



An American *in* Paris

The amazing
voyage of
New Jersey's
Clarksville Diner.

by Peter Primavera



How was I going to tell NJDOT that right in the middle of their highest priority project was a historically significant diner, of all things?

In 1986 I was conducting a study for New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) along Route One, between Trenton and New Brunswick. NJDOT was planning to widen the highways and build several overpasses. One of the highest priorities on the project was the intersection at Quaker Bridge Road and Route 1, where NJDOT wanted to build a grade-separated cloverleaf, thus eliminating the stop lights and increasing the safety and capacity of the intersection. This project had extreme priority at NJDOT.

We deployed historians, architectural historians, and archaeologists to investigate all possible historical resources which could be there, and that could potentially be affected by the proposed project. A great deal of historical research preceded the field studies.

I will never forget the day the architectural historians called to inform me there was a diner immediately adjacent to Route 1 that was clearly intact and eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. I had the greatest confidence in their judgment and professional evaluation, so the news sent my heart into my throat instantly. How was I going to tell NJDOT that right in the middle of their highest priority project was a historically significant diner, of all things?

One must recall this was about the time that Chester Liebs from University of Vermont had introduced the concept of roadside architecture in American as a significant theme and a resource worthy



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of preservation. To my knowledge no one had ever told NJDOT, an agency responsible for maintaining, building and widening roads, that something could be historically significant because it was designed to service the vehicular travelling public. This could open a Pandora's Box of gas stations, motels, diners, and the like which were specifically designed to be along the roadsides of American's rapidly growing vehicular economy.

The Clarksville Diner was an absolutely perfect and completely intact Silk City Diner from 1940, (see below for information about Silk City Diners). It was still operating and looked as if it has rolled off the factory floor the day before. Even the interior was historically intact.

It had been placed hardly fifty-feet from the edge of Route 1—but worse, it was located right where we needed to build a high-speed deceleration lane which would take vehicles from northbound Route 1 onto eastbound Quaker Bridge Road. It was in the worst possible place for our project, and for the diner.

All the involved parties agreed it was historically significant, so what to do? We explored numerous alternatives, including moving the diner back from the road. After numerous meetings, in depth study, and engineering analysis, the NJDOT engineers were able to shorten the off



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ramp design, which allowed us to avoid the diner. No simple trick. The National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 study was then completed, the diner was saved, and the road would be built.

But then the *really* interesting story begins.

After a couple years of construction DOT had completed the very much-needed overpass. Then I received a call from an official at NJDOT.

“Peter, have you seen the overpass?”

“Yes, it looks great”

“Peter, have you seen the diner we did all that work to avoid and save?”

“Well no, the last time I passed by there the traffic was busy and I was not looking in that direction.”

“Well, it’s gone! Some guy from Iowa showed up and bought it. It is on its way to Iowa. We did all that work to save it in compliance with the state and federal preservation laws, and some guy just shows up, buys it, and carts it away.”

And so the saga began. A restaurateur named Gordon Tindall, a New Jersey native, now from Decorah, Iowa, who loved diners had seen it, loved it, bought it, and was trucking it to Iowa. He did this all with his own money, so he was not subject to all of the state and federal laws



The article...
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which applied to NJDOT.

We made some inquiries and, sure enough, Mr. Tindall was restoring it beautifully. It took several years to do.

Sadly, after four years of restoration a large truck swerved off the road in Iowa and hit the diner, doing heavy damage to the exterior. Mr. Tindall returned to New Jersey to successfully find replacement parts.

He operated the diner for six years, but it eventually failed financially. It would seem the “Jersey Diner Addiction” was not transferrable to Iowa, though he made every effort to make a go of it. Mr. Tindall had also gotten the diner listed on the National Register of Historic Places—in Iowa!

About twenty years passed, and the Clarksville Diner had faded from memory—at least from mine. Trips up and down Route 1 always elicited the memory of the shiny Silk City diner, but I assumed it was probably in some sad state of ruins in Iowa.

Until one day in 2010 a friend sent me an article from the internet. Now remember, in 1986 when we did the original studies we had our first Apple 2C—no internet, no cell phones, and two IBM Selectric typewriters. The article, with photos, showed the Clarksville Diner sitting in the middle of a massive modern corporate office complex. In fact it was the headquarters for the French National Television network. WHAT!?!?!?

Yes, someone from the *French* network has heard about the dinner,



Silk City Diners:

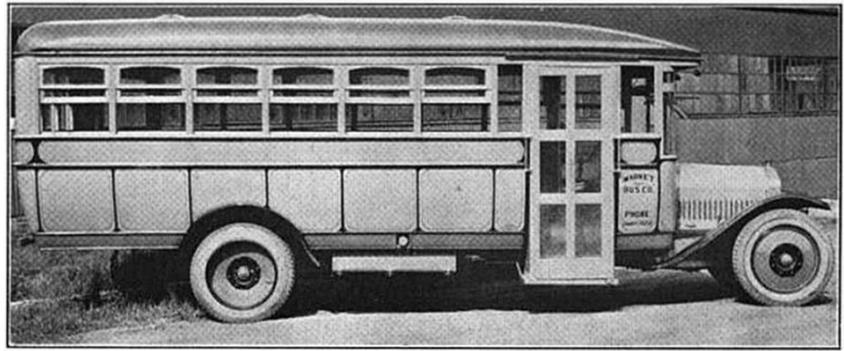
From: <http://www.silkcitydiners.com>

The Paterson Wagon Company, later renamed the Paterson Vehicle Company, was founded in 1886 by Everett Abbot Cooper. They began building and selling carriages, business wagons, harness, horse goods and bicycles using the tag line in their letterhead, "Everything for a Horse." By 1900 they added "Automobiles Rubber Tires" to their letterhead and dropped bicycles thereby keeping up with the evolving transportation industry. Interestingly, Henry Ford would not enter auto manufacturing until 1903...The Coopers were, indeed, pioneers in the nascent auto-building industry.

In 1927, Everett and his sons decided to add on to their automobile, truck and bus body building business by offering Silk City Diners. Why Silk City Diners? Because, at the time, Paterson, N.J. was the center of the silk trade and manufacturing industry in the U.S.

What made Paterson Vehicle Company so unique was that they discontinued building custom-made diners, as was the standard of their industry, and picked up on Henry Ford's idea of "mass production" and applied it to diners. They built six to eight units at a time using different color schemes, and were able to offer lower-priced diners with a "4 Year Payment Plan," which they aggressively advertised.

The Paterson Vehicle Company went on to become one of the most prolific builders of that most nostalgic of American icons, The Diner.



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Before they started manufacturing diners, Silk City Diners was known as Paterson Vehicle Company. (From their website: <http://www.silkcitydiners.com>)

decided it would be a great amenity to their massive modern HQ in Paris. So it was purchased from Mr. Tindall, moved, further restored, and can now be found at Espace Lummiere 48 Qual du Jour, France, the address of the French National Television headquarters.

As you have probably anticipated, I thought of asking Gordon Bond, GSL Editor-In-Charge if I could visit the diner for this article, but I knew the question would not be well received.

Of additional interest is the fact that the diner was de-listed from the National Register when it was move out of the country, which is certainly understandable. I have made numerous inquiries to determine if the current owner or the French agencies intend to have it landmarked under French law, but have not yet gained a reliable answer.

So, a Silk City diner, built in 1940, made its way from Paterson to Lawrence Township, then to Decorah, Iowa, then across the Atlantic Ocean to France.



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