Traditional Greek Folk Life of Florida: Preserving Hellenism

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By Steve Frangos and Tina Bucuvalas
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Thomas Burgess, a historian of Greek emigration, wrote, "Greek wanderers from all classes may be found, Odysseus-like, in every nook and cranny of the world." Certainly this is true in the United States, which hosts the largest population outside Greece. While most came from the Peloponnesus or the Greek islands in search of better economic prospects, almost as many ethnic Greeks emigrated from Turkey as a result of political unrest in the early part of the twentieth century.

Prior those waves of immigration, Greeks were among the early settlers in Florida. In the mid-eighteenth century, Scottish physician Andrew Turnbull dreamed of creating a profitable plantation in Britain's newly acquired Florida lands. Turnbull, whose wife was the daughter of a Greek merchant from Smyrna in Asia Minor, believed that Mediterranean peoples would be well suited to Florida's climate. He recruited 1,405 colonists from Europe. There were predominantly Minorcan, but also included about 500 Greeks from Asia Minor (Smyrna), the Peloponnesus (Mani), and Corsica. Although the New Smyrna colony did not succeed, the former colonists moved to St. Augustine and many of their descendants live there today.

There are many large Greek communities throughout Florida, but the most widely known is in Tarpon Springs. Greek men, primarily from the Dodecanese Islands, have been diving for sponges in the waters near Tarpon Springs since 1905. The men were recruited to continue this traditional occupation when it was discovered that Florida's waters provided the only U.S. habitat for natural sponges.

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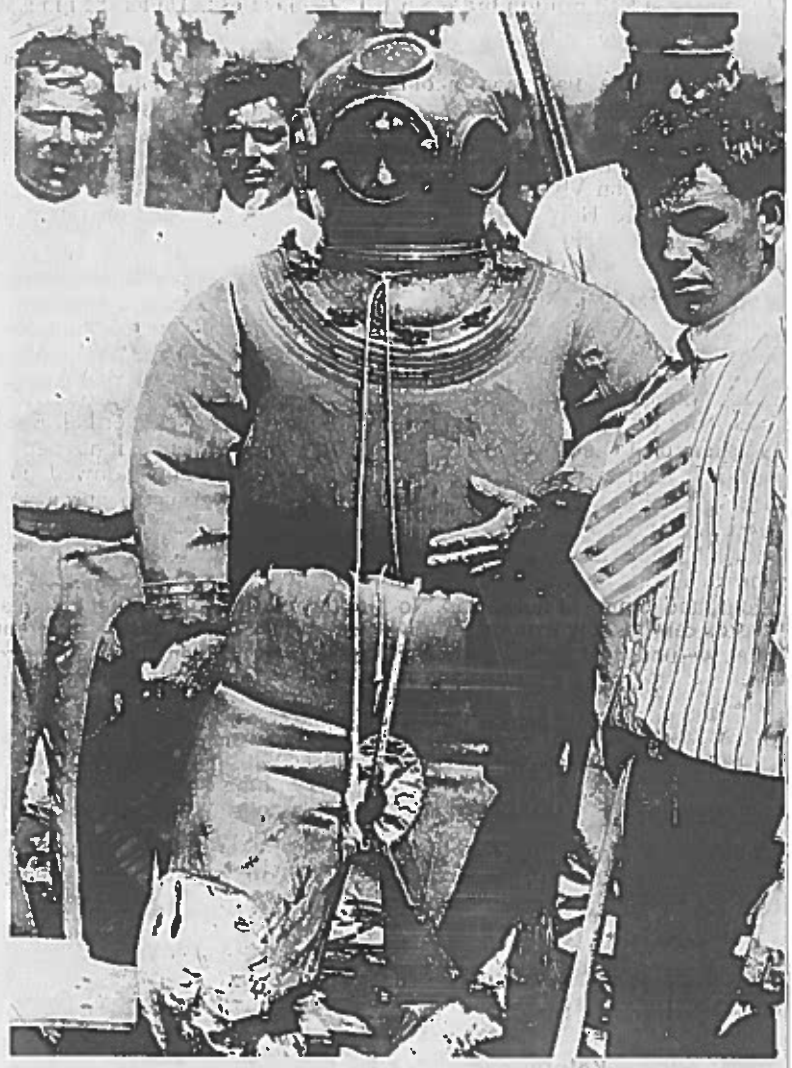
Those who did not dive staffed or maintained the boats, sold the sponges, or practiced other related maritime occupations. The divers gradually brought their families and their strong religious beliefs to Florida where they flourished.

Today, the sponge industry endures and Tarpon Springs preserves its strong Greek character and maritime heritage. In recent years, many Greeks who moved to the industrial north for work have returned to the Tarpon Springs area. Moreover, Greek-Americans and Greeks from all areas continue to re-locate to this area that stretches more than forty miles from Port Richey to the north and Clearwater to the south. As a result, there is a strong and diverse Greek community that includes enclaves from virtually all parts of Greece.

Though today most sponge divers use modified scuba gear, a few still wear the traditional canvas and rubber suit topped with a heavy helmet made from copper, brass and plate glass created by Nick Toth. Toth's grandfather, Antonios Lerios, was born on the Greek Island of Kalymnos. As a boy he moved to Istanbul, Turkey, where he worked in the shipyards, eventually becoming a master mechanic and machinist. He came to Tarpon Springs in 1913, when he was 21, and soon became known as the best diving helmet craftsman. Over the years he continually refined his design, making the helmet more comfortable, improving airflow and increasing visibility.

In the early twentieth century, sponge divers often went to sea on ships that stayed away from home for several months. Although the men often ate fresh fish, they broke



Greeks dominated early 20th century sponge industry. Above left: A Greek in full diving gear. Above right: The sponge exchange in Tarpon Springs was the largest in the world. Below right: Sponge diving boats are still a popular tourist attraction.

using fine quality color pigments from around the world, which result in luminous, permanent colors. Damianakis, whose work is found in

taught the art. King remembers, "The young girls would come to our house....The girls would bring their treadle machines and their lunch,

the monotony of their diet with a preserved meat called kavourma. Before sailing, the crew was responsible for preparing enough kavourma to last an entire trip. The preparation of kavourma became a local social occasion as well as a necessity. Although sponge divers no longer need to take kavourma, some Tarpon Springs residents continue to make the dish for special occasions or to teach others about the tradition.

Greek Floridians maintain a wide variety of traditional arts, many of which have a close relationship to family and religion—the areas of greatest cultural conservatism. An essential Orthodox belief is that the icon is a vehicle of divine power and grace. Through the icon, the represented becomes present. Orthodox tradition has fixed many features in the depiction of the saints and the holy family so that the relationship between the prototype and recurring images would not be lost. Nevertheless, there are periodic and regional variations in iconographic style and detail. In Greek Orthodox churches, icons are displayed on walls, on the proskynetarion--the stand that holds the day's icon, and on the iconostasis--the screen that separates the chancel from the nave. Most Greek families display icons in the bedroom, the most private area of the house.

Florida is lucky to include several well-respected Orthodox iconographers among its citizens. Born in the United States, Elias Damianakis (New Port Richey) completed a twelve-year apprenticeship in iconography and has made extensive visits to Byzantine monuments and holy sites to further his knowledge. Damianakis adheres to strict Orthodox prototypes in creating portable icons, wall murals, frescos, and Byzantine window design, but he infuses his work with a warm personal style. He mixes his own paints,

Florida, California, New York and Greece, received a Florida Folk Arts Fellowship in 2001.

In the home, women take an active hand in teaching values and ways of life. Traditional domestic arts express the aesthetic vision of the individual through media that fulfill the basic needs of family and community. In Florida, many Greek American women practice domestic arts such as needlework, home decoration, and food preparation.

Until the past few decades, young Greek girls learned needlework such as embroidery, crochet, and tatting in order to make items for their dowries. Many Greek American women learned needlework arts from family and friends and continue to create household items of great beauty. There is significant exchange in this area, as Greek American women draw inspiration from Greek examples and share American patterns with friends and relatives in Greece. In Tarpon Springs, women also create the colorful costumes of their ancestral homes for children to wear to celebrations such as Epiphany or Greek Independence Day. In many parts of Florida, altar cloths and the vestments worn by priests, altar boys, cantors, and other participants in the Greek Orthodox Liturgy are formally prescribed yet are often dependent upon the needlework skills of parishioners for their fulfillment.

Panagiota King (Sarasota) was born in northern Greece, where some families continue the custom of providing a dowry for their daughters. All the linens needed for the bride's new home are typically included. When she was a little girl, King would sit on her mother's lap for hours, watching her embroider traditional designs on tablecloths, curtains and pillowcases for dowries. King's mother was the first in their area to embroider on a treadle sewing machine, and she later

and all day they would practice. In 15 days they could do everything she could do, but not as fast." King married an American missionary, and has adapted the art form to her life in Florida. "In Greece," she explains, "everything has a doily on it or a tablecloth or something like that." Since those items are not as common here, she concentrates on apparel. Her embroidery on blouses, shirts and jackets is very much in demand. While her mother specializes in white-on-white, King is known for her color work on both treadle and electric sewing machines.

In many parts of Greece, people decorate the churches with palm leaves on Palm Sunday. In Florida, some Greek Americans still plait the fronds in a decorative manner or weave them into objects associated with the events of Palm Sunday, such as donkeys and riders, or into decorative crosses. The priest distributes palm crosses to the congregation at the end of the Palm Sunday service. Parishioners place them on the family icons for good luck throughout the year. Every year, Kalliope Joanos (Tallahassee) makes hundreds of crosses in a unique style that originated in her native island of Patmos.

Music is embedded in a whole range of social occasions such as church picnics, baptisms, Greek fraternal celebrations, and weddings. Greek music played in Florida encompasses a wide range of folk and popular genres, including many distinctive regional variations that utilize unusual traditional instruments. People often want to hear the old rural Greek songs, so musicians regularly include the old as well as the new in their repertoires. In recent decades there have been significant changes in Greek instrumental music: the bagpipe is now very rare, and only a few musicians in the country play the santouri. The bouzouki has be-

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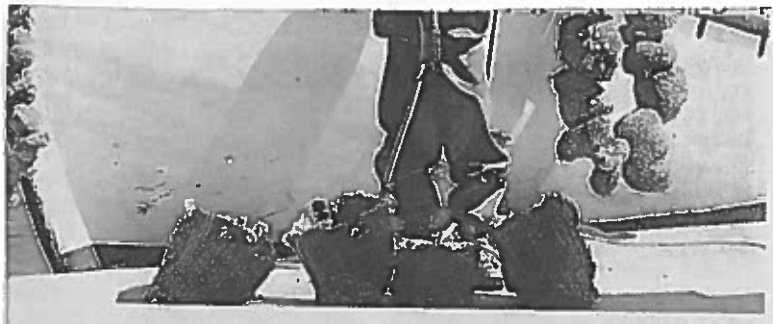
rather than the chords and rhythm played by mainland players. Sometimes two laoutos accompany the lyra, with one playing melody and the other rhythm and chords.

Cretán lyra player/maker and vocalist Kostas Maris (Holiday and Miami) is an impressive musician and craftsman who produces handsome instruments that play very well. He has played at the Smithsonian's Folk life Festival in Washington D.C. and at Carnegie Hall. The Folk life Collection of the Museum of Florida History includes a lyra made by Maris' father, the late lyra musician Elias Maris. Maris' laouto playing partner, Nick Mastras (Holiday), is also an excellent musician and participates in the local chapter of the Pan-Cretan Association.

Greek traditional dancing occurs in a variety of formal and informal contexts, such as weddings, holiday celebrations, or regional fraternal organization and church parties. Although Greeks and Greek Americans share many dances, there are myriad variations of such basic dances as the kalamatiano, sirto, or tsamiko developed by those from different regions of Greece or the United States. Greek Orthodox churches often sponsor dance troupes, such as the Opa! Dancers from Holy Mother of God Greek Orthodox Church in Tallahassee, led by Alexandros Theodoropoulos.

Visitors to Greek dances sometimes overlook the structure of the dances as they are swept up in the event. Musicians usually follow the lead dancer in such as way that their playing accents his or her movements. In the curved line dances, it is the lead dancer's prerogative to improvise on the basic steps with flips, whirls on the heel, and slaps to



me the most common lead in-rument and electric amplification now an inescapable feature.

Spiros Skordilis is a master of veral types of Greek music: re-tika, laika, and kantadas. He first arned Greek music from his fa-er in Athens. As a young man, kordilis formed and played uzouki in two popular trios, the iki Orchestra and the Blue Trio. s work gained him contracts with lumbia Recording Company, en with RCA. Skordilis soon won re fame by recording his own mpositions, some of which be-me standards in Greek popular usic. During the era of military le in Greece, many musicians re harassed. As a result, Sko-ilis toured the U.S. and Canada, en settled in Tarpon Springs. In 86-87, he served as a master ist in the Florida Folk life Ap-enticeship Program. Today he rforms and teaches bouzouki, ile continuing to write songs th his wife Kay.

The lyra is the most popular lodic instrument on the island of ete. A bowed instrument similar the violin, it usually has three ings tuned in fifths. Musicians y the lyra in an upright position, ting it on the knee when seated. standing, they place a foot on a air and rest it on their thigh. In unusual fingering technique, sicians press against the sides of strings with the tops of their fin-gernails instead of pressing the strings with fingertips. An instrument that frequently accompanies the lyra is the Cretan laouto, which is typically larger and tuned lower than the mainland version. Cretan laouto players often play melodies on the four pairs of metal strings, the shoe. Ideally, the dancer becomes so absorbed in the music that kefi, a state of high emotion, inspires him or her to dance without premeditation. A handkerchief allows the second dancer to aid the leader in the improvisations. The third dancer keeps to the regular steps, thereby providing a model for the rest of the line. Finally, the last dancer places the left hand in the small of the back and ensures that the dancers maintain the curve by always moving slightly backwards.

Many predict the end of Hellenism in North America yet it is clear that many Greeks across Florida remain ardent Hellenes.

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