

THE WICHITA BEACON — KANSAS
 OCTOBER 26, 1933
 NEW \$10,000 PORCELAIN LUNCH



Here is the new Valentine Lunch, a \$10,000 all-porcelain structure done in the modern style after the building at the Century of Progress, which will be located at the corner of Beacon Lane and Market Street on the old Postoffice grounds.

NEW PORCELAIN LUNCH TO OPEN

Valentine manager of the system... The Valentine system opera... several cafes and eating pla... near Wichita in the surround... territory. Their new cafe... largest all-porcelain structure... built in this country, will be... first place opened here... building is fini...



Now called Spinner's Diner, this little Valentine in Anthony, KS is still a popular gathering place. (Photos by the author.)

Sometimes you think you're familiar with a town and know where everything is. I've been to Anthony, KS many times—in fact my grandparents lived there for a number of years. The city is recently benefitting from an oil boom in the area and is showing its prosperity with several new buildings and new businesses, but as we drove down Main street we were looking for a Valentine diner building from another era.

In his book "American Diner" by Richard Gutman, he described the diner as a "prefabricated structure with counter-service hauled on to a distant site. These prefabricated diners, the prefabrication of a complete restaurant, is a uniquely American idea." The concept actually goes back to the horse-drawn lunch wagon that had its start in 1872, when Walter Scott of Providence, Rhode Island took his lunch wag

IT'S A VALENTINE



The sign by this abandoned building on the highway at the north edge of Pratt, KS says, "Jim's Auto Sales", but the center portion of the building was originally a Valentine Diner. To identify, look at the rounded edges, and the white porcelain panels covering the outside. It is also easy to identify it as a Valentine because of the small parapet above where the door was originally located. (Staff photos)



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on and served meals to workers at their jobsite.

But Arthur Valentine had another idea and created an industry that lasted more than 30 years in Kansas. A native of Illinois who came to Kansas in 1914, for a time he sold automobiles in Great Bend. But he became his own boss when he opened a lunchroom in Hazelton, KS with his wife, Ella. This was the first of many restaurants that operated under the 'Valentine Lunch System'. It's possible he may have had 50 restaurants in operation in the 1920s and '30s.

Valentine thought being his own boss was important, though still renting or leasing buildings from other people. He came up with the idea of a manufactured building that would be fully equipped, with everything needed to operate a restaurant when it was moved onto a new site.

At the same time, in Wichita, the Ablah Hotel Supply Company was building small portable restaurants and had them operating in Kansas, Missouri, Texas and Oklahoma. Some of them were operated under the name of White Crown or Little Palace. They had even built a diner for Valentine. So it's not surprising that Valentine began working for the Ablah company as a salesman, while he continued to operate his lunch systems. His new employment gave him connections with the sheet metal workers in the factory. It wasn't long before Ablah wanted out of the restaurant business, and Valentine was more than ready to take over and develop his diners.

One of the first structures was announced in the **Wichita Beacon** on Oct. 26, 1933. A "\$10,000 porcelain home" operated under the Valentine Lunch System was placed at the corner of Beacon Lane and Market street in Wichita. It was promoted as the largest all-porcelain structure ever built in the country. The interior and exterior were covered with porcelain. This building was bolted together in metal sections by the Metal Building Company of Wichita and its supplier, Martin Perry Company of New York. The menus included short orders, regular dinners, lunches and sandwiches. Valentine stated they would even offer curb service.

Back in Anthony, we found Spinners Diner in plain sight at 416 west Main. When they say a small building, they mean a small building. On the end of the building was the Valentine company logo painted on the white exterior. The large windows around the front and one end gave the



Arthur and Ella Valentine in their Hazelton restaurant, ca. 1930. (Below) A view of a diner being shipped. (Photos from the Kansas Historical Society).



illusion of a more spacious interior. Ten stools mounted on a raised ledge followed a counter that curved around one end. Stainless steel was everywhere, and helped reflect the light.

Major Weiss, the owner, was seated at the lunch counter. He purchased the business in May of 2011. Nearly everything was original, with a few additions to help with menu items. Yet the little business is still contained in its original shell. The diner was moved to Anthony in 1943 and operated by the Green family under the name The Green Spot. It happens to sit over a basement where they have a freezer and ice maker. The building, which had fallen into serious disrepair before it was restored, has black

and white checkerboard tile floor that brightens up the small space. Weiss said he would like to find the original silverware and dishes that came with the Valentine diners, which would make it even more authentic.

On the wall just inside the door is the deposit box. Original owners were required to put a percentage of their day's profits in the box, to pay off the diner. A Valentine employee with a key would make rounds to collect the payments at each location. If the owner defaulted on his payments, it was quite possible that Valentine would come and load the building up and haul it away.

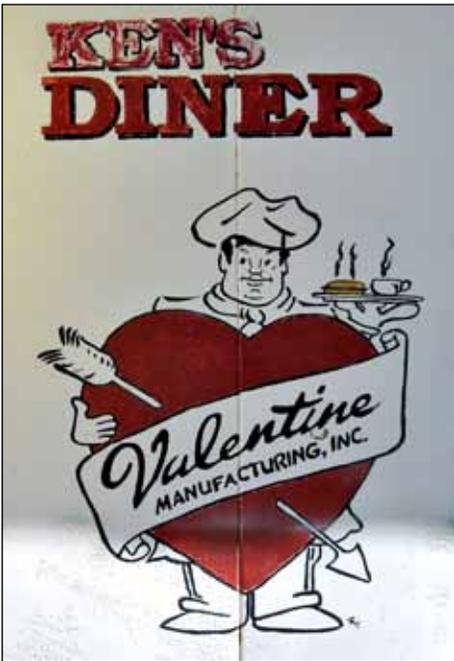
Spinners Diner is open from 7 a.m. - 2 p.m. and 6-9 p.m. Monday through

Saturday. The menu is stuck on the wall along with a sign that says "Order what you want, eat what you get." He offers a variety of sandwiches, and says his double cheeseburgers sell the best. He has his own spin on dishes, and sells deep-fried quarter-pound hot dogs and a lot of the chili cheese variety. Friday night a regular clientele stops by for fried catfish. Don't be surprised when you stop in to find something new that he's trying, like chili cheese pie, fried sandwiches or his barbecue pork cooked in lemonade.

The stools at the counter were placed for a generation that had narrower 'behinds', but then that was Valentine's intent to have a friendly atmosphere and a family-run business. Weiss' children have worked in the diner and he employs high school students in the summer, but there's only room for one or two people behind the counter. Everything is efficiently placed to give the "finger-tip control" that Valentine promoted in his flyers. Picnic tables sit in front of the diner if you are claustrophobic or aren't interested in being sociable. This model of diner, which closely resembles the No. 1 Master, has a walk-up window where you can place your order. There was a variety of designs for Valentine diners. Many models had booths including a version that came out in the late '60s and had enough booth space to seat 64.

After Arthur Valentine had taken over the Ablah business, it wasn't long before rationing for World War II affected his production and he had to put the business on hold. In 1947 the Valentine Manufacturing Company was formed in Wichita. He was now the owner of the company and had fixtures, trucking and construction under one roof and under his control. In the early years he had only five or six employees. Valentine wanted to emphasize ownership of a business to his customers. The following was published in his brochure after the war, when men and women were look





This logo is painted on the outside of what is now Spinner's Valentine Diner. They were shipped all over the country and to England! There are a number of diners still operating in Kansas.



The wall safe on the inside of Spinner's Diner. Every Valentine Diner had one of these. (Photos by the author.)

ing for jobs in the post-war economy:
"The individual operator is assured of a permanent, 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."

Valentine diners were shipped all across the United States. It was estimated that there were 2,000 diners in Wichita alone. Some of the buildings were modified to meet current demands. When Kansas repealed Prohibition in 1949, the little buildings were sold with only a few shelves in the interior to be used as liquor stores.

Arthur Valentine had been a success with his lunch counter diners, but his health was failing and he turned the business over to others while remaining on as a consultant. He died in Wichita on September 3, 1954.

The business continued on after his death and changed ownership a number of times. The Radcliff family purchased it in 1958. The Valentine company moved to new fireproof quarters in 1959. In 1960 the office and storage area of the building burned, destroying all the company records, supplies and equipment. The manufacturing building was untouched and the firm continued to add a new line of buildings such as portable dry cleaning stations, ticket stations for turnpikes, buildings for used car lots and offices for service stations.

The fast food industry helped to put an end to the diner business, but there are a number of buildings still in use across the United States. Brint's Diner in Wichita is another example of the original details laid out by Valentine, but most of the small buildings have now found lives as a business other than a restaurant, and their original interiors are gone.

Today it would not be possible for a couple to make a living off of a diner with only 10 chairs, but Weiss -- and many like him -- have a sentimental respect for a day and age when a family could run their own little business in a Valentine diner. 

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