

A wet-your-whistle stop on the Great Notch Road

By Joe Donnelly
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One recent evening at the Great Notch Inn on Route 46 in West Paterson, a burly young man strode into the combination bar and package-goods store.

Greg DiLeo, the tavern's eccentric 81-year-old proprietor and bartender, was talking on the telephone in the backroom as he suspiciously watched the shaggy customer clad in jeans move toward the glass beer case, which sits under an unobtrusive handwritten sign reading: "No self service."

"Hey, no self service," the 5-foot-3, 136-pound DiLeo yelled out. "No one waits on themselves in here."

Until then, the patron, was doing a good job of looking tough, but after the reprimand, his voice rose an octave as he spoke. It was obvious that he had wilted under DiLeo's first assault.

After fetching the customer his beer and following him to the front of the bar, DiLeo let loose one of his whistles. "Bwoooowip, bwoooowip!" The Hudson tubes — the loudest and hardest in DiLeo's repertoire.

Now the guy was startled. And when he laughed, it was with a bit of uneasiness. It was another case of the old curmudgeon besting a pretentious roughneck.

In business since 1920's

Greg DiLeo has been selling beer at the spot just west of Clifton since Calvin Coolidge was president and the highway was Great Notch Road.

"We were still having farmers coming in then with their horses and wagons," DiLeo said above the din of the cars passing by on the six-lane highway.

DiLeo, gray hair parted down the middle and wire-rim glasses across a face that has rows of wrinkles, boasts that he is the oldest bartender in the state.

Who can argue? Dressed in a small-collared, white shirt with a black clip-on bow tie, black pants, and a tattered black sweater, DiLeo can ramble on like a wiseacre barkeep of yesteryear once he loosens his suspenders and softens his cantankerous manner.

He first visited the area in 1914 as a boy scout hiking along the ridge of Garrett Mountain. Six years later he bought his first property — 54 square feet — and has since expanded his holdings to about two acres. "When people were selling it, I was buying it," he said. "That's how I accumulated it, little by little. Now it is very valuable."

He opened his first roadside stand, The Green Chateau, in 1924, and despite Prohibition, sold beer



Greg DiLeo

to the ever-increasing numbers of people taking weekend automobile excursions in the country. "I was crowded during Prohibition a lot, but when they put the highway through in 1939, I started selling more bottled beer."

When the highway builders came, The Green Chateau was demolished. DiLeo bought a nearby house, had it moved to his property, and renovated it into the present Great Notch Inn with its hewn beams, mahogany bartop, and antiquated cash register.

"Yeah, I guess everything in here is old," he said looking around at the dust-covered beer taps and railroad memorabilia.

DiLeo's interest in trains became intense when he worked for the Erie during the 1920's and early 1930's. While waiting for the train at the Great Notch station once, DiLeo tried his hand at imitating the whistle.

"It just came to me," he said. "Once I got it, though, I just changed the pitch. They are all just pitched musical sounds, believe it or not. I've heard other people do whistles, but they just can't do the variations."

Besides the Erie, DiLeo imitates the Phoebe Snow, the Pennsylvania Congressional Limited, New York Central 20th Century, and the New York City subway. From watching the television shows, he said, he taught himself the whistle from Petty Coat Junction and the ocean liner in Love Boat.