

LIBERTY BELL CAFE
(O'Neill's Streamline Diner)
19370 State Route 194
Perris
Riverside County
California

HABS No. CA-2256

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Building Survey
Pacific West Region
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

LIBERTY BELL CAFE
(O'Neill's Streamline Diner)

HABS No. CA-2256

Location: 2201 South A Street
Perris, CA 92570
(Moved from: 19370 State Route 194
Perris, CA 92570)

Latitude: 33°45'36.04" N
Longitude: 117°13'49.89" W

Present Owner: Orange Empire Railway Museum

Present Use: The Liberty Bell Cafe is currently part of the Orange Empire Railway Museum collections.

Significance: The Liberty Bell Cafe is significant as one of the last remaining streamlined roadside diners in southern California.

Historians: Margo Nayyar, Historian
California Department of Transportation
Division of Environmental Analysis, Cultural Studies Department
1120 N Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Project Information: The Liberty Bell Cafe recordation was completed as one of the mitigation measures for the Ramona Expressway Interchange project (Caltrans #08-Riv-194/215-P.M. 30.6/31.4). Photographs were taken by an unknown photographer in March 1987. The Liberty Bell Cafe was determined eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places on July 25, 1983 under Criterion C as representative of a Streamline Moderne converted railroad car roadside diner.

Date: March 2014

Part I. Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: ca.1920

The diner was converted from a railroad car for use as a diner in ca. 1920s. Accounts of the built date vary, but various newspaper articles and oral histories approximate a 1920s built date. Railroad enthusiasts date the current appearance of the diner to the mid 1930s when the Union Pacific streamliner style was popular, the style which the diner was designed after.¹ It is likely the diner was built in the 1920s and renovated in the 1930s after the streamliner style.

2. Architect: Unknown

3. Original Owner: Michael Hoskie

No other information is known about Michael Hoskie.

4. Builder/contractor: Unknown

5. Original plans and construction: The diner was originally located on the corner of U.S. Highway 395 and Van Buren Boulevard in Perris, California. In 1943, it was moved approximately 3.75 miles south to Route 194 and Martin Street in Perris, and in 1951 it was moved slightly within the same parcel to accommodate the road widening of Route 194.

The Liberty Bell Cafe was originally designed as a Pullman Vestibule Passenger railroad car, Passenger Car No. 721. It was ordered by the Santa Fe Railroad Land Improvement Co. on April 2, 1906 and was built using the Pullman Ground Plan 1764-D. When the railroad car was converted for restaurant use numerous alterations took place, including the removal of the original bench seating, replacement flooring, new exterior stucco wall cladding, the streamlined nose and window additions, as well as a kitchen addition, and a new foundation.

6. Alterations and additions: Alterations detailed only pertain to the streamliner design in which the diner is significant.

Two notable exterior alterations include the addition of permastone veneer under the belt course, and metal awnings along the west façade. Both were added in the 1960s.

¹ Charlene Keltz, "The Preservation and Restoration of the Liberty Bell Cafe," Master's thesis project, California State University Dominguez Hills, Fall1991; John Snyder, "Liberty Bell Cafe," HPSR original DPR form, February 1982; Orange Empire Railway Museum "Rails West," <http://www.railswest.com/OERMguide.html>, accessed February 1, 2012.

B. Historic Context

The Liberty Bell Cafe was built from an original 1906 Pullman Vestibule Passenger railroad car, Passenger Car No. 721. It was ordered by the Santa Fe Railroad Land Improvement Co. on April 2, 1906 and was one of twenty-five coaches built from the Pullman Ground Plan 1764-D. Like many railroad and streetcars retired in the 1920s, this former 1906 Santa Fe passenger car was re-used as a roadside diner, and adopted a streamline design.²

Streamlining generally implies simplifying the design, and reducing the physical and visual weight by eliminating extraneous details, giving the “impression of speed, efficiency, and progress.”³ It is based on the naturally efficient shapes which offer less resistance to air or water, minimizing turbulence. The streamline style design emerged in the 1930s and was widely accepted since it evoked an emotional response toward modernity and a future made better through technology.

The Zeppelin, a giant airship designed in Germany, was a major inspiration for streamlined design, as was the public's fascination with airplanes and steamships. The grandiose and technologically advanced equipment inspired and promised progress from the destitution of the Depression era.

Railroad companies, such as the Union Pacific, quickly began developing streamlined railroad cars. The “City of Salina” was the first streamlined example developed, and one of a series developed called the “City Series.”⁴

Streamlining entered architectural design through vernacular designs, such as roadside diners. Diners, “were the original quick-lunch emporiums and their interior design represented cleanliness and speed.”⁵ By the late 1930s, the Worcester Lunch Car Company and the Sterling Diners began building diners with bullet-shaped ends and neon lights, and called them streamliners. While literally thousands of such diners were created during the 1920s and the 1930s, some conversions and some of new construction, roadside America rapidly developed a vocabulary of fanciful architecture including streamlined diners, giant hot dogs and oranges, milk bottles, and the like.⁶

Railroad cars were well-suited for use as diners: they were sturdy, cheap, and easily movable. They also symbolize the rise of roadside services, which developed during the 1920s to serve the increasing number of motorists. The original owner, Michael Hoskie, placed the car adjacent to Highway 395 at Van Buren Road, close to the March Air Force Base. It was originally called O'Neill's Diner. In 1943, wartime expansion of the base forced relocation to

² Charlene Keltz, “The Preservation and Restoration of the Liberty Bell Cafe,” 4.

³ Keltz, “The Preservation and Restoration of the Liberty Bell Cafe,” 2.

⁴ “Union Pacific Passenger Train,” http://www.up.com/aboutup/history/passenger_trains/index.htm, accessed February 1, 2013.

⁵ Keltz, “The Preservation and Restoration of the Liberty Bell Cafe,” 2.

⁶ John Snyder, “Liberty Bell Cafe,” HPSR original DPR form, February 1982.

its present location. It sat vacant for five years until Allie Handy purchased the property and reopened the diner as Liberty Bell Cafe in 1948. In 1951, Route 194 was widened and the California Division of Highways acquired the structure. Handy repurchased the diner at auction and moved it the few necessary feet to avoid destruction and reopened. The diner was sold to Joe Perry in 1978⁷, and remained in operation until its acquisition by Caltrans in 1982.⁸

The diner had a full dining room area, plus a 10-seat counter, and acquired local fame for its smoked turkey sandwiches and beer.

Handy painted the Cafe red, white, and blue during World War II to show support for the military. Since the diner was located in close proximity to the March Air Force Base, the diner served as a favorite gathering place for servicemen. At one point, "part of the dining room was partitioned off as a small bedroom and used when patrons had too much to drink and were unable to drive home."⁹ A male caretaker also stayed in the small bedroom for a short time.

As the wartime era ended, a period of advanced transportation and mobility began. The creation of the Interstate highway and freeway system during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, led to the rapid demise of most roadside diners. Controlled freeway access eliminated the ability for travelers to pull off at his or her leisure and remain on bypass routes. Fast-food outlets and gas stations grouped around freeway interchanges have replaced roadside diners. The Liberty Bell Cafe was the last remaining streamlined roadside diner in southern California.

The California Department of Transportation relocated the Liberty Bell Cafe to avoid demolition during the Ramona Expressway Interchange project. The diner is now part of the Orange Empire Railway Museum's collections located in Perris, California.

Part II. Architectural Information

A. General Statement

- 1. Architectural Character:** The Liberty Bell Cafe is the last remaining streamlined roadside diner in southern California. It exemplifies the streamline design with its metal nose grill, windshield and portholes typical of the streamline Moderne style. The nose grille gives the appearance of the Union Pacific M-10002 streamlined locomotive built in 1936. Also original to the diner conversion is the counter and stools, neon signage, and exterior stucco finish.

⁷ Beverly Becker, "Funky Perris diner features smoked, barbecued meats," *Press Enterprise*, March 16, 1980.

⁸ John Snyder, "Liberty Bell Cafe," HPSR original DPR form, February 1982.

⁹ Keltz, "The Preservation and Restoration of the Liberty Bell Café," 7.

It also retains original architectural details from its time as a railroad car. Details include the Tuscan-columned dividers with turned spindle work, the arched clerestory windows with opalescent glass, and the headliner with its original gold stenciling hidden under latex paint.

- 2. Condition of fabric:** The diner is in poor condition. The original wood siding beneath the stucco is deteriorated and likely contains fungal rot and termites. The roof is deteriorated and parts of the interior ceiling support system are exposed to the elements. Interior walls are stained and warped from water damage. The floor system is deteriorated.

B. Description of Exterior:

- 1. Overall dimensions:** The one-story building has a basically rectangular ground plan with a rear kitchen addition. The dining areas measures approximately 82 feet long and 10 feet wide. The addition measures approximately 30 feet long, and 16 feet wide. The entire height of the building is approximately 14 feet.
- 2. Foundation:** Concrete piers make up the foundation.
- 3. Walls:** Originally, the railroad car exterior walls were sheathed in poplar wood boards. When the railroad car was converted to a diner resembling a Union Pacific streamlined bullet train the car was given a false "streamlined" nose of frame and stucco construction. The nose features a windshield and portholes typical of the style. At the same time, the entire exterior of the wooden car was stuccoed to enhance the Moderne look. In the 1960s a permastone veneer was added along the belt course.

The roof monitor displays small symmetrically placed rectangular vents used for air circulation in the dining car.

- 4. Structural System/framing:** The diner has a wood frame with steel reinforced framing. Patent numbers 456,291 and 453,403 are stamped on the railroad support beam frame and verify the steel reinforcement construction. The 1891 patents by Mr. H. H. Sessions indicates the use of strengthening metal angle plates. A strong metal frame is located at each end of the railroad car to protect the, "ends of the side and roof timbers of the car and...the floor-timbers."¹⁰ The metal side plates prevented the side walls from separating upon shock and damage.

5. Openings

¹⁰ United States Patent and Trademark Office, U.S. Patent Numbers 456,291 and 453,403, <http://patft.uspto.gov>, accessed February 7, 2013.

- a. **Doors:** Two doors are located on the west façade. The replacement doors likely date to the 1930s. They are wood with two small, single-pane, fixed-sash windows with a metal framed screen door.

A simple wood door is located on the rear, south façade.

A wood panel door with a single-pane window is located on the north façade of the kitchen addition.

- b. **Windows:** Original railroad car windows are located on the west and east façades. The large, symmetrically aligned, picture windows are wood framed and have two parts: a large single-pane, and a small, upper single-pane, fixed-sash window.

Added after the conversion to a diner are the three port hole windows on the east and west façades at the front, north end of the diner. Also added are the band of four, wood frame, single-pane, fixed sash windows on the “nose” or north end of the diner.

The kitchen addition displays two awning windows on the east elevation and two louvered glass windows on the north elevation.

6. Roof

- a. **Shape, covering:** The roof the dining car is rounded with a center monitor. As a railroad car the roof was clad with wood and copper flashing. As a diner, the roof is clad with sheet metal. The kitchen addition roof is clad with composite roll.

C. Description of Interior

1. **Floor Plan:** The north portion of the Cafe is the dining room. The south portion consists of the kitchen addition, storage closet, hallway, bathroom, and counter with ten seats.
2. **Flooring:** As a railroad car the flooring consisted of yellow pine wood boards. As a diner the flooring consists of tile and has since been covered with linoleum tile.
3. **Wall and ceiling finish:** The original finish from its use as a railroad car is still extant. The walls are clad with oak and veneer panels, and the ceiling is clad with poplar veneer with painted gold Greek border. The walls and ceiling have been painted over.
4. **Openings**
 - a. **Doorways and doors:** The kitchen has an open arched doorway to the dining room. Other doors in the diner to the restrooms are original with etched glass.

- b. **Windows:** Original leaded clerestory windows with art glass are located in the center monitor area. The windows are symmetrically placed and display copper sash trim and are two-pieces which open like hopper windows. The clerestory windows align with the exterior monitor vents aiding in ventilation of the dining car.
- 5. **Decorative features and trim:** Extant original elements of the railroad car include the half wall with Tuscan-column divider and turned spindle-work carried in the main arch, between the north and south sections of the dining room.

6. Mechanical equipment

- a. **Heating, air conditioning, ventilation:** Original ventilation techniques used include the monitor vents and clerestory hopper windows.

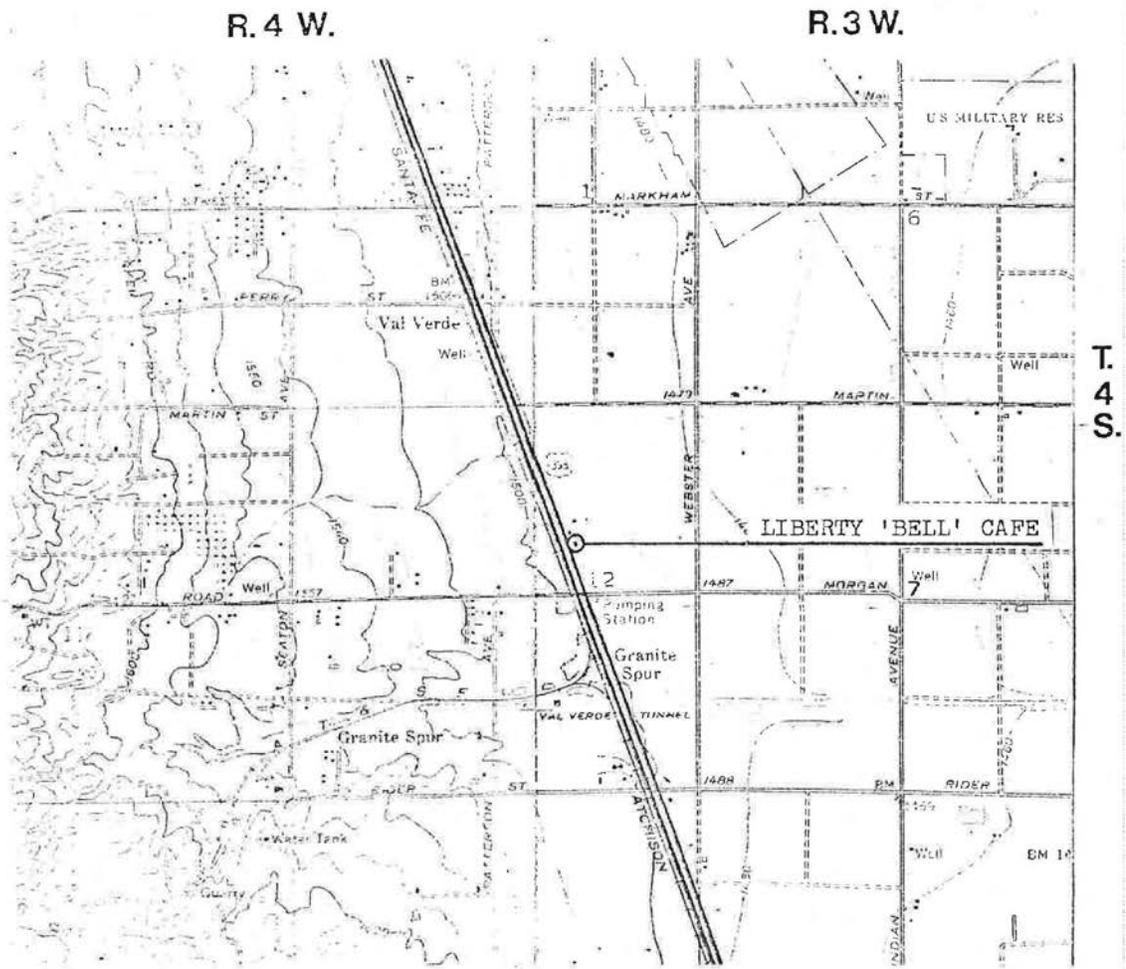
A roof heating and AC unit is centered on the dining car.

- b. **Lighting:** Original railroad car wall lamp lighting fixtures were removed at an unknown date. Florescent lighting is located in the monitor along the southern portion of the dining room.
- 7. **Original furnishings:** Original railroad car seating was removed during the conversion to a dining car. Original diner furnishings consist of the laminate counter and metal counter stools.

D. Site

- 1. **Historic landscape design:** No landscape information is known for its original location on the corner of U.S. Highway 395 and Van Buren Boulevard in Perris, California.

In 1943, the diner was moved 3.75 miles south to Route 194 and Martin Street in Perris. Its landscape consisted of a dirt parking lot, rock planter borders, and small shrubs. By 1987 the property had mature palm trees and shrubs.



STEELE PEAK QUADRANGLE
CALIFORNIA - RIVERSIDE CO.
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

PERRIS QUADRANGLE
CALIFORNIA - RIVERSIDE CO.
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)



Part III. Sources of Information

Becker, Beverly. "Funky Perris diner features smoked, barbecued meats," *Press Enterprise*, March 16, 1980.

Farley, Joe. "Old rail car battles modern cafes for business." *Press Enterprise*, July 15, 1972.

Keltz, Charlene. "The Preservation and Restoration of Liberty Bell Cafe." Master's thesis project, California State University Dominguez Hills, Fall 1991.

Patterson, Rom. "Restoration-minded folk not rushing to save Liberty Bell." *Press Enterprise*, 1983.

United States Patent and Trademark Office. U.S. Patent Numbers 456,291 and 453,403. Accessed February 7, 2013, <http://patft.uspto.gov>.

Snyder, John. "Historic Property Survey Report for the Ramona Expressway Project." California Department of Transportation, unpublished report, March 1983.

Union Pacific. "Union Pacific Passenger Train." Accessed February 1, 2013 http://www.up.com/aboutup/history/passenger_trains/index.htm.