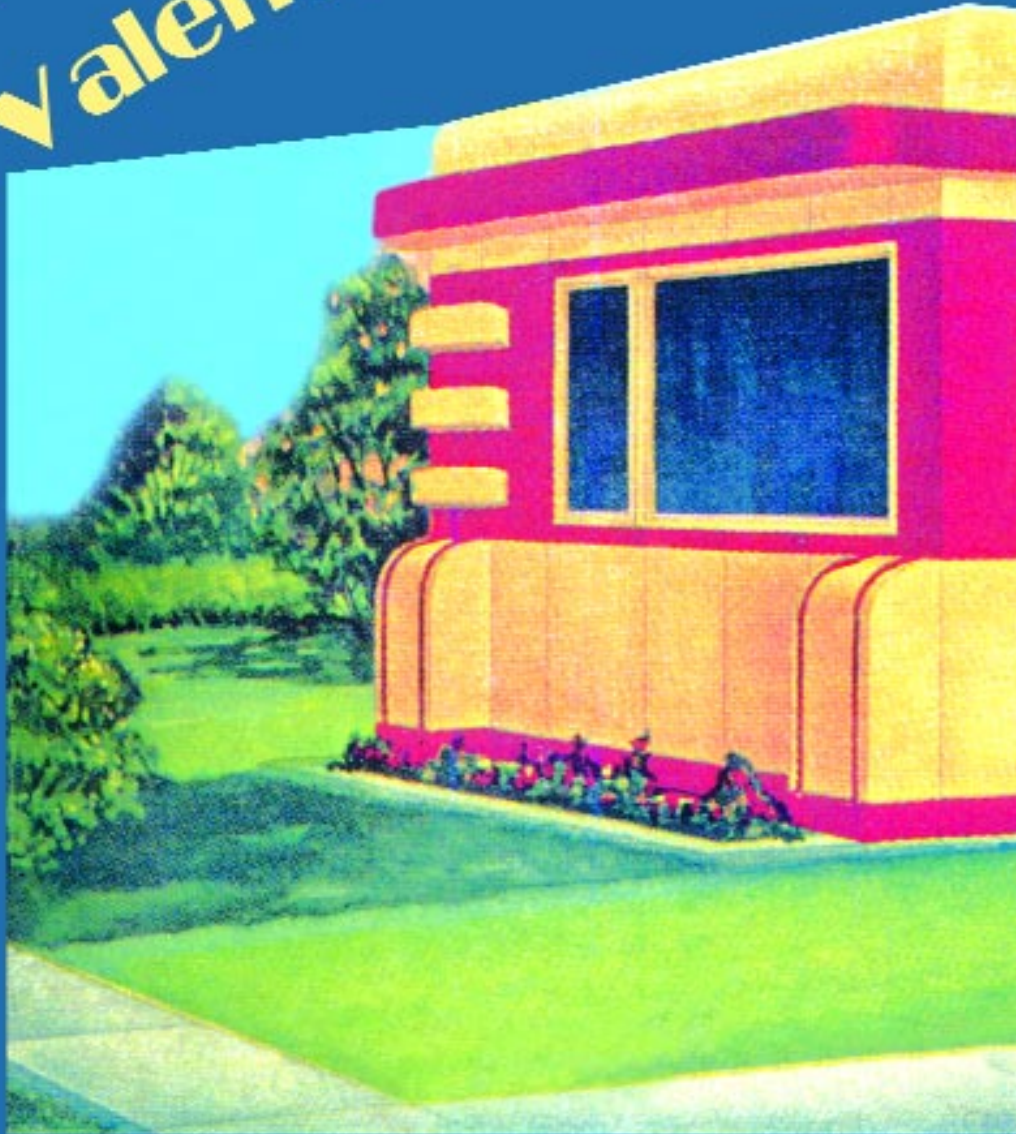


# Nothing Could Be Finer Than A Valentine Diner

**B**rint's Diner in Wichita is a survivor, straight from another age in America, an eating place that's not fancy but offers comfortable seats where you can get good food fast. It's a place where, if you come back often enough, you're considered a regular member of the family. But Brint's, like several other such establishments dotted across our state, is not just any old diner. It's a Valentine.

Valentine Diners began their nearly forty-year career in Wichita, Kansas—an idea born of the Great Depression. They were constructed as eight-to-ten-seat diners that one or two people could operate. If



you were good at it—if you served good food at a fair price and kept your customers happy—you could make a successful business of a Valentine. In an industry where nearly all major diner manufacturers were on the East Coast, this Kansas creation managed to

... in the morning, at noon and suppertime too. Good food and friendly service were at the heart of the Kansas Valentine.



Adapted from catalog courtesy American Diner Museum, Providence, R.I.

By  
**BLAIR TARR**

ship its little pre-fabs all across the country. Valentines could be found along major highways to attract travelers, in industrial areas to attract workers, and in small towns where they might be one of the only (if not *the* only) restaurants available.

So what is a diner? The term is said to derive from “dining car,” and in concept it was meant to offer the type of service that came from the old restaurants on wheels. Today the word is loosely used to mean any small restaurant, but among purists a diner can mean

only one thing: a manufactured building, with a long counter and a few booths, that is transported to its site of operation. The roots of the diner go back to 1872 when Walter Scott of Providence, Rhode Island, used a horse-drawn lunch wagon to serve meals to those who worked dusk to dawn. The lunch wagon gradually evolved from providing some shelter for customers to come in out of the elements to a structure placed on a foundation—but one that could be moved if necessary. Most of the best-known diner manufacturers on the East Coast, particularly in New York, New Jersey, and the New England states, produced the stainless steel structures that provide us with the image we have of the classic shiny silver 1940s and 1950s eateries. Because of the manufacturers' locations, diners didn't seem to be a Midwest phenomenon before the early twentieth century. But all of that was about to change.

Illinois-born Arthur H. Valentine came to Kansas in 1914. He was a natural salesman, hawking automobiles for a while in Great Bend but always hoping someday to be his own boss. Sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s Valentine and his wife, Ella, opened a restaurant in the small south-central Kansas town of Hazelton. They took a liking to the business, and others followed in such towns as Wichita and Hutchinson, and eventually their "chain" of restaurants became known as the Valentine Lunch System.

On October 26, 1933, the *Wichita Beacon* announced that the Valentine Lunch System was about to open a new "\$10,000 porcelain home" at the corner of Beacon Lane and Market Street in that city. The structure was built in sections by the Metal Building Company of Wichita and the Martin Perry Company of New York, which supplied the Wichita business. The cafe included a complete line of foods for its customers—short orders, regular dinners, lunches, and sandwiches—and, according to Arthur Valentine, curb service would be featured.

**A**round the same time Arthur Valentine was opening his cafes, another Wichita company became interested in portable buildings. In the 1920s the Ablah Hotel Supply Company not only had begun building small, portable lunchrooms, but it ran chains of restaurants in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. The Ablah Company may have turned out as many as two hundred buildings, including those they operated under the names Little Palace and White Crown. And at least one of those buildings had been built for Arthur Valentine's chain in Hutchinson.

The connection between Ablah and Arthur Valentine proved to be a fortuitous one. Valentine soon began working for Ablah as a salesman of portable lunch buildings while continuing to operate his Lunch System cafes. His employment with Ablah brought him in contact with Ablah's sheet metal workers, a fortunate connection for all involved. By the end of the 1930s the Ablahs wanted out of lunchroom construction, and Arthur Valentine stood ready to take over and continue the business under his own name.

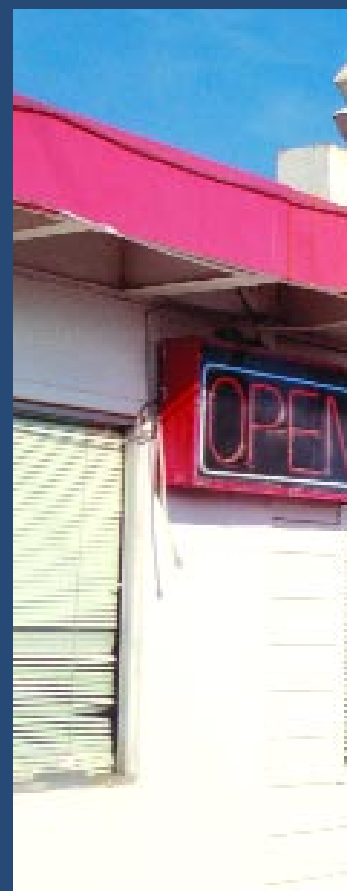
Timing, however, was not on Valentine's side. As a new owner, he was only able to construct a few buildings before World War II made it impossible to acquire the materials necessary to produce the diners. As with many manufacturing businesses during the early 1940s, Arthur Valentine's would have to wait out the war.

Valentine Manufacturing Company formally incorporated in 1947, and with building materials now readily available, business took off. Arthur Valentine was finally his own boss. And it was gratifying knowing that part of the charm of the Valentine Diner was that owners of the new diners also had a chance to run their own businesses. A post-war sales brochure for the Valentine company in fact lauds the benefits of self-employment: "The individual operator is assured of a permanent,



**Valentine**  
**Portable**  
**Stainless Steel**

**307 N. Main**





# Manufacturing, Inc.

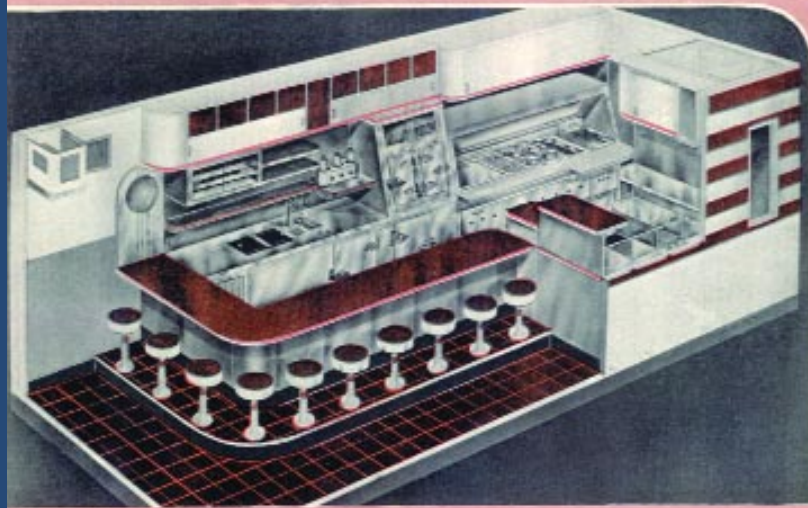
Steel Sandwich Shops  
and Lunch Room Equipment

New — Modern

Tel. 7-4287

WICHITA, KANS.

## 10 STOOL MASTER MODEL



The interior of the new Master Model reflects its name—it is master craftsmanship—shows in the gleaming, stainless steel, shining glass and matching color of the serving counter and upholstered seats. The floor is of long-wearing asphalt tile or inlaid linoleum.

It is engineered to give the highest efficiency, the quickest service, in order to assure you fast turn-overs. It is designed to attract the very best class of trade, serve them quickly and bring them back to pleasant surroundings—and, most important of all, TO MAKE MONEY FOR YOU.



FLOOR PLANS, PAGE 6

Courtesy American Diner Museum



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Ad in the 1951 Wichita City Directory; illustrations from the ca. 1952 and ca. 1957 Valentine Manufacturing, Inc., catalogs; Liggett's Kitchen, Russell; Valentine Manufacturing logo; Arthur Valentine, ca. 1950; Robert Brincefield and Danny Dean, former owners of Brint's Diner, Wichita.

Courtesy American Diner Museum



Courtesy American Diner Museum



“OLD-TIMER VALENTINERS”—NO LONGER OPERATING AS DINERS (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE): West Pacific Avenue, Salina; East Pacific Avenue, Salina; Hwy. 24, Perry; West Main, Enterprise; Hwy. 169, Welda; city ballpark, Lane; near Ellsworth at Interstate 70 and Hwy. 156 (exterior and interior).





self-sustaining revenue where he becomes his own boss and is not subservient to someone else. His immediate family may assist in the operation of each unit, as only two operators are required on each shift when it is running to capacity. During slow periods of business, one operator can do all the work and give good and efficient service, thereby holding the overhead to a minimum, with corresponding high profits.”

Although the initial investment may have given pause to some new owners, Valentine enacted a system that made it easy for them to pay off the purchase price. Many diners were equipped with small wall safes located just inside the door. Operators would put a percentage of each day’s profits in the wall safe, and a Valentine representative would make regular rounds, removing the payment from each diner on the route. Failure to make the payment brought the threat of, quite literally, removing the building.

How would you recognize a Valentine Diner? They’re best described as small boxes. Definitely not fancy and not even particularly attractive, the little square-sided structures were designed to be easily moved on flatbed trucks. Inside, stools were placed around a counter, which kept the customer out of the work area. There were no booths, and the size and design of the diner depended on the type of business the owner operated; operators who were willing to provide curb service needed their pick-up window situated away from the cook and/or dishwasher.

A 1948 ad in the *Wichita Eagle* implies that Valentine had already shipped buildings to thirty-eight states, although this may have included Ablah’s business before the war. Each diner built by Valentine had affixed to one wall a small metal plate proclaiming it an official Valentine Diner. The total number of diners constructed in Wichita is not known, but two thousand is a minimal estimate. And always thinking of new business opportunities, the astute entrepreneur also advertised a line of stainless steel restaurant fixtures.

**A**rthur Valentine died in 1954, having already relinquished some of his duties because of health concerns. The company struggled on for a few years, and in 1957 it was purchased by the Radcliff family. The diners built during the Radcliff years were kept small for portability, but the design allowed for additional

sections for booths. Furthermore, new structures were created for other uses. Arthur Valentine had designed some buildings for ice cream stores and apparently for liquor stores after Prohibition was repealed in Kansas in 1949, but the Radcliffs went further, making car washes and drive-up banks, to name a few. The diversification was necessary to attract business, but it wasn't enough to keep up with the competition brought on by such businesses as developing burger chains and general urban growth. By the end of the 1960s Valentine was slowly fading away, and by 1975 it was gone for good.

Today a joint project between the Kansas State Historical Society and the American Diner Museum of Providence, Rhode Island, is under way to locate existing Valentine Diners across the United States and document the history of the famous Wichita diner company. In some places, individuals or groups have purchased diners for personal use or to restore them to their original function. The Coronado-Quivira Museum in Lyons, Kansas, has possible plans to restore its Valentine building as does the Lakewood Heritage Center in Colorado. A number of diners survive, and although many have been converted for other uses, many more stand abandoned and deteriorating.

Fortunately, several Valentines are still operating as diners in Kansas and can be found in Cheney, Eureka, Garden Plain, Junction City, Liberal, Meade, Norton, Topeka, and Wichita, as well as at locations beyond our state's borders. "The diner is like a family reunion every day," said Danny Dean, former owner of Brint's in Wichita. But it was a contented customer who may have best put into words the legacy of this Kansas creation: "One thing is sure," he said, "you'll find a lot of heart in the old Valentine Diner." KH

If you have information about a Valentine Diner or the Valentine Manufacturing Company, we'd like to know! Please contact Blair Tarr at the Kansas State Historical Society, 6425 SW Sixth Avenue, Topeka, KS 66615; 785-272-8681, ext 427; [btarr@kshs.org](mailto:btarr@kshs.org). You may also contact the American Diner Museum at P.O. Box 6022, Providence, RI 02940; 401-723-4342; or visit them at [www.americandinermuseum.org](http://www.americandinermuseum.org).

BLAIR TARR is a museum curator for the Kansas State Historical Society. He has researched Valentine Diners for more than fifteen years, collecting documentary artifacts, photographs, and interviews related to his subject.





“STILL TAKING ORDERS”—CURRENTLY OPERATING DINERS  
 (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE):  
 Patty’s Place, 2134 North  
 Kansas Avenue, Topeka; Brint’s  
 Diner, 4834 East Lincoln, Wi-  
 chita; original Valentine serial  
 number plate; Dyne-Quik, 1202 North  
 Broadway, Wichita; Stacy’s Restaurant  
 (interior and exterior), 118 West Flint  
 Hills Boulevard, Junction City.

