

**Mr. Arthur Vambaketes, Member of the Vambaketes Family Ownership Group of Tony's Ranch House Restaurant and Lounge at 3330 Godfrey Road in Godfrey, Illinois; Lifelong Resident of the Godfrey-Alton region of Madison County Illinois; Veteran Social Studies Middle School Teacher of the Jennings and Ferguson-Florissant School Districts in St. Louis County, Missouri**

**Transcript of Interview for the Madison Historical Society Oral History Project.**

**Interviewed by Mr. Brian K. Weaver, Sr., PhD History Student at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville**

**Date: May 28, 2024**

**Brian Weaver [BW]:** 00:03 [Recording Starts]: The following interview was conducted with Mr. Arthur Vambaketes on behalf of the Madison County Oral History Project, which is part of Madison Historical, the online encyclopedia and digital archive for Madison County, Illinois. The interview took place on Tuesday, May 28, 2024, at Tony's Ranch House Restaurant and Lounge in Godfrey, Illinois, 3330 Godfrey Road. The interviewer is Mr. Brian K. Weaver, Sr., PhD history student at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville in conjunction with Southern Illinois University Carbondale. To begin, Mr. Vambaketes, how are you doing today?

**Arthur Vambaketes [AV]:** 00:47 I'm doing well. Thanks for having me.

**BW:** 00:49 It's our pleasure to be able to come and visit with you and dialogue with you concerning Godfrey, Illinois and Madison County, and the history therein. Mr. Vambaketes, tell me about your childhood and adolescence in Godfrey. How was life in Godfrey in the 1980s and the 1990s?

**AV:** 01:12 All right. Well, I was born in 1980. I actually grew up in Alton, which is right next to Godfrey. My grandparents lived in Godfrey and then my family had the Tonys' Ranch House on Godfrey Road, which was also in Godfrey. It was good. I mean, we rode bikes around the neighborhood, we went up to the ice cream stand, you know, it was different than what kids do today. But we thought it was awesome. I went to St. Mary's Catholic School, kindergarten through sixth grade, and then went to Alton Public School District where I finished high school in 1998.

**BW:** 01:49 Okay, tell me a little bit about what your schooling was like at St. Mary's. And then, as well, what was the schooling like, curriculum-wise and things like that—life for a teenager in Alton High School, as well as for a child of pre- adolescence at St. Mary's Catholic.

**AV:** 02:16 St. Mary's, it was a pretty good, really tight-knit community. Mostly everybody was Catholic. I wasn't Catholic, I was Greek Orthodox, but we went there. It's actually the same school my grandpa went to as a kid. It's right as you cross the bridge. It's that big brown church that you see.

Mostly, kids' parents knew each other. We all went to the same swimming pool in the summer together. A lot of us played sports together. So, it was a really tight-knit community. And then growing up and going to public school, I really enjoyed public school too. It wasn't as tight-knit of a community as St. Mary's, it was a much larger community but, I got in with a group of friends that usually played sports and I hung out with them until I graduated. I went to Alton High, which is now the current Alton Middle School, when it was three separate buildings. It was an open campus and they gave us a lot of freedom; it's just different than I see what kids have today.

**BW:** 03:14 Uh huh. Were you able to decide on your career path while you were in high school? Or did that kind of morph as you graduated from high school?

**AV:** 03:28 Yeah, always being around the family business, I thought this was probably what I was going to do. But not being a college graduate, my dad always wanted me to make sure I got a college degree. So, I really didn't think much about careers or much in high school. I always enjoyed history and social studies. So, once I started going to college and had to start zeroing in on my classes, that kind of seemed like the most viable path for me, and I always enjoyed school and being around students and stuff like that. So that kind of just morphed once I got to, pretty much Lewis and Clark Community College, which I went to first and then Southern Illinois at Edwardsville.

**BW:** 04:07 Okay, so then growing up in the restaurant, it sounds like the restaurant was a central feature within your family kinship network. Talk a little bit about what it is, what it meant to grow up, really, within a restaurant.

**AV:** 04:28 Yeah, we were pretty much born and raised here at the restaurant. At the time, we didn't think much about it, you know, it was normal for us. I mean, I'd be sitting right next to the grills and in the coolers and everything and people would be cooking and coming and going—hustling-bustling, and us kids would be all around all the time. My grandparents were always here. My grandma would always be cooking. My grandpa would always be sitting on the bar side chatting with the customers. And then the same with my parents, they'd always be here also. So, we were here almost, not every day, but pretty much almost every day.

**BW:** 05:05 So, was the restaurant named Tony's Restaurant back then?

**AV:** 05:10 In the 1980s, and before that, it was called Carroll's, that was my grandfather's partner, from 1960 to 1984. And then in 1984, my dad bought the other half of it. So, it was all in our family. And a few years after that, he changed the name to Tony's Ranch House. The Ranch House, the original name of the place when it opened in the 1940s was Phil's Ranch House. And it was like a car hop and a drive up. So, he kind of went back to the roots of the name, he just switched it from Phil's to Tony's.

**BW:** 05:46 Okay. So, then the restaurant, did it feature American cuisine mainly?

**AV:** 05:54 Yeah, it was mostly like an American diner cuisine. Sandwiches, we were open 24 hours in the 80s and 90s, early 90s. So, a lot of breakfast foods, omelets, and just breakfast plates and stuff like that. Recently, you know, once my generation—my brother and my sister started running things—we've kind of switched to more of an American-Greek themed menu.

**BW:** 06:25 Okay. And how did that go over?

**AV:** 06:30 Well, about maybe 10 years ago, we started doing Greek Nights, once a month, and it just went over super, super good. We only do it once a month. They're usually all sold out, we sell out of almost everything we make. You know, we pride ourselves, they're all homemade recipes that my yai-yai taught my aunt, my aunt has taught us, and we remember my yai-yai cooking 'em, my grandmother, so it's gone over really, really well.

**BW:** 06:57 So then, the physical location of the restaurant, has it changed? Or has it always been in this location at 3330 Godfrey Road?

**AV:** 07:06 The actual Ranch House has always been right here at 3330 Godfrey Road. My family, starting with my great grandfather, had owned places in Alton throughout the years, throughout the 20th century. But this is the place that we've had since, like I said, my dad bought the other half in 1984.

**BW:** 07:27 So then, is it safe to say that Tony's Ranch House is a fixture in the community?

**AV:** 07:33 Yeah, it's a fixture. It's on the main thoroughfare in town. Everybody's got stories that come here back in like the 80s or 90s, with their grandparents and getting breakfast or getting off work and having a drink on the other side, you know, with some co-workers. So yeah, we see people in here that are, that are elderly, and then we see people that are from the new generation.

**BW:** 08:01 Okay. So then, through your lens, and through the lens of Tony's Ranch House, concerning Godfrey, Illinois, in what ways has Godfrey changed over time, since the 1980s, I would say?

**AV:** 08:23 It's become a lot more developed. It was pretty much a farming community up until the 70s I would think. Even when my grandfather bought this, I remember my dad telling me stories, and he thought that Godfrey was a rural farming community. Not that Alton was much more back then, but he just saw it as two different areas. So, it's much more developed, it has remained pretty conservative and tries to respect green spaces as much as possible. But at the same time offering opportunities for businesses and development.

**BW:** 09:00 Okay. I understand that Godfrey was incorporated as a village in 1991. If you could, please describe its dynamics and relationship with Alton and other nearby Great River Road communities.

**AV:** 09:23 Okay, from what I understand, I was pretty young at the time, but I think Alton kept encroaching on Godfrey because it was an unincorporated village. It wanted to become its own community. I remember the first mayor, he was one of my college professors up at Lewis and Clark, Lars Hoffman. He was actually out here the night that he won the first term as mayor. So, I remember those kinds of stories because my dad was also in politics too in Alton as an alderman, even though he owned this business in Godfrey. So, you know, he always liked that part of society too. So, I don't really know how much it has changed or anything because of that dynamic or that switch. I know that we take a lot of pride in the River Road and the bike trail and our parks and everything like that. I feel like as a village instead of just an unincorporated town, it's been able to stand on its own two feet and make a little more progress than it probably would have otherwise. But like I said, I was only 11 years old when that happened.

**BW:** 10:27 Hmm. Do you remember the general sense of, or was there a sense of celebration, a sense of camaraderie or cohesion? Or was there kind of a hesitancy to...just through your young...

**AV:** 10:42 Through my young eyes, I think there was a sense of celebration. I don't know, but from my dad, I probably got that vibe, mostly from him. And my grandpa, my grandfather was here. I don't know if they thought that that would increase development and spur development, and maybe that would help the business and things like that, but it seemed like it was a sense of celebration.

**BW:** 11:04 Okay. Okay. So then, along that same vein, what would you consider to be Godfrey's claim to fame, if you will. What sets it apart from nearby towns and villages?

**AV:** 11:19 I would think it'd have to be, even though we share it with Grafton and Alton, I would think it'd be the Great River Road. Our connection to the river and our agricultural past and all that kind of just melds right there, I feel like with the Great River Road.

**BW:** 11:34 Um Hm. And to kind of follow up with that. Could you tell me about any monuments or events, such as parades, or festivals, statues, anything like that to serve as a source of pride, for Godfrey inhabitants?

**AV:** 11:55 Godfrey, it doesn't seem like so much as Alton. Alton, I feel like has most of the historical landmarks and stuff like that. Thinking of Godfrey, I know that the founder, Benjamin Godfrey, his house is up the street. And you know, it's kind of like a local historic museum type of place. But besides that, and like the River Road where we have the—and that might even be considered Alton—the Piasa Bird. Yeah, the Piasa Bird. I think those are some things that stick out. Alton has, you know, Robert

Wadlow, and Alton has Elijah Lovejoy, and Lincoln-Douglas Square. So, I feel like most of that type of stuff is associated more with Alton.

**BW:** 12:46 Right, and is there a sense of competition with Alton, with the other smaller towns like Godfrey, Grafton or whatever? Do you just kind of...

**AV:** 12:58 I don't feel like necessarily. I mean, one's maybe like the core and the other on the periphery. But I don't feel like it's an unequal relationship or anything like that. And I don't know; whether you go live in Alton or Godfrey, everybody attends Alton High School. So, we're all together that. So, there's not really any competition, I feel like this was more of a rural area, whenever historical things were kind of happening in this country, in this area. And now it's developing, and it's kind of like the newer part of Alton, but we don't have those historical ties. Alton's got awesome stories with the Underground Railroad and the Civil Rights Movement and stuff like that, that I don't necessarily... I think Godfrey was just so closely associated with Alton and it was almost one in the same.

**BW:** 13:50 Ah, so then the Godfrey region, is it safe to say, was an active Underground Railroad site? If you situate it along with Alton? Would that be safe to say?

**AV:** 14:06 Probably even without being associated with Alton, I bet it would be. Just because of its proximity to Missouri and the Mississippi River. You know, and access to get out of Missouri.

**BW:** 14:21 What do you think? What are some of your thoughts or feelings about this chapter of Godfrey's history that is being associated with the Underground Railroad? Do you have any thoughts or feelings about that?

**AV:** 14:35 Um, no, as a kid, you know, we were always, when we first started learning about local history and stuff, the Underground Railroad was always something that was always taught to us. So, we always took pride in that. I think in Godfrey, the same thing, earlier you know, as a rural community with a lot of farm houses, it provided a lot of opportunities for stations, for people to hide out during the day and it was always a real, from what I understood, a real Christian area too, which you know lent a hand to the abolitionist movement too, also.

**BW:** 15:12 Uhm hm. And so, then the dangers involved with crossing the Mississippi River. We tend to hear a lot of dynamic stories about crossing the Ohio River. Have you ever heard of any particular incidences of slaves escaping? In any particular stories, or is it kind of in general?

**AV:** 15:43 Not any particular stories from right here. I did go to, on a tour at the beginning of this school year with the new director of DEI for the Ferguson-Florissant School District, and she called it a Sankofa Tour. And she got connected with a lady that taught at UMSL, I think, or at Lindenwood. I

want to say her first name was Beverly, an awesome historian. And we actually went to a place right north of downtown on the river, where there's a plaque there now about a story of slaves trying to cross. When you sit right there at the river, I think the reason we don't hear about people crossing the Mississippi like we hear the Ohio is because it's a much different kind of river. If you look at the Ohio compared to the Mississippi, it looks like a creek. You know, it's nice and calm. And right there where you're looking, it's a long—where I'm talking about on the Mississippi, north of downtown St. Louis—it's a long way across.

**BW:** 16:28 Yeah.

**AV:** 16:40 But there are some stories about how the people probably tried to get some kind of passage on a ferry or something like that. You know, secretive, incognito. But I don't know if anybody would have swum across that river.

**BW:** 16:51 No, you're not getting across the Mississippi River (Laughter). I understand completely with that one. Yes, sir, I do. Along those same lines, Mr. Vambaketes, could you please tell me about race relations in Godfrey or nearby areas of Madison County from the 1980s and beyond? What do you think about the race relations?

**AV:** 17:14 Um, well, when I went to St. Mary's, it was pretty much an all-white school. So, the first times that I was around African Americans in large numbers would have been when I went to East Junior, in seventh grade. There were a couple students that were African American that I played soccer with. So, you know, I knew a couple of students there, and that was my end. So, I never had any issues with race relations or anything.

**BW:** 17:39 Um hm.

**AV:** 17:39 That was in the seventh grade. When I got to high school, there were a couple instances where there were some, some big, big fights, I would say. I wouldn't call them anything bigger than that. But between a group of Black students and a group of white students, and you'd hear people, you know, mention the race riots that they used to have in this area back in the 70s. But as far as me, it's a segregated area. You know, Godfrey is majority, heavily majority white, whereas I would think Alton is way, way closer to half and half African American and white.

**BW:** 17:41 Um Hm.

**AV:** 18:14 So, I don't know if there's necessarily, there's not a lot of integration, when it comes to that kind of stuff. But I haven't really had any real issues with race problems in the Alton-Godfrey area.

**BW:** 18:27 Right. Do you see Lewis and Clark Community College as, as it situates and as students come in, and come and go, do you see more of an African American presence in Godfrey now, due to the pull of Lewis and Clark Community?

**AV:** 18:47 I'm not sure, maybe. Obviously, I think just because over time, you get more integration and everything. There is obviously more of a pull to African Americans to the Godfrey side of the region. Whether or not it's connected to Lewis and Clark, I'm not really sure.

**BW:** 19:07 Okay. Okay. So then along those same lines, speaking of race relations, I want to kind of move the topic toward ethno-demographics. Mr. Arthur Vambaketes, you are of Greek American heritage, correct?

**AV:** 19:29 Correct.

**BW:** 19:31 And could you go into just a little bit of detail. Could you describe the ethnic composition of Godfrey? I know you spoke about it a couple of moments ago. But could you describe a little bit more the ethnic composition of Godfrey, and then to a lesser extent the surrounding municipalities?

**AV:** 19:53 In Godfrey, I would think that, like I said, it's mostly white; I would say, mostly like an Anglican, Protestant ethnicity background. I don't know how valid those religious labels are anymore in today's society. But that's kind of how I would picture the Godfrey area. Alton's probably a little more diverse, especially because of their African American presence. It's lacking in Godfrey. But I'm not really sure about the background so much.

**BW:** 20:23 Okay.

**AV:** 20:24 I know as a Greek American, there's not a whole lot of Greek Americans. I know that there were some families that somehow came to this area, you know, back in the early 1900s. So there seemed like, in the early 1900s, through the mid-1900s, there was probably a greater Greek American presence. But if I think about all the people from Alton that go to the Greek Orthodox Church, which is in St. Clair County, it's probably less than a half a dozen I bet from the Alton area.

**BW:** 20:56 Hmmm. So then would you be able to talk about or discuss the impact of Greek heritage within Godfrey, and within Madison County at large as it relates to the restaurant setting? On what you call Greek Night?

**AV:** 21:20 Okay, well, we've always, my family has always been in the service industry. Like I said, my great grandfather owned a place in Alton, right where Washington and Broadway meet, right, because they had all of them factories right there on Broadway and the river. He owned a place there but



then my grandfather owned a couple places on Broadway, and then this place. So being like, being like the well-known Greek family in town, and having a restaurant, it made sense that we just combined those two ideas. We, you know, we have always did Greek Easter, and we'd invite people from the community to come in and see how we celebrate and everything like that. So, when we did the Greek Night, it almost just went hand-in-hand. And we pretty much just do what we would, do it like a family, like a Greek Easter. We just cook a bunch of food and serve a bunch of food and, and we just sit and socialize and eat. And that's pretty much the extent of it.

**BW:** 22:24 So then as a child at St. Mary's, as a Greek American, and then as a teenager, in Alton High School, East Alton, or Alton?

**AV:** 22:35 Alton.

**BW:** 22:36 In Alton High School, was there a recognition of your ethnicity as a Greek American, or did that necessarily, not necessarily come into any sort of play?

**AV:** 22:48 I don't know if recognition is the word. I mean, people knew, I mean, obviously, when I was going, all my classmates were going through their religious procedures or in sacraments and stuff, you know. I'd be hanging out in the back because I didn't participate in the first communion or first confession or all of them Catholic rituals.

**BW:** 23:07 Um Hmm.

**AV:** 23:08 Even though my religion is very similar to Catholic, I didn't participate in any of that. So, people knew that I wasn't, I was, I was Greek. I don't know if they necessarily knew I was Greek Orthodox, but they knew I was a Greek instead of Catholic. I remember, you know, as a kid, I don't know if it was second grade, or third grade, when we had like, some kind of ethnic festival or something. Of course, my class chose Greek. And I remember going to the Greek church and making Greek food, and I remember my mom teaching everybody how to dance in a circle and stuff like that. And that there might have been like, a night one week where all the families came out, and we did our little performance or whatever. When I got to Alton High, not so much. You know, you're kind of a smaller fish in a bigger pond, I guess. Once I got to Alton High, not so much. But everybody knew that, we had the restaurant and we were Greeks, so we cooked Greek food.

**BW:** 24:00 Okay, so then it never was a source of tension of ethnic tension.

**AV:** 24:07 Never.

**BW:** 24:08 Okay. All right. Thank you so much for that.



**AV:** 24:13 No problem.

**BW:** 24:15 Let's talk about how the Greek... Let's broaden the context and talk about the Greek American heritage in Madison County, St. Clair County and how it relates to the larger Greek community in St. Louis, and St. Louis County.

**AV:** 24:38 Okay.

**BW:** 24:38 What's the dynamic of that?

**AV:** 24:40 All right, well, like I said, there is a diaspora of Greeks that came and settled in this area. On the St. Louis side of the river and on the Illinois side of the river. There are three Greek churches. There's St. Nickholas, which is the oldest one which is in the Central West End, downtown St. Louis. It's the big one. I feel like it's kind of like the hub, and then there's a new, somewhat newer church in West County, in Des Peres, called Assumption. And then there's one in Fairview Heights for most of the Greek Americans that settled on the Illinois side of the river.

**BW:** 25:16 So then the one, what's the name of the one in Fairview Heights?

**AV:** 25:20 Saints Constantine and Helen.

**BW:** 25:22 Okay. And that serves as pretty much the hub for the Metro East, is what I'm kind of hearing. Somewhat?

**AV:** 25:29 Yeah, well, it's the church for the Metro East. There's not a whole lot of Greek, Greek Orthodox, you know, in the area. So, it's pretty much the church. I wouldn't really call it a hub. It's just the church. And then there's some, there's some churches, I think, a Greek church in Mount Vernon, you know, just slightly outside of the Metro East.

**BW:** 25:45 So then, is there a distinction between Greek Orthodox cultural segment? And is there another segment of, of the Greek ethnic community?

**AV:** 25:58 Or what do you mean, like a religion?

**BW:** 26:00 Yeah, because I keep hearing Greek Orthodox.

**AV:** 26:03 Okay, because it's, it's distinct from... Well, there's another Orthodox, there's the Orthodox Church of America, which would be just like a conglomerate of Greeks, Russians. You know, Ukraine,

whoever worships that. A lot of people in Eastern Europe are Orthodox. So, that's why I'm saying Greek Orthodox, I guess. There is the Orthodox—OCA, is what it's called, Orthodox Churches of America.

**BW:** 26:35 Okay.

**AV:** 26:35 But then Greek Orthodox is something different. I think their beliefs are identical. But it's two separate religion groups.

**BW:** 26:42 Okay. I understand that the Central West End was the center, central area, for the Greek community of the St. Louis metro. In the first half of the 20th century, and since then, the Greek community, quote-unquote, dispersed into St. Louis County, West County, more so if you will, some into South City, and etc., to the extent that we do not have a Greek Town, per se, as does the one in the Greek community in Chicago, the Greek community in Detroit. As a Greek American, and part of the larger diaspora of Greeks, Greek Americans, would you say that the community, as it stands here in Madison County, does it relate more, or find more of a connection with the Greek community in Chicago, or the Greek community in St. Louis?

**AV:** 28:08 I think that even the Greek community in St. Louis probably relates more to the Greek community in Chicago, because if you get outside of Athens, Chicago has pretty much like, the largest density of Greeks or somebody with Greek ethnicity, I think maybe in the world. So, like, people in Greece, probably never heard of St. Louis, but everybody in Greece has heard of Chicago.

**BW:** 28:34 Hmmm.

**AV:** 28:35 You know, there's a lot of Greeks in Chicago. I didn't know, I mean, I knew that the Greek church was in Central West End. But I never knew that there was like a big, localized area where there was like a little mini- Greek Town in St. Louis. I never knew that. I knew that there used to be the *Majestic* right there on, I don't know, Lindell and one of them roads. It was a Greek restaurant that had been there forever. But I didn't know that they had like a little Greek town area in St. Louis area.

**BW:** 29:05 Uhm Hmmm.

**AV:** 29:05 So I would say for here, for us on the Illinois side would probably be Chicago, too. But I just think because there's just such a large group up there. And that's where the central part of the church, the Archdiocese of Greek Orthodox is centered in Chicago and stuff like that. I mean, that's, I bet there's more Greeks in Chicago than New York. I mean, I don't know if that's true, 100% true, but I'd be willing to bet it's probably true,

**BW:** 29:36 Right.

**AV:** 29:36 Or any large metropolitan on the West Coast too.

**BW:** 29:40 I know there's a large Greek community in Boston, Detroit, Chicago, in New York City, of course.

**AV:** 29:50 Yeah.

**BW:** 29:50 And then there's like 10,000 Greek Americans who consider themselves of Greek American heritage in the St. Louis area.

**AV:** 30:02 Okay.

**BW:** 30:02 In Missouri, there's 15,000.

**AV:** 30:05 So most of them are in the St. Louis area then.

**BW:** 30:07 Right. I'm thinking then that Kansas City will come into play. We don't hear anything much about Indianapolis,

**AV:** 30:15 Yeah.

**BW:** 30:15 Memphis, even Minneapolis, I'm just trying to get a contextualization.

**AV:** 30:21 Yeah, no, I think those towns that you mentioned definitely probably have a larger Greek presence. But I think Chicago would dwarf all of them if you looked at numbers.

**BW:** 30:28 Yeah, Chicago seems to be the place. The Greek festivals are celebrated here in the St. Louis region. We just had one for Memorial Day weekend at Greek Assumption Church in Des Peres, West County.

**AV:** 30:48 Yeah, they always do theirs at the beginning of summer on Memorial Day weekend. And then the lar... I heard that it's, you know, the largest ethnic festival in the country, is St. Nick's Festival, which is the Greek church in the Central West End in on Labor Day weekend. That's like four or five days of Greek dancing and gyro eating, and there's people as far as you can see,

**BW:** 31:12 Yes, I've been able to enjoy that for a time or two (chuckles). I understand that they draw between 40 and 50,000 participants within that timeframe. Those numbers could be different by now. That was a few years ago. So then, also Mr. Vambaketes, along these same lines, concerning religious observances, I know we've spoken of it in some tangential ways. How does the Greek community celebrate Easter and other religious holidays?

**AV:** 31:52 Well, Easter is the big one for the Greek religion. We celebrate Christmas and, pretty much like most other Christians, but Easter is different. For some reason, Easter is on the old Gregorian calendar, I want to say, or Julian calendar, and the Christians follow the opposite one. So, some years Easter's on the same day as American or Western Easter, but most years, it's different. So, we kind of have our own day to shine. Most years growing up when there was a larger Greek community and my grandparents were around, and all their siblings, and then my cousins and everything, we would cook lamb every year. We'd go over to Grand and there's an old packing house called Star Packing right in the middle of the town. We'd get a lamb, and we'd rotisserie that thing from you know, late Saturday night and all day, all night up until Sunday. And then, they take it down and they take it apart and chop it all up and put the meat in pans and everything. So, Easter was always the big thing. The super religious people, the reason that we did that is, Greeks fast for 40 days before Easter, from no meat, no oil, no dairy. So, I remember my grandma—my grandpa never participated, or he wasn't as successful—but my grandma, she would go those 40 days and she would eat, not much, like beans. And she would come up with some, they had creative things that they would eat. But they were ready to eat some real food by Easter. So by the time Easter Sunday hit they, we had a whole lamb, we'd have lamb chops, we'd have pork chops, we'd have sausage from Chicago, we'd made Greek-style meatballs, and there'd be a little bit of side dishes on the end, but it was mostly like a carnivore diet for that day (Chuckles) So yeah, Easter was the big one for us. And it still is.

**BW:** 33:49 It sounds like you're having some fond memories...

**AV:** 33:52 Oh, yeah.

**BW:** 33:52 Of those times. Talk about that, just a little bit more, about your grandparents, your uncles, their siblings, that whole generation who have passed off the scene. Does it seem to be that the sense of community is less since their passing or, talk about that.

**AV:** 34:14 Yeah, it definitely feels like that. My grandma was one of seven children, mostly girls. She, her oldest brother and her, were born in Greece in the 1930s. And then, after World War Two, they came over with their mom to meet their dad who was already over here. He had somehow gotten involved and was fighting for the United States in World War Two. So, after the war, they came over and then she had the rest of her, you know, my sib, my yai-yai's siblings over here, and they were farmers. Most of them lived in the Alton-Godfrey area, Granite City area; they found other Greeks to marry probably through the church. So, there was a really tight-knit community. All the cousins, you know, were around too for that generation. And then on my grandpa's side, kind of the same deal. His parents were married over in Greece. The dad came over here to try to get settled, lived here for like 12 years, and then the wife came over and found him and then they ended up having more kids over here. Seems really kind of odd to us. But I think it was pretty common back then for some, for somebody to come over before and kind of pave the way. They weren't as close as my grandma's side. So, it seemed

like I was much closer to all the Greeks on my grandma's side than my grandpa's side. And then my dad only had one other sibling, it was a sister. She got married to somebody from Chicago and moved up there. So obviously, when both grandparents are gone, they don't have as much reason to come back. So, my cousins, I think, came back maybe three or four years ago for Greek Easter. But it's been a while and I recently went up to Chicago to see my aunt, she's getting a little older. So, I wanted to make sure I went and checked her out during spring break. Definitely, with the older people passing away, you don't have that common link anymore. So, I feel like that makes the community kind of, kind of less tight.

**BW:** 36:32 Fascinating.

**BW:** 36:32 Mr. Vambaketes, we've been able to speak of Godfrey, Illinois and childhood experiences, and adolescent experiences that you've had here. We've been able to speak on race relations and historical events, as they relate to Alton, Illinois and the other River Road cities, Godfrey being one of them. And now we've also been able to speak about ethno-demographic conceptions concerning the Greek American experience here in Madison County, as it situates, with Godfrey, St. Louis City, St. Louis County, and Chicago. With all those bits of information, as we pulled this interview together, let's pull back into Godfrey and talk about the topic of successes and challenges that the region has and faces. If you'd be so kind, sir, what sorts of successes has Godfrey experienced in your 40-plus years as a resident of this region?

**AV:** 38:12 I think the school district is a success. In the Godfrey area, there's been many people that have gone through that school system, you know, going on to college, came back and been able to have, really good careers in this area, either as entrepreneurs or in the service industry as doctors and lawyers, those types of careers. So, I think Godfrey has had some success with that. I think like any small town, being able to attract or to keep citizens in your region is always going to be a struggle, because you're competing against places that are hard to compete against. If you think about places like Austin, Texas now, and the opportunities they have with technology, careers and things like that, it's hard for a small town in the Midwest, like Godfrey, to compete with that. I think that does allure some people with the small-town vibe and values and things like that. But that's not usually the number one thing that people are looking at whenever they're deciding on where to live their lives. So, I think Godfrey, Alton, like almost all smaller towns, are struggling to figure out how they're going to keep people from just leaving in mass numbers to go to these urban areas that are just really flourishing.

**BW:** 39:37 Right. It appears that the population seems to be holding stable at 18,000. Has that been like that for a long time?

**AV:** 39:50 I think that's kind of deceiving. I'm not really sure. But I think if you were to look at the population of Godfrey as it increases, it's probably really closely related to Alton's decrease. So, it's kind of like, Alton's the older part of town; the housing's getting older, maybe a little more crime, stuff like that. So then, people are moving out to Godfrey and into more rural areas to try to get away from that

and try to get a slower pace of life and things like that. So, I'm not sure, but I think Godfrey has been steady for a little bit. I think it did jump, probably around the time you were saying it got incorporated in the early 90s. But I think that's the same time where I think Alton lost quite a bit of the percentage of its population. I think in the 80s Alton was around 50,000. And now it's down to like, low 30s I think.

**BW:** 40:44 Ohh. Okay.

**AV:** 40:45 So it's quite a bit.

**BW:** 40:49 So then, Mr. Vambaketes, as we wind down and conclude our interview today, as a proud citizen of Madison County, what would you like to see occur within the next 20 years or so, to sustain the vibrancy, if I can use the term the vibrancy of the region? Or just to see the region continue on an upward path?

**AV:** 41:29 Yeah, well, they, I think, in order for that to happen, they need to think of innovative ways to keep it vibrant. The things that attracted people to the Godfrey area, at the turn of the century, in the middle part of the century, those things aren't attracting people anymore. So, I feel like it might be, I don't know if it's high-speed rail from Kansas City to the St. Louis area, and we're a little offshoot of that. Or if it's between St. Louis and Chicago, and we're in the middle of that. But something, something to connect us easier to the outside world, I feel like.

**BW:** 42:13 Along that same line of question that I do have, there seems to be a salient disconnect, a divide between the Metro East and the St. Louis side of the river. I can't quite put my finger on it. I can't put my hand exactly on it. But it just seems to crop up when speaking of Venice, Brooklyn, Madison, Granite City, is there, is there something, is there a "there" there?

**AV:** 42:55 Um, there might be. I was, when you first started that, you know, bringing that up, I was thinking more of like, people from the urban areas look, which would be the western side, which would be the St. Louis metro area, look at kind of like the Metro East or Southern Illinois kind of more rural or backwoods or hillbillyish. But I don't know necessarily like what you're saying with the actual African American or Black population, within the Metro East.

**BW:** 43:31 Right. Because there's, there's a distinct difference of view, viewing each other in the Black community as people from the East side, you hear the phrase? People from the East side.

**AV:** 43:52 Yeah, yeah. I, and when I hear that I only even associate it mostly with the smaller black communities you mentioned... usually East St. Louis is the first thing that pops into my mind.

**BW:** 44:02 Right. And so, I was just wondering, was that a similar dynamic, Grafton, Wood River, Roxana?

**AV:** 44:13 When people talk about the East side, they're probably talking more like directly across from the downtown urban area more like to Granite City area, more like the Venice area. Unfortunately, you have a lot of nightclubs that are open all night. I think when I hear East side that's the first thing that pops into my mind, I think that's probably common across the St. Louis area.

**BW:** 44:36 Right. So, then there is a perceptual component going on here because Madison County is very large, 721 some-odd square miles. We put that in perspective. St. Louis County itself is only 230 some-odd square miles, I believe; City of St. Louis is 61, so you could fit...

**AV:** 45:01 That's a lot bigger.

**BW:** 45:01 Two or three...

**AV:** 45:03 Yeah, definitely. I feel like you do have two different sections of Madison County. You kind of have the rural section, and then the, the urban. And I say I'd say rural, but just farther away from the downtown metropolitan area. I wouldn't consider Alton a rural area.

**BW:** 45:25 No.

**AV:** 45:26 But it's far enough away, where I don't think it gets that same vibe as a Venice would or Brooklyn, Illinois. Because it's, you can see, you can see the downtown skyline from those towns.

**BW:** 45:39 Right. Well, as we wrap up this exciting interview with Mr. Arthur Vambaketes, here at Tony's Ranch House, in Godfrey, Illinois, we leave away, much more enlightened about the dynamics of our region, the successes and the challenges and the richness, the diversity of our region, as evidenced by our Greek American segment of our population. As we've noted, there's approximately 10,000 people of Greek American heritage here in the St. Louis region. And although they're spread out, there are some zip codes in West County, that have a substantial percentage of those numbers. And then as we look at the Madison County region, we understand, and please correct me if I'm wrong, that there's a sparse number of Greek Americans in...

**AV:** 47:04 Definitely in the northern part of Madison County. I'm not so sure about like the Collinsville area, Belleville is Madison, no Belleville is St. Clair. I'm not sure about even the Edwardsville area, but definitely in the northwestern part, you know, in the Alton-Godfrey region is pretty sparse anymore. I think it used to be a little more vibrant.



**BW:** 47:25 Okay. But they all tend to point toward Chicago.

**AV:** 47:31 Oh, yeah. Chicago is the Mecca.

**BW:** 47:32 As the Mecca. Yeah. Even from the St. Louis side of the river.

**AV:** 47:36 Yeah, I think even from over there. Yeah.

**BW:** 47:38 Yeah.

**AV:** 47:39 Yeah, most of those people have cousins or weddings that they attend up in the Chicago area.

**BW:** 47:46 The Greek American experience is dear to me, I've been able to work with the Karagiannis family on the St. Louis side of the river, featuring *Spiros Restaurant* in the 1980s for six years. And it's a fascinating segment of our population. And it lends itself to the richness of our fair Metro. And to that, I want to thank you, Mr. Vambaketes for your time, and for your willingness to participate with Madison Historical Oral Histories program on behalf of the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and all of the staff related to it. And through our coursework through our history course this semester. We again send you a, extend to you a hearty thank you for an excellent dialogue about...

**AV:** 48:55 Thank you for your being a fan of the Greek American community here and I think this was a really good conversation.

**BW:** 49:03 Thank you, sir. Brian K. Weaver, your interviewer, Mr. Arthur Vambaketes our narrator. Thank you so much and have a great day.