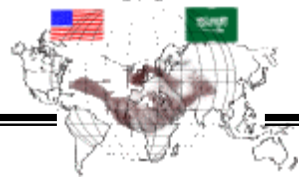


# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

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

BY FRANCES MEADE

### CHAPTER THREE

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#### 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.

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

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

##### CHAPTER THREE

**1996**

**We are spending a quiet Friday afternoon at home. The house is U-shaped, enclosing the small courtyard and pool where we are enjoying the September day with its hint of fall coolness. The sky is that clear piercing blue that almost hurts the eyes; a blue unique to the desert. The wall is shadowed by the date palms that surround the house. They are still heavy with fruit that has not yet ripened and their fronds barely flicker in the slight breeze. For ten years we have been happy in this comfortable white house so similar in design to those we have known in Arizona and we come back from our summer sojourns with genuine pleasure. The pair of ringnecked doves that frequent our courtyard swoop by hoping that we will go inside and leave it for their exclusive enjoyment, and the Lab barely lifts his head as they pass. Yes, a very pleasant Friday afternoon at home.**

## **1965**

We rattled through the dusty streets behind the Yamama on our way to view the company villa, feeling that at last, we were making some progress toward becoming true residents. Even a look at our new home would be definite progress. The back streets had more animal traffic than cars. Packs of wild dogs roamed freely, but like street gangs staked out their own turf and never left it. Herds of goats, shepherded by small girls and boys, traveled established routes scavenging through the garbage left outside the walls by the various householders; a very effective form of waste management that anticipated recycling by many years.

Near Sitteen Street we pulled up to a tan wall and an elaborate gate topped by a pair of abstract wrought iron birds. This was it. Stepping inside we were in a small patch of garden in front of a one story stucco villa, trimmed with stone in a checkerboard pattern. It looked quite modern to me with a carport off to the left, a covered front porch and steps leading up to the front door. So far, so good. We were warmly greeted as we stepped into our future home.

The small entrance hall led to a pair of double sliding doors painted a dark brown that reminded me of my grandmother's old house, and a duplicate set opened to the left. Our hosts invited us to step through the latter into the living room, which was like walking into a kaleidoscope. It had two blue walls, two green walls and an orange light trough running around the white ceiling. Our predecessors had solved this decorating problem by buying a bright blue carpet and Scandinavian furniture upholstered in orange. It would not have been my solution.

Proudly, they opened yet another pair of sliding doors to show us the dining room. I was almost afraid to look. But here, the decor was less hectic; the wall colors remained the same, but there was no light trough. The orange and blue carpet of vaguely oriental design recalled the basic color scheme, but the dining table, chairs and buffet were of simple local manufacture, and the shiny veneer was almost black and relatively conservative. I felt I could eat in the dining room, but I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to sit in the living room.

Still, another set of doors opened on to a central room from which the rest of the house could be reached; a wing of two bedrooms and a bath, a hallway to the kitchen and another bedroom and bath. Only the master bedroom had been furnished; a double bed and dressing table of local manufacture featured that same shiny veneer in white.

The white-tiled kitchen had a sink with a marble drainboard -- standard equipment in all houses of the time -- a wooden table with a bright red top, a refrigerator, stove and two rather shaky free standing wooden cupboards for storage of food and utensils. It was spotlessly clean, and my hostess cheerfully remarked that the two of them had all their meals there. Their tenure had been relatively brief, so I suppose they had opted for simplicity, and by their own account, they hadn't done any entertaining. I thought of the tuxedo I had gone to such trouble to obtain and wondered again about its potential usefulness.

Returning to the living room I noticed a small flight of steps leading from the central room to an entrance at the side of the house. They showed me that it led to a corresponding gate in the

outside wall around the corner from the main gate. This was for women guests to enter directly into the central room where the ladies of the household could entertain in the privacy provided by all those doors. If more space were required, the doors to the dining room could be opened and they would still be secluded from any activity in the living room and front hall where the men came and went. This explained the jigsaw puzzle arrangement of rooms, and we discovered later that it allowed for maximum flow of party traffic when all the doors were open.

We spent a pleasant hour with them, and I tried not to notice the two lamps, one standing, the other tabletop, both of which sported astounding matching lamp shades of some kind of skin stitched with thongs into cones a good three feet high. They were simply appalling.

All the way home, we talked about how wonderful it would be to get out of the hotel and into the villa and how Woof would love being outdoors in the garden where some eucalyptus saplings were already staked out. We tried to plan how we would furnish the two empty bedrooms, one for the girls to share and the other as a combination guest room and office, since the radio would leave the Yamama with us and needed a room of its own. No one brought up the subject of the color scheme; it seemed a bit ungracious to criticize before we actually took possession.

The trip that evening to Wazir Street to shop for furniture gave us an insight into the difficulties our hosts had faced. Other than Karawan, a store that had the monopoly on Scandinavian furniture, everything else was made in the souk in either very ornate or pseudo-modern styles. There seemed to be an endless supply of gleaming veneer in all colors. Not so the upholstery, at least on the imported furniture; it came in green and charcoal gray and only in wool, which might have been appropriate in its native Scandinavia, but less so in a hot desert. The orange we were to inherit seemed to have been one of a kind; we never saw anything like it anywhere we went in Riyadh. We were the only lucky ones.

The important task was to order furniture for the girls' bedroom and the guest room/office. We went Scandinavian with attractive teak beds, which were, however, rather spartan -- no springs, just wooden slats and a mattress. We hoped they would promote strong straight backs in our progeny who in any case would be going off to boarding school in a few weeks.

We felt we were now ready for the move, but there was one more essential acquisition -- a houseboy to occupy the servant's quarters cum laundry room on the roof. Dick had tentatively arranged for this one through a Sudanese headwaiter at the Sahari Palace hotel; a candidate was available and waiting for an interview. We trooped off to assess this potential addition to the family, and Mohammed came into our lives.

The headwaiter introduced us to a tall, white-robed, turbaned Sudanese of impressive appearance who beamed at us with such genuine good will that we knew at once that we were meant for each other. The subsequent interview conducted through the limited interpreting skills of the headwaiter was simply pro forma; the outcome was never in doubt. He spoke no English. We spoke no Arabic. We never gave it a thought, and, in truth, it never mattered. What mattered was that we had acquired a devoted friend, whose presence enriched the 11 years he spent with us. Having been told that the dog might prove to be a problem, we could only hope that the interpreter had correctly informed him of the canine in our household, but Mohammed treated

Woof or "Borf," as he persisted in calling her, in exactly the same spirit as he did the rest of us.

It is laughable to say that we acquired him. He simply took us in hand and molded our lives to fit his own standards of how life should be lived in a western household in Saudi Arabia. He had very definite ideas on the subject ranging from child rearing to entertaining and a rigid code of what was and was not appropriate. We had yet to learn how pervasive his influence would be in our lives, but we knew at once that he was one of us.

When the great day came, we escorted our predecessors to the airport and broke all records back to the Yamama to check out once and for all amid the smiles, of relief no doubt, and waves of the staff, and move in to the villa. At last, life in Riyadh was about to begin; everything else had been a prelude to having our own home.

The children's bedroom furniture had arrived, and we set about to do our unpacking while Ali Harbi, the driver, went off to fetch Mohammed who shortly appeared carrying a number of bundles and disappeared to his rooftop quarters. It was obvious that his cleaning abilities were not required the first day since the villa was spotless, but there was bed making to be done and an assessment of what we had on hand in the way of cooking and housekeeping equipment.

We made lots of discoveries as we explored the villa. There was, surprisingly, a speaker in every room including the bathroom so that one might plug in a tape recorder and have music resounding throughout the house. Unfortunately there were no individual controls in the various rooms; it was all or nothing, and when the girls were in residence, you couldn't have a bath without the Beatles pouring out over your head.

Even more surprising was the bell box in the kitchen, a feature I had only seen in films about the great houses of the Victorian era. Pushing a bell in any of the rooms caused a little card to pop up in the kitchen with the name of the room inscribed upon it, but the inscribing had been done by the contractor who built the house and we had some interesting designations. The bedrooms were slipping rooms and the living room the saloon. It all seemed a bit unnecessary in such a small house, but it did convey a sense of personal grandeur to summon Mohammed to the saloon. In fact, he couldn't read English or Arabic and simply walked around the house looking for the source of the summons but what a touch of class.

A less pleasing discovery was the realization that the electricity supply could support only the one air conditioner in our bedroom. Elsewhere were desert coolers, which consumed only a fraction of the wattage but put out only an equivalent fraction of the cooling. I reminded myself that this was to be an 18-month adventure, and we were lucky to have any kind of cooling at all.

We seemed to have enough kitchen equipment to satisfy Mohammed, the most vital being the big pot in which water would be boiled for drinking, cooking and dish washing. Mohammed had this going at once, and it became a permanent fixture on the stove. The company handbook had been right about this one; there was no bottled water available, and the local supply was not yet potable. The instructions were many on the subject of pure water and the care to be taken in the preparation of all fresh produce. There were also strictures about the cleanliness of servants, and I combined all of these into an omnibus rule that had Mohammed washing his hands as well as

the dishes and vegetables in a clorox solution. He accepted this as a peculiarity that he would have to endure, and we lived in such a sterile environment that I was to come down with bacillary dysentery in no time. Fortunately, the girls went off to school before their intestinal flora had been completely eradicated and ate everything in the streets of Beirut without ill effect. Dick had already built up his immunity during the months before I arrived.

We went to the Mission for dinner and spread the word that we had moved into the villa and would now be at home in every sense of the word. This was particularly important to the girls who were anxious to have the opportunity to return the hospitality they had enjoyed at the homes of some of their contemporaries whom they had met at the Mission. We too had kindnesses to repay and looked forward to entertaining friends in the foreign community.

Secure in our new status, we spent the first night in the villa. There were more discoveries to be made. I came awake with a start, not quite believing the sound that had awakened me. All was quiet and then I heard it again. I still didn't believe it. I felt Dick moving and saw him sit up.

"Dick," I whispered, "did you hear a lion?" I could barely bring myself to ask the question. It was too ridiculous and surely Dick would give me a disdainful explanation of what I had heard.

Instead, he said, "Yes."

I cleared my throat. "There can't be lions in Arabia," I said with some assurance.

"There aren't supposed to be," he said, "but it's either that or a tiger, and it can't possibly be a tiger."

He lay down again, and we were both silent. There it was again. We said nothing. There was no sound from the girls across the hall, just the lion somewhere out there. Speculation seemed pointless, and we were both so overwhelmed by the impossibility of what we were hearing that we simply turned over and went back to sleep.

Susie and Patty slept soundly through it all, but the following morning, they made a discovery of their own -- sand flies. Both of them had hard little red bites on their arms that itched painfully. These nasty little creatures were small enough to come through the window screens and were a plague in both the spring and the fall when the weather was changing. The air conditioner in our room had dropped the temperature enough to discourage them, but the girls hadn't been so lucky with their desert cooler.

The bites itched painfully, but Mohammed knew at once what it was and promptly dispatched Ali Harbi to buy some Dettol, a European disinfectant we had never heard of, but one that did the trick. We would have been more concerned had we known how potentially dangerous these bites can be; one of the company employees contracted leishmaniasis from similar bites and had to be evacuated to the hospital in Beirut.

Well, now we knew how to deal with the sand flies, but we still had the lion. We couldn't ask Mohammed or Ali Harbi because we didn't know the Arabic word and even if we did it seemed

in the light of day too outlandish to take seriously. But, I told Dick, I really thought he would have to find some explanation before night fell again. Off he went to the Ministry, rehearsing lighthearted inquiries like, "Say, about those lions," or "Do you have trouble sleeping at night with that roaring going on?" The unexpected answer was that it was indeed a lion, one of the collection of ex-King Saud that had just been moved from the palace in Nazrieh to the site of the present zoo on Al Ahsa Street well within roaring distance of our house. We felt rather foolish until other recent arrivals admitted that they had been equally dumbfounded by the sounds of a neighboring feline who should by rights be living thousands of miles away in Africa.

The girls and I busied ourselves with settling in, rearranging the orange furniture and discussing decorating potential. The practical alternative seemed to be white walls, and I vowed to make painting my priority.

We loved the windows. Each one had four double hung casements that folded inward, matched by external shutters that folded out with a very pleasing effect. They were very picturesque, but far from airtight, and Mohammed spent a good deal of time dusting several times a day in sandstorm season.

We finally got ourselves sufficiently organized that I actually sat down in our vibrant living room with a book, and the girls went off to their room.

Suddenly, a clamor at the gate shattered the peace of the August afternoon. Terrified and fully expecting the gate to come down at any moment, I dropped my book and dashed into the front hall where I stood trying to catch my breath and decide what to do. As the noise went on, I tried desperately to imagine what we had done in the first 24 hours to inspire the obvious wrath of whoever it was who was attacking our gate. Were all the doomsayers, who had assured us of the unspeakable dangers to be faced in this new country, right after all? The girls joined me in the hall, and the looks on their faces were graphic reflections of my thoughts.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Mohammed stalked grimly past us and out the front door, slamming it behind him. We rushed into the living room to peer through the shutters. As the gate opened, we caught a swift glimpse of a bearded man with a large rock in his hand before he was blocked from our view. Even so, we could see gesticulating arms appearing and disappearing around the edges of Mohammed's thobe and hear quite plainly a ringing exchange of Arabic.

Suddenly, it was over. Silence. Mohammed closed the gate, and we headed once again for the hall to find out what had happened. That our lack of a common language might inhibit his ability to give us the information didn't even occur to us. We stood expectantly like baby birds waiting for their mother's return to the nest, and we were not disappointed. He smiled. For all the years he was with us, the vertical tribal scars on his cheeks were our cultural barometer; when they crinkled upwards, all was right with the world, but when they lengthened, we could expect the worst. Even now at the beginning of our long association, we took comfort in that smile. He then said, "*Shai*." Instant satisfaction. A word we knew from our Yamama days. This was further clarified by drinking gestures. We nodded, yes, yes, and he embellished the tale with an out-flung arm in the general direction of the street. Clearly, the man at the gate had been asking for a cup of tea. General nodding from our side. But wait -- he held up five fingers and pointed to

each one of us in turn. Mystification. Patiently, he pointed to each one of us again while sipping tea with the other hand and ending up with another flourish toward the street.

Of course. We had been invited to tea. At five o'clock. But by whom and where? Surely, it must be one of the neighbors but which one? We assumed that Mohammed knew and that would have to suffice. But why the assault on the gate instead of simply ringing the bell? As with so many other facts of daily living in the Riyadh of the sixties, we had yet to learn that the random comings and goings of the power supply made doorbells less reliable than the time-honored use of a handy rock readily available in the unpaved streets. We soon became attackers of gates ourselves.

Meanwhile, we couldn't wait for Dick to get home from the office. Even though our waiting skills had become finely honed in the absence of a telephone, it was hard to be patient when we had the exciting news of our imminent plunge into the neighborhood social scene. Upon arrival, Dick demonstrated his superior cultural sensitivity by asking Mohammed if this was a ladies' party or if he too was included, a distinction we had never thought of. According to our social arbiter, he was indeed included, and we all went to dress for a prompt five o'clock trip across the street. The hour came, and we told Mohammed that we were ready to go. Consternation. Elongated tribal scars. This was not the time. But -- I held up five fingers just as he had done and pointed to my watch. Comprehension. Crinkled cheeks. He pointed to the hour of six. The incident at the gate had occurred at one o'clock and the invitation was for five hours later. Yet another abyss of ignorance on our part, for in those days, Arabic time prevailed, and invitations were couched in terms of so many hours before or after sunset. The Sudanese aptitude for charades was not up to explaining this concept, and he had settled for the number of hours remaining between invitation and event.

When the time was finally right, we trailed Mohammed across the street and, feeling a bit foolish, watched him pick up a rock and bash the gate. It was opened by the same fierce-looking man we had glimpsed earlier, but this time the arms were thrown wide in greeting, and the smiling welcome had us all grinning in return and muttering the few greetings we had learned. Mohammed swept back across the street having discharged his obligations to his pathetically inept employers, and we were ushered into a delightful garden where the members of the family waited to welcome the new foreigners to the neighborhood.

The eldest son greeted us in English. He was among the first students of the Saudi secondary school English program and justifiably proud to be able to demonstrate his abilities. Even without him, I'm sure we would have had a most enjoyable time, but having him there to introduce all the members of his extended family, which included the two wives of our host and their respective sets of children as well as a cousin or two, made our first contact with a Saudi family a very special occasion.

Out came the tea -- I think they skipped the traditional cardamom coffee in deference to the undeveloped tastes of their guests -- and there under the trees, I felt truly at home for the first time since our arrival in Riyadh. The tea was hot, sweet, almost thick in texture and surprisingly fragrant, served in little glasses like miniature mugs. Sitting among the colorfully dressed ladies and the men in their white thobes, I congratulated myself on the very fact of being

there. This was what I had envisioned when we made the big decision to come to Saudi Arabia -- to be a part of something exotic and rare in a land few Americans had even heard of at that time. It didn't take long, however, to realize that we ourselves were the exotic and rare. Our hosts were as obviously interested in us as we were in them, and they had the advantage in the ensuing game of 20 questions since the translator was on their team and seemed to find it easier to translate the Arabic questions into simple English than vice versa.

But, we learned about unspoken things that one absorbs through the senses -- an ease of hospitality, an unquestioning social confidence, an acceptance of silence as a natural punctuation of friendly conversation. Our afternoon in our neighbor's garden was a springboard into the cultural waters of our Arabian experience, and we remained forever grateful for it.

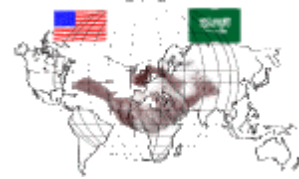
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### **About the Author**

**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.

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