

The Pioneers of Confection in America

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By Steve Frangos

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ROUND LAKES, Ill. - Few Greeks today realize that from the early 1870s until just after World War II, their compatriots held a commanding presence in the American confectionary industry, dishing up tons of sinfully sweet treats from behind the counters of their candy stores and ice cream parlors. In fact, the Greeks' early presence in this trade can be documented from a wide variety of sources.

As Theodore Saloutos relates in his book, "The Greeks in the United States," the pioneer confectioners were Eleutherios Pelalas of Sparta and Panagiotis Hatzideris of Smyrna, who established a *lukum* (sweet) shop shortly after their arrival in 1869. This partnership was terminated within a brief time; in 1877 Pelalas assumed the management of an American-owned establishment in Springfield, [Massachusetts] where he later opened a number of stores. Hatzideris, on the other hand, formed a partnership with another associate in New York, which handled

more commercial brands, such as 'Turkish Delight' and 'Greek Prince.' Hatzideris eventually returned to Smyrna, but his partner continued the business under the name of Haggis Greek American Confectionary Company, with plants in New York, Memphis, and Pittsburgh. The estab-

lishment of Pelalas and Hatzideris furnished employment for many of the first immigrants from Sparta, providing an opportunity to learn the skills of the trade (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964: 262).

Dr. Saloutos, who is drawing this account nearly word-for-word from

Bobbis Malafouris' "*Ellines tis Amerikis 1528-1948*," (c.f. New York 1948: 272-273), is focusing not on the first known candy store but the first documented Greek-owned candy company. This is all the more curious since in the paragraph immediately after the discussion of Pelalas and Hatzideris, Malafouris cites, what he plainly identifies as the first Greek-owned candy store in the United States. According to Malafouris, in approximately 1820, an immigrant by the name of Athanacios Sanitsas, a Laconian, opened a candy store in Chicago, where he also sold fruit, somewhere on Blue Island Avenue.

There are several reasons why Dr. Saloutos found this date and location highly questionable. But we now have information available to us even this esteemed scholar did not. Therefore, we must now consider historical information Dr. Saloutos would never have looked at twice. As we shall see, there are vast differences between what Malafouris asserted and what can reasonably be said to have existed. But it is these historical difficulties that can still ultimately lead us



PHOTOS COURTESY OF A. PASPALAS

"Candy Room," Pulakos candy store, Erie, PA. The Greek-owned candy and ice cream parlors represent one of the earliest industries associated with Greeks in North America.

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back to what must have reasonably taken place.

By 1816, the second Fort Dearborn (the first had been burnt to the ground by Potawatomi Indians in the War of 1812) was built on the north end of the Chicago River. Yet it was not until 1830 that a village of some 12 families had established itself near the fort. By the 1820s, given the nature of military forts and wilderness settlements, certainly there was no Blue Island Avenue. Yet all this does not necessarily mean Greeks were not to be found along the riverbanks and grassy prairie by-ways of Lake Michigan.

In 1833, Chicago was incorporated as a town, with a total population of just 550. Then, in March 1837, when the total number of inhabitants was 4,170 Chicago was incorporated into a city. Greek American scholars have always cited 1840 as the time when Greek sailors, ship captains and merchants began arriving into Chicago ports. That some Greeks may have come earlier is not outside the realm of possibility. But who was Athanasios Sanitsas and how is he related to all these persons and events?

When I posed this question to Dr. Andrew T. Kopan, the preeminent scholar on Greeks in Chicago, he sent me a photocopy from Spyridonos P. Kotakis's book, "*Hoi Hellenes en Amerike*," (Chicago: S. P. Kotakis Printing Press, 1908). According to

facing we must offer, even if only in passing, something of the American Society these men moved in every day. For example, the last great battle of the Indian Wars at Little Big Horn took place on June 25, 1876, just as Tsakonas and his friends were establishing themselves in Chicago.

The business method Tsakonas developed over time was very simple. First Tsakonas would train young Greeks from his family, village or region in the confectionary business. As soon as they became proficient enough to manage on their own, he sold them an interest in a store and/or sold them supplies from his Greek American Fruit Company. In 1879, Tsakonas brought another 15 men. The shootout at the OK Corral between the three Earp brothers, Doc Holliday and the Clanton gang did not take place until 1881. Then, in April-May 1882, the three ships Archimedes, the Vicenzio Florio and one other arrived in North America with some 600 Greeks from Laconia. This first large systematic migration of Greek immigrants to America never saw the Statue of Liberty on Bedloe's Island in New York Harbor. The colossal monument was not unveiled until four years later on October 28, 1886.

Long before Buffalo Bill's Wild West exhibition first performed in 1883 Greeks had a strong foothold in the American candy and ice cream business. All of these Greek confectionary workers, as well as other compatriots who soon followed, were initially con-

migrated. Chain-migration simply put is where individuals from the same village or region migrate to work together or one-after-the other to some predesignated location. Tsakonas' efforts were especially successful since some 3,000 individuals are said to have come to North America through his personal efforts.

In Peter W. Dickson's especially fine article, "The Tzintzinians in America," the success of this method can be noted in that, "Eventually many Tzintzinians moved away from Chicago, evidently in search of greater economic opportunity in the



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Christos Tsakonas, "Columbus of the Greeks," helped an entire generation of Greek immigrants

Kotakis, Athanacios Sanitsas graduated from Lake Forest University with a degree in dentistry in 1895. No mention is made of Sanitsas owning or working at a candy store. In 1908, Sanitsas was the first and only Greek dentist in the city of Chicago. So where does this take us?

Surprisingly, a passing comment in Kotakis' vignette on Sanitsas suggests a connection to the first systematic migrations of Greeks to North America. And it is this series of events that would ultimately lead to the overwhelming presence of Greek immigrants in the ice cream and candy stores across the country. Sanitsas was a Laconian from the village of Khrisafa. This village is near the cluster of villages from which one of the most important Greek immigrants hailed, Christos Tsakonas. Born in 1848, Tsakonas in his own bid for a better life, quite literally helped an entire generation of Greek immigrants establish themselves in America.

Christos Tsakonas arrived in Chicago, along with two compatriots, in 1873, just two years after the great Chicago Fire. Building upon skills learned in Alexandria, Egypt, and New York City, Tsakonas and his two friends establish themselves in the candy and ice cream business. Realizing the potential for growth, Tsakonas left for Greece with a mission. In September 1875, Tsakonas brought five Greek boys on the SS *Amerique* to New York City. To fully appreciate the circumstances that Tsakonas and his young friends were

concentrated in the Midwest before Frederick Jackson Turner gave his famous lecture, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," to the American Historical Association on July 12, 1893. In academic circles the presentation of this lecture has come to officially mark the end of the West as a frontier while simultaneously noting the beginnings of the modern era. So even before the formal realization of America's Manifest Destiny Greeks were a dominant force in the candy business. As Spyridonos Kotakis documents, by 1908, over 400 Greek-owned candy and ice cream stores could be found in Chicago alone.

All of this historical information on the Tzintzinians is largely due to the work of one man, Peter W. Dickson (Diakaaios). Through his efforts to trace his own family's history Dickson, a trained historian now retired from a post at the State Department, has uncovered the first systematic efforts of Greeks to enter the United States. Dickson's collaboration with Dr. Helen Gerasimos Chaplin, another descendant of this first migration, on the worldwide movements of the Tzintzinians is easily one of the most significant contributions to Greek-American studies since Theodore Sahloutos' watershed study.

The Greeks in the United States first arrived in quite a distinct manner that is essentially the same as the Greek Nineteenth Century pattern of migration into Northern Europe, Russia and North Africa. They chain

establish themselves in America.

small towns of Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and New York. This migration back east gradually gave rise to more Tzintzinians-owned candy stores throughout the region, numbering more than 50 in the 1920s. These stores, which often had names such as The Sugar Bowl and Candyland, could be found in Akron, Warren and Youngstown, Ohio, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Erie, Sharon and New Castle, Pennsylvania, Ithaca and Syracuse, New York, Morgantown, West Virginia and Wilmington, Delaware (Greek Accent (1986) 7 (1): 15)."

With this quote in mind, a passing reference by Anthony C. Zacharakis, in a November 4, 1998 letter to the *Hellenic Chronicle* takes on new meaning. The main thrust of Mr. Zacharakis' letter is that the Greek American press should do more to educate the Greeks in this country about our own collective past experiences. Among those aspects of our past that he wishes we would hear more about are the "Candy Kitchens of the Hudson and Mohawk Valley."

What this early immigration and involvement in the confectionary business suggests is stage migration. Stage migration is where an immigrant progressively moves away from his or her place of birth to the location they make their permanent home. As part of this overall process is acquisition of a trade along with a

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series of personal, social, and business skills. Tsakonas learned his confectionary skills in Alexandria and New York City long before coming to the Chicago/Milwaukee region. For Pelalas and Hatzideris it was the same. Dovetailing into this collective migration is the well-documented fact that many of the fraternal groups formed self-help buying co-operatives. They were able to overcome the competition by undercutting their prices. This is where Dr. Chaplin's research on the Tzintzinians in Hawaii is especially helpful. From her writings we learn that Tzintzinians on the

The Greek involvement in the candy business was intense. In Chicago and New York City by "1921 a partial list shows that in New York the candy industry, operated by Greeks [involved] about 200 retail candy stores, 20 candy jobbers and wholesalers, 7 candy manufacturers and 6 dealers in confectionary supplies. In Chicago there were about 432 retail candy stores and 10 wholesalers. Two years later Chicago had 788 retail candy stores, 7 manufacturers of candies and 2 stores of confectionary supplies, while several Greek owners operated 2 to 4 chain candy stores."

visiting the website of Heath Candy I learned that the Heath Brothers met a candy salesman who shared receipts with them. Furthermore, that "the most popular recipe he shared was the '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.' The year was 1928." The existence today of the Dove Ice Cream Bar or the Andes Candies turtles' are also due to the talents and labors of Greek immigrants. While each successive wave of Greek immigrants to America can be proud of their collective accomplishments more attention needs to be paid to how Greeks have moved through various specific professions over time.

Greeks neither invented ice cream nor the candy business in the United States. The Greek-owned candy and ice cream parlors—and many more are still in existence than is now realized—represent one of the earliest industries associated with Greeks in North America. Just as Greek Americans today are recognized as the proprietors of restaurants, between the two world wars, Greeks were as directly associated with ice cream and candy stores. As other ethnic groups that came to the United States between 1870 and 1920, Greeks helped to build the American way of life that



PHOTOS COURTESY OF A. PASPALAS

Top: Candy kitchen in Hillsboro, Texas, Prop. Zarafonitis Bros.; candy kitchen in Terre Haute, Indiana.

*"...by 1908,
over 400 Greek-
owned candy
and ice cream
stores could
be found in
Chicago alone."*

(Koken, et. al. 1999:97-98).

And all of this says nothing about those Tzintzinians and other Greeks such as Athanacios Sanitsas, who first found work in America in these con-

Proprietor James Georgopoulos.

various Hawaiian Islands were able to send their compatriots pineapples and bananas at discount and to their most rural store location.

rectionary stores only to move on to other careers as they chose.

And while Greeks as a large distinctive group no longer own candy stores as they once did their legacy is far from gone and forgotten. While

we enjoy today. These Greek pioneers of confection, who ceaselessly gave so many the delights that only their sweet creations of sugar and ice cream could convey, do not deserve to be so woefully forgotten.

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