

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XV

6-22-93

No. 20

AMERICAN DINER PROJECT



This past winter I received a letter from Daniel Zilka, diner historian and architectural conservator who is working with the Rhode Island Historical Society on the development of an American Diner Museum. In his letter he states: "At one time it was common-place to find at least one diner in every small town or city in America. But it is happening before our very eyes. What we once took for granted has been disappearing. After documenting and photographing diners for seven years, I am compiling a history of the diners and diner manufacturers in the Great Lakes Region of New York."

This spring Mr. Zilka appeared in person seeking further information on diners in our locality and the Orleans Manufacturing Co. Inc. which was located on Beaver Alley in Albion. It seems this company which was operated by Stephen Penasack, manufactured diners that were entirely produced locally and completely outfitted with furnishings. There were several employees hired by the

company including a Stanley Karls who did the upholstery work. Diners were made by this concern during the 1940's but ceased production because of low demand. Mr. Zilka has only been able to locate one unit manufactured by the Orleans Manufacturing Co., which is the Highland Park Diner in Rochester, New York. He is continuing to seek information about this company, its employees and the diners that were built.

The two photos which accompany this article are of diners which were located in Albion. The one squeezed in between two buildings was known as the Liberty Diner. It was located on Main Street across from the Rialto Theater. In the mid-1940's this was removed along with the building on the left, when Ray Severns built a restaurant on the site which is now the Harvest Basket. The other photo shows the Albion Diner, perhaps in the 1930's. It was located at the corner of East Bank and Platt Streets. Jimmy Hubbell's gas station was later located on the lot behind this. Mr. Zilka informs me that this diner was manufactured at Silver Creek, New York by a company there who produced quite a few. We tend to believe that the Liberty Diner may have been made by that same company. There was also a diner on E. Center Street in Medina which was operated by Skip Wilde.

As a child back in the early 50's, I can remember being in the Albion Diner when it was operated by Walter Chatfield. Other than that, I know very little about these structures. They were certainly a fad during the 1920's, 30's and 40's, giving a sense of streamline speed along our streets and highways. They seem, no doubt, one of our first attempts at fast food for their short order cooks. But beyond this, I think they played off the excellence commonly associated with the dining cars on the railroads which enjoyed a reputation for fine food during the same time frame.

Any information that readers may have about these two diners or the Orleans Manufacturing Company is greatly desired. For all I know, there may well have been other diners in the county. Reader response in the past has been very fruitful. I will be sure to pass any information on to Mr. Zilka.

Office Hours: Mon. 9-Noon, 1-4; Thurs. 7:30-9:30 p.m.; Fri. 9-10 a.m. Phone 589-4174.