

A New Exhibit: The Greeks of Berrien County

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"The Greeks of Berrien County," as a permanent museum exhibition – now housed at the Annunciation and Saint Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church in New Buffalo, Michigan – is a wonder to behold. Under the direction of Dr. Elaine Cotsirilos Thomopoulos, the overall project has taken several years and encompassed field research to put together, with a touring exhibition, a lengthy booklet, a lecture series and now the exhibit's installation at the parish. The Michigan Humanities Council, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, funded all the various aspects of this project, in part. But it was the determination of Dr. Thomopoulos, ever supported by a host of Berrien County Greeks, which saw this project to its triumphant conclusion. Berrien County is the southwestern-most region of Michigan, long recognized for its splendid fruit crops and beautiful shoreline. The settlement of Greeks in this largely agricultural county back in the early 1900's was a conscious choice. Greeks sought out the south shore of eastern Lake Michigan due to its beauty, tranquility and, frankly, for being totally unlike the cities such as Chicago, Detroit and New York City, where they had first established themselves.



(L-R) Ted Kerhoulas, president of the Annunciation & Saint Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church in New Buffalo, Michigan, John Arvan, Elaine Thomopoulos, curator of the "Greeks of Berrien County" exhibit, Angelo Arvanitis and Nick Thomopoulos.

While these Greek pioneers worked in family-owned restaurants, candy stores, groceries and other small businesses, they were infused each summer by a host of fellow Greeks vacationing in small cabins and shore houses. With Greeks seeking out Greeks, their summertime presence in the county made their overall numbers seem much larger than their actual year-round demographics.

The Berrien County Historical Society was especially supportive of Dr. Thomopoulos' initial project proposal, due to the general admiration of Greeks in Western Michigan. What many Greeks in North America seem to forget is that their lives and the experiences of their ancestors are as much a part of American history as they are of Greek Diaspora history. Projects such as those undertaken by Dr. Thomopoulos can be applied for and conducted anywhere in the nation.

"The Greeks of Berrien County" exhibit, now just off the narthex of the Annunciation & Saint Paraskevi Church, was originally a storage room. An 8-foot hall attached this room to the church. Roughly speaking, the storage room itself is no more than 20 feet by 40 feet, but it is accented by a ceiling well over 20 feet in height. Church members cleared out the room, which was loaded floor-to-ceiling with all the kinds of odds and ends every church seems to acquire over time. The room was then cleaned and painted. The exhibition panels, banners, traditional costumes, historic photographs, large objects, traditional needlework and embroideries, and display cases were all artfully arranged in this refurbished space. As if in waiting for this exhibition were the windows high on the southern wall, allowing for ambient light which graces the entire space with a constant soft glow. The 8-foot hall is perfectly employed to feature just the six-by-eight-foot full-color opening panel.

Aside from general tours, this exhibition room has been visited by an endless host of school children. As a permanent installation, it will clearly serve as an ongoing source of inspiration and pride for the local Greek community.

That a rural Greek community drawn from a number of small towns and hamlets – which has never numbered more than 70 permanent Greek families and individuals – could undertake and accomplish such a project so successfully is a lesson all Greek American communities everywhere should take to heart.

This exhibition was also augmented by a series of well-conceived public programs which accent various themes seen within the museum panel text. To date, four out of the five public programs have seen presentation.

On February 24, Tasso Rigopoulos' documentary film, "Greeks and Americans," was shown at the Box Factory for the Arts in St. Joseph, Michigan. On March 11, Dr. Artemis Leontis delivered a lecture, "Greek American Identity: What Women's Handiwork Tells Us." Held in the church hall, this lecture was complimented by an open-floor discussion by local Greek women on the traditional needle arts featuring examples of their handiwork.

On March 17, Dr. Thomopoulos gave a lecture with slides on "The Greeks of Berrien County," once again in the parish hall. Also present was Professor Dan Georgakas, who spoke on the Greeks of Detroit. Rather than simply lecture on the Detroit Greeks, Georgakas drew upon his extensive knowledge of other Greek communities in Michigan and elsewhere in order to place the history and personal experiences of the Berrien County Greeks into a wider historical and cultural perspective.

On March 24, "Like a Little Greek Town: Memories of Michigan Summers," featured Dr. Erin McCarthy and Dr. Thomopoulos in an open-discussion session.

The presence of vacationing Greeks along the Berrien County shoreline is an aspect of Greek American history which, until this exhibition, has been largely ignored.

Most assuredly Greeks in the United States actively sought out summer retreats. That Greek Americans spent many a summer season in Greek-owned resorts found in the Catskill Mountains is still a lost aspect of the New York City Greek's history. It is still not fully understood that Greeks who own condos in the immediate three counties around Tarpon Springs, Florida largely support the Greek community in that small city.

All across the nation one can find small gatherings of Greeks who spend summers in the company of other Greeks, and we can thank Dr. Thomopoulos for bringing this ignored aspect of our collective history to the fore.

On Sunday afternoon, April 22 (2:30 PM), the final lecture/discussion will feature noted Michigan-Greek writer Pearl Kastran Ahnen, who will offer readings from her novel, "Daughter of Immigrants," and Paul Chardoul, who will speak on "The Greeks of Grand Rapids." Rev. James Bogdan, longtime resident and current parish priest for the Greeks in Grand Rapids, will moderate.

The fact that the History Center at Courthouse Square, which houses the Berrien County historical association, remains an ardent supporter of this entire project (www.berrienhistory.org) can not be overemphasized. Greek Americans remain convinced that local Americans do not really care or wish to learn about the Greek American historical experience. But nothing could be further from the truth – as the ongoing success of the Berrien County project clearly demonstrates. Readers will note that I have not offered any account of the history or experiences of the Greeks in Berrien County. Dr. Thomopoulos has already written such an account in the museum booklet, which could well serve as a series of articles right here on the pages of the National Herald.

Bold as Greeks may be in their lives among the Americans in a Greek setting, however, they seem to become confused. The history Dr. Thomopoulos would offer – with a beautiful array of historic photographs, objects and oral histories – is, by definition, not "news." This sometimes makes the Herald's editorial staff pause. Complicating this issue is the question concerning how representative the Berrien County story is to the rest of Greek America, another topic often brought up in editorial discussions.

Without hearing comments from our readers, these hesitations are not without merit. We can not be the community's voice if we do not hear from you. The responsibility for what is published on these pages can not be limited to just the staff. The Greek American community must get up off its collective behind and engage our community institutions, or we will never see a continuance – let alone a rebirth – of our community at which everyone on the National Herald's staff works very hard daily to help achieve.

The history of Greeks in North America is not a history exclusively of big cities and famous men. It is a collective history of Greeks everywhere, and at all times. I have traveled the country extensively over the past five years, going from one local Greek community to another. Many Greek Americans in their thirties and forties believe all it means to be Greek is to speak Greek, know Greek kinship and attend church. If you do not speak Greek, than many of the rest you can not possibly be Greek. When I ask these same economically and socially successful individuals if they have ever read a single historical account on Greeks in the United States, I have yet to meet one person who has said yes.

If we intend to maintain Greek culture in America, we must overcome our own collective phobias and prejudices. "The Greeks of Berrien County" exhibition can go a long way in demonstrating to Greek America at-large how such projects can help to preserve and reinvigorate local communities. We owe Dr. Thomopoulos and her hardworking Greek American colleagues a debt of gratitude for offering us a real world example of what can be accomplished through local American historical societies. Greek America is made stronger by the sterling accomplishments of the Greeks of Berrien County, Michigan.