



Buffalo Tales



Volume 9, No. 2

Buffalo County Historical Society

February 1986

THE FIRST GREEKS IN KEARNEY - Part I

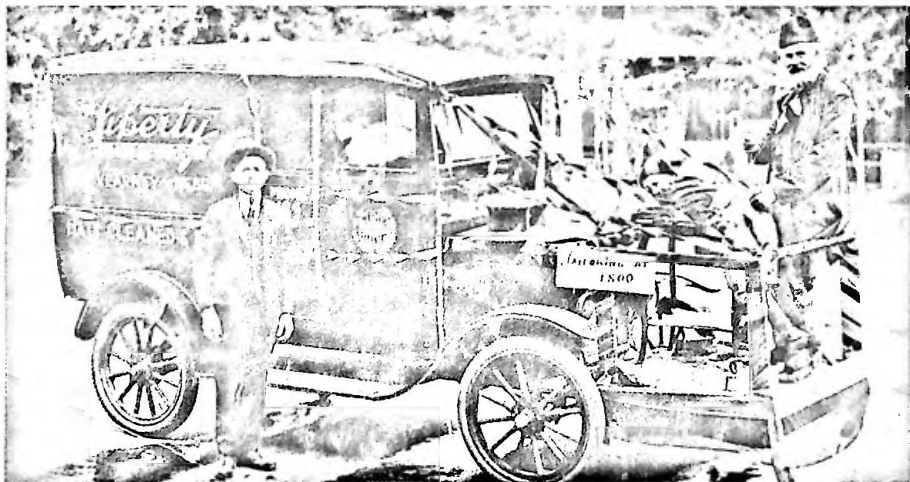
by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Many families that emigrated from Greece found their way to Nebraska in the early years of this century, and those who settled in Kearney, though not large in numbers, played an important role in the city's business, economic and cultural history.

In coming to a new land it was important to immigrants of all nationalities to seek a place where others from their native country had settled. This was true of the Greek families who made their homes in Kearney. In most cases, very young men and women, sometimes no more than children, would follow an uncle, a neighbor or an older brother because of the glowing reports that had come back to them that America was indeed a land of opportunity.

Kotsiopoulos

Peter Kotsiopoulos was probably the first of the Kearney Greeks to come to America. At the age of 14, with four other eighth grade graduates he left his native village of Goura, near Corinth, in 1898. However, he would not become a resident of Kearney for some twenty years. Upon arrival at the New York harbor Peter made the required stop for all immigrants at Ellis Island, and there was given a \$1.00 bill and some bread before "stepping off" onto the New York City entry. There he washed dishes and shined shoes until he saved enough to move further west. He worked in



Kearney 50th Anniversary Parade, 1923. Peter Kotsiopoulos I stands beside his first delivery truck, while a local tailor sews up a young man's "drawers."

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BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68847. It is sent to all members of the Society. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people.

Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Basic Membership	\$ 7.50
Institutional Membership	\$10.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

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Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director.

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WITH THE SOCIETY

Sunday, February 23. The Buffalo County Historical Society will meet at 2:00 p.m. in the community room of the First State Bank at Shelton. BARNs TELL A STORy, a history of Nebraska barns, will be presented by Larry and Lorna Epp of Aurora. Through photographs and stories the program will tell of interesting and unusual barns, including the 1733 barn, the historical Filley stone barn and the round barn near Newark.

BARNs TELL A STORy is a popular program in the state and is recommended for all age groups. Come and bring your friends.

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The last two issues of Buffalo Tales, Letters to Nellie, have raised the question of who was R. A. Moore. He apparently was the builder of the house at 20 West 27th Street, into which the Adairs moved in 1899. A search of the 1889 City Directory reveals that he was an attorney, in the law partnership of Moore & Jones. He is also listed in the 1892-93 directory. We have no further information about him and assume that he was among those who left the city after the Kearney "boom" period.

NEW MEMBERS

Mary F. Vavra	Amherst	Otto & Elma Lohrenz	Kearney
Blanche Leymaster	Broken Bow	Robert A. Munro	Kearney
Icel Northrup	Elm Creek	Mr. and Mrs. F. M. Parker	Kearney
Don Sullwoold	Elm Creek	Jeannette D. Sidner	Kearney
Mildred Marquis	Gibbon	John J. Smith	Kearney
Kenneth H. Wagner	Gibbon	Robert W. Sorensen	Kearney
Eva Y. Austin	Kearney	Opal Tollefsen	Kearney
Mr. & Mrs. Steele Becker	Kearney	Kenneth Whaley	Kearney
Terry Christensen	Kearney	Martin Maul	Riverdale
Dr. Phillip J. Cuba	Kearney	Blanche Klein	Shelton
LaMoyné & Jan Fern	Kearney	Mr. & Mrs. Everett Waddington ..	Shelton
Lucille Gilster	Kearney	Kay Horst	Woodland Hills, CA

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

Dr. & Mrs. Philip S. Holmgren ..	Kearney	Elizabeth Anderson	
Dorothy S. Wilson	Kearney	Uldall	Edinburgh, Scotland

St. Louis and Kansas City before finally reaching Omaha. As did many of the Greek immigrants, he worked for a short time on the railroad, then at the Panatorium, a large dry cleaning business in Omaha, a job that led to the trade he followed the rest of his life. From Omaha he went to Lincoln, and eventually set up his own dry cleaning business in York, Nebraska. Peter was drafted into the United States Army in World War I. Before leaving for the service he sold his dry cleaning plant and business in York.

When he returned from the war he came to Kearney and on August 1, 1919 opened a dry cleaning business, which is still in operation. His early stay on Ellis Island and the constant viewing of the Statue of Liberty inspired the name for his new business, Liberty Dry Cleaning Co. The business office was located at 2021 Central Avenue, and the dry cleaning plant at 17th Street and Central Avenue. A younger brother Constantine (Con) had also emigrated from Goura and was associated with Peter in the business. In 1921 the need for a larger plant led to a new location at 2013 Central Avenue where the business continued until November 1966 when a new plant and office was established at 802 West 25th Street. This is the present location of the Liberty Dry Cleaners and Shirt Launderers, along with a new branch location opened in 1985 at 525 East 25th Street.

Peter's wife, Antigone Kapota, was born in Tripoli, Greece. While visiting her sister, Athena Mitchell, in Kearney, she met and later married Peter in 1921. They had one son George, who, after Navy service in World War II, purchased the dry cleaning business in 1947. His wife is Paula Kyros, a native of Boston, also of Greek descent. They have two children. Their son, Peter II is vice-president and general manager of the business started by his grandfather in Kearney over 66 years ago. Their daughter, Dr. Antigone Kotsiopoulos-Culp, is a professor at Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

Constantine (Con) Kotsiopoulos was born August 6, 1899, and emigrated to America when he was fourteen, coming on the S. S. Lorraine which arrived in New York City on January 28, 1914. He joined his older brother Peter in York, Nebraska, then came to Kearney and was associated for many years with the Liberty Dry Cleaning business.

His wife Constantina (Nitsa) was from the Greek town of Megalopolis. They were the parents of two daughters, Mary and Helen.

In the early 1950's Con and Nitsa and their daughters moved to San Jose, California, where they started a dry cleaning business. Con Kotsiopoulos is now deceased but Nitsa and her daughters still live in the San Jose area. A granddaughter, Shannon Collins, is presently a senior at Kearney State College.

Peterson

In 1912 George Petropoulos, at age 17, emigrated to America from the village of Vahlia near Tripoli. From New York City he made his way, first to Milwaukee, and then to Lincoln, Nebraska, to join his older brother Nick who was working for the railroad. Because Nick's foreman had so much trouble spelling the Greek name, Nick changed it to Peterson (Petropoulos meaning Peter's son, and their father having been named Peter) and George also took the Americanized name.

Mr. Peterson worked at various jobs, on the railroad, in a fruit stand, and in restaurants. Language was a problem. He recalled when the boss of the fruit stand told



Wedding picture of George and Venetia Peterson
in Fremont, Nebraska, July 6, 1924.

him to get a couple of apples for a customer. Not knowing that "a couple" meant two, he brought out a full sack. He preferred restaurant work, and after several jobs in cafes and restaurants in Hastings, North Platte and Lexington, and for a short time in Iowa, he decided to open his own place of business in Kearney. He chose Kearney because there were several Greek families here. He was a young man and wanted to marry, and did not want to bring a Greek wife to a town where there were no other Greeks.

He bought a lot on Central Avenue and built a new building. In 1923 he opened the Central Cafe at 2021 Central Avenue, a business he operated for over 35 years. The Ku Klux Klan was at its height at that time and the day he opened they put up posters in downtown Kearney, "Why do you want to patronize the Greeks when there are American restaurants in Kearney!" Such tactics had no effect, however. The Central Cafe was a successful venture for Mr. Peterson. It became a well-known restaurant throughout the Kearney area, and was a popular spot at "coffee time" for many Central Avenue business people.

Venetia Papapavlou (Paul) came to America in 1920 from the Greek village of Niata near Sparta. She was seventeen years old. Her younger brother Peter and several cousins had come at the same time. Because she had an uncle in Fremont, she took the train from New York City to Nebraska to live with her uncle and aunt. With some suggesting and arranging by uncles and aunts on both sides of the family, George Peterson and Venetia Paul met in Fremont when he stopped there on a trip to Omaha. They were married on July 6, 1924, forty days after they first met.

Mrs. Peterson helped in the restaurant, as did their two sons, Peter and John, as

soon as they were old enough. Peter enjoyed being cashier and on one occasion, according to his mother and much to her embarrassment, he followed a customer out of the cafe and up the street when he failed to pay for his nickel cup of coffee. He was about nine years old at the time.

Mr. Peterson never forgot his native village. For a poor immigrant boy he felt he had done very well, so he shared his good fortune with family and friends in Vahlia. He bought homes for his sisters and brothers still living there and made improvements in their churches. His outstanding contribution, however, was financing the construction of a new waterworks for the village, for which he was honored by the naming of its main street as Petropulos Street. In recognition of Mr. Peterson's great service to his hometown, he was presented the First Class Gold Medal from King Paul, King of Greece, on June 23, 1963.

Mr. and Mrs. Peterson retired from the Central Cafe in 1959 and live in the family home in Kearney. Their son Peter has become one of the nation's foremost authorities in the field of economics, and served as Secretary of Commerce under President Nixon. He now lives in New York City. Their son John has been in real estate investment/development for many years, and now lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Bill Peterson, a younger brother of George, who emigrated to America from Vahlia, was also in the restaurant business in Kearney for several years. He operated the Tasty Tea Room at 2300 Central Avenue from the mid-1930's until 1947. He and his wife Helen, who is of Greek descent, now live in Grand Island.

Patsios

Dionios (Don) Patsios was one of the first of the Greek immigrants to settle in Kearney. In 1914 at the age of 16 he came to America on the S. S. LaLorraine to join his brother John who had emigrated two years previously and lived in York. He was from the small Greek village of Goura, near Corinth, and had been a classmate and neighbor of Con Kotsiopoulos.

Mr. Patsios spent one year in York with his brother. He came to Kearney on



Don Patsios beside a school bus, of which he was the driver.

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March 1, 1915 and has made his home in Kearney since that date, which makes him a 71-year resident of the city. He opened the Kearney Shine Parlor, Newsstand and Cigar Store at 2019 Central Avenue soon after his arrival and operated it for many years. It is interesting to note that the shine parlor he started has continuously been a shine parlor since then, although under other proprietors.

In 1925 Mr. Patsios started Don's Taxi and Rent-a-Car. He became a bus driver for the Kearney Public Schools in 1928, and drove a school bus for 29 years. During this time he also provided taxi service, and for one year held a franchise for DeSoto and Plymouth automobiles.

Mr. Patsios and his wife Elvia had five sons. Those still living are James and William, of Kearney, and Nicholas, of Las Vegas.

Kavadas

Tom Kavadas, born at Pam Lefkar, Greece, on February 3, 1888, came to America in August of 1912. He apparently came to Kearney within the next two years, and was the first Greek to settle in the city. He is listed in the Kearney City Directory of 1915-16 as a bootblack, and the following year as the operator of a shine parlor, newsstand and cigar store at 2215 Central Avenue.

One of Kearney's downtown business buildings was known as the Kavadas Building. The address was 15-19 West 22nd Street. From 1920 to 1958 Mr. Kavadas conducted various businesses in this building. He first operated a billiard parlor, then a grocery store and confectionery shop for several years, and after that a restaurant known as the White Star Cafe. On the second floor were the Kavadas Apartments. This building has since been razed.

Mr. Kavadas returned to Greece and brought back a bride from his native village. They made their home in Kearney until the early 1960's when they moved to California. Tom and Anita Kavadas were the parents of two sons, Samuel and Nicholas.

SOURCES

Interviews with George and Peter Kotsiopoulos, January 22, 1986; George and Venetia Peterson, February 1982; Don Patsios, January 15, 1986. *Kearney Daily Hub*, July 31, 1919; June 23, 1963. Buffalo County Naturalization Index; County Superintendent records. Kearney City Directories, 1915-1970.