

# Bingara Dreaming

With a date set for the opening of the Roxy Museum, the inspirational story of the Greeks who changed regional Australia forever is about to turn Bingara (Pop. 1207) into a place of passionate pilgrimage

MICHAEL SWEET

**It may be a seven hour drive north of Sydney, but the tyranny of distance isn't something that should stop anyone with even a passing interest in Australia's Hellenic story, or the history of regional Australia itself, from making the journey to Bingara.**

After 5 April 2014 there will be an even greater imperative to head there: the Roxy Museum - the final jewel in the crown of the Roxy Theatre complex and the last chapter in the restoration of a truly great Greek Australian landmark - will finally open its doors.

Celebrating the iconic Greek café, the inspirational story of the Roxy's founders, and the sheer hard graft of early Greek settlers down under, this is a must-see destination.

With less than six months to go, plans are well-advanced for a series

of stunning interactive displays in the historic building, telling the story of the Greek diaspora's experience beyond Australia's cities.

Originally built by three Kytherians in 1936, the Roxy Theatre and adjoining spaces will - after more than a decade of redevelopment - be a shining beacon of memory illuminating the remarkable story of Greek immigration to regional Australia.

Comprising rare memorabilia, photographs, interpretive texts and digital wizardry, the museum will invoke the vivid dream that the Roxy's original creators - and hundreds of other Greek pioneers - realised in New South Wales, Queensland and beyond.

Sydneysider Peter Prineas, grandson of Peter Feros - one of the Roxy's founders - was appointed curator of the Roxy Museum last year and began researching the Roxy's history in 2004.

His book on the subject - *Katsehamos and the Great Idea* (Feros' nickname was Katsehamos) became the catalyst for the building's further re-development. Restoration of the café and progress on the museum concept followed.

"I was raised in a Greek café family in a NSW country town. Like many café kids I didn't want to carry on the family business," says Prineas who, apart from his writing, has spent his working life as a lawyer, consultant and environmental activist.

As curator, his intentions are to tell the story of the Roxy building in the wider context of Greek immigration and settlement.

At the heart of the narrative, Prineas says, is 'the shopkeeping phenomenon' as first described by Australia's chronicler of the Greek Australian experience - historian Hugh Gilchrist.

"There was an aspiration amongst the more successful Greek café operators to extend their interests into picture theatres," says Prineas, "to build what picture theatre historian Kevin Cork described as 'Parthenons Down Under'."

Working with former Roxy manager Sandy McNaughton - who was instrumental in much of the early fundraising for the Roxy's refurbishment, raising some \$2m in grants from state and federal government - Prineas has been central to the museum project.

Its major source of income to date has been a \$94,000 grant from the NSW Government's Arts Program. Other donors include the

Nicholas Aroney Trust, the Kytherian Association of Australia, AHEPA and Sydney businessman Nick Politis.

Tackling the design of the museum is the Melbourne-based company Convergence Associates - whose previous projects include the Italian Museum in Carlton.

Convergence director Jenny Klempfner says the project is something very special for her Camberwell-based consultancy.

"It's a regional treasure," says the enthusiastic Klempfner - who has twice made the trip to Bingara to research the project.

"To come across a building like that - it's a jewel - a building that's been wonderfully loved and nurtured, both in its inception, and in the last ten years since the council has owned it."

Central to her interpretation of the 50-page design brief is to ensure the museum's design responds to the resources available and its management.

"It's a heritage building - and one that's very precious, so we have to tread lightly, the challenge is thinking about who is going to be approaching the museum and how."

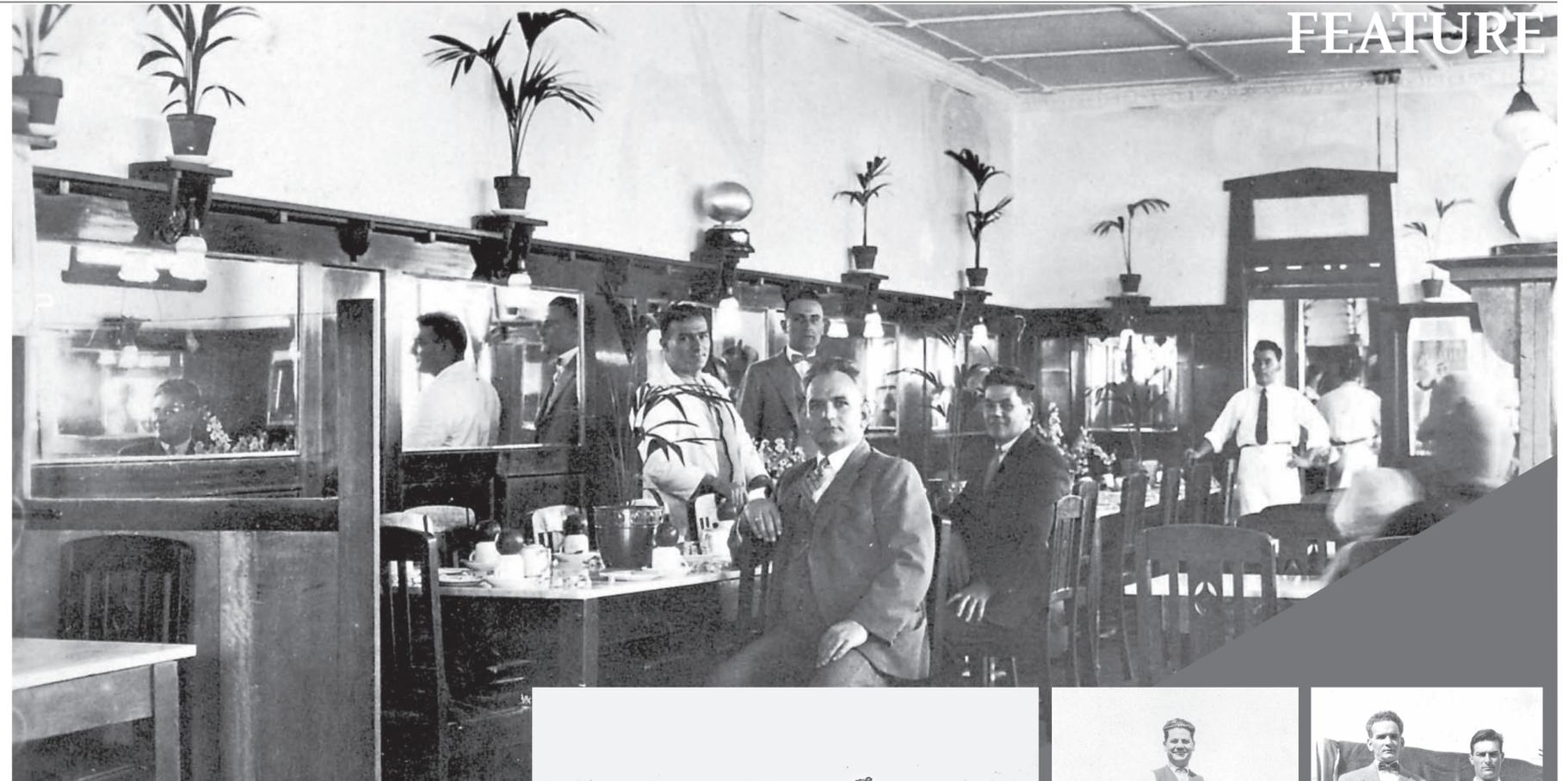
With the Roxy's interconnecting shopfronts restored - comprising the traditional Greek café - with its elegant Art Deco fittings and cinema foyer, the museum experience will weave its magic throughout the building.

"We're treating different spaces in different ways," says Klempfner. "The café is operational but there will be museum interpretation in there too."

"It'll be fitted out with jukebox style audio in the booths - so you can listen to stories from Greek café-owners, and the memories of customers."

The space wholly devoted to the museum will have a symbolic monument centre-stage - an antique cinema projector.

"We're telling the story of how Greeks came to these country



Peters & Co. in their Bingara cafe in 1935. Seated: Peter Feros (front) and Emanuel Aroney. Standing (L): George Psaltis.

PHOTO: PETER FEROS COLLECTION.

towns. We see the story as a dream - an amazing vision," says Convergence's director.

"We want to create that feeling - of coming from small villages in Greece that were often very poor. These people who came then had the chutzpah to make a go of it."

One display will focus on 'Greek café kids made good'; biographies of remarkable Greek Australians whose early years were spent in cafés.

The first such life to be celebrated will be pioneering physician Archibides 'Archie' Kalokerinos (1927 - 2012), named Greek Australian of the Century by *Neos Kosmos* in 2000. By auspicious coincidence Kalokerinos worked in Bingara for ten years and was based in the Roxy building.

The Roxy Museum has a profound tale to tell. Its narrative is not just the story

of the Roxy, remarkable in itself, but the stories of thousands of Greeks who - through their cafés and cinemas in regional Australia - nourished a young nation and left a legacy of inspiration.

*Contributions of memorabilia to the Roxy Museum collection are welcomed. For further information contact Peter Prineas at pprineas@ozemail.com.au*

*References: Katsehamos and the Great Idea. Peter Prineas. Plateia. 2006. Bingara Roxy Museum Design Brief. 2012. Ph.D thesis of cinema historian Kevin Cork.*



The Roxy Theatre with unfinished facade, April 1936. Between 1915 and 1963, Greeks operated more than 120 cinemas in some 57 country towns across the length and breadth of New South Wales.



Emanuel Aroney. PHOTO: PETER FEROS COLLECTION.



Peter Feros (L) and George Psaltis. PHOTO: PETER FEROS COLLECTION.

## A Kytherian vision

Peter Feros, George Psaltis and Emanuel Aroney arrived in Bingara in the 1920s having left Greece - a country decimated by war and social upheaval.

The three entrepreneurs from Kythera formed a partnership: Peters & Co - a generic name popular in the district and previously used by other Greek businessmen.

Soon after they bought the Greek-owned 'Oyster Saloon and Refreshment Room' in the town as their first enterprise. Despite trading through the Depression years they prospered, enabling them to invest in a second café - The Golden Bell at Barraba in 1930.

Despite competition - the Bingara

Regent Theatre was also screening movies - by late 1934 they had begun work on the Roxy - an entertainment complex without equal in the region, comprising a 750-seat cinema, a 140-seat café, three shops and a guesthouse.

To great excitement the Roxy Theatre opened in March 1936 to amazing scenes. The local newspaper reported a crowd "stormed the streets" to attend the first night, to marvel at the dancing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the RKO feature *Roberta*.

But the Roxy under its original owners would burn bright for a desperately short time. The end credits rolled far too early for its intrepid founders. Within six

months the turf war with the Regent Theatre - who pointedly advertised its own cinema as "100 per cent Australian" - had been lost.

Excessive outlays and costly delays had overwhelmed the Peters & Co balance sheet and they signed for bankruptcy.

Without its founders at the helm, the Roxy continued to operate as a cinema until its closure in 1958, delighting thousands. For the next 40 years it lay virtually dormant. Meanwhile its café continued under a series of Greek owners until the mid-1960s, before becoming a Chinese restaurant.

But as the lights came down on the 20th century, the Roxy rose phoenix-like again. Bingara

Council purchased the historic complex in 1999 and with the assistance of state and federal funding, set out to restore the building to its former glory.

The Roxy Theatre reopened its doors in 2004 and the restored Roxy Café in 2011. Owned by Gwydir Shire Council, today the Roxy operates as a multipurpose cinema, performing arts venue and function centre. The last piece of the jigsaw - the Roxy Museum - opens in April 2014.

### EPILOGUE

After losing virtually everything they had strived to create, Peter Feros, George Psaltis and Emanuel Aroney went their different ways.

Peter Feros moved to Victoria and bought a café at Murtoa where his wife and children joined him after the war. He retired to Junee in the Riverina region of NSW where he died in 1954.

Emanuel Aroney stayed in Bingara for a time. For 20 years he managed cafés in the town before retiring to Sydney. Eventually he returned to Greece and passed away in Athens in 1969.

After a stint in the NSW capital, George Psaltis returned to Bingara to manage the Roxy Café for a time, before returning to Sydney to establish a café in Kings Cross. In the 1950s he moved to Adelaide where he died penniless some 20 years later.



Jenni Klempfner of Convergence with Roxy Museum committee member George Poulos discussing the museum's design. PHOTO: MIKE SWEET.