

A TRULY UNIQUE NAME

George Holdren,
As told to the William Baillie

It began simply: One day at the Society library Donna Laubach asked me, "George, what letter is this at the beginning of this name?" I looked at the Declaration of Intention [to apply for citizenship] she was studying and replied: "I know exactly what that letter is; it's a *Z* and the name is *Zeneldeen*. That was the name my wife's uncle was known by: Zeneldeen Swartz."

It had been a question in the family for a long time: how did that uncle come to have the very unusual name *Zeneldeen*? His birth certificate is straightforward; it shows that on 11 January 1932 Ecla B. Swartz and wife Loretta M. Taylor, of Mount Pleasant Township in Columbia County, had a child whom they named "Ecla Zeneldeen Swartz." He would be known as Zeneldeen for the rest of his life, although he was also known as "Nick."

Now I had a clue to why he was named Zeneldeen. According to the Declaration of Intention filed 30 April 1924 at Columbia County, one George Zeneldeen, occupation Merchant and born in Mount Lebanon, Syria, was then residing at 129 West Front Street, Berwick, PA.

So who was George Zeneldeen? In the 1920 federal census he is shown as a tobacco merchant residing with his family at 118 West Front Street. In the 1925 city directory for Berwick he is listed with business at 125 West Front Street where he operated a produce and tobacco shop with his cousin, Joseph Alley, and resided in an apartment above the shop. I thought that maybe the Alley families still in the Berwick area had some information about this relative.

I telephoned the first Alley listed in the phone book and explained what I was searching for. He responded immediately, "You need to talk to my sister." He gave me the name and number of his sister, who lives in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. She, it turns out, has been researching the origins of her Berwick family, including her uncle Zeneldeen.

She found ship-arrival records that show that Chahin Zein-El-Dine, a 23-year-old single male, left his father in Mohtara, Syria, sailed from Dunkirk, France aboard the SS *Californie* and arrived in the U.S. 8 October 1909. His destination was Naugatuck, near Union City, Connecticut, where a relative, Joseph Faris, lived.

Some years later Chahin, now known as George Zeneldeen, returned to Mohtara to bring his family to Berwick, PA, where he had taken a residence in an apartment above his cousins' business operated under the name J. Alley and Sons. In the 1920 census George, his wife "Sallie," and his son George, age 10, all give their birth country as Syria and their immigration year as 1915. [The son's name actually was Arif, known as Harry.] Their daughter, Amelia, age 1, was born in Pennsylvania.

In that same 1920 census, Eckley Swartz is a 23-year-old single male boarding with a family in Berwick Ward 3 and working as a railroad car builder at American Car & Foundry. As a working man Eckley would have gone to the

nearby tobacconist to purchase his plug of tobacco. When he later married and had children, he gave his second boy his own first name and borrowed the middle name from his acquaintance's Americanized surname.

It would appear that Chahin Zein-El-Dine's name was transformed to George Zeneldeen at the convenience of an English-speaking Clerk of the Common Pleas in the county of Columbia. That name Zeneldeen was then chosen by Eckley and Carlotta Swartz for their second son. Later, ironically, the immigrant shortened the made-up name "Zeneldeen" and used the briefer name George Deen. That is how he registered with the draft board during World War II, when he was living in Richlands, Tazewell County, Virginia. That registration, incidentally, gives his birthdate as June 1, 1885.

The Zeneldeen family met with misfortune in Berwick soon after the census-taker's visit. Daughter Amelia died 7 May 1920, just past age 2, having eaten strychnine. She was buried in Roselawn Cemetery. Nine years later her mother Salha Zeneldian was buried beside her; she had been living in Virginia, and died in Abington in that state while under anesthesia in connection with angina pectoris.

In 1930 George Zeneldeen returned to his homeland and remarried. He came back to America on the SS *Providence* traveling with his new wife, a 16-year-old female named Edma Shamaha, from Ancoli Shouf, Lebanon (a village across the valley from Mohtara). He brought her to 129 West Front Street in Berwick.

Meanwhile his namesake, young Zeneldeen "Nick" Swartz, became a minister of the Gospel. A search of census records shows no one else in America bore the given name of Zeneldeen. Like so many other immigrants' names, it came from an anonymous clerk's offhand effort to Anglicize an unfamiliar foreign surname. It was truly a unique name.

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