

# A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

*The Bright Star, Bessemer, Alabama*



As told to Amy Evans Streeter by Jimmy Koikos, March 11, 2004

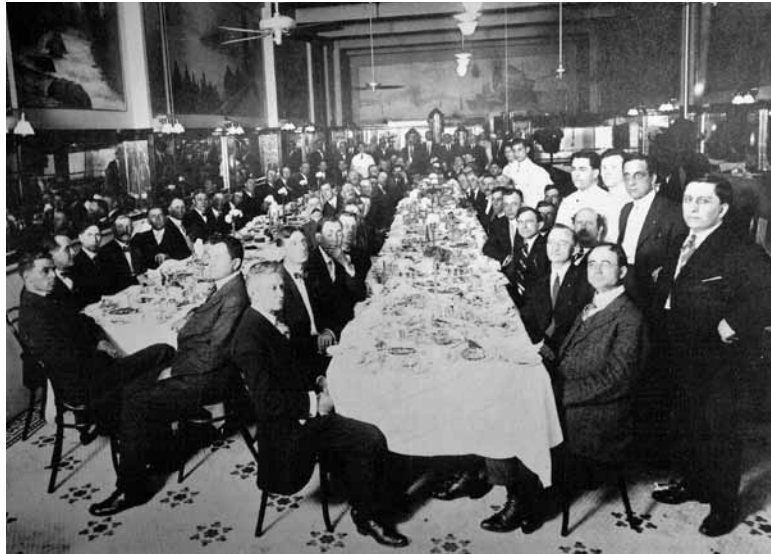
Opened by Greek immigrant Tom Bonduris in 1907, The Bright Star is Alabama's oldest restaurant. It has been in its current location in the steel town of Bessemer, just outside of Birmingham, since 1915. Bill and Pete Koikos, great-nephews of Tom Bonduris, took over the restaurant in the 1920s. Bill's sons, Jimmy and Nick Koikos, still work the floors and the kitchen, serving an encyclopedic menu that owes debts to both Greece and the American South. The interior of the restaurant is true to its 1915 glory, with hand-painted wall murals, a marble-tiled floor, and private, curtained booths.

I'M JIMMY KOIKOS, owner of The Bright Star restaurant. My daddy came in 1920 to The Bright Star [and worked] until he passed away in 1988 at the age of ninety-four. He had a brother that had come to New York earlier. And so, we don't know exactly why, but he (my uncle) came to Birmingham. And he (my father) came off Ellis Island, and he got here and walked through these doors and started working as a young immigrant to learn the language, to send his mother everything he made.

There were Greek immigrants in the late 1800s, early 1900s, coming to America for a better opportunity. A lot of people followed him from the same town. Most of the Greek immigrants were in Birmingham, which is, you know, thirteen, fifteen miles from here. Mr. Bonduris was a very smart man. He couldn't get educated, but he was smart and was a good businessman. And he said, "This restaurant is a Bright Star"—with a vision of nothing but a land of opportunity. We've had the same neon sign there since 1941.

These murals, above the booths, have been up there since 1915. They were painted by a European artist. He painted that first one with a guy fishing, and he painted it in Brighton, Alabama, which is just up the street. He was kind of like a wino, but he had talent. So he painted that thing, and Mr. Bonduris liked it, so he painted all European things. And then he painted these murals one by one. Put them up. Then they fed him and wine him and—he just wandered on through. He never dreamed they'd be up here ninety years later.

IN THE EARLY 1910s, soup was a nickel, and it included a drink. And, you know, ten or fifteen cents for hamburgers and chili. The town of Bessemer was booming. The Bright Star, when it first opened up here in 1915, used to be open close to twenty-four hours a day. It was just people coming from mining towns—coffee, doughnuts, chili.



It became a seafood restaurant and a steak restaurant in the 1930s. That's when they started getting fresh snapper. And it's still a specialty today called "Bright Star's Snapper Greek-Style." Fresh snapper, broiled with a little oregano, olive oil, lemon juice.

We have snapper throats, which is the throats of the snapper, and we fry it, serve it with vegetables. It's got bones. It's different. It's a delicacy. People just love it. We cut all our fish, all our steaks. We get fresh fish from Panama City Beach, Florida. We get them two to three times a week. He'll deliver about 1,500 pounds in a morning.

All our pole beans, we shell them. The squash is fresh. The cream potatoes—the potatoes are not instant. And, you know, that's what we believe in.

One of the most popular steaks in the Birmingham area is Bright Star's Tenderloin of Beef Greek-Style. We split it and put a little olive oil, a little Worcestershire sauce, and we marinate it. That's one steak I recommend everybody eat.

We make all our pies here. We've got two pastry people who do nothing but make our pies. And we make them every day. We've got a lemon icebox—we serve a lot of them to go. Then you've got the peanut butter pie, the pineapple cream cheese pie, and coconut pie.

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ONE TIME [Alben] Barkley came in here—he was vice president under Harry Truman. They had a Bessemer corn and livestock festival. And he came probably in the late '40s. Of course, George Wallace has been in here. Oh, Senator [Richard] Shelby comes in here, of course. Coach Bear Bryant ate here a lot. In fact, we got his booth back there. We would love to get a President of the United States here, but, you know—of course that remains to be seen.

We went through the Depression, and the good times. Now, I think, we're fighting chain outfits. There's a new restaurant on every corner. But there's a lot of respect for The Bright Star. We've had to fight location. We're off the beaten path. People have to come down here to us. We're in a city that was booming that is not exactly booming anymore. When Bessemer was going down, we just decided to stay out here.

But we still average about 5,000 people a week. Eighty-two employees. Seven days a week. We've got some great people. We've got one woman who has been here for thirty-five years, and one twenty-seven years. One seventeen years. Our chef's been here twelve years. The success of the restaurant is to have people like that. 🍷

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PREVIOUS SPREAD: Former Bright Star owner Bill Koikos with waitresses in the 1940s.LEFT: A banquet at The Bright Star ca. 1915. Photographs courtesy of Stacey Craig, The Bright Star restaurant.