

Anna Flesor Beck. *Sweet Greeks: First-generation Immigrant Confectioners in the Heartland. Champagne, Il: Illinois University Press. 2020.*

Reviewed by Penelope Karageorge

Beware, reader, of opening Ann Flesor Beck's new book, *Sweet Greeks, First-Generation Confectioners in the Heartland*. Her work, scholarship tempered by love, tells the story of Greeks coming to America to plant their confectioneries on the main streets of small-town USA. These enterprises made a difference in the social and culinary landscape of America. But Beck's book is dangerous. Like Proust's famous madeleine, whose taste plunged him into memory and writing *Swann's Way*, *Sweet Greeks* can set off reminiscences that cause the reader to trip down memory lane.

I found myself recalling high school years when I worked for my father Stephen Karageorge, proprietor of "Steve's Ice Cream" in Newburgh, New York (pop. 28,255). The soda fountain, in Clark's Pharmacy on Broadway, Newburgh's main street, was located directly across from the Ritz Movie Theater. Actress Dorothy Lamour once stopped in for a soda, my dad told me. (Stars often tested their acts in Newburgh before a New York show at the Roxy theater.) This was the real deal, a soda fountain/ drugstore with circular fans overhead, marble-top tables, cane chairs, and the heady, mingled aromas of drugs, vanilla, and perfume.

My dad approached making "Steve's Ice Cream" like an artist. Not even Leonardo Da Vinci could have given more attention to mixing his colors than my father did to developing his ice-cream flavors, with real strawberries, genuine lemons, and brewed coffee rather than artificial flavors. He won fame and loyal customers for his delicious ice cream with high butter-fat content, the mark of superior ice cream.

You could work your way from the top of Broadway where the Commodore Chocolatier, the Striphas art deco confectionary prevailed, all the way down to Water Street and the Foundas lunch room with its mahogany booths, with stops along the way

at the Moustakis Candy Kitchen and the Stephanou Crystal Palace. With the exception of the Commodore, these sweets palaces have vanished.

Before writing *Sweet Greeks*, author Beck, a third generation Greek-American confectioner and independent scholar, with her sister, Devon Flesor Story, restored her grandfather's emporium, Flesor's Candy Kitchen in Tuscola, Illinois. She dedicates her book to Constantine "Gus" Flesor. Married to historian Roger B. Beck, and an independent scholar, she writes: "My family always referred to Grandfather's business as 'the store' and we still do today. While not always a term of reverence (especially after a long day and perhaps a night of making candy), the moniker is the symbol of the visceral smells of chocolate, popcorn, sweet syrup and tobacco and of remembrances of family members coming and going. I believe most of these first-generation Greeks took great pride in their stores. These buildings, those sacred places to the first-generation Greeks, generally became icons of success not only for the immigrants but also for many of the small towns where they were located."

Beck's book offers a journey back to the establishment and development of Greek confectioneries particularly in small towns in the Midwest, tracing how and why Greeks settled on this particular kind of enterprise. Beck has done an in-depth job of researching this hitherto almost ignored aspect of Greek Americana. More than one-hundred pages are devoted to notes, footnotes, a bibliography, and an index. She also provides wonderful photographs of proud proprietors posed in their confectioneries, showing them in all their glory of tiled floors, marble-topped soda fountains, and delectable candy.

Greeks had a strong sense of *philotimo*, or self-esteem and preferred to be independent. Although they frequently worked at other demanding jobs, their goal was usually to save and establish a business. Networking was an important aspect of the Greek confectionery business. A young man could arrive in Ellis Island fresh from the *horio* with a note in his pocket to go to a fellow Greek in St. Louis, for instance. There he would learn English and apprentice in the confectionery trade. After he learned the business and accumulated enough capital, an individual could set out to start his own enterprise. Having all family members work in the restaurant or confectionery also contributed to cost savings, as did leasing space until enough funds were saved to purchase property.

According to Beck, Greeks found the perfect niche in the confectionery trade at just the right time, when the largest number of immigrants were arriving from Greece. From 1900 to 1915 almost one in four Greek males between the ages of 15 and 45 immigrated to America. They arrived and stayed in large urban areas, but they also journeyed west to work in the railroads, in the mines, on ranches and farms where they earned the money to open their establishments.

Candy had once been a luxury item, but in May 1895, a leading manufacturer ballyhooed the "new age of candy". By 1910, indulging in candy had become one of America's leisure time activities. The *New York Times* proclaimed that Americans ate more candy than all the world combined, an estimated \$500,000,000's worth in 1910. Chicago became the "Acropolis of the Greek-American candy business" with practically every corner occupied by a Greek candy store.

While enterprising Greek-Americans established their sweets emporiums, they often faced a backlash against foreigners, the anti-hyphen movement. In a fascinating chapter, "Greeks vs. Goblins," Beck probes the prejudice that Greeks faced. "The backlash against 'foreigners' that had been building during the war years (World War I) erupted into openly ugly and vicious attacks in urban centers and small-town America in the early 1920s. 'Nativist' Americans accused Greeks of being un-American because they established Greek schools, sent great amounts of money back to their homelands, read Greek newspapers in their coffee houses, became involved in labor strikes and did not immediately forget their language and customs."

Anti-immigrant "100 percent Americanism" campaigns were encouraged by America's leaders including Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, with the Klu Klux Klan playing a major role against anyone not of "old stock" and Protestant. Beck examines the "second era" Klan that flourished in the Midwest and Illinois in particular. This "new" Klan attacked Greek confectioners. The Klan did not parade in white robes and wave torches, but reveled in its "ordinariness." The secret order represented a local cross section of white Protestant society. Klan members marched in public without masks, took pride in Klan music including recordings such as "Why I am A Klansman" or "Uncle Sammy's Melting Pot." Part of the attraction was a social aspect to Klan life that gave a chance for members living in small towns to come together, to feel like part of an important larger movement. The Klan held enormous rallies, including a gathering in Kokomo, Indiana that brought together fifty thousand people for everything from a parade to a beautiful baby competition. White Protestant women joined to put on church suppers and social celebrations. Appearing innocuous on the surface, this Klan promoted and spread Klan bigotry.

According to Beck, "greasy spoon Greeks" were often attacked, and studies showed that many Greek restaurants and confectioneries were forced to close because of boycotts instigated by the Klan. Klan speeches and literature targeted Greeks, calling for them to "be sent back to where they came from so that white supremacy and the purity of Americans could be preserved." At a St. Louis rally, the Rev. James Dunleavy, a KKK organizer, proclaimed that "white women were not safe working in Greek candy kitchens."

A common accusation made about Greeks was that they were involved in white slavery, conducted through their restaurants and candy kitchens. Klan brutalization was particularly evident in the South. Young Greek men were taken on lynching parties. Although none were hanged, they were roughed up and told to leave town. Another favorite Klan warning was that a Greek was not to be seen with a "white girl." An intriguing aside: when young Greek-Americans enlisted to serve during World War I, their nationality was designated as "Oriental."

As attacks by the Klan accelerated, Greek leaders responded by forming the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (or Order of the AHEPA) on July 26, 1922. Their founding meeting was held in Atlanta, home of the national Imperial Headquarters of the Klan. A critical figure in AHEPA was George Poulos, employed by the Klan, a Greek-American "double agent" who had advanced knowledge of plots and plans of the Klan. Poulos and other AHEPA leaders framed a response to the wave of hostility by creating a fraternal order espousing "undivided loyalty to the United States, American citizenship, proficiency in English, active participation in the civic mainstream, economic stability, social unity and the pursuit of education." AHEPA, an important and dynamic organization, remains active and vital today.

Beck's grandfather and his Candy Kitchen had a personal experience with the Klan, which held rallies through the summer of 1923, including a large one in Tuscola. A fiery cross blazed and speaker Jack Masters delivered "a most seething denunciation of foreigners and especially the Greeks." The local newspaper came to Flesor's support, and he ran a large ad for the Candy Kitchen's remodeling and an open house celebration. The ad provoked the Klan to erect and burn a cross near the Candy Kitchen, but the opening went on as planned.

Beck goes on to give the background and history of famous Greek confectioneries such as Vriners in Chicago. Vriner's customers included notorious gangster Al Capone, who was partial to their chocolate marshmallow sundaes, and would frequently eat three at a sitting. Another loyal customer was Roger Ebert, the film critic who worked for the News-Gazette and recalled how "the paper was put to bed every day at noon, and the city room cleared out for Vriners across the street."

Greek confectioneries formed a big part of the social life of America, at a time when a Saturday night entertainment could consist of a movie, a walk on the main street, and stopping for an ice cream or sweet. Beck remembers that on Saturday nights her grandfather would roll the combination popcorn popper and peanut roaster out on the sidewalk and "dispense goodness in a bag for a nickel."

“Soda fountains are reminders of small-town meeting spots across the nation and the Greek confectioneries in particular became, as Sinclair Lewis recalled in his classic tale of middle America, iconic symbols of Main Streets in America, where teenagers gathered ‘at the counter of the Greek Confectionary Parlor.’ ”

Beck does a remarkable job of documenting the Greek confectioneries of the Midwest. The names alone stir nostalgia and provide their own kind of poetry: Papadakos Confectionary and Soda Fountain; Candyland; Olympia Palace of Sweets; Queen Bee Candy Kitchen; Deluxe Candy Kitchen; Acme Candy Kitchen; Olympian Ice Cream Parlor; The Royal Confectionary; Sugar Bowl; The Candy Shop.

Unfortunately, most of these delightful sweet’s palaces have disappeared. Greek-American upward mobility inspired a new generation to hang up their aprons and achieve success in a variety of professions. Downtowns lost viability as malls and big box stores took over. With the explosion in car ownership, “Main Street with its soda fountains and Mom-and-Pop stores was left behind as America headed to the highway.”

Beck hopes that her book will help inspire further study of Greek entrepreneurial pursuits. Her book overflows with fascinating lore, including tracing the wider networks of support and training between and among first generation Greek immigrants. The book contains so much which is familiar, and somehow taken for granted, but is documented here for the first time. How the entire family worked at “the store” – a byword for so many of us Greek-Americans. When we went to visit relatives, the first stop was “the house” and then “the store.”

This wonderful book is a valuable and delightful exploration of a unique Greek-American institution. The Italians gave America pizza, Jews the knish, but was anything ever more delicious than Greek sweets.

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