



THE HISTORIC COUNTY

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NEWSLETTER OF THE
PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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SILK CITY DINER STILL ALIVE AND KICKING

by Michael Cervine

About a year ago, a special exhibit on the Silk City Diners was exhibited on the third floor of Lambert Castle. This nostalgic display of pictures, advertisements, articles and artifacts served to remind New Jerseyites that these ubiquitous, often taken-for-granted eateries had their origins in our fair state. As a kick-off to this exhibit, our Museum Director and Curator, Heather Garside arranged for Michael Gabriele, author of *The History of Diners in New Jersey* to present on the history of diners in New Jersey and, in particular, the Paterson Vehicle Company. In researching for his book, Gabriele traveled to many diner sites, from various manufacturers and traced the history of these relics of the mid-twentieth century. One needs to be reminded that the majority of the roadside restaurants we see today are not the diners of the past; they have been built on-site like many commercial buildings and individual homes, while a true diner was manufactured, shipped via truck or rail to the site and then assembled and connected to utilities. Few of these original products exist today, and of those that have survived, the vast majority have been renovated several times and bear little resemblance to their original design. Fewer still are those manufactured by The Paterson Vehicle Company. Gabriele interviewed many people involved in the manufacturing and owning of diners and several of these individuals attended the Lambert Castle presentation. This article will tell the story of how one couple is keeping the history of Paterson and the Paterson Vehicle Company alive for future generations.

While mixing with the other attendees of the presentation, I happened to talk with Jeff and Vonnie Castree, who own a fully restored Silk City Diner which operates full time in Baraboo, Wisconsin. I suspect in any random group of a thousand people, not even one would know where Baraboo is or for what it is famous. However, since my daughter's family lives about

one hour from Baraboo in Wisconsin Rapids, I was very familiar with the area and got that amateur historian's itch to see it in person.

Located about an hour north of Madison, in approximately the center of the state, Baraboo, both on the map and in person appears to be another sleepy little Midwestern town. But this picturesque Norman Rockwell type village is also the birthplace and home of the Ringling family of Ringling Brother's Circus fame. Much of the city of Baraboo is dedicated to the history of the famous circus family and has retained many of the historic buildings and structures of that era. This is one of



A view of the Broadway Diner in its current location, Baraboo Wisconsin.

Photograph courtesy of the author.

the reasons that Jeff and Vonnie, already residents of Baraboo, decided to bring what is now known as The Broadway Diner in its original form to this historic location.

The Broadway Diner is a classic "Silk City" diner. The Silk City model was manufactured by Paterson Vehicle Company between 1924 and 1967. The Broadway Diner was built in 1954, during the golden age of diners! It was originally called the A & P Diner and found its

home in Groton Connecticut. The 1980's brought several name changes, including the Bridge diner, and the Twin Bridge diner. In 1988 the diner changed hands and became Rosie's Diner; albeit not the one from Little Ferry featured in several Bounty commercials. The diner was in operation as Rosie's until 2005, when it was replaced with another building.

Steve Harwin of Diversified Diners in Cleveland, Ohio bought the diner and had it transported to his property. Harwin's plan, as always, was to find a buyer who wanted a 1950's vintage modern stainless-steel diner. When the prospective buyer came forward, then Steve would have his team of workers update and restore the diner prior to delivery. In late 2011, those new owners came into the picture: Jeff and Vonnie Castree of Baraboo, Wisconsin. Rosie's became The Broadway Diner. An additional

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Lambert Castle, a picturesque 1892 Victorian mansion located on the Garret Mountain Reserve, is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Castle is operated and managed by the Passaic County Historical Society, a not-for-profit 501(c) educational institution.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Since its inception nearly ninety years ago Passaic County Historical Society has amassed a large collection of books, archival collections, photographs, and artifacts. These items were acquired through both purchases and donations. Up until a few years ago, there was no modern procedure in place to digitally catalog and document the collection. As a result, a complete inventory of the items in the collection has not been completed in over a decade.

In an effort to address the need for a comprehensive list of holdings, around 2004 the Society embarked on a project to digitally catalog the entire collection. The process involves photographing each artifact, creating a description and then entering this information into a museum database program called PastPerfect. Collections related staff and interns have been working diligently on this project and will continue to do so. To date, approximately 35,000 items have been entered into PastPerfect, however, much work remains to be done. It is estimated that there are 150,000 items in the collection and that number continues to grow as more artifacts are acquired.

Although this project is time consuming, the end result will be well worth the effort. It is exciting to think that at some point in the future it will be possible to digitally access every item in the collection quickly and efficiently.

Catherine Cavallo
President

THE PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY THANKS THE FOLLOWING MERCHANT SPONSORS WHO HAVE SUPPORTED OUR INITIATIVES IN 2015:

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Beacon Trust

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Passaic County Historical Society
Genealogy Club

Pencilworks

Plochs

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Serendipity Salon and Spa

Shook Funeral Home

Shop Rite of Brookdale

Shop Rite of Little Falls

Six Brothers Diner

Stager's Auto Body

Stew Leonard's of Clifton

The American Labor Museum/Botto House
National Historic Site

The Montclair Historical Society

The New Jersey Devils

The New York Giants

The New York Jets

The New York Red Bulls

Totowa Plaza Cleaners

Trader Joe's, Clifton

Valley Brook Liquors

Valley Brook Veterinary Hospital

Venus Creations

Vesta Wood Fired Pizza and Bar

Walt Disney World

Whims and Wishes

Willowbrook Golf Center

building for freezer space, restrooms and additional seating was built first, and the restored diner was moved to its current location and attached to the building in May of 2012.

Born of Italian descent, Chef Jeff Castree was destined for the culinary world when his passion for food was recognized at an early age. His relationship with food began in his family owned grocery store, Castree's Pace Maker, run by his grandfather and father, and the kitchens of his Sicilian grandmother Sara and Aunt Kate, whose meals were always an event. He then began his own career, starting as a dishwasher at the Angle Inn Diner in Rockford, Illinois. In this diner he quickly discovered his niche; small diners, where the customer and the cook develop relationships. With thirty years of experience in places like Rockford Women's Club, Rockford Hoffman House and the famous Ishnala Supper Club (where he catered to prominent guests such as Martha Stewart) and a culinary degree from Madison Area Technical College, Jeff was ready to fulfil a life-long dream of



Diner on the move. This Silk City diner car was moved from Groton CT in 2005.

Photograph courtesy of the Castrees.

owning his own diner. In Jeff's own words "I had always wanted to own a breakfast and lunch diner of my own. Living in Baraboo, WI home of the Circus World Museum, it seemed fitting to try and re-purpose a train car into a diner. I would ride my bike over to the Circus grounds to look at the beautiful train cars parked on the tracks. While researching dining cars online I stumbled upon these original 'diners' from the 1940's and 50's. I remember telling my wife, 'look honey these are already diners and they're vintage.' I was hooked."

With Jeff's love for nostalgia and the open kitchen concept and his wife's constant desire to recycle and reuse, the idea of revitalizing an old relic that had been cast aside was a sure winner. They began researching and soon found a restorer in Cleveland, known as the Diner Miner. The restorer had many diners to choose from but the only one equipped with the open kitchen concept was a 1954 Silk City Diner. It was of vital importance to Jeff and Vonnie to maintain the original integrity of the diner when having it restored. Chef Jeff and his wife Vonnie opened the Broadway Diner in May 2012, as a full service restaurant. In 2013 they

began the endeavour of adding catering to their growing business. They take great pride in serving high quality, as well as locally-sourced products. They are confident in their ability to provide patrons with the food and service everyone will enjoy, food prepared with Love!

You can find Jeff and Vonnie almost every day at the Broadway Diner cooking, serving guests, cleaning tables and doing all those necessary tasks that keeps a vibrant eatery going. Most importantly they are friendly and warm to both regulars and visitors alike, taking time out to say hello or discuss local happenings. Although my wife and I only met them on two occasions we feel like we've know them all of our lives.

All the decorating in the world will not overcome a poor menu or ill-prepared meal. The two lunches Dot, my wife, and I had there were excellent. The service was quick, although we had to wait for a table as they are very busy at the lunch hour and the quantity and quality of the meal was significantly better than I would have expected from a "diner." While I'm not particularly picky

about my food, Dot has a much more discriminating palate. But even she commented that her potato pancakes were crispy and flavourful and not at all greasy! That's quite a compliment from her. Again to quote Jeff, "our idea is to have diner fair (yes that includes eggs and toast) with an upscale twist, using as much fresh and local ingredients as possible. To be successful in this business you have to go with local demand, but also try to introduce the customer to something new and unexpected."

This amateur historian is always looking for ways to experience the past and found great success in this instance thanks to the PCHS exhibit and presentation as well as a wonderful couple who brings the Paterson past to the current and future generations in Baraboo. If you are ever in the Madison area, it's worth a trip to visit Circus World Museum and have breakfast or lunch at The Broadway Diner. If you do visit, tell Jeff and Vonnie that Mike and Dot from PCHS said "hi."

For more information and history go to Jeff & Vonnie's website at: <http://www.broadwaydinereats.com/>

Victorian Tea at Lambert Castle

April 15-17



Join us this spring for our annual Victorian Tea at Lambert Castle.

Seatings at 12 p.m. and 3 p.m. daily with a musical performance by the Four Old Parts.

Admission is \$45.

Reservations required.

To reserve a seat call (973)247-0085 ext. 201



PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Lambert Castle, 3 Valley Road
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PCHS CALENDAR OF EVENTS

February 12 **Valentine's Day Masked Ball at Lambert Castle.** 7p.m.- 11 p.m. Don a mask and join us at Lambert Castle for some dancing. Light refreshment will be served. Cash Bar. Semi-formal attire requested. Tickets \$25 per person. No one under twenty-one years will be admitted. Reservations required. Call (973)247-0085 ext 201.
Friday

March 12 **Make your own Victorian Valentine.** 1p.m.-4p.m. at Lambert Castle. Join us at Lambert Castle on Valentine's Day and make your own Victorian style Valentine. Learn about early Valentine cards and the evolution of the holiday. Regular museum admission applies.
Saturday

March 19 **Make your own Spring Basket.** 1p.m.-4p.m. at Lambert Castle. Join us at Lambert Castle and make your own Spring basket. Regular museum admission applies.
Saturday

April 15-April 17 **Lambert Castle Victorian Tea** Join us this spring for our annual Victorian Tea at Lambert Castle. Seatings at 12 p.m. and 3 p.m. daily with a musical performance by the Four Old Parts. Admission is \$45. Reservations required. To reserve a seat call (973)247-0085 ext. 201
Friday-Sunday

May 4 **Annual Quarterly Meeting:** 7 p.m., at Lambert Castle. Business meeting of the Society followed by "*The Castle*" in Ramapo State Forest presented by Richard Moon. The presentation will discuss the history of Jacob Rogers' (of Rogers Locomotive Works) Van Slyke Mansion. The story includes Warren Clark Van Slyke, an Assistant Chief of Naval Intelligence during WWI, who sought war reparations from the German government for the sinking of the Lusitania. Free admission.
Wednesday

Visit lambertcastle.org for the most up-to-date event information.