

A DAIRY THAT HASN'T SPOILED OVER TIME

BY JOSH KINNEY

Standing in the original 100 year old freezer room, stocked with milk, eggs, and chilled gallons of delicious Swiss Tea, Bob Neri said, "We're a throwback to the old times. The history that's here just doesn't exist anymore." There are some places that stay the same as always; unhampered and left as they once were. We call these hidden pearls of pure and preserved history, treasures. One of these relics remains on the corner of Spicer and New Jersey Aves. in the heart of Wildwood, NJ. The Lehigh Valley Dairies, originally Abbott's Dairies, built in 1902, serving the South Jersey seashore communities. Being one of the oldest businesses on the island, its exterior has not only withstood time but original interior operations continue almost just as they were 100 years ago.



University with a degree in accounting, family was what brought him back to his seaside roots. During the summer of their college years, Bob and two roommates worked at the Wildwood Depot making deliveries. With little money as a college student, their needs were generously met by customers who would provide food and snacks for them such as rolls, roast beef and other homemade goods as well as making milkshakes out of the damaged and discarded ice cream. He describes the relationships back then as genuine, lax and carefree. In essence, they survived off dairy, and their reliable relationships with patrons. "If you were out somewhere, your customers would want to take care of you. You were 'their' milkman," he said, leaning back in his chair, sporting a smile of reminiscence.

Initially, the Wildwood Depot was Abbott's Dairies of Philadelphia and South Jersey, serving also as an ice cream company and providing coastal services from the tip of Cape May to Atlantic City. During the 50's, before the days of Wawa, when big Acmes and Shop Rites weren't around, several dairies existed to serve the barrier islands, though this particular one seems to have survived in part, as others died off. From its opening day in 1902, the depot has gone through a few name changes starting with Abbotts to Pennbrook Farms, then Fairmont Foods, later Labatts Beer, and now Dean Foods, which surpasses Kraft as the largest dairy holder in the U.S. Home delivery was a large portion of the business up until the mid 70's, however, "We're still operating like we did 30-40 years ago," said Robert Neri, Dean Foods Sales Manager.

What started as a summer job for 15 year old Neri in 1974, evolved through his college years, becoming the foundation for what would be his full time profession. Every summer since he was 6, Neri would visit his grandparents in North Wildwood where he found himself working for Abbott's. Having gone to the University of Colorado in the town of Boulder, or as he likes to call "The Cape May of the West" and then finishing at Temple Uni-

The Wildwood dairy has spent over 50 years building loyal clients, such as Douglass Candies and Groff's Restaurant on the Boardwalk. People from all walks of life found themselves employed at the Depot, including school teachers who saw a good summer job, one in particular who was there prior to Neri's arrival was Bill Carr, a chemistry teacher at Lower Township High School, has had over 34 summers of working experience and added a creative flavor with academia on one side and blue collar on the other. Bob fondly recalls Billy, Bobby and Ralph, the 3 Osborne brothers who he grew up working with at Abbott's. It was Bill, who also worked for Atlantic Electric for 34+ years, who helped Bob get his job there. Many interesting characters came through the dairy, leaving lasting impressions and hilarious stories, but Bob and his receptionist, Joan Gallagher, are the last two of the original crew in the last 30 years.

"Everyone came from Philly back then when around 250,000 people slammed the island in the 70s and 80s," he said. Today, people vacation in various places such as Florida and the Outer Banks of North Carolina, but back then everyone went to the treasure that was in their own backyard, Wildwood by-the-sea. In the hey



Bob Neri, Bill Piergiovanni, Ken Gray (Land Douglas Jones, Rob Piergiovanni, &

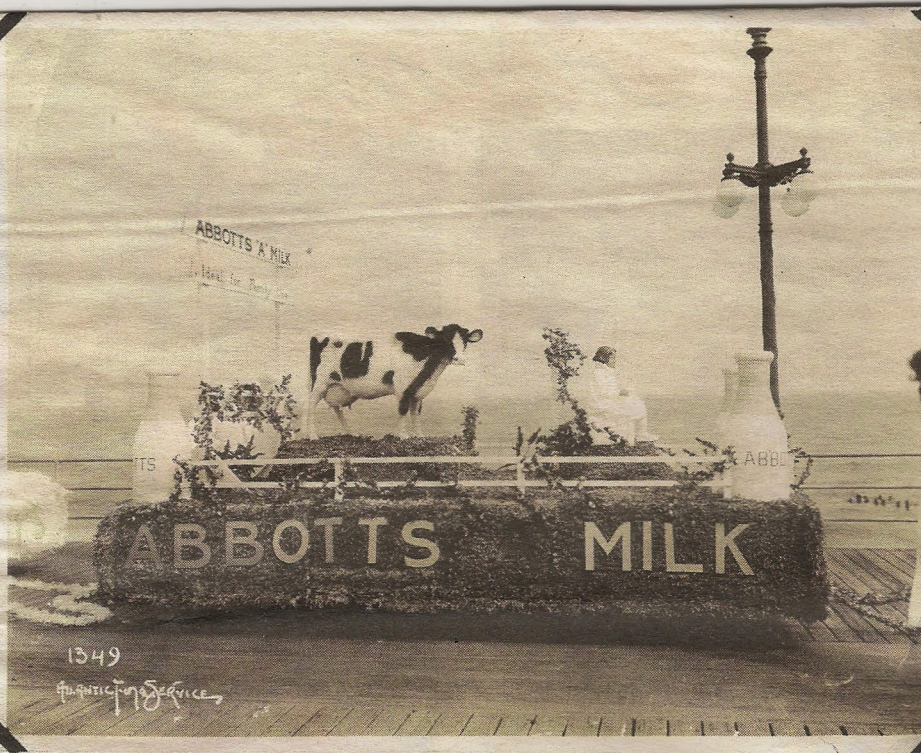
We're a throwback times. The history that doesn't exist anymore



A peek inside is like a visit to a museum~ a century old and bent wooden spoons are all piece



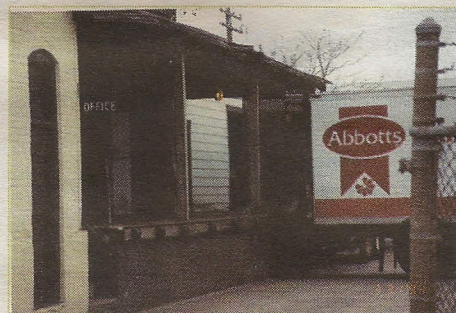
1922



1934 Wildwood Baby Parade

day of disco there were many clubs on Pacific Avenue. In those warm summer evenings, Bob, and Wildwood Commissioner Rich Nordaby, and 3 or 4 others would be loading trucks from 4 to midnight when around 10, the cars would trickle back in the streets. Bob would be sent out, flashlight in hand, directing them into the dairy parking lot, \$5 a car to park, which went to food costs for employees. The work environment Bob grew up in was completely different than that of today where so much is sensitive and protocol. Now, such things wouldn't be allowed, but things were much different back then. Let's say enough time has passed to reveal that little secret.

What people don't know that makes Wildwood's location so original and unique is that 70% of its customers don't order milk; they rely on depot employees to come in and fill it. This lost art is called Pack and Pedal. "It's a dying aspect you don't find anymore," said Neri. Today, trucks come and go every day, each driver having an average of 40 customers. Because of the ebb and flow of business, it's hard to determine what's going to happen, such as a big weekend when customers might need more supplies, but the dairy is conveniently on the island, not coming from PA or elsewhere. The client base has expanded, including chain stores, hospitals, and nursing homes with delivery



1994 Back loading dock.

routes as far as Pennsville, Hammonton, Vineland and Millville. Bob, Joan, and the employees of the Wildwood Depot continue a rich tradition of serving the best products with quality service. Today, Bob, along with his wife Tracy, are busy raising their two children, Austin and Daria. He loves fishing, cooking, and the Wildwood Yacht Club on Sunset Lake. He's a history buff, an avid reader with an appreciation for art and architecture, antiques, and old relics, finding himself in the perfect place for his vintage personality. Bob and his friends have survived on the dairy and its loyal customers. Wildwoods exhibited artifact on Spicer and New Jersey Avenues has also endured in the same way, through loyal relationships that have kept preserving this historical remnant.

Old Photos Courtesy of Wildwood Historic Society



1922 The corner of Spicer & New Jersey Av



1960 The corner of Spicer & New Jersey A



2011 The corner of Spicer & New Jersey A