

GEORGEPOULOS--SLAMA

Probably traveling to a promised job with a Rock Island Railroad provided ticket to Omaha, Evangelos (Joe) Georges left his unnamed remote village in the prefecture of Messinia, Greece some small distance from of Kalamata as a very young man. He reached Omaha for the first time in 1919 via Ellis Island. But he temporarily abandoned the Railroad, re-crossed the Atlantic and most of the Mediterranean Sea to fight for Greece in its Army. With fighting over, and with experience gained from American living and working, he evidently convinced his younger brother, James, to return to Omaha with him after Joe's service in the Greek Army.

A rather handsome, tallish, man of strong and sinewy physique, Joe again took up work with the Rock Island Railroad on his return and got employment for his brother also. The location of Joe's place of employment was serendipitous since it was across the street from a residence in the Bohemian section of South Omaha which was the home of the Slama family. Elizabeth Slama, while still at a very young age, had been removed from a nunnery by her Catholic parents to care for the family. Judging from her later accomplishments alone, she must have been an able student. How this functionally illiterate man and comparatively accomplished young woman met and how the courtship began and flowered into a love story is lost to history but physical attraction on the part of each is certain considering the photographs of the pair.

Joe was ambitious to become a section foreman but the job entailed detailed written reports. With no previous academic training and being in a hurry, he would have shortly deduced that formal schooling at this point would be time-costly. Arranged marriages were the nearly mandated standard for young Greek immigrant men in America because they could not travel to woo in Greece since they might be inducted into the Greek Army and because they needed to continue their employment in American with which to support a bride. A Greek bride could not be helpful to Joe. Elizabeth, on the other hand, must soon have convinced him of her ability to conform to any Rock Island requirement for record keeping. Yet, he had to learn enough English to transfer daily section gang data. Rather than become proficient in English, Joe required Elizabeth to learn the Greek language. She did. Elizabeth was to become Joe's friend, confidante, wife, secretary,

translator, and partner as well as a fluent Greek speaker, church choir director, Orthodox Christian, and lay leader at “St. John Greek Orthodox Church” where she and Joe were married in 1923. A photo of Elizabeth in the driver’s seat of an enormous, suicide-doored, four door, open phaeton sedan can be seen appended along with a photo of her and her sister in law, Spiridoula Georges, seen on the right in the photograph. Joe became that foreman on the Rock Island Railroad and did his job ably because he was a leader of men and understood goal accomplishment methods. Joe continued to sign his name with his mark (“X”). Elizabeth became so fluid in her Greek speaking skills that second generation Greek children (and some young children brought from Greece by the first generation) in the early forties who were junior choir members under Mrs. Georges would marvel that she was the only Greek mother who spoke such perfectly unaccented English. Only later would these students learn that the organ playing choir director’s Greek was flawless and unaccented instead.

As the name of his home village has not been unearthed, neither has the church name or religious environment within which Joe grew up been recorded. Only his small village and small church could have nurtured his early years. Whatever influences his family, village and church had on his character, Joe Georges became immersed and completely influential in St. John’s ecclesial and political life. He and Elizabeth became sponsors at many baptisms at St. John’s. He was the church president from 1927 through 1931, that is from the end of the affluent free-spending twenties through the first years of the world economic depression period. He took up the gavel again in 1940. As has been noted in the general St. John’s centennial history, Omaha Greeks had to choose between political followers of Venizelos or King Constantine and then had further to choose between archbishops claiming authority from Athens or Constantinople. Joe chose the King, the Forerunner, and Vasilios I, the self-anointed Archbishop of the United States and Canada. The moneyed Omaha Greek men chose Venizelos and established Holy Trinity. Immediately after working all day on the tracks, Joe would convene his board of directors for a church meeting sometimes to interview a priest. Before Father Tsaousis was hired, marauding priests from Greece would seek to lead churches already established throughout the United States. An anecdote regarding a St. John’s such interview process is also found in the general centennial history. Elizabeth related many years later that Joe had returned home in the wee hours of the morning with his board of directors after a marathon church

meeting and ordered her to kill, bleed, pluck, clean and cook chickens they raised to feed the ravenous men. A leader of men in those days demonstrated to his followers his patriarchal entitlements at home by having his demands immediately and smilingly satisfied.

Also appended is a photo of Joe Georges (the name Georgeopoulos was shortened to Georges at the instance of James Georges when the longer name became the subject of scornful remarks) on the left in the photo sandwiching the priest, Rev. Elias Tsaousis, with Joe's brother James (the tallest man on the far right in the photograph). They are shown on the South side of the house on the corner lot of 27th and Drexel Streets, in South Omaha, which was the first and only home of Joe and Elizabeth until their separate deaths and the address from which they reared their only son, Louis Georges, who continues to be a member of St. John's. Father Tsaousis served St. John's from 1928 until 1931 and again in 1940 to 1942. Only the priest is shown with a continuous skin tone in the referenced photograph. The two Georges brothers display "farmer foreheads". Men constantly working outside wore hats against the sun which produced a white band from the hairline to the eyebrows and a deep tan below the eyelids.

Father Tsaousis and Joe Georges became as mighty a priest-president duo as has ever served St. John's. Their personalities were complementary and they had great respect for each other. As has been recognized before and since, such a combination produces results. Joe's hale and hearty appearance, his strenuous physical railroad labor and discharge of his harrowing church responsibilities, belied a defect: heart disease (which would many years later also strike down a grandson also named Joe at a young age). In 1942 while serving as President of St. John's, Joe's heart gave out and he died at age 46. His great, good friend Rev. Elias Tsaousis was deeply saddened. From this sadness or from some other cause, the priest, too, succumbed to the same fate on the same day while praying over the body of his dead friend. A joint funeral service followed and the eyes of the congregation ran with tears.

Elizabeth continued employment and some years later the widow married another Greek, Tom Crutis.