³ Much of this information came from Steve Bishop, who recently wrote "This 'diner's' a 'dinor,'" *Corry Journal Weekend Magazine* (Apr. 14, 1990), 1, 2, 23.



Dick's Diner, McKeesport, 1952, with its new neighbor, Eat' N Park.