

History of Pittsburgh Chapter Icaros 7

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The Icarian Brotherhood of America and Chapter Icaros share the same origination, an age of 112 years. Their histories date back to the congregation of a few Icarians in Demetrios Vassilaros' back grocery storeroom in bustling downtown Pittsburgh. Those noted pioneers who convened were Dimitrios Vassilaros, Vasilios Triantafilou, John Pamphilis, Stamatios Kratsas, Emmanuel Pamphilis, Nicholaos Vassilaros, Angelo Tsantes, Anastasios Tiniakos, John Lardas, Nicholas Paralemos, and John Mavrikis. This primary assembly was the result of 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 first signer of the charter was Angelo Tsantes who later spearheaded and oversaw the construction project of the Agios Kyrikos High School building. Coincidentally, seven years after the charter was approved on that day, Icaria would be declared a free state from the Ottoman Empire.

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. Later, other goals included: to establish clubs with libraries and to arrange for free lectures for edification of its members wherever the financial condition of the Chapters permits the incurring expenses for such an action; to render charitable aid and assistance in the education, civilization, and spiritual needs of all peoples of the human society, regardless of creed, race, and religion, wherever deemed necessary. In the next three decades, the Brotherhood expanded its primary goals by supporting the 1912 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. The Brotherhood contributed to the relief efforts of the earthquake devastations in places such as San Francisco, Japan, and Sicily. A notable Pittsburgh project effort by "Icaros" was the monetary donation for the construction of the Greek Room at the University of Pittsburgh's Nationality Rooms. There in the Greek Room sits a chair with "Ikaria" written on it in Greek, which exemplified the Pittsburgh Icarians' commitment to honor their Greek heritage.

Parallel to the establishment and endeavors of the Icarian Brotherhood "Icaros", another Icarian organization operated under a similar vision - the Panicarian Beneficial Society of America "Artemis" headquartered in Verona, Pennsylvania (established November 10, 1910). The goals of this society were to foster unity and love among Icarians and the motherland Greece; to assist the ailing and unemployed members; to cover member medical care costs and funeral expenses; and sponsor philanthropic deeds for Ikaria on the condition that funds were available. According to the 1919 Artemis bylaws (Article 5), this beneficial society did allow women to join if they were of Icarian descent or had a spouse, father, brother, or relative who was a paid member. Their membership would cover all medical expenses, except for child birthing. In essence, both organizations (Icaros and Artemis) provided a safety net for its membership in times of hardship as well as a social outlet to convene. The most popular social gatherings were the summer picnics to celebrate July 4th or Icarian Independence Day on July 17th. Most of the well-known summer picnic photographs of both clubs were taken at "Fradellos" farm. In its beginnings (November 13, 1910-September 30, 1916), "Artemis" had a documented 450 current members, 134 absent members, and 13 deceased members recorded in its general report. The society of Artemis was named after the ancient temple of Artemis in Nas, Ikaria located in the northern part of the island where most of its members had originated. The northern Icarians had joined Artemis in protest, because most of Chapter Icaros' sponsored projects were on the southern side of the island. As time went on and the needs of immigrants changed, the Artemis club evolved into a

private social club located in downtown Pittsburgh and later in the Oakland area of the city. Presently, most of the Artemis descendants are leaders and active members of Chapter Icaros.

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 AHEPA 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 6 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 esteemed Chapter Icaros members Elias Vlahos (1948-1950), Christ E. Aivaliotis (1958-1960) (1967-1969), George L. Vassilaros (1963-1965) (1973-1975), and most recently Emanuel C. Aivaliotis (2007-2009). Two years after the first National Convention (1935-Youngstown, Ohio), 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 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. As a consequence of sons, husbands, and young single men abroad during 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 be sent to Icaria after the war. Throughout the post war era, many of the children and grandchildren of the Chapter Icaros founders were now young adults taking an active role in the Brotherhood. During the 1949 Pittsburgh convention, the chapter was led by Dr. C.Z. Moraitis. This 45th national convention at the William Penn Hotel was chaired by Dr. Stephen A. Pamphilis.

At this time, many young women became active in the auxiliary and worked alongside their mothers. "Elpis" held their larger meetings together with Chapter Icaros and smaller meetings at the members' homes. The women's group assisted "Icaros" with social activities and fundraising, such as dances, picnics held at the GAPA fairgrounds, and most importantly the national conventions. The women's group also sponsored children's Christmas parties, Bingo games, loukoumades socials, and Mother's Day teas. Following George Kotsagrellos, chef of the initial chapter dinners in the South Side clubhouse, the women's group took on the huge responsibility of cooking the club dinners. In addition to its many local philanthropic endeavors, "Elpis" continued to sponsor clothing drives for Icarian inhabitants who had fallen on hard times and sent monetary aid to the ill-stricken of Icaria. They had sent clothing and school supplies to the Village of Amalou after it was damaged by a flood in 1956. Later the group donated \$1,000 toward furnishing a room in the newly built Icarian Hospital in 1959. A letter written by Sofia J. Vassilaros thanked the club and noted that the donation would be utilized for a hospital room in honor of "Elpis".

In 1954, the Chapter hosted the Golden Anniversary Convention chaired by Chapter President George A. Tsounos to commemorate the first Icarian formal assembly held in 1904, though our current conventions are numbered as anniversaries to indicate the 1903 origin. Two years prior to the convention (1952), Chapter Icaros began a fund and had raised \$11,800 for a new clubhouse. The needed money came from the treasury and solicited interest free loans of \$200 per member family. The first meeting at the newly purchased clubhouse with "Icaros" and "Elpis"

members took place on June 8, 1952 with President Diamandi Vassilaros presiding. Previously, meetings were held at the offices of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral in (Oakland) Pittsburgh. After four and a half years of preparation, the Chapter Icaros clubhouse was finally ready to open its doors at 81 South 19th Street in Pittsburgh's South Side. In a 1956 notice to its membership, the new clubhouse boasted roominess, modern kitchen facilities, new lounges, and a bar. Most importantly, the renovated facility had plenty of room for dancing! The hall was officially dedicated at 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 1959.

In the 1960s, many of Chapter Icaros' philanthropic endeavors were directed toward the Pan-Icarian Foundation that was headquartered in Pittsburgh. In the early stages of the Foundation's establishment, there was an air of uncertainty about the vision of this entity because many members did not understand how it would operate. Luckily, the few who initially understood the Foundation's foresight, such as PSPs Christ E. Aivaliotis and George L. Vassilaros of Pittsburgh, worked tirelessly to influence the local and national membership to accept this proposal. After the proposal was accepted and the Foundation was established on September 6, 1965, Christopher Passodelis, another driving force behind the newly formed Foundation, was appointed its first Director (1965-1975). 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, firefighting equipment, medical assistance, humanitarian aid, academic research, and to support the Pan-Icarian National Archives. Also during the 60s, Chapter Icaros enjoyed hosting leisurely activities such as the 1967 Pittsburgh Convention, street fairs, chartered cruises, and sponsoring a traveling young men's softball team. By the beginning of the 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, Joanne Melacrinis, and Maria Aivaliotis. In 1975, a milestone convention had been celebrated with the Pittsburgh Chapter donating all of the proceeds of its convention toward 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 (1975) under the presidency of Christos Melacrinis. The festivities, meetings, and memorial services first took place at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral before moving to the present location – the Dormition of the Theotokos Greek Orthodox Church in Oakmont-Verona.

In the beginning of the 1980s, Chapter Icaros revived its New Year's Eve dance at St. Nicholas 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 a generation gap and add 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. The creation of this favored event 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 more 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. This event was chaired by Chris Aivaliotis and Chris Kefalos under the presidency of Steve Manners. 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. At last, in June 1992,

Chapter Icaros purchased the old First National Bank of Verona on East Railroad Street in Verona, Pennsylvania. 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. Since Chapter Icaros now had a permanent home, a proposal was submitted in July 1994 to petition to house the National 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 by Archivist Joanne Melacrinis 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 under Chapter President Nick Kalogeris. Following the 20th Century and leading into the new millennium, Chapter Icaros elected its first female president, Stamatina Moussetis Frangos.

In 2003, the Pittsburgh chapter undertook the monumental task of hosting the biggest family reunion/birthday party to commemorate the centennial of the Pan-Icarian Brotherhood under the presidency of George Vassilaros, Jr. and tireless co-chairs Chris Aivaliotis and Chris Kefalos. This nostalgic celebration began with a blessing ceremony and memorial tribute to Icarian heroes of the U.S. Armed Forces. This historic convention highlighted our Brotherhood's history with the first archival display compiled by Archivist Joanne Melacrinis and a documentary premier titled "The Pan-Icarian Brotherhood of America, A 100 Years of Caring," by directors and Dean Mougianis and Mike Politis. Both unique projects were generously supported by the Supreme Lodge and Foundation. Other "firsts" of this convention included a church service held in the hotel ballroom, and a fireworks display launched at Point State Park that showcased this 100th birthday celebration.

Following the 2003 national convention, George Halvas was elected Chapter President. He was best known for introducing a youth event to our Mini Convention activities, the beloved Wiffle Ball tournament (2004). This Sunday afternoon activity continues to be played between the kariotakia of the northern and southern parts of Pittsburgh every year at Moore Park in Brookline.

In continuing to support the youth, the first Pan-Icarian Brotherhood National Youth Leadership Conference was hosted by Chapter Icaros in May 2005 during the Mini Convention weekend. Seventeen young adults from Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Indiana, Montreal, New York, and Philadelphia convened to discuss issues concerning the Icarian youth and participate in the weekend social activities. Another productive and festive Youth Leadership Conference was again hosted in Pittsburgh and chaired by sisters Georgia and Connie Barlamas during the Mini Convention of 2013.

Into the next 100 years of our Brotherhood and chapter, many leadership roles have been occupied by women. The Pittsburgh Chapter elections of January 7, 2007 saw the first ever all women board of officers: Michelle Kotsagrelis (President), Joanne Melacrinis (Vice-President), Cathy Pandeladis (Treasurer), Koula Tsahas Facaros (Recording Secretary) and Anna Aivaliotis (Corresponding Secretary). Although many chapter board officers have completed their terms, Anna Aivaliotis still continues her service as corresponding secretary with much dedication.

After fulfilling her duties as Chapter President in 2009, Michelle Kotsagrelis went on to serve as District Governor 2, followed by Cathy Pandeladis, who now is our first female member to serve on the Supreme Lodge (Treasurer/Database Manager). Another Chapter Icaros member who has worked diligently for the academic needs of our youth at the national level is Scholarship Chair Georgia Pandeladis.

Chapter Icaros continues to strive to be recognized as the chapter with the highest number of paid members. It maintains its governance with monthly meetings. Among its recent social activities, it has organized Atlantic City trips, sponsored Halloween /Oxi Day celebrations, children's Christmas parties, annual Super Bowl parties, and yearly Memorial Weekend Mini Conventions, which include the Steve Manners Golf Classic. It also fundraises with spaghetti,

chicken, or fish dinners donated by member families. Presently, Chapter Icaros with much enthusiasm is hosting the 2015 Convention with a theme of "Celebrating Women." It is fitting that our two, first ever female convention chairs, Chapter President Joanne Melacrinis and Sophia Facaros, take on this project and manage this most celebrated event.

Chapter Icaros' history would not be so rich 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.

Icaros' mother would surely be proud of her son's descendants and their love for the chapter that bears his name!

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