

KARAVAS KYTHERA TO GLADSTONE, QUEENSLAND LIFE STORY OF MICK CORONES (1903 -1969)



Before we venture on to read an oral history of Mick Corones by one of his staff – Jessie Bain – (as told to John Sourrys) - it is important to place Mick's life in context. Minas Koroneos was born in Karavas, Kythera, in 1903. His parachoukli (nickname) was

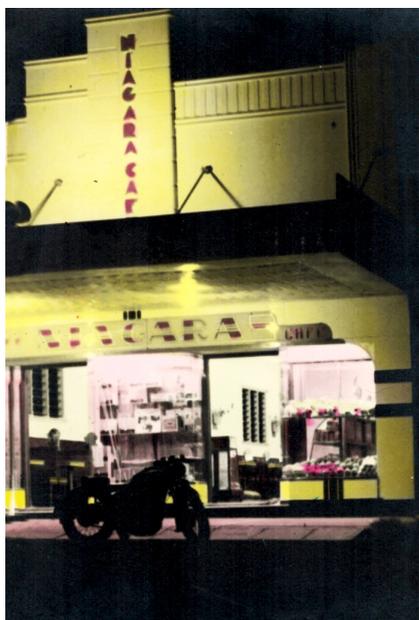
'Koutalyanos'. Despite the fact that he came to Australia in 1928 – and was well established by the end of WWII, he does not feature in Denis Conomos' classic work, *The Greeks in Queensland - a history from 1859-1945*. Hopefully this brief article may encourage more intense research into his life and legacy.

When he arrived in Queensland he moved to Charleville and worked for Harry "Poppa" Corones, an uncle. He then moved to Quilpie, to work with Jim Corones, Harry's brother. From there he moved to Wowan where he opened his first cafe in about 1935. He obtained his Australian citizenship at this time.

In 1938 he moved to Gladstone. Gladstone was named after British Prime Minister William Gladstone (1809 – 1898), and is a city in the Gladstone Region of Queensland. It lies approximately 550 kilometres by road north of Brisbane, and 100 kilometres south-east of Rockhampton. It is a major Port and industrial city

opposite the Great Barrier Reef. Heron Island lies opposite, and is only accessible from Gladstone.

In 1939 Mick Corones opened up the Niagara Cafe. It was a magnificent Art Deco building, which incorporated all the modern cafe ideas imported from America. Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis have spent



a lifetime researching the 'Greek cafe' and its role in 'the Americanisation of Australian eating and social habits'.

"The American influence was essentially generated by Greeks who had relatives or friends working in the United States in food catering enterprises, or who had been there themselves working in such establishments. The classic Greek country cafe, which experienced its golden period from the mid-1930s to late 1960s, was primarily an evolutionary amalgam of its three predecessors. In names such as the California, Niagara, Monterey, Astoria, Hollywood, New York and Golden Gate, the American component of the Greek cafe's creation is well suggested, but more so in its provision of customers with American sundaes, milkshakes, sodas and freezes or crushes, American confectionery (hard sugar candies and milk chocolate bars), and another popular product, American ice cream".

In this tradition Mick had imbibed his 'cafe' ideas from his father Panayotis Koroneos, who had recently visited America for an extended period. He was particularly proud of the modern coloured strip neon lighting, which formed part of the decor of the Niagara. The Niagara was not located in the central business district of Gladstone, but it was located opposite the Regent picture theatre, and very close to the railway station, in order to maximise business.

Mick Corones struggled in the early years, but his business prospered during the WWII because American troops took their Rest & Recreation leave in north Queensland.

In 1948 Mick Corones married Evdokea Avgoustinou, the daughter of a doctor, from Piraeus. She was fairly quickly inducted into the 'cafe culture' workforce. Mick and Evdokea would have two children, Helen, born in 1949, and Peter, born in 1951.



In 1951 – because of lack of accommodation in Gladstone, Mick decided to build a caravan park at Barney Point, on the waterfront. Barney Point is named for Lt Colonel Barney – who led an expedition from NSW to establish a colony in Queensland. It is backed by a reserve – Friend Park - that commemorates the founding of Gladstone, together with a picnic, playground and barbecue area. Barney Point is the only swimming beach in the township of Gladstone, and is located 1 km east of the city centre. It is a 300 m long, east facing beach that usually only receives low wind waves generated inside the harbour.

The Corones Caravan Park became an iconic tourist attraction, synonymous with the town of Gladstone. You can see how highly the Corones Caravan Park was regarded by the viewing the various postcards of



Gladstone depicted on this page. Prominent persons used the caravan facility at Barneys Point. Note that in the Corones Series No 4, Corones Caravan Park, Gladstone, Q postcard, Slim Dusty's "Super" caravan is parked there.

Along with the caravan park, Mick opened up a second cafe at Barney Point. Originally it featured a tea garden, which was used for a while, for 'al fresco' dining. For



many years Mick Corones ran both the Niagara and Barney Point simultaneously. It became increasingly difficult to staff

both enterprises, so in the time honoured Kytherian tradition, Mick enticed young nephews to migrate to Australia to assist. After WW2 – the immigration boom from southern Europe was at its peak.

The 'nephews' Mick sponsored to Australia included Nick Tzortzopoulos, and Harry Corones (who migrated in 1948), and Harry's twin brothers Mick(y) and John Corones, who migrated to Australia in 1950. John Coumessos arrived in June 1951. His mother and Peter Corones (jnr) maternal grandmother were sisters.

Nick Tzortzopoulos was born in Plattia Ammos, the son of Lefteri Tzortzopoulos. In 1978 Nick moved back to Kythera, with his family, and lived in Karavas in the Patrikio Skoli, for a number of years before moving to Plattia Ammos. He served in various capacities on the Municipality of Kythera, achieving a great deal for the northern part of the island. He died on Kythera in 2009.

Mick(y) Corones, twin John, and older brother Harry were born in Korenianika, Karavas. They worked in the Niagara Cafe from 1950 until 1960. In the early sixties Mick Corones decided that he could no longer maintain both the Niagara and Barney Point, and run them efficiently. He sold the Niagara business to the three Corones brothers and another nephew John Coumessos who ran it in partnership for two years.

Mick(y) Corones remained in the partnership until 1970, when he left Gladstone. He moved to Brisbane, where he ran a restaurant for a number of years in



(Nephews L-R) Nick Tzortzopoulos, Mick(y) Corones, John Coumessos - Great mates at the Niagara Cafe.

Garden City, which is a large retail complex at Mt Gravatt. He then moved on to run a fruit shop business, for 12 years at Stones Corner, which is located on the

fringe of the Brisbane CBD. Now retired, he is 79 years of age, and continues to live in Brisbane.

John Coumessos was born in Bayianika, near Karavas. Upon arriving in Queensland in 1951, he worked for Mick Corones throughout the 1950's, until entering into the partnership with the Corones brothers. After 2 years, John Coumessos sold his share and moved to Biloela. Biloela is a rural town and locality in Shire of Banana, Central Queensland. It is situated 120 kilometres (75 mi) inland from the port city of Gladstone. There he opened a fish shop. He moved back to Gladstone in 1965, where he opened another fish shop business for 2 years. After being employed in various occupations, he eventually retired in Gladstone, surrounded by his family. He is now 80 years of age.

You can see the three nephews, Nick Tzortzopoulos, Mick(y) Corones and John Coumessos along with their



Uncle Mick Corones and two staff members, behind the counter of the Niagara Cafe, in this photograph.

During the early 1950's, young Mick(y) came back from Sydney with a pair of roller skates. Mick Corones decided that roller skating was a craze with a future, so he converted the al fresco part of his cafe into a skating rink. You can see the size and scope of the skating rink, in the photograph opposite / above / below. Skating engendered a great thirst and hunger amongst the patrons, which proved a boon to Mick Corones' neighbouring cafe business.

In 1969, Mick Corones died, as the result of a heart attack, aged 66. Peter Corones, his son was just 18. He was still in High School. He found himself suddenly promoted to the helm of the businesses that his father had created. Peter Corones' business and public life achievements in the 40+ years since, is another story for another time.

Evdokea Corones, Mick's wife and Peter's mother, died in 2002, aged 84.

Peter and his wife Kathy run the Barney Beach Accommodation Centre, which now features 85



superbly appointed cabins on the site. Mick Corones would be well proud of what the Barney Beach Caravan Park has been transformed into.

Peter Corones would appreciate any information about his father's life in the years between 1928 & 1939 in particular. Contact him by email at petercorones@bigpond.com



A Mini-Memoir:

Jessie Bayne as told to John Sourrys.

A Slice of Your Life: The Niagara Cafe, Gladstone, Queensland. Mick Corones

It was war in the Pacific. The Japanese invasion was imminent. Troop trains with young soldier recruits rumbled north while troop trains carrying the wounded



rumbled south. Near the railway station at Gladstone stood the Cafe Niagara - one of the best eateries in Australia.

The Niagara Cafe was run by an emotional Greek by the name of Mick Corones. The railway would let Mick know when the troop trains were going through. Mick would make sure he would be open for them. Sometimes the trains arrived in the middle of the night. The soldiers would be tonguing for a good steak. They would come pouring out of the train station. The rush would be on. Mick had to get the meals out. Mick would get excited and he and the other Greeks would start shouting; and with the raised voices would come 'talking with their hands.' You know what the Greeks are like? Just when you thought violence would erupt it would be all over. It was very volatile. My sister who was 17 and a waitress there couldn't handle it. She wanted out. But there were the manpower regulations and you couldn't leave like that.

My name is Jessie Bayne. I was a 12 year old girl at the time and these are my observations of Mick Corones.

Mick told my mother that my sister could leave but only if she replaced her. My mother's name was Ellen Mercy Bain. Everybody called her Mercy. She had 5 kids and dad was in hospital dying of cancer. She needed the money so she took the job.

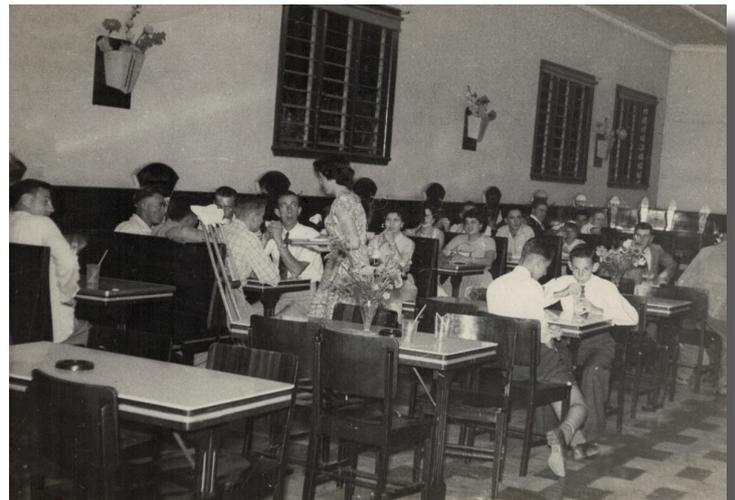
She was just a wisp of a thing but real smart. Her brain was always ticking over. She could do anything. She could balance 4 or 5 plates on one arm and make sure the customer got the right order. She became valuable to Mick because there were no bookkeepers around and mum could do the books. She became a key employee.

Mum and dad were a real love match but she had to work long hours. She had to walk to work through the blackout. She got a bike. She could ride it when no one was around but if there was anybody around she'd fall off. We all had bikes and we'd laugh; we would say, 'come on mum pretend there is no one around.'

Mick had a job to get the meals out. He didn't wear his heart on his sleeve. Mick expected everybody to work. We kids - there were 3 of us - would go to the cafe to see mum and Mick would put us to work. There was no standing around. We'd be put to work wiping the dishes. Mind you we kids were not paid but he would feed us. Keeping up the plates was a major enterprise. Grandma got a job washing the dishes. She needed the extra money.

Mick was big on presentation. One of my jobs was to do the butter on a dish. You used to use something like a paddle pop stick shaped with ridges. You rolled the butter up and made it fancy and put it on a little dish.

They used to do grills, mixed grills and fish. When it came to meat, Mick only wanted the best for the soldier boys. He controlled the quality by dealing with his



own butchers. There was a meat works in Gladstone. I never saw anybody prepare grilled fish like he did. His nephew Harry was a top cook too.

My father who was in hospital liked Irish Moss. It was a cough mixture and dad like it running down his throat. We couldn't afford little luxuries, but Mick bought dad a whole carton of Irish Moss.

Mick sent over to Greece for a wife. Mum tried to teach her English. I remember Mick's wife couldn't pronounce the word one. She would say o,n,e, each letter singly. She ended up giving up saying - 'English is mad.'

Our family the Bain family were in the Salvation Army and the captain would give vouchers for food to the blokes on the road. There was no welfare in those days. Mick would often feed them and accept nothing. A real Christian!

Mum was working hard. We never knew Mick to have a holiday. She was tired. Working long hours. She had Dad to worry about. She felt guilty she wasn't seeing the kids so she told Mick that she needed time off. Mick refused. So Mum threw down the tea towel and walked out.

Mick would send food to our house by Taxi - ham and fruit. The taxi driver would call out, 'fill up the pantry!' Mum would tell the taxi driver to tell Mick she wasn't coming back. The taxi driver much amused said, 'good on you!' But the taxi driver kept coming around with goods from the Niagara. He would laugh and the message became, 'I am not ready yet!'

Finally, Mercy went back. I had my reception for my wedding at the Niagara. When I moved to Townsville with my husband and had children we would go back to Gladstone and take the kids to see Mick. He was always pleased to see us and would shout the kids ice cream and drinks.

You asked me how I'd rate him as a human being? I'd have to give him 10 out of 10. He was good to my family.



John Sourrys comments:

When I heard this story I thought it had everything. It was a slice of life was set in World War 11 and Gladstone was a place in the thick of it. What was at stake was the feeding of the soldiers. And a Kytherian did it. Very successfully too. He didn't compromise on quality. He served the best steaks and we underestimate how good the Kytherian cafe owner was. You see American awards for best eateries. The produce always came first. Nothing compares to a big juicy steak, forget the trimmings. Here the Kytherian were before their time.

Alex Bain Jessie's brother walked into the White Swan Cafe in Hughenden in North Western Queensland and he was surprised

to see Johnny Corones behind the counter. Johnny and his brother young Mick were new arrivals in Australia and were Mick's nephews who came out later. Johnny was to marry Stella Georgas from Kythera. He met her in Hughenden. Johnny had bulked up; he was in training then. Mick, his brother who remained in Gladstone, could handle himself too and had a gym behind the shop. You never knew when somebody would attack you with a chair.

Mick Corones' son, Peter would later become the Mayor of Gladstone, for 14 continuous years.



Niagara Cafe today - Of course it's important that shops have good uses, as this Medical Centre does. But is symptomatic of how many of the Kytherian and Greek Australian cafes have disappeared, along with their Art Deco beauty. The Greek cafe culture heritage thereby risks being lost forever. That is why the preservation of Greek Cafe's such as the Roxy in Bingara and the Paragon in Katoomba is very important. It helps retain our Greek Australian History.

