

Newsday May 6, 2005

## One Classic Diner, to go

By Joel Gershon

There are plenty of diners that offer delivery, but it's not often that a diner itself gets delivered.

That's just what the village of Liberty, N.Y., ordered up and got yesterday – after a bump in the road, of sorts – when a truck designed for oversized loads carried away the silver and blue Munson Diner that had stood at 49<sup>th</sup> street and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue since the 1940's and had served coffee, pancakes and burgers to generations of New Yorkers, 24 hours a day.

The Munson escaped from New York all right, and was almost free and clear in its new Catskill home when, the top of the diner nicked a railroad overpass along Route 17. That required a detour to Poughkeepsie, where a fine was paid and another permit was obtained before it finally arrived in Liberty, greeted by a couple of hundred cheering folks along South Main Street.

The diner will play a role in plans for Catskills revitalization. But until early yesterday, the classic-looking diner was ultra-urban, enjoying for years its share of fame from its Hell's Kitchen perch. It was featured on television shows such as "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," "Seinfeld" (it was referred to as "Reggie's" in the "Bizarro Jerry" episode) and "Law & Order," and its photo was included on an inside album cover by the rock group Foreigner.

Last summer, though, the Volvo dealership next door bought the property rights to the diner to expand the showroom to the corner, and Munson's doors were shut. But the dealership's general manager, Anthony Chianese, simply didn't have the heart to tear down the diner.

"It would have been easier and cheaper to demolish it," Chianese admitted. "But I felt it was important to preserve, so we found a way to work it out."

Chianese tried to sell the structure to Hollywood production companies for use as a set but found no buyers. Then, he was contacted by the American Diner Museum, based in Rhode Island, which had heard of his interest in preserving it and offered to help broker a deal.

First, a group from Brooklyn wanted to bring it across the East River, but that fell through. Then 15 investors from Liberty, including a lawyer, a dentist, a painter and children of a former diner operator, became interested in purchasing the diner as a potential tourist destination as part of a revitalization effort in Liberty, where countless families once vacationed at the now-defunct Grossinger's hotel.

"We see it as a *shidduch* between Liberty and Manhattan," said Gary Siegel, one of the investors, using the Yiddish term for arranged marriage.

The Liberty investors, with guidance from the museum, brought in a crew of four professional diner movers from Lancaster, Pa., led by Mel Brandt, whose first name (remember Mel's Diner on "Alice"?) couldn't be more appropriate for his line of work. Brandt estimated he's done about 50 of these jobs throughout the country and spent three days removing the diner. Finally, at 2:30 a.m. yesterday, the diner rolled out with a gyro

poster still affixed to the front door, and made a left turn on 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue on its way to its new home, about 100 miles northwest of the city.

Norman Sweeney, a street vendor who sells art outside the MoMA, lives a few blocks away and took photos of the diner being loaded onto the truck.

“This was one of the first places I ate at after I moved here from Ireland in 1987,” Sweeney said. “It wasn’t just a piece of metal – they’re taking away my diner. I’m going to miss it, and I’m definitely going to visit it up in Liberty.