

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Culture Project

Greek Impact on Campbell

O. H. 648

MARY REYES

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

December 4, 1980

MARY C. REYES

Mary Reyes was born on September 13, 1928, the daughter of Mike G. Corfias and Irene Spirtos, in Campbell, Ohio. The Reyes' have lived in Campbell for approximately 52 years. Mary attended Gordon Elementary School. She graduated from Campbell Memorial High School and proceeded to further her education by attending Youngstown State University, graduating from that institution with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1956.

Mrs. Reyes is currently teaching at Gordon Elementary School in Campbell, where she specializes in English. Mrs. Reyes is actively involved in and genuinely concerned with the Greek community in Campbell. She is a member of the Archangel Michael Greek Orthodox Church and enjoys reading, art and traveling as her hobbies.

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INTERVIEWEE: MARY REYES

INTERVIEWER: Wilfredo Rivera

SUBJECT: Kalymnians, name days, cohesiveness, dowry,
extended family

DATE: December 4, 1980

RI: This is an interview with Mary Reyes for the Youngstown State University Greek Impact on Campbell Project, by Wilfredo Rivera, at 3477 Porter Avenue, Campbell, Ohio, on December 4, 1980, at approximately 7:30 p.m.

Mrs. Reyes, can you tell me something about your background starting with your childhood and working up to your present status?

RE: I was born at 22 Gordon Avenue in Campbell on September 13, 1928. My mom had just come over from Greece the year before. My dad had gone over and married her in 1920. He came here in 1908. He didn't come to Campbell directly. He went with the Greeks to Tarpon Springs, Florida, I think. He hated it, didn't like it. When he was in Greece he worked in the shipbuilding yard in Kalymnos. The main industry on the island was sponges and sponge diving. He worked in the shipyards and made boats. When he moved from Tarpon he worked a little bit in Augusta, Georgia in the shipyards there. Most of his friends that he had come over with had gone to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and that is where he went to stay for a number of years. He worked at the Quaker Oats Factory there. Again, I suppose with the rest of the Greeks that were there, he made a move to Campbell because there were more jobs and more Greeks here, I think. He stayed here in Campbell the rest of his life then. Until about 1949, when he had this urge to go back to Greece because he retired, his dream was to go back to Kalymnos. He went there in 1949 and stayed until 1951 or 1952. Then he decided he was more of an American than a Greek; he had been there so many years. All his friends were old. The dreams and aspirations he had about going to Greece

weren't there anymore. The kids that he knew as youngsters were already grown, married, old. He didn't know anyone. He wasn't used to their customs anymore. The only thing he wanted to do was to come back to America. When he came back to America he was really happy. He had the customs. We had to speak Greek. We were Greek 100%, but I guess he liked it here better. He worked from 1908 until 1920. In 1920 I guess he decided he was ready for marriage so he went down to Greece. He saw my mother and he liked her and they fixed it up. My mother, to this day, tells the story about how all these other guys wanted her because she was real pretty. Somehow I guess it was her luck to marry my dad. I guess she didn't go wrong because they had a very good life together. My father was a devoted husband. He was not a Greek like the other Greeks that go to the coffeehouses. He was a homebody. I suppose you might say he worshiped the ground she walked on. He did everything for her; he helped her in the house and worked in the mill. He never took off any time. He was just a very good person.

RI: In regards to education, did your family emphasize education to you while you were growing up?

RE: It was very important that I got good grades, but by the same token they were warped in their way of thinking. Grades and behavior we had to be angels in; we had to get good grades and we had to be good. To my mother the big deal was to graduate from business school and be a secretary. That was a good thing. If you had a job and your own money she thought this was a good thing. She never really pushed me for the kind of grades I had and for the mental ability that I had because I look back afterwards on the tests that I took and I saw that I had an IQ where I could have made it into something better. She never pushed me in any direction like that.

I went to Gordon School from the first to the fourth grade. Then they closed Gordon and we had to go to Penhale. I went to Penhale from fourth to eighth and then to Memorial. When I graduated from Memorial I went to Youngstown Business College. It was a very small school. I took business courses and that was about it. Education was absolutely important, but my mother didn't think to tell me to be anything other than a secretary. That was what she had in her mind and that was where I was pushed. She sent me to summer school every summer. I was skipped a grade. I graduated when I was only fifteen years old and nine months, which was way too young to know anything about anything, about what you're doing, and what you think of the future. I graduated in that June and the following September I became sixteen. I was going to college during the evening and during the day

I worked at Youngstown Sheet & Tube in the offices for a while. Then I worked at the city hall in Campbell for about four years.

RI: Mrs. Reyes, in regard to the other Greek families at that specific time, did they emphasize education more so than your parents? Did they stress finding a job more?

RE: That wasn't really what she had in her mind either. She thought this was a good thing, not necessarily only to make a living. She thought this was the kind of an education. I think all the Greeks want their children to be something. If you were a boy they thought of one thing, for you to become a doctor. At that time I think even more important than becoming a doctor was to become a teacher. A teacher was very well-respected in the business world. Some became doctors, but I think everybody had in mind that their children should have some education.

They were very close-knit. The house was never empty. We always had people over. People stuck together. They were very clannish.

My father did learn to read the newspaper by himself. It was important for him to read the newspaper every day from one end to the other. He did learn to read, write, and speak. My mother has been in this country 53 years and she still can't speak the language.

RI: Can you touch on some specific customs that are practiced among the Greek people?

RE: Religion, fasting for the children, the children speaking Greek in the house, the children going to Greek school, if it is all possible, marrying a Greek. I think in that case they've mellowed. I still think they want the spouse to go along with your religion. The religion is very important above all. Superstitions are another custom. They are highly superstitious people. Whatever they believe in Greece they carried over. If you buy something new you're supposed to sprinkle in with holy water. At Easter time you know about the lambs. Everybody has to buy a lamb because it has something to do with the Bible and the sacrificial lamb. On a lot of the houses you see a cross on the outside. That has something to do with the Bible where they marked the houses with crosses. They carry those customs over. In Greece, for remembrance of the resurrection, they have all these fireworks. They rejoice for the resurrection of Jesus. They still do that here. I don't think they've gone away from hardly anything. Within the last twenty years they've broken away from the custom that when someone died they would

take them to a hall and stay all night with the dead. Now they just have calling hours like everybody else. They would wear black the rest of their lives if a child or husband died. If it was their parents that died they would wear black for a year, and wouldn't go anywhere. A lot of them still follow that. Mostly everything has to do with religion. On certain days they cook a certain kind of a wheat after a death and people come together and spice it up with sugar and things and make the sign of the cross on it and go to church and have a memorial service. Then it is distributed out to the people. Those customs they have still continued. When I was a kid and it was All Soul's Day my mom would make those Greek doughnuts and I had to take them to all those Greek houses on the street. We would have to say that this was for our dead. Sometimes on this day we would cook macaroni with butter and we would take that to the houses. Some of them still do that.

RI: Can you elaborate on the custom of the dowry?

RE: It doesn't apply to the Greeks in Campbell, but it sure applies to the Greeks in Greece yet. My father and his brothers--I think they had five sisters--had to build a house for each one of those sisters. They came to America and they still sent money to help finish whatever they needed so that they would get married. When a girl got married she had to have a house and a dowry. Her dowry was all her linens and all the things that she needed in the house. Of course, the more you had . . . If you came from a wealthy family the more things you had for your dowry, the better chance you had of getting someone that had an education. You went according to what you were looking for. If you had enough of a dowry you could marry a lawyer, a doctor. If not, you could marry someone from a good family. You went up or down the scale according to what kind of family you came from and the kind of a dowry that you had. My dad had to build a house for all his sisters. He had nothing; he didn't have a house. The boys didn't have anything; they gave it to their sisters. When they got married, then he got my mom's house. My mom had to have a dowry and she had a house in Kalymnos and it went to my dad.

RI: Would you say that since the dowry doesn't exist in Campbell anymore the concept of prearranged marriages does exist among the Greek people?

RE: Definitely. The purpose of this is to make sure that you marry someone that they know, that they know their family. If your mom and I were friends and we had children we would try to get them together because you know each other's

background.

RI: Are the Greek people in Campbell still holding this bias toward other ethnic identities in marrying at the present time?

RE: I think that they've mellowed. I'm familiar with a person whose daughter is not going with a Greek. The mother is very much against it, where at the beginning she wasn't against it. I think his attitude . . . not coming in with the Greeks, not coming in and being part of our ways, she is definitely against the marriage. I think if a person is marrying a Greek is a non-Greek and is civil and above comes with our religion they don't hold it as much against them. I think they've mellowed with age. There are so many intermarriages. Yet get a Greek to marry anybody and turn Catholic, forget it. They are bias there. Their religion is their most important thing. Everything sort of centers around that.

RI: What are your views about religion overall?

RE: They are the same.

RI: What is so special about your religion? Why does their religion keep the Greek people together so much?

RE: George Gallop, who has the Gallop Polls, studied our religion and made his findings and published them in the Orthodox Observer. He found it amazing because he didn't know exactly what it was, but he said that all the Greeks and their children have this religion imbedded in them. It might be tradition, I don't know. Somehow it is imbedded in them from when they are small. They could go away and live their own ways, but somehow they stick together from their religion. I would say it was from religion. He could not get over compared to the other religions how tight the Orthodox religion was. The only problem that he found was that a lot of the kids are not understanding the language of the church. In our church Father Pappas says some things in Greek, other things in English. He stresses youth. That church is packed. He has certain pews reserved for the kids.

RI: When you first married Victor . . .

RE: They killed me. They beat me and I had to be taken to the doctor.

RI: Your family?

RE: Yes.

RI: How did the Greek people in the community react to you marrying Victor?

RE: I think that they reacted to me in a very decent way because I was a teacher. If he hadn't been in our church, forget it. They saw that we lived well. You can't say that it wasn't looked down upon, but I think I got away with it because I was a teacher; that's the only reason.

RI: Mrs. Reyes, how does the church react to something of this matter? Do they have a voice at all? Is the church totally against interracial marriages?

RE: No. We're all God's children. What they say and what they believe are two different things, but the church can say whatever they say. If I married somebody black, you can forget it, church or no church.

RI: What other special services are rendered by the church besides the Greek school that make the community aware of what is going on, keeps the culture cohesive?

RE: The Sunday school has started a GOYA group, which is for the Greek youth. Then they have a JOY group which is for the younger Greek group. The only thing I can tell you is that everything seems to be smoothed over if the person a Greek marries goes our way with religion and with our customs. If he goes the other way you can forget it; you would have trouble.

RI: Can you tell me something about the significant value behind the Greek dance? I understand there is an underlying reason why they dance in a certain way?

RE: The Jews and a lot of the European nations once upon a time danced in circles. They had the polkas and the other things which we didn't have. I don't really know the significance.

RI: I understand the Greek line dance represents a specific part of Greece.

RE: Some Greeks have slow, easy, simple dances. People that are from Northern Greece have another kind of dance. I don't really know how we picked that up.

RI: What do you think was the motivating force that brought the Greeks from Greece to Campbell?

RE: I think at that time everybody thought that America was the place to be because Kalymnos was a very, very small place. The only living that you could make was to be a

sponge diver. I think mostly they came here for a better living, more money. Their dream was to come here, make a lot of money, go back to make their life better there, which didn't work out that way. The idea was for them to come here and work.

RI: Work where?

RE: In the mills or anywhere to make more money so that they could send down the dowries. Generally their dream was to go back.

RI: Why did most of the Greeks coming over have a tendency to jump into these painting companies or construction?

RE: What else were they going to do? They didn't speak English. Jobs were tight in the mill. They didn't have enough capital to open up a business of their own right away. Painting seemed like a great thing, \$100 or \$150 a day. I don't know if it is a challenge but this is what almost all of them end up doing. The Greeks that have a little bit of an education and money in Greece don't come here.

RI: I understand that of all the different groups that came over from Greece that the Kalymnians are the most dominant in Campbell. Is there a reason for this?

RE: They're dominant because they are the majority. There are only a few of all the other kind of Greeks. It is imbedded into Greek children to stay near their family. A lot of other kids of other nationalities get married and move elsewhere. The Greeks sort of stuck around; I think that is why they've multiplied.

RI: Can you tell me how the present crisis of layoffs at Youngstown Sheet & Tube and Campbell Works has affected the Greek community in Campbell?

RE: I don't think it has affected them a great deal. I think a lot of them were laid off but they seem to be getting along. A few of them have thought about moving elsewhere.

RI: What effect has it had towards the church?

RE: I don't think it really affected the church. Every time we go to church we're as crowded as ever. There are still Greeks coming in from Greece. They're talking about expanding the church and all. I don't think it has had that much of an impact yet because a lot of them are still receiving their benefits. I think a lot of the Greeks were in that age bracket where they could retire or where they could take the pension. The younger kids

are mostly all educated so they had other kinds of work to do.

RI: What were the years from 1970 through 1980 like for you and your people in Campbell? Were they progressive years?

RE: Definitely. I think they were good years. I would say late 1960's and 1970 is when things were becoming. People were buying the nicer houses in Campbell.

RI: Can you tell me something that has happened in your own life that has changed your own outlook about the Greek culture?

RE: Not really. The only thing that has changed my outlook is that is has changed for the better. That only comes with age. When you're young you are ashamed of what you are. We have a good culture and we live as good as anybody else.

RI: Are there any other social factors that we haven't touched on that might bring in some more insight about the Greek culture?

RE: Basically everything stems from the home.

RI: In regards for the future, what does the future have in store for the American-Greeks in Campbell?

RE: I think the Greek community will still be a Greek community, but in order for it to stay as strong as it is right now they have to clamp down on their kids and on their religion. It won't be as tight among the second generation Greeks as it is with the first.

RI: What you're telling me is that you see the Greek culture deteriorating through generations that are to come.

Thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW