

Oh, Those Sweet Greek Americans!

By Steve Frangos

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Now that Easter time is here, one of the high points for children (adults, too) is the vast array of sweets, chocolate and other candies produced by the candy industry at this time of year. People of all ages, particularly children, are delighted by the assorted assortment of Easter candy available: chocolate bunnies, chocolate and candy-coated eggs, marshmallow peeps – not to mention all the baked goods sold at bakeries or made right at home.

That being the case, and candy being a pretty major theme in the yearly Easter celebration, this is a good opportunity to explore the contributions of Greek Americans to the United States' candy industry.

As Greeks today are associated with restaurants in the days before World War I until the just after World War II, Greek immigrants

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were the undisputed rulers of America's collective sweet tooth.

The once commanding role of Greek immigrants in the ice cream and confectionery business is a well-established fact of American history. The neighborhood "sweet shop" was a mix of ice cream store and candy shop. These stores showcased handmade ice cream and seasonally cooked candies.

Typically family-owned businesses, these ice cream parlors and/or candy kitchens, with their array of confectionery creations, were havens where all could enter and all were safe in sweet-tooth paradise. Long before malls dominated the American consciousness, these local sweet shops featured elaborately decorated interiors filled with mirrors, mechanical music and chilled iced sweets.

Academics are missing the chance of a lifetime. In all the oral history collections, I am aware of, where the recollections of Greek Americans are included no one has bothered to ask Americans what

In the early 1980's – when I was living in Bloomington, Indiana – I once met a woman, then in her early seventies, who had grown up in Columbus, Indiana. She recalled for me "the day spent with the Greeks." Her parents would give her a quarter. With that money she went to the Saturday movies – then a much longer presentation than today, with not only two full-length feature films (sometimes of the serial variety), but also first newsreels, and then a brace of cartoons.

After this visual feast, another feast waited for them. All the children would come pouring out of the theater and head down to the ice cream store. There, using their remaining 15 cents, the children could have a banana split, or a double-malted, or any of the other cool iced confection creations. Her reference to "the Greeks" was automatically understood as the Greek-owned Kerasotes Movie Theatre, and then Zaharakos Confectionary.

Founded in 1909, Kerasotes Theatres has been a family-owned and operated business for three

candy, the Dove ice cream bar, and the ice cream cake – now those Greek immigrants most certainly invented.

On the Heath Candy website we read the following: "The Heath Brothers opened its doors on January 7, 1914 in Robinson, Illinois. The confectionery did very well selling fountain drinks, ice cream and homemade candies.

In 1915, L.S. Heath joined his sons in the family venture, and the confectionery shop was expanded by adding new items on a regular basis. During this period of time, salesmen from all over the Midwest made stops at the shop. One such salesman got to know the Heath Brothers and began to share recipes with them.

The most popular recipe he shared was for "Trail-Toffee," carried from an enterprise operated by Greek candy-makers in Champaign, Illinois. The Heath Brothers took this recipe and developed it further. After several months of trial and error, the Brothers declared their formula for "English Toffee" to be "America's Finest (<http://www.joink.com/homes/users/r-everly/heath.htm>)." The year was 1928.

Dove Bars can be found anywhere in the country. Mike Stefanos is often asked to recall how his father gave birth to the Dove Bar in 1956 at his south side Chicago candy store: "My dad had the best candy and ice cream around, and my brother and I were guilty of taking off after the ice cream truck when he heard the bells. And that hurt my Dad's feelings, so he decided to make a bar that would keep us around the store."

Thomas A. Carvelas (1906-1990) is a complicated figure who not only invented the soft ice cream machine (1936), the ice cream cake and other such confections, but is also widely recognized as 'the father of franchising.'



they remember about the Greeks they grew up with. These memories are easily recovered.

Here's one from a woman in Greenfield, Indiana:

"Greek's was the place to go when I was in high school in Greenfield in the early 20's. The store was a Greek candy store. In the front window was a machine

generations. The Company currently operates 539 screens in 77 locations across the Midwest, including Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota and Missouri. As is often the case with Greek immigrant managers, these small town theatres were known for their elaborate beautiful interiors, cleanliness and safety. Zaharakos Con-

going around which pulled taffy. There were candies of different kinds. What we liked to do was get a banana split. That was the height of our times. Your boyfriend would take you downtown Greenfield and get you a banana split. The boys would get their money for this by stealing money from the milk bottles out on the street to pay for their milk. As pranks, the boys often would take the money out to take their girlfriends out at the Greek's. Greek candy kitchens were all over the state, and then went out of style. Every small town had one. Fred Thomas's drug store was another place, which I believe the owner was named Poolitzen, but the real name was Greek's Candy Kitchen."

fectionery was the local Columbus sweet shop.

No parent or adult in Columbus was afraid once their child was within sight of the local Greeks. Quiet, but ever watchful, the Greeks brooked no outlandish behavior. A stern look went a long way in the 1920's. This is perhaps because, in the days before "political correctness," a simple but quick pop to the back of the head ended most excessive horseplay.

But more than memories are available to those with a taste for Greek-made candy and ice cream.

LASTING CREATIONS

I grew up hearing that Greek immigrants invented the ice cream sundae and the banana split. Neither claim is true. Heath toffee

Today, the Carvel Corporation is a multimillion-dollar global company. Carvelas was brought to the United States from Greece as a child. In 1932, "Borrowing \$15 from his future wife Agnes, Tom began selling ice cream from his battered truck. On Memorial Day weekend of 1934, Tom's truck suffered a flat tire, so he pulled his trailer into a parking lot next to a pottery store and began selling his melting ice cream to vacationers driving by. Within two days, Tom had sold his entire supply of ice cream, and realized that he could make a lot more money working from a fixed location. The generous potter allowed Tom to hook into his store's electricity, and Tom opened for business. Two years lat-



er, Tom bought the pottery store, converted it into a roadside stand, and permanently establish himself as the first retailer to develop and market soft ice cream (www.carvel.com/pr_timeline.asp)." Theodore Saloutos was the first

American historian to write about the 1880-1920 immigration wave to the United States and the immigrants' return home to their country of origin. The first study of its kind, Saloutos' *They Remember America: The Story of the Repatriated Greek Americans* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1956) mentions the ice cream parlors bringing back Greeks established in Greece. But the story is more involved than that. In 1869, while the first Greek-owned candy company was established in North America, the owners, Eleftherios Pelalas and Panagiotis Hatzideis, had apparently learned their trade in Smyrna and Alexandria.

LEONIDAS CHOCOLATES

The Greek confectionary connections are far more complex. Take Leonidas Chocolates, for example, which today boasts more

info@leonidaschocolatier.com)." The rest, as they say, is history.

I hope no one thinks the day of the Greek-run ice cream parlor or sweet shop is over. You can visit any number of Greek-owned family operated businesses nearly anywhere in the nation. Just sit at the counter or in a booth and have yourself an old-fashioned treat. Here are just three examples.

The Zaharakos Confectionery (also known simply as "The Greeks") in Columbus, Indiana is one of those Victorian-era soda fountains which looks like it should be in a museum (329 Washington Street, 812-379-9329). While this store is not on the National Registry of Historical Places, there is a plaque outside on the front of the building which says, "This structure has been recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey of the United States Department of the Interior for its archive at the Library of Congress." This is easy to understand once you step inside and see the mahogany woodwork, Italian marble countertop, a stamped tin ceiling, stained-glass

generation, Ann Dutro and Jim, Lew, and Ted Zaharakos. Ann and Jim are the children of Manuel, and Lewis and Ted are Lewie's children."

As with many of the Greek candy kitchens, Zaharakos soon became associated with the young people of Columbus. "In 1905, the opening of a new high school just a few blocks away proved to be very good for business, and Zaharakos' popularity increased when the Pearl Street gymnasium opened 20 years later. By the 1940's, the ice cream parlor became a favorite hangout. Zaharakos' was "the place to be seen" after school hours, and it was a gathering place for kids after ballgames and even the prom. Today, people come back to Zaharakos' just to enjoy an ice cream treat and remember the days when they were teenagers. Many times, they bring their children or grandchildren along, and visitors to Columbus happily discover the ice cream parlor, as they take the walking tour of Columbus. They all like coming to Zaharakos' because it's very different from the

than 1,750 stores worldwide. As we see on their website, "Our founder, Leonidas Kesdekidis, emigrated from Greece to New York at the turn of the century. As a member of the USA Greek delegation, he went to Belgium to participate in the International and World Exhibitions. There, Leonidas' chocolates were awarded first a Bronze medal for excellence in 1910, and then the ultimate accolade, the Gold Metal in 1913. So popular were his creations that Leonidas soon rented a room on the Boulevard Anspach in Brussels. He began selling his freshly-made chocolates from his window (Leonidas Chocolates, 230 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10169, the Helmsley Building, 212-661-4820,

lamps, mirrors, and onyx fountain. John Philip Sousa marches can be heard from the 185-piece player belt-organ.

Popular from the day it first opened on October 20, 1900 Zaharakos' was founded by three brothers from Greece.

"A relative in Richmond, Indiana advised James, Pete and Lewie Zaharakos that Columbus would be a good place to open an ice cream parlor and candy store. After helping to run Zaharakos' for many years, Lewie and Pete moved onto other jobs. That left James, who stayed with the ice cream/candy store until he passed away in 1945. His sons Gus, George; Pete, Lewie and Manuel inherited the business, and it's now run by a third

ice cream stands and stores most of us see today (<http://www.kid-atart.com/htdoc/zaharako.html>)."

The Wilton Candy Kitchen in Wilton, Iowa is located in an 1856 building listed on the National Register of Historic Places (310 Cedar St. Wilton, IA 52778, 319-732-2278), and is considered the oldest ongoing ice cream parlor and soda fountain confectionery in the United States. Established in 1867, the same Greek family has owned the business since 1910. Everyday of the week, George Nopoulos, the founder's son, makes his own homemade ice cream, lunches, candy, and also showcases a Wilton history muse-

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um in the back.

The Crown Candy Kitchen has sweetened St. Louis, Missouri with chocolate and ice cream since 1913, when Greek confectioners Harry Karandzieff and Pete Jugaloff opened shop (1401 St. Louis Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63106, 314-621-9650, www.CrownCandyKitchen.com). This is the city's oldest soda fountain. Karandzieff and Jugaloff brought their confectionary skills from Greece, along with a dream of providing a friendly family environment to enjoy their delicious creations. Harry's grandsons Andy, Tommy and Mike make up the third generation running the business. Once you walk in the door, you will see a vintage jukebox, Coca-Cola collectibles and an elaborate soda fountain. As you might suspect, the Crown Candy Kitchen still makes their own chocolate candy.

MAVRAKOS CANDIES

And then there's the famous Mavrakos Candies in St. Louis, which closed down in the mid-1980's after approximately 100 years in operation. John Mavrakos, the founder, died in the 1910's or early 1920's. After his son, John Mavrakos Jr., died in 1975, male heirs have not been easy to track down, so information is sketchy on the Internet. But there are some people who remember sampling the candy, including our managing editor, Evan C. Lambrou, who went to college in St. Louis.

"I remember their chocolate-covered molasses crunch balls. It was absolutely some of the best candy I ever tasted. Unfortunately, Mavrakos Candies went out of business soon after I started studying at Washington University. I don't remember exactly, but it was within a year or two, so I caught Mavrakos candies at the tail end of its business life," Evan told me.

Other people have fond memories of Mavrakos candies, too.

"I sure remember that wonderful Mavrakos candy my mother would bring home from shopping

trips to Famous-Barr and Stix in St. Louis. Everything they say about it is true," according to Carol Leber Dreier from St. Clair County.

"If that's the candy that I remember growing up in East St. Louis, Illinois (just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri) and sold at Famous Barr, Stix and Fuller Department Stores in St. Louis, and in their own independent candy stores... well, those European candies can't come close, and Hershey isn't even a close 10th! It was to die for, and I have never had any as good since. I don't think I realized it was started in East St. Louis, so thanks for the question, and brining back some wonderful memories. But now I want some! I will ask my 86-year-old mother if she can add anything to your story. She, too, loved that stuff," according to Carolyn Wilburn Medlin of East St. Louis.

The Mavrakos family owned a candy factory in East Saint Louis. Madeline, (b. December 4, 1888) married John Mavrakos, a Greek immigrant. Unfortunately, the births recorded stop after the 11th child. Lena was the last of twelve. Madeline died on June 27, 1967. She married John Mavrakos, lived in Clayton, an affluent suburb in St. Louis, had one son, John (Jack) Mavrakos, who also lived in the St. Louis area. John Jr. was born on August 6, 1913 and died in January 1975. He had one daughter, Elizabeth, who recounted stories of the wonderful candies that her older family members raved about to her friends.

There are very few times one can actually taste the history of Greek accomplishments in North America. More Greek-owned candy kitchens and ice cream parlours than you suspect still exist. Go into one of these national treasures and taste their butterscotch malted, chocolate phosphate or a double-split sundae for yourself, and then you tell me, have we not have truly conquered America?

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