

## **History of Pittsburgh Chapter Icaros 7** *By Alea C. Melacrinos Mavrogeorgis (2003)*

The Icarian Brotherhood of America and Chapter Icaros share the same origination. Their histories date back to the congregation of a few Icarians in Demetrios Vassilaros' back grocery storeroom after facing the dilemma to bury Pittsburgh's first deceased Icarian, Ioannis Stefanos Lefes, in 1903. This initial meeting was held on January 26, 1903 and thus was the originating date of our present organization. Thereafter, the members of the Pittsburgh Icarian community wanted to create a formal and permanent organization. The Brotherhood was established officially on February 12, 1905 with its charter granted and approved by the State of Pennsylvania on July 17, 1905. The primary aims of the Brotherhood were to unite and cultivate close relations among all Icarians living in the United States, to care for its sick members, and to bury its deceased. In the next three decades, the Brotherhood expanded its primary goals by supporting the 1912 Icarian Revolution and aiding to police the Free State of Icaria. In 1925, it built the first high school in Icaria, gave educational assistance and humanitarian aid, and sponsored social and cultural events.

On Sunday, October 28, 1934 a critical meeting took place in Youngstown, Ohio (St. John Greek Orthodox Church) that would progressively change the organization of the Icarian Brotherhood of America "Icaros." Three years prior to 1934, V.I. Chebithes, an Icarian pioneer and Ahepan founder, initiated the Knights and Ladies of Icaros in Akron, Ohio. Since the original charter (Icarian Brotherhood of America "Icaros") did not make any provisions for the chartering of chapters outside of Allegheny County, the special 1934 meeting merged the original and newly formed chapters under one name, The Pan-Icarian Brotherhood of America "Icaros." Hence, Chapter Icaros of Pittsburgh became the seventh chapter under this reorganization. Subsequent Supreme Lodge Presidents from the newly formed Pan-Icarian Brotherhood were Chapter Icaros members: Elias Vlahos, Christ Aivaliotis, and George L. Vassilaros. Two years after the first National Convention (1935), Pittsburgh Chapter Icaros hosted its first convention on November 25, 1937 and its second national convention on September 3-4, 1939. Unfortunately, additional information is not known of the 1930s activities of Chapter Icaros and the Supreme Lodge because of the missing gaps of information in the National Archives.

In the 1945 Pittsburgh Convention album, Supreme President James C. Mylonas wrote in his presidential message, "Last year the U.S. Treasury has honored our society for its war bond activities. Our society sold more war bonds than any other Greek society in America for its size." During the war era, many of the Brotherhood's activities as well as Chapter Icaros' were geared toward the war effort. Also mentioned in the 1945 album is a World War II Honor Roll dedicated to the 102 young Icarian soldiers of the Pittsburgh area. With sons, husbands, and young single men abroad in World War II, the Icarian women of Pittsburgh first established a woman's auxiliary, "Elpis" (Hope), to also assist with war effort projects. They sold war bonds, solicited donors for the Red Cross' blood drive, and prepared bundles of clothes, shoes, blankets, and non-perishable items to send to Icaria. Again in 1949, Chapter Icaros held the forty-fifth national convention at the William Penn Hotel that was chaired by Dr. Stephen A. Pamphilis.

In 1954, the Chapter hosted the Golden Anniversary Convention to commemorate the first Icarian formal assembly held in 1904. Two years prior (1952) to the convention, Chapter Icaros began a building fund and had raised \$11,800 for a new clubhouse. Previously it had held its meetings at the offices of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Oakland, PA. After four and half years of preparation, the Chapter Icaros clubhouse was finally ready to open its doors at 81 South 19<sup>th</sup> Street in Pittsburgh's South Side area. In a 1956 notice to its membership, the new clubhouse boasted roominess, modern kitchen facilities, new lounges and bar, and most importantly, plenty of room for dancing. The hall was officially dedicated in a Grand Opening Dance on October 14, 1956 with Pittsburgh's popular entertainment, Billy Kay (Kratsas) and his Orchestra. Chapter Icaros hosted the last convention of the 1950s at the William Penn Hotel.

In the 1960s, many of Chapter Icaros' philanthropic endeavors were directed toward the Pan-Icarian Foundation that was headquartered in Pittsburgh. There was an aura of confusion about the Foundation because many members did not understand how it would operate. But the few who did, including Christ Aivaliotis, worked tirelessly to influence the membership to accept the Foundation. In 1965, the Pan-Icarian Foundation was established with a deed of trust, dated September 6, 1965, in Pittsburgh,

Pennsylvania under Supreme President George L. Vassilaros. Christopher Passodelis, the driving force behind the newly formed Foundation was appointed its first Director. During the course of many years, the Foundation has undertaken and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for the following projects: schools, hospitals, scholarships, Icarian nursing home, road building, fire fighting equipment, medical assistance, humanitarian aid, academic research, and support to the Pan-Icarian National Archives. Also during this decade, Chapter Icaros enjoyed leisurely activities such as hosting the 1967 Pittsburgh Convention, holding street fairs, chartering cruises, and sponsoring a traveling young men's softball team.

By the beginning 1970s, the Club's gender barrier ceased because the Pan-Icarian Brotherhood "Chapter Icaros" began to include "sisters." The first female members to enlist were Stella Vassilaros, Despina Xenakis, and Joanne Melachrinos. The 1970 Convention was held in Pittsburgh and visited by a planeload of Icarians from Greece. Again in 1975, another milestone convention had been reached with the Pittsburgh Chapter donating all of the proceeds of its convention towards the Pan-Icarian Foundation. In efforts to congregate Icarians nationally and create an annual fundraiser, Chapter Icaros held its first Mini-Convention during Memorial Day weekend (1976) under the presidency of Christos Melachrinos. The festivities, meetings, and memorial services took place at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral before moving them to the present Verona-Oakmont locations.

In the beginning of the 1980s, Chapter Icaros revived its New Year's Eve dance at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral under the direction of President Xenophon Tsarnas. Local Greeks and out of town Icarians would pack a full house at this event. It was so well attended that people were turned away at the door because the facility's maximum occupancy had exceeded. In an attempt to bridge generation gaps and adding another venue to the annual Mini-Convention, Chapter Icaros launched on May 25, 1985 the first Pan-Icarian Golf Classic held at the Pittsburgh Chestnut Ridge Golf Club. This brainchild (golf outing) by then President Steve Manners was later renamed the Steve Manners Golf Classic in 2001 to honor the memory of this dear active member. Prior to Pittsburgh's 1988 Convention, Chapter Icaros' membership increased dramatically with many women and youth joining the club. By the 1980s, the Chapter had its first woman officer (Despina Xenakis) hold the position of Secretary. A few years later (1988), Chapter Icaros hosted yet another successful convention and broke attendance records, including a Grand Banquet with over 900 attendees. In the late 1980s, Chapter Icaros sadly closed a chapter in its history by selling the South Side clubhouse. Its needed repairs were too costly and its upkeep expensive. Therefore, the club was forced to sell and look for another home.

Looking for a new clubhouse was not an easy task. As a result, it took a few years to find a clubhouse that was affordable and had the appropriate size with a suitable location. Jeremiah Gemellas worked diligently and behind the scenes to accomplish this task, and in June 1992, Chapter Icaros purchased the old National Bank building on East Railroad Street in Verona, PA. In completing this project, architectural plans for the building were designed by George Perinis, with monies, materials, and labor generously donated by the membership. An official ribbon cutting ceremony under the leadership of President John Facaros was held on March 19, 1994. With Chapter Icaros now having a permanent home, a proposal was submitted in July 1994 to petition to house the archives of the Pan-Icarian Supreme Lodge and Foundation. The petition was accepted at the 1995 Montreal Convention, and the national archives were organized and catalogued on the second floor premises of the Chapter Icaros clubhouse. On May 22, 1998, the Chapter finally celebrated the grand opening of the National Archives. Following past Chapter President, Nick Kalogeris, and into the new Century, Chapter Icaros elected its first woman president, Stamatina Mousetis.

Chapter Icaros' history would not be so rich and accomplished without the contributions of every past and present member. There are not enough pages to list everyone's contribution. We can only observe our strong, productive chapter and realize that everyone's offerings have impacted its success. Today, Chapter Icaros' most current project is hosting the Centennial Anniversary of the Pan-Icarian Brotherhood of America. With resolve, Chapter Icaros hopes to make this historic celebration the most entertaining, nostalgic, and memorable one in history!