

# Service with a Smile

## Three Generations of DiAntonio

### Family Auto Service

Bart Van Valkenburgh

By the end of the 1920s, automobiles were no longer a machine solely for the wealthy, having become affordable to the masses with the introduction of the Ford Model T and its revolutionary assembly line manufacturing process. More expensive marques such as Chevrolet, Dodge, Packard, Buick, Cadillac and Chrysler also adopted the assembly line process, making them affordable as well. The common thread among these vehicles was the need for regular maintenance and good quality gasoline and tires.

The motor oils in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had not been developed to the level of quality of today's synthetics, so it was normal to have the oil changed every 1–2,000 miles. Spark plugs and mechanical ignition "points" also had shorter lifespans, and tune-ups were needed every 10–15,000 miles. Today's automobiles no longer have "points" but use electronic ignitions that may last more than 100,000 miles. 21<sup>st</sup>-century synthetic motor oils typically only need to be changed after approximately 8,000 miles of driving. Comparable developments in tire technology have extended their useful lifespan by two-to-three times, reducing the need to replace them as often, so today's autos require fewer trips to the mechanic.

In those early days, motorists did not have a lot of choices for car maintenance; the local blacksmiths switched from shoeing horses to learning the ins and outs of automobile repair and maintenance. Dealerships were small and not located in every town. The local gas station became the place to get your auto serviced. This is the story of three generations of the DiAntonio family that have serviced and maintained the cars of the Upper Main Line.

I interviewed several DiAntonio family members and local residents who shared many stories and recollections of "the D's" service stations. Grandson Danny DiAntonio arranged access to a large cache of old Brownie camera-style black and white photos that were mounted on poster boards by his dad Vince and hung on the wall of Vince and wife Peggy's garage. TEHS volunteers scanned these photos and placed them in our archives. Some of these photos will help me tell this story.

Motorists of the Upper Main Line were first introduced to James DiAntonio at his Devon gasoline service station in the early 1930s. He opened a Sunoco Station on the north side of Lancaster Pike between E. Conestoga Rd. and Old Lancaster Road. Today, the GSI Bath Showcase at 757 Lancaster Ave. occupies this location.

Following the enforced breakup of the Standard Oil monopoly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of oil refining and distribution companies emerged, and had not yet consolidated into the handful of giant "Big Oil" corporations that we know today, so competition to capture the new gasoline market was fierce. There were many generic brands of gasolines that might not allow a car to operate to full capacity, so the big branded companies relied on marketing to make their products stand out to the motorist as a better choice for their cars.



Proud owner Jim DiAntonio on the right, his nephew Jimmy in the rear, circa early 1930s.

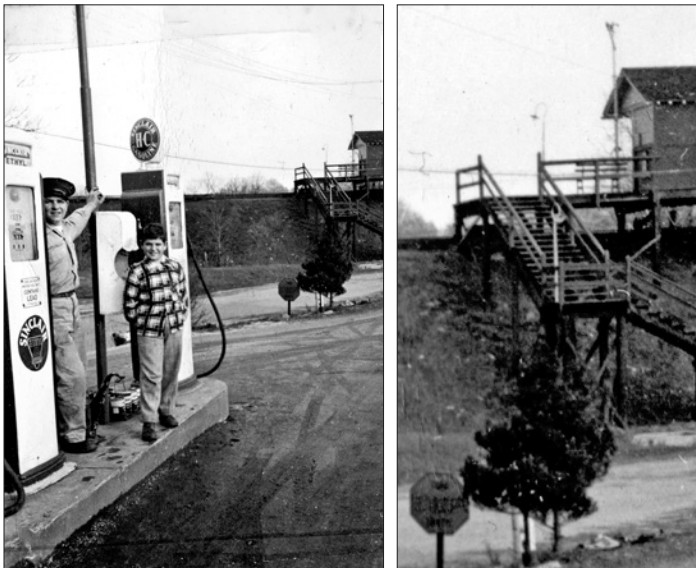
The above photo of Jim DiAntonio ("Jim D") showcasing "Blue" Sunoco is taken from the front side of a post card mailing to prospective customers (perhaps an early example of a direct mail marketing campaign). The back side has a short note from Jim, shown below, and a place to inscribe the address of the prospective customer.

Note the strong statement "... You can't buy inferior cut price Guess-olines here. We recommend only Blue Sunoco..."

When you look through your mail today and see all of the direct marketing campaigns, you can look back and see that nothing is really new— Jim D did this back in the 1930s, almost 90 years ago.

*Dear Neighbor -  
Do you recognize the picture? It's where you get real personal service and the most for your money. You can't buy inferior, cut price Guess-olines here. We recommend only Blue Sunoco — Today's Biggest Gasoline Value*

Many of the “D” family told how Jim had several locations to sell gasoline; they said he was able to get branded gas but needed a place to sell it. Jim also needed workers to man the pumps, wash the windshields, check the tires, and service his customers; his four sons fit the bill. Serafino “Fino” the oldest, then Vince, Fred, and the youngest, Dom—all worked at the family stations.



LEFT Jim D's sons Vince, left, and Dom at the “D’s” Sinclair station.  
RIGHT Enlargement of the upper right corner showing the P&W station.

The photo on the left was probably taken in the late 1940s at a Sinclair gas station that Jim D operated. The family had trouble remembering the station’s location; we began to look for clues deep inside the photograph. We enlarged the railroad station in the upper right corner and tried to match it to a known location on the Paoli Local line of the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) but could find no match. Then came the “a-ha” moment; the rail platform is elevated and not at ground level. The PRR used ground-level platforms but the Philadelphia & Western trolley used elevated platforms, so it must be the a P&W trolley stop, but which one? Researching further in the TEHS archives, we found this late 1940s photo, shown below.



The P&W trolley overpass and station at Lancaster Pike in Strafford, c. 1940s. Photo by Lester K. Wismer, from Ron DeGraw’s book “Pig and Whistle.”

The sign on the right marks the border of the Strafford, Pennsylvania community, and the photo shows the long-gone P&W overpass crossing Lancaster Avenue. This overpass was located between Meadowbrook Rd. and E. Conestoga Rd. Looking to the upper right you can see the P&W elevated platform which does not show up in most histories of the trolley line. The Lancaster Ave. stop was added between Sugartown station and the terminus of the line at the Strafford Station for the convenience of the passengers who preferred to embark/disembark closer to the Pike.

We then knew the location of the station, and realized that the Sinclair pumps were on the corner of Lancaster Ave. and E. Conestoga Rd. The Sinclair operation only sold gas and oil and did not do any repairs; one would assume the customers needing repairs were sent up the street to the “D’s” station with the garage.

The “D’s” Sinclair was located on the far side of the overpass on the point of E. Conestoga and Lancaster Ave. between the Strafford sign and the westbound auto just to the left of the sign.

The third DiAntonio operation was the Pure Oil Company station at Old Lancaster and Lancaster Ave in Devon. The Pure Oil Company trademark design that featured a small “Cottage Style” building that would fit discretely into a neighborhood became famous across America, with several thousand built. The “cottage style” made such an impact on motoring history that many are on the National Historic Register and are repurposed for modern use. Such is the case with the Devon building.



UPPER: Pure Oil gas station building in Devon, operating as DiAntonio’s Gulf, circa 1950, *Di Antonio album*. LOWER: The building survives, restored and repurposed as a home for two new businesses: the Christine Shirley Shop, providing apparel and accessories; and Dina Previti, providing counseling, coaching, and consulting. Photo © 2019 John O. Senior



The Pure Station at the Old Lancaster location had an interior repair shop bay—it became the center of the “D’s” service and repair operation. The four sons all worked there in the late 40s and 50s. The collection of family photos shows a proud dad surrounded by his sons, all smiling and having fun with their customers. The photos represent “Service with a Smile” that is hard to find these days.

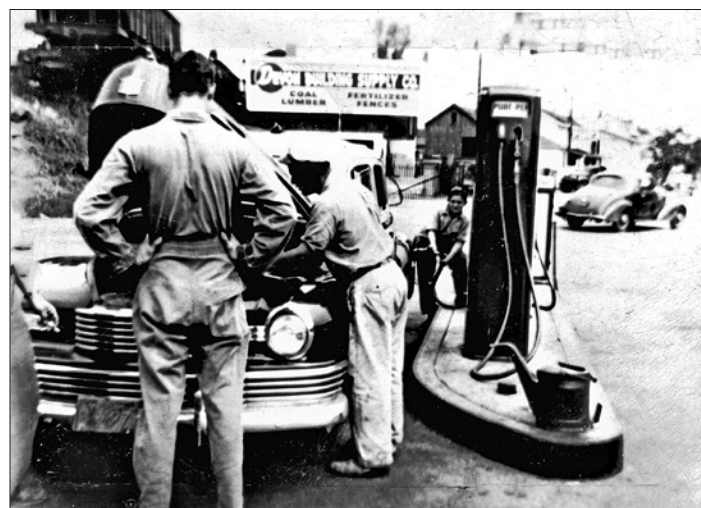
The “D’s” station switched gasoline brands in 1948 from Pure Oil Co. to Gulf Oil Co. You can see the different brands in the background signs in the following family photos.

The brand-new Paoli Shopping Center opened in 1956. The corner of Lancaster Ave. and Chestnut Rd. at the western edge of the Center became the new home of DiAntonio Gulf. The “D Team” opened this much larger station with three service bays and two pump islands. The loyal customers followed the move to Paoli along new customers from the area.



The four sons had married and started their families, all living locally. Naturally the third generation began to work in the family business. Fino’s son Anthony “Tony,” Vince’s sons Dan, Jim, and Timmy, as well as Fred Jr. all learned the business, starting by pumping gas, washing whidshields, and checking tire pressures and oil levels. The “D Team” kept up with the latest technology by attending training seminars and purchasing the latest diagnostic tools so they could repair the new cars emerging in the changing auto landscape. The company also purchased the latest (including flatbed-style) tow trucks to rescue stranded motorists. The towing business also handled transportation for other repair centers and local police departments.

During the 1980s and 90s, oil companies started to consolidate and grew much larger. They also began to rethink the way gasoline would be sold in America. The service



Photographs of the DiAntonio famiy operating their Pure Oil, and later Gulf, station in Devon in the 1940s–50s, across the road from Devon Building Supply. All photos from the DiAntonio Collection, TEHS Archive. UPPER LEFT: Jim D standing beside a shiny Mercury. UPPER RIGHT: The “D Team” (L to R) Fred, Fino, Jim, Dom. LOWER RIGHT: Checking the oil and filler up. LOWER LEFT: Customers lined up, Jim pumping and Fred on the windshield

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bays began to disappear and were replaced with small “quick markets” where you could purchase drinks and sandwiches made to order. Car owners had to learn to pump their own gas as well. The advent of do-it-yourself credit card point of sale pumps was another blow to owner operator service stations. The automobile, as stated in the beginning of this article, needed fewer visits to the shop because of improvements

in the designs of the mechanical systems. Some of you may remember that Pennsylvania once required twice-a-year State Inspections, now only required annually. All of these changes have eroded the automobile service business. America today has become a largely a do-it-yourself, immediate gratification society that no longer supports the old-school “Service with a Smile” and a handshake from “my mechanic.”

The Paoli Gulf Station closed in 1998 and Fino, Vince, and Dom have passed away. The third generation of D's, Tony and Dan, learned their skills and the art of customer service from their fathers and grandfather. They are taking care of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century needs of local motorists. Fino's son Anthony “Tony” DiAntonio has been the Service Manager at Jeff D'Ambrosio Fiat Alfa Romeo in Frazer for many years. Dan “Danny” DiAntonio, Vince's son, is the owner of DiAntonio Auto repair on King St. in the Malvern Borough.



Santa Claus at the D's Paoli Gulf Station, circa 1970



Vince DiAntonio



The Third Generation (L to R): Tim DiAntonio, with Frank Donato and Lou DiMaio



Dan DiAntonio, King St Malvern Pa.



Tony DiAntonio, Service Manager, D'Ambrosio Frazer

If you ever happen to stop in and see Tony or Danny, you always get a smile and a handshake along with a “Thanks for coming in.”

For over 80 years, the service they provide is, and has been, as the kids call it, “Old School.” I wonder where Tony and Dan learned that?