



"In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life. It goes on." ~Robert Frost

BENNIES. . .ANTLERS. . .OWENS

~A Series of old Wildwood Bar Stories~

BY JOSH KINNEY



A brisk wind came off the ocean and swept down the coast of New Jersey, blowing sea grass and sand across the boardwalks. Midnight had come and the lights from Atlantic City flickered along the shoreline as the city's corrupt treasurer Enoch "Nucky" Johnson made a sarcastic toast to the members of Congress in Washington. That evening in 1919, prohibition had been ratified, prohibiting the manufacture, sale and transportation of liquor inside the United States.

Just over thirty miles down the same coastline, Bennie Versaggi stood on the stoop of his bar restaurant. The tough, old school Sicilian man who was loved, respected and feared by many in the Wildwood community, grumbled as he removed the bar sign from his establishment, replacing it with another sign that reflected the wintery weather: "Ice Cream."

Of course, it didn't happen exactly in this order. The days and months aren't exactly spot-on accurate, but what we do know is that Bennie Versaggi opened an ice cream store during the time of prohibition and rented the rest of his building out to the A&P groceries, making it two different stores.

The building on 17th street in North Wildwood finds its origins in the late 1800's when it was owned by the Five Mile Beach Improvement Company and sold to Mary C. Lafferty. During the 1920's, the Versaggi's purchased the building from Dr. Irvin W. Kirk, beginning a dynasty of family operated business.

Bennie's daughter Catherine worked at the ice cream parlor. She would grow up to marry Victor Di Sylvester who worked nightly as a bartender at Bennie's when prohibition finally ended, and the two stores were consolidated into one again. Catherine worked in the kitchen with her sisters and her mother Jennie. The couple

had a son who they named Victor Jr. He would come to spend his summers during the 1940's cherishing fun-loving memories at "Bennie's Café."

For the bar and restaurant patrons, relatives and visitors, the island was experiencing an era that was thriving with fun; what we would call, and as the boardwalk jingle reminds us every summer: true "Wildwood Days."

"Everyone knew everyone," said Di Sylvester, "You always recognized the faces." At the time, the 17th street area in North Wildwood was a hub for business.

Long lines swelled outside the restaurant all the way down to the end of the street as customers waited to enjoy Jennie's special spaghetti and meatballs. The delicious homemade meal was only a \$1 at the time. "Of course, this created a very busy bar business," said Di Sylvester.

In the 50's brothers Charles and Ross Versaggi continued the great tradition of Bennie's Café until they sold it to Antlers Cafe in 1975. In 1986, Michalene O'Flynn's moved in the building and stayed until 2001.

As the story goes, TJ Haldeman walked into Michalene O'Flynn's in the fall of 2001 and overheard the owners talking to the real estate agent who was preparing the papers to put the bar up for sale that day. He saw this as a GOD WINK, especially given their family's long history in town dating back to when their grandparents bought their first home on 14th Avenue in 1921. Thus Owen's Pub was born, April 22, 2002 with brothers TJ & Michael Haldeman. "No doubt," as TJ and Michael note, "we're proud to add to the rich history of such an important landmark in town – a place that many tell us makes them feel at home. We know our grandparents would be proud."



From Left~ Charlie Versaggi - Bennie's son, Charlie Peacock - cement salesman, Salvatore Versaggi-Bennie's brother, Vincent Tabone - Bennie's nephew, Dominic Versaggi-Bennie's son



Antler's Cafe, circa 1976



Sebastiano (Bennie) Versaggi



Ross & Charlie Versaggi –these Brothers took over 1950 to 1975)



Brothers, Michael & TJ Haldeman, of Owen's Pub 2012



Sebastiano (Bennie) and his wife Giovanna (Jennie)