

How Did Those Greek Festivals Get Started In America?

By Steve Frangos 6/2/07
Special to The National Herald

As with so many things in Greek American history, no one really knows who started the Greek Festival. Outside of the liturgical calendar, it's safe to say this is the one social event celebrated by nearly every Greek Orthodox Church in the country. This one event has so aided and changed our society and culture in North America, one would imagine that some enterprising folklorist or cultural historian has documented its origins and development. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In keeping with most other Greek-inspired cultural innovations in North America, these 'Hellenic,' 'Greek' or 'Grecian' festivals are not simply popular local events. The Greek Festival has reached a stage where virtually any American knows immediately the event by name if not by direct experience. As a symbolic event, it's crucial to the ongoing image of Greeks as hosts who provide social events where all are welcomed, safe, well-fed, and lavishly entertained. The Greek Festival now has equal popularity and instant name recognition, almost like such All-American public celebrations as Mardi Gras and the Super Bowl.

Don't take my word for it. The Internet encyclopedia website, www.wikipedia.com (which is now said to be more extensive than the Encyclopedia Britannica), offers the following: "A Greek festival or Greek Fest is an annual celebration of Greek culture presented by many ethnic-Greek communities and organizations in the United States and Canada, particularly Greek Or-

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thodox churches. Typically, these events are intended for attendance by the general public. Attendees can sample Greek music, cuisine and dance, typically performed in traditional dress. Such events are often fundraisers for Greek churches."

Today, the church festivals are typically organized by "a committee of volunteers within the community that is formed particularly for the purpose of organizing the Greek Festival. This organizing effort takes months of preparation, and nearing the days of the Greek Festival, many more volunteers are mobilized... highly noted are the numerous ladies (and often gentlemen) who are known in the community for their mastery and skill in cooking traditional Greek food. This is why food at Greek Festivals has a distinctive homemade taste and presentation (www.greek-fest.com)."

But where did this singular event come from in the first place? The public record affords us no answer. We must turn instead to our own recollections first.

LIVING MEMORY

I'm 55, and I can remember when there were no Hellenic festivals, only church picnics. The Greek Festivals are a product of the 1960's-1970's surge in Greek American popularity. Following the films, "Never On Sunday" and "Zorba the Greek," Greektowns across the country were revitalized with gyros, flaming cheese, bouzouki bands and belly-dancers drawing in the afternoon businessmen, tourists and evening crowds. Not only was it 'chic to be Greek,' everyone wanted to hear our music and eat our food.

But this explosion of popularity hides a more gradual process which spans at least two generations.

My father is 81, and he now works the gate at the Saint Nectarios Festival in Palatine, Illinois. Working as a volunteer, my father has never missed a festival in over 30 years. Still, when asked, it is the syllogo (fraternal organization) picnics he remembers. In talking about the syllogo picnics with my parents, they both recall that, after World War II, the numerous syllogo picnics dwindled in importance to the church-held events. Upon reflection, I believe my parents are generally correct.

At the same time, I wouldn't discount the different experiences

Greeks who arrived after World War II may have had in their involvement with syllogo events they attended in the 1950's-1960's. Still, in terms of overall demographics, I feel it's safe to say that a definite transition took place in Greek American society from one social form - e.g., syllogo to church - and one generation to another.

The current economic primacy of the annual Greek festival is well understood as being the financial backbone for the majority of Greek Orthodox parishes. Even without hard data, it's impossible to imagine the expansion of the Greek Orthodox churches in North America or the array of cathedral-size structures without the annual festival revenues.

In the 1980's, when I was visiting Greeks in Merrillville, Indiana, I recall being told that, when festivals began to gain in popularity, various Greeks who had already held festivals would go about and help friends and relatives at other churches start their own.

It seems safe to say that American friends and dignitaries were always present at Greek picnics and dinner dances. The critical distinction here must be between non-Greeks coming as guests and as paying customers.

THE PUBLIC RECORD

The Greek American press has endless accounts of syllogo and church dinner-dances, picnics and festivals. Let's consider instead the American memory. Here again, the public record is murky, and one must be careful with the available material. Early American news ac-

counts reflect all the ignorance, prejudices and misconceptions about Greek immigrants and their celebrations one can imagine.

In the April 6, 1897 edition of the New York Times, we read of the "Greek Festival Here... The Grecian national fête will be celebrated in this city today, with services in the Greek Church, at 340 West Fifty-third Street." Or little more than a year later in the Chicago Daily Tribune, on August 29, 1898, we find "Evanston Greeks Hold a Feast... The six Greek fruit dealers of Evanston (Illinois) yesterday celebrated in their joint home in Benson Avenue the Greek festival day commemorating the birth of the Virgin Mary. Their feast consisted of fruit and goat meat."

Some of these accounts are nothing short of fantastic, as in the "Plan To Revive Old Greek Custom, Boston-A Greek folk custom by which young men of that country were wont to propose to the blushing maidens of their choice by handing them a shining apple and, if their appreciations were reciprocated, received in return a rose, is to be revived for the first time in America at a big Greek picnic.

"More than 1,000 American Greeks are expected to attend the outing. The announcement of the betrothals by means of the apple is the chief feature of the program, and so hopeful of success are the churchmen that a staff of Greek pastors is to be on hand to tie matrimonial knots.

"The custom is said to date back 1,500 years to the time of King Pansianos (Byzantine Emperor Jus-

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Festival in America

inian I). The king, legend says, had his country searched for young and charming women suitable to share his throne. On the appointed date, the king reviewed the line of blushing candidates and finally stopped before the beautiful Theodora and handed her a golden apple, Theodora in turn handed the king a rose from her bodice and thus their troth was plighted (Decatur Review, August 27, 1911)."

A more conventional account appears in the pages of the Sheboygan Press, "Greek Picnic Held Sunday... Members of the Greek Orthodox churches of Green Bay, Sheboygan, Appleton and Manitowoc were in attendance at the sixth annual picnic of the Fond du Lac Greek church held at Columbia park at Calumet harbor on Sunday. Approximately 200 persons were present, among them the Most Rev. Archbishop Alexander, D.D., presiding archbishop of Greek Orthodox churches for the North and South Americas and apostolic delegate of the Ecumenical Church of Constantinople. He is a guest at a cottage at Linden beach while on a

vacation in Fond du Lac. Mass was read on the grounds at 10:30 AM. A picnic lunch and a dinner were served, and a program of delightful entertainment was enjoyed. Transportation to and from the park was provided by members of the congregation (August 21, 1929)."

An e-mail exchange between Dan Georgakas and Dimitra Kessenides prompted my thinking on festivals. Ms. Kessenides had recently heard on a Greek radio program that Saint Demetrios Cathedral in Astoria had the oldest Greek festival in the country. She had written Professor Georgakas in a hope of learning if this claim was true. The good Professor asked me my thoughts on this claim.

At this moment in time I know of no documented account which identifies which parish or fraternal organization held the very first Hellenic Festival, as we now understand that event. We may, in fact, never know the answer to that question. I do believe a critical distinction must be made between the picnics of the 1900's to the 1950's and the intentional public-oriented

Hellenic Festivals held on the grounds, which began soon after the 1960's.

Hellenic Festivals, I would argue, evolved not solely out of the picnics, but in some way from the dinner-dances, as well. In looking at church histories and other sources during the 1950's, there was a steady rise in the hosting of "Greek Nights," "Greek Bazaars" and the very beginnings of public bake sales. It seems likely that Greek Americans, seeking a post-World War II fundraising event, merged a number of entertainment venues/forms into what is now known as a Greek Festival.

We can say without question that the revenues from these festivals forever changed the nature of our Greek Orthodox parishes in North America. Simultaneously, no other public event generates such goodwill among the general American public toward the local churches as these festivals. For these and so many other reasons, the Modern Greek American Hellenic Festival deserves much closer consideration.

RENEWED GLORY

The Restoration of the Parthenon



The Nisyrian Society of New York invites you to attend an exciting presentation on the history and recent restoration of the Parthenon.

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Presented free of charge by the Nisyrian Society of New York. All are welcome and refreshments will be served after the lecture.

Saturday, June 16, 2007 at 3PM
The Hellenic Cultural Center
27-09 Crescent Street
Astoria, Queens