

Bob's Diner comes back to life, provides trip back in time

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Bob's Diner's new owner Lana Caldwell, left, poses Friday with her crew; mother Dianna Caldwell, William Roach, Sydney McElwain, Kolton Hodges and Olivia Hodges. The diner transports patrons back to the 1950s with decor, car hops and old fashioned cooking. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

By MARY LAMBERT

- Special to the Leader & Times

A Liberal favorite since 1957 is open under new owner and manager.

A newly painted sign on North Kansas Avenue recently announced that Bob's Diner is open after a year of family health problems.

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The diner, that itty bitty 'midget place' with the giant menu, sits back off the street, squeezed between other commercial buildings at 1032 North Kansas Ave.

The new owner is Lana Caldwell, the daughter of previous owner, Dianna Caldwell, who is continuing as the "head cook."

Lana chose to take the diner back in time to the original 1950's theme, with curb service, a couple of outside picnic tables with umbrellas and '50s music.

Patrons can still come inside and sit on one of the 10 red bar stools and visit with the other customers.

Lana also has hired more staff. William Roach is the new manager and back up cook. Sydney McElwain, Olivia Hodges and Kolton Hodges work as "car hops." Lana continues as a waitress with her mom still cooking during rush hour.

For those not around in the '50s, curb service means people can drive up at the diner, honk the car's horn, and a car hop will come out and take the order.

"Customers don't have to get out of the car," Lana said. "For those who are alone, they can roll the windows down, visit with the people parked next to them, listen to the music, or sit and text friends."



The old cash register, most of the equipment, bar, and 10 stools are all original to the diner. The

diner came to Liberal in 1957 on a big trailer, ready to set down on the foundation, plug in the electric, hook up the gas and water, open the door and greet the first customers.

Bob's Diner is a historic Valentine Diner, manufactured in Wichita. Valentine Diners are best described as small boxes, definitely not fancy and not even particularly attractive. The little square-sided structures were designed to be easily moved on flatbed trucks.

Inside, stools were placed around a counter, keeping the customers out of the work area. The early models had no booths, and the size and design of the diner depended on the type of business the owner operated. All the stainless steel equipment came installed and operators who were willing to provide curb service had their 'walk-up/ pick-up' window situated away from the cook and dishwasher.

The Valentine Manufacturing, Inc. started in 1947 and closed in 1957, though Arthur Valentine had been designing and selling diners for years that he had manufactured in Wichita by other companies.

Bob's Diner has been the home of the Big Jack Burger (three hamburger patties on a 6-inch bun) and the Super Jack Burger (four patties), Carl's Famous Chili, chicken fry sandwich (which covers a dinner plate), as well as old-fashioned milk shakes and malts.

Bob's now serves five and six patty hamburgers, as well as old fashioned Bierrocks and the "best fried catfish in town," Lana said.

In the winter months, Bob's will have a 'Blue Plate Special' such as chicken and noodles. The Blue Plate Special was a standard of the '50s lunch counters everywhere.

The first owner, Bob Glassey, opened Bob's Diner in 1957 and operated it until in 1961, when he sold it to Carl Rich. Carl ran the diner assisted by Agnes Norwood as cook for 30 years.

In February 1991, Carl sold it to Dianna Caldwell, who had been serving as a waitress at the diner. Dianna, pronounced 'Di-nah,' who had grown up in a family café, became the owner and cook, hiring her three daughters, as well as the waitresses. Norwood stayed on for several years as the main cook.

In the fall of 2011, Dianna developed some health problems that sent her to Wichita and the hospital. She would return home and try to open and run the little diner, but health problems kept sending her back to Wichita. She put the diner on the market.

In the meantime, Lana kept thinking about not having the diner. It has been a special part of Lana's life for more than 20 years, and she didn't want to give it up, so she decided to buy it from her mom and reopen the diner, renewing the '50's theme.

Lana, along with friends and family, have been painting inside and out, as well as cleaning, polishing all the stainless steel equipment and counter, and purchasing some new dishes and equipment items. She hired a staff and chose new employee uniforms of red T-shirts and ball caps.

Bob's Diner, with its 10 stools, has a number of features typical of the '50s diner atmosphere. It has the same grey rubber mouse mascot that sits under the soft drink dispenser. There are the usual good-natured barbs traded between staff and the regulars, such as, "Where else can we go and get this kind of abuse and be charged for it, too?"

Bob's Diner offers a Sweetheart Special with two burgers, two fries, and two drinks. For those who don't have a sweetheart, the sign says they charge you double.

It is also the place where the local customers (businessmen, career women, truck drivers, ball players, students, barbers, salesmen, teachers, families, etc.) can visit with a stranger one day, and a week later feel like old friends.

"The diner is like a family reunion every day," Lana said.

A few years ago, the regular customers had affectionately renamed the diner "Dianna's Dump." Now with a new owner, they will have to find a new nickname for Lana's place.

One of several Valentine Diners that were in Liberal in the '50s, Bob's Diner is the only one still in operation and there are very few still around in any community or state. Many went through several remodelings and if they are still being used today, they don't even resemble a diner.

At Bob's Diner, people will find "a little diner that might be a little slow and a little backwards, but it's a whole lot of fun," Lana said. "Where else do you get coke or grape or orange soda in a bottle?"

It was a contented customer who may have put into words the legacy of this Kansas creation: "One thing is sure," he said, "You'll find a lot of heart in an old Valentine Diner."

When one visits the diner, it is a step back in time, as well as a place with great food, good company and a friendly atmosphere, according to Lana.

"We only accept cash, so be sure and stop by the ATM on the way to the diner," she said. "Hours are from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. for lunch and 5 to 8 p.m. for supper on Monday through Friday. Saturday hours are from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. The diner is closed on Sundays."