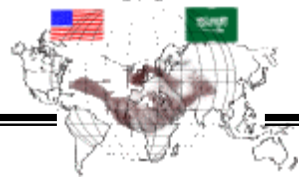


Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

March 13, 2004

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

CHAPTER TWO

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

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>

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

CHAPTER TWO

1996

It's been a delightful evening with old friends who are staying for a few days at one of Riyadh's five star hotels. After dinner, which we all agree was beautifully prepared and served, we spend an hour or so with them in their comfortable suite with its view of the city by night and reminisce about the old days. We are still in the throes of nostalgia when, on our way out, we pass through the elegant lobby, smile at each other and say, "Yamama."

1965

Memory often paints a pastel picture, but I see the Yamama Hotel as clearly in my mind's eye as I saw it that first day when we drove through the gate and around a circular plot of unmowed grass and undisciplined flowers. A dozen men sat crosslegged on the grass in a circle of their own. I was to discover in due time that these were the taxi drivers, who attached themselves to

the Yamama just as their counterparts did to the Sahari Palace, the only other hotel in town. Here, in this bit of garden they waited for fares, ate, drank tea, prayed, and came to know all there was to know about us and all the other guests in the hotel. They were, of course, Saudis as were all drivers of private and public vehicles. The great migration of cheap Asian labor was many years away.

Through the front door we went, complete with dog, into a vast high-ceilinged lobby carpeted with dozens of rugs of oriental design and lavishly furnished with many ornate sofas and coffee tables covered with ash trays and boxes of tissues. At this hour of the morning, it was empty, and we were hailed by the desk clerk as we came into the gloom. Dick, having already taken up residence, was well known to them as the lone western guest. Whether or not they were expecting an unknown western dog was questionable, but with great aplomb, they ignored her presence and welcomed the rest of us. We were taken up in a somewhat uncertain elevator and shown to two cavernous connecting rooms on the third floor--the topmost floor that was actually being occupied and, as it turned out, almost exclusively by us. This was, I'm sure, a conscious move to afford our small family a kind of privacy and keep us and our canine out of the mainstream of hotel life.

In any case, we were to live in relative isolation during the hours when Dick would be at his office in the Ministry of Communications, which proved to be right then. He departed, leaving us to unpack and promising to return in time to take us to the Mission for lunch. At least, we knew what the Mission was -- the United States Military Training Mission, an American oasis in the midst of a strange city. A place where we could have a sandwich for lunch instead of the multi-course meals served in the hotels. We couldn't wait.

But, unpacking and getting accustomed to our new quarters took a fair amount of time. Though the rooms were painted a dark gray with heavy dark drapes and furnishings, the windows were wide and the sun bright so they seemed fairly cheerful. The best feature was the closets, which seemed to be proportionate in size to the rooms.

We had arrived with two suitcases apiece as well as an air shipment of a hundred pounds of clothing and personal possessions -- everything else was to be purchased locally -- and the various pieces of luggage were distributed randomly between the rooms, so it seemed best to start by sorting them out. We started dragging suitcases, but we were interrupted by an imposing white-robed and turbaned Sudanese with an armful of towels who appeared horrified by our physical exertions and insisted on taking over the job. With some very graphic sign language, we were instructed to call him -- here, he indicated the bell that would summon him -- whenever any kind of similar activity was contemplated. This was a revelation to someone with a lengthy history as an American housewife and mother. I'd certainly never had anybody to summon before nor the mechanical means to do the summoning. Things were looking more and more as I had dreamed they might.

He disappeared into my bathroom to distribute a very large quantity of towels, which turned out to be all one size somewhere between hand and bath and of extraordinary patterns, no two alike. There were no washcloths. The bathtub crouched sadly along one very long wall with a pipe and shower head emerging dead center, but there was no shower curtain, and since there was no

shower rod either, it was clear that this was no mere oversight. A quick check of the girls' bathroom confirmed the fact that shower curtains had ceased to be a requirement of life. As we later discovered, this accounted for the number of towels assigned to us. Each morning the room boy, with his thobe kilted up to his bony knees, sloshed about using all the towels in the bathroom to mop up the floods that resulted from our uncurtained showers and brought a fresh pile to deal with the next day's inundation. The linoleum tiles with their curled up edges testified to the fact that we were not the only guests who left the floor looking like a small pond.

Susie and Patty came in complaining that there weren't enough hangers. With a flourish, I rang for the room boy, an imaginary tiara settling on my head. He appeared immediately and was dispatched for hangers. He did not reappear and when summoned again, disclaimed any knowledge of available hangers. We shoved the cartons of our air shipment into the closet still packed. They contained winter clothes, and we had no immediate need of them in the August heat. It proved later on to have been a bad move.

With little else to do until the hanger situation was resolved, we decided to take Woof for a walk. Downstairs, the clerk in the still empty lobby sent us out the back door into a huge garden studded with fluorescent lamps on steel posts that suggested outdoor evening activities of some kind. We promenaded up and down the paths while the dog explored the dusty flower beds, but there was no hint of the surrounding neighborhood. All we could see was the high wall enclosing the grounds and nothing beyond; the government ministry buildings we had seen across the Airport Road when we arrived were now hidden by the hotel itself. There were tables and chairs scattered about, but it was getting on toward noon, and with the sun directly overhead, we weren't inclined to linger and back we went, up in the rickety elevator and down what we now realized was a rather dark and musty corridor to our rooms. It began to dawn on me that life in the Yamama was going to be a challenge to our imaginations.

Fortunately, Dick was as good as his word and reappeared in time to take us to lunch at the Mission, located in a building which had been and is once again, a hotel on the corner of the Airport Road and University Street. This was the central crossroads of our Riyadh world. The round building, still to be seen, which we Americans all referred to as the Capitol Records building, was the newest building in town. Next to it was the Aramco office and across the intersection the Ministry of Commerce.

The Mission lobby pretty much duplicated the decor of the Yamama, and at first glance, there was no American influence to be seen. But, the second floor dining room was a revelation.

There could be found most of the American community, if not at lunch, certainly at dinner and invariably on movie nights. We were greeted effusively by the headwaiter, an elderly Sudanese in western clothes, universally known as Chief -- I don't think we ever discovered his real name -- who charmed us at once. He beamed on one and all and Susie and Patty seemed happier than they had appeared to be since our arrival. We met an overwhelming number of people all at once, military and civilian, sat down to a very American lunch and were invited by one of the officers to come to his quarters for coffee.

I couldn't believe it when we walked into his suite -- there can't be too many posts in the world

where both officers and enlisted men on single status all enjoy individual suites but that was how the hotel had been designed, and there were no complaints to be heard about living accommodations at the Mission. Our host later proved to be a great friend to all the teenagers in town, organizing activities and figuring largely in their social life. We felt far removed from the alien atmosphere of the Yamama and began to realize that the interdependence of all of us foreigners was the keystone to living in Riyadh.

Dick was free after lunch to give us a tour. Since his office was in the Ministry of Communications, he usually kept Ministry hours, ending the work day at 2:00. So we piled into the car and got our first look at the city. It didn't take long.

With few paved streets, no traffic lights and very little traffic, it was simple to strike out in a circuit of the city not only by road but cross country. If you could hold present-day Riyadh in your hand, it would cover your entire palm, and the city of the sixties would occupy a space the size of a dime somewhere along your life line.

Geographically, our micro-Riyadh would be as unfamiliar to most of today's foreign residents as it would be to those who have never lived here at all. Its boundaries enclosed an area that has been left behind by the great expansion boom that began in the mid-seventies. Today, huge foreign compounds lie east of the city and the complex of university, Diplomatic Quarter and palaces has spurred the expansion to the north. In the sixties, the old airport was the northernmost outpost with only the mosque, the Sahari Palace Hotel and the small compound of the Mo'ammara family as neighbors. The eastern edge of town was near the race track in Malaz. Everything beyond was desert.

Thalateen Street was a wadi, which effectively blocked further development toward what are now Suleimaniya and Olaya. Beyond the pink walls and buildings of King Saud's Nazrieh and the elegant white palace of King Faisal, other princely palaces backed up to yet another wadi system with nothing between them and the Tuwaiq escarpment, the western edge of the plateau upon which the city is built.

Riyadh was centered around the Dukhna and Dira area, the traditional heart of the city, where nowadays imposing pedestrian malls and public buildings have replaced the old square and souks, which were the core of its commercial and governmental life. The Friday mosque, a splendid example of simplicity of design and material, presided over the unpaved square across from the Palace of Justice and the Emirate. It was in this square that executions and other criminal punishments took place after the noon prayer on Friday. They still do.

The whole area was alive with the bustle of the souks, open markets that flanked the mosque and meandered off into winding alleys between the surrounding mud houses, one of which had been the home of St. John Philby, father of British spy Kim Philby, when he lived in Riyadh at the time of King Abdul Aziz in the thirties.

Engulfed by the houses, only the towers and facade of the Mismak palace could be seen. This, the oldest structure in Riyadh, faced the souk across a narrow dirt lane, and it was easy to reconstruct a mental picture of the battle that took place there at the beginning of the century, a

milestone on the road to the creation of Saudi Arabia as a unified kingdom and the absolute power of the royal family. At this time, it was being used as a prison, and it was an incongruous sight to catch a glimpse of a group of manacled felons entering the Mismak shepherded by guards who were carrying the prisoners' gaily painted tin trunks.

To the south, the animal and charcoal souks of the old Manfouha quarter constituted the city limits, and once again, desert and wadi took over. The actual area of the city was easily encompassed that afternoon, but we had only the most fleeting of impressions and absolutely no sense of the character of the place other than its strangeness. I stared unashamedly at this alien landscape of white robes, donkey carts, harsh light and deep shadows and wondered how we were ever to become part of it. Well, I was the one who had longed for the exotic and here it was. I was the alien here and it was up to me to blend in and find my place. This was not a tourist attraction to be stared at and recorded in postcards to the folks back home; this was a life to be lived and I'd better get on with it.

The Yamama looked almost homey after my glimpse of the world outside and the friendly faces of desk clerks and room boys were morale boosters. Woof was delighted to see that she hadn't been abandoned after all and the girls took her downstairs for another garden excursion.

In retrospect, it is hard to imagine what we were thinking of in our naive assumption that bringing a dog to Saudi Arabia to live in a hotel was a perfectly normal thing to do. That we continued to believe it was a testament to the traditional Arab treatment of guests. We could do no wrong. Dogs are considered to be among the most unclean of animals to a Muslim, yet no one would have dreamed of embarrassing Dick by the most indirect reference to his peculiar household much less evict him as would probably have been the case in most hotels at home. Woof's presence was never actually discussed but simply accepted and then ignored.

We continued settling in until it was time to leave for dinner at the Mission. I had decided earlier to confine the use of the balky elevator to upward trips only, so we were heading down the stairs when we began to hear a buzzing from below that grew louder as we went. Emerging into what had earlier been a deserted lobby we found every seat occupied, the coffee tables laden with cold drinks, the air layered with cigarette smoke, and lively conversation in full cry. Until we were spotted, that is, and a dead silence ensued.

We tried to be nonchalant as we trekked across the acres of lobby to the door and finally heard the conversation resume as if turned on by a switch.

"What was going on in there?" I demanded of Dick as soon as we were clear of the door.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that the lobby is the prime meeting place in town in the late afternoon and evenings. I guess you girls just don't fit into the picture."

Susie announced that she was not going back into the hotel until everybody had gone.

Unfortunately for her, Dick explained, the crowd would be there well into the late evening with the overflow in the garden outside, and we'd better get used to it. As the only western family in

the hotel, we were going to attract attention and might just as well face up to it, behave appropriately, and sooner or later, the novelty would wear off. Nobody intended to embarrass us; we were simply an unexpected diversion in the nightly routine. This cut very little ice with Susie, who was at an age when undue attention could be painful, but Patty couldn't have cared less and was markedly unsympathetic. From then on, we did try to confine the dog's trips outdoors to the less popular hours of the lobby assembly and left to Dick the unavoidable late night walk before going to bed.

Sleep that night and for all our Yamama nights was unaccountably disturbed by strange noises emanating from the air conditioning ducts, and I count it among the kindnesses extended to us by the hotel staff that we never found out during our stay that the cause was four-footed, long-tailed and distinctly rodent.

We descended to the dining room for a family breakfast the next morning with somewhat the same result as our foray into the lobby the night before and decided that henceforth Dick could breakfast alone, and we would manage to sacrifice togetherness in the interests of privacy and additional sleep. So, our days gradually resolved themselves into a cycle of a room service breakfast of watermelon, local and delicious, and toast which had initially appeared to be of the raisin variety, but was not and required a fork to remove the dead "raisins;" walks in the garden with Woof; lunch at the Mission; and long afternoons when Dick went back to his office for one reason or another. There was no possibility of going out in the streets on our own. It just wasn't done for females, foreign or otherwise, to wander the streets of the city. There was no public transportation available, and a taxi was useless since we couldn't speak Arabic. A further complication was the lack of street names -- we couldn't go anywhere because we didn't know how to get there ourselves nor explain it to a driver. So, the high point of the day was the radio check with the Jeddah office.

Telephones existed in the government offices and the hotels, but connections between the cities were rarely satisfactory involving a great deal of shouting, a lot of "What? What?" and inexplicable interruptions, so the company maintained a radio network to communicate with the desert camps and Riyadh. The radio was housed on the deserted fourth floor of the hotel with an antenna strung between the elevator shaft towers on the roof. Another tribute to the hospitality of the Yamama -- this weird American had not only a dog, but a radio. Never mind.

The trips to the fourth floor enlivened the afternoon, and we wouldn't have missed them despite the fact that there was no air conditioning up there and a great deal of dust. It was thrilling and very reassuring to hear those far away voices as, one by one, they came on the radio to discuss the progress of the work. Just one more bead on my string of new experiences, and for the girls a chance to move around and a change of scene, hot and dusty though it was. Actually, if they had wanted to, they could have run foot races in the corridor on our own floor in perfect privacy; there was no one else there to disturb, and the room boy would have loved it, but they were not so moved. I will always be proud of them for being such good sports about their confinement in the hotel, making the best of it as we all looked ahead to the day when the company villa would be ours.

Meanwhile, a series of diversions kept us on our toes. One morning, as I rang for the room boy -

- this was becoming mere routine and I no longer thought of myself as a great lady -- there was a loud hissing noise, the bell fell off the wall, and the exposed wires began to give off a small fireworks display. Yelling for the girls to follow, I dashed into the corridor to find the room boy dashing toward me; apparently, the effect on the other end of the line had been equally spectacular. He charged into the room and with remarkable dexterity born, undoubtedly, of previous experience, yanked the bell, wires and all out of the wall, turned to me and calmly awaited whatever request I had that had caused the conflagration. I didn't remember then, and I don't remember now why I had rung, I only recall trying to peer into the hole in the wall in an effort to see whether anything more was happening in there.

A quick trip to the lobby to relay the incident to the Egyptian desk clerk generated nothing more than smiles and assurances that repairs would be forthcoming. I found it hard to believe that a short circuit that had affected both ends of an electrical connection would not be smoldering quietly somewhere within the walls between them and I may have been right. We were shortly to enjoy a power failure that knocked out the lights and the air conditioning resulting in a particularly sleepless night sweating to the energetic scrabbling coming from the non-functioning air ducts.

Dick's comment was, "Well, we've had fire and famine," referring to our rather restricted breakfast menu, "pestilence comes next."

How right he was. Once again catastrophe struck in the morning with Dick at the office; this time to the sound of a waterfall emanating from my closet. When I opened the door, I discovered a cascade of some loathsome material coming from a previously unnoticed opening in the ceiling, which went straight up through the next floor to the roof. Shouting at top volume produced a face peering through the square of daylight above. He may not have understood English, but he had no trouble understanding that he had somehow upset the wild woman two floors below.

Something quickly clanged into place, blocking the opening and I was left to view the result of his efforts. Fortunately, the closet was large and the hangers few, so our clothes occupied only one end of the closet and what was clearly sewage the other. Not so fortunately, the cartons of air freight were at the receiving end. A mad dash to the children's room to ring for the room boy -- there was, of course, no means of summoning him from my own room, only a hole in the wall -- brought bewildered stares from the girls who must have been having serious doubts about one parent's sanity, and my cries of "Sewage!" did nothing to reassure them.

They got the picture soon enough as did the room boy, who for the first time lost his composure and looked wildly about for instructions. I made mopping gestures and to my horror he rushed into the bathroom, scooped up all our towels and hurled them into the closet, killing off any enjoyment of future showers. I couldn't bear to watch and feeling that reinforcements were needed, I made the familiar trip to the desk. This time, there were to be no evasive answers. I required action, and the desk clerk knew it. Possibly, he had already heard from the unfortunate on the roof who had mistaken our closet for a disposal shaft of some kind. In any case, a squad of cleaners arrived, and miracles were wrought.

We were relieved to find that the air freight cartons were of sturdy construction, and the contents

were untouched, but it required unpacking everything and sending for whatever cartons could be found in order to repack. Naturally, all had been dealt with by the time Dick arrived from the Ministry to take us to lunch, and our tales of pestilence struck him as very amusing indeed. We still weren't laughing, but we brightened at his news; we were invited by the soon to be departing couple still occupying the company villa to come to tea and see our future home.

The end was in sight; they would be leaving early the following week, and the Yamama would see the last of us. I suspected that since we seemed to have brought such chaos with us, the joy of our imminent departure might be mutual.

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.

The Saudi-American Forum is a FREE service provided to the public by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. The Forum consists of a web site and an email information service.

Visit the web site at: <http://www.saudi-american-forum.org>

CONTACT INFORMATION

You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the Forum through use of the "Feedback" form on the website or through direct email to the Forum at: info@Saudi-American-Forum.org

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