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THE IMMIGRANT STORY OF BILL LEFERIS

BY ANTIGONI LEFERIS LADD

After two years of collaboration, ten Greek families published a book in 2015 of their individual histories plus the story of the community they established here—Honoring Our Heritage: The Greek Families of Westminster, Maryland.

As the book's editor, Antigoni Lefteris Ladd found a deeper appreciation for her own family's experiences. Here she shares the story of her beloved uncle Bill Lefteris who came to Westminster in 1921 as a teenager. His is one of the stories that inspired the book.

Vasilios Eleftheriou, known in America as “Bill Lefteris,” left Greece at age 12, bound for a new life in America. He was the second child of Christos and Pagona (Amprazes) Eleftheriou, and he now had the chance of a lifetime—a new home in America, where he would be raised by his uncle in Maryland. Bill was born on January 1, 1908, in Trikala, in the mountains of north central Greece. He had one older sister, Evanthia, and two younger brothers, Athanasios “Arthur” and Yiorgo “George.” His father died young, leaving Pagona with four children to raise on her own. She had financial help, however, from two brothers, Tom and Harry, who had emigrated to America in the early 1900s, worked first in the textile mills of Manchester, New Hampshire, and then traveled down the East Coast working in various jobs until they reached Maryland. There they invested their money and time in the restaurant business.

The First Family Member Arrives in Westminster

Partnering with the Samios brothers, Peter and Zachary, in 1917, Tom Amprazes invested in a small



Bill Lefteris' 1920 visa was printed in Greek and French and included his photograph. All images courtesy of Bill Lefteris, unless otherwise noted.

store-front at 9 East Main Street, Westminster, near the railroad crossing. They converted the building, originally a pool hall, into the American Restaurant, which would become a landmark for more than 50 years, changing hands from one Greek family to another until closing in 1969. During that half century, the American Restaurant provided employment and training for Greek immigrants who moved to Westminster, and it became a microcosm



Bill Lefteris (left) and Tom Amprazes at the American Restaurant, 1920s.

of the immigrant experience—people helping one another find work, offering financial and emotional support, and proving that the American dream could come true.

Tom and his wife, Bessie, daughter of a Russian immigrant, lived in a second-floor apartment at 7 East Main. Bessie worked in real estate and the hardworking couple gradually became financially successful. They did not have any children of their own, and hoping to have someone to follow in his footsteps, Tom wrote to his widowed sister, Pagona, and offered to raise her eldest son, Bill, in America. He promised to bring the boy from Greece, educate him, teach him business skills, and provide a loving home.

Crossing the Atlantic Into a New Year and a New Life

Tom also convinced his mother, Zoe, to accompany her 12-year-old grandson and move to America. Tom made all the arrangements for the trip but could not leave his business to join them, so his younger brother, Harry, made the long journey back to Trikala. They left Greece in December 1920 on the ocean liner *King Alexander*. Bill celebrated his 13th birthday aboard the ship that docked in New York harbor on January 5, 1921.

In Westminster the new arrivals took up residence with Tom and Bessie on East Main Street. Bill was enrolled in St. John's Catholic School, directly across the street from the American Restaurant. There the teenager learned English quickly,

A Family Tragedy

For Memorial Day in 1921, Tom planned an excursion for his mother, Zoe (Prosangelis) Amprazes, hiring a car and driver to take her to historic Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. On the road to Gettysburg, the driver of the rented car swerved when he passed a truck and was forced off the road, with Zoe thrown from the car. She died at the scene, having lived less than six months in America.

Zoe's sons chose a burial plot atop a hill in Westminster Cemetery, making Zoe Amprazes the first Greek immigrant laid to rest there. Her large stone marker shows her name engraved in two languages—her native Greek spelling, and her English name.



Tom Amprazes, standing, with his mother Zoe and nephew Bill.

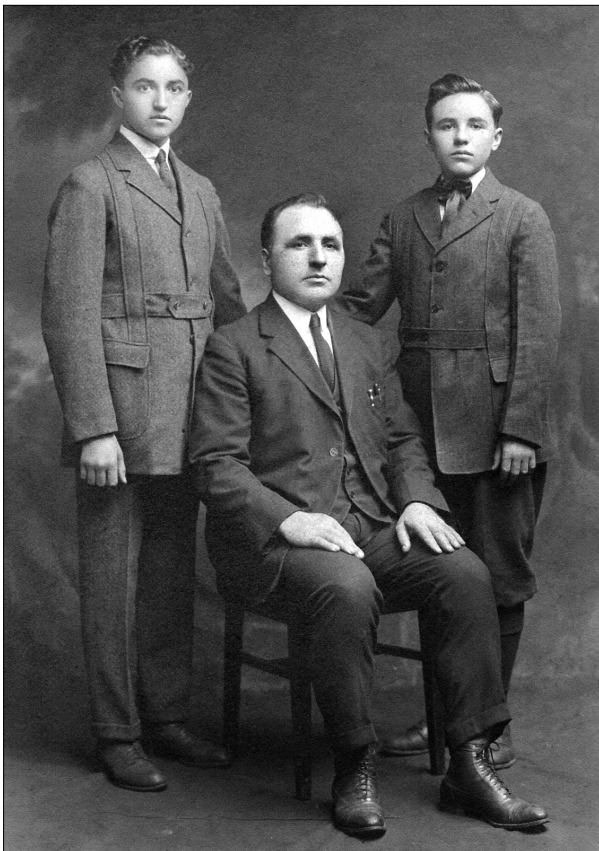
surrounded by young people his own age. He mastered a new alphabet, and the nuns taught him English cursive writing, giving him a lifetime skill that made his handwritten letters, even today, a pleasure to read.

A thoughtful and quiet teen, young Bill flourished at St. John's, making friends easily and learning



Above: The house at 101 East Main became home to the Amprazes family. Historical Society collection.

Below: Bill Lefteris (left), Tom Amprazes (seated), and Steve Holevas, mid-1920s.



American ways. Upon graduation, he entered Westminster High School, where he became a member of the class of 1927. All the while, he worked with Uncle Tom in the restaurant, learning the business from the ground up.

Two years after Bill came, his cousin Steve Holevas arrived from Greece. The two boys, close in age, attended school together and worked side by side in the American Restaurant.

The growing Amprazes household needed more space, so Tom and Bessie bought a three-story house at 101 East Main Street. The large home provided room for the boys, a back yard, and space to entertain. Tom and Bessie always had room for friends and family, and they helped the new arrivals find work. Over the next 30 years, their house would become home to dozens of Greek families.

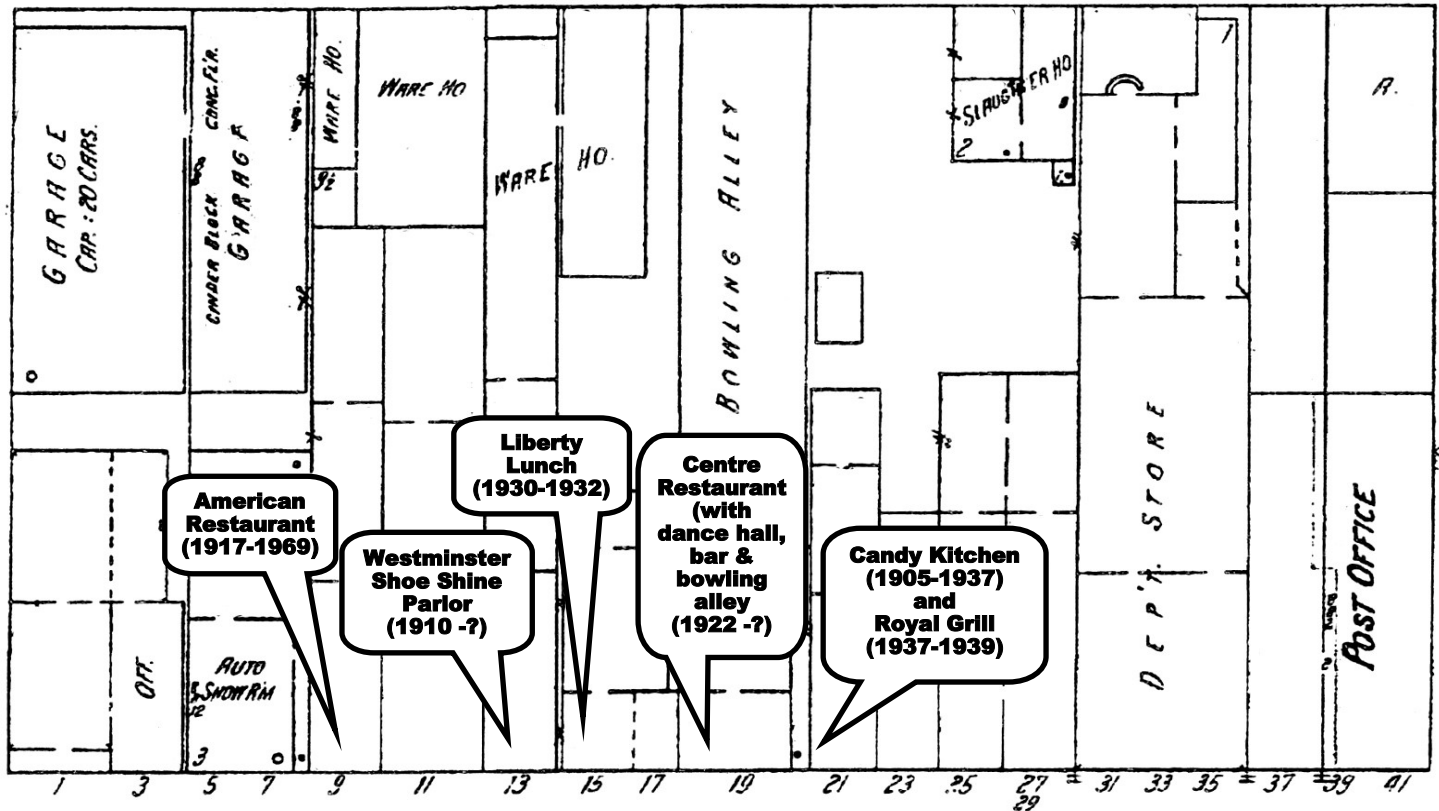
Growing Up in Two Cultures

Uncle Tom made sure the two cousins did not lose touch with their Greek heritage. The small Greek enclave in Westminster included several young men near the ages of Bill and Steve—George Chrissyffuthes, Lou Sharkey, and Arthur Samios. Although the Greek families in Westminster had come from different parts of Greece and Turkey, they quickly formed a new community. They respected the old-world customs, raising their children in the Greek Orthodox faith by attending church in Baltimore, standing up for one another at weddings, becoming godparents for each other's children, and celebrating Greek holidays together.

Young Entrepreneur

By the time Bill graduated from Westminster High School, he had become a key player in the restaurant and joined Uncle Tom in managing the business. Then, with Tom's blessing, Bill decided to try running his own restaurant, so in 1930 he opened Liberty Lunch at 15 East Main in partnership with the Samios brothers.

On that same block on East Main were several Greek businesses: Tony Chrissyffuthes' Westminster Shoe Shine parlor, Stanley and Lou Sharkey's Centre Restaurant, the Samios brothers' Candy Kitchen, and, of course, the American Restaurant. Steve Holevas also tried his hand at business, joining his uncle Harry Amprazis (who



Detail from the 1927 Sanborn map of Westminster showing the close proximity of Greek businesses in the first block of East Main Street.

spelled his surname differently from brother Tom's) in opening the Coney Island Lunch across the railroad tracks at 40 West Main. When the noon whistles blew, workers from the booming factories along the railroad tracks flooded the downtown streets looking for a quick meal.

Triumphant Return to Greece

In 1934 Bill sailed for Greece to visit his family for the first time since leaving as a child in 1920. His older sister, Evanthia, was now married, his middle brother, Arthur, was just finishing military service, and youngest brother, George, was quickly growing into manhood. Family and friends gathered to meet the successful 26-year-old business man. Bill attended village-wide celebrations, drank a toast or ate a meal in every household in the old neighborhood, and traveled into the mountains to

Greece, 1934.

Right, upper: the Lefteris brothers—Bill, Arthur, and George.



Right, lower: standing, from left: Harry Amprazis (Bill's uncle), Bill, Vasilios Economou (Bill's brother-in-law), Vasilios Holevas (Bill's uncle), Pagona Lefteris (Bill's mother), Eleni Holevas (Bill's aunt), Evanthia Economou (Bill's sister). In front: George Lefteris (Bill's brother), John Plastiras, and Arthur Lefteris (Bill's brother).



Announcement

THE CITY RESTAURANT

Announces the

O P E N I N G

of the new location at 12 WEST MAIN STREET, WESTMINSTER on
SATURDAY, SEPT. 10th '33
at 5 P. M. This New Restaurant will be located next to the present es-
tablishment.

*The New Restaurant will be the Only Restaurant of its size in
this part of the State. Will have SEATING CAPACITY OF ONE
HUNDRED AND THIRTY..*

All New Equipment

*and most modernistic Type. The new Restaurant will feature an
open type Kitchen also a huge size*

Soda Fountain

*Later on the New Restaurant plans to open the second story for a
large size Dancing floor and Dining room combine.*

This announcement of the opening of the expanded City Restaurant in 1938 appeared in the Carroll County Times.

small towns like Westminster, rapidly changed. The restaurant business was strained—first with gasoline rationing, then with rationing of bacon, butter, sugar, meat, cheese, milk, and other staples. But the biggest challenge was the loss of personnel as the men were called into military service.

First to go were the male cooks; then Bill was drafted in 1942, leaving the restaurant without a full-time manager. He left brother Arthur (still learning English), Arthur's young wife, Tula (pregnant with their first child), and Uncle Tom to manage the City Restaurant, though they struggled to keep the business afloat.

Bill traveled west by train from one training camp to another until he reached California, where he was slotted for medical service in the Pacific Theater. He wrote home almost daily.

hunt and fish and cook outside on the spit. Arthur and George were so impressed by the obvious success of their older brother, that they decided to join him in America.

Changes and More Changes

When Bill returned home to Westminster, Uncle Tom announced plans to set up a new, larger restaurant a few blocks away on West Main—the City Restaurant. Bill would help him manage it and continue as a partner in the American Restaurant. In March 1936, Bill's middle brother Arthur landed in America, put on an apron, and went to work in the American Restaurant.

Juggling two businesses, Bill soon sold his shares in the American Restaurant and threw his energy into expanding the City Restaurant into a new space at 12 West Main, increasing its seating capacity to 130 and adding a second-floor banquet hall. Arthur also moved to the City Restaurant, and the family shared long hours keeping a first-class establishment running. Bill's fortunes rose as Uncle Tom made him the manager and a partner in the City Restaurant.

In August 1937, Bill's beloved Aunt Bessie died suddenly of a heart attack while seated in front of the City Restaurant. She had been his second mother since he arrived in America, and Bill mourned her death, clipping her obituary from the newspaper and carrying it in his wallet for the remainder of his life.

After December 7, 1941, America was drawn into the world war. Lives everywhere, including those in



Private William C. Lefteris, Medical Training Battalion, Fort Robinson, Arkansas, Spring 1942.

October 11, 1942
[from Oakland, California]

According to your letter, things must be pretty bad back there. You say Pete has left there, and Francis doesn't come back regular, and you are short of girls. Well, I don't know what to say. I can't be of any help from where I am. The only thing I can tell you is do the best you can under the circumstances. And if you can't do any better, the only thing I know is to close the place up and turn the key over to the landlord.

His next letters came from his assigned post—the 1st Field Hospital, New Guinea. It was a long way from home.

April 6, 1943

I am in New Guinea and I am well, but I can't tell you what I am doing. I am living on cocoanuts and bananas. All I have to do is go out and climb a tree and get my breakfast, and for dinner and supper do the same thing. The natives are pretty nice. The girls are wearing grass skirts, from the waist down.

Always making the best of any situation, Bill wrote on May 9, 1943, that he was moving ahead of the unit, and it was hard for him to write, especially since there was no stationery available. Using the only paper he could get his hands on, Bill wrote that letter on toilet paper. It survives today with key words sliced out by the Army censor to avoid betraying the hospital location.

When Arthur was also called into military service, Bill wrote to Tula.

September 9, 1943
[from New Guinea]

Take care of yourself, and tell Uncle Tom not to worry too much with the store. If things begin to go too tough on him, to close it. Tell him I said I'd sooner see the place closed rather than see him ruin his health. I know he's not a young man anymore, and it's a limit to what he can do.

In the more than 60 letters Bill wrote to his brother and sister-in-law, he never complained about the Army, his assignments, or any of the people in his unit.

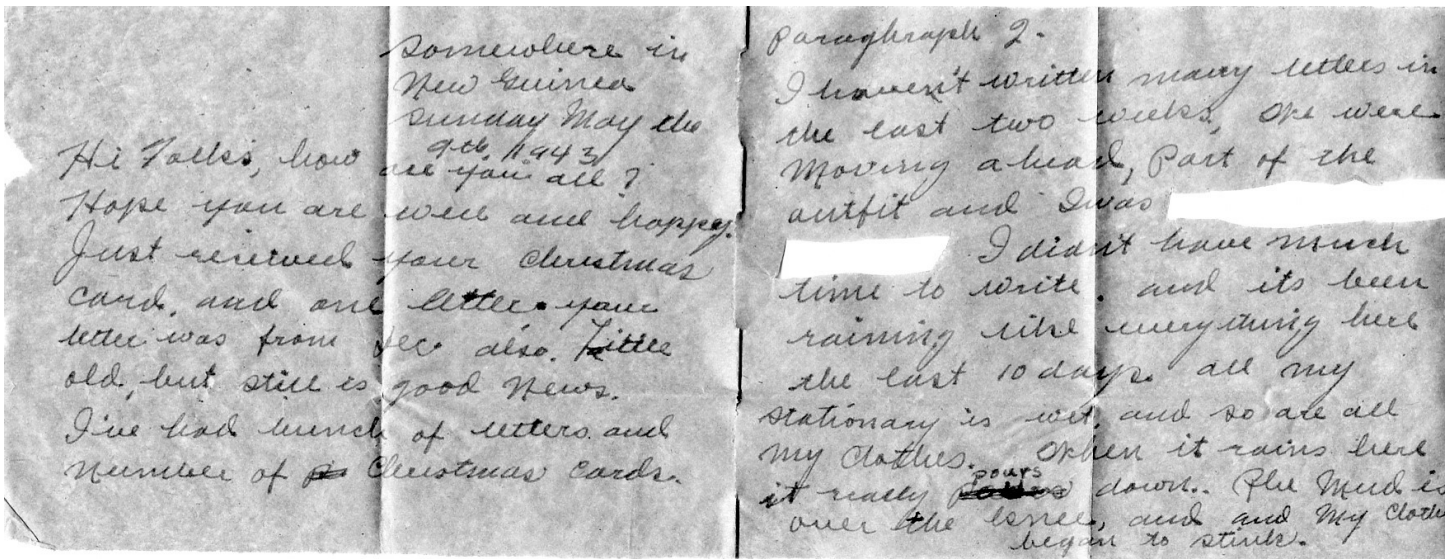
September 6, 1943
[somewhere in the Pacific]

I like this assignment a lot, pretty interesting and lots of traveling.

He worked in sweltering heat, cutting trees to clear the land, building field hospitals in the jungles, and supervising surgical technicians in the operating room for long hours.

July 7, 1945
[somewhere in Mindanao P.I.]

Well Sis, I guess that's about all for now. I'm pretty tired, and it's almost 11 o'clock PM, and I had a pretty hard day all day. I am working in the surgery and we are pretty busy. Just before I started to write, we finished an emergency operation—took one guy's appendix out. I'm on call every other night, and tonight was my night. Work all day and sometimes through the night.



Bill wrote over 60 letters home to his family during the war, including this one that was written on toilet paper. The holes were made by the military censors.

Bill speculated about what life would be like when he returned from the Pacific.

*September 30, 1943
[1st Field Hospital, New Guinea]*

I don't think I'll be satisfied to get back there again. Westminster is a nice town and I hate to leave, but there's a lot of nice places, and a lot more money could be made. I've seen a lot since I've been away, and I am developing a few new ideas.

The war had brought sadness to Bill's family in Greece with the deaths of his cousin and his brother-in-law, and the severe battle wounds suffered by his youngest brother, George. Uncle Harry had left Westminster to live in Greece in 1933 and was trapped in Trikala with his wife and children for the duration of the war.

New Directions

Bill returned from the Pacific the day before Christmas in 1945. Arthur had come back from service earlier and was helping Uncle Tom run the City Restaurant. It was a grand homecoming, with Uncle Tom, Arthur, Tula, and their two young children, Antigoni and George, greeting him. Bill had not yet met the children since they were both born while he was in the military. Despite his longing to travel and move to another part of the country, he threw himself into helping his family in Westminster.



Tula and Arthur, with their children, Antigoni (Goni) and George, October 1945.



Harry's Lunch and Leteris Food Market (later Leteris Liquors) were side-by-side on West Main from 1946 to 1975, when the city tore down the building.

Uncle Tom bemoaned the loss of restaurant staff since the war began. Waitresses had left town for higher-paying war jobs in the cities, and some cooks, drafted by the Army, had never returned. Bill, Arthur, and Tula pitched in to rebuild the City Restaurant business, but it was simply not the same.

In 1946, after 12 years stranded in Greece, Harry Amprazis returned to Westminster with his wife and their three children now grown from infants to teenagers. Harry decided to open a small sandwich shop that he could manage with his family and found space at 54 West Main, naming his business Harry's Lunch. Bill and Arthur opened a grocery store next door at 52 West Main. Uncle Tom owned the building where these new businesses were set up, and the families moved upstairs, Bill living over Leteris Food Market and Harry over Harry's Lunch.

Bill went to school to learn butchering, giving the small grocery store a specialty niche. He often joked that, after working in surgery in an Army hospital in the jungle, he had a good foundation in cutting.

Bill was a devoted uncle, spending all his spare time with his young nieces and nephews. For Harry's children, Bill arranged for a tutor, Mabel Price, to come to the apartment and help the teens learn English. Bill bought a Jeep (long before the military vehicle became fashionable) and spent every Sunday taking Arthur's children on excursions. "Let's get lost," he would say, bundling them into the car and letting them choose a new place to explore. Of course he knew every back road for miles around town, but he allowed the children to believe they were exploring new territory. They reveled in their discoveries of beautiful farms, winding country roads, and an abandoned mansion Uncle Bill solemnly declared was Pinocchio's house.

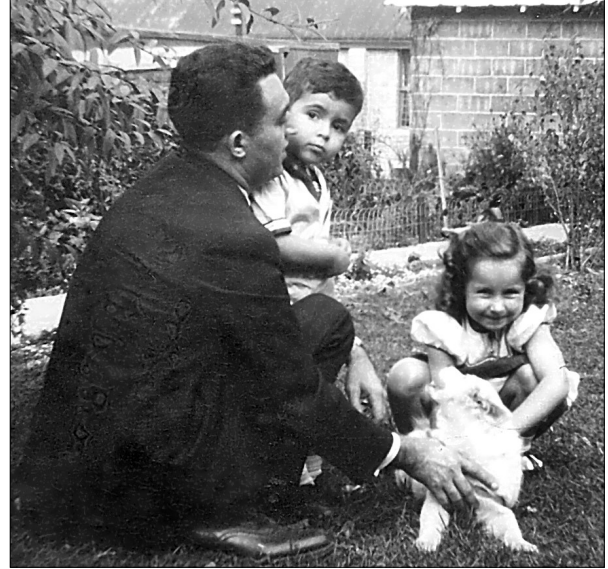
When Arthur and Tula wanted to buy a larger home on the edge of town, Bill helped by purchasing the land around the house as well as the large tract of land (called Snowden's Manor) on Bond Street Extended. Bill, Arthur, and Tula became the "three Musketeers" sharing responsibilities in business and enjoying family time together. They developed work shifts to keep the store open 15 hours a day, and they spent every weekend clearing the land around the home to develop more than 60 buildable lots and construct a new street which Bill named Goni Terrace after his niece.

In 1947, Bill and Arthur brought their youngest brother, George, over from Greece. George, then 31, had been wounded while fighting in the Greek army and had spent nine months in a hospital. In America, he underwent additional surgery at Johns Hopkins to remove shrapnel near his lung. George recovered, married a beautiful Greek lady from Baltimore, Polly Cardiges, and moved to the city.

In 1950, the Lefteris brothers brought their mother, Pagona, from Greece. Pagona moved in with Arthur's family on Bond Street, where she indulged in cooking Greek dishes the "right" way—from scratch.

Bill's life reflects the Greek immigrant values of hard work, support of family, and love of two cultures. A veteran of World War II, he joined the American Legion—a source of pride for him. He served as best man at weddings of friends, and was godfather to many daughters of friends and family in America, as well as in Greece. While he never married (though many Greek ladies have admitted to having crushes on him), he was "Uncle Bill" to several generations of young people he mentored. In

his quiet way, he was a model of kindness, generosity, and strong family values. He died in 1976 at the age of 68. His World War II letters, found in a trunk, are now part of the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress.



Bill with nephew George and niece Antigoni (Goni), and their new puppy, about 1947.

Author's Note

To all of the young people who have not taken the time to ask their elders about their youth, their life experiences, and how they made their key decisions in life, this story is dedicated. Please ask the questions now, learn the stories while your family members can share, and do not wait to dig out old photos with no names or dates. Listen attentively and keep their memories alive.

If you have anything to add to the story of the Greek community in Carroll County, please contact me at AntigoniLadd@TigrettCorp.com.

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