

The Greek Rogue of the American West

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By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

PART ONE

In the stories Greek Americans tell themselves rogues, criminals, and disasters (natural and otherwise) are often heard of in considerable detail. Growing up I heard many a recollection told of early misadventures in Ameriki. Traveling priests who performed funerals, marriages, or baptisms and who later turned out not to be ordained clergy. Losing one's entire savings as a young naive 'greenhorn' was another often told tale. Mournful accounts of dear relatives or friends from the village killed in the mines, smelters, and during railroad accidents are still bitter memories even when told, today, by the descendants of the original tale-tellers. To their credit Greeks

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also recall long involved stories of the hilarious mistakes and embarrassing situations resulting from an early lack of the English language.

Among these tales told Greek-to-Greek are those of Greek gamblers, confidence men and all manner of sharp-eyed rogues. Far from exaggerated folk tales such stories were and remain the best memories of real-life individuals and actual witnessed events. This being the case it should not prove too surprising that more than one Greek grafter – and his unfortunate prey – can be discovered in the historical record.

The convoluted story of Dr. P. G. P. Attias offers us an almost case-book study of a sly, and oh so polished, confidence man.

The earliest newspaper account, I have managed to locate, on Dr. Peter George P. Attias, finds him during the summer of 1899. Attias and his entourage are at the St. Cloud Hotel in Syracuse, New York. Dr. Attias received a reporter from the Evening Herald into his suite of rooms. Attias is decked out in his "knickerbockers suit, with heavy soled shoes...and a white duck coat and cap." In this first glimpse we learn that "Attias is a man of 26 years, born of Greek parents in Alexandria, Egypt, possessing a more or less intimate acquaintance with ten languages and equipped with a stock of stories of a busy life which make him an entertaining conversationalist."

Syracuse was but the latest stop in Attias' walk around the world. A planned three year journey Attias relates, he on January 1, 1898 in Cadiz, Spain. "He has walked eighteen months, just half the time allowed and has covered 25,000 miles." Attias even boasts his

science. I am a member of the geographical societies and scientists are interested in my trip. What I write for the papers they pay for well."

Leaving aside for the moment what the good Doctor means by "others traveling about begging" what could possibly have led to this world-wide walk-about?

Not long after, now in Des Moines, in another interview we learn that: "Attias is making his third trip around the world on foot on a wager of the London Sporting club, that they will pay him the sum of \$25,000 if he makes the journey of 40,000 miles within three years from the time of starting (Daily Iowa August 14, 1899)."

If Peter G. Attias; medical doctor, explorer, writer and frequent circumnavigator of the world, accomplished all that can be readily found in the American and Greek-American press of the 1899 to 1909 era, then, the man should be reckoned as one of the most foremost

While Peter Attias proved to be one of the most polished con artists, he cause great damage to the Greek colonies he preyed on.

Greek adventurers of the Modern Age!

Today, with the instant communication possible with telephones and the world-wide-web it is difficult to understand the international sensation caused by Jules Verne's 1873 novel, "Around the World in Eighty Days." This now classic adventure relates the adventures of "Phileas Fogg of London and

traveler would claim to be involved in scientific studies of one kind or another. Peter Attias would make all these claims and more.

To cite just one published account of this overall phenomenon we can have only to turn to the pages of the Portsmouth Times. On July 18, 1903, we find the headline, "The Old Gag: Another Vagabond Tramp around the World." I will not offer the full account just the core:

"Another member of the vagabond gentry, claiming to be traveling on foot around the world on a \$5,000 wager to be paid when he completes his tramp, is due to strike Portsmouth, Thursday. The latest citizen with a fairy tale calculated to separate the dear, credulous American citizen from his coin, calls himself "Sailor Jean." Advanced literature sent to The Times says that Jean left Augusta, Maine, on April 1 for a trip on foot to every state capital in the United States, and will cover a distance of 22,000 miles, which he will make in three and one-half years, thus making one of the most remarkable pedestrian tours of any person in the world...To help defray his expenses Sailor Jean sells souvenir pictures of himself...at the conclusion of his trip he will write a book, entitled, "The Adventures of Sailor Jean and his Trolleyette."

The threatened invasion of 'Sailor Jean' recalls the visit of the last of these gentry to Portsmouth. They were a couple of ignorant Roumanians who claimed to be professors in a New York college, traveling for the New York World, and making collections of plants about the country...Really this around the world wager business is being overworked. Give us something new."

teen months, just half the time allowed and has covered 25,000 miles." Attias even brought his own press clippings from the towns and cities he had already visited for the Syracuse reporter to read over.

All published reports on Attias offer the same core story: "He was given every advantage in his youth that money could supply. He was educated in the best schools of Europe and is a graduate of the French Institute of Medicine and Surgery at Paris. He also studied at Berlin and Leipzig, Germany, at Vienna and Rome, Italy and Madrid, Spain. He writes and speaks fluently fourteen languages (Salt Lake Herald July 29, 1904)." Which, if one knows anything about the Greek Diaspora, all sounds plausible.

In speaking with the Evening Herald reporter, Attias made what initially seems an extremely odd statement, "You have others traveling about begging and they 'claim' to have walked so far. I do not claim, I prove. I have been several times around the world so I know how to do [it] now I walk. And I travel in aristocratic manner. I have three men to arrange details and I have two dogs. I have spent \$17,000 already, I earn money. I do not beg. I travel in the interest of

venture relates the adventures of "Phileas Fogg of London and his...valet Passepartout [as they] attempt to circumnavigate the world in 80 days on a \$20,000 wager set by his friends at the Reform Club (wikipedia.com)."

Whatever else Peter Attias may or may not have been he certainly was a member of a unique tribe of confidence men. This brand of con man followed the Verne novel fairly closely. First, the 'world traveler/explorer' arrives in town claiming to be involved in a round-the-world trip. Sometimes the trip was just around the United States or the entire Western Hemisphere but then every state or country was said to be included. The journey is fixed in its time frame, e.g. 80 days, one year, whatever.

At the end of the journey should the traveler have completed the round-the-world trip in the allotted time then he wins a sizable bet or as it is most often phrased 'gentleman's wager.' The traveler has already journeyed thousands of miles and has tales to tell at a lecture hall or has or plans to write a book/pamphlet/newspaper to sell detailing his experiences. Many of these travelers also carried their press clippings with them as 'proof of their exploits. Very often the

being overworked. Give us something new."

I won't even try and explain what a 'trolleyette' was other than it was a contraption meant to dazzle the locals. Portsmouth is in Ohio and I will let you find out where it is located and what its population must have been in 1903. The point of choosing an account from Portsmouth, Ohio is that - as this news report clearly conveys - even a community of this location and size was frequently subjected to this specific type of confidence game.

While Peter Attias was to prove to be one of the most polished of the around-the-world con artists he caused great damage within the Greek colonies he preyed upon. Beginning in, 1899 Peter Attias can be tracked across fifty American newspaper articles (to say nothing of Greek American news accounts) moving about the country over a ten year period from Des Moines, Iowa to Steubenville Ohio, nearby Newark Ohio then out to Salt Lake City and Ogden Utah for at least two full years after which he moved on to Reno Nevada, San Francisco and Los Angeles California, then, on to Anaconda Montana, Detroit Michigan, and once again back to Syracuse.

Given the published accounts that have come down to us it seems that only Attias' ability to speak English (and various other languages) was all that was really 'true' about this man. Using his linguistic abilities Attias was able to pose as one of the few educated Greek professionals scattered about the American west. As we shall see disastrous consequences followed in the wake of Peter Attias' presence in every Greek colony he ever visited.

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are welcome to e-mail him at greekwrite@yahoo.com.

Jamaica Day School Provides Soundtrack for Education

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The demographics of the area are much different now than when Melikokis first got involved in education. When Jamaica Day School was built, in 1966, it accepted only Greek Orthodox students. Today, it opens its doors to anyone in the community

"The bottom line is, we have a good school, we have good results," Melikokis said. "Eighth-graders go to the high school of their choice, either public or parochial."

And Spanopoulos will continue to keep her faith in music. "It's astounding," she said. "It's a great program and the kids are phenomenal."

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PART TWO

From 1899 to 1909, the career of Peter George P. Attias can be documented in over fifty American newspaper accounts from towns and cities all across the United States. Posing as a world traveler, Attias claimed to be a medical doctor involved in a wager with unnamed individuals from the London Sports Club. The alleged wager involved Attias in, a round-the-world trip to be completed within a fixed period of time. The terms of this wager required that Attias take no money with him but that he earned monies along the way.

This Attias accomplished according to interviews he offered to an array of reporters from 1899 to 1909 by writing a newspaper he periodically sold to subscribers he acquired along the way, by his lectures, by corresponding for an array of European and American newspapers, by providing

their lifetimes. For just five cents people living in the most remote hamlets, villages and towns all across the planet could finally see the great cities of the world, the mightiest mountains and rivers, the clash of armies whose outcome would determine the fate of millions and all that might be seen—beyond the tree edged ridge-line that surrounded their still, mostly isolated community.

It is important to remember that moving pictures, projected onto a wall, was not technologically possible until the cusp of the late 1890s and the very early days of 1900. The success of confidence men such as Peter George P. Attias, during the late 1890s and through the first part of the 1900s must be seen against the real provincial nature, not simple of the American countryside but the planet in general.

Given the times and numbers of foreign

tures, by corresponding for an array of European and American newspapers; by providing select subscribers the just invented picture post cards for each of the cities he visited on his tour and for subscriptions to his always just-to-be-published riches-to-rags-to-riches-again life story, "The Ups and Downs of Life."

Yet, as the vast majority of the available news account document, Attias was an unabashed confidence man, bigamist, and his numerous claims to being a medical doctor never established. Even a close reading of the available newspaper accounts where Attias offers his own version of events are filled with so many contradictions, especially in terms of traveling dates, it can only be concluded the man was a habitual liar.

Further incriminating information is found in even small town newspapers that report on the frequent appearance of self-proclaimed traveling aristocrats on round-the-world treks based on a wager visiting them. These rogues drew their con game straight from the fictionalized doings found within the pages of Jules Verne's novel, "Around the World in 80 Days."

With all this being the case, the obvious question remains, how could Attias have gotten away with his tissue of lies for so long and in so many cities? Unfortunately, Peter Attias was the right man with the right skills in the right place at the right time.

The great initial success of the motion picture industry was that it brought to people all around the world the very first images of places, people and events the viewing audience would ever see in

Given the times and numbers of foreign workers from dozens of countries, whoever spoke English became a community leader

The massive waves of immigration to North America from Europe and elsewhere beginning roughly after the Civil War in 1865 and ending in 1924 remains one of the greatest movements of working people in modern times. This very same era also marks one of the greatest transformations in industrial manufacturing. The unintended consequence proved to be that with the very invention and mass production of a dazzling array of goods and services came a massive surge of individuals as ready consumers for these new amenities.

All these technological innovations take place just as these new immigrant workers arrived on American Shores. Not infrequently the new workers are in the factories producing these new goods. These foreign workers met another wave of displaced humanity those rural Americans who were being forced off the farms and out of rural areas. The establishment of the culture of consumption then met a new collective class of workers whose new level of income allowed for participation in this hitherto unimaginable consumable of goods and services.

As these two populations met in the cities the massive industrial growth and movement of populations engendered a wild boom and bust cycle in the general economy. During this time of innovations and uncertainty it was the waves of for-

COMMUNITY HISTORY

American West

eign laborers (rather than the company bosses who hired them) who were blamed for the economic difficulties of the native-born American day worker and small time merchant.

From the 1870s onward, immigrant workers labored on expanding the American network of railroads ultimately unifying the nation as never before. It also meant that, as newspaper stories of the era document, the increasing appearance of literally hundreds of non-English speaking foreigners (seemingly out of nowhere) brought by the trains to work in the new industries.

So not only was the average American, in the big cities or the small towns, able to see the whole world for the first time they were also in the unexpected position of meeting any number of foreigners on a daily basis. But these encounters were anything but scripted Hollywood musicals!

Given the times and numbers of

27, 1907).

Peter Attias' activities in Salt Lake City are especially worthy of note since it not only records his typical behavior but sets the stage for his long and bitter conflict with Leonidas Skliris. On the dodge from unstated offenses in Denver we learn:

"Doctor' Attias left by freight, and was subsequently compelled to walk part of the way, and by the time he arrived at Cisco, Utah, he was in a pitiable condition. Some shepherders and railroad men in that section found him and took him to Cisco. He told them he was a doctor, and a specialist in women's diseases, and that he did not have money to go any further.

The people at Cisco took pity on him and passed around the hat. The result was that when he had in a measure got over the effects of crossing the Green River desert in June he came on to Salt Lake as a passenger, his baggage having previously been expressed to Salt Lake

Hollywood musicals!

Given the times and numbers of foreign workers from literally dozens of countries, whoever spoke English as a second language became a community leader. The multi-lingual Attias arrived just in time to profit from this time of industrial innovations, social and cultural tensions and fundamental linguistic needs.

Especially interestingly given his subsequent frauds is how often Attias appears listed on the social pages of the American West.

Dr. Attias frequently gave lectures of his world wide adventures to both Greeks and to native-born Americans, he was noted for speaking at the funerals of Greek laborers and as a general spokesperson for the Greek communities in Utah and California and Montana (c.f. Salt Lake City Herald August 15, 1904; Deseret Evening News October 15, 1904; Daily Nevada State Journal March 17, 1905). In 1905, at the time of Greek Premier Delyannis' assassination, we find note only this con man described as "Dr. P. G. P. Attias, a leader in the Greek community of San Francisco," but his several paragraphs of his remarks in the pages of the San Francisco Call (see June 15, 1905 issue).

News accounts of Attias borrowing money (that he never paid back), gathering investors (for companies or projects that never materialized), or taking money from his fellow Greeks in his role as a labor agent (for jobs that did not exist) fill the pages of newspapers in Utah, California, Nevada and Montana (see again, Salt Lake Herald March 4, 1905; Deseret Evening News November 22, 1906; and the Syracuse Herald August

passenger, his baggage having previously been expressed to Salt Lake C.O.D. prior to leaving Denver. Upon his arrival here he hunted up Skliris, who is the recognized leader of the Greeks, and begged him to get his baggage out of the express office, so that he could have decent clothes to wear.

This was done, and Attias engaged a room at the Wilson, where the same evening his baggage was attached by the Luke collection agency for an alleged claim which a man by the name of Hintchey claimed he had against him for a hotel bill in Colorado.

Then it was, so claims Skliris, that he went to Skliris and presented a paper to him, stating that it was a bond for his appearance at the justice's court in Murray, and asked Skliris to sign it, which that young man claims he did, without examining the paper.

Subsequent developments proved this paper to be a note for the amount due on the grips. At the trial of the case Attias lost, and the bank demanded the money due from Skliris (Deseret Evening News October 15, 1904)."

As these events were unfolding, the mercury-quick Attias realized Leonidas Skliris was earning a king's ransom as an interpreter, labor agent, and general advisor to the Greeks. Without losing a step Attias made his play to usurp Skliris' position of power--not for the benefit of the struggling Greek laborers, like those who had 'passed the hat around' in Cisco -- but for his own personal reward.

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are welcome to send their e-mails directly to him at greekwrite@yahoo.com.