

Greeks in Phoenix: Hellenism in the Valle

By Steve Frangos
Special to The National Herald

For the "Greeks in Phoenix", another in the ever expanding series of Greek American photographic histories, the dedication summarizes this volume's purpose: "This book is dedicated to all those who preceded us in the Greek community and church. Our hope is that their memory will live through this book to help future generations recognize their Greek legacy (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2008)." In the best of all Greek American worlds, no one is ever forgotten and each individual has their moment to be recognized. That this is not how Greeks anywhere in the world interact on a daily basis does not detract from this honestly felt intention.

This volume is also yet another

expression in what can only be understood as a tsunami wave of publications in people's history. While academics count their footnotes and jockey for yet another power-lunch with Administration officials the average American, be they Hellenic in origin or not, yearns to read (or see) historical accounts of the social worlds in which they grew up.

For Greek Americans the feeling that the world has changed and that the familiar unquestioned reality of everyday life has somehow slipped away sees nationwide expression in one history volume after another.

My evidence for this claim is the overwhelming demand for local history books along with the ever growing number of documentary films dealing exclusively with the recent past. By 'recent' I mean that

period of time that is still recalled by living individuals. Some extension or blurring of time is admissible since having been told by ancestors and/or elders about their lives and experiences - are very much a part of any individual's memories.

The Greeks in Phoenix is a collective endeavor of the Holy Trinity Greek Historical Committee working for well over a year in association with the Arizona Historical Foundation. The volume itself is composed of some 186 images presented in the following chapters: the Introduction; 1. The First Families; 2. Birth of the Greek Community; 3. Holy Trinity Church; 4. The Later Years; 5. Business; 6. Organizations; 7. Social events; 8. Civic Leaders and Community events; 9. World War I and World War II and finally 10. New Church. As this community understands itself, "[T]oday the legacy of the area's Greek pioneers lives on through the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, which has established a research archive and museum to preserve and celebrate the Greek history of Phoenix. (www.arcadicapublishing.com)."

We learn in an online synopsis: "The Greek community in Phoenix began in 1907, when the Sanichas brothers, Charles and Chris, arrived in the city to establish the Sanichas Confectionery Store. By 1912, the year of Arizona's statehood, the community had grown to nine families, including the Georgouses family of five brothers. In 1930, ground was broken for the construction of the Hellenic Community House, where religious services were held until 1947, when the Hellenic Orthodox Church was built (www.arcadicapublishing.com)."

While many of you may feel this kind of description could serve for virtually any and all communities in the United States, there is an added

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From a red-figure situla painting ca. 360 B.C. depicting Odysseus and Diomedes stealing Rhesus' horses

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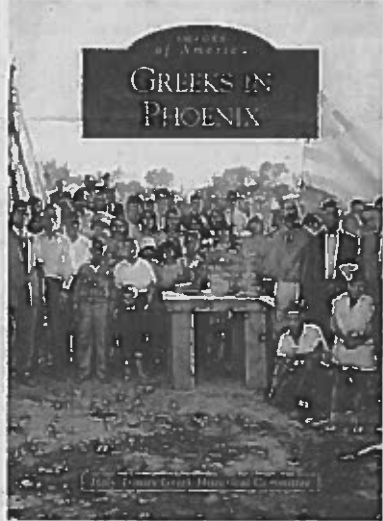
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Greek American photographic histories are becoming popular.

social and cultural twist here I could not find mentioned anywhere in this volume's text, in any review, or anywhere else.

First I would suggest you go back and read the above paragraph again noting that in 1912, there were nine Greek families, total, in Phoenix. Until the 1940s, the overall demographics of Greeks in Arizona never rose above 500 individuals. The hard demographic facts suggest that for the pioneer Greeks in Phoenix, the struggle to maintain their identities and raise their families as Orthodox Christians was all that much harder than for larger Greek communities.

Phoenix is the capital and largest city in the state of Arizona and the fifth largest city in the United States with 1,552,259 residents. The Phoenix metropolitan area, also known as "The Valley" (from the Valley of the Sun) is the 12th largest in the United States with 4,281,899 residents and includes much of the central part of the U.S. state of Arizona.

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Greek presence in this region has grown as well since: "[F]rom humble beginnings in the early 1900s, the legacy of the area's industrious Greek pioneer's lives—on today through four Greek Orthodox Church communities in the Valley (www.arcadicapublishing.com)."

Greek families scattered across 'the Valley' are also found in this volume such as Douglas, Miami, Nogales and Gila Bend. It is also important to stress that in these Arcadia publications, the real story is in the captions. Individuals, places, events, special occasions provide golden nuggets of solid information. I was especially impressed with the inclusion in the "Business" section of the listing of Greek-owned businesses for which no photographs were available. As more and more of these local Greek American histories are becoming available we are being provided the hard evidence that Greek immigrants commonly owned businesses on America's Main Streets all across the nation.

This is one of the reasons I believe, histories, such as this one on the Greeks of Phoenix is in many ways far more important, in the long term, than those written about Greeks in the major metropolitan areas. It is logical to assume that some evidence of the Greek experience in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco or any of the major metropolitan areas will always be available. The same can not be said for the small collectivities of Greeks scattered across North America.

Srianthi Perera's reporting on the 'Greeks of Phoenix' offers us further information. "The book came out of what we'd collected for a historical room in the church," committee member Alex Anagnopoulos said. Part of the book's proceeds will go toward establishing the museum. Anagnopoulos and several others already had tapped friends, relatives and community members for old photographs, which they then researched. One photo is of Anagnopoulos' parents: Her father came to the United States in 1910 and served in World War I. He later married and settled in Phoenix and became a supporter of the church.

Freelancer Andy Limber wrote much of the story. He also appears in one of the photos as an altar boy. He was 8 years old when he came to Phoenix from Indiana. "We got an appreciation for the amount of hard work and effort it took in that time period for people coming from Greece to establish in this part of the world," Limber said. "Today's Phoenix is drastically different from the one they came to."

Like many immigrants from Europe, Greeks came without money or education. What they brought with them - a good work ethic, a love of family and their Orthodox faith - stood them in good stead.

"Education was a big factor - they had to learn everything all over - and learn a new language. But they kept much of the old ways," said Limber. "They assimilated into

American culture and American commerce."

"It's a labor of love," Anagnopoulos said. "We learned a lot about our community. And we wanted to leave this for our future generation (Arizona Republic (October 10, 2008))."

Any community or individual wishing to compile a photographic history of Greeks in the United States can be well served by reviewing the Greeks in Phoenix closely. A point I was especially struck by were the number of Phoenix Greeks involved in movie theaters. The prominence of Greeks in the American movie theatre industry, culminating with figures such as Alexander Pantages and the three Skouras brothers, is well known within the Greek American community, but is a lost passage in general American history.

My one criticism of this volume is that more of an effort could have been made in identifying the early Greeks in Phoenix and the Valley of the Sun. Sitting in a Starbucks coffee shop in West Chicago, Illinois, I located news accounts and advertisements for Charles Sanichas, and his "famous Supremus Chocolates" in the Arizona Republican newspaper beginning in 1904, not 1907 or 1912. Sanichas is expressly called "the Phoenix candy man" in the December 3, 1905 edition of the Arizona Republican (see also April 21, 1905; May 28, 1905).

A 1917 Greek picnic at Camelback Mountain is included among the photographs of Phoenix's Greeks. This mountain is a prominent landmark for the metropolitan Phoenix valley, and is located between the Arcadia neighborhood of Phoenix and the town of Paradise Valley. This mountain was named by Indians after they saw the United States' experiment with camels in the late 1850s. On May 25, 1892, the Phoenix Republican carried a news story on "Uncle Sam's camel tamer, Hi Jolly...he is a Greek by birth, and relates anecdotes with a cleverness that would make Mark Twain jealous..."

The history of Greeks in the United States is not the same as a history of the local Greek Orthodox churches. The history of Greeks in America as Americans recall it is also not the history we tell each other or that we preserve in such photographic histories. This does not mean we should not be aware of these parallel historical accounts.

Greeks in Phoenix by the Holy Trinity Greek Historical Committee is available for \$19.99 from the Historical Committee Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, 1973 East Maryland Avenue Phoenix, Arizona 85016; Book orders: (602) 952-9400. We hope to soon hear the official announcement on the opening of the historical room in the brand new Education and Cultural Center at Holy Trinity.

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