

# Let Us Save the Forgotten Greek American Press

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By Steve Frangos

Special to the National Herald

The Greek-American Press, so vibrant and productive for well over 100 years, is from an archival point of view now nearly gone. Libraries and archives around the country that once held long runs of Greek newspapers, magazines and books have had to cull these materials from their collections. This is no conspiracy. Public institutions are living entities. As matter of course newspapers, magazines, books and other print materials are reviewed by their custodians. When any published holdings are

not used by the public, after a prudent period of time, they are simply pulled from the shelves and abandoned.

With no active class of Greek-American scholars and even fewer average Greek-Americans seeking out these carefully saved collections they have slowly faded from the shelves of our nation's libraries. Every Greek-American should be alerted to this situation. Private collections are now very often the only source for these once commonly available documents. They contain our unwritten history. When they pass into oblivion anyone will be able to virtually make any claims

they wish, based on the few scraps left behind.

You can help save the publishing history of the Greeks in the United States. And without exaggeration if you have one of these now rare periodicals you may, in fact, be literally the only one who can do just that.

By at least 1903, Greek American publishers were successfully producing much more than simply newspapers and magazines. Among the readily available publications produced strictly for popular entertainment were the annually-issued chronologia. In any chronologia issued, that I have

seen, the beginning pages always feature a month-by-month breakdown of the year both in terms of astrological and ecclesiastical calendars. In the pages that follow each chronologia is a rich mix of feature articles, poems, historical accounts and even droll comedic satire.

Given the rarity of the Greek-American press I have only seen a ten year run of these chronologia. As fate would have it the only chronologia I have ever seen were all published by the Ethnikos Keryx. Since its inception in 1915, the Eth-

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nikos Keryx has produced a long line of noteworthy publications aside from the regular daily and weekend editions of the newspaper. In terms strictly of the chronologia the Ethnikos Keryx issued some of the most beautiful volumes I have ever seen any-

where. At approximately 5" x 7" these chronologia are lavish volumes printed on only heavy gloss paper with sometimes two colors per page running 300 to 400 pages per volume. All the covers I have seen are embossed and in two colors, with gold, being the most frequently seen cover color. With sewn signatures these volumes, as

soon as one is in your hands, are obviously publications for which great craft and care were taken.

Given the era when these annual volumes were produced Petros P. Tatanis was the Ethnikos Keryx publisher and Reverend Demetrius Callimachos the editor.

The thematic content of these chronologia provide us insights in-



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to what the Greek American press was issuing as popular reading during the heyday of Prohibition and the Great American Depression.

In the 1929 *Ethnikos Keryx chronologia*, we see America's past being praised in articles on the Boston Tea Party (pp. 333). International history sees attention with a lengthy article on Frederick the Great (378-379). The contemporary life of the United States saw explanation with articles such as "The New York Stock Exchange" (whose title was in English with its accompanying text in Greek, 319-320), one explaining the New York Public Library (402-403), and numerous others. The activities of Greeks in North America saw discussion in an article on the Greek American Progressive Association (367-374) and the historical account "E Proto Elliniki Sinoikias tis Neas Yorkis" (412-415). The future was discussed in articles about television (with line-drawings) that included lengthy discussions of radio technology (347-351) and those that discussed zeppelins and transcontinental airplanes (356-363).

I selected this specific volume because it was the year of the American Stock Market Crash. No discussion of this singular American event appears in this volume or the 1930 volume. It is as if this event never happened. This omission along with the content and upbeat language of the volumes overall suggests that *chronologia* were read strictly for entertainment.

*Chronologia* regularly featured numerous articles appeared discussing the local customs of various regions in Greece and the islands. These regional articles were sometimes loosely grouped as in the 1933/34 volume's articles on Crete (279-282) and The Dodecanese Islands (221-245).

Survey articles of varying lengths regularly evaluated American politicians and political life. Industrialists, artists, and other prominent individuals were featured in biographies. In this vein we need only look at the 1930 volume, where we see concise biographies of (among many other notables) Henry Ford, President William H. Taft, and Petros P. Tatanis (pages 294; 77; 408 respective-

ly). Other aspects of American Life saw discussion with articles on American athletics, technological innovations and region culture. The 1928 article "O Athlitismos en Ameriki" (387-390) is typical of the sports articles. Another sport (and what to definitely watch for when you played it) can be seen in the 1931 "Hartopaikta kai Hartopaiktika Kolpa" (343-349).

The wider world was surveyed in a number of articles on the people and customs of Africa and India. Detailed nature articles on cobras, the great apes, tigers and other exotic animals were also common. In the joint 1933/34 volume we even see an article on the then extremely popular newsreel series "Bring Them Back Alive!" with Frank Buck (195-198). The natural wonders of North America were not ignored as the 1928 article on "Yellowstone Park" demonstrates (167-172). These natural wonders of North America also included articles on Dinosaurs (1932:133-138). Regional issues can be seen in articles such as "E Nea Yorki den einai Ameriki" (1933/34: 293-295). A subject dealt with in various articles, lithographs, or photographs were American Indians (see 1928: 255; 1933/34: 134-135 and 296-297 and others).

Illustrations ranging from photographs to lithographic drawings (many of which must have been stock images for engravers of the 1920s to 1930s) are to be seen on virtually every page. Interestingly some of these images, for the time in which they appeared, were quite risqué. An American slang term, 'cheesecake,' can best describe a particular category of images seen in these *chronologia*. Cheesecake images are best understood as fairly innocent photographs or drawings of scantily clad women. Cartoons of flappers, lithographs of Classical Goddesses, photographs of bathing beauties (1928: 289-294) and/or female movie stars such as Mary Pickford, Jean Harlow, and others can all be readily seen.

Curiously there are few advertisements in the *chronologia*. This suggests that the sales of these volumes were based strictly on direct purchase. Some of the advertisements were clearly "house ads."

Advertisements for products generated by the Herald such as its \$3.00 English-Greek/Greek-English dictionary or the Star Engraving Company 143-5 West 20th Street NY which provided the Herald Publishing company with the lithographs are regularly seen. Other advertisements include those for the Prodrmidis Radio and Music Shop on 8th Avenue and the Acropolis Hotel at 308 West 58th Street.

In Greek-American Studies the movement of the Greek laborers from working class to middle class status occupies the core of all published accounts. The manner in which Greeks made this transition is a romanticized knock off of the Horatio Alger story. Greeks simply "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps." The precise manner and exact means by which Greeks collectively accomplished this monumental social and cultural transition is never discussed let alone systematically analyzed. This brawn-over-brains model is too simplistic to be real.

When looking at popular press publications like the *chronologia* a series of questions naturally spring to mind. What do we know of the reading habits of Greeks in the United States? Were Greeks learning about dominant American values and culture from publications like the *chronologia*? Did this ideological shift from rural peasant to urban resident rest on something more than simply cleaning the dishes and cooking the soup down at the diner?

While the obvious answer to the last question is "yes," once again, there has been no systematic investigation of the Greek-American Press in order to determine what role reading and self-education played in the lives of the early immigrants. We must move beyond the useless stereotype of the ignorant 'unlettered Greek peasant' as merely a hardworking immigrant. As the very existence of the *chronologia* and all the other publications I have not been able to mention here demonstrate these very same individuals were dedicated readers.

We must now do what we can to preserve as much of the Greek American Press as we can. If we do not, no one else ever will.