

Preservation of our Community Histories: Past, Present, and Future

Workshop Presentation
July 1 and July 2, 2002,
36th Biennial Clergy Laity Congress
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

Mary K. Mousalimas

Welcome to the first ever presentation on the Preservation of Community History at a Clergy Laity Congress. We are deeply indebted to His Eminence Metropolitan Anthony of San Francisco. His foresight and keen interest in accurate historical documentation have made this event possible.

The methodical documentation and preservation of our community history in this country is long over due. While other ethnic groups are trying to discover their roots, our own rich heritage is being diminished and even distorted. We are losing untold volumes of written and material resources on a daily basis. The time has come when we all must realize that to ignore the loss of these resources is to rob our future generations of their due legacy.

A resolution from Oakland, California, was presented and enthusiastically accepted at the San Francisco Diocese Clergy Laity Conference in February of this year, 2002. The resolution requested the establishment and support of a committee dedicated to the documentation and preservation of community history in each of our parishes. Hopefully, our resolution will make it to the floor of this Congress.

Today, we will discuss the critical need for the preservation of our community histories, and we will acquaint you with the work we are doing. We will indicate some techniques for systematic research. We will inform you about existing archival resources.

In my presentation, I will provide a brief overview about the Greek immigrant and then a detailed account of the Ascension Historical Committee's efforts thus far, to preserve our Greek American history. I shall also mention some of the challenges we encounter when collecting, archiving, and preserving our community's history; and I shall share our strategies in overcoming these challenges.

About the Greek Immigrant

Parish History is as Much About the People as it is About the Official Proceedings

When we stress the preservation of our community histories, we must begin with our parish records. They are vitally important. We assume that parish records are in safekeeping. This is true as far as the ecclesiastical records are concerned.

The records of baptisms, marriages, and funerals are of primary concern, and they are safely kept. The records of proceedings, such as minutes of parish council meetings and general assemblies, as well as the church bulletins, are another matter. If they are not properly stored, they are lost or destroyed. When parishes lack adequate office space and

furnishings for storing files, outgoing officers often take those records with them for safekeeping, but subsequent generations discard them. Furthermore, records have been purposely destroyed due to a schism or an unfortunate scandal, for example, within the parish. There must be a systematic approach to preserving the records of our communities.

So, we save and store our parish records. But what do we know of the societies in which these records were produced? What do we know about the people who established and maintained the communities? Where did these people come from? How did they live? Where did they work? Are they immigrants? Are they converts to the faith? Are they fourth, fifth, or even sixth generation Greek Americans? What information will we leave for future generations who, some day, may want to know about us? In other words, parish history is as much about the people as it is about the official proceedings.

We tend to presume that Greek American history is the same throughout the United States. We tolerate the stereotype of the immigrant who came to Ellis Island, worked hard, opened a restaurant or some other business, married a picture bride, built a church, sent his children to college, and lived happily ever after. This generality is too simple.

There was a geographical difference among the earlier immigrants themselves. The living and working conditions of early Greek immigrants in the western parts of the United States differed greatly from those in the eastern parts. Greeks arriving early in the eastern states found compatriots in the cities, with whom they shared familiar customs and language. They found work in established industries such as textile mills, shoe factories, stockyards, and steel mills. In contrast, the early Greeks who came to the western states found themselves dispersed within vast territories that were altogether new even for the United States. Western states had not yet achieved statehood when the first Greeks settled here. California joined the union in 1876 and Utah in 1896, for example. These immigrants going to the western parts of the United States were employed initially as laborers in mines and on railroads, until they could establish their own enterprises and communities. They were pioneers in new territories who contributed to the building of vast new states ... and they confronted some oppressive obstacles.

Those who came in the second wave of immigration from the 1970s, as well as some of the relatively few who had come after World War II, were far better educated and better skilled than most of the early immigrants, and they were more familiar with America and the English language. Many of these in the second wave were reunited with kinsmen of the earlier immigration who had already established themselves in this country and who were able to assist them in the process of acculturation. They found institutions already in place through the efforts of the earlier groups.

The newer immigrants encountered customs and superstitions among the earlier immigrants, which appeared archaic, having been preserved here while lost in Greece from the turn of the century; but they encountered little if any racial prejudice, because by then it had become chic to be Greek. Their easier, more recent experience tends to overshadow the severe difficulties encountered by the earlier immigrants.

When the Ku Klux Klan enjoyed resurgence, reaching a peak in the 1920s, the Greeks were targeted in racial slurs and actual attacks. The resurgence fueled the fires of American national xenophobia. It resulted in virulent prejudice against Greek immigrants throughout the United States. Although today there are few if any immigrants surviving from that era, the children of these same immigrants are alive. Too often, however, we choose not to recall such horrid experiences. Nevertheless, these events did happen. They happened time and again. Should we forget?

While preserving the histories of our communities, we are also required to document the histories of their founders.

Challenges and Strategies

When collecting, archiving, and preserving our community's history we often face challenges. We encounter resistance from the second generation who choose not to be reminded of their struggles for acculturation and assimilation. We also encounter resistance from second and third generation Greek Americans who see no merit in recalling our past and who are unaware of our rich legacy of customs and traditions. We encounter resistance from recent converts to Orthodoxy and from clergy who have no sensitivity for the origins of our establishments and tend to resent efforts that concentrate on our early immigrant history.

When we seek to collect family histories, we often find that artifacts which have long been ignored, locked away in trunks or left moldering in basements and attics until a historian shows an interest in acquiring them, suddenly become prized possessions to their owners who then refuse to share them.

The problem of funding also appears to impede us, but it is an imaginary problem, not a real one. Too much time and effort are wasted in seeking the means for funding a research project. The delay hastens the loss of primary sources and material. In reality, very little equipment is needed, and therefore very little funding.

These are obstacles we face in our collecting, but they are easily overcome. We meet these challenges by informing people that all of us, each and every one of us, bring our personal histories with us into our community; that, as historians, we should not ignore the realities of the past; and that our new parishes today are the beginning of a new era in this country.

We have also learned to stimulate interest with every exhibit we stage. When people see their family histories have not been included because of their own negligence, their attitudes change.

Most importantly, we have learned we must nurture and encourage budding historians to continue the work we have begun, helping to weave a rich tapestry of past events which will inform and educate future generations.

We have learned that through patience, accountability and perseverance, we achieve our goals. With DEDICATION, MORE DEDICATION, AND STAMINA, we persevere.

Ascension Historical Committee's Efforts Thus Far To Preserve Our History

In 1989, the president of our Parish Council asked me to form an historical committee. He just happened to be my son in law. He had gotten weary of hearing me complain that we "should do something" about documenting our history. So, the Ascension Historical Committee was officially created with the sanction and support of the Proestamenos and the Parish Council in August of 1989. The committee was given a classroom in our Education Building for our exclusive use. With permission and with parish council funding, we immediately installed our own dead-bolt lock on the door, and purchased a fireproof filing cabinet. We began meeting once a month.

Our initial aim was twofold: to document the early immigrants and to take oral histories from the surviving primary sources. This we did. We began, and still continue, to record oral histories. Originally, we also met at the public library each week and scoured all the different East Bay city directories from year to year, beginning with the first available year. We found that city directories contain a wealth of information. We looked for Greek and Greek sounding names. We could count these names. But how could we tally the Greeks who had changed their surnames to Ellis, Thomas, Donovan, Andrews, Johnson, Peterson, and so on? While the city directories provided a starting point, we knew we could obtain a truer tally than the census of those times with further research.

Since 1989, in addition to the oral histories and the tallies, the Ascension Historical Committee has collected an impressive number of artifacts. These include the 1917 charter of the incorporation of the Hellenic Community of Oakland and Vicinity, the 1920 records of the ground breaking ceremonies of the first Greek Orthodox Church in the entire East Bay, the Church of the Assumption at 10th & Brush Streets in Oakland, and the 1921 records of the dedication of this church. We have also been able to obtain and save the original baptismal font as well as part of the iconostasis from the original church, containing signed and dated icons on canvas.

Let me concentrate for a moment on the original Brush Street Church building, as its story offers a lesson. The last Divine Liturgy was celebrated in that church in 1960, when the Brush Street church property was sold in favor of new property in the Oakland hills where our current church is located. With the selling, a litany began as people kept saying, "We SHOULD do something!" For sixteen years, from 1960 to 1976, the refrain continued, "We SHOULD do something." Then, in 1976, Senator Nicholas Petris of Oakland informed me that the old church building was scheduled for immediate demolition by the California Department of Transportation. I responded by meeting with the Director of the Department of Transportation, who greeted me with these words: "What took you people so long?"

The Director of the California Department of Transportation handed me the deed to the church, which I quickly refused. I could have left the office owning my own church! The responsibility appeared too formidable for me at that time. The meeting was our first. What

would I do with a building located in the site of a new freeway and slated for demolition, I asked myself at the time? Should I hold the deed on my own?

Time was of the essence. He told me that his office had earlier contacted one of our more prominent parishioners who had exclaimed, and I quote, "Who wants that old piece of junk?!" The huge and costly highway project, which would merge two new freeways, was nearly completed. The vacant, old church building sat directly in its path. The highway project could not be finished until the demolition or disposition of the church building was settled.

So, the Committee to Save the Brush Street Church was established and incorporated by just two people. We proved that the church building met the established criteria, and we had it registered as both a State and National Historical Landmark. We saved the church building from demolition. It was moved one city block away from its original site. Due to the state's conflict of interest guidelines however, our committee was not allowed to purchase the property, and it was sold to another denomination. The church building still stands as a place of Christian worship.

Imagine how much more we could have accomplished had we not spent those sixteen years saying WE SHOULD do something. Imagine how much we could have accomplished if we had DONE something during those years. At the very least, we could have acquired the building for ourselves, and today would have owned a vital piece of our history. We might even perhaps have used the building as a museum.

Now, let us return to the description of the archives of the Ascension Historical Committee. We also hold Greek school books, as well as dictionaries written in *katharevousa*, other books, out of print magazines, historical and contemporary photographs, military records dating from the Civil War and the Spanish American War, religious documents, legal documents, and immigration records, as well as play bills, scripts and programs, especially of Greek plays. We followed Salt Lake City's lead and have already filled two binders with obituaries from local newspapers. In doing so, we have come to appreciate the degree of information contained in those obituaries.

Each Wednesday morning, our committee has a workshop during which we are currently documenting and cataloguing every item in our archival collection. Our collections continue to grow, so much so that we are running out of space.

In our impressive collection of oral history interviews, an immigrant woman, for example, recalls her train journey across the country. Famished, she bought food from a vendor as everyone else on the train was doing. She was given a slice of meat in two pieces of bread. The meat was "raw" red. She threw it out of the window. Later, she learned to enjoy ham sandwiches.

In our collection, we have a description of the living and working conditions of the immigrants as described through the eyes of a sixteen-year-old boy who came to Oakland to join his brothers in 1906. We also have a heart-wrenching saga recalled through the eyes of a six-year-old girl when she, her family, and her Christian community were forcefully evicted

from their inland village in Turkey and forced to walk to the coast. She describes the brutality of the soldiers, the tragic deaths of her family members, and her own separation from her surviving relatives. When she entrusted this history to us during an interview, she was advanced in age. Telling it to us, she was following the age-old tradition of oral-history as she had repeated her story over and over again throughout her life, so that it would not be forgotten. We hope in the near future to publish these valuable histories from our collection.

The activities of the Ascension Historical Committee are many. We have presented successful public exhibits. We also have instituted several annual events such as:

- Founders Day, when we remember the founders of our community with a *mynmosynon* during the Divine Liturgy. We also have an *artoclasion* for our committee members. The West Oakland Altar Boys Association, all of them senior citizens now, put on the robes of acolytes to serve in the altar once again.
- March 25th Independence Day Run, when we organize a number of competitions for various ages and levels of ability.
- Veterans Commemoration Day, where the emotions felt by the attending veterans and their families are so tangible that everyone present is deeply affected

We have invited authors and historians as guest speakers to discuss their relevant works. Through one of these presentations, we learned about the history of Byron Hot Springs in northern California, which was dedicated in 1948 as the Greek Orthodox Mission of Saint Paul by His Eminence Archbishop Athenagoras. We also learned some of the reasons for its demise.

We have even organized a day trip to Salt Lake City, Utah, with twenty-seven participants, including our two priests, to tour the Hellenic Cultural Museum.

Cooperative Endeavors

We convened an inaugural symposium in 1998 at the Cathedral of the Ascension for the Preservation of our History, Past, Present, and Future. It was conceived and co-sponsored by the Ascension Historical Committee of Oakland, California, the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute of Berkeley, California, and the Hellenic Cultural Association of Salt Lake City, Utah. To our knowledge, this symposium was the first of its kind. It drew participants from Arizona, Colorado, Texas, Washington, and Utah, as well as from several cities in California. Following the event, news reports published in the Greek American press drew requests for information about the symposium from Illinois, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Missouri, as well as from London, England.

As a result of the inaugural symposium, we have together co-sponsored two more symposia, one in Phoenix, Arizona, 1999, the next in Stockton, California, 2001. Each was convened by enthusiasts in the respective community. The keynote speaker in each was Helen Papanikolas of Salt Lake City, a respected historian and author. Both of these symposia were highly successful. They resulted in the founding of preservation committees: the Arizona Greek Cultural History Project, and the Saint Basil Heritage Society of Stockton.

A key issue emerged during our symposia in Phoenix and Stockton: the necessity for us to facilitate a network of communication. At a special meeting that preceded the Stockton symposium in 2001, we made the decision to develop a website to promote our vision worldwide. The outcome of that momentous decision was the launching of our award winning website, **PAHH.com**. The acronym, PAHH, stands for the "Preservation of American Hellenic History". The website will enable us to establish dialogue with other preservation groups throughout the country, and keep us aware of one another's progress.

Our website, **PAHH.com**, was launched at the beginning of March 2002. The web-stats were analyzed on June 11, 2002. The site has received a total of 22,330 html requests, which include "robotic hits". From the total, we have modestly estimated about 10,000 real requests by human beings for our pages. This number has occurred since the launch, within merely 5 months!

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to leave you with these thoughts. As we discuss the preservation of our community histories, let us also recognize that we live in museums. Yes, our homes are live museums. They are museums of our daily lives, our furnishings, our clothing, and our habits. We ourselves are books. We are living books. We hold the memories of our childhoods, the memories of our parents and others who have gone before us, and the stories they have told us. Each and every story, each and every memory adds to our collective history. These are treasures. We must preserve these treasures.

We Greek Americans are justly proud of our success. Yet the truth remains: We are able to boast so glowingly of our accomplishments today because of the deprivations and struggles of those early pioneers who established our institutions for us. If we do not act, and act promptly, then they and their labors will be forgotten.