

Sign Language

For 30-plus years, a pianist mounted hundreds of homemade street signs across the Valley to guide motorists and promote his unique road numbering system.

MOST PEOPLE WOULD BE pleased just to properly organize their garage, or even a closet or two. Not Dennis “Denny” Gleason. The talented ragtime pianist who couldn’t read a note of music had a grander goal: Starting in the mid-1930s, he personally organized Valley roadways, one paint can lid at a time.

With “Why Get Lost?” as his official motto, Gleason devoted his life to efficiently directing motorists around the Valley in the pre-GPS era. Frustrated by spotty street

signage in Phoenix, Gleason devised a standardized system for determining one’s distance from Downtown or from any other location in Maricopa County. He promoted his plan by publishing a handbook and obsessively mounting unauthorized, homemade street signs made from 5-gallon metal paint can lids near intersections.

“At one point, you could see Denny’s signs on almost every power pole around,” says Ed Chilleen, owner of Crazy Ed’s Satisfied Frog Restaurant, a longtime Cave Creek watering

hole that recently relocated to North Phoenix. “Denny was one of the last great characters in Phoenix. We opened Crazy Ed’s in 1962 and Denny showed up almost immediately in an old car with some paint can lids and his wife. He played the piano and frequently dropped by to sit in with our band.”

Gleason’s nephew, Larry Gleason, remembers him as the lovable-eccentric type: “He was good-looking, charismatic, kind and full of personality.”

There were few clues that Phoenix had gained one of its most memorable characters when 16-year-old Denny Gleason arrived from Indiana with his family in 1911. Gleason lived a typical Valley life, graduating from Phoenix Union High School, serving in the U.S. Navy during World War I, marrying Rispah O’Farrell, and having a son, Jack. The paint-can-lid-prophet then unexpectedly found his life’s calling when he entered the haberdashery business with his brothers, William and Lawrence, in the early 1930s.

Gleason’s Men’s Clothing Store featured high-end attire and was located on Central Avenue just south of Washington Street. Denny’s role was to drive around Maricopa County collecting payments from customers. At the time, street signs were scarce, many roads in the Valley had multiple names, and some streets were simply known by their Salt River Project lateral numbers. Not surprisingly, Gleason grew tired of cruising dusty, unmarked roads in search of customers’ homes.

Seeking a better way to navigate the Valley, Gleason took copious notes and published a 120-page pocketbook, *Denny Gleason’s Numerical System Street, Road, and Rural Route Guide*, in 1935. In the manual, Gleason adopted a version of the Public Land Survey System that was used to demarcate Arizona into points north, south, east, and west of the intersection of the Gila and Salt River Meridian and Baseline (now known simply as “Baseline Road”), located just south of the confluence of the Gila and Salt Rivers.

For his own system, however, Gleason switched the starting point to the intersection of Central Avenue and Van Buren Street. From this crossroads, Gleason determined every location in Maricopa County based on mileage coordinates. For instance, Camelback Road and 44th Street became 4N, 5E, and Dobbins Road and 27th Avenue became 6S, 2.5W. The two intersections were 17.5 miles apart (4N + 6S = 10 miles; 5E + 2.5W = 7.5 miles).

In the midst of promoting his navigation handbook – which Gleason hoped would “make money,” according to the book’s liner notes – Denny’s life dramatically changed.



Guerrilla city planner Denny Gleason displays his handmade city street signs, circa 1960s.

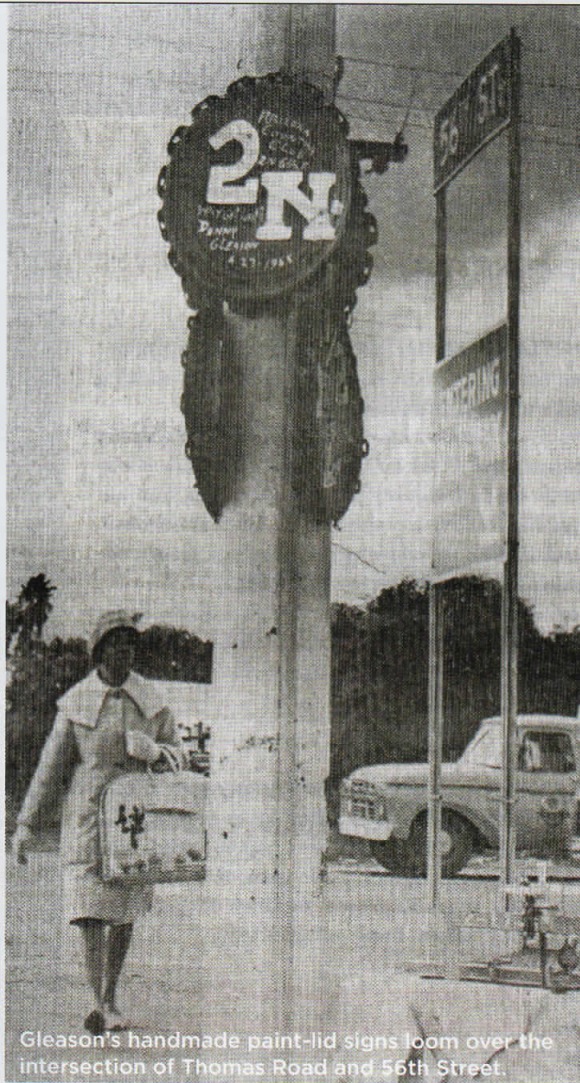
"The Gleasons closed their clothing store during the Great Depression after my father died," Larry Gleason says.

Denny's wife divorced him shortly thereafter, reportedly because of the lovable Irishman's fondness for bourbon. However, Gleason soon landed a position on a road marking crew for the Maricopa County Highway Department, which provided him an opportunity to dramatically increase the visibility of his street-naming system.

The new job also gave Gleason access to a near-inexhaustible supply of paint can lids, which he repurposed for his personal street signs. He painted location coordinates on the lids and mounted them to utility poles with baling wire. Depending on one's knowledge of Gleason's system, the paint lids, painted black with white lettering, were helpful navigation tools or mysterious, and perhaps unsightly, hieroglyphics.

Gleason also placed his signs at schools. "Denny mounted one at Mo-have Elementary School in Scottsdale, which I attended," recalls his great-nephew, Chip Gleason, a Phoenix firefighter. "I really didn't think too much about it at the time. I guess I just figured everyone had a slightly eccentric family member that did such things."

There were few limits to Gleason's system or his enthusiasm for promoting it. He often stopped by friends' homes unannounced to present them with handmade signs that bore their home's location. "We started Crazy Ed's Lake Havasu in 1966 and, on opening night, Denny and his second wife, Lennie Wallace, showed up with paint can lids with our coordinates," Ed Chilleen recalls. "It was like 160W, 40N."



In his free time and on his own dime, Gleason continued to labor over his unique project, focusing in later years on unincorporated county areas. "Denny drove an old 1940s brown sedan with his name and slo-

gan boldly painted on the sides," recalls Michael Swaine, a Phoenix graphic artist.

Over the years, Gleason's sign material evolved from paint can lids to sheet metal, and, finally, to 15-inch plywood boards. Gleason lobbied for years to receive official approval for his sign system. Finally, in the late 1960s, Maricopa County agreed to pay him \$5 per posted sign but rescinded the contract after only a couple of years. Municipalities were either ambivalent about his signs or passionately opposed to them. Many signs were removed. "It's unfortunate Denny's system was never adopted because it made a lot of sense," Ed Chilleen says.

During the evenings, Gleason played piano at bars and restaurants around the Valley for drinks and whatever proceeds customers put in his tip jar. "He never took a piano lesson but had an amazing ear for music," Larry Gleason says. "You could name a song and 9/10ths of the time he would be able to play and sing it."

In the early 1970s, seemingly resigned that his coordinate system would never be officially adopted, Gleason devoted his energy to playing keyboard at shopping centers to solicit donations for the St. Vincent de Paul Society. He died in 1976 at age 81.

Though it's been more than 20 years since the family has seen one of his signs along a road in the Valley, there might still be a few survivors. "Denny put them up even in the most remote locations in Maricopa County," Larry Gleason says. "There's probably a few out there still slowly gathering rust."

— Douglas Towne

Light Brigade



FORTUNATELY FOR CONNOISSEURS OF Phoenix's fading heritage of mom-and-pop roadside businesses and their eye-popping neon displays, Michael Levine has equipment few people possess. "A lot of people want old signs, but not many have the machinery and space to salvage and house them," Levine says. The energetic Brooklyn native has rescued some of the city's last remaining historic neon signs – one-of-a-kind pieces of promotional art that were installed when cars sported tail fins and Van Buren Street was the main drag for cross-country motorists.

Among the signs salvaged by Levine is one from the Sun Villa Motel, formerly located at 2529 E. Van Buren. "Its scale is incredible," Levine says.

The sign is so tall that only the top 15 feet can be displayed in his Levine Machine Complex building, located in the Warehouse District. Levine was lucky that its neon tubes were intact. "All we had to do was fire it up!"

Levine wasn't so fortunate with the lower portion of the sign. "I power-washed out 40 years of pigeon poop and bird skeletons," he says. "It was unbelievably putrid; I couldn't get the smell out of my head for a week." So why does Levine do such dirty work? Of his passion to preserve the Valley's architectural elements, Levine says, "It's really simple. Once they're gone, they're gone, and they won't be coming back."

— Douglas Towne