

SSF's Greek History

Written by Mesurs. Chris and Tony Gellepis, c. 1985

Greek Immigration

It was during the years just before World War I that the Greeks began to arrive in South San Francisco, each family lured by the enthusiastic letters of the immigrants who had preceded them, reluctantly departing their impoverished land for the promise of better employment opportunities, just as the Irish had done before them. In South City they mingled with other ethnic groups, particularly the Spanish, Portuguese and Italians, many of whose descendants still flavor the town. And because the Great Depression was still some years away, the Greek immigrants were able to find jobs with the established industries, most of which have long since departed: companies like Enterprise Foundry, Western Pipe, Edwards Wire Rope, and Bethlehem Steel, as well as the meat processing plants like Western Meat.

Greek Restaurants

But many of the more ambitious Greek arrivals, not content to work for others, opted instead for the small businesses that make up a town, establishments like dry cleaners, groceries and bars, but above all, restaurants. They established, in fact, four Greek operated restaurants on Grand Avenue alone; this in a town of less than five thousand residents. Pete's Place was hosted by Pete and Catherine Dress and lasted into the fifties; the Bay City Grill, whose proprietor was George Davanis, was a landmark for years; The Depot Café was another, owned by George Zamboukos; the Grand Café was co-owned by Steve Balopolus and Andrew Gellepis. Balopolus also operated cafeterias at Mills Field, Bethlehem Steel, and Western Pipe.

Other Thriving Greek Businesses

The Superior Steam Landry, in an era of limited washing machines, located at the intersection of Grand Avenue and Old Bayshore Highway, was owned by James Nicolopoulos, father of current city councilman Gus. He also owned and operated the Oxford Hotel, an ex-military barracks in Vallejo which, declared surplus there, was shipped by barge to South City in order to provide shelter for the industrial city's workers. Now long gone, the site is currently occupied by Bertolucci's Restaurant.

Another thriving business of the period was the Golden Eagle Hotel and Bakery, operated by Jim Gellepis. While the upstairs rooms were used to provide even more accommodations for the town's growing labor force, the downstairs area, complete with a large brick oven, was used to produce a tasty Greek version of French bread. Baking began in the early hours, with only the dough mixing done by machine. Not only Mrs. Gellepis, but the children – Tony, Chris and Sophie – were enlisted to coax the dough into shape. With daylight, the loaves were loaded into the Gellepis' panel truck, a 1925 Dodge, and as was demanded by customers in those days, delivered house to house to each doorstep.

Greek Customs

Determined to cling to their culture and fiercely proud of their ancestry, the immigrants followed their old country customs as much as possible, insisting their children learn and recite the epic poems of their forebears, even starting a supplemental Greek language school for them, one that operated for a few hours each week. For a teacher they employed one Nicholas Trangas, an attaché at the Greek consulate in San Francisco. Over the years, classes were held at several locations, including Fraternal Hall, as well as Martin Primary School.

Greek Church

For religious solace the Greek families attended the two Greek churches in San Francisco. Since few of the immigrants had autos, the alternative was by way of Grand Avenue street car, which bisected the city east and west, and then a transfer to the old number 40 line to the City. What with transfers, a good three hours could be spent on travel time alone.

Easter Celebration

Easter is the great Greek holiday, a day that called for much celebration, a day when, following tradition, children were expected to kiss their father's hand. A community picnic was sure to be held somewhere, often at Oak Cove Park in the San Mateo Hills, or perhaps at Salada Beach. On the occasion of the group photo, the location was South City's main beach, located at the end of Butler Road. Widely used for swimming by the young of the town throughout the thirties, it is now the site of the city's marina.

Customarily at these picnics a whole lamb could be seen roasting on a spit over an open bed of coals. Meanwhile the men sampled each other's homemade wine and made suitable comments. A three or four piece combo was often present, inspiring the adults to form circles and perform the traditional Greek dances. A common exchange between people would be: "Christ has risen." To which the response was always: "He has indeed risen."

Politics

In order to insure against being overlooked by the various politicians, the Greek men formed what they called "The Greek-American Voters' League," thus, by dangling the potential commitment of a bloc of votes, they were usually successful in enticing a supervisor or two or possibly a city councilman to these picnics. Sadly, few of the original immigrants survive. Gus Gonis, who for years operated a barber shop on Grand Avenue, is one, as is Teresa Xerogianis, whose husband Jim for decades operated the Pacific Coast Food Market on Juniper Avenue. Still another is Catherine Gidas, whose first husband operated Pete's Place. She still resides on Palm Avenue in South City.

Continued Impact

While most of the immigrants are gone, their descendants for the most part still reside in San Mateo County. Many, like James Balopulos, still live in South City. Now retired, he was for many years a successful merchant, as well as a realtor, and still later owner of BAYCO Construction Company. Gus Nicolopulos was for years a South City policeman before becoming a councilman. His brother, Tom, also retired and living in the East Bay, was for years head of the State Reconciliation Service, helping to settle

countless labor disputes. Another descendant is Jim Dilles of Los Gatos, who in 1959 wrote "The Good Thief", a novel that dealt with South City's Greek immigrant families, contrasting the old and the new cultures.

While the close-knit community spirit of the old Greeks is now gone, their descendants still keep in touch. Gus Nicolopoulos' campaign gatherings are always well attended, and the orthodox churches of San Francisco, as well as that in Belmont, are active with San Mateo County's Greek-Americans, all of whom are acutely aware of their heritage and proud of their culture.