

The Lunch Wagons and Diners of Fredonia
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2011

Although lunch wagons were being manufactured by 1887 and diners by 1891, the first local reference is in *The Fredonia Censor* of 9 April 1919 which had an article headed “Chateau de Hot Dog.” It explained that the Village Trustees were wrestling with the deep questions of “when is a wagon not a wagon,” “when is a building not a building,” and if a building is horse-drawn onto a lot, has it been erected or not? “Many persons who have objected to the modern D.A.V.& P.—B.&L.E. 1882 model Lunch wagon now gracing the Main street side of the former Columbia site have urged that some action be taken by the Village Trustees. The Building Code applies if the wagon is a building. On the other hand, if the building is a wagon, it does not apply.” With “lunch wagons invading the sacred and very disreputable looking Columbia Hotel property, West Main street is in a bad way.”

The Hotel Columbia (*1 Park Place*) had burned down on 27 January 1918 leaving a rubble strewn block that took time to clear. Apparently, at least one lunch wagon was put on the site. It seems to have been in the shape of a railroad diner or a streetcar, but why 1882? Probably the *Censor*'s idea of humor. It is even possible there was not room in the 2 April issue, as close to April 1st as a weekly newspaper could get. What the Trustees thought is less clear, because there is not a word of it in their Minutes. What is in the Minutes, of the 14 April meeting, is notice of a petition to the Board from Warren J. **Hall** for permission to put a temporary lunch wagon on the site, which was granted. The car may, in fact, have been the one sitting on the empty lot waiting a decision when April Fool's Day came around.

On 29 June 1920, the former owners of the Columbia Hotel sold the property to A. William **Russo**. When he later began clearing and excavating, the diner had to be moved off which accounts for the ad Hall placed in the *Censor* of 17 May 1922: “FOR SALE—Lunch wagon 22 feet long, 11 feet wide. Inquire Hall's Restaurant, 6 Center street.” In fact, the correct number was 8 Center Street. **Hall** had taken over the restaurant that had been there for a number of years run by Ernest **Michalski**.

On 27 March 1924 Harry V. **Hotchkin** applied to the Board for permission to put a dining car on a lot he had purchased at *41-43 West Main Street*. He had purchased the dining car from Silver Creek and, because no photographs or drawings were available, he included a detailed description of the car's construction and some sketches of how it would look on the lot. Unfortunately, according to the *Censor* of 16 April 1924, a Samuel **Lyon** of Westfield and a young lady friend “were soused to the gills” at a dance hall on Roberts Road after which they came into Fredonia. “Not liking the appearance of the new lunch wagon on Main street, they started to tear it down.” Apparently not too much damage was done.

That Main Diner first appears in the city directories in 1925 as the Main Lunch Wagon. By 1930 it is being run by Mrs. Bertha **Hall**, Warren **Hall's** wife. A. K. **Dickinson** bought it from a Mrs. **Burlage** in 1942. In 1951 it was sold and moved off. The property owner, Raymond **Arnold**, had a permanent, brick structure put up named **Arnold's** Restaurant. According to a *Censor* article of 28 February 1952, the then owner of the diner, Mike **Palermo**, was moving it to a lot near the Kimball Stand at Rte. 380 and Rte. 60.

It was not too long after the Main Lunch Wagon appeared on West Main Street in 1924 that “Mr. **Mulholland** of the Dunkirk Dining Car Corporation” petitioned the Village Board for

permission to install “one of their steel-constructed dining cars on the Park Garage property.” That was on 8 February 1926. The **Mulholland** Spring Co. of Dunkirk had been in operation since 1881. In 1913 they began manufacturing automobile bodies at their Washington Avenue plant and in September 1925 they formed the Dunkirk Dining Car Corporation to sell the dining cars they were beginning to build. These steel-framed cars were 30 feet long and ten feet wide. The “Park Garage property” was at 9 Day Street where the Park Garage and Park Diner were located. Walter **Ehmke** had the diner in 1926 and it was taken by J. C. **Donnelly** in 1927. The *Censor* of 9 May 1928 reported that “Our enterprising restaurateur, Jack **Donnelly**, has opened another lunch car. This one at ‘Kendalville,’ out East Main road near Silver Creek. (“Kendalville” referred to the Kendall camp grounds and service station on East Main road.) Donnelly apparently ran into financial difficulties during the depression since his lunch wagon is listed in the County Treasurer’s notice of tax delinquents in 1931 and after. **Donnelly** moved the lunch wagon out on East Main Street opposite Cleveland Avenue at 174-178 East Main Street. In April 1933, George **Kopp** bought the diner and planned to move it to 24 West Main Street.

A serious fire that destroyed the buildings at 20 through 28 West Main Street had occurred on 1 March 1933, which made the location available for **Kopp**. He intended to make improvements to the dining car before moving it to the property he was leasing from Mrs. Josephine **McPhee** who owned the **Petz** Bros. building at 24 West Main Street and from Edward **Crimens** who owned the **Crimens** Cigar Store at 26 West Main. When the refurbished Park Diner was relocated, it became 24 West Main Street. In August 1948, the then owner, Harry **Stanton**, moved the Park Diner one lot west to 26 West Main Street. Ollie M. **Finch** had it by 1961 and Frank **DeJohn** bought it in October 1966. By 1969 it was Richard **DeJohn** as proprietor and by 1972 it was transformed into Richard’s Park Pub or just Park Pub. It has been altered and much added to as well as renamed the Park Pub Deli and Spaghetti Factory (1991) and **DeJohn’s** Italian Spaghetti House (2004).

The assessment rolls for 1926, 1927 and 1928 show a Theresa **Tucholski** with a “lunch wagon” on Water Street, no numbered address given. (She may have been Theresa the wife of Walter **Tucholski** of Dunkirk.) However, by the time of the 1930 Directory, Walter **Johnson** had a diner at 16 Water Street, probably the earlier lunch wagon’s location. A 1935 map of Fredonia business locations has an entry for the Water Street Diner at 16 Water Street. The 1938 Directory lists it as a restaurant although a September article in the *Censor* refers to it as “**Johnson’s** Diner” being remodeled. However, the 1944-45 Directory lists 16 Water Street as “vacant.”

One other diner on record is the Family Diner about at today’s 3771 East Main Road (the Paper Factory). It was opened by Sam and Joseph **Militello** in 1949 and sold to William “Irish Billy” **Collins** of Arcade in September 1962. He had it until 1968 when it was sold to Blossom **Domenico** who renamed it the Family Kitchen. By the time of the 1972 Directory it was standing vacant, and was gone from the site thereafter.