

**George Sarris**

Where: At her home in Morgantown, WV

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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George Sarris was born in Liberty, West Virginia in Scotts Run, March 15<sup>th</sup> 1940. His parents were Greek immigrants from Crete. His father worked in the coal mines and then quit to open a restaurant in Osage. In this interview, Sarris talks about growing up in the diverse coal community of Scotts Run, including his opinion of the Roosevelts and his memories of his father's restaurant. He speaks about the importance of the Scotts Run Museum today and the friendships he maintains with others who grew up in the community.

GS: George Sarris

EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: Okay, so could you introduce yourself and tell me who you are, where you're from and when you were born?

GS: Okay. Hi, I'm George Sarris and I was born in Liberty, which is about a mile and a half west of Osage. I'm... right now I'm 79 years old. I was born in 1940, March the 15th and my father built a restaurant, built a 2-story building in Osage with his cousin. It was called Nick and John's. He was Nick, he had the restaurant on the street level and upstairs, we called-- it's a Greek custom, anyone older than you, you call them uncle. So uncle John lived upstairs. He had 5 bedrooms up there, one was his, he rented out some of the others. And this was before whiskey by the drink was legal or wine by the drink was legal. He sold liquor by the drink and 'course, like I say, my father had the restaurant downstairs and it was 100% legit. I wasn't even, I was 10 years old when he opened the restaurant and if he wasn't in the restaurant, if he had to go out for a second and someone wanted a bottle of beer, I'd have to ask them to come around and take it out of the cooler. I wasn't allowed to touch it.

EH: Where were your parents from? Tell me about them.

GS: Okay, my parents... my father came from the island of Crete, and my mother, her parents came from the island of Crete also. My father before he opened the restaurant-- he was a coal miner there in Scotts Run and my grandfather also worked in the coal mine and worked in Pursglove, which is half... just next to Osage. It's halfway between Liberty and Osage.

EH: What were your parents' names?

GS: My father was Nick Sarris, and my grandparents--my mother's maiden name was Panos, P-A-N-O-S.

EH: Did your dad ever work in the mines or did he...

GS: Yeah, he worked in the mines and he went from the mines to the restaurant. And he died in 1969, April the 1st and he... I got black lung from my mother-- they found spots on his lungs and they had been there for many years, so he had started out working in Colorado. His brother came here first from Greece, went to Colorado, was working in the coal mine, sent for my father. My father worked in the coal mine. His brother became a US citizen, and on his way out of the mine on the last day he was to work--he was gonna go into the first World War-- he was electrocuted and died. So my father left Colorado at that time, went to California, and he just kinda wandered until he ended up in Scotts Run.

EH: Why did he decide to leave the mines and start the restaurant?

GS: Well I think because the danger in the coal mines. And he had 5 children, you know my wife and 5 children, so I believe that was the main reason.

EH: And was Liberty mostly a Greek community?

GS: Not mostly. We had about every type of nationality you could think of. It was a very small community but I know of 1,2,3,4,5,6, maybe 6 families, Greek families that lived there, but there were a lot of Greeks in the Scotts Run area.

04:36

EH: What were the other ethnicities in Liberty?

GS: Well, first of all, there were a combination-- it was integrated--there were blacks and whites, there was Polish, Hungarian, Russian, Croatian, Serbian, um... and Americans, you know people just born in this country. So there were quite a few--probably, probably 8,9 different nationalities.

EH: Did you interact with all different types of people?

GS: All of 'em. We all were-- it was a real nice community, it was real clean, everyone kept up their yards or houses. Everyone helped each other out. We didn't even have locks on our doors or our windows. And today I live in a development, you know, in a pretty nice development, and we keep our doors locked 24 hours a day. There in Liberty, we'd go on vacation for a week or 2, never locked the doors or... never had locks or doors on the windows.

EH: What are some of your memories hanging out in the restaurant?

GS: The main thing that I remembered in the restaurant is that, course I would say 90% of our business was black, and the blacks had a lot of respect for my father and in turn, that was probably the safest place for me in the world was Osage, because the blacks wouldn't allow anyone to bother me. I was safe. I could go into Osage any... 24 hours a day and I never had to worry.

EH: And you were saying that--so it was your uncle that had the...

GS: Yeah, had the... he had the upstairs of the restaurant. We called him uncle, he was actually a distant cousin, but he was part of the family. And I don't know, for some reason I was his favorite and I stayed with him quite a bit.

EH: What are some of your childhood memories of playing and growing up in Liberty?

GS: Well in Liberty we had, we probably had 10, 12 kids that were within 2, 3 years, you know same age, or 2, 3 years of my age and we all, you know, we rode bicycles, we played cowboys and Indians, the great game was marbles. And just set around and we would read, we all had comic books and we'd get together say on Saturday morning and everybody would bring their comic books and we would sit for hours and just read comic books.

EH: (laughs) What are some of the comics--do you remember?

GS: Yeah, a lot of the cowboys, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry and Hopalong Cassidy and Dick Tracy and those are the only ones I can think of right off the bat.

EH: (laughs)

GS: But my favorite was always cowboy.

08:13

EH: So this would have been before your time but did you know of families that had left Scotts Run to go to Arthurdale?

GS: I didn't know any of the people that, that actually went to Arthurdale. I know people, I know a family that lived in the development, but they bought it after the development actually was considered a failure, that concept. But and you know, they're trying to revive it now. Well, they have. But I was not involved. It was before my time and that was president, well Eleanor Roosevelt was mainly responsible for that. But they wouldn't take--all they took from Scotts Run to go to Arthurdale, you had to be white. They wouldn't take any foreigners; they wouldn't take any blacks.

EH: Yeah, and I also read that you couldn't be below a certain, you couldn't be extremely poor.

GS: That I don't know. That I don't know.

EH: So a lot of people tell Eleanor Roosevelt stories or have them in their family, did you hear or did you have Eleanor Roosevelt stories that circulated?

GS: The only thing is I heard those stories and at first I was really a Roosevelt fan because of what they did, you know, but then when I got to thinking about the way they selected the people, and they thought I understand, I read some place that the foreigners, well were thought of less than the blacks, and the poor blacks, you know how they were discriminated. So when I put all of that together, then I get upset with the Roosevelts.

EH: Right, right. Yeah, I'm interested in the way that she, or they're both kind of celebrated in Scott's Run, but it seems like there was a, it's more complicated than that.

GS: What, with the Roosevelts?

EH: Yeah.

GS: Well what happened was is Eleanor Roosevelt came up Scotts Run and if we'd just forget about that Arthurdale, she visited people's homes, she visited the Settlement House, and she was very concerned about the coal miners, she was concerned about the conditions that they had to live in and the economic conditions of Scotts Run. You have to give her credit-- she was concerned about that, and kept coming back to Scotts Run. So she was really by the majority of people, she was very highly thought of. And the only thing I had against 'em was the way they selected the people to go to this Arthurdale Heritage.

EH: So when did you leave Scotts Run?

GS: I stayed there til I was 25 years old and that's when I got married. And I moved to Westover, I had a house built and it was ready about 2 weeks after we were married and my first job out of college was in Fairmont with Galas (?) Manufacturing, but I lived in Westover and I was in a carpool and worked there for 6 years and then I went with CONSOL as controller of the Blacksville mines. They started up the 2 Blacksville mines and then ultimately became controller for northern West Virginia, the northern West Virginia region of Consol.

EH: Where did you go to college?

GS: WVU. I got a BS in Business Administration and a major in accounting.

EH: And did you live in Scotts Run when you were going to school?

GS: Yeah! I lived in Scotts Run and I worked-- my father closed the restaurant down and he had to have an operation. He had to have a couple operations, so he closed the restaurant and kind of retired and I got a job, when I was in high school and college, and Max's Family Store in Osage. And I worked for Max for 8 years, and when I graduated from college in 1963, I had the keys to his store 'cause when he wasn't able to come, I ran the store for him. And I would say that he had as much business as any clothing store in Morgantown. He was a very, very good fella. And he helped so many people in Scotts Run, but anyway I gave him his keys back when I graduated from college. I got a job with Galas and he wouldn't take 'em back. I still have 'em in my jewel box. And he said if you ever want to come back, he said just open the store. And he would come and visit me at least after I graduated, after I got married, you could ask my wife, he would come to our house at least once a month and he wanted to open a store in Morgantown that put me in business. And the store is similar to what Gabe's is right now. And it was before Gabe's came to town. And the reason I wouldn't, you know, I told him, no one would do something like that for me except my father, but he treated me as a son. He had a son, and his son died. He probably was maybe 35, 40 years old when he died and he lived in Cleveland, and they couldn't get together... I mean they couldn't get along as far as the business was concerned, but they were still close family and they weren't sure what he died from. Some people tell me today it probably would have been diagnosed as Legionnaire's Disease, but I don't know that for sure. But anyway, he treated me just like a son.

EH: Wow. And that was a clothing store...

GS: It was for everyone. It was from the time you were born to the time you died. When any customer of his that had a baby, he gave them their first pair of shoes. And when they got a little older, and the family would come in the store, he would always have a box of suckers in back of the counter, and he'd ask the parents if it was okay, on the side, for them to have sucker, and they'd say yes, and he would tell the kids, go on in back of the counter, get yourself a sucker, and they would do that and he was really smart 'cause the next time they wanted to go clothing shopping, those kids said we want to go to Max's! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Right, right. Exactly.

GS: So, but he was an honest man. He... my biggest job when I first started working for him was to move--there was a lot of foreigners that had worked in the coal mines and they had retired, and they didn't have anyone to take care of 'em and when they got to the point that they needed someone to take care of 'em, Max would find somebody that would take care of 'em and he had an old Willie's Jeep, and that was my job to get their bed and their dresser and to take it to wherever the person was gonna stay. And he made sure that somebody was gonna take care of 'em. And when they died, even though he was Jewish, he found the minister to bury them. A lot of the people in Osage, especially during the 1950s, we had a recession, and a lot of people lost their jobs and Max would see their parents and he'd say listen: it's time for school to start, your children need clothes. Come in the store, get whatever you need, we'll put it on your bill. When you get a job, just start paying 5 dollars a pay, whatever. And he did that. I don't know very many people that would do something like that. Would take that type of risk. They were people that were about to lose their houses-- he would sign for loans. I know in some cases where he actually signed when people, for people to buy the house. He would co-sign so that they could own the house and they paid it off and then it was theirs. But that's the way he was. His philosophy was if you can't do a man any good, don't do him any harm. And he lived by that.

EH: Did he live in Scotts Run ever?

GS: No, he lived in Morgantown on... in well he lived on Grand Street, Grand and Maple. And I'm trying to think of the section of town. But anyway, he lived in Morgantown in a real nice section in Morgantown.

EH: Did you always maintain ties with Scotts Run?

GS: Me?

EH: Yeah, after you had moved away.

18:34

GS: Well I always went to, you know there was a shoe shop in Osage and I always took my shoes to Osage and by that time a lot of the businesses had you know, a lot of 'em had quit-- people would close down their businesses. But my father had that building and even though he died, I rented it out and people ran it as a beer garden for years and it's still there today, but evidently I mean it's obvious-- it caught on fire at one time and the top part, the top floor had burnt and now they have a slanted roof and maybe just one apartment upstairs. But it had a sun porch on it and it was right in the middle of Osage and right on the curve and you could look down the street and you could look up the street. And my father gave the key to that top floor to the policeman, Osage policeman at night. He would go up there and he could watch the whole street.

EH: So when did you start going to the museum? The "coffee shop"?

GS: Well, probably, it's only been... maybe a year and a half, a year and a half or so. Albert Anderson kept talking about it and he said come on down! So I went down one Saturday. I knew the Coulters, I had forgotten about them and... but I knew the whole, I knew the family. And they were very nice to me, and then, there were people coming in from all over the United States. Maybe it'd be 15 or 20 people in there on a Saturday, but 3 or 4 of 'em would be from-- you just don't know-- from all over the United States. And their grandfather, their father, one of their relatives had worked in the coal mine and they heard about that museum and they wanted to come and look through the books that were up there and see if there's any, they could find any pictures of their relatives. (coaster knocks over) That's okay. And then I just... it just became a nice place to have a cup of coffee and talk. A lot of people that come in there, I... were friends of mine years ago and so I've really enjoyed... and Mary Jane, she's just as nice as she could be. She offers you coffee and something to eat. So I'm trying to help them raise some money so that they can continue operating that place. I know it's tough on Mary Jane. It's her building and she runs it and we're checking some sources in Morgantown, some of the industries and see if they won't put in their contributions budget the museum.

22:00

EH: Nice. There also might be grants available.

GS: Yeah. There are and I think that she's probably aware of 'em because she's very close to Eve Faulkes who's a professor at Creative Arts Center, and they're very close and I'm sure that she's probably helped her, has suggestions for her as far as some of the grants are concerned.

EH: Who are some of the people who are your friends there? Either new friends or that you knew?

GS: Well, the first one that I would have to say would be Lou Birurakis. He lives in Morgantown. He was our next door neighbor in Liberty, and his mother is the one that taught my mother how to cook and how to bake. My mother was married when she was... 16. Her first son was born when she was 17, I was born when she was 18, my sister was born when she was 19. She skipped a year, then she had twins. So 21 years old she had 5 children. And my father was working in the coal mine and Lou Birurakis' mother helped my mother. They lived... I mean it wasn't 100 yards away. And she taught my mother how to bake.

And my wife learned how to bake from my mother-- the Greek pastries. My mother had nothing written down but my wife would go over when she baked and help her and she would-- my mother would say well use a pinch of this. And Barbara would measure it and write it down. So she came up with a book with all my mother's recipes and she gave a copy of those books to Lou's daughters because she said your grandmother is the one that taught my mother-in-law how to bake. but Lou played football for WVU and he had 3 other brothers and a sister. And our families were very close. Their family was from the island of Crete also and Lou's father was a coal miner. And so we were very, you know, very close and then I worked in the restaurant there and I knew Albert Anderson-- I used to serve him pie and milk every night when he came back from Perry's Shoe Shop in Morgantown where he was working and I just knew everybody in Osage. And I, like I say, I went to Osage Junior High School, so I knew a lot of people that are my age that come in there that went to school there. So...

EH: What did they serve at the restaurant?

GS: My father's restaurant? He served about anything that you wanted. I mean he-- his special on Sundays was creamed chicken, but he had steaks and hamburgers and he always had chili and vegetable soup, homemade. And he always had a special every day, and spare ribs and cabbage I know was one of the big items that the people liked. But it was, you know, it was just a complete restaurant, but he also sold beer.

EH: And pie.

GS: Yeah, he sold pie. Yeah. Pie and coffee.

EH: Who was the cook?

GS: My father.

EH: And who made the pies? Did he make those?

GS: No, we bought the pies and... but my father was probably a better cook than my mother. I mean he was a great cook. Beef stew. I never tasted beef stew better than what he made.

EH: Where did he learn to make those American recipes?

GS: Well, if you would study the Greeks, most of the Greeks went into the restaurant business and after he left the coal mine in Colorado and he started traveling, he had friends, Greek friends that had restaurants and he worked in those restaurants out in California, and he went to Detroit. And I don't know of any restaurants that he worked in in Detroit, but I knew he was in Detroit, and he ended up in Scotts Run in the coal mines. But he did work in restaurants throughout the country.

26:53

EH: Do you want to talk a little bit about the way people remember Scotts Run versus the way you remember it or the way it actually was?

GS: Well I could tell you that, you wouldn't hardly believe Scotts... when... you're talking about Scotts Run or Osage?

EH: Well you were talking about how some, maybe some people romanticize the area.



GS: Well, let me just say that Osage as I recall, and I added 'em up a little while ago-- they had 5 grocery stores, 2 barber shops, 2 shoe repair shops. There was a dentist there. There was a jewel-- a woman had a jewelry store there. There was a couple clothing stores-- Max's and another Jewish fella. A Levinson. And all during the day you would see cars and people on the streets. They were going to the grocery stores. We didn't have Kroger's then and Giant Eagle. They had the A&P in Morgantown and our family would maybe drive there once a week or every other week and go to the A&P, but most of the time you bought your groceries at these local grocery stores and there were no carts. You know, they weren't big enough to have a cart. You just picked the things from the shelves and put 'em on the counter. But there were a lot of people there and particularly on Saturdays... Saturday you could hardly find a place to park in Osage. Friday nights and Saturday nights, people would dress up, particularly the black people. They would dress up. I guess you call 'em African-Americans, I don't want to say the wrong word, but anyway, I mean I was friends with all of them and neighbors. But they would come from Morgantown and you thought you were in Hollywood, I mean you couldn't believe the way the people dressed--the suits and shoes-- and the people at Osage would do the same thing and they would all come down to Osage on Friday night and Saturday night and sometimes things got a little rowdy and somebody got shot or stabbed, but...

EH: (laughs)

GS: But it was a busy town.

EH: But yeah, I think Miss Sarah was talking about hopping the train all dressed up to get a mile ride down to, I think Osage from where she lived.

GS: Well they, they used to have I guess a trolley and that was before my time. Running through Scotts Run and ran up they tell me to Blacksville. I don't remember that--that was before my time. Miss Sarah I think is 96 years old and I just turned 79 so-- what she said is what my father said. There was a trolley that went up through there and yeah, so...but it was a busy place. Like, say even all during the week, especially on Saturdays, people would come and do their shopping and one time there was an article in the paper that said that's the only town in the United States where the cars park on the sidewalk and the people walk out in the streets. Well it really didn't have sidewalks, so you didn't know when you pulled in the park, you didn't know how close you were to the building for sure, but there was no sidewalks.

EH: What do you think the importance of the museum is for the community?

GS: Well, it lets all, like I said, the people that come back, they come back and they see their relatives. There's a lot of old coal mining equipment there. They get an idea of how the old coal miners had to work. You know, they had carbide lamps, they had to buy their own carbide, and they learn about the way coal mining was, and the union. The miners being you know, joining unions...

and I have to admit, I was in administration at CONSOL and probably the best compliment that I ever received was that if they went on strike, we had to go to Elkins to get an injunction before a federal judge and I always represented CONSOL in getting those injunctions and the union, one day we were down there and they were all out on strike-- all the coal mines in the area-- and the union asked for a recess and I went outside and I was smoking, to smoke a cigarette and one of the union presidents came out and he said that the, our lawyer said that you're the only one that he believes from CONSOL. I wouldn't like, you know my father was a... well I don't lie period. But in addition to that my father was a coal miner and he told me how they had to dig the coal with a pick and shovel and they would load it into the cars and it was the company people that would check the cars and give you credit for the cars and they would weigh the cars and there were a lot of times they didn't give you credit for all the cars that you loaded. They didn't give you credit for all of the weight that was in the cars, so I was very sympathetic and it's always been my philosophy that the only time that you have a union is when you aren't treating the people correctly.

And my father fought for the unions. He started out in Colorado, and so... I was very close, lived with union people all around me. I lived with some people that were foreman, but it didn't make any difference. I got along with all of 'em and...

EH: Did you ever face discrimination for being from Scotts Run?

GS: No, I never did. I... Greek orthodox, we've had our Greek orthodox, you know. At that time, you belong to the Greek orthodox church if you were Greek orthodox. Today we're trying to say it's an orthodox church rather than a Greek orthodox. But my family was-- my father and my mother and father were highly respected in the Greek community and they were respected in the community where we lived and I never once felt discriminated. I went to Saint Francis after Osage and there was no one--well there was one girl in my class that was from that area but other than that, that was about it, but there was no discrimination-- I never felt any discrimination or anyone looking down on me because I was from Scotts Run.

35:11

EH: Well is there anything else you would like to add?

GS: The only think I'd like to add is it's just too bad that it's run down, you know? You go through there now and it's run down. You go up to Liberty--there-- Lou's son has bought several of the houses and has remodeled 'em. But prior to that it looked like um... would, would you call, just a run-down community. I was almost ashamed to drive through there comparing it to what it used to be. But today with Lou's son is trying to build some of the buildings. Osage...some of the buildings are down, you see wax, glass wax on a lot of the buildings as you come in, if you come in from the school on the right hand side and they have names of what they do there. The building that we owned, the fella that owns it now took me through it. And I said what do you have here? He says it's a bottle club. Well I went through it--there's nothing, there isn't anything there. There's a bathroom. I think there was one little bar and a few stools. There wasn't a kitchen. I don't know what goes on there--what kinda... he said it's a bottle club.

EH: What's a bottle club?

GS: Where you bring your own bottle...

EH: Okay. And where is that--is that right across...

GS: Right across the street from the museum.

EH: Okay. I think I know what building.

GS: Yeah. And Osage had, they called it The Spot. It was a pool room. It was next door to my father's restaurant.

EH: Uh-huh. I've seen the sign on it.

GS: Yeah, yeah. Well the building--there was an older building right beside it when you looked at The Spot from across the street there was an older building beside it and my father and uncle bought it and then they built this building and it was a 2-story and the only one that had a porch on it in Osage. You know, second story.

EH: Right. Well, and I heard Louie is trying to start a museum. Lou Birurakis, with all of his archives.

GS: I didn't know that, but I've been to Lou's house and his office is probably, excuse me, probably about the size of this dining room here, I imagine maybe. 10X12. And on one whole wall he has notebooks that, with 3-ring binders and by year, he has the history. He went to the newspapers in Morgantown--they were all stored, I guess the old-- probably fiche copies, I'm not sure-- in the old law building. And he'd go there every day and anything you could find about Scotts Run, Osage, Liberty, Pursglove, whatever, he recorded it. He would either get a picture of it or write it and put the date that it was in the newspaper if he wrote it. So he has as far as history's concerned. He has a lot of that.

EH: Yeah.

38:59

GS: And I've read a lot of those books. So... when you read those books you find out that just about everybody in Osage and Pursglove and Liberty were arrested at one point in time for moonshine! (laughs) And you'd be surprised, I mean you're talking about some of the elderly ladies.

EH: (laughs)

GS: You know. And I thought it was quite amusing.

EH: That's funny. Yeah, I need to pay him a visit sometime and check out his room.

GS: Yeah.

EH: Well anything else?

GS: That's all. I just had a lot of friends up Scotts Run and a lot of fond memories and I always went back you know, I retained friendships with a lot of the people and... like I say it was a safe, great place to grow up.

EH: And do most of those friends--they don't live there anymore?

GS: No, a lot of 'em because they, you know there was the coal mines, a lot of the... there used to be many coal mines up and down Scotts Run. The train used to run right there in front of the museum. You know there's railroad tracks right there and they'd go maybe twice a day. And it was closer than from here to that wall, the train. You know, it'd go through there. And what I was gonna say was I went to school, elementary school at Pursglove which was between Liberty and Osage and Junior High School I went to Osage and at that time, they had for the African-Americans, they had their school up on top of the hill and the rest of us were down in the Osage Junior High School and then in 1954, I'm pretty sure it was 1954 is when we integrated and Mr. Stephenson (sp?) who later became superintendent of county schools was principal at that time and he called everyone together in the gym first day of school and said there will be no problems or no trouble, and he was absolutely right. I don't recall of one racial incident. And I was there during the 8th and 9th grade when we integrated and there was not one racial incident. And we had a lot of the African-Americans were in the school there and we were all friends.

EH: And that would have been middle school?

GS: That would have been Junior High School, yeah. It was 7th and 9th. But that Osage School went from 1st through the 9th. But the school that I went to at Pursglove, it was 3 different buildings and it

went from first to fifth and then you would go to Osage from 6th to 9th, but Junior High was considered 7th through 9th.

EH: Well thank you so much!

GS: Yeah, I enjoyed it.

EH: Yeah, I'll be-- see you at the coffee shop tomorrow?

GS: Well I hope so, there's a West Virginia professor that I got on the Mon General Hospital Board-- Robert Mosst (sp?) was a, probably one of the... he's probably the... they tell me that as far as taxes are concerned, the brightest guy in the state of West Virginia, and he died of a brain tumor. And they're having a... they're having a service for him tomorrow at 11 o'clock at the Alumni Center so I'm not sure that I'm gonna be at Osage.

EH: Well, next time.

GS: Yeah, cause I got him on the Mon Health System Board. He was a great fella.

43:23

END OF TAPE