

FAUX IRISH IN DEEPEST TEXAS

Posted on June 4, 2023 by Keghart



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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 11 May 2023

It was a brisk March morning in Corpus Christi, the Texas town a stone's throw from Mexico. The year was 1982. I was on a bus tour of the town named "Body of Christ". We had seen the Harbor Bridge, the thousand-year-old oak tree, and the flamingo-blanketed beach. But the distracted guide wasn't making a particular effort to make Corpus Christi ("Sparkling City by the Sea") an alluring tourist destination. When we drove by an imposing mansion in the town's upscale neighborhood, I was surprised the guide said nothing about the three-story white building which boasted a sturdy red-roofed tower. When I asked him about the house, he replied that a wealthy family had built it long ago. The family didn't "mix much with the community...they were foreigners," he elaborated. I asked whether he knew the family's name. He said it was Donigan "with 'i' and not 'e'." I was not aware of the alternate spelling of Donegan. During the rest of the tour, I wondered why a family named Donigan would be considered foreigner and why didn't members of the family mingle with their hometown people. "Foreigners," "didn't mix with the community" and the misspelled Irish name made me wonder...My antennae was up. Were they Armenians who had changed their name from Donigian to Donigan?

A few days later, when I was back in Toronto, I wrote to the Corpus Christi Convention & Tourist Bureau and asked if they could send me information about the Donigans. Shortly after, the bureau sent me several clippings from the *Corpus Christi Caller* and *The Corpus Christi Times*. Some clippings went back to the Forties. Recently, I checked the Internet to learn more about the Donigans. Historian Robert Parks of KRIS6 News had expanded on what the earlier papers had published.

In an article titled "The Donigan Home: Ocean Drive's Most Recognizable House" Parks wrote that the Donigans originated in the Ottoman Empire "who had lived the American Dream in Corpus Christi and built the city's most famous home." Khachadour and Mary Donigian had immigrated to the United States in 1882 from Geyve, Turkey where Khachadour had been a wealthy silkworm merchant. Park wrote: "The Donigians were Armenian who were routinely persecuted by the Turks and their village was becoming increasingly dangerous to live." In the 1880s, about 22,000 Turks, 5,900 Armenians, and 4,500 Greeks lived in Geyve, a town two-three hours from Istanbul.

Using part of the \$10,000 in gold he had brought with him, Khachadour bought a farm near Houston. When his wife died the following year, he sold the farm and moved (1890) to Patisson, Texas. That year, Vartan, the son of Khachadour, married Hripsime Garabedian. The bride also hailed from Geyve.

Vartan, born in 1867, succeeded his father when Khachadour died. The young man had the golden touch. With interests in farming and mining, Vartan invested heavily in Corpus Christi real estate. It seemed whatever Donigan (he had dropped the "i" from his last name) touched turned into gold.

The Donigans had three sons (Parnot, Mesog, and Zareh) and two daughters (Nectarine and Lucille). Parnot must have been Parounag and Mesog probably Misag.



Donigan's State Hotel...1907

In 1907, Vartan built the State Hotel which became Corpus Christie's most significant building. After operating it for a few years, he leased the hotel for five years and moved to Fort Bend County to help his brother run a cotton gin firm. When he returned to Corpus Christi in 1912, he resumed operating the hotel. Parnot and Mesog helped their father manage the hotel. He then bought the 125-room Alta Vista Hotel which overlooked the sea. The hotel had never operated because of friction among its creditors. When the hotel burned down, Donigian built on the site a three-story, hefty mansion-homestead which he named Alta Vista Place but in time townspeople nicknamed Donigan's Castle. The mansion was a replica of the Donigian house in Gevye.

Vartan Donigian died in 1943 at the age of 76. Of the six pallbearers, three were Agopians from Brookshire, Texas. The obituary said Donigian was a member of the Armenian Episcopal Church. Mrs. Hripsime "Harop" Donigian died three years later.

Parnot and Mesog continued to manage the State Hotel in addition to running numerous other city properties.

Mesog didn't marry. Zareh lived much of his life in Brookshire where he was the manager of the

Brookshire Merchantile Company. He died in 1979.

Parnot, from an early age, was obsessed with bowling. In addition to his various businesses, he owned, over the years, several bowling outlets. He was also a state champion bowler. He died in 1992 at the age of 95. His sister Nectarine died in 1989 also at the age of 95.

Other than Vartan Donigan, the most interesting member of his clan was Ruth Donigan, the daughter of Parnot and Bertha. Born in 1932, she was a business, cultural, and social dynamo. She seemed to have been a member of every civic group in the city. She loved Corpus Christi and said she wouldn't leave her hometown "for a million dollars."

Ruth owned the Secretarial Services company. In a 1976 *Corpus Christi Caller* interview, she said: "The company does secretarial, accounting, bookkeeping and drafting work." The newspaper said she "was past conference secretary of the United Methodist Church, president of the Desk and Derrick Club, service team director of Paisano Girl Scout Council, treasurer of the Altrusa Club, P.E.O chapter, member and past vice-president of AV, and past conference secretary of the United Methodist Women, and she had worked 3,900 hours as a volunteer at the information desk of the Memorial Medical Center."



Donigan Home in 1933 and following renovation

Ruth had a B.A. and an M.A. in sociology, American literature and foreign languages. She spoke Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Italian, Russian and a few African dialects. She played the violin, trumpet, trombone, and piano.

In the interview with the newspaper, she said: "I like my work because I feel at one with it. I have always felt that you have to have a three-way oneness to survive: Oneness with God, oneness with yourself so that you feel comfortable with yourself and then, when you have those two, you automatically feel a oneness with other people."

Since Ruth was an avid reader, the reporter asked her what was the last book she had read. The ignorant reporter misquoted her and wrote that the last two books were Michael Arlen Jr.'s "Passage

to Arafat" and "Exiles". Ruth explained the books tell of Arlen Jrs.' search for his Armenian heritage. She said: "I'm Armenian and I think we have a great heritage so I read both books twice." Ruth did not marry. She died at the age of 49 in 1981.

Until a few decades ago to fit in the great melting pot called the United States of America newcomers had to downplay their ethnicity. It wasn't just their last name which the Donigans had to massage. Vartan was referred to as "V.D.". His son (Parunag) had become Parnot while his second son (Misag) had become Mesog. Vartan's wife abbreviated her name from Hripsime to Hrope while her name was spelled Garibidian. Reading the clan's history, one can't find any hint that Vartan's descendants spoke Armenian. Various members of the family had joined non-Apostolic Armenian churches, including the Episcopalian and Methodist. The loss of name and language are the first steps in loss of identity. How many other Armenians have vanished in the great American melting pot while reaching for the American Dream? Luckily, things are changing: the *Saturday Evening Post* version of America is no longer viable. The social, political, cultural...changes of the past fifty years should encourage young Armenians not to be lured by *odar* identity for there is no there there.

Photos: [*The Donigan Home: Ocean Drive's most recognizable house*](#)

Comments



Lucine – 2023-06-19 12:22:46

Fantastic article! Important teaching moments. Thank you, Jirair.



Arsine Basmadjian – 2023-06-06 13:56:08

Arsine says, June 5, 23 Wonderful story to read. This article shows the perseverance of Armenians who came to America to better their life. Some came with money and some were less fortunate to have the means. However, the majority became successful through their perseverance and hard work. I wish they had kept their Armenian name with pride
DONIGIAN



David – 2023-06-04 19:12:42

Great story!



H – 2023-06-04 12:05:42

Much more than an opinion. This is called investigative journalism of the highest order! One of the most interesting articles I have read about what the Armenians are pressured to do to change their name, culture, identity. And what Armenians have allowed and still allow to happen to their language, culture, and identity. Thank you Mr Tutunjian for your write up and thank you Keghart for publishing.



Sylvie Tertzakian – 2023-06-04 11:46:40

An excellent article with a great message.