

Hair cutter extraordinaire turns 99

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

WATKINS GLEN — Gene DeDominicis pointed to a manual cash register that, to a younger generation, may look like it belongs in a museum. But for this simple barber from a modestly sized village, the gigantic machine has always been sufficient.

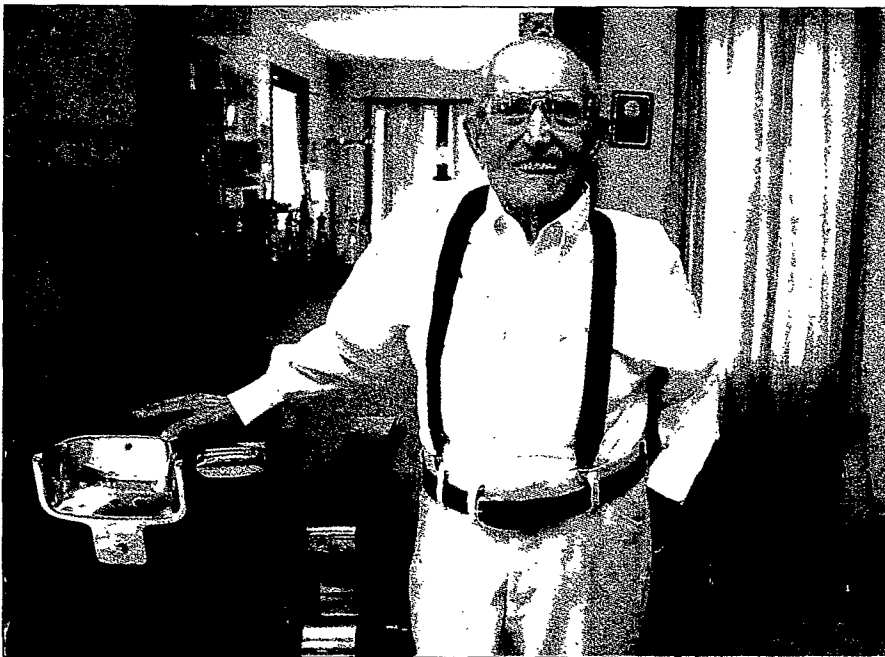
"He likes to say he sent us to school through that cash register," said DeDominicis' daughter, Anna Jean.

"That's a hundred years old," he added proudly in a thick Italian accent.

In less than 12 months, the man known around town as "Gene the Barber" can make the same claim about himself: DeDominicis celebrated his 99th birthday on April 30.

When asked to estimate the number of haircuts he's rung up on the register, which he has used for several decades, DeDominicis just chuckled. You'd have trouble with the math, too, if you'd been clipping and shaving hair for close to 75 years. Although he's not barbering these days, DeDominicis kept a regular business right up through the past year.

Since the early 1970s he toiled in a shop attached to his home on 10th Street. The facility still contains relics of a proud past: the cash register towering over a few waiting chairs; the single barber chair; and photos on the wall showing DeDominicis at work and with family members — always with a smile on his face. While giving a visitor the grand tour, DeDominicis reached below his work counter and pulled out a large framed diploma from bar-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Recently retired Watkins Glen barber Gene DeDominicis stands next to the chair in his shop April 30, which was his 99th birthday.

bering school, dated 1930.

DeDominicis' longevity has recently drawn the interest of national talk shows. Representatives of "The Tonight Show" wanted him to do a guest slot for Jay Leno this past year, but his daughter said the flight to Los Angeles would have been too taxing.

DeDominicis has never been one for travel, anyway. He has stayed firmly rooted in Watkins Glen, save for one trip he took back to his native Italy in the late 1960s. Why not more vacations?

"Too many people," he said of his customer base, pointing out that "I used to have the barber shop open until 12:00 (midnight)."



DeDominicis was born in the Abruzzi region of Italy. He sailed to Boston when he was 15 years old and moved to Watkins Glen a year later — "alone with 50 cents in his pocket," his daughter said. But DeDominicis forged a living, finding work along with many other Italian immigrants at the village's salt plant, before going to New York City to attend barbering school.

He then returned to Watkins Glen where he and his wife, Catherine, raised their son and daughter while attending St. Mary of the Lake

Parish. DeDominicis began cutting hair at the former Jefferson Hotel, and eventually bought that shop. After the hotel was slated for demolition in the early 1970s, DeDominicis converted part of his home — which he has owned since it was built in 1933 — into a barber shop.

DeDominicis has cut hair for several generations of Watkins Glen families. "I used to have a lot of people — old, young kids and women," he said. "I used to go to old people and cut their hair at home."

He offered a simple explanation — "It's an art" — when asked how he kept from getting bored with the tonorial trade. His loyal customers have been a motivator as well: "I love the work," he said. "People come, we talk. No seem like work."

DeDominicis shows a photo of a community band in which he once played, further evidence of his love for this village on the southern tip of Seneca Lake. "It's nice. Don't nobody bother you," he said.

He continues living in the family homestead with his daughter, a retired music teacher who is a music minister at St. Mary of the Lake Church. DeDominicis' wife and son, Sammy, are deceased. His sole grandchild, Gina, lives in New York City.

On his 99th birthday, DeDominicis enjoyed visitors all day while getting phone calls from as far away as Italy and Arizona. In addition he was flooded with cards, flowers, fruit and balloons.

As he begins his 100th year, DeDominicis still gets around quite well and remains excited about life.

"I'm feeling young," he said, flashing that ever-present smile. "Oh yes, very good."

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