

A "History Room" In Every Parish

By Steve Frangos 8/15/09
Special to The National Herald

Every Greek Orthodox church in North America should have a "History Room". Ideally, this facility should archive all the historic documents, photographs and objects related to the establishment and experience of the individual parish community. Not only should these materials be systematically collected, but select elements from the overall collection should be prominently displayed. Displaying historic documents, photographs and even objects teaches every one, especially the younger generations, about the history of Greece, Greeks in the United States and the establishment and history of their local parish. This is not some pie-in-the-sky idea; rooms like this already exist in Pueblo, Colorado and Berrien County Michigan. Larger display areas and entire buildings already exist (or, as you read this account, are in the very process of being built) in Salt Lake City, Utah; San Jose, California; and Chicago, Illinois.

I have seen thousands of dollars raised for Greek Orthodox church gyms, tennis courts and even pools. So, raising money to preserve, protect and display your local church parish's history is not asking a lot. It will cost much less too. Ever since I can remember I have heard Greeks in the United States ask each other: "How can we teach our children what it means to be Greek?"; "How can we keep the kids in the Church?" and the perennial "Why don't our kids speak Greek?" The logical answer to any and all these questions is because you never teach them anything about being Greek. This isn't the village or some neighborhood in Athens. How do you think anyone learns something? They personally experience it. How is anyone to learn about being Greek in North America if they do not spend time with Greeks learning what it means to be Greek?

So, how does someone first go

Continued on page 10

where he was taken in the second I train

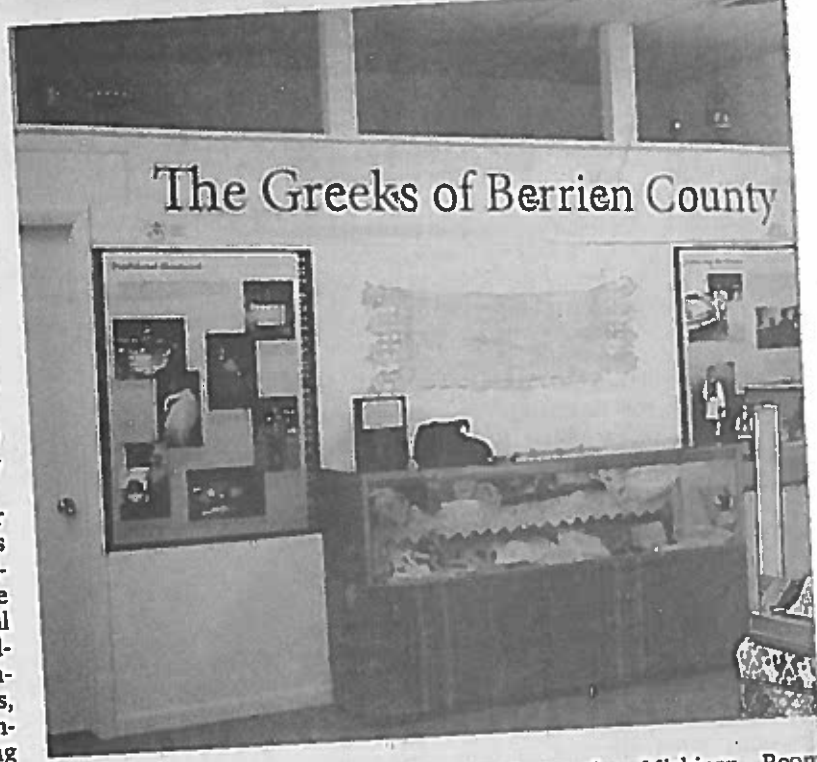
"History Room" in Every Parish: An Old Idea

Continued from page 1

about amassing such historic materials? This is the easiest part of the entire venture. Just go around the church and begin looking. That is exactly what the parishioners who eventually formed the History and Archives Committee of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation, in Atlanta, Georgia, did to gather their quite considerable archival collection. Now this organization has a temperature controlled room for their documents, an oral history room where they video-interview and a display room.

Be flexible. The baby boomer Greek Americans are in the process of retirement. Many of these individuals have been involved one way or another with their local communities all their lives. According to the 1970 Bureau of the Census Report, Greek Americans, counted among their own numbers, were supposed to be among the most educated individuals in the nation. Well, let's apply all that accumulated intelligence, experience and work ethic to the task of saving our individual parish historical documents.

What should we keep in this space? Logically, the average history room should be an extension of the church library and parish



I give these people numbers and write that number on the Xerox copy right on that person's image. With the tape recorder running I ask questions, or the informant offers some information about each person. For reasons I can not understand, a Greek American will be able to tell you in minute detail

stored in the Michigan Room archives of the local public library. Beginning on February 15, 2007, the Berrien County touring museum exhibition became a permanent part of the Annunciation and St. Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Church in New Buffalo, Michigan. The Lowell Hellenic Heritage

archives. Most of the church libraries I have visited are armed fortresses where you could never borrow a book as you do from your neighborhood library. Others will only let members of the parish check out books. Having said that, the history room should have documents such as the church's original state incorporation papers. Newspaper articles on the church and local Greek community should also be collected and made available. Any and all photographs that document the history and experiences of the local community should be collected and stored for long-term preservation. These life-to-death records would also include materials such as baptismal and cemetery records.

Let me repeat that the public display of historic photographs and documents should be mandatory because not only is that one of the reasons they were collected in the first place, but because this is the best way to reach many of your fellow parishioners who will not read the bulletins you send them about the ongoing history project.

Now much of this kind of documentation is hard work. Over the last 30 years I have sat many times with Greek Americans looking at historic photographs. I have the Greek informant (that's what they are called) look at the original photographs while I have a photocopy in hand. I always have a tape recorder running during such identification sessions. As the informant identifies one person after another

every aspect of their job or business, literally, point by point. But when I ask them to identify people they have known their whole lives in a large group photograph they inevitably ask me, 'why?'

Well, think about it. Those large group photographs you have of your immigrant parents, grandparents or great grandparents, honestly, who are all those people? In various 50th, 75th and 100th church commemorative dinner-dance books, photographs of large groups are always shown. Yet few are identified, person by person. Sure you know the people you grew up with and/or went to church with but what about your children, grandchildren and/or great grandchildren, are you sure they will be able to accurately identify all those same people?

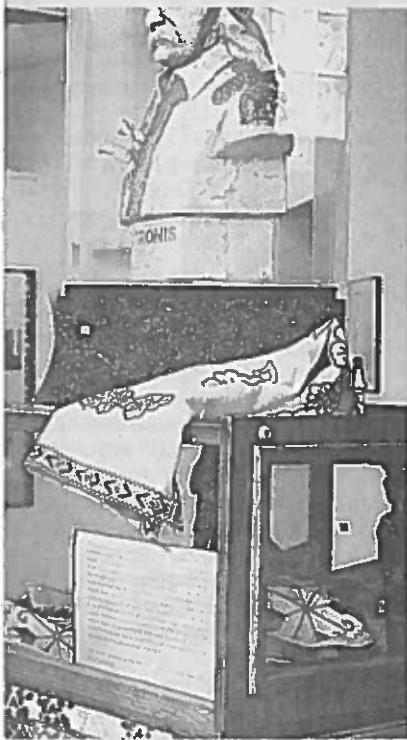
Who will do all this work, you ask? Well, most likely the same small group of people who do all the work in the church anyway. Look, no one is going to be Greek for you. No one else really cares.

Greek Rooms do not have to be in the church itself. Communities such as Grand Rapids, Michigan; Berrien County, Michigan; Lowell, Massachusetts; and Providence, Rhode Island have all chosen to first mount local museum exhibitions. In Grand Rapids all the documentation gathered or copied for their 1980 exhibition (including oral history interviews and videos): 'The Greek American Family: Continuity through Change,' is now

Association [LHHA] (P.O. Box 960, Lowell, Massachusetts 01853; <http://community.uml.edu/hellenicheritage/>) has taken advantage of the latest technology to create what can be called a "virtual museum." The LHHA has produced "a trilogy of exhibits that represent the history of the Hellenic American presence in the Lowell area through an initial century, 1874-1974:" Acropolis of America, The Greek Community of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1930-1940; the Acropolis of America II, The First Greek Immigrants 1874 -1929, which tells the story of the community from the arrival of the first Greek immigrant until 1929 and finally the Acropolis of America III, Passing the Torch, 1940 to 1974 (the war years, the arrival of new immigrants and entry into the new era).

Other communities have taken the long view. The Hellenic-American Historical Society of Rhode Island (HAHSRI) has elected to become affiliated with the Heritage Harbor Museum (222 Richmond Street, Suite 206 Providence Rhode Island 02903 (401) 751-7979) which is now under construction. As one can read on the Heritage Harbor Museum website "The Heritage Harbor Museum will be a major tourism attraction for the state of Rhode Island [and] is expected to annually draw over 325,000 visitors and contribute an estimated \$30 million in economic impact to the Rhode Island economy (www.heritageharbor.org.)"

Idea, but Still a Vital and Noble Endeavor



The Greek Americans of Berrien County, Michigan are among the first communities to establish a Greek Room to present and preserve their history. Similar efforts have begun with exhibits at local museums.

The Greeks of Rhode Island are clearly a serious lot, since Americans of Hellenic ancestry (first) met in 2002 to form an organization that will be responsible for development of the Hellenic exhibit at Heritage Harbor Museum, Rhode Island's statewide history museum and cultural center. They formed

tacted various older members of the Greek community to not only collect photographs and documents but to learn fundamental historical questions...now what?

Please remember you are an American citizen as well as a Greek and have probably lived in the local area for decades. Go find a local

fall to construct a museum building in Chicago's Greektown neighborhood. In New York City the Greek Museum, the Center for Greek American Heritage (CGAH) (P.O. 1863 Grand Central Station New York City, New York 10163 www.Greek-Museum.org) is an example of a critical community insti-

the Hellenic American Historical Society of Rhode Island and formalized their intention to have a permanent exhibit at Heritage Harbor.

"The exhibit will trace the contributions that Hellene Americans have made to the Rhode Island community in business, cultural and religious life, as well as the influence of classical Hellenic architecture in some of our state's most significant buildings, including the Rhode Island State House and the Providence Arcade."

Among the society's immediate priorities is identifying all Rhode Islanders of Hellenic ancestry, including those who are not members of the three Greek Orthodox churches in the region: "Anyone who has at least 25 percent Hellenic lineage — one grandparent of Greek descent, not necessarily born in Greece... so that they can be accounted for, and their story included in this exhibit (www.pahh.com)."

Establishing a Greek Room in a public setting is actually not that new of an idea. The Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh's main campus in the Oakland neighborhood has a Greek Room as one of its 27 Nationality Rooms. The difference is that in November 1941, when this room was dedicated, rather than present the historical experience of Greeks in the United States, a classical theme was chosen.

So, you've gone around the entire church and collected what you could find. Maybe you even con-

historian or archivist either at your local (or state) historical societies. Talk with them at some length about how to go about looking through public records/documents. Have them give you copies of the forms you need to track historical documents down.

Once I realized that, from the 1960's to the 1970's, Greek Americans had been writing autobiographies, histories of their communities and had gradually moved to full fledged archival, genealogical, oral history collections and museum preservation, I wrote about these collective efforts as The New Preservation Movement phase of Greek American history. Therefore, I am far from the first person to ever think about how to preserve local Greek community history.

You can learn from other Greek Americans as well as from professional historians and archivists. The Preservation of American Hellenic History Web site is absolutely the best single source for information about preserving your community's local history (www.pahh.com). Links to the work of other Greek American communities around the country can be found at this site. I would suggest you begin at the 'Symposia' section of this site so you can read over the articles on how to go about collecting and preserving documents.

Other Greek organizations have already established museums. The Hellenic Museum and Cultural Center will be breaking ground this

tuion being held together by the will and tenacity of its two tireless co-founders, Katherine R. Boulukos and Anastasia Nicholas.

Many parishes are turning to publishing community photographic histories as the first step in a more broadly conceived preservation effort. In my recent review of 'The Greeks in Phoenix (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2008)' (July 2, 2009), I reported that this excellent volume was a collective endeavor of the Holy Trinity Greek Historical Committee working for well over a year in association with the Arizona Historical Foundation. This project led the local community to establish the Hellenic Cultural Museum of Phoenix within vacant space at the Community Center on the Holy Trinity property. As I am told, this museum is in the very early stages, or 'phase one,' of a more expansive venue planned for the future. The establishment of this museum is being undertaken by the same people who worked on the book.

Your parents, grandparents and more frequently everyday great grandparents founded the church you worship in every Sunday. Can't you take the time and effort to dedicate one room in the complex they fought so hard to establish and maintain to the preserving their experiences and personal histories? If you want to help Greek history, culture and religion survive in North America, then, I heartily suggest you immediately establish a 'History Room' in your local parish.