

How the Tsintzinians Conquered America

By Steve Frangos
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CHICAGO - Most historical accounts of Greek workers has them stepping onto American shores primarily between 1880 and 1920. In terms strictly of demography this is the period when the vast majority of Greeks arrived for a temporary stay of work abroad. Yet between 1870 and 1880 some 3000 Greeks arrived in roughly three distinct waves. This systematic migration was based on a highly successful business model which was the creation of one man, Christos Tsakonas.

Christos Tsakonas was born in the village of Tsintzina in the Pamon Mountains northeast of Sparta. After the Greek War of Independence, the original inhabitants of Tsintzina could be found newly scattered in three villages: Tsintzina, Goritsa, and Zoupena. Given the living and working conditions of the mountainous parts of the Greek mainland it was not an uncommon phenomenon for even the poorest of families to have double or multiple residences, known in Greek as *diploka-toikia*.

Tsakonas left home when he was 14, ultimately finding employment in coffee shops within Greece. At some later point Tsakonas followed his fellow Tsintzinians to Alexandria, Egypt. I have been told by Greeks living in Chicago that at the time Tsakonas arrived in North Africa there were no more opportunities for Greeks to es-

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chased pineapples and bananas from Tsintsian fruit dealers in California and Hawaii. These shipments arrived in Chicago first and were then distributed to confectionery stores in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. It was this collectivist model that impressed later Greek immigrant businessmen. A long overlooked aspect to Greek mercantile success in the United States is their readiness to join network to purchase in bulk. This form of purchasing raw goods allowed the individual Greek businessman to under sell his local competition. The rise of individual Greek immigrant businessmen in California or Hawaii such as the Camarinos family, George Lycurgus and others can all be traced back to the earlier mercantile experiences of

Tsakonas and his network.

So successful were the Greeks that by 1906 over 900 Greek-owned candy stores were to be found in Chicago alone. This in no large part was due to Tsakonas having lured some 1,000 young Spartans to Chicago between 1870 and 1880. It cannot be overemphasized how ubiquitous Greeks were in the confectionery trade. By 1920, in the classic of American literature *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis we find that the last business found along every American main city square was the Greek-owned confectionery.

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establish themselves in the confectionary business in that region given that earlier arrivals from Tsintzina already dominated the trade. Nevertheless, Tsakonas learned a confectioner's skills in North Africa but as predicted could not advance there.

In 1873, Tsakonas left North Africa heading for New York City where he immediately began selling candy from a pushcart. From New York Tsakonas moved to Chicago to continue in the peddling trade where he focused on a combined fresh fruit/confectionery establishment. This proved so successful for Tsakonas that by 1875 he had returned to his village of Tsintzina to pay off family debts. Upon his return to the United States Tsakonas brought five young villagers back with him to Chicago. By 1882, for reasons not known to history, Tsakonas moved his business enterprises to Milwaukee.

After training the five youths in the confectionery business Tsakonas left Milwaukee to set up yet another store. Over the rest of his professional life Tsakonas followed this pattern of establishing and then handing over to his extended relatives or fellow patriots the business as he traveled south and east down through Illinois, across Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania into the upper Mohawk Valley of New York State. Once each store was successfully established Tsakonas would sign over part ownership to those he left behind and then move on to found yet another store. Tsakonas established his stores in small industrial cities just then springing up across the nation.

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ca: the Conquest of the Tsintzinians



Right: The 1920 Sinclair Lewis
ple of Main Street USA.

don't lie" argument sounds valid enough it completely ignores the whole realm of symbols in everyday life. So prominent were/are individuals and communities of Greeks on a regional basis that the very fact that they are ignored on a national level seems more than simply curious. This omission is all the more striking given the much publicized Greek War Relief efforts of World War II. Literally overnight, Greeks, as depicted in the popular press, are elevated from mere ignorant immigrant laborers to much esteemed fellow Americans who were unquestionably the descendants of the Classical Greeks.

Since the 1960s, a wide array of studies has questioned how the popular press reports upon the daily news to the American people. One such study, *Manufacturing Consent* by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (both as a book and a documentary film) stresses how the "news" is not reported objectively as it happened--but is a presentation rather of class, po-

late Dr. Andrew T. Kopan, being well aware of the Tsintzinians in the Chicago area, saw to it that historian Peter Dickson gave the first lecture at what is today the National Hellenic Museum on this key group of pioneers. As an example of how these connections were only finally recognized by the exchanges between a variety of scholars it was Professor Kopan, in fact, who gave Dickson a copy of Christos Tsakonas' photograph (the first even Dickson

for scholars working in Greek America where they could share their research." During the discussions surrounding the presentation of Chaplin and Dickson's work Dr. Alexander Kitroeff made the comment that the actions of the Tsintzinians followed, as best I can recall his words, "the wider pattern." When I immediately asked what that wider pattern might be the conversation moved on and I never learned what Dr. Kitroeff meant.

Main Street by Sinclair Lewis



had seen) and other published information. Dickson pursued the trail of the Tsintzinians to their silo go's clubhouse along the shores of Lake Chautauqua in unstated New York. There in the attic of the clubhouse Dickson discovered treasure trove of silogo dinner dance books and other publications that proved fundamental to his ongoing work. Even so, as Dickson himself reports it was not until 1985 that Dr. Chaplin and Dickson working together finally pieced out all the various kinship and friendship connections between the Tsintsian pioneers.

With the publications of two articles in the collected volume, *New Directions in Greek Amer-*

And the research continues. Jim Lucas, historian of the Greek community in San Francisco, in his online article, *The Camarinos Family of Hawaii* offers further details on the actions of Tsintzinians in the United States (www.sanfranciscogreeks.com). There is in fact no sign that this exploration into the lives, experiences and lasting contributions of the Tsintzinians is over (tsintzinasociety.com).

Greeks are known the world over for fighting among themselves. How these very same Greeks came together to work and advance themselves in the United States is for all intents and purposes lost to history. How they were some achieve-

We can extend this issue of who's perspective do we learn about daily life and/or history by yet other series of studies about how history is also a constructed tale that serves interests other than merely offering a point-by-point itemization of previous human actions, experiences and events (www.historyisaweapon.com).

The complexities, individuals and personal histories involved in this broader story of the connections between Greeks in Chicago, San Francisco and the Hawaiian Islands was not fully apparent even to the most knowledge of Greek-American historians. Although Theodore Saloutos visited Helen Gerassimos Chaplin twice to confer with her, at that point in time, the two missed the underlying Tsintzian connections between Tsakonas and the others. The

Georgakas and Charles C. Moskos (New York: Pella 1991), *The Greek Pilgrims: Tsakonas and Tsintzianians* by Dickson and *The Greeks of Hawaii* by Chaplin that the detailed documentation was set forth itemizing the underlying personal connections between these widely scattered individuals.

I attended the 1989, Theodore Saloutos Conference whose selected papers formed the basis for the *New Directions* book. As Dr. Moskos was later to report this conference, "celebrated the placement of the Saloutos Papers in the Immigration History Research Center of the University of Minnesota. The agenda of the conference was to honor the pioneering work of Saloutos; to call attention to an important archive that wished to amass a Greek American collection; and to provide a forum

ments may have been far greater than achieved by any and all other groups, native-born Anglos included, is never even entertained. Surprisingly, as in all things really Greek the actions within our community can often be reduced to the village, town or region from which one (or their family) hails. We must reclaim our history with the full recognition that each journalist and historian must be examined far more closely than ever before. The documented actions and contributions of Greeks in the history and development of the United States is beyond contestation. Our ongoing efforts must be to see that such documented accomplishments are not excluded from the pages of world history.

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