

# Whistling up an era

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WHOOOOOOA. WHOOOOOOA.  
The haunting moan of a steam engine's whistle filled the room. It curled around the beer bottles and vanished into the shadows past the end of the bar.  
Greg DiLeo, the man who imitates train whistles, grinned.

HE HAD STARTLED another forewarned listener with his good-as-gold imitation of a steam train hurtling towards a crossing.  
"But that's another story," he insisted with a sweep of his hand.  
"The real story is that I'm probably the oldest bar owner in the state and

that this place here is going on 56 years old."

DiLeo's Great Notch Inn, black timbers laced with red neon, lies in a small hollow, a stone's throw off Route 46 in West Paterson. It looks like just the place to quaff a few or to be alone with quiet thoughts.

**BUT THESE DAYS**, few people do, said the pint-sized man behind the bar.

He was sporting a black bowtie, hung at the throat of a worn white shirt, and dark jacket.

The voice behind the 80-year-old wizened face poured out in rapidfire chatter; too old to fool, to stubborn to quit.

"These last few weeks, hah! I might as well close the place," DiLeo grumbled. "Business is very poor."

**OUTSIDE THE** windows, headlights of the cars on the four-lane highway rushed past; tiny points of light on a speedway to nowhere.

"I remember when they used to drive their horses and buggys here," the wiry old man reminisced.

"I started with a roadstand back in 1924, about the time I was laid off from the railroad. Then, during prohibition, we sold liquor from a stand out there in the parking lot using homemade plumber's spigots and underground tanks."

He laughed; his raspy-voiced mirth

taking him back to the dangerous years:

"You kept a hammer and when the federal man came around, you smashed the spigots," DiLeo chuckled. "I was the only seller around that was never padlocked. I never sold to anyone unless I knew them."

We sit alone at the end of a ten-stool bar.

**THE BACK WALL** is lined with liquor bottles and a glass cooler holds popular brands of beer against the north wall.

"There's nobody coming in here tonight," DiLeo said. "I hope you're not a jinx."

He started to speak of his weekends, the hours in which he and two of his buddies — Charles Van Wagner and Frank Eichert — traipse up and down the East Coast looking for antiques, railroad memorabilia and a chance to meet new friends.

"The whistle opens a lot of doors for me," he said.

He bounded away, past the ancient Coke cooler, over to the cluster of small tables on which are scattered his cherished memories.

**WHEN HE RETURNS** he spreads proof of his fame on the barwood:

- An autographed calender from artist Eric Sloane;
- several yellowed newspaper clippings;
- a message penned inside a book from his friend John Gambling;
- a picture of him next to another friend, WOR's Pegeen Fitzgerald.

"I am the world's greatest steam train whistler," he said matter-of-factly. "I've heard others do one or two whistles, but no one can do the variations I can."

**HIS SPEECH** has become rounded: He's removed his teeth.

"All trains have different pitches," he said. "I used to imitate them and it sounded like this: Woooooo Woooooo."

"Then one night my voice changed," he went on. "All of a sudden I could do the combination of half pitches that modern trains use."

He quickly ran through four or five variations.

The tone is low, but unmistakable.

There is a train in the room!

It is coming nearer.

With closed eyes one can see the thick black smoke billowing out of the stack and the brakeman climbing on just in time.

**HE PURSED HIS** lips and the whistle changes: Now it's an engine on the Erie Lackawanna, then a New York subway, an Amtrack locomotive, a whistling jet.

"I couldn't do a diesel until a few weeks ago," he said proudly. "And no airplanes until last year. Everything I do I taught myself."

"And, I know them all, Norman Rockwell, Grandma Moses, the Fitzgeralds, Jim Buckley and Bob Grant," he boasted.

"They all like to hear my whistles."

So, packed with the gallon-sized gift of gab, the old man with the unusual calling card hits the road each weekend and is kept young by the attention and affection of his audience.

**OFTEN, HE WILL** walk into a hall, take over the microphone and, for a short while, become the performer he was meant to be.

But business is business, so DiLeo still tends bar for his customers and he reads when he can.

The bar is just the way he likes it: The wood is dark, the fixtures old, the character solid.

"It's a tough life, but I always try to look on the bright side," he said quietly. "I could retire, but I figure to keep working till I drop."

He paused for a moment, savoring his years behind the bar.

"A LITTLE WHILE ago, a college professor stopped in here," he said. "He looked like a beatnik; just like the kids. We got to talking, so I asked him: 'Who is the father of history?'"

"What do you mean?" he says.

"Who was the father of history?"  
"He said he didn't know so I told him. It was Herodotus. Imagine that, a college history professor who didn't know who the father of history was."

"It's been quite a life, son, it's been quite unusual," he said.

Out in the yard, standing on the gravel, he said goodbye:

"WHOOOP. WHOOOOOP . . .  
WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOP."



DiLeo holds up a part of his collection of railroad memorabilia, a photo of a steam engine in a roundhouse.

Herald-News Photos  
by  
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