

Cemeteries of St John Church In Pueblo, Col.

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

Beginning in the 1880's, just as Greektowns were being established all across North America, the new immigrants also immediately sought out graveyards. Upon reflection, the fact that Greeks collectively purchased entire blocks of cemetery sites, often long before churches were physically built, should come as no surprise. Life in the ksentia was long understood to be dangerous, and by the standards of the day, Ameriki was especially so.

While it is fairly easy to learn about the histories of Greektowns all across North America, locating documentation on the history of Greek American graveyards is more difficult to systematically acquire. That's why we need to pay more attention to gravesites - especially with the shrinking of the Greek American community and the closing of parishes all across the country, particularly in the American West.

The historic Saint John the Baptist Greek Orthodox community of Pueblo, Colorado recently observed its 100th anniversary. Greeks began arriving in Colorado in the 1880's to labor in the mines, work as smelters, and to help build the ever-expanding railroads. The Sante Fe and the Missouri Pacific railroads both had section gangs of Greeks who would winter in Pueblo. The Greek settlement in Pueblo was due principally to Minnequa Metal Works (later the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company), which soon became the largest complex of smelters west of the Mississippi. By 1903, the claim was made that 1,500 Greeks lived and worked year-round in Pueblo, with another 1,500 or more who would winter there when the mines and the railroads closed down for the season.

Saint John the Baptist parish first opened its doors in 1907. As news of the new church spread among Greeks in the West, the regularly attending communicants of

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Saint John's Sunday and holiday services soon began to arrive from hamlets, small towns and cities located just south of Denver all the way to Taos, New Mexico. Individual Greeks, as well as entire families, traveled from as far east as Garden City, Kansas. The western boundaries of Saint John parishioners extended to Grand Junction, Colorado.

Over the course of 100 years, this unique geographic dispersal eventually led to the situation where the majority of parishioners no longer hail exclusively from the city of Pueblo itself. As documents, community memories and present circumstances all report, Saint John's Church in Pueblo has always been a multi-community parish. A partial list of these other locations for regularly attending parishioners includes (but was not limited to) Alamosa,

west of the Mississippi.

THE PARISH GRAVEYARDS

The immigrant founders of the Pueblo parish were men who faced the daily realities of hard work and life head-on. All available documents and most community memories agree. The foundation of church and the establishment of a cemetery were simultaneous. The first article of the parish constitution, based on a longstanding oral tradition, was finally put into print by the 1920's as, "The Greek people of Pueblo, having come together, formed a community under the name, 'Greek Orthodox Community of Colorado in Pueblo,' whose purpose will be the erection of a church, the purchase of a cemetery, and the maintenance of them both." Nothing could be clearer.

Hard-pressed by grueling physical labor, these men were under no illusions. Directly involved in the industrialization of the American West, these Greek laborers, by first-





ABOVE: The historic Saint John the Baptist Church in Pueblo, Colorado soon after construction that the lettering along the front fascia had not American and Greek flags indicate the grave of Greek immigrant in Rosel Christ George Argyr, M.D., founder of Saint John's community; Metrolo grave.

Aspen, Canon City, Colorado Springs, Grand Junction, La Junta, Lamar, Leadville, Salida, Trinidad and Walsenburg, Colorado; Garden City, Kansas; Questa and Raton, New Mexico; and a host of other small towns in the region. So those with memories of the Greek community in Pueblo, and who regularly attended church services there, have never all been exclusively from that city.

This unique situation resulted in the Pueblo parish drawing its congregation from roughly 87,000 square miles. Due to the wide geographic dispersal of its parishioners, Saint John's Church unintentionally became - strictly in terms of geographic dispersal - the largest Greek Orthodox community in the country, and its multi-community base has never fundamentally changed. This parish has never moved from its original location, and has the distinction of being the oldest Greek Orthodox community to continuously observe services in the same edifice

hand experience, had to live with the appalling work conditions of the smelters, mines and railroad gangs every day. Company doctors were to be avoided at all costs, as they were paid a set fee for amputating limbs rather than healing injured men.

Living harshly frugal lives, these early Greek pioneers sent the vast majority of their wages home. Seeing fellow workers die or immigrants being abused or severely harassed for no reason by 'native-born' Americans, these Greek laborers quickly realized what options were open to them. They knew very well that life changes with every breath. The harsh reality of daily life naturally linked the needs of both the living and dead.

Just as in other areas of community life, in matters of the dead, the Pueblo parish has never simply served a congregation based solely in the city of Pueblo. Gravesites in La Junta, Trinidad, Salida, Rocky Forge, Canon City and elsewhere in south-



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