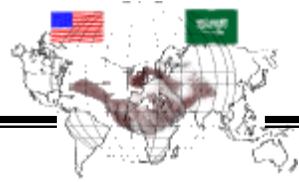


Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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HONEY & ONIONS: A MEMOIR OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE SIXTIES

BY FRANCES MEADE

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

CHAPTER ONE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The Saudi-American Forum is very pleased to present "Honey and Onions" by Frances Meade. This delightful memoir of the early days of Americans working and living in the Kingdom will be presented one chapter per week for the next ten weeks.

We hope you enjoy it and you will join in a discussion of the book.

<http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/ubbthreads/Post165>

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

There is an old Arabic proverb, *yawm 'asl wa yawm basl*; "one day honey; one day onions," that is to me the universal description of life. Certainly it characterizes my own and I can't think of a more fitting title for a book that invites the reader to share my life in the Saudi Arabia of thirty years ago. That those years and the ones that have followed have been happy ones is self-evident; the honey has been very sweet and the onions surprisingly mild.

This is a personal memoir of the years before the economic boom that transformed the kingdom. My story is a preface to that period of tumultuous change, a backdrop against which the larger story of unprecedented development can be better appreciated. For those of us who lived through it, the metamorphosis of Arabia was a gradual evolution, but looking back over the years, we can see that it was a breathtaking leap into an unknown future.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the many friends, Saudi and non-Saudi, who have contributed to the richness of my life in Arabia. All of you are here in this book; there could be no book without you.

**HONEY & ONIONS: A MEMOIR OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE SIXTIES
BY FRANCES MEADE**

CHAPTER ONE

1996

We are returning to Riyadh from a short holiday in Italy. Although the plane lands after midnight, we emerge from the jetway into a bright indoor world of trees and flowers. The escalator glides down past cascading waterfalls and we walk across the carpeted floors to the computerized immigration station. Then into the customs area where a Sri Lankan porter plucks our bags from the carousel and a young and efficient Saudi customs official exchanges greetings, briskly examines our luggage and waves us through. The driver is waiting, the car is comfortably air conditioned and we are off on the multi-lane highway with the lights of the Riyadh skyline in the distance. Twenty minutes later we pull up to our front gate to an ecstatic welcome from the black Lab whose enthusiasm remains undiminished by our comings and goings. We are home.

1965

The twice-weekly Boeing from Beirut to Jeddah was full, but my two daughters and I had the good fortune to be traveling with the manager of the company that had brought Dick to Arabia and we were ensconced in First Class; a curtain and a world away from the mixed bag of Arab and western men in the back of the plane. We had met the company manager while waiting in Beirut for our Saudi visas and he had graciously delayed his own return to accompany us on a trip that had been unimaginable six months earlier in this watershed year of 1965.

It all began with a newspaper ad, happened upon at a moment in our lives when we were ripe for something new and I was probably the ripest of all. I was a wife and mother in my thirties who had married right after four years of college during World War II. I had never been anywhere outside the States except Bermuda on my honeymoon and as one who had teethed on travel and adventure books, I yearned for the foreign and exotic.

"How would you like to go to Jeddah for eighteen months?" A post-interview phone call from Dick.

Jeddah. Jeddah? A wild guess--Yugoslavia, perhaps? An expensive education had clearly let me down and I was grateful that my parents would never know how badly.

"It's in Saudi Arabia." Aha. That conjured up a map in my fourth grade geography book of Africa and Asia tied together by the strings of an apron called Saudi Arabia with accompanying pictures of Bedouins and camels. How much more exotic could I hope for?

So I said, "Okay."

"Okay," and our lives changed forever.

And here I was six months later, with my 12- and 14-year old daughters plus a dog of mixed

heritage, on a midnight flight streaking across the dark Arabian peninsula toward an unknown land and an unpredictable future. My first hint of unpredictability had come three months earlier when shortly after Dick's arrival in the kingdom and quite unexpectedly, he was assigned to the capital to be the company's liaison with the Saudi government and our residence was changed from Jeddah to Riyadh.

I had been notified of the switch just before leaving the States--and after all our things including winter clothing had been put in storage--by a telephone call from the same manager now sitting beside me. He had informed me that life in Riyadh was much simpler than it was in Jeddah, urged me to bring warm clothes for the winter and to be sure that Dick had dinner clothes. Bemused by the possibilities of black tie dinners in mud houses, I had proceeded to a department store, described Dick's dimensions as best I could and had in my luggage a tuxedo that I could only hope would make him presentable on those hard to envision occasions for which they would be required.

But our first stop was to be at the company headquarters in Jeddah for a taste of life on the Red Sea and orientation by the oldtimers, some of whom had been in the kingdom almost a year, and who would surely be helpful if for no other reason than to supply me with a bread recipe. The company handbook had assured me that I would have to bake my own and I had never seen bread baked in my life.

Lounging in the unaccustomed luxury of First Class, I congratulated myself that the great adventure had, so far, more than lived up to my expectations. The girls and I had had a wonderful month in Europe, and Beirut, our introduction to the Middle East, had charmed us.

The way to Saudi Arabia began in Beirut where all foreign airlines connected with the Saudi flight and it was customary to obtain visas there rather than in our countries of origin. This meant a stopover of several days while the marvelous people who were employed by our company scurried about obtaining the necessary documentation while we pampered beings whiled away the time in a splendid hotel. There was always someone to show us around, take us shopping and generally provide for our comfort.

We had visited the American Community School, ACS, the boarding school the girls would attend--there was no school for them in Riyadh as far as we knew--been entertained at a beautiful outdoor dinner in the Bekaa valley, and on the more practical side, had arranged for a year's worth of appointments with the only American-trained orthodontist in that part of the world.

Here in Beirut we had been reunited with the family dog who had been shipped from the States to coincide with our arrival and the few days we spent awaiting our visas were an unexpected treat. And now the denouement was at hand as the plane dipped into the landing pattern and we could see the lights of Jeddah strung along the shore line of a vast black area that we knew must be the Red Sea.

We landed in an unexpected blast of insect repellent sprayed lavishly up and down the aisle by the flight attendant. After all the inoculations we had been required to take for such colorful

diseases as cholera, plague, typhus and yellow fever, the last thing I expected was to be decontaminated. It seemed to me that they ought to be spraying whatever was lurking on the outside that had necessitated all those shots. Trying to take very shallow breaths, we gathered up our numerous carry-ons, the door finally opened, and we stepped out into a smothering blanket of humid heat. I literally gasped for breath and turning, saw that the girls were doing the same and looking as shocked as I felt.

Down the ramp we went onto the tarmac where a waving flashlight indicated the direction of the terminal and heavily laden with all the treasures we had acquired during the European phase of our travels, we trudged off toward the distant lights, the aforementioned treasures bumping us in the legs with every step.

In no time at all the horde from the back of the plane had overtaken and surrounded us--First Class had clearly ceased to exist at the bottom of the ramp--jostling and sweeping us along. Intent on keeping the girls within arm's length, I lost our manager in the rush and we wound up minus an escort as we pressed through an iron gate into a shed with a dirt floor to be greeted by some very imposing soldiers who were shoving people into the semblance of a line in front of the immigration table.

Somewhat daunted, I tried to appear very cooperative, but soon found the line deteriorating and myself well on the way to being the tail end of an unruly crowd. However, some judicious flailing with our many carry-ons kept the mob at bay and all seemed to be going well until a fierce-looking soldier stepped in front of us, thrust the business end of his rifle at Patty, my younger daughter, and shouted something in Arabic.

My God, what had we done? What was he saying? Where was that damned company manager? My mouth went dry and I looked at him stupidly. Again, he shouted and thrust the rifle toward my child. Instinctively I threw my arms around both daughters, clouting them painfully with the carry-ons, and clutched them protectively. An Arab businessman behind me tapped me on the shoulder.

"He's asking about the frames."

The frames! A mental inventory of my various bags produced no frames. Was frame smuggling a problem in Saudi Arabia and why did he think we were engaged in it? I shrugged helplessly. My interpreter asked a question and translated the answer.

"He wants to know why she has frames on her teeth."

My knees almost buckled with relief as I recovered from my first brush with the ingenuous curiosity we were to encounter again and again in this part of the world. My explanation of the principles of orthodontia were relayed in Arabic and our interrogator, looking as perplexed as we had felt, shook his head in disbelief and motioned us on.

After that experience, the immigration official's perusal of passports, visas and health cards seemed negligible and we passed through the barrier into the back of the shed where long metal

counters awaited the bags that were being dumped out of baggage carts and swarmed over by our fellow passengers. To our relief, the immigration official's perusal of passports, visas and health cards was time consuming but straightforward and we passed through the barrier into the back of the shed where long metal counters awaited the bags that were being dumped out of baggage carts and swarmed over by our fellow passengers.

There we were reunited with our escort and there coming toward us was Dick, very tan, very authoritative, and very much at ease amid the confusion. For the first time since our travels began I was no longer the mainstay of the group and I could have wept with the relief of knowing that I didn't have to plunge into those heaps of luggage and haul ours out.

Other figures materialized, company employees who wrestled the bags onto the counters for examination and lugged them out through the terminal and into the cars. I was almost whining with gratitude and the children appeared to be permanently attached to their father's person.

The airport was a clutter of old buildings in the middle of town, centered around the barracks where the pilgrims camped before and after the Haj, the annual pilgrimage to Makkah. We left the artificial bustle of the terminal behind and emerged into the relative quiet of Jeddah at three o'clock in the morning. The heat, almost forgotten in the drama of our arrival, closed in on us once again as we piled into the non-air conditioned cars and were taken to the old Haramain hotel.

Even those company magicians could not spring the dog from the airport until the following morning--she in her box had not, thank heaven, been among the baggage that had been deposited so haphazardly in the customs shed, but was being held overnight in some kind of quarantine area at the airport. We couldn't help wondering what kind of welcome she had received and we were all so concerned about her welfare that we were barely conscious of our surroundings and not terribly interested in the hotel accommodations. Since it was now well into the early morning hours, we all fell into bed and consoled ourselves with the fact that Woof's stay in the airport would only be a matter of a few hours.

In the morning we awoke to a dust storm and Patty's birthday. Dick left early to go back to the airport to retrieve the dog and the girls and I huddled on the bed in my room looking out the window at the dust that often sweeps across Jeddah in the hot months turning the landscape gray and, for us, emphasizing the strangeness of the street scene below. Donkey carts with jingling bells went by hauling drums of drinking water, the drivers sitting sidesaddle on the narrow seats. We spotted our first veiled ladies and ghutra-draped men. Passing cars roiled the dirt road into mini storms unrelated to the blowing dust from the desert. Nowhere was the fabled Red Sea.

But--there was a car pulling up in front of the hotel, Dick getting out and an unmistakable Woof on her leash trotting happily along with him. We were all together again, but we welcomed our prodigal with a certain amount of restraint since our joyous reunion in Beirut had resulted in the release of a torrent onto the carpet of that fancy hotel lobby. There were no mishaps this time; life was back to normal.

We ordered a room service breakfast and produced the birthday packages that had traveled with

us plus Dick's contribution from the gold souk. No, life wasn't really back to normal; compared to Patty's previous birthdays this one was opening a new and exciting chapter.

The rest of the morning was spent at the office compound, meeting a bewildering cast of characters from a dozen different countries doing an amazing variety of jobs. Only the second American company to come to Jeddah, theirs was the task of designing and supervising the construction of the first highway network throughout the northwest quadrant of Saudi Arabia. Crews had to be sent out in the desert to locate routes, on the move for weeks at a time, equipped to set up new camps every few days with all that was required not only for living, but for working. Permanent camps had to be planned and built for those sections of road which were actually going into the construction phase. The logistics of such a project were staggering, and the organization required to maintain an American standard of living in a desert wilderness with no normal links to the outside world was hard to imagine.

The office building was a large sprawling three-story villa bristling with balconies and porches surrounded by a high wall. Once through the gate we drove into a tiled courtyard with several outbuildings and piling out of the car went up the front steps and into a conglomerate world of employees from all over the world. The only nationality not in evidence was Saudi Arabian. At this time, there were very few Saudis equipped to handle upper level jobs, and their cultural tradition prevented them from accepting anything less, so from manager to coffee boy, foreigners filled all the available positions.

We were greeted with great cordiality by everyone from the office staff to the cooks and waiters in the mess hall. It was our introduction to the tightly knit structure of the company where life was the sum total of every single person on the payroll plus their families. The company *was* life in Jeddah and a benign consequence of this all-embracing institution was a birthday party for Patty that same afternoon, with a beautiful cake baked by one of the wives.

Earlier, we had driven out along the shore to the American Embassy to register our presence in the kingdom and had caught our first glimpse of the Red Sea. Even on this dusty day we were able to see the beautiful colors, pale blue-green in the shallows turning to dark turquoise over the reef--Red was a misnomer if ever there was one. Not until our next visit to Jeddah did we actually swim and experience it for ourselves, but on this occasion it was enough just to see it at last.

Evening brought a rooftop dinner in our honor at the home of another company couple and I finally got to ask some of my questions. To my dismay, all the answers were couched in terms of, "Well, that's how it is in Jeddah, but Riyadh is different."

It was obvious that most of the wives were delighted that I was the one going to live in Riyadh rather than one of them, but since it turned out that none of them had ever been there I tried to slough off the "poor you" implications. Corporate sympathy was the last thing I needed and in this case it served only to make me more determined than ever to live my adventure to the hilt. We were to leave the following morning and I said goodbye to the company bread bakers (yes, they did bake their own bread, seemed always to have known how, and had brought their own bread pans) without requesting recipes--pride having superseded need.

The early morning trip to Riyadh was uneventful and we were fortunate that this was the day for one of the two weekly flights of the 707 jet since it was not only much faster than the usual DC-3, but would enable us to take the dog on the plane. Even so, there was a bit of a problem over shipping the dog. It became obvious that the transportation of dogs was not something Saudi Air Lines relished. In the end a First Class ticket had to be purchased for her, although she rode once again in the hold, and the rest of us were back in Economy mode despite Dick's valiant attempts to get one of us into Woof's unoccupied seat up front.

The daytime flight let us see for ourselves the bleakness of the desert terrain, in some ways very like the Arizona landscape we had come from, but without the softening influence of the cactus and other flora that characterize the American Southwest. The dust was still everywhere so the scene was blurred, but the harsh lines of the wadis, dry stream beds cutting their way through the unyielding desert were easy to see.

Riyadh at last. We landed in front of a cluster of mud buildings, one of which sported a rudimentary control tower reached by a wooden ladder. Since this was a domestic flight there was no bug spray and we disembarked very close to the arrival gate--a break in the iron fence that separated the runway from the airport buildings. This was, of course, the old airport site; even the concept of the magnificence of King Khalid International was still far in the future. Dick waved to someone and as we made our way through the gate we were met by a beaming Ali Harbi, all dark beard, flashing black eyes and very white teeth. He was our driver, the only company employee besides Dick in Riyadh and he was obviously pleased to see that the ranks were swelling.

We shook hands all around and then another hand, attached to a small, skirted Yemeni, was extended for shaking. We complied and learned that this was "our" baggage boy, one of the group who, presumably, lived at the airport and worked as independent contractors. He had commandeered the bags when Dick first arrived in Riyadh and thus, according to the code of the group, was permanently assigned to him and, by extension, to us as well.

It seemed like an auspicious beginning with all the smiles and greetings and we were very optimistic as we picked our way through the dusty footpaths to the street and, good sports to the end, got into a non-air conditioned car once again, this time to be driven to the Yamama Hotel.

Since Dick's predecessor and his wife were still occupying the company villa and would do so until they finally departed the kingdom in a few weeks, this four story fortress-like edifice would be our temporary home.

About the Author

Frances Meade is an American who has lived in Saudi Arabia since 1965. Born in New York, she and her family moved to Arizona in the '50s and still call it home. She has a degree from Mount Holyoke College and has written and edited educational texts as well as a monthly magazine column.

ABOUT THE SAUDI -AMERICAN FORUM

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues -
- impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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Thank you for your support of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the Saudi-American Forum.