

Greek Gandy Dancers Help America Open Its Railroads

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

From the late 1880's up until the end of the First World War, Greek immigrant laborers streamed out to the American West to work in smelters, mines and factories, and to help build the country's ever-expanding railroad system. During this era, more Greeks lived and worked in the American West than any other part of the nation.

Not unexpectedly, then, railroad work has a special place in Greek American lore. There is hardly a Greek American family with roots in the 1880-1924 Great Migration who does not have a story about their ancestors working on the western railroads. Family memory can often recall the name of a railroad which a grandfather or great grandfather worked for, or use the term "railroader" to describe their ancestor's or relative's job. Unfortunately little else is recalled on the specifics of Greek immigrant involvement with the greatest expansion of railroad networks in North American history.

This was seasonal work. In the winter, the earth was frozen and/or the rails were rendered too brittle by the unrelenting cold to do any serious sustained work. Only a few crews were maintained for various routing duties. Greek immigrants became so prevalent as railroad workers, they soon began to form and work in all-Greek railroad gangs.

GANDY DANCERS

A "gahdy dancer" is a slang term for a railroad maintenance worker or section hand. These were the men who dug and prepared the track bed; laid the tracks and ties; and ultimately maintained the rail system, in general. Given the nature of the iron rails, the men were



"Greek Workers," from a photo in Seraphim George Canoutas' "Greek-American Guide (Phoenix Printing Co., New York 1909, pg. 209)." A long series of railroad accidents where Greek immigrant workers met their deaths can easily be found in published reports of many newspapers in the American West.

Continued from page 1

required to work collectively in unison to situate the rails and tamp the ties into place. If the spikes and rails were not worked collectively, then the materials would come under tension and snap, with the potential of randomly killing a worker. The rhythmic motions the workers made as they rocked their tools to and fro to straighten and/or bend the track goes far in explaining the "dancing" aspect of this slang term.

Outside of railroad circles, gandy dancing was not considered an honorable profession. But everyone in the railroad profession recognized that it was the gandy dancers who kept the rail lines safe and in working order. Laying the new lines was exceedingly hard and often dangerous work, located for the greater part of the season in remote areas.

Complicating this entire sce-

nario is the fact that the railroad companies would pit one ethnic group against another. Always seeking to keep the worker's wages as low as possible, the railroad bosses would hire the cheapest labor possible. The added twist to this ongoing process was that each new gang of workers was always an ethnic group different from the previously hired one. These tensions were further heightened by the fact that all these new foreign workers were entering an existing American society not given to welcoming immigrant workers.

The recollections of average Americans, as well as newspaper accounts from across the country, frequently report on the presence of the newly arrived Greek rail workers. Given that the gandy dancers were primarily engaged with laying new rail lines, they were housed in boxcars immediately adjacent to their ever-moving worksite. This isolation for long periods of time

did nothing but make all the immigrant workers more mysterious and dangerous for the average American.

The speed with which these olive-skinned men appeared, literally out of nowhere as far as the local Americans were concerned, must also be pointed out. Hundreds of Greek gandy dancers could be brought to any part of the nation literally over night.

Their unexpected presence was also matched by other types of massive change. Greek immigrants of the 1880's to 1920's era of mass migration arrived just as the everyday technology of the United States was getting ready to take a giant leap forward. Our Greek grandfathers and great grandfathers arrived as America moved from a horse-and-wagon-based culture to an industrially based one. More and more trains began to arrive in small towns and cities all across America. Train wrecks responsible for killing

ture of the iron rails, the men were

Greek Gandy Dancers & U.S. Railways

numerous passengers; exploding gas ovens (then a major technological advancement over wood-burning stoves); and articles on exactly how to use a telephone (initially, all party-lines where anyone on your string of hone-lines could hear your conversation) were all common everyday subjects for articles in newspapers across the nation.

That even the smallest of local newspapers in the American West regularly reported on the new arrivals attests to not only the novelty of the unknown Greeks, but also to their nearly instant disbursement throughout the country, even to the most remote locations. Many are chilling accounts.

The American landscape was new to the Greeks. The memories of Amelia (nee Krieger) Werre growing up on her German immigrant parent's remote Oregon farm can also help us to see more of the lives of these Greeks in the most remote areas of the American West: "It must have been in the years between 1908 and 1911 that a double railroad track was built north from Vancouver to Seattle, skirting the bluffs and near Lake River. The Greek laborers working on the new railroad often came up the canyon to our house to buy eggs and other produce. They complained bitterly about their itching legs. Father told them it must be poison oak, as the hillsides were covered with the pest (www.bobthorn.com)."

ROLL CALL OF THE DEAD

Through all this turmoil, many Greek immigrants paid with their lives.

A long series of railroad accidents where Greek immigrant workers met their deaths on American soil can be offered effortlessly. It is important that Greeks living today know of these events. The

Greek immigrants who worked in the American West during the years cited below were most certainly aware of the dangers. In the face of these dire possibilities, these men worked every day they could. What follows is but a fragment of the available news accounts.

The Hansboro Pioneer newspaper served Towner County, North Dakota. On April 4, 1907 this newspaper noted, "A disastrous wreck occurred on the main line of the Great Northern near the town of Bartlett, Monday morning, in which nine persons are known to have lost their lives and a large number were injured. The Oriental Limited, the Great Northern crack train, struck a broken rail at 1:23 AM and went into a ditch. Eight Greek laborers who were in the smoker were killed, as was also a mail clerk. Almost immediately after the wreck a fire was started, caused by the explosion of an acetylene tank, all the palatial cars except the sleeper and observation cars were burned, and the bodies of the dead pinned under the wreckage were cremated. Stories of eye witnesses tell of harrowing scenes and deeds of bravery."

The Surf, a local newspaper, reported extensively on the excavations necessary to put in the Ocean Shore Railroad along the coast near San Vicente Canyon: "The tough dangerous work was done mostly by crews of Greek laborers brought in... just for that purpose. Several hundred Greeks cut the road into the canyon wall, undertaking what one official termed, 'the hardest class of work (September 23, 1905).'"

The San Vicente gave up the railroad grade grudgingly, and injuries to workers were a daily occurrence. Boulders crushed arms and legs, and there was a steady

stream of injured men taken to Santa Cruz for care. Confronted with what, to them, were unpronounceable Greek names, the newspapers often reported the injuries simply by giving the number that the man wore on his overalls: "Two Greeks injured by falling rocks. Greek No. 573 and Greek No. 25 were treated lately by Dr. P.T. Phillips for injuries received by falling rocks. These Greeks all have numbers, a brass tag around their necks distinguishing them. No. 573 received the most severe injury and had his leg badly cut open, and No. 25 had his collar bone broken (December 2, 1907) (www.santacruzpl.org)."

Yet again we learn that on March 1, 1907, "Forty-two Greek laborers, injured yesterday morning in a smashup of a construction train on the Salt Lake road at Leith, Nevada, were brought to this city on a special train this morning. The bodies of the three men who were killed remain at the scene of the wreck (Reno Evening Gazette)."

Other news accounts could be cited on the deaths of Greeks in train wrecks and other railroad-related accidents. The point here is not that some percentage of Greeks died in industrial accidents, but how those work-related deaths were reported by the American press. Greek workers did not decide overnight to become immigrants. Nearly half of all Greeks who came to the United States between 1880 and 1920 returned to Greece never to set foot on American soil again. After hearing even these few fragmented accounts, can you blame them?

Readers who wish to contact Mr. Frangos may e-mail him at greekwrite@yahoo.com.

To advertise or to obtain rates: