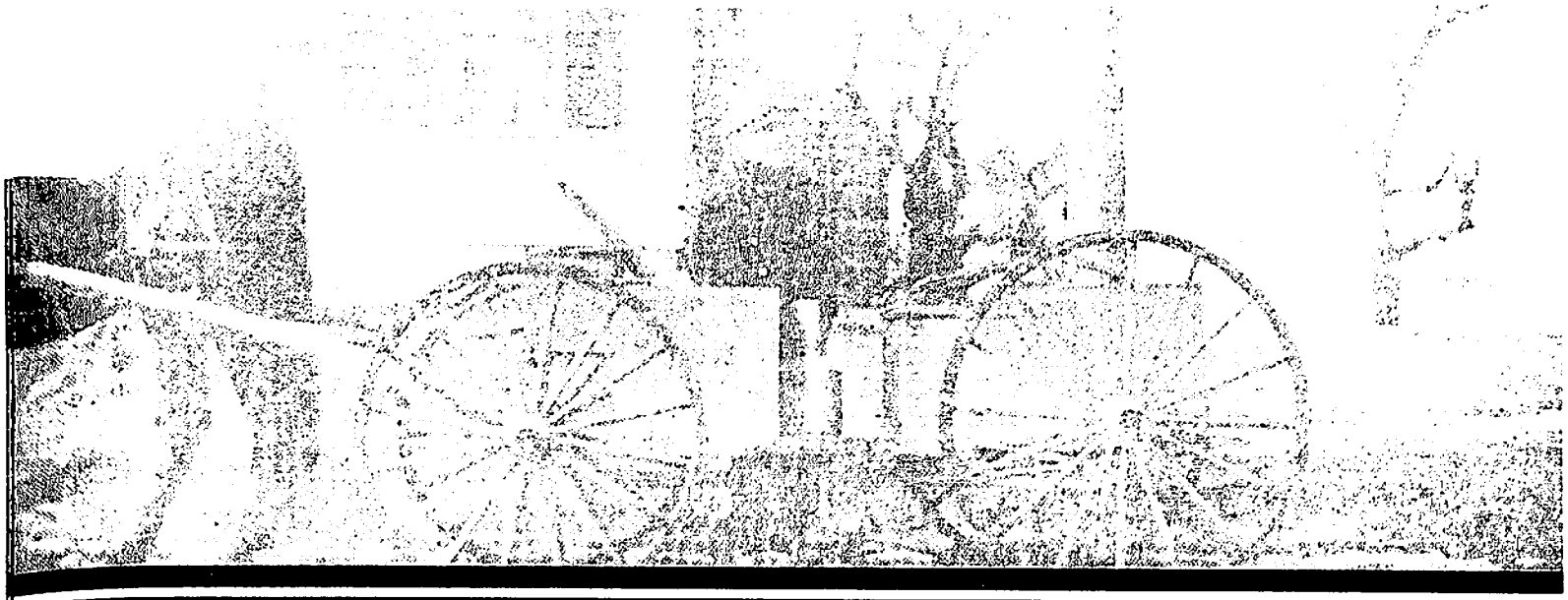


# 1901 Profile

At 15 years old, Petros Bakolas arrived in America from Greece to work in a shoe factory to pay for his sisters' dowries; soon, he was not so sure he wanted to return to his homeland.

## Life at Home

- When Petros Bakolas arrived at Ellis Island two years earlier, his father's first words were, "Welcome, son, it is now your turn."
- Since he was a young boy, Petros had known that he would be responsible for raising the dowries of his sisters, but that did not stop the sting of his father's words.
- Petros had come to America in the company of five young men, all from a village outside Sparta, Greece.
- All six had been recruited to work in a shoe factory in Cincinnati, Ohio, which was willing to pay the steamship fare to bring them to America.
- The entire trip over, the young Greek emigrants debated their vision of America; most believed they could make their fortune in one summer and be back in their homeland by fall.
- Petros's father had believed the same, but it took him four years to raise the money for one dowry.
- When Petros arrived, his father's comment clearly indicated that he was heading back to Greece as soon as possible.
- It was lonely enough to be a 15-year-old immigrant in America; it was twice as lonely to know that he'd soon be seeing the back of his father's shirt.
- For years Petros had dreamed about seeing his father again, feeling his rough hands upon his shoulders and sharing stories old and new.
- He had even looked forward to traveling together by train from New York to Cincinnati, where his father worked as a shoemaker since arriving in the first wave of Greeks coming to America.
- Unlike emigrants from the rest of Europe, Greek emigrants joined the flood of workers streaming into the country later than most.

*At 15, Petros Bakolas arrived in America from Greece.*

first decade of the twentieth century was double the number for the previous decade, exceeding one million annually in four of the 10 years, the highest level in U.S. history. Business and industry were convinced that unrestricted immigration was the fuel that drove the growth of American industry. Labor was equally certain that the influx of foreigners continually undermined the economic status of native workers and kept wages low.

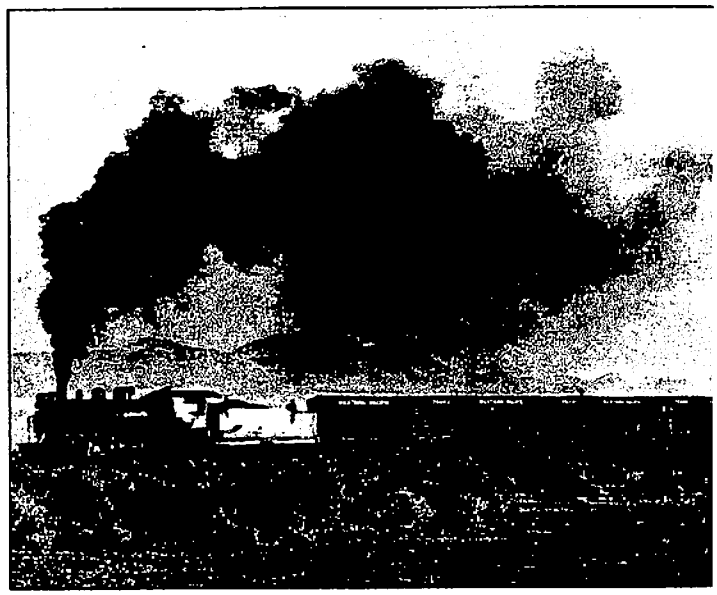
The change in productivity and consumerism came with a price: the character of American life. Manufacturing plants drew people from the country into the cities. The traditional farm patterns were disrupted by the lure of urban life. Ministers complained that lifelong churchgoers who moved to the city often found less time and fewer social pressures to attend worship regularly. Between 1900 and 1920, the urban population increased by 80 percent compared to just over 12 percent for rural areas. During the same time, the non-farming workforce went from 783,000 to 2.2 million. Unlike farmers, these workers drew a regular paycheck, and spent it.

With this movement of people, technology and ideas, nationalism took on a new meaning in America. Railroad expansion in the middle of the nineteenth century had made it possible to move goods quickly and efficiently throughout the country. As a result, commerce, which had been based largely on local production of goods for local consumption, found new markets. Ambitious merchants expanded their businesses by appealing to broader markets.

In 1900, America claimed 58 businesses with more than one retail outlet called "chain stores"; by 1910, that number had more than tripled, and by 1920, the total had risen to 808. The number of clothing chains alone rose from seven to 125 during the period. Department stores such as R.H. Macy in New York and Marshall Field in Chicago offered vast arrays of merchandise along with free services and the opportunity to "shop" without purchasing. Ready-made clothing drove down prices, but also promoted fashion booms that reduced the class distinction of dress. In rural America, the mail order catalogs of Sears, Roebuck and Company reached deep into the pocket of the common man and made dreaming and consuming more feasible.

All was not well, however. A brew of labor struggles, political unrest, and tragic factory accidents demonstrated the excesses of industrial capitalism so worshipped in the Gilded Age. The labor reform movements of the 1880s and 1890s culminated in the newly formed American Federation of Labor as the chief labor advocate. By 1904, 18 years after it was founded, the AFL claimed 1.676 million of 2.07 million total union members nationwide. The reforms of the labor movement called for an eight-hour workday, child-labor regulation, and cooperatives of owners and workers. The progressive bent of the times also focused attention on factory safety, tainted food and drugs, political corruption, and unchecked economic monopolies.

- And despite poverty and poor farming in their homeland, most vowed in their hearts they were only leaving t beloved Greece temporarily, just until they had enough money for their sisters' dowries, to construct a house o buy a farm.
- The majority of Greek immigrants were young men who had left rural areas still under the oppressive rule of Ottoman Turks.
- The people were not only poor, but their family obligations weighed very heavily upon them.
- Brothers were expected to pay their sisters' dowries before they could start their own families.
- Complicating matters, taxes were high under Turkish rule and many families carried long-standing farm debts.
- During their first meal together in America, Petros's father told him that he would not be going to Cincinnati; inst he would be boarding a steamship the next day.
- He'd been away for four years and was eager to see his homeland.
- Then he coughed loudly, held his sides tightly and wiped some bloody spittle from his mouth.
- His advice: Only buy from Greeks; stay away from unions and American girls; avoid cold, closed buildings; and come home quickly so his younger sisters could marry.
- "Enough of America," he said in Greek as he left for the docks the next morning, "Now it is your turn."
- Arrangements had been made for Petros to work at a shoe factory in Ohio; now all he needed to do was get there.
- None of the six boys from Sparta spoke English, and none had ever ridden a train or used American money.
- Two were still dressed like Greek farmers, which attracted stares, even in New York.
- But they had jobs if they could find Ohio using the train tickets the company had provided.
- Greek immigrants were known for their excellent manual dexterity, solid work ethic and a great capacity to save money.
- This last attribute kept the workers out of bars and made them more dependable, especially on Saturdays and Mondays when hangovers were epidemic.



*Petros and other arrivals from Sparta, Greece, took the train from l York to Ohio to begin work.*

- Petros's mother had died in childbirth when he was nine years old.
- When his father went to America to make his fortune a few years later, Petros was raised by an aunt and uncle.
- For decades, the men of his village had been heading for other lands to make a living, but rarely were they gon more than two years.
- So his father's letter calling for his oldest son and five other willing workers to take jobs in America caused vil wide excitement and speculation.
- Petros's village was up in the mountains where the backs of animals instead of wheels were used to carry things
- Petros saw his first wheeled cart when he was 15 and getting ready for his journey to America.
- The trip to America also introduced him to trains, ocean-going steamships, large crowds and bananas.
- Bananas were part of a welcome basket provided by a Christian organization in New York whose gifts included eral pamphlets in English, which Petros could not read, and some fruit.
- None of the six boys from Greece knew what to do with the yellow fruit until a passerby demonstrated how to it; Petros immediately loved the creamy exotic taste and vowed to eat bananas often.
- Once the immigrants arrived in Cincinnati aboard a train, there were people waiting for them to go directly t apartment owned by their new employer.
- There they were treated to ice cream—another delight first enjoyed in America.

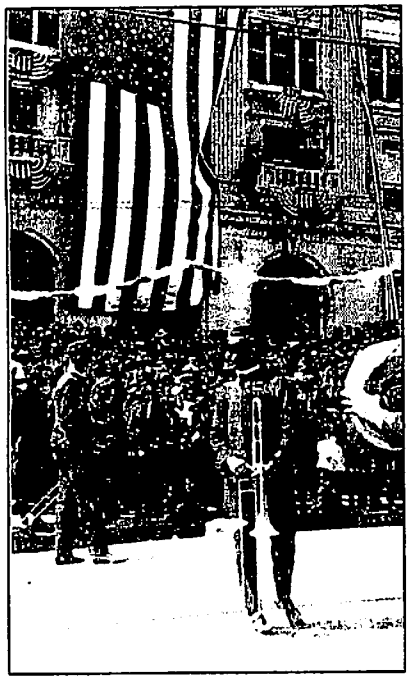
- Then the six young men were shown where they could sleep in the two-bedroom apartment and where to report for work the next day.
- Accustomed to small rooms and crowded conditions their entire lives, all six elected to sleep on the floor of one room.

## Life at Work

- Petros learned quickly that the Greeks must stick together to survive in a world that spoke a different language, dressed in a different manner and seemed not to care what life was like back in Greece.
- Work quickly became an oasis of pleasure; two Greek supervisors—and friends of his father—were very willing to show Petros how to both operate the leather-sewing machinery and manage life in a new land.
- Within a week he felt capable of producing an acceptable shoe that met the standards of the company.
- And he made his first American money.
- Living with five fellow workers from Greece proved less acceptable.
- The oldest of the group, Iannis, wanted to establish all the rules and enforce them with a rigidity Petros found inappropriate.
- But following Greek tradition, he allowed the oldest to rule—until he was told he could not attend school at night to learn English.
- The YMCA down the street was offering free classes to newly arrived immigrants on how to read, write and speak English.
- Within days of his arrival, Petros had decided to learn English so he would not be hassled on the streets of Cincinnati.
- Yet the boy who had taken the role of boss said, "No."
- Iannis believed that everyone should stay together as a group; besides, he was convinced that Petros simply wanted to meet girls, not learn English.
- He said that everything in the United States was out of proportion, was too loose and free, and that going to school alone could only cause trouble.

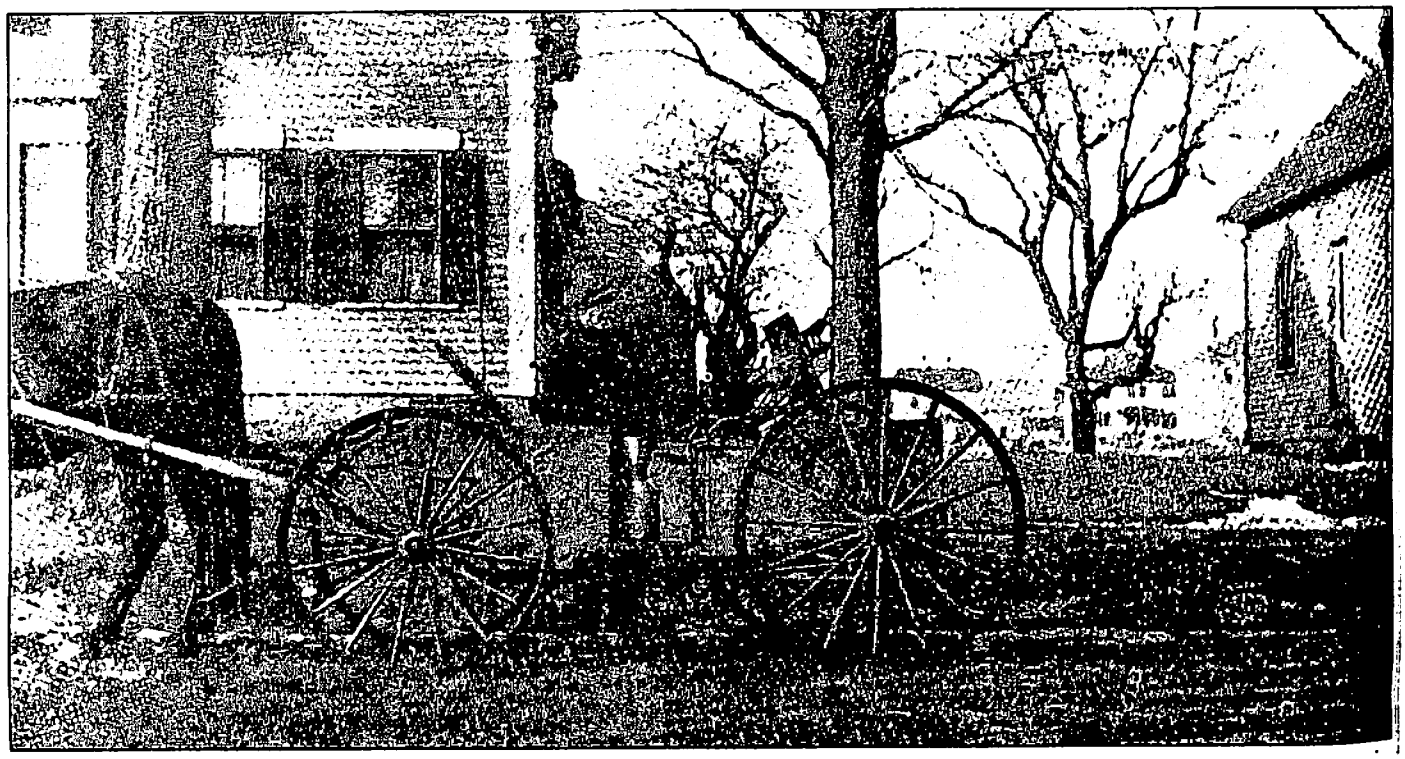

*Petros quickly learned how to produce quality shoes at the shoe factory.*

- Iannis said there was no YMCA in Greece, so none was necessary here.
- Petros went to the night classes anyway, only to find all the apartment doors locked when he returned.
- A major shouting match ensued and four of the six moved out so they could attend school also.
- Overnight, Petros had become the leader.
- His work started at 7 a.m. and lasted until 6 p.m. with one hour for lunch.
- He had to learn how to care for himself with no mother, no father, no uncles, no aunts or help from the community.
- In a place where all the sounds and smells were different, he had to work a full day, take care of his clothing, learn to cook and go to school at night if he wanted to be an American.
- He was paid between $4.75 and $7.50 a week, depending on his production; 10 weeks of the year he was laid off without pay when boot and shoe orders became slow.
- No sick leave was permitted, no holidays except Christmas, and no compensation if injured on the job.
- Most workers did not report on-the-job injuries for fear of losing employment; every immigrant knew that dozens of workers were willing to take his place as soon as he complained or slowed down.
- Immigrants also knew that talking to union organizers was dangerous business, especially after the major labor strikes the boot and shoemaking industry had experienced a few years earlier.
- The unions were all promising better pay, shorter hours and more breaks.



*Petros learned enough English to socialize with Americans on the street.*

- Within nine months Petros had learned enough English at work and at the YMCA to be willing to speak to Americans on the street.
- For the first time he understood that the ruffians in his community thought he was Italian, hated his clothes and respected his powerful shoulders.
- His YMCA classes also taught him about dangerous diseases such as tuberculosis, or TB, which was killing thousands around the world.
- Their description included the hacking cough, high fever and the bloody mouth he had seen on his arrival, and for the first time understood why his father was so eager to return to Greece: he was dying of the dread disease in a foreign land among strangers.
- On Sundays, after communion in a tiny Greek orthodox service, Petros often took the trolley outside the city so he could walk the farmlands of Ohio and dream of Greece.
- Every month he was sending money home so his two younger sisters could marry, and often shined shoes in the park on Sundays so his remittances would be larger.
- All around him he saw opportunity and often wondered whether he really wished to return to Greece when the time came.
- Now that he was learning to speak English and had acquired a passing knowledge of sums, he wondered whether he could become a merchant—an American merchant.
- Working in a factory was for animals, willing to do the same thing over and over again for the little grain the bosses chose to toss.
- Besides, he might even defy his father's advice and marry an American girl who had grown up in a brick house with heat, knew about trains and had even seen an automobile.



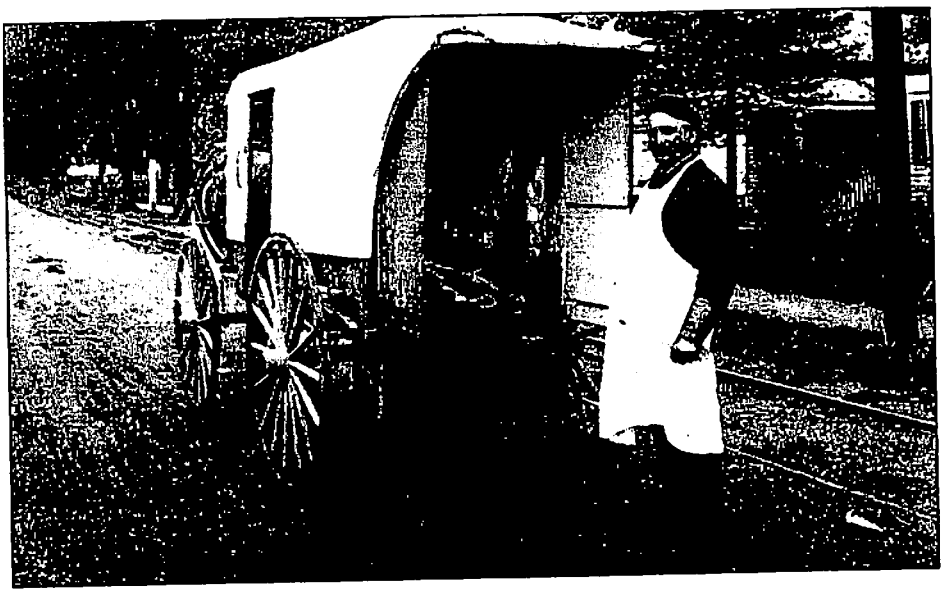
*At 15, Petros began working in America.*

*Transportation by rail was especially good in Cincinnati, with more than 20 railroads within city limits.*

## Life in the Community: Cincinnati, Ohio

- Owing to its peculiarly eligible location, Cincinnati had long been a manufacturing center respected for its ingenuity.
- Transportation by rail and water were especially good; more than 20 railroads converged within its borders.
- Annually, the Ohio River cheaply moved abundant quantities of bituminous coal from Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio to power the factories and support 500,000 people living in the city and surrounding area.
- Well-known for its whiskey distilleries, Cincinnati also boasted iron making, White Burley tobacco manufacturing, several cigar box factories and the manufacture of numerous lines of clothing, boots and shoes.
- In addition, the oldest and best-known publishing house in the West, Robert Clarke & Co., started in Cincinnati in 1857; locals liked to brag that so many schoolbook publishers existed in the city that a finished book was turned out "with every swing of the pendulum of a clock."
- The manufacture of billiard tables was one of the largest industries in Cincinnati at the turn of the twentieth century; Cincinnati was also home to Baldwin and Company, manufacturer of organs and pianos, and the famous Rookwood pottery, a high art institution of the city.


*In addition to factory work, Cincinnati boasted a thriving music scene.*



*For many Greeks, employment as a street vendor was a first step toward a more promising career.*

- Cincinnati was also proud of the well-appointed Procter & Gamble factory village, Ivorydale, created to manufacture its celebrated Ivory soap and candles.
- By contrast, ancient Greece, which had inspired one of the greatest civilizations in history of the world, scarcely showed any traces of its former glory in 1900.
- Wracked by internal conflict and conquest, Greek citizens were eager to find their fortunes elsewhere.
- For thousands, employment in American factories, mines, and as street vendors was a first step toward a more promising career.
- And once they had acquired enough capital, Greeks who elected to stay in America habitually established small shops to sell flowers, confectionery or prepared foods.
- These family-run businesses enjoyed a high degree of success, as everyone in the Greek community tended to support one another.
- So successful were the Greek restaurants, Petros was able to regularly find feta cheese, kokoresti and domathakia—reminders of home—by his second year in America.