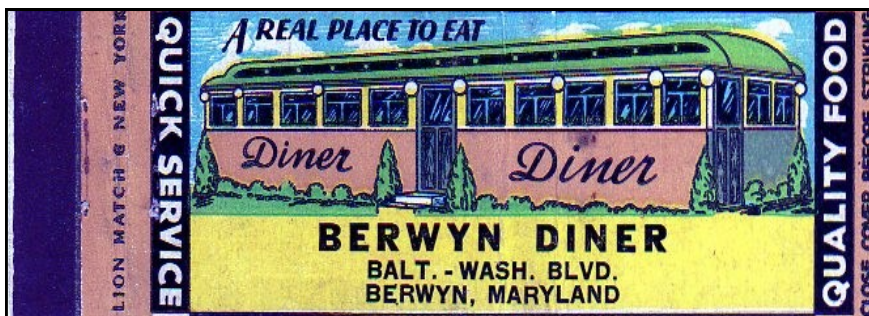


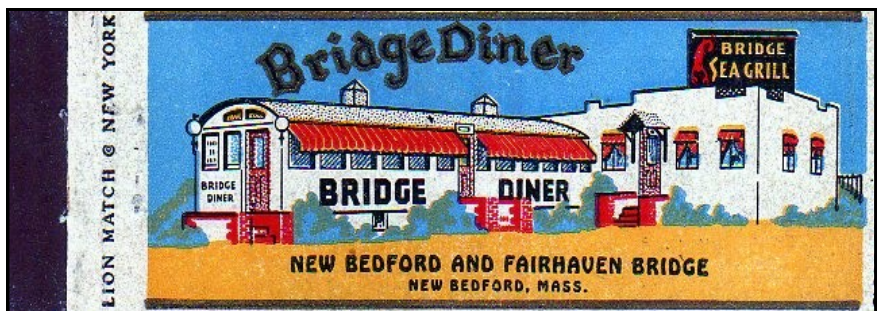
# Collecting Full-Length Diners

by  
Mike Prero



sought-after. Many of these covers represent match art at its zenith. The details, the colors...they herald a call from a bygone era, sadly, never to be seen again.

What is a 'diner?' (for you youngsters) Well, it's bigger than a hot dog stand and smaller than a regular restaurant. As you can see by the covers pictured here, they were traditionally small, rectangular, boxcar affairs. Inside, there would be a counter with a long row of stools, and, if there was enough space, a few tables or booths.



The topic of Diners, itself, is loaded with nostalgia. There are Diner organizations, Diner preservation societies, Diners that are designated as historical sites. They have a very fanatical following, with books being published about them, videos, etc. The

late Hank Northam was into Diners. He gave me a video on them a number of years ago at an AMCAL convention. It was fascinating.

The history of the diner is rich in flavor and pleasure, unlike, perhaps, diner food itself. In 1827, Walter Scott of Providence, RI, took a regular horse-drawn freight wagon and outfitted it with some food serving equipment and set out to town loaded with pies, sandwiches, and coffee. Success! Sam Jones was one of Scott's customers and had the mind of an entrepreneur. He built a few wagons for himself; the competition grew, and the lunch car industry was on its way.

Then along came a man from Worcester, MA, one Thomas Buckley. He had more style, creativity, and flair, and he recognized that these lunch wagons could use some aesthetic refinement. He started building lunch wagons that were more appealing to look at and more pleasant to be around. These waggons had chrome fixtures, ceramic tiling, marble counters, mirrors, and stained glass windows with painted scenes and etched figures on the outside panels. Diner names were adorned with gold filigree, and gold leaf scrollwork decorated entire surfaces. All this was his way of merchandising and inviting the customer to good, cheap, fast food.

Meanwhile, horse-drawn trolley cars were being replaced by the newer electric versions. People started buying the older trolleys for next to nothing and outfitting them with food preparation equipment. Architecturally, the trolley became an important influence on diner manufacturers in the 1920s and 1930s. The most striking feature was the monitor roof, which gave diners the railroad car look. It was Charlie Gemme (in charge of the Worcester Lunch Car Co. for 55 years) who pioneered classic diner design.

The all-night, 24-hour business feature that we associate with diners was a result of the lunch wagons' being forced into permanent locations on streets. Lunch wagons did business from dusk to 10 AM the next morning when they were forced off the streets by many city ordinances because many locals thought the wagons were an eyesore. So, to avoid this 'Cinderella' syndrome, operators dismantled their wheels after finding a good location for a permanent site. The 24-hour business was born, and the diner was on its way to becoming an important feature in American culture.

In the 1920s, diner manufacturing started to gain ground, and the legendary "Pop" Tierney became the next innovator in the field. He called his lunch cafes "diners," which stemmed from railroad dining cars. The Tierney diner was built at his plant in New Rochelle, NY. He was also the one that introduced tables, booths, and even toilets to diners. Paramount diners were innovative in devising a system of splitting the diner lengthwise when it was transported; the two halves were shipped separately, and then joined together late.

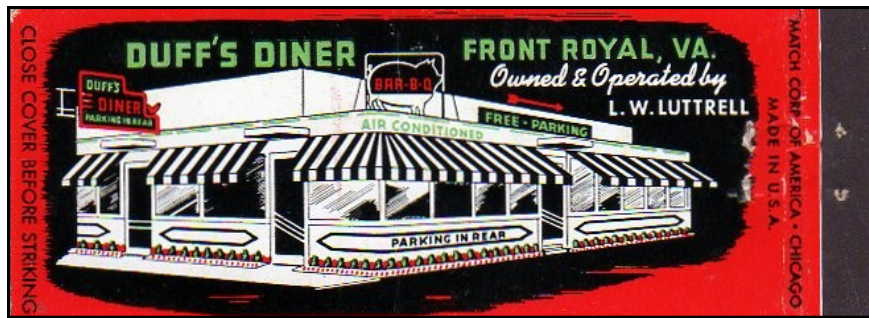
Most diners were built in the Northeast, with the majority of manufacturers located in New Jersey. The most famous builder in the Midwest was the Valentine Manufacturing Co., in Wichita, KS. The Kullman Dining Car Co., in Avenel, NJ, remains today the oldest still in operation, and now the largest as well.

Most of the covers in this category come from the 1940s and 1950s. There are some modern examples, but, as you could guess, they lack the awesome attention to detail and are few in number, since the day of the diner has also come and gone and goodly number of years ago.

What constitutes a Diner cover? Well, there are two schools of thought on that. Purists would say that the cover actually has to say "Diner" on it, and, in fact, 99% of them do. However, **look at the "Rippowam Grill" cover pictured on the next page.** It most certainly is a diner in every aspect except its actual name.



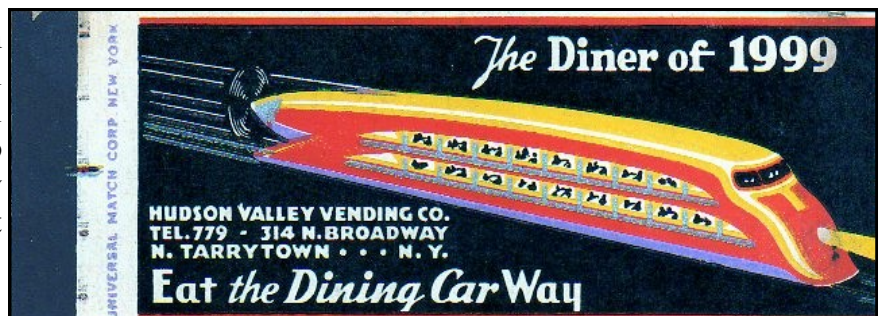
Thus, I put it in my own collection, making me less than a purist, I suppose...but a Diner by any other name is still a Diner...to me. It's always up to the individual collector; no one is going to find fault with you for setting your own standards for your own collections. It's just when you go to trade that 'grill' cover to a Diner collector that the question might arise on whether or not *he's* going to also see it as a Diner.



This is definitely not an easy category. Them's that got'em tend to keep'em! The covers are hard to come by, and there weren't that many to begin with. Consequently, they

command a high prices. But, this is a rewarding category. In 1988, Joe Onofri reported having 676 Diners, but I don't know how many of those were full-lengths. Mel Garrett, KS, had 113 in 1993. There is no listing of Full-length Diners.

Because they're so few and so highly prized, you normally don't see these in trades, unless you've set up a special trade with a fellow enthusiast, but even finding a collector who has them to trade is quite difficult. Occasionally they pop up in auctions, but infrequently.



As I said, this is not an easy category. Don't neglect to run ads for what you are looking for. Collectors will help you, but they have to know what you're looking for. It always surprises me how few people take advantage of their bulletin's classified ads, And, don't overlook the RMS Web Site; you can post a six-month ad for a nominal charge, or run a classified ad for 10¢ a word. *[just thought I'd throw that little plug in!]*



Full-length Diners will always be a small category, but for most collectors the covers may just have well been made out of gold!

