

PAYNE (PAPADOPOULOS) - HOFFMAN

At five feet nine inches, Nicholas Papadopoulos was taller than most of his contemporaries in American society in the early 1900s and he towered, both in elevation and cultivation, over most of Greek immigrants of the time. Spiro Papadopoulos, his father, had been born in Kalavrita a village a few kilometers to the South of Aigion but Spiro moved to Aigion upon his marriage to “socially prominent” Georgia Michalopoulos. The latter brought with her a sixty acre orchard of olive and fruit trees and a sense of propriety and discretion which Nicholas would emulate for the remainder of his ninety some years on earth. Nicholas was born December 19, 1894 in Aigion and was educated there. By the time he reached maturity, the first Balkan War was about to erupt. Commonly families were sending sons to America because of economic or conscription reasons. So Nicholas was sent to America by his parents and was met by his cousin and future business partner, Fred Schizas on May, 10, 1910 who was working on a fruit cart in the Boston area. Both Nicholas and Fred worked in the candy business in Boston.

In a history prepared years later by Clara Hoffman Payne, Nicholas is said to have written to his uncle John Birbilis of Lincoln, Nebraska about learning a trade. The Birbilis Lincoln establishment was a beautiful confectionary named “Paris Confectionary”. Moving to Lincoln, Mr. Payne learned to make fancy ice cream, dipped chocolate treats, red and white candy canes and other kinds of candy including taffy which was prepared using a large hook to anchor the taffy pulling. Peter Papadopoulos followed his brother to Lincoln and they worked together until 1916 when Mr. Birbilis went with the brothers to Council Bluffs, Iowa to look over a candy store for sale there. With a Birbilis loan they opened the “Palace of Sweets” a typically glass and bronze show cased, octagonal floor tiled, extensively mirrored, candy and restaurant operation with mahogany millwork. It prospered. It was located at a major transfer stop of the new Omaha and Council Bluffs, Street Railway Company. All riders going for entertainment to Lake Manawa, a nice resort, or to downtown Council Bluffs would have to descend the street car in front of the store. A banker told Nicholas that Papadopoulos was too long and suggested the surname Payne.

Clara Hoffman was born to a German Nebraska family and met Nicholas in

Lincoln where they were married and where George Payne was born. The Paynes moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa from Lincoln when a suitable apartment was found. All survived the 1918 flu pandemic from which so many millions died even though they each had a mild case. When Fred Schizas married Helen Katsuras of South Omaha, the couple moved in with the Paynes. Clara's brother lived with them at other locations also. Pearl Payne Clawson was born in Council Bluffs in 1921.

The large Calumet Café in Omaha had been established in 1893 by Tolf Hanson and was a twenty four hour a day, every day of the year operation in Omaha, Nebraska which had served up to three thousand customers (mostly railroad passengers) daily. After Mr. Hanson sold to partners and opened a disastrously fancy restaurant elsewhere, both the Calument and Hanson's Café Beautiful fell on hard times and closed. Cedar Rapids cousins and the Thomas brothers persuaded Nick Payne and Fred Schizas to join with them in buying the defunct Calumet. They did and renamed it "The Virginia Café." It was the biggest and busiest restaurant in town and the first to have air conditioning. The 26 year lease called for \$800 per month rent and for a security deposit of \$19,200 in 1920 which was faithfully paid by the lessees Constantine Androutsos, N.S. Payne, Fred Schizas, Peter Psaros and John Thomas. Eventually Peter, John and Fred were bought out by Mr. Payne who bought the building in 1964 from the widow of the owner and her second husband. The Palace of Sweets operated for eighteen years, simultaneously with The Virginia for many years, until the building was taken by a bank for its own use. The Virginia became the largest restaurant West of Chicago and served three thousand patrons each day. Mr. Payne personally selected fruits and vegetables from the Omaha market early each morning.

When Fred Schizas left to open The Boston Grill, Mrs. Payne started working at The Virginia as bookkeeper (she was good at arithmetic), cashier, payroll clerk, and part time manager. During the 1936 violent street car strike The Virginia was commandeered to feed the Nebraska National Guard Troops who were enforcing curfews, preventing union arson and keeping the peace. During World War II, the restaurant, under government contract, fed thousands of enlistees who had joined the Army and were awaiting shipment out. A booth for selling "Liberty Bonds" was set up in the restaurant. Otto Swanson, owner of The Nebraska Clothing Company, the most upscale men's clothier in the City, was a customer and friend of

Mr. Payne's. He bought a bond. It was the first of a million dollars worth of bonds sold by the Paynes at The Virginia. It brought one of many accolades and recognition of charitable, ecclesial and patriotic acts of this "great, good man." He received recognition from the United States Government for this achievement. He was also honored by the AHEPA national body and the Patriarchate of Constantinople, becoming an Archon in 1983. He was inducted into the American Restaurant Magazine Hall of Fame in 1956 and was given the Omaha Restaurant Association's highest award in 1967. A charter member of Omaha Chapter 147 of the Order of AHEPA in 1927, he continued to attend meetings for over fifty years and missed only one national or international conclave of that organization.

Bearing the same onus, although a lighter burden for him than for the majority of other immigrants who left sisters behind in Greece, Mr. Payne provided dowry money for his two sisters and paid tuition and expenses for his brother, John, left in Greece to enable his enrollment into a German university so as to become "Dr. John Papadopoulos".

In the opinion of many the above achievements of Mr. Payne pale in the light of his service and dedication to his Greek Orthodox faith and his support of the Church as an institution. In the early years following the establishment of the first St. John's site at 16th and Martha (the church building was about five years old when he arrived in the area), he strongly contributed his time and resources it while seeking contributions from Greeks through out the area for the maintenance of a Greek Church. Priests were entitled to, and many quite frequently received, free meals at the Virginia. Many silent, unseen and unrecognized money contributions were received by St. John's from him. In the late 1920s during the apotheosis of the Venizelist-Royalist para-psychotic political episodes in Greece, St. John's came under the aegis (or fiefdom) of Royalist Archbishop Vasilios. Nick Payne and other business men contributed money to establish a second church served by a priest with Venizelos "new idea" credentials. They bought two houses to serve as a church, Holy Trinity, a block North of 22nd and St. Mary's and seven men contributed one thousand dollars each to purchase a rental property on the Northwest corner of 22nd and St. Mary's. After the World War II, a new perspective on politics in Greece obtained and the two churches joined. Mr. Payne took the presidency and with Rev. Spyridon Zoys started a building fund. Rev. Nicholas Velis the followed Father Zoys. Fr. Velis's enthusiasm and leadership coupled with the quiet

bed rock foundation for a new church laid by Mr. Payne (and omitting mention of his large and steady monetary contributions to the scheme), the present church building, the former Temple Israel at Park Avenue and Jackson Streets was purchased in the early fifties, was consecrated in 1953 and celebrated its golden anniversary in 1958. Mr. Payne worked with a varied, and sometimes difficult, series of men on the governing boards. He unfailingly received respect for his even-handedness, patience and courtesy. Always well dressed (pictures of Mr. Payne from the earliest days in Council Bluffs, show an impeccably dressed man with a meticulously maintained persona) at work and at any function, private or public, he exuded the affability, kindness and good breeding probably infused into him while on his rather patrician mother's knee. He oversaw the purchase, reconstruction of the interior, the mortgage and the consecration activity to include presenting the highest monetary bid for the "door opening" ceremony at 602 Park Avenue. As with the original two or three original South Omaha Greek businessmen who put up money rather than conversation to buy the lot and build at 16th Street, the present edifice and its life owe the greatest debt to this man.

St. John's Greek Orthodox Church communicants have not been known to deify their leaders - or even to recognize them after service. Frequently vilification has been the prize for too much church service. Yet, other than sporadic luncheons or dinners given to AHEPA leaders or its auxiliaries, the single testimonial and recognition dinner of note was organized by the then President of St. John's for Mr. Payne on April 9, 1983. Held at the Kiewit Plaza's Cloud Room, the dinner on gold trimmed burgundy china, complementary napkins, white tablecloths, fine flatware and sparkling crystal was as elegant a gathering as was called for by the occasion. Bishop Philip of the Denver Diocese of the Archdiocese of North and South America appeared and spoke. After an introduction containing much of the above material, offered by Frank Meares, Mr. Payne gave his usual humble offering in his response and received from the church a Steuben Glass horse head supported by a properly inscribed base similar to those granted by Harry Truman to visiting heads of state.

Mr. Payne died in 1989. Nick Bitzes, his long-time friend, eulogized him at the funeral. St. John's was packed with his family, friends and admirers from all walks of life. Second generation George Payne, now in his nineties, is also a long time church supporter as is his spouse, Peggy Payne.