

Generations of Memories – Frimenko Family Reunions

“Move together, people!” shouted Uncle Mike from the beach. “We need you closer on the steps to fit you all in the photo.”

“Hang on, Nika,” whispered my mom, as she squeezed me closer and inched nearer to other family members gathered on the dune steps.

Nearly 40 years ago, I was just a toddler at the time, and this is one of my earliest memories. I can still recall my mom holding me in the midst of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. This extended family photo op capped the end of our first ever Frimenko family reunion at Emerald Isle, which also became the first of decades-worth of annual summer reunions to follow. It all started with my Uncle Mike and grandfather (who we called, “Gido,” i.e., “Grandfather,” in Ukrainian).



The sons of Ellis Island immigrants who arrived from Ukraine across the Atlantic in the 1910’s, my Gido and great-uncle, Uncle Mike, grew up in Bethlehem, PA. Both brothers enlisted and served with the US Navy during World War II. Following the end of WWII, Uncle Mike continued in the armed forces, serving also in the Korean War and eventually following his calling to become an ordained Orthodox Christian priest and military chaplain. He was later stationed as chaplain at Camp LeJeune, and he and his family settled outside New Bern, NC.

For Uncle Mike’s daughter’s wedding, he and my great-aunt rented a few houses on Emerald Isle for family members to stay during the weekend of wedding festivities. The Emerald Isle experience left such a lasting positive impression that shortly afterwards, Uncle Mike and Gido started planning a week-long Emerald Isle family reunion for an upcoming summer.

These reunion weeks always displayed a beautiful melding of the generations across our family. The older, teenage cousins coached and encouraged the younger cousins to venture past the breakers, providing a steady support and a helpful boost. Arm in arm, we'd push through the crashing surf and then gently bob and bounce for hours, laughing and singing at the top of our voices. The babies and toddlers contented themselves in the sand and shallow surf, while an available aunt or uncle took the role of assigned lifeguard, counting heads between the rise and fall of the waves. The grammies and gidos would venture down to admire our sand creations, joining the kids in simultaneously panicked and joyful laughter as the rising tide inevitably won, overtaking the intricate mazes of moats and turrets.

In the late 1980's, the family started visiting Emerald Isle during the week of the 4th of July, and around this same time we also started the tradition of holding "talent shows." During one of the earlier family reunions, older cousins started long jump contests on the sand. These friendly competitions grew, and in a spirit of inclusivity, younger family members were encouraged to join in and share their own skills as well.



Eventually, this morphed into "anyone-share-anything talent shows." Nadine (one of the teenage cousins) wrote and directed skits that all the cousins then performed. Resourcefully, beach towels were turned into turbans or capes for costumes. The older relatives shared jokes and magic tricks; the younger bunch recited poems and rhymes; the audience of grown-ups and grandparents applauded and cheered. The evening usually concluded with Gido breaking out his harmonica and showcasing his talent of piping some joyful tunes.

One year, Gido attempted to form a "harmonica choir," gifting each of the kids a harmonica. He gleefully gathered us and instructed us in following his conductor directions. The night of the talent show, Gido announced to the living room cramped full of relatives, "Gather round! Gather round! And hear my Phil Harmonica in S-E-A, sea-flat!" The noise was deafening. We managed to somewhat follow

Gido's directions, but mostly it just sounded a mess. Gido didn't mind – he beamed, emphatically directing with his arms, encouraging his grandchildren, who all happily blasted our harmonicas.



The evening of the 4th of July always held a special celebration. We'd wait for the sun to set and grandly wave sparklers, dancing across the porch. Then, as the final sparkler sizzled in the sand bucket, we'd hang over the railing, slurping melty firework popsicles, racing to lick them up before the sticky juice plopped onto the porch floor. Any syrup-y remnants were quickly remedied with a rinse off from the porch hose. We loved peering down the pitch-black beach to catch the bursting, glowing views of fireworks set off from the fishing piers.

My grandparents and their siblings held a special appreciation for the 4th of July. The celebration of our nation's independence also represents a celebration of all the freedoms their parents had sacrificed to immigrate and achieve. The gratitude my grandparents displayed for these freedoms was palpable: the freedom to openly admire and soak up the beauty of the Crystal Coast land, sea, and sky; the freedom to gather as a family and offer grace before a meal; the freedom to pursue our unique interests and talents and share those creativities with the world.

We've vacationed at Emerald Isle for so many years, it's easier to number the summers we weren't able to make it rather than list out the numerous years we did. We've seen the island undergo many changes ranging from hurricane aftermath to new grocery options. And our family has undergone many changes as well: new spouses, new babies, the loss of Uncle Mike and Gido. Witnessing these changes unfolding year after year, I reflect with awe and inspiration. My husband and I now bring our own children to these continuing family reunions, and I'm built by the love passed down to me from the generations that came before. As my generation now holds this torch with the blazing flame of love, we are next to pass it to our children.

At a sibling's recent wedding in May, 2022, my cousin and I laughed together, recounting memories from our childhood and young adult adventures spent together on Emerald Isle. "I have something for your kids," she mentioned, gesturing them over. My son and daughter beamed as they unwrapped two shiny harmonicas. Wasting no time in trying out some tunes, my cousin and I had to hold our ears, but I know Gido was enjoying the noise and beaming down upon them.