



## Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

By C.J. Hirschfield



A photo taken in 1915 shows the Lake Merritt Boathouse, which housed the Zerikotes Restaurant for nearly 30 years.

## Oakland revives restaurant in Boathouse

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The historic Oakland Municipal Boathouse was re-dedicated with much fanfare last week, and there will soon be a restaurant at the scenic Lake Merritt site – the first in over half a century. At least one person at the dedication was remembering the first restaurant in the building, since it bore the name of his great uncle. Gene Zahas was just a child when he frequented Zerikotes Restaurant, which operated from the early 1930s to 1956.

James Zerikotes emigrated from Greece in the early part of the 20th Century, and settled in Oakland, where his eatery was celebrated.

“It was really THE dining spot in Oakland,” recalls Gene. The menu featured American food (steak, fried chicken, abalone), and a grand meal could be had for 65 cents. Guests would dress for dinner, and the gregarious James would make a point to visit every table to welcome

all of the diners.

“I can’t think of any place that was quite that unique,” recalls Gene, who as a kid used to perch on the stairway and listen as community meetings were taking place with a view of the waterfront.

One of the groups meeting at Zerikotes was the Lake Merritt Breakfast Club, which gathered there each week for over 15 years. James was a longtime member of this benevolent association, which still meets every Thursday morning, but now at the Garden Center in Lakeside Park. It was the Breakfast Club that conceived of and created Children’s Fairyland, and that is how the young Gene got to accompany his great uncle to the park’s grand opening day in 1950.

Gene owed more than that experience to James – it was his great uncle who introduced Gene’s parents to each other.

In 1956, James’ lease was up

with the City of Oakland, and the municipality decided to replace the restaurant with City offices, including the Parks and Recreation Department.

“It was so sad,” recalls Gene. “My great-uncle not only lost his livelihood, but his position in the community.” The City gave him a 10’x10’ section of the boathouse where he was able to sell hot dogs, which he did for a couple of years. James Zerikotes died in 1986.

The late, great columnist Peggy Stinnett wrote in the *Tribune* that at the closing of the restaurant a testimonial was presented to James Zerikotes by the Breakfast Club. She wrote, “Mopping away tears, Zerikotes told his buddies ‘of one thing I’m very proud, it was here in my restaurant—which is no more—that the idea of Children’s Fairyland was made a reality.’”

Gene Zahas made a contribution to the renovation project through his membership in Oakland Rotary 3, and also donated a lovely bench by the entryway of the boathouse on behalf of the Eugene Zahas family. James Zerikotes is part of that family.

“I think my great uncle would feel somewhat vindicated,” Gene muses. “We’re all glad to see this great building returned to public use.”

Gene tells me that the new restaurant’s co-manager, Laura Truppelli, wants to talk to him and his sister, Elene Manolis of Piedmont, to learn about what Zerikotes was like, back in the day. I hope she continues Mr. Zerikotes’ tradition of supporting community groups and events. Because you never know what kind of magic can happen when local citizens meet to break bread.

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