

The DiLeo limited
WORLD'S GREATEST RR WHISTLER

by Nancy Charlton

Country fairs, apple time and the maples on the turn invariably bring my good friend, the train whistle man, back to Connecticut.

Gregory DiLeo reached his 80th birthday this year but is as full of hell as ever and jokes roll off his tongue as easily as his imitations of railroad trains.

"Whoo-ee-ee!" I heard as I was hanging out washing on the clothes line. "Too-o-ot!" Nothing sounds like that except an engine rolling up to our station on the defunct Berkshire Division — unless it could be Di Leo out for a Sunday run.

DiLeo it was - with remarkable adventures to relate. Not only had he whistled up a performance this past spring at Caesar's World and at Resorts International in Atlantic City, but at the latter he played on the same bill as Frank Sinatra. But, while Old Blue Eyes probably pulled down about 10 grand for his performance, DiLeo did his gig for the fun of it. "I love people, love to hear them laugh, to surprise them, make them happy," he said. "Who needs money? Whoo?" toots the train whistle man.

Every Sunday, DiLeo closes up his tavern in Little Falls, N.J. — the oldest tavern under the same management in the entire state — and he takes to the road in black jacket, white shirt, jaunty bow tie and railroad cap. This time he wore a "Chessie" cap but he wears 'em all. Each week it's a new place, new faces, new stories to tell, except for his regular fall track runs up Route 7 and through Cornwall. Bless him for that!

Another one of his spring adventures was a visit to the biggest railroad museum in the world in Baltimore. "The acoustics were marvelous," enthused my friend. I could imagine him there, surrounded by engines great and small and the astonishment of the museum guides and sightseers when DiLeo's tried out his whistling skills in the

huge building with its high arched ceiling. It must have sounded like the locomotives were all set to highball out of the place.

But, though it can be lightly written about, DiLeo's unique talent is not to be treated lightly. In the mind and the throat of this lively little man, who looks like a cross between Jimmy Cagney and a leprechaun, are stored the sounds of our past. There were no movie sound tracks when Di Leo, as a boy, began to memorize and practice imitating the chuffs, chugs, wheezes and whistles of our old steam trains. There were no radios or TVs or tape recorders, either. Some of those sounds are stored in one man's memory and, fortunately, he's able to reproduce them.

How does he do it? "It's a matter of pitch," he answers modestly. "You just work up — do, re, me — Whoo-oo-ee!" and one of his authentic whistles blasts out.

It was time to go. The train whistle man kissed me quickly on the cheek and, agile as a boy, ran to his car. The staccato whistle of a steam loco pulling out of the station floated back as he pulled away. In railroad language, its nine sharp toots go like this: TOOT, TOOT, toot, toot, toot, toot, toot, toot, toot! What they say is "Clear the track! We're coming fast!"

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