

The Greeks of Berrien County, Michigan

by
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A History of the Greek Immigrant Experience in Southwest Michigan

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“Can you go to America to save the rest of [the family]?” Yiannis’ mother asked. He said nothing and lowered his head. Early the next morning she heard the door slam behind him. Despite the risks and hardships he knew he would face in America, he summoned up the courage to help his family. When he arrived in the United States, he could not read the signs or ask for directions. He did not have enough money for his train ticket. Thus Yianni began his journey to America — a stranger in a far-away land, separated from loving relatives and friends, and with the burden of the family’s future heavy on his heart. Yiannis eventually helped his family in Greece and brought his father and brothers to America.



John Arvan (left) with his father George and an unidentified worker, tend sheep in Karyae, his hometown in southern Greece, in 1953. During the winters Arvan traveled with his family to grazing land 50 miles away where they lived in a 6' x 10' straw hut for six months. (Photo by Michail Kerhoulas)

The Early Immigrants

Greek immigrants started coming to America in the 1880s because of devastating economic conditions in Greece. They planned to earn enough money to feed their families, pay off family debts, provide dowries for sisters they had left in Greece, and then return to their homeland. They were uneducated young men, most of them unmarried, and came from the poor farm villages of Greece. They worked long hours at menial labor in industrial cities like New York, Chicago, Gary or Detroit. The immigrants usually found employment at first as laborers, working in the factories or steel mills or shining shoes. They also worked on the railroads and mines in the West. Wanting to have a business of their own, they became peddlers, and then went on to operate small businesses such as candy stores, grocery stores or flower shops. They planned to return to their homeland, and one-third to one-half of the pioneer Greek immigrants to America did repatriate by the 1930s.

Many Greek immigrants who settled in Berrien County (a rural county in the southwest corner of Michigan) in the early 1900s had previously lived and worked as laborers in big cities like Chicago. They had saved enough money in those jobs to open restaurants, candy stores, groceries and other small businesses in Berrien County. Some of them preferred to raise their families in a small town rather than in a big city. Also, Berrien County’s countryside, with its grape vines and fruit trees, reminded them of Greece.

Only a few ethnic Greeks lived in Berrien County in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The 1900 federal census recorded no Berrien County resident as having been “born in Greece.” The 1910 census recorded only six

people of Greek nativity, although twelve people reported that they had been born in Turkey. These were most likely immigrants of Greek descent. The census did not record whether there were others of "Greek descent" (i. e., immigrants' children). Most of the Berrien County Greeks in the early decades of the twentieth century came from the Peloponnesus in southern Greece, with some from Asia Minor, Roumeli and a few from Greek islands. The early immigrants to the county settled primarily in the Benton Harbor area, according to a 1933-1935 roster of the local chapter of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA), a national fraternal organization. A perusal of the 1942 *Lakeside, New Buffalo, Three Oaks Telephone Directory* revealed only three Greek names. Clyde Pappas recalls that there were six families living in the area in the 1940s.

Greek immigration to the United States decreased drastically after 1924 due to immigration restrictions against the peoples of the Balkans and southern Europe. Many Americans at that time harbored deep prejudices against people from that region. In 1924, the United States set a quota of 307 Greek immigrants per year.

The Later Immigrants

Not until the 1950s, after the enactment of the Displaced Persons Act, did immigration to America resume in significant numbers. There was a surge in the number of men and women who reported Greece as their country of origin in the 1960 census of Berrien County, perhaps in large part because of the new immigrants. In 1960, the census reported 175 men and women "of foreign stock that reported Greece as their country of origin." In 1950, only 36 had claimed Greece as their "birthplace," as compared to 74 in 1940 and 55 in 1930.

Even more Greeks immigrated to America after the enactment of a more lenient immigration policy in 1965. Few Greeks, however, came to the United States after the 1980s due to improved economic and social conditions in Greece and stricter immigration laws. There is no infusion of new Greek immigrants into Berrien County at this writing, nor are many Greek immigrants anticipated in the foreseeable future.

Postwar Greek Immigration

World War II and the Greek Civil War left Greeks poverty-stricken and the Greek countryside devastated. Greeks able to immigrate to America arrived full of determination to advance themselves. Like earlier Greeks immigrants, they were willing to work ten to fourteen hours a day to put poverty behind them. The immigrants who came to Berrien County after World War II felt grateful to leave war-ravaged Greece. The Greeks suffered through World War II under the occupation of the Italians and the Germans, as well as during the Greek Civil War. The Civil War between government troops and the Communists took place from 1945 to 1949 and ended with defeat for the Communists.

Despite the destruction of eighty percent of his village of Karyae by the Germans, Michail Kerhoulas and others we interviewed felt the Civil War created greater havoc than World War II. He says, "Brother fought against brother, father against son. In World War II, you knew who your enemy was. During the Civil War, you could not even trust your neighbor. He could kill you."

The postwar immigrants often came to Berrien County to join family members who had already settled there. Established immigrants often sponsored them. Michail Kerhoulas' uncle brought him and his late brother John. A man from his village sponsored John Arvan, Kerhoulas' cousin. Arvan in turn brought his brother, Angelo Arvanitis. (Often brothers had different last names, a result of translating the name from Greek to English, or because one of the brother's names was Anglicized or shortened and the other's was not, or simply from personal preference.) The cousins, Kerhoulas, Arvan and Arvanitis, working alongside their wives, whom they had married in Greece, did well in Berrien County: Michail in the real estate and insurance field, and John and Angelo as restaurateurs. Many other immigrants who came after the war also entered the restaurant business, including Chris and Anastasia Lepeniotis in Bridgman, Sophie and Nick Fatouros in New Buffalo, George and Soula Bilonis in Stevensville, and Tom and Sylvia Stavropoulos in Benton Harbor.

John Papoutsis first attempted to enter the country by jumping ship in 1967 or 1968. The adventurous young man traveled from the East Coast to Benton Harbor to stay with his aunt, Jennie Couvelis, and work at Bendix Corpora-



William and Jennie Couvelis with their sons Steven (left) and James, ca. 1938. (Courtesy James Couvelis)

tion. After a few months, immigration officials deported him. Papoutsis refused to give up his dream of America and came back to the country as a student. He married, had two children and worked for many years at Bendix. He also volunteered as an organizer and coach of children's soccer teams. He is now retired.

In contrast to the immigrant pioneers who came to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, Greeks who immigrated after the wars often had the good fortune to visit relatives in Greece. Their relatives also came to the United States from Greece to visit or to settle in America. At least three of the later immigrants (Mike Kerhoulas, John Arvan and Nick Fatouros) returned to Greece to find wives. The women who immigrated in the 1960s and 1970s worked beside their husbands in the family businesses, kept the household and raised their children.

Greek immigrants who came to America in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s brought a new vitality to the Greek-American community, with their love of the Greek Orthodox religion, Greek language and Greek traditions. They took leadership positions in the church and AHEPA.

Family Separation

For both the early and later immigrants, hope in the new land was tempered by sadness because of family left behind. Pitsa Arvan recalls, "I missed my parents so much I thought I would die. I cried and cried."

Because of immigration restrictions, hard economic times in the 1930s and complete restriction of travel during the war years of 1940 to 1949, some of the earlier immigrants never saw their parents or siblings again, and many of the early immigrants' children never got to meet their grandparents, aunts or uncles who had remained in Greece. Even married men who had traveled to America to earn a living spent many years separated from their wives and children. Mail from America often had difficulty reaching Greece. Not until the 1950s and 1960s did many of the early immigrants and their children journey to Greece to see relatives. Nick Thomopoulos describes the 1962 reunion of his mother with her sister in Greece, whom she had not seen in 40 years: "She saw us and said several times, 'Who are you? Who are you?' My mother started crying and said, 'I'm Maria. I'm your sister.' Startled, Aunt Diamantia took a few moments to get her composure and then all began screaming, crying, hugging and kissing." In recent years, the relative ease of air travel and better economic conditions has allowed some immigrants to regularly travel back to Greece.



Naturalization certificate of Nicholas Katsulos, 1948.

Intermarriage

In the early twentieth century, Greek men outnumbered Greek women in America because the Greek women did not immigrate until later. Because of this, many men married outside of their ethnic group. The Greek community apparently welcomed the non-Greek wives. Many non-Greek women joined the local Greek Orthodox Church, the Philoptohos (a church women's organization that translates to "friends of the poor") and the local Daughters of Penelope chapter—the women's auxiliary of the AHEPA. Four of the twelve officers listed in the 1959 Daughters of Penelope Annual Convention Ad Book were not Greek, although they had Greek husbands. Alma State, an immigrant's non-Greek wife, organized the chapter and later was elected District Governor of Michigan. Another non-Greek woman, Harriet Andrews, served as chapter president.

The immigrants' children also married non-Greeks, often over the objections of their Greek parents. Marriage for love is a New World phenomenon. In the old country, marriages were arranged. The ratio of mixed marriages of Michigan Greeks to total marriages conducted is indicated in a survey of the marriage records of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church: between 1951 and 1960: five out of fifteen; 1961 to 1970: eleven out of seventeen; 1971 to 1980: ten out of twelve; and 1981 to 1990: four out of five.



George Katsulos with his grandparents in Tripoli, 1952.
(Photo by George Katsulos)

For intermarried second generation couples, love proved stronger than the fear and reality of family rejection. A son of an immigrant Greek couple had to leave the family business when he married a non-Greek woman. Even some of the immigrants who had married non-Greek women wanted their children to marry Greeks. A father who had married an Irish woman objected to his daughter marrying a non-Greek whom she had met while vacationing in Michigan. The father became estranged from his daughter because she rejected the Greek man he had selected for her in favor of her true love. Harold Pavlides related how his immigrant father, who had married non-Greek, told him that he should be married through *proxinio* (arranged marriage) so that there would be "Greek blood." He married a non-Greek woman instead.

Work

The early Greek immigrants established successful businesses. They did well in America despite a lack of formal education, knowing little or no English when they came to the United States, and not having the support of family members they left behind in Greece.

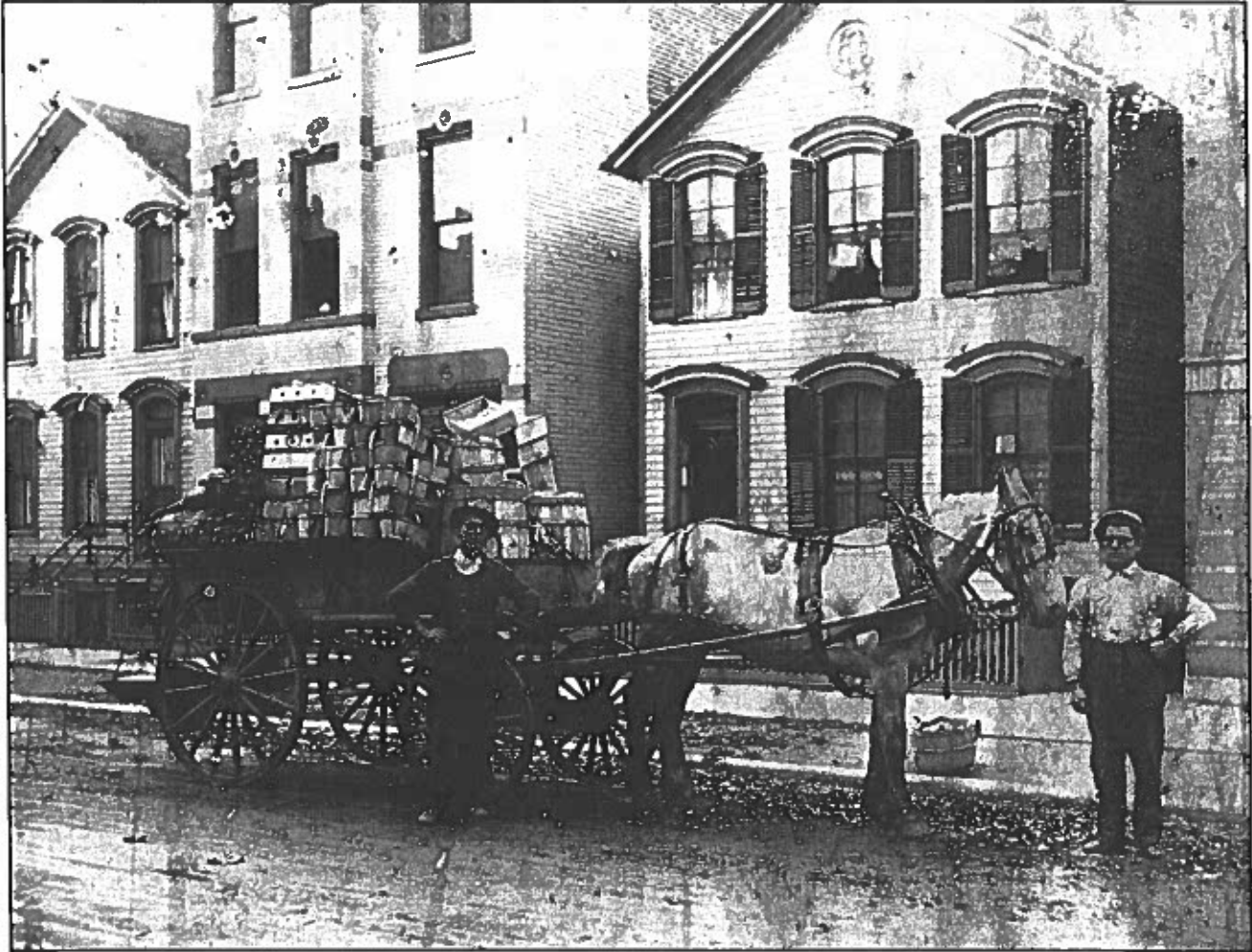
The early Greeks worked primarily in the food business, especially restaurants. They often worked six days a week and twelve to fourteen hours a day. They entered the restaurant business because running a restaurant did not require either a good command of English or a large cash investment. Moreover, a man could be his own boss. The early immigrants often gave jobs in their food service businesses to their brothers, cousins, nephews and friends who had recently immigrated. After a short period of apprenticeship, the new immigrants often ventured out to

establish their own restaurants. Some of the wives (whether they were Greek or non-Greek) and the children of the immigrants also worked in the family businesses. Only a few of the children continued in the businesses. Many moved out of town to go to college and pursue professional careers.

As early as 1909, the Olympia Ice Cream Parlor advertised regularly in the local newspaper. Owned by James Andros and George Spiris, it stood at 128 Pipestone Street in Benton Harbor. Of twenty-six men whose occupations were indicated on the 1933-1934 AHEPA membership registry, ten were proprietors of restaurants or confectioners and four were cooks. According to the Polk telephone directories and the recollections of area residents, the Greek-owned restaurants and bars of the 1920s to the 1940s were concentrated primarily in downtown Benton Harbor and St. Joseph. They included: Palace of Sweets, Harbor Restaurant, Manhattan Waffle Shop, Main Restaurant, Apollo Restaurant, Market View, Candyland, Moutsatson Restaurant, Coney Island Lunch, and the Aragon Bar. Other Greek-owned downtown businesses included the Manos and Pappas shoe repair and hat cleaning shops and a small but busy popcorn store beside the Bijou Theater. John "Popcorn John" Moutsatson is said to have served, "the best popcorn in the world, with lots of butter." George Andrews and Nick and John Dorotheon operated the Michigan Hotel.

Other families (Fasseas, Manglaris, Douvas, Davros, Billions and Pavlides) established summer resort businesses throughout the county. They catered to the hundreds of Chicago Greek vacationers who came to frolic in Lake Michigan and enjoy the countryside. In the 1950s and 1960s, Greek-owned restaurants in New Buffalo included Greg's Grill, Theo's Lane, Log Cabin Barbeque, Calvin's Grill, Buffalo Cafe, J and J Restaurant and Karagon's Grille. At present, at least twelve Greek-owned restaurants are located in Berrien County.

Greeks founded other businesses besides restaurants. Two Greek immigrants developed the Sunset Shores area of New Buffalo: Peter Kerhulas (who started out as a fruit and poultry farmer) and his partner, Steven Roumell (a New Buffalo lawyer). Nick Argondelis built a fruit processing and fruit export business (Pearl Grange Fruit Exchange outside of Benton Harbor). Nick Katsulos and his partner, John Giaras, started a thriving trucking business in Stevensville.



Nick Katsulos (left) and his uncle, George Kalogianes, peddle fruit and vegetables in Chicago, ca. 1910. Katsulos bought a farm in Stevensville in 1912 and started a trucking business with partner John Giaras in 1916. (Courtesy George Katsulos)

AHEPA and Daughters of Penelope

The national organization of AHEPA was organized in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1922 in reaction to harassment by the Ku Klux Klan. Through AHEPA, the immigrants worked hard to both maintain their ethnic identity and become good United States citizens. The Fruit Belt Chapter No. 292 of American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA) was chartered in Berrien County in 1933. The chapter enrolled thirty members during its first year; by 1952 it counted sixty members. After the construction of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, the organization met regularly in the church basement. Its members recall that the Fruit Belt chapter of AHEPA disbanded sometime in the 1980s.



John "Popcorn John" Moutsatson's popcorn stand became a local legend in Benton Harbor. (Courtesy Jeanne Govatos Wittmann)



Left: George Karagan opened Karagan's Grille on US 12 near the Michigan-Indiana state line in 1943 and operated it until 1970. It is today (2007) the Beechwood Restaurant. (Courtesy James Karagon)

Below: James Karagon with his father, Nicholas, in Karagon's Grille, Christmas 1949. (Courtesy James Karagon)



The Daughters of Penelope Andromache No. 14 Chapter organized in 1934 with twelve charter members: Helen Katsulos, Alma State, Jennie Kanalos, Theodora Smirniotis, Helen Manos, Stella Burganis, Jane Smirniotis, Mildred State, Jada Baccash, Genevieve Smirniotis and Zafero Shenias. The Daughters of Penelope hosted rummage sales, bake sales and other fund drives to raise money for the Greek Orthodox church. Together with the AHEPA, its members held annual picnics to benefit the church. The Daughters of Penelope stopped functioning after the formation of the Philotochos, a women's church organization, since its members found it too difficult to support both groups.

The Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church



Religious faith has helped bind Greek immigrants together. College student Joanne Bilonis stated in an interview that, "You can't separate the two; if you're Greek, you're Greek Orthodox." Since nearly one hundred percent of the early Greek immigrants were baptized in the Greek Orthodox faith, having a Greek Orthodox church in the community was very important. Before building their church in Benton Harbor in 1949, the immigrants and their children traveled to South Bend to attend church. A few people, although they kept their Greek Orthodox faith, attended local Protestant churches

Members of AHEPA's Fruit Belt Chapter: John Govatos, Mike Govatos, Tom State, Peter Kerhulas and George Andrews. (Courtesy Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church)



Daughters of Penelope members Alma State, Evelyn Kiouis, Presbytera Bessie Moulas, Evangeline Moulas, Panagiota Giaras, Joanna Giaras, Joantha Andrews, Harriet Andrews and Patsy Govatos. (Courtesy Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church)

as well, such as the Lutheran, Episcopal and Congregational churches.

On April 11, 1945, an AHEPA meeting "was called to determine the attitude and the desires of our community towards the oft discussed church problem." At that meeting a church committee was appointed. Tom State, on AHEPA stationery, writing about the history of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, related that the Greek community held a general meeting regarding the church at the Apollo Bar in Benton Harbor on May 13, 1945. The twenty people attending elected the following officers: president, Peter Kerhulas; vice-president, John Kanalos; secretary, Tom State; treasurer, George Andrews; and trustees Stephen Roumell, Nick Rantis, John Giaras, Angelo Rose and Gust George. They arranged to have the priest from Kalamazoo come every second Sunday to hold services. The congregation held services at the International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) Hall in Benton Harbor where the AHEPA also met. AHEPA paid \$80 annual rent for the use of the hall.

The church organizing committee raised over \$25,000 to build a church. The AHEPA and Daughters of Penelope held fund-raising events. Nick Dorotheon, who had decorated the church with hand-carved wooden ornamentation and iconostasis, crafted church-shaped wooden canisters that were placed in Greek-owned businesses to collect funds for the church. Non-Greek as well as Greek customers supported the church by depositing their change in the canisters and attending the fund-raising events.

The Berrien County Greek Orthodox Community incorporated in 1948 "To own and conduct a Church under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church for North and South America; to conduct a school for the perpetuation of the Greek language and to do such other things for the education and physical development for youths of Greek decent." Stephen Roumell, William Couvelis, Nick Rantis, John Kanalos, Peter Kerhulas and George Andrews signed the incorporation papers. The first board also included Alex Gust, Nick Rantis, Tom State, John Moutsatson, John Giaras and George Smirniotis.

According to the *Souvenir Book of Dedication, 1956*, "In June, 1949, Nick Dorotheon was elected as Chairman of the Building Committee and ground was broken" for the white Greek-style Annunciation Church at 725 Broadway in Benton Harbor. In 1954 the church purchased a house next door at 715 Broadway for the residence of the new priest, Father Moulas, his wife and three daughters. The *Souvenir Book* also reported that, "In November, 1949, at a meeting, Mr. Nick Argondelis offered more money for the name of the Church, which he named *Evangelismos tis Theotokou* or Annunciation." On November 23, 1950, the church held a banquet for a ceremonial burning of the mortgage."



The Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church was built in 1949 at 725 Broadway in Benton Harbor. (Courtesy Jeanne Govatos Wittmann)

The church's location in a residential neighborhood put it in close proximity to many of the immigrants' homes and their downtown businesses. Margie Souliotis recalls that several families lived inside a ten-block radius of the Annunciation Church during the 1950s, including the Moulas, Govatos, Andrews, Souliotis, Dorotheon, Kanalos, Gust and Couvelis families. Church membership never numbered more than about seventy families and individuals. During summers in the 1950s and 1960s, attendance at the church increased with the influx of vacationing Greeks.

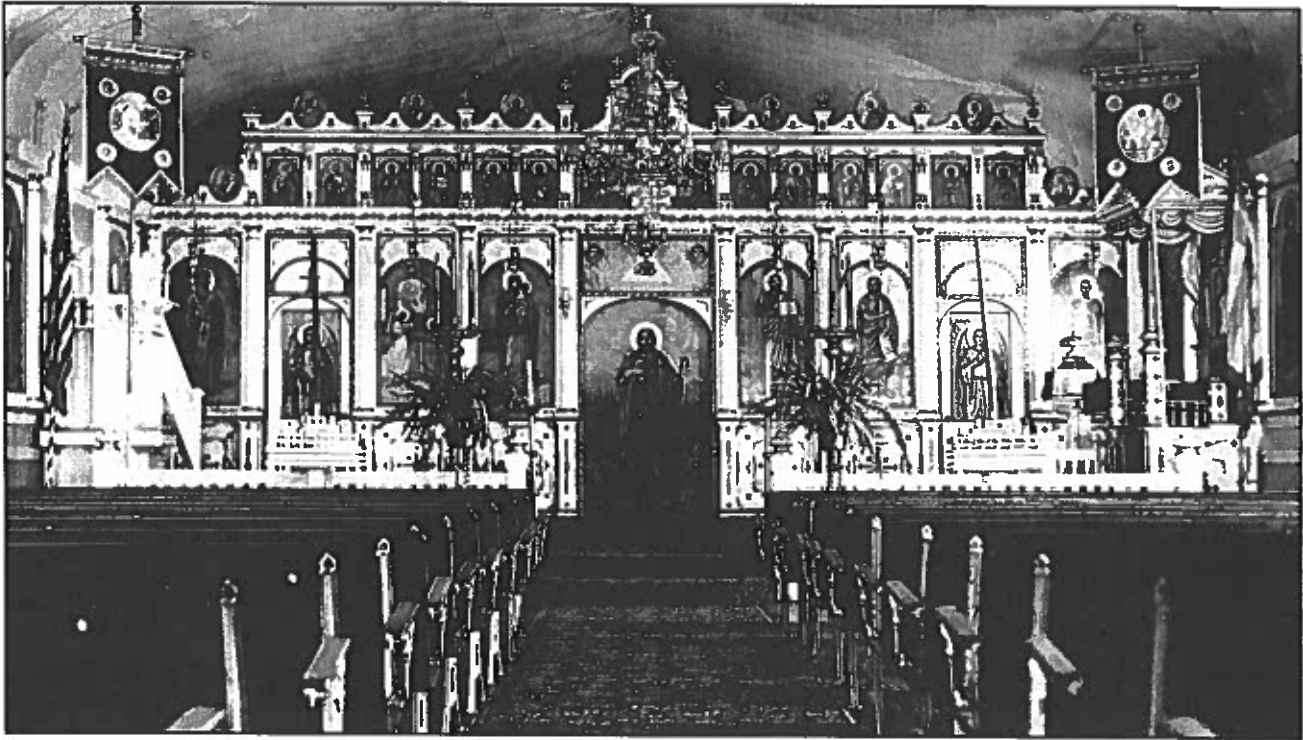
Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church

The church congregation eventually moved from Benton Harbor. Ethnic Greek families started leaving the city in the late 1960s and 1970s, partially due to "white flight," but also because of the declining economic opportunities with the loss of many manufacturing companies. The church remained in Benton Harbor, however, until 1996, when it relocated to New Buffalo. The Greeks have scattered throughout the Berrien County area, with many full-time and second-home Greeks living in the southern part of the county around New Buffalo and Union Pier. Not all of the Greeks living in Berrien County attend the Berrien County church. Some attend St. Andrew's Greek Orthodox Church in South Bend, Indiana, and a few attend Holy Trinity, a Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Michigan City, Indiana. Some of the early immigrants' children attend other denominations.

In 1982, the church purchased the former Tin Tree Theater on Behner Road in New Buffalo, which it equipped with a kitchen and remodeled as a banquet facility. The American Hellenic Center, as it is now known, provides revenue for the church and space for their social functions and special events. In 1994, the church bought the former Golden Door Restaurant at 18000 Behner Road, just across from the American Hellenic Center. Blessed on November 12, 1995, by Chancellor of the Detroit Diocese, Very Rev. Archimandrite Efstathios Metalinos, the remodeled facility served the parish as a second church — St. Paraskevi.



Father Christos Moulas with choir members, ca. 1955. (Courtesy Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church)



Interior of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Benton Harbor, 1952. (Courtesy Jeanne Govatos Wittmann)

In 1996, the congregation sold its original church, the Annunciation, as well as the two houses it owned on either side of the church. Since the sale of the original church building, the congregation has celebrated services at the 18000 Behner Road site. The New Buffalo church became known as the Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church. The newer church's interior bears a striking resemblance to the interior of the old church since the interior decoration from the old Benton Harbor church (including the iconostasis and pews) were moved and installed in the new church under the direction of Michail Kerhoulas and Ted Lavedas.

Priests who served the church in the early years included Rev. Ioannis Panos, Very Rev. Father Chrysostom Trahathaes, Rev. Ireneo Souris and Very Rev. Christos Moulas, who served the church from 1955 until his retirement in 1982. Very Rev. Moulas organized the Philoptochos. He encouraged the development of the choir that continued until the 1960s when Rev. Moulas' daughters, who played the organ, left home for college. Rev. Moulas also taught Greek school, assisted by Louisa Kerhoulas and Christina Hager.

After Rev. Moulas retired, other priests who served the congregation included the Very Rev. Archimandrite Efstathios Metallinos, Rev. George P. Savas, Rev. Theodore Vaggalis, Rev. William Conjelko and Rev. George Topitges. Since 1992, Rev. Basil Stamas, from Kalamazoo, Michigan, has served



The Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church in New Buffalo. Church President Ted Kerhoulas and the Rev. Basil Stamas stand in the foreground. (Photo by Elaine Thomopoulos)



Very Rev. Christos Moulas (center), Tom State (left) and George Andrews.

According to Louisa Kerhoulas, up to fifteen children attended classes held in New Buffalo during the 1980s. The Very Rev. Moulas, Louisa Kerhoulas and Christina Hager taught the children.

The children recited Greek poems and sang patriotic Greek songs on Greek Independence Day (when Greece declared its independence from Ottoman rule on March 25, 1821, after 400 years of domination) and on *Ohi Day* (when on October 28, 1940, Greece said “No” to Benito Mussolini’s request for free passage through Greece). The Greek army subsequently repelled the Italian troops who invaded Greece at the Albanian border.

The immigrants’ children, on the most part, retain at least a basic speaking knowledge of the language. However, many of the grandchildren have not retained the language, especially if their mother or father is not Greek.

the church. Beginning in 2005, Rev. Paul Martin has also served the church. Cantors have included Nick Dorothean, Michail Kerhoulas, George Billionis, Presbytera Angela Stamas, Presbytera Nikkī Martin, James Bouramas and Spiro Polymeris.

The Greek church community has always been small in number. Dating back to the 1950s, church membership never numbered more than about seventy families and individuals, although at holidays, such as Easter, the church was packed. Rev. Stamas conducts bi-monthly services mostly in Greek, while Rev. Martin holds bi-monthly services in English.

Greek School

The immigrants wanted their children to retain their Greek Orthodox religion and to cherish the Greek language, history and traditions. Tom State writes that, “On October 4, (1945) a school committee was appointed and decided to have school services in Benton Harbor on Thursday afternoon and in New Buffalo on Friday at the expense of \$15.00.” For decades the school educated young Americans in the Greek language and traditions in classes held after regular school hours or on Saturdays. Joantha Andrews Argoudelis remembers attending classes once a week in the 1950s, along with three other students — the priest’s daughters. With the infusion of the immigrants who came in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, attendance at Greek school increased during the 1980s.



Interior of the Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church in New Buffalo. (Photo by Michail Kerhoulas)

Maintaining Culture and Traditions

Berrien County's Greek immigrants and their children take pride in their heritage, which goes back to classical Greece and the contributions of renowned ancient Greeks who paved the way for Western civilization. They included philosophers such as Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, scientists and mathematicians such as Democritus, Archimedes, Pythagoras, and Hippocrates, and artists and literary giants such as Phidias, Aristophanes, Sophocles and Homer. Objects in homes and businesses, such as pictures or models of the Parthenon, busts and photos of philosophers, reproductions of sculpture and ancient vases, photos of Greece, as well as books, remind them of this heritage. In their homes they also have mementos of village life, home altars with religious icons and votive lights, and delicate handmade doilies, tablecloths or hand-woven blankets. The families stress Greek values like *filotimo* (treating others with kindness, respect and honor) or *filoxenia* (kindness to strangers).

Most of the twenty-one immigrants the Berrien County Historical Association interviewed spoke some Greek in the home. John Papoutsis says that he spoke only Greek to his children, even when they were in public. The immigrants who came from the 1950s through the 1970s also took their children on trips to Greece. They stayed for weeks at a time with grandparents, uncles or aunts, thus invigorating their "Greekness."

The immigrants celebrated traditional holidays, such as Easter, Christmas and New Year's Day, and name days (a day sacred to the saint whose name a person bears) by serving traditional foods, such as lamb and *pastichio* (pasta) and dancing and singing Greek songs. Even non-Greek spouses learned how to cook Greek food. Arlene Pappas prides herself with the ability to select tender grape leaves off the vines for *dolmathes* (grape leaves rolled and filled with spicy ground meat). Some non-Greek spouses even learned the language.

Reaching Out to the Community

The annual events organized by the Greek community brought Greek culture to the broader Berrien County population. Starting in the late 1930s, the AHEPA and the Daughters of Penelope hosted annual Greek picnics. In the 1950s and 1960s, up to 1,500 people flocked to picnics held at the Davros-Douvas Fruit Farm Resort along the St. Joseph River and at Sportsman's Park, north of Berrien Springs. They enjoyed Greek-style half-chickens, potato salad and pastries, and danced to Greek music at the all-day affair. In the 1970s and the early 1980s, annual "Greek Nights" held at the Bridgman American Legion replaced the all-day picnics. They also featured Greek food and American and Greek dancing. From 1985 into the 1990s, Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church had a food booth (featuring *gyros* and Greek pastry) at the Venetian Festival, which is held annually in St. Joseph, Michigan. Since the purchase and renovation of the American Hellenic Cultural Center, the Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Church has held its annual Greek Nights there, attracting 400 to 500 people. Since 2000, it also holds a two-day Greek festival in the early summer.

Berrien County's non-Greeks enjoy Greek pastries such as honey drenched *baklava* baked with layer upon layer of thin philo dough, or powdered sugar-coated butter cookies called *kourambiethes*. Hundreds of women lined up to purchase the "take-out" Greek pastries baked annually and sold from the Benton Harbor church by the Philoptochos women. Presbytera Bessie Moulas, the priest's wife and an energetic, talented woman, spearheaded the effort. Patsy Govatos and Margie Souliotis recall having "so much fun" working together in the basement of the church for this event.

Greece and America: Two Countries Now

Immigrants and their children have felt the pull of two countries: Greece and America. When Nick Fatouros' son asked him, "Which do you like best, Greece or America?" he responded, "I like America. I like both. I have two *patridas* (countries) now." A few of the immigrants felt they weren't truly accepted in either country. Demetra Andreason said, "The sad part is you are here, and the people see you as a foreigner because of the accent I have. And then I go home to Greece and they also take me as a foreigner. So I am a foreigner in both places."

Some immigrant children have struggled with their identity. Vaso Georgulis Powers said, "While growing up I felt I was stuck somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, between Greece and America. When I got to Greece, on my first trip, I felt I was going home. I cried when we were flying over the Peloponnesus. But when I got there I felt I had a cork in my mouth — I couldn't speak Greek comfortably — and I came to realize I wasn't a Greek from Greece. . . . I didn't feel really American, either, until way into my adult life."

Ties to Greece

The immigrants continue to have strong ties to Greece. Greek Americans have provided assistance to their home country ever since they arrived in America. During the 1940s, the Fruit Belt AHEPA Chapter raised \$1,058 for Greek War Relief and contributed funds for a Greek hospital. The immigrants have always sent money and packages of food and

clothes to their families in Greece. They helped to build churches and schools in their old villages. Peter Kerhoulas built a cheese factory in his old village so that the people there could have employment. He also set aside a sizeable portion of money in his will to be used to educate young people in his community. Both the national AHEPA and the local chapter lobbied Congress to increase the quota for Greek immigrants after World War II.

God Bless America

The Greek immigrants and their children see themselves as American. Several of them, in the interviews conducted by the Berrien County Historical Association, said, "God Bless America." They credit America for giving them opportunity and take pride in their American citizenship. They have served in her wars. Over 25 percent of young Greeks in America joined the U.S. Army during World War I — the highest percentage of army enlistment of any immigrant group, according to the Greek Heritage Society of Southern California. Through the efforts of the local AHEPA Naturalization Committee, Berrien County Greeks taught fellow Greeks the responsibilities of citizenship and encouraged them to become naturalized. Fruit Belt AHEPA Chapter No. 292 supported non-Greek charities such as the Community Chest, Red Cross, Good Fellows and local hospitals. During World War II, they sold over \$200,000 worth of war bonds.

Many Greeks accepted positions of leadership in various organizations, including the Masons, Elks, Moose, Chamber of Commerce, American Legion, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Girl Scouts and children's soccer leagues. Few Greeks have sought political office. A few exceptions include Michael Govatos and Gust Anton, who served as Benton Harbor City Commissioners; Spiros Polymeris, who is on the Bridgman Planning Commission; and Clyde Pappas, who served on the New Buffalo Planning Commission and school board.



Daisy Farmakis, Rev. George Topitges, Peter Farmakis and Presbytera Eleni Topitges grill lamb for an ethnic dinner. Peter Farmakis played his violin and sang Greek folk songs at the gatherings. (Courtesy Michail Kerhoulas)



Achieving the Dream

The Greeks have always comprised a small minority of Berrien County's population. The 2000 federal census listed 390 people of Greek descent residing in Berrien County out of a total of 162,453 residents - a mere 0.2% of the total. The census does not count those of Greek descent who have second homes in Berrien County. Although small in number, the Berrien County Greeks have had a significant impact on the community and take pride in their Greek and American heritage. Greek immigrants came to America short on money and education but long on ambition and strength of character. Michail Kernoulas sums it up: "We have gone from no shoes to driving a Cadillac. . . . The poverty punished us so much we didn't want to fall back."

The Greek's value of education has helped their children become successful professionals and entrepreneurs. In fulfilling their dream of "making a new life for their families" they have enriched Berrien County with their vibrant culture, enthusiasm and community spirit.

This poster was popular with the early immigrants. The motto in the foreground reads "Long Live Greece." (Courtesy Chris Lepeniotis)

Summer Memories: the Greeks Who Vacationed in Southwest Michigan*

“Like a little Greek town,” is how Nick Poulos (Panagopoulos) described the Sunset View Cabins north of Benton Harbor, where he vacationed during the 1930s and 1940s. He remembers the *parea* (companionship) of other Greek families and the singing of Greek songs, such as *To Gelakaki Pou Fores* (The Vest You Wear), accompanied by an accordion. Greeks who spent summers at other resorts in southwest Michigan have similar stories. They too recall banding together to recreate the idyllic rural life their parents had left behind in Greece.

Beginning in the 1920s, the immigrant Greeks from Chicago and Gary flocked to Berrien County, Michigan, to escape the oppressive summer heat and crowded, noisy conditions of the city. Those who drove the three-hour trip from Chicago to Michigan remember packing two families in a car – not all families then owned an automobile. Children squeezed in, sometime sitting on a lap of a mother or grandmother. Celia Alexopoulos recalls the trip: “We’d sing school songs and old folk songs and the Greek and American national anthems. And reminisce about the early times, with parents telling their stories about growing up in Greece. It was a happy occasion riding in the car. Those are happy memories.” Others took a passenger ship across Lake Michigan or a train or bus to the lakeside or countryside resorts that stretched out on the Lake Michigan coast from Grand Beach to Hagar Shores.



Greeks resorters at Nick Manglaris' Emery Fruit Farm Resort in Benton Harbor, 1931. Until the 1950s, Greeks from Chicago and Gary used to vacation at the resort, which was operated first by Nick Manglaris and then the Davros and Douvas families. (Courtesy Dean Katsaros)

In a time before the dual career family, mothers and their children stayed for weeks and sometimes months at a time. Fathers joined them on weekends, too busy at their restaurants, candy stores or grocery stores to take off more than a few days. Many of the Greek mothers and children came to Michigan as soon as the school year ended and did not return until after Labor Day. The Greeks believed that the Michigan air was cleaner and healthier. Smaragde Georgulis escaped the city because she feared that her children might be exposed to polio.

The Greeks congregated in ethnic enclaves at various summer resorts located about one hundred miles away from Chicago. Southwest Michigan, with its rural countryside, lush fruit orchards, vineyards and Lake Michigan, reminded them of Greece. Aphrodite Demeur noted, “It was like going back to the homeland.”

*Adapted from an article that originally appeared in *The Greek Circle*.

Some of the people went to the Greek-owned resorts, such as Fasseas' Riviera Resort in Stevensville, the Emery Fruit Farm Resort in the rural Benton Harbor countryside near the St. Joseph River or the Billions Resort (which later became the Pavlidis Resort), in Sodus, Michigan. Other resorters took up summer residence at the numerous non-Greek-owned resorts all along the coast of Lake Michigan. Dozens of Greeks purchased summer cottages in the 1930s to 1950s.

Every summer for many years, Greeks from Chicago and Gary returned to their beloved summer cottages or resort communities to recreate a "micro-Greece": speaking the Greek language, grilling lamb, hot dogs and hamburgers, singing Greek songs and dancing the Greek circle dances around the campfires, sometimes accompanied by traditional Greek instruments such as the lyra and the mandolin. During the day, some women did embroidery or knitting, skills they had learned as young women in Greece. Animated conversation, often over Greek and American card games, went on into the wee hours of the night. Some of the adults bathed in the Whitcomb Hotel's mineral baths for their health.

Friendship networks developed among the various resort communities. For example, Dean Poulos' family traveled by car from their vacation retreat north of Benton Harbor to play cards and socialize with their cousins, Helen and Alice Anthony, who had a home in Grand Beach.

Socializing with other Greeks who came to Michigan created a family atmosphere and solidified ethnic identities. The relationships formed in the summer continued after the families returned to Chicago. Young men and women, including Angelyn and Andrew Fasseas, Fran and George Katsaros, and Helen and Lou C. Malevitis met at the resorts and married. Helen Malevitis recalled, "When I started dating Lou, my brother had to go with us on the dates. Of course Lou used to pay him a dollar to get lost for an hour because the deal was he at that time was dating a girl at that time who now is his wife, and he could not get married until he married off his two sisters, and that was the deal. So he was anxious to get us married."

The Greeks, like other vacationers, spent much of their summer on the beaches of Lake Michigan and at amusement parks such as Silver Beach in St. Joseph and the House of David in Benton Harbor. Bill Rantis describes those parks: "Silver Beach was a thrill. . . . It was a mini Riverview. And they had quite a few rides there. They had a major roller coaster there. They had a fun house. They had bumper cars. They had motor scooters. They had boat rides. It was a lot of fun. Or we would go to the House of David amusement park in Benton Harbor, and they had those hot-rods . . . [where you could] pay a fee and go around a track. And they also had a miniature train with stations all around the park, and you could get in the train and go through the park on the train, and it was very thrilling. It was very, very nice."

In the 1940s, Tom Pekras remembers the excitement of seeing Satchel Paige of the Negro League play against the bearded House of David baseball team. The House of David also had a band, which the summer Greeks enjoyed. Bands also played in Stevensville, St. Joseph and Paw Paw Lake.

Janice Georgandas describes the Stevensville outdoor theater where the movie was projected on a huge screen and audience members sat in their cars to view the latest attractions. "We use to go . . . fourteen of us in a car together, because we paid by the car. And they luckily had seats outside so we could sit, but usually you got mosquito bitten to death." Al Coulolias smiles when he remembers that time. "We . . . used to put kids in the trunk and try to get them in – just like you see in the movies, and we'd use to get away with it."

Eugenia Georgoules Seifer recalls the happy days she spent at her Uncle James Douvas' Emery Fruit Farm Resort in Benton Harbor, near the St. Joseph River, in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s:

In the evening they used to congregate on the veranda on wicker chairs and play cards. In the living room, I played and sang Greek songs on the piano, such as the *Kalamatiano*, the *Lemonaki*, and *Misourlo* and the people used to dance Greek. The men would play cards, dance and sing. They had a slot machine.

. . .

The food was excellent. My uncle and my brother, Thomas Georgoules, got lambs from a lamb farm in Stevensville. My uncle would slaughter the lambs and the Greek chef would cook them. There were fresh vegetables and fruit - peach orchards and apple trees were on the property. They would ring a cowbell for lunch and dinner. Sometimes there would be 100 guests for dinner. It was fun. It was something!

Seifer recalls a mock wedding party in which the bride and groom traveled from the Riviera Resort in Stevensville in a Model T Ford, accompanied by family, friends and a clarinetist. The clarinetist played in the tower of the hotel.

According to Beulah Iatropulos, her father and uncle, Chris and Andrew Fasseas, owned the Riviera Resort in Stevensville from about 1925 to 1934. She fondly remembers the baptism of her baby sister Ellie on the resort's sandy Lake Michigan beach. "They rolled up their pants and filled a *kazani* (tub) with water. A priest who had come from Chicago baptized her."

On Sundays, some of the Greeks attended the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, built in Benton Harbor in 1949. In the 1950s, Chicago area youths including Jim Demeur, Alexander Rassogianis and Angelo Siaperas served as altar boys under the direction of Reverend Christos Moulas. Some of the summer Greeks pitched in with the local Greeks to work at the church's yearly summer picnics. Greeks and the general community relished these picnics, which featured lively Greek music and dance, as well as more than a thousand plates of chicken and potato salad.



Ethnic Greek women from Chicago at the Riviera Resort on Ridge Road in Stevensville, 1944. Chris and Andrew Fasseas owned the Riviera from about 1925 to 1934. (Courtesy Vaso Georgulis Powers)

Year-round Greek residents of the Berrien County community welcomed the summer Greeks. They met each other at the local Greeks restaurants or at the church. The local Greeks may have initiated the summer migration of the Chicago Greeks, since many of those who settled in Berrien County had previously lived in Chicago. Those who had second homes in Michigan had a steady stream of visitors. The Economos home had a sleeping porch, "about thirty feet long and there were a lot of beds in there. It was like a dorm." Mike Economos recalls, "In those days you never needed an invitation too much to go to somebody's home, you just did it. You just did it . . . the home was open to my mother's family, my cousins, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, my grandfather. My cousins used to come and stay there and they'd come for a week or a few days or a weekend. We had a very large extended family . . . and the Greek tradition was if you married into another family, they became your family too. It was they were never the in-laws, they were the family, you know, and so everybody was welcome."

John Rassogianis enjoyed helping his Uncle George can pears, peaches, blackberry jelly, grape jelly, and tomatoes. He says, "There's just something real nice about, about doing the simple things like that when you're a kid. It's more of a family kinda thing."

The concept of a loving extended family appears frequently in oral histories of the Greek community. Tom Pekras describes it as, "A lot of love and a lot of warmth and a lot of family that always did things together, and we always trusted each other, and we had a lot of good times."

Helen Malevitis explained what the summer experience meant to her. "The children would play; they would go down to the beach; at night they would gather, maybe sing songs. It was a lot of just camaraderie and sharing. . . . I mean it gave me such a sense of solidarity and a sense of wholesomeness."

Affluent and middle class Chicago Greeks often bought second homes in southwest Michigan. Poorer Greeks who struggled through the Great Depression also came, finding refuge in primitive shacks with no running water, where they cooked meals on kerosene stoves and walked to community bathrooms and showers.

Whether they were at a resort, second home or a primitive cabin, children enjoyed their carefree summer vacations in southwest Michigan, spending many hours at the beach, reading, or playing baseball (a favorite game of Illinois Senator Adeline Geo-Karis) or games such as hopscotch, pick-up-sticks, Monopoly or card games. Television sets and video games did not yet exist. The Rassogianis brothers of Stevensville donned pith helmets to go exploring in the swamp behind their house. John hung binoculars around his neck. Sometimes they went hunting with air rifles.

Summer differed from the structured environment of the school year. During the school year, Tom Pekras helped out at the store at age seven and eight and went to Greek school three days a week. "I just look back at those years - to get away in the summer for a short time, it's one of the happiest years of my life."

Vaso Powers explains, "It was a very unstructured time (in contrast to school and teachers telling you what to do . . . and you know after school stuff). I think that unstructured time is really important for people to have as they're growing up. You get some sense of yourself and what you like. . . . You need to work through your own head and figure out who you are."

Helen Malevitis reflects, "Greek parents did not really get involved in their children's activities. They allowed you to be innovative, be creative, come up with your own ideas, and so you did. You played games; you played hide and go seek; played marbles; you found ways of entertainment. There was no such thing as saying to your parents that you are bored."

Sounds, smells and sights - significant reminders of summers spent enjoying southwest Michigan. The author remembers swimming in the cool Lake Michigan water, the waves turned pink by the sunset. The soothing repetitive rhythm of the waves lulled her to sleep. Al Rassogianis recalls summer sounds: "Going into the lunchrooms in the resorts and hearing that screen door keep slamming all the time. I remember that screen door. People coming in and out of that screen door. It had a specific sound to it." He also remembers the train whistle. "Every time I hear a train whistle here, I think about those trains in Michigan when I was a kid. That has stayed with me."



Vaso, Helen and Cleo Georgulis (left to right) relax in front of their cottage on Ridge Road in Stevensville, 1947. (Courtesy Vaso Georgulis Powers)



Fran Poulos (left) and her friends enjoy the Lake Michigan shore, ca. 1947. (Courtesy Fran Poulos Katsaros)

The fishy damp smell of the lake and the smell and taste of Michigan fruits and vegetables prod the memories of the Greeks who vacationed in Michigan. Bill Rantis describes his love affair with peaches while he was visiting his Uncle Nick Rantis' home: "There was always peaches, and I'll tell you if you've ever picked a peach off a tree and eat it I mean it doesn't get any better at least for me. I'd rather eat that than anything."

Didi Tatooles says, "We liked to go to the farm and pick fruits, and everything tasted so much better there. You know like the tomatoes were actually tomatoes instead of the plastic stuff we eat from here now. And I remember my mother making fresh raspberry pie, which raspberry being my very favorite fruit. We'd go to the farm, pick the raspberries, and she'd make pie. And cherry pie."

Didi Tatooles smiles at the memory of another smell: "This is the funny thing. The ladies one day sent us out. All day we were to be out. The dads and the children were to be out all day because they were going to make *scorthalia*. *Scorthalia* is garlic sauce. They worked on it all day. And when it was time for us to come home we could smell the house before we got there. They were just so thrilled because it was the first time that they made *scorthalia*. They were very happy. They were, and my mother is American-born."

Marianne Kagianis recalls the "wonderful aroma of roasted lamb" and the homemade wine they served at their Grand Beach home. Many families brought homemade wine with them when they vacationed in Michigan.

Resorts served American-style breakfasts with "sizzling bacon, eggs, and pancakes" in their community dining rooms or in the home. Mothers also concocted a Greek-style drink for their children. Beulah Iatropoulos says every house had it. She shares the recipe: "You take an egg yolk, throw away the white, put it in a glass, a sturdy glass, pour sugar in it, take a knife, and whip it until it turned a lemon color, and then . . . pour milk in it. . . . That was your booster for the day." She recalls the unpleasant taste of cod-liver oil. Parents fed it to naughty children who they caught eating forbidden fruit from the nearby orchards. An aunt used binoculars to catch the culprits.

Peter Kerhulas, a permanent resident of Stevensville, had a poultry farm and delivered live chickens in boxes to the resorts. The chef then slaughtered them. Mike Economos tells a gruesome story about the Rantis family lamb: "They had a lamb, which they had raised for a year or two. To me it was like a pet. I loved it. It was summer, and they decided to butcher the lamb, and my grandfather was a butcher in his younger day, and so he butchered the lamb, killed it; and then he slit it. So he peeled off all the skin and everything like that. It was kind of hard to eat the lamb."

According to Adrienne Georgandas, “The food tasted better because we were always outside. You know? It was that outside living that we liked so much, and I experienced the same kind of thing when I lived in Greece, the outdoor living. I like it so much better than everyone being closed in here.”

The vacationers enjoyed eating and playing outdoors. Pleasures included swimming in the lake, fishing and taking leisurely walks. Walks at night with kerosene lamps or flashlight gave the vacationers an opportunity to admire the sparkling stars.

Adrienne Georgandas delighted in the Michigan sunset. “The sunsets were absolutely gorgeous, because, you know, when you’re on the other side of the lake you see the sun set. . . . So, the sunset was just something unbelievable, and you could see it from the top of the hill when we would go home from the beach at like six or seven at night, you know, and it would still be light. And you could watch the sunset, fall into the water, and it was just gorgeous. I won’t forget the sun as long as I live.”

Even rain was a delight. Mike Economos says, “One of my favorite things . . . always, was when we would go to the beach and then a storm would be coming across the lake. We would sit up in the dunes and watch the storm come over with the lightning and everything on the clouds and the thunder and everything. And we would race until it got right close to us, then we would run home to see if we could beat the rain home.”

The summers that Greeks spent in Michigan came to an end in the 1960s, when Greeks started going to Greece instead or to other travel destinations. Also, as the children grew into the teens and entered college, southwest Michigan no longer had the allure it had before.

The childhood joys of summers in southwest Michigan linger in the memories of those who experienced the era. John Rassogianis recalls the visit of his friend’s son. This friend, who now lives in Greece, loved Michigan and kept repeating to her son the wonderful stories of Michigan and the beach. When John showed him the beach, he just stood there in awe and said, “So, this is the beach. This is the beach.” As Mike Economos remembers, “It was a great time. It was really nice and carefree youth. . . . It’s out of my mind, but it isn’t out of my soul.”

About the *Greeks of Berrien County* Project

The History Center at Courthouse Square, in partnership with the Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church of New Buffalo, Michigan, and Columbia College Chicago, conducted research and collected photos and artifacts for a project entitled “The Greeks of Berrien County, Michigan.” The project was funded in part by the Michigan Humanities Council, an affiliate of the National Endowment of the Humanities. As part of the project, in November and December 2002, the students of Erin McCarthy’s Columbia College Chicago’s Oral History Class interviewed twenty-one ethnic Greeks who vacationed in Berrien County, Michigan, from the 1920s to the present. In addition, staff and volunteers interviewed twenty-five full-time residents. In 2006-2007, an exhibit based on this research was installed at four Berrien County locations: Orchards Mall, The Box Factory for the Arts, the History Center at Courthouse Square, and the Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church in New Buffalo.

Greek Businesses in Berrien County

Many Greek-owned businesses were located in Berrien County. These included: Palace of Sweets, Harbor Restaurant, Manhattan Waffle Shop, Market View, Candyland, Moutsatson Restaurant, Ace Lunch, Main Restaurant, John Kanalos Restaurant, Aragon Bar, Lions Bar, Silver Beach Concession, Fifth Wheel Café, Shamrock Restaurant, Chop House Restaurant, Michigan Hotel Café, Barrel House Bar, Abe Frank Grocery, Oasis Grocery and Liquor, Apollo Bar, Nick’s Red Garter Bar, Burger King, Rocket, Little Castle Restaurant, Billion’s Grocery, Greg’s Grille, Karagon’s Grille, Log Cabin Barbeque (later known as Greek Harbor), Calvin’s Grille, Buffalo Cafe, and J and J Restaurant.

Peter Kerhulas (a former fruit and poultry farmer) and his partner Steven Roumell (a New Buffalo lawyer) developed the Sunset Shores area of New Buffalo. James Smirniotis developed a subdivision in St. Joseph Township. Several immigrants, including Nick Stamatopoulos and James Bizanes, invested in real estate. Ted and Georgia Lavedas had Theo’s Lanes in New Buffalo. Nick Argondelis operated the Pearl Grange Fruit Exchange outside Benton Harbor. Nick Katsulos and John Giaras started a trucking business in Stevensville. Several Greeks operated farms.

Current Greek-owned businesses include: Internet Café and Art Gallery, Dino’s Restaurant, Millennium Steakhouse, Prime Table Restaurant, Olympus Restaurant, Stacy’s Grill, Sophia’s Pancake House, Mr. Gyros, Tony’s Family Restaurant, J and J Restaurant, Hilltop Restaurant, Babe’s Lounge and Mr. Goody’s Restaurant. Other Greek-owned businesses are Lakeshore Realty, Kerhoulas Insurance, Athens Jewelry, Fatouros Media, Fatouros Value Investing, Sound Creations, Buffalo Liquors, ‘Sno-Wonder Enterprises, Atilla of the Soil, and Gallery on the Alley.

Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or Michigan Humanities Council.

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