

The Sweet Smell of Success

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

WILTON, Iowa. — From the early 1900s until just after World War II Greek immigrants were a commanding force in the ice cream and soda fountain business. Little remembered today is the fact that the nostalgic reminiscences of small-town America very often feature a Greek-owned candy store. In Sinclair Lewis' 1920 novel, "Main Street," the panorama of stores along this archetypical American small-town street includes "the Greek candy-store [with] the whine of a peanut-roaster, and the oily smell of nuts" (New York: Harcourt, Brace: 34). Or in the WPA-produced "New York: A Guide to the Empire State," (1940, reprinted 1976), we hear this association even more clearly stated: "No town of any size would be complete without a Greek candy kitchen."

By 1910, Greek immigrants were equally scattered in small towns and major metropolitan areas all across North America. This demographic dispersal did not go unnoticed. The

■ continued on page 5



THE NATIONAL HERALD ARCHIVES

Some seven generations of patrons still have the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen to call home. Many former residents make a special point of visiting the store whenever they return to Wilton, Iowa.



St

THE NATION
This action was



Top: The Soteris Family, Pete, Karen, Larry, Mary, Betty and Thelma all worked at the Greeks; Above, left to right, Harry Dice, Bill Grunder Sr., Perry Nelson, Gus Nopoulos, Edna Maurer and Gus Chimpanis. Photo taken in 1916.

Historical Society of Iowa

This certifies that

Wilton Candy Kitchen

has been entered in

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

under the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of October 15, 1966 and Chapter 903, the Code of Iowa

Tom J. Gaudin
Governor of Iowa

James H. ...
State Historic Preservation Officer



Gus-1953



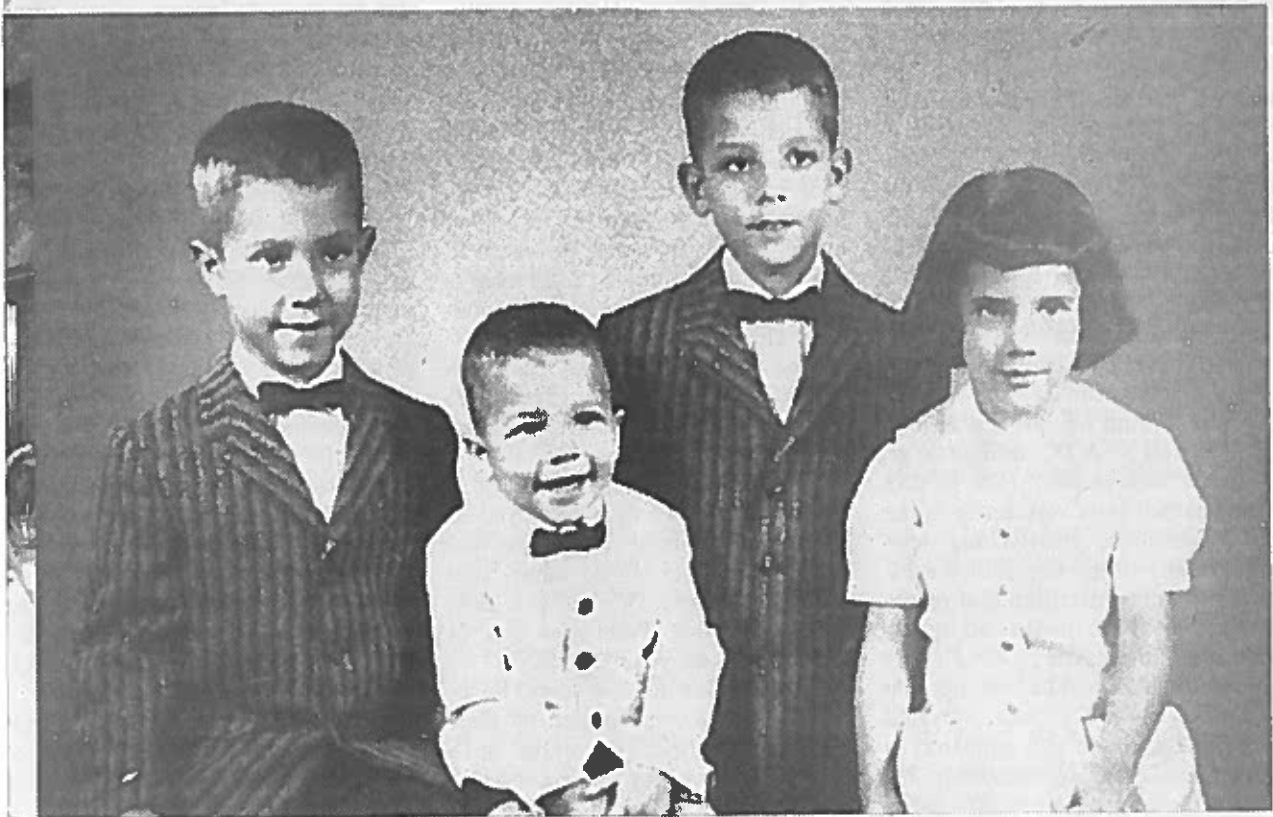
George -1953



Thelma-1949



Frankie-1945



Top, center, dedication of Wilton's historic "Wilton Candy Kitchen," 1966; top, right, various members of the Candy Kitchen; above, Peter, 6, Nic, 2, Gus, 8 and Peggy, 4, 1959.

Nopoulos Candy Kitchen:

■ continued from page 1

Reverend Thomas Burgess in his book, "Greeks in America: An Account of Their Coming, Progress, Customs, Living and Aspirations," (Boston: Sherman, French and Company, 1913) takes care to stress:

"Let us remind the reader of that other large and important class of Greek colonies, or rather of groups of individuals, we mean those thousands of Greek men scattered everywhere throughout every state in the Union, by ones, two, tens, or even a few more. Such isolated Greeks, through ever remaining devoted sons of Hellas, become, because of their very isolation from their fellow countrymen, quickly assimilated into American life, and are everywhere respected as enterprising businessmen and good fellows." (Ibid: 175).

Little did the good Reverend realize what these "isolated Greeks" were destined to accomplish.

As Greeks are stereotyped today as owning restaurants, in the early decades of the last century they were known as premier candy makers, ice cream scoopers and soda fountain artists. But not all of these ice cream fountains are a thing of the long, lost past. Some Greek American families still hold fast to their old-fashioned soda fountains and candy kitchens. Their individual histories are now as much a part of traditional Americana as they are the bedrock of the Greek Diaspora.

JOURNEY TO WILTON JUNCTION

In 1907, Gus George Chimpanis arrived at Ellis Island from Vervena, Greece, with \$10 sewn into his coat-lining by his mother. Just 19 years old, Chimpanis had a sure destination, Davenport, Iowa. There in the buckeye state the young Greek was going to work for his Uncle John Chimpanis. Over the next three years young Gus steadily labored in his uncle's candy and ice cream stores in Davenport and Des Moines. Gus was taught the art of candy, chocolate and ice cream making. During this time John Chimpanis, for reasons no longer recalled, decided to change his last name to Nopoulos. Young Gus Chimpanis, not wishing to have a name different from his uncle, legally changed his name

to Gus George Nopoulos.

In 1909, Gus Nopoulos, and a friend, Nick Parros went to work at one of the largest and grandest fairs in Iowa, the Wilton Junction Fair. Historical documents attest that the first Wilton Junction Fair was held in the fall of 1871 on 21 acres just on the north end of town. Each year the fair grew. In the 1907 and 1916 fair books this annual event was said to be "Open To The World." Wilton Junction is located on old Route 6 just 30 miles west of the Quad Cities (Davenport, Bettendorf, Moline, and Rock Island) in the eastern part of Iowa. Just a stones throw away from the Mississippi River Wilton Junction is only some 200 miles west of Chicago, and about 180 miles east of Des Moines on today's Interstate-80.

The two young Greeks sold ice cream cones for five cents each, then, at the very end of the day, two for a nickel. According to local historians Nopoulos and Parros sold the very first ice cream cones ever seen at the Wilton Junction Fair. Somehow, Parros learned that a recently closed confectionary shop at 310 Cedar Street was not only for sale but that it had "the Tufts Soda Fountain, [with] all the fixtures intact." The two young Greeks bought the business, restocked the store and then reopened the door to the public.

The Wilton Candy Kitchen held its Grand Opening on June 10, 1910. On that first day the two enterprising Greeks made a total of \$17. The rent was then \$8 a month, which in 1910 was considered a steep payment for a new business. To gain some perspective on when this opening day occurred, William Taft was President of the United States, women could not vote, and the Wright brothers were still trying to sell their first airplane to the United States Army.

Little did the young Greeks realize it would mean the store would be open for the next 93 years, 16 to 17 hours a day, 365 days a year, holidays included. It should be stressed that the year Nopoulos and Parros started their business, "the streets of Wilton were dirt, horse-and-buggy was the common mode of transportation, and the ice necessary to cool the Candy Kitchen's drinks and freeze the ice cream was cut from a nearby stream during the winter and

stored for use during the rest of the year." According to family recollections Gus Nopoulos only knew two words of English when he owned his store, "Thank you."

Yet the Nopoulos family has always been very clear that the two young Greeks had simply reopened an existing confectionery store. The building at 310 Cedar Street was built before the Civil War in 1856. It is said that since 1867, the Cedar Street store had been the location of a confectionary/soda fountain. And such a claim is not hard to believe. I

*...nostalgic reminder
America ver
a Greek-own*

is documented that by "1832, John Matthews, just off the boat from England, was peddling the soda fountain, which dispensed soda water on demand to store proprietors. Six years later Eugene Roussell began selling flavored soda drinks to his customers. Some entrepreneurs added sweet cream to soda water but in 1874 Robert M. Green...a soda-water concessionaire at the Franklin Institute's semi-centennial celebration in Philadelphia, ran out of cream and in desperation substituted vanilla ice cream (American August 1991: 60)." This event marks the birth of the ice cream soda. Consequently since the Cedar Street location has been the ongoing location of an ice cream/soda fountain it is said to be the "Oldest Ice Cream Parlor/Soda Fountain in Continuous Operation" in the United States.

In 1855 the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad (soon to be called the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad) came to Wilton Junction. During its peak Wilton Junction saw as many as 100 trains a day. In 1895, with only 1,212 people living within the city boundaries the railroad became a much used form of local travel. A regularly scheduled train ran three to four times a day from Wilton Junction to Muscatine, the county seat. Between 1855 and 1934, this train known locally as the "Wilton Plug," (Engine #1902) provided local farmers with a fast and easy means to reach the nearest market town

The Sweet Smell of Success

and intercontinental commerce.

Farmers from the surrounding area (such as the nearby towns of West Liberty and Moscow) would bring their families into Wilton by wagon or buggy. Posting their horses and rigs at the livery stable the farm families would board the train for Muscatine. There the families would spend their day and often their money. But part of these infrequent trips to Muscatine was another stop. The farm families always made a point of taking the time to visit "the Greeks" for an ice cream cone or a sundae.

*scenes of small-town
often feature
a candy store.*

In 1913, Gus Nopoulos purchased the 310 Cedar Street building. There was not really enough money in the business for two men so Nick Parros left on good terms and went on to Rock Island, Illinois to seek his fortune. Yet the hopes of these young Greek immigrants knew no bounds. Sometime after 1913, three of Gus's cousins Kostandenos (Gus), Bacilios (Bill), and Stelianos (Steve) Chimpanis came to work with him. As Gus Nopoulos prospered he always attempted to improve his business or property. An example of this is in 1915, when Gus had earned enough to put in a brand new intricately designed stamped-metal ceiling.

A photograph taken in 1916 shows the interior of the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen and six individuals. From left to right we see Harry Dice, Bill Gruder, Sr., Thomas Perry Nelson, Gus Nopoulos, Edna Maurer, and Gus Chimpanis. Harry Dice eventually moved to Bellevue, Washington. Bill Gruder, Sr. stayed in Wilton Junction eventually taking over his family's business. Thomas Perry Nelson was a co-founder in 1926 of the first Air Mail route between Chicago and St. Louis along with his former Army classmates, Charles Lindberg and Phil Love. Nelson was referred to by his co-workers as "King of the Airmail Pilots." In December 1929, Thomas Perry Nelson was killed in a plane crash. Edna Maurer was the Candy Kitchen's first waitress. This may al-

so be the last photograph of Gus Chimpanis.

With the outbreak of World War I, the three Chimpanis brothers went to war for their adopted country. Gus Chimpanis was the first soldier from Wilton Junction to die in that war. The supreme sacrifice of this young Greek was never forgotten. As Henry Wildasin (1855-1962) writes in his Revised History of Wilton, Iowa-1947: "the local post 584, The American Legion, was originally formed in 1921. On December 29, 1921, they received their charter and at that time carried the name of 'Gus Chimpanis Post 584.' This pioneer Legion group carried a membership of 15."

Still, even with the will to work incredible hours a commonplace among the Greeks, there simply was not enough income for Nopoulos and his two cousins when they returned from World War I. Bill and Steve went on to Marengo, Iowa and opened the Rainbow Candy Kitchen. The cousins always remained close.

AFTER THE GREAT WAR

Young Gus Nopoulos eventually received the nickname "Gussy." He was also often referred to as the "Iron Man" given his Herculean work schedule. Sometime after the Great War Gus Nopoulos married a young maid from Wilton Junction, Mildred "Frankie" Hudler (1898-1969). In time the couple had two sons Leo and George. The entire family worked at the store to keep up with the constant workload. Until World War II, when sugar and chocolate became scarce, Gus Nopoulos made all his own candies, chocolates, toppings, and ice cream as required.

The Nopoulos Candy Kitchen soon became one of the social centers in town. Undoubtedly, Gus' specialties had much to do with this attraction. Sundaes called Happy Thought, Wilton Special, Chocolate Jersey, High School Special, and Black Cow have been a mainstay for over 90 years. Customers can still select from a variety of drinks such as Green Rivers, Chocolate Cokes, Red Rivers, Pink Lady, Odd Ball, Hadocal, Vanilla Phosphate, Orange Water, Root Beer, and Coca Cola. Over the years a select number of light sandwiches have also entered the daily menu.

Some sense of the gradual increase in business at the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen can be judged, in part, by all the people who worked there over the years. As we have noted Edna Schoeder Mauer was the first waitress from 1916 to 1921. The second waitress was Dorothy "Toots" Templeman, from 1923 to 1928. Then Erna Marie Beinke Hansen was the third waitress working from 1930 to 1941. Finally, Mary Stella Soteris Ford from 1940 to 1946 was the fourth waitress. Others who worked at the store since the 1930s would have to include Esther Bestman, Elmer and Reuben Koenig, Paul and Cecil (Jumbo) Duncan, Dorothy Templeman Dickinson and her brothers Milo and Harold Templeman. Various ladies who worked in the Candy Kitchen as teenagers would include Carolyn Ford Thomas, Beverly Oveson Radedeaux, Renee Radedeaux Lockridge, Janet Schneekloth Carstens, Beverly Baker and Karen Soteris. While for many years Harlan "Tinker" Beinke worked for Gussy as a handy man.

This is not just a random list of names. The presence of these people speaks to the extreme popularity of the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen. The sheer number of people cited here could never have been employed unless there was a steady flow of customers. The other aspect to this long list is the pride and fond memories with which these individuals speak about working at "Gussy's." Such a long list of local people who don't want to be left off or forgotten as having worked at the Candy Kitchen also speaks to the kind of man Gus Nopoulos was as an employer. Rather than a mere list of names it is a record of vital and enduring social bounds within a small community.

Daily life in rural Iowa, from our perspective in time, is often difficult to envision. The widely scattered farms, the miles of crops blowing in the wind, the seemingly endless stream of trains rolling along the prairie, no electricity, the small out-buildings housing the flocks of chickens, herds of cattle and/or hogs dotting the landscape, or even the simplest activities in the widely spaced towns all appear completely alien to our way of life today. Just one memory, Larry Soteris shared recalls some-

■ continued from page 5

thing of the uniqueness of this time and place: "our neighbor Mr. Bausch had a wooden plow pulled by two mules. He walked behind clearing heavy snow from the sidewalks of the neighborhood in the south end of town. He also cleared the walks uptown to the post office and the grocery store."

Life without electricity is especially hard to imagine. But the inventive Gus Nopoulos had to have a vast amount of ice or he couldn't run his business. Ice was collected from Mud Creek, which is just south of Wilton Junction. This ice was used to make and refrigerate ice cream in the years before electricity was available. A wooden icehouse was attached to the east side of the Wilton Candy Kitchen. The stored ice was packed in six inches of sawdust, which kept the ice ready for use in the candy kitchen. A brief recollection written by Lydia Nagel for the Bicentennial book Wilton, Moscow and Yesterday 1776-1976, entitled, "Putting Up Ice for the Candy Kitchen," describes this annual process:

"The ice house behind the Candy Kitchen was about 20 ft. x 20 ft. The ice was cut at Mud Creek by hand and a horse pulled it up on a platform. Rudy Walters caught it quickly and put it up on a wagon. It would freeze to the platform if it were not moved quickly. Another platform was at the storage place. A horse was used here, too, for pulling up the ice much as farmers pulled up their hay. George and Leo Nopoulos helped by filling baskets of sawdust for packing. Layers of sawdust were put around every cake of ice. These cakes weighed up to a couple of hundred pounds each. When ice was needed for use, it was dumped from above. Gus packed the cabinets in the Candy Kitchen with ice and drained the water twice a day. Sometimes someone would come in the night and want a little ice—5 or 10 cents worth—maybe for a sick person. Usually Gus did not charge for it, even though he had been called out of bed. "That was one of the disadvantages of living close to your business."

In 1965, with ice no longer being collected and stored in this building it was finally torn down.

In 1922, Gus Nopoulos purchased an assortment of walnut booths with marble tops, along with mirrors, and tiffany lamps from his Uncle John

Nopoulos. The elder Nopoulos had elected to close his store in downtown Davenport. These items were integrated into the overall décor of the store. The Nopoulos Candy Kitchen's interior then featured, as it still does to this day, walnut booths trimmed with marble, stained glass light fixtures, beautiful mirrors accenting the walls, leaded glass lamp shades over each booth, an elaborately designed metal ceiling, and the Tufts marble and walnut soda fountain. Fancy décor and fine sweets were not all the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen offered. It also was one of the very first places in town with mechanical music! In 1926, at the age of six, George Nopoulos was assigned his first job in the candy kitchen. Young George would stand, for what seemed like hours, on a wire ice cream chair, winding the Brunswick record player and so supplied the store with its own musical ambiance.

Gus Nopoulos and his Chimpanis cousins were not the only Greek immigrants in Wilton Junction. Another Greek immigrant, Peter Soteris from Pylos, was a section foreman for the Rock Island Railroad. Along with his railroad work Soteris used to raise hogs while maintaining a small farmstead. In the Revised History of Wilton, Iowa-1947 we learn of the 1945 "killing of Pete Soteris." It seems Soteris, and one of his men Lamp, saw a train coming from one direction and stepped on the other track not noticing that a train was approaching on the track where they were standing, the road being of the double-track system (Ibid)." The two men were killed instantly. Soteris left behind a wife Hazel (née Camp) and six children: Pete, Karen, Larry, Mary, Betty, and Thelma.

A number of historical photographs and paintings hang in the Wilton Public Library attesting to the town's self-understanding of its past. One such painting shows Wilton's Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad Depot. This painting was executed by Faye Grunder in 1975. Built in 1898 this depot was listed in 1990 on the National Register of Historic Places. The Grunder painting is dedicated to Peter Soteris, section foreman, for the Rock Island from 1907 to 1945. In addition, Soteris has seen enrollment in the Railroader's Hall of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania (Strasburg).

POST WAR BOOM

Leo Nopoulos served in the Navy during World War 2. George went into the Army and was discharged on February 28, 1946. Upon their return the two Nopoulos brothers, on October 1, 1946, each took over a half interest in the Candy Kitchen. But as in times past there simply was not enough business for two young men. So on December 1, 1946 Leo sold his interest in the store and moved with his young family to Stuart, Iowa where he first opened a café and later another candy kitchen. Leo Nopoulos then moved on to Dexter, Iowa where he operated another ice cream parlor. Leo, while still working at his own business, eventually earned himself a law degree and served many years as a lawyer until his retirement.

In 1941 Thelma Soteris began to wash dishes at the Candy Kitchen when she was only 10 years old. After George's return from the war he found himself working with Thelma everyday and the sparks soon began to fly. They fell in love. Thelma received her engagement ring in the tiny office of the Candy Kitchen on July 8, 1949. The young couple was married on October 30, 1949. They are the parents of four children Gus, Peter, Peggy and Nick. All four children worked at the soda fountain and it was monies earned from this family business that all four used when they attended the University of Iowa.

In 1954, when Uncle Steve (Stelianos) Chimpanis died his Rainbow Candy Kitchen was closed. Thelma Nopoulos made a point of insisting that certain items from the store be brought to Wilton Junction. One item, in particular, catches the eye. It is a child's size round old-style ice cream table with four proportioned wire-backed chairs to match. When the two cousins had established their own ice cream parlor in Marengo, Iowa, Gus Nopoulos had generously provided them with various fixtures and pieces of equipment they might need for their new store.

While the railroad had long since severely limited its passenger travel that does not mean Wilton Junction has lost its place in the frantic whistle-stop campaigning that state and federal politicians love to engage in. Photographs line the walls of the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen documenting a host of barnstorming politicians, their wives and their families. An October 1952 photograph shows Dwight D. Eisenhower and his wife Mamie

THE SWEET SMITH OF SUCCESS

making a campaign whistle-stop in Wilton Junction. Among the various photographs marking this event is one from the Des Moines Register that shows Thelma Nopoulos handing Mamie Eisenhower a bouquet of flowers. Another photograph, this time from the Quad City Times, shows Pat Nixon speaking with Thelma Nopoulos in 1959. Then we see Elizabeth Dole, while she was campaigning for her husband in 1979.

Still the railroad's role in the lives of rural Iowa had long been on the wane. By 1947, rail service began to decline rapidly. Within twenty years there was only one daily passenger train and six freight trains passing through Wilton Junction. In 1967, the Wilton Junction Depot was closed and shortly after "Junction" was officially dropped from the town's name.

A NATIONAL HISTORICAL SITE

In the Des Moines Sunday Register's magazine's cover story, "The Remarkable Gus Nopoulos of Candy Kitchen" Gus is said to have "nickled and dimed his way to success, cashing in on the sweet-tooth cravings of succeeding generations of Wilton residents and on his own thriftiness and ingenuity.... 'Nobody now would go through what I did then,' he says. They wouldn't work that hard (June 8, 1980: 7)." The Greek immigrant had not only managed his own daily business but after only three years in Wilton Junction regularly purchased property in town and across the county.

Gus George Nopoulos passed away on July 4, 1983 at the age of 92. He is buried with his wife and immediately next to Bacillos (1896-1953) and Stelianos (1894-1954) his two Chimpanis cousins at the Wilton Oakdale Cemetery. The circular VFW metal markers mark the graves of the two World War I veterans.

Much had changed since the two young Greeks first sold ice cream cones at the Wilton Junction Fair. The "Restored Soda Fountains of Yesteryear" feature article by Roger Rapoport, a general survey of ice cream and soda fountains around the nation, opens ominously with: "No one in Wilton, Iowa, will ever forget September 28, 1987. That day, the Nopoulos family, owners of the town's only soda fountain, called it quits after serving the community for 77 years." (Americana August Volume 19 # 3 (1991): 60).

Rapoport next reports that, "More than two thousand nostalgic cus-

tomers, including Governor Terry Bradstad, showed up for one last cherry Coke, turtle sundae, or brown cow. The Candy Kitchen was seemingly another Main Street victim of the interstate, the shopping mall, and fast-food industry.

"As one-hundred-year-old Ruby Ellyson of West Liberty sipped one of the fountain's last strawberry floats, faithful patron Leona Schoeder dropped off a poem dedicated to Wilton's favorite hangout. Perhaps its most poignant line recorded the reaction of her son, stationed far away in the Army, to the bad news: 'Mom,' he asked, 'can you mail a cherry Coke?'"

But at seven the next morning, as the people of Wilton headed for work, the lights were still on at the Candy Kitchen. "We changed our mind," said Thelma Nopoulos, as she and her husband, George put on the coffee. "This is our life" (Ibid: 60).

During Wilton's Founder's Day celebrations on August 28, 1993 the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen was formally placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The standing of Wilton in local Iowa politics as well as the relative social position of the Nopoulos family can be judged by those who actively participated in this observance. Attending this event were the, then, two senators of Iowa Jack Rife and Richard Drake along with Governor Terry E. Branstad as well as a sizable array of state, county and city officials. Closing remarks were made by Father Basil Papanikolaou of St. George Greek Orthodox Church of Des Moines.

On October 30, 1999 George and Thelma celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary at the Candy Kitchen with an Open House. Well over 400 guests attended.

The back room of the Candy Kitchen has evolved into a museum not only of the ice cream parlor but also Wilton Junction. Nearly one hundred years of artifacts, documents and photographs testify to the history of the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen, the town of Wilton Junction and the role of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad in Muscatine County.

Pride of place has taken many expressions for the Nopoulos family. Thelma Soteris Nopoulos is just about finished with her own history book. It has taken her some five years to research, write, and complete. Tentatively entitled, "Wilton, Iowa 1855 to 2005: Our Town Speaks," the volume is based on Thelma's interviews with nearly 200

residents and former residents of the town. It is Thelma's fixed intent to have the book completed and ready for the town's one hundred and fiftieth birthday.

Aside from her introduction Thelma has determined that the best way to learn the history of Wilton Junction, Iowa is to hear it from those who lived here. And in a town this size there is a lot of cross over of information and memories. Along with all the other treasured memories of life and years gone by are those centered on the Candy Kitchen: "I've got people in my book here, a hundred years old that when they were little their first recollection was coming to the candy kitchen and having a dish of ice cream." This is a far from uncommon experience.

Some seven generations of patrons still have the Nopoulos Candy Kitchen to call home. Many former residents make a special point of visiting the store whenever they return to Wilton. George still makes his own ice cream. Each morning some six to eight men gather at the front counter for coffee and conversation. Mother's shopping in town invariably bring in their children for a treat. And they are far from the only visitors. As Thelma reports, "ladies that are 98 years old come in and sit at the same booth they did 85 years ago."

Anyone who thinks the influence of Greeks in North America is simply a matter of demography does not take our spirit or individual character into the overall equation. According to the 2000 Census there are only 5,754 Greeks in the entire state of Iowa. The total population of the state is 2,926,324 individuals. There are only 2,577 people in Wilton. But there have never been more than a handful of Nopoulos', Chimpanis', or Soteris', in Wilton [Junction], Iowa at any given moment.

Aside from legendary airplane pilots, fallen heroes of World War I, Presidents on whistle-stop tours, movie stars like Gregory Peck or Brooke Shields or even those seven generations of Iowans anyone can still experience the sweet creations of one extremely hard working family. Go see for yourself. The Nopoulos Candy Kitchen located at 310 Cedar Street Wilton, Iowa 52778 is open 7 days a week, 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. They are among the very last of the Greek ice cream fountaineers. It is no exaggeration to say that once their kind is gone, no others will be able to take their place.