

Haven Brothers: Legacy of the American Diner - Food on a truck, man!



Beautiful late spring weather favored the crowds sampling the diner fare from the iconic truck parked in front of the Columbus Theatre on Broadway early in the evening of Saturday, June 7, at the Providence premiere of *Haven Brothers: Legacy of the American Diner*, the directorial debut of independent Rhode Island film maker Jeff Toste. The diner itself could not fit inside the auditorium so patrons could watch the documentary through its windows, but it was the next best thing.

The documentary itself is surprisingly fast-paced for what one expects at first to be a limited subject, but creative cinematography shows perspectives that are not apparent from casual acquaintance, shooting from the outside looking in and taking a few time-lapse spins as the diner wends its way through the streets. Glimpses into the process of extensive preparation needed to keep the diner running on its odd-hours sunset-to-sunrise schedule prove fascinating, with the clean-up and behind-the-scenes resetting of the mobile restaurant beginning in the morning almost as soon as it gets back to its berth - with, of course, a different crew.

The core of the film, though, is the myriad characters involved with the various aspects of the story, ranging from centenarians who dismiss disputes about authenticity out of hand with emphatic matter-of-factness — “It’s the diner! It’s in the same place!” - to near-centenarian descendants of prior operators. *Providence Journal* reporter Karen Lee Ziner, not exactly known for her prowess at singing and dancing, even obliges with a reprise of her song “I’m a Haven Brothers Hot Dog” to the tune of the old advertising jingle “I’m an Oscar Meyer Weiner,” originally performed for the satirical Newspaper Guild Follies.

Former Mayor Joseph Paolino emerges as the almost-likeable villain of the piece, having sparked public opposition with a proposal to relocate the food truck to the hinterlands away from its prime space next to City Hall adjacent to Kennedy Plaza. Paolino admits that the plan was ill-advised and said that in such circumstances he did what any politician would do: “I folded like an accordion.” As a kind of peace offering, Paolino hosted a 100-year anniversary party in 1988 - except that it turns out the business started in 1893 rather than 1888, but everyone figured it was, literally, close enough for government work.

Started by a widow with her husband’s life insurance money in an era when status as a widow made it possible to buck the usual constraints of a society where women were not ordinarily expected to be

independent, she employed her sons in the original incarnation of what would always be a family business for a succession of different families. In this sense, the film invites comparison with one of the classics of modern documentaries, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, which although nominally about Japan's most famous sushi chef and his obsession with quality and perfection, is ultimately about the relationship of an 85-year-old father and his patient and loyal 60-year-old son. Haven Brothers is not turning Japanese, though, and although the son gets involved at age 14 - he eventually takes his driving test using the diner truck - he quickly assumes increasing responsibility from his father.

Today, the son runs the business five days a week and the father runs the business two days a week, marking a generational laying on of hands that, almost as much as the diner itself, harks back to a past era. Yet this continuity suggests that there is no reason that the family business could not continue on to a third and fourth generation, showing exactly that sense of permanence and perseverance that is so highly valued by Rhode Islanders. *Haven Brothers: Legacy of the American Diner* is the quintessential Rhode Island documentary about a beloved Rhode Island institution.

Profile of director Jeff Toste: motifri.com/havenbros/

Haven Brothers: Legacy of the American Diner official web site: havenbrothersmovie.com/

Trailers: youtube.com/user/havenbrothersmovie

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/havenbrothersmovie>