

# Greek Dancers and Dance Teams the 1920

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Special to the National Herald

## PART THREE

The four Condos Brothers are among the most acclaimed rhythm tap dancers in the history of modern dance. Totally absorbed into the art of dance each of the four brothers is individually universally recognized as a Master Dancer based on their long careers on stage and as documented in many Hollywood films. Many professional dancers today still model themselves on the steps and routines these four Greek-Americans created.

The Condos brothers hailed from Pittsburgh where their parents owned a restaurant. Frank was the eldest and born in Greece circa 1906. Like so many others of his time and generation he was brought to Pittsburgh by his immigrant parents around the age of one. As far as can now be determined next came Harry, Nick (26 January 1915-8 July 1988) and Steve (December 1919-1990). There were also three the Condos sisters: Eve, Ann and Joan. While reports exist of Eve became much sought after ball room dancer little other evidence is now publicly available on her career.

From 1920 to 1922 when Frank Condos was between 14 and 16 years old he attending high school and working at his family's restaurant after school. Part of his daily duties was delivering food. The Standard Restaurant was "at the corner of Eleventh and South Street across the street from the Standard Theatre, an African American vaudeville house in Pittsburgh. Because of the theatre, South Street was a place that drew dancers from the surrounding neighborhoods." Frank and his brothers often found themselves taking food over to the performers at the Standard Theater.

Seen from a Greek-American historical perspective none of this is unusual. Other Greek-American artists such as Johnny Otis (Veliotis), John Stamos, or George Pelecanos, to name only a few all worked at their parent's business,

be it restaurant, grocery store or candy store. What also bobs beneath the surface of Greek American history is its unexamined relationship with African Americans. As a case in point, we need only cite the song "North Memphis Blues," recorded by Memphis Minnie, Queen of the Country Blues, concerning the North Memphis Café. Opened in 1903, the North Memphis Café at 235 North Main became the only 'all black' restaurant in that city and soon after a gathering place for Blacks from the surrounding region. As some of the lyrics report more can be understood in these words than simply the taste of the food:

"I tell all you people, you can rest in ease

Because the North Memphis Café got everything you really need.

Now listen to me good people,  
I don't even make you made  
You go to North Memphis Café  
And get something you never had."

Just for the record, aside from the clientele, the Memphis Café was widely recognized for offering soul food at its very best.

What you do not see in the Hollywood historically sanitized film "Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef" is that the non-Greek sponge divers attacked the Greek divers in the 1913-1915 era (and some say later) for hiring African Americans to work with them on the boats as equals with equal pay.

From the moment Greek immigrants arrive in North America in the 1880s they worked side by side with African Americans in mills, railroads and elsewhere. Unreported in Greek-American historical accounts is that many Greek immigrants from the 1880 to 1920 wave of immigration worked their entire lives in factories, mills or in their own businesses all across the nation with African American co-workers. This undeniable fact alone stands the whole notion of racial segregation and the Greeks on its head.

At the same time it is also not unexpected to learn that Frank Condos' Greek immigrant father

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A poster for a show starring Paris Mestusis performed a variety of dances d

wanted his son Frank to be a lawyer. But that was not to be. The dancers at the Standard Theatre had quickly become Frank's idols. As a teenager Frank saw (and studied) some of the finest dancers of the era such as Covan and Ruffin, Eddie Rector, Jack Wiggins, Buck and Bubbles, and the Three Eddies. Who were these dancers? As Frank Condos later stated "the best dancers were colored."

Published sources report that during his period Frank practicing all the time. During interviews in the late 1960s, Frank Condos told dance researcher Marshall Stearns

# s through the 1960s: The Condos Brothers

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MANY  
LANDS

DRAMA  
TRAGEDY  
SATIRE

is Mestusis and Joan Valerie who  
during the early 20th century.

that he "began to practice upstairs in his bedroom while his father worried downstairs in the restaurant. "I went for those three-tap Wings and I said to myself, I am going to try to do this step even better." One day, while practicing, he jumped too high and hurt his knee. "I told my father I slipped on the ice." Condos learned the hard way. "I practiced all the time, night and day, and I danced very, very hard. It just about wore me out." We must assume from what followed that this 'dancing bug' also bit various other members of the Condos family as well.

Around the time of Frank Condos' 16th birthday he became obsessed with the idea of performing a "Five Wing Tap," thought to be impossible at that time. Frank Condos always noted that he "was approached by an old timer about the idea of doing a Five-tap Wing (www.streetswing.com)." Whoever this unnamed individual must have been and we should assume he was an African American dancer; this man inspired the young Greek American to greatness.

In 1923, Frank Condos ran away from home with neighborhood friend and dance partner Mateo "Mattie" Olvera. For the next few years the duo dance on stage and club circuit venues as 'King and King' and soon saw billing as the "fastest legs in the business (www.streetswing.com)." 'King and King' eventually found steady work in Chicago and the team soon received praise from other dancers white and black as well as all manner of media critics.

But professional success did not stop Frank Condos from realizing that—as he told Marshall Stearns decades later—"from the waist up we did not have much personality." The artist in Frank Condos led him to make this severe judgment of 'King and King' in part because of a wider movement within popular dance. As Stearns describes it "tap dancing was evolving away from the original concept of the Irish Jig—that is, movement from the waist down only—toward a more flexible style. Specifically tap was assimilating body movements from vernacular dance, putting them together in new combinations, and inventing steps of its own—including air steps, which employed the upper half of the body too."

Without getting too technical just as the Condos Brothers entered the world of American tap dancing it was already transforming itself from the 1920s jazz beat to the 1930s swing beat. For music historians, and perhaps Greek diaspora researchers of the future, I will only note in passing, that the musical goal the Andrews Sisters sought (and some say lead to their enduring fame) was their sustained ef-

forts to also perfect a swing beat singing style.

In the late 1920s, Frank Condos achieved the allusive five-tap Wing. Frank Condos is universally recognized as the first professional dancer to successfully perform a five-tap Wing.

So what exactly is the five-tap Wing? As Marshall Stearns describes this step: "to explain a five-tap Wing, it is important to note what is not happening. One leg (the legs alternate) is bent at the knee and raised up and back out of the way. This leg does nothing or something additional. With the other leg, the dancer jumps up in the air, and on the way up and down, makes five clear and distinct sounds on the floor with his foot. "Its no use jumping higher to gain more time to tap because then your foot won't reach the floor... and jumping lower gives you no time to tap at all—that jump has to be just right." And he might have added that the taps have to be in perfect rhythm."

Let me stress Condos did not just perfect the five-tap Wing. His additional claim to fame is that he would switch back and forth from one leg to another doing one set of five after another. Frank Condos unquestionably realized his act's inherent limitations, "we got pooped out. Other guys would be fresh after sixteen bars. We were exhausted trying to give our act more flash." African American dancers were (and remain) unanimous in their praise of Frank Condos. As Pete Nugent recalled, "He had legs of iron. I've seen him do the impossible—a five-tap Wing without a mat from a low couch."

By 1927, 'King and King' were the featured dancers in 'Artists and Models' the hit Broadway show. Condos and Olvera split in 1929 with Olvera going on to form another dance team 'King, King and King' with his two brothers. Over the next ten years Frank Condos went on to establish, lead and inspire the "Condos Brothers" dance team.

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