

Exhibiting the Greek American Experience

By Steve Frangos 11/25/06
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A number of museum exhibitions about the Greek American experience have opened all across the country. This says nothing for the existing museum exhibitions already on permanent or seasonal display. In fact, several touring exhibitions on Greek Americans from various parts of the United States are making their way across the country as we speak.

As incredible as it may seem, new books on local Greek American communities (based on museum exhibitions or commemorative celebrations), Internet sites as museum exhibitions, DVD's of local history, and even audio DVD's of oral histories are all readily available on Greek American history.

That we are awash in nothing less than a massive grassroots preservation movement seems to have escaped the conceptual notice of the general Greek American press.

While many individual museum exhibitions and events are regularly reported in the Greek American press, others somehow pass below our collective awareness. This again speaks of the Greek American community's continuing parochial, rather than national, focus. Nevertheless, the common theme of all these new or recently opened exhibitions, wherever they may be, is to present and preserve the history of local Greek Americans and their communities.

As the old Greek immigrants I grew up with used to say, "Numbers don't lie." All this activity speaks for itself.

THE EXHIBITIONS: MIDLAND, MICH.

The exhibit, "Child Entrepreneur: John Rapanos' Ice Cream Business" opened on July 29 in the galleries of the Herbert D. Doan Midland County History Center in Midland, Michigan. Although it is no longer on display, the display (the exhibition closed on October 1), it is still worth mentioning.

If you spent your childhood in Midland during the 1950's, chances are good that you have fond memories of hearing the distant sound of bells from ice cream carts peddling those frozen treats up and down Midland's streets for five cents. While the carts were a welcome and familiar sight, the unusual story behind them is fascinating, and one not often told.

Local businessman and developer John Rapanos began his business career before he was a teenager, selling gloves, candy bars and pints of milk to Dow Chemical workers at the Austin Street Gate from his hand-pulled red wagon. By the time he was 12, he had organized a business selling ice cream bars throughout Midland, and hired other local children to help him sell those ice cream bars. John's business soon spread to Battle Creek, Lansing, and other Michigan towns – all before he went to high school. These experiences, and others, set the pace for John's future endeavors. His restored carts, a 1920's ice cream delivery truck, and other items which were on display must have brought back fond memories of summertime in Midland.

SOMERVILLE, MASS.

Next we have, "New Lives in a New Land: Immigration in Somerville & the Greater Boston Area – The Greek Community and Hope, Valor and Inspiration, 1896-1918: The World of George Dilboy, Greek Immigrant and American Hero," which recently opened on September 10 at the Somerville Museum (1 Westwood Road, Somerville, Massachusetts, TEL: 617-666-9810).

This exhibition runs until March 25, 2007. Organized under the direction of the Somerville Museum and Historic Somerville, it presents the Greek migration to the Somerville-Greater Boston area during the 20th Century, and has a dual focus. While presenting the contributions on local Greeks in the greater Boston metropolitan area, this exhibition highlights the life and service of a 'native-son,' George Dilboy.

Dilboy was a Greek immigrant from Alatsata in Asia Minor and a one-time Somerville resident who became the first Greek American to be awarded the United States Medal of Honor. Dilboy's life and times are documented through newspaper reports, photos, poetry, medals, portraits, statues and other memorabilia.

The sacrifices and the opportunities Greek immigrants made are as real today as they were a century ago. But all too often, the efforts and the achievements of those immigrants from decades ago are fading from memory. To help keep these activities and the patriotism and values which were made clear by World War I alive, the Dilboy exhibition is providing its audience

with a variety of ideas and insights into the past. Equally as important, the exhibition is allowing a look at lives and actions from a century ago, which still inspire people today.

BERRIEN COUNTY, MICH.

Another Michigan-based exhibition, "Greeks of Berrien County," is in the process of being completed. Dr. Elaine Thomopoulos, book review editor for the National Herald, conducted research involved for this particular exhibition in 2002-03, which explores the history and contributions of Greek immigrants who settled and vacationed in Berrien County, Michigan.

This exhibit is drawn from oral histories, photographs and artifacts, and will be displayed at three places: the Orchards Mall in Benton Township from November 20 to January 6; the 1839 Courthouse Museum in Berrien Springs from January 16 to February 9; and, finally, a permanent display at the Annunciation and Saint Paraskevi Church in New Buffalo, beginning February 18.

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Additional components of the project include a 20-page publication; humanities scholars presenting public discussions about Greek immigration; radio presentations; oral histories; and Internet postings of many of the exhibition's photographs.

"By exploring the history of the Greeks of Berrien County, we will gain a better understanding of the struggles that immigrants have experienced, no matter where they have come from," Dr. Thomopoulos said. "Their history is our history. We are very grateful for the support of the Michigan Humanities Council and our community partners, the local church and Orchards Mall, as well as the libraries, businesses, organizations, scholars and hard-working volunteers who are contributing to this important project."

PHILADELPHIA

Recent Internet announcements assert that the Philadelphia Museum of Art is scheduled to open a retrospective exhibition on famed Greek American artist Thomas

Chimes in early 2007. Chimes, an 84-year-old Greek American artist who lives in Philadelphia, is a contemporary of Robert Rauschenberg and Theodore Stamos, yet his distinctive work is not known to the general American or Greek public, and has not been included in recent large exhibitions on the work of Greek artists.

When reading about these Greek American exhibitions, what is so very instructive is that all of them are the result of a very small group of dedicated people.

Dr. Michael Taylor who is the Chimes exhibition curator has known of this artist and his work for more than 15 years. It is striking how the personal relationship, so fundamental to Greek American social interaction, sees expression in the very manner these exhibitions have come into existence.

This is but a mere survey of the new and upcoming museum exhibitions.

THE MUSEUMS

I should also mention the two

Greek American museums which opened on a daily basis. The Saint Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine in St. Augustine, Florida (www.stphotios.com) and the Hellenic Museum & Cultural Center in Chicago (TEL: 312-726-1234) have beautiful permanent exhibition spaces, and both continuously develop new programs.

The Hellenic Cultural Museum of Salt Lake City (TEL: 801 328-9681, 801-484-9708) is open by appointment for visitors and researchers alike. This museum reflects the life of early Greek immigrants to the American Southwest by displaying immigration artifacts such as old letters, manuscripts, early mining tools, a mining exhibit, photographs, costumes and manuscripts.

All of these upcoming and ongoing events demonstrate that Greek Americans throughout the country are, virtually on their own, doing everything they can to preserve and proudly present as much of their experiences and culture as they can.

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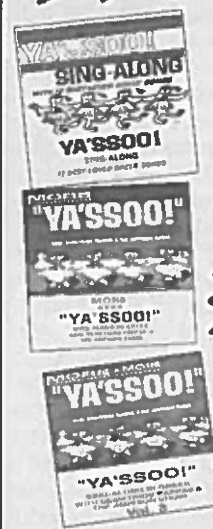
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