

# Saudi-American Forum

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

BY FRANCES MEADE

### CHAPTER SIX

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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 – in ten chapters – will be presented one chapter per week.

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

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

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##### CHAPTER SIX

*I have been asked to join the two thousand students and teachers massed on the school athletic field in the hot sun. A tall crane raises a television camera high above our heads, and the cameraman shouts through a loud hailer, "One, two, three," and we all wave and shout back, "Good Morning, America" for the benefit, we hope, of the millions who watch this popular morning TV program in the States. Then it's over, and the carefully arranged assembly breaks up as we rush for the school building and the air conditioning.*

A block west of the racetrack in Malaz, there is a neighborhood of small businesses located in old villas interspersed with modern commercial office buildings. Hidden among them is a small villa with nothing much to distinguish it, but I know it well. The Riyadh International Community School (RICS) opened in that little house in 1965.

It was founded by an extraordinary American woman, Geneva Abou Seoud, who came to Arabia as a single mother to start the Parents' Cooperative School in Jeddah. Despite the name,

that school was owned by Saudi Arabian Airlines, then managed by TWA, and her contract was with the Ministry of Defense and Aviation. As it turned out, her tenure in Jeddah was brief for she met and married a Palestinian businessman and moved to Riyadh.

With two pre-school children, she was determined to have an American curriculum school ready for them when they reached the appropriate age, and the Riyadh Preparatory School was the result. It opened in 1963 with a handful of children in grades kindergarten through third grade. Then the Ford Foundation arrived with some older children who formed a home study group under the Calvert Correspondence system until the two groups came together as one school.

Here is where I would like to lay to rest the persistent legend that I started RICS. Not at all. I was one of the first teachers, but the driving force was Genevra. She had dark red hair and green eyes and an imposing presence that belied her slight build. She was six-feet tall when it came to authority and educational principles. Her precepts were simple -- all children would learn to answer all questions with a complete sentence, and all non-English speaking children would be incorporated immediately into the classroom and be addressed in English at all times. The result was a standard of literacy for both groups that might serve as a model for any school anywhere.

The school had an enrollment of thirty-three children of a dozen different nationalities and the atmosphere of an old-fashioned one room school house. I taught fourth and fifth grades with a total of nine students, but they did not divide neatly into two groups. There were an American brother and sister, one in each grade, who had been on an accelerated program that had them a full half-year ahead of the others so each of them constituted a separate class. Of the seven remaining, two Americans and a German were in fifth grade, and the fourth graders were French, Italian and Pakistani. The one left over was a German boy who spoke no English at all, and whose grade level could not be determined because he had no school records with him, and his parents were non-English speaking as well. Luckily, I had a background in teaching experimental classes and was used to shifting educational gears to suit the situation, but even so, it was a daunting assignment.

We had desks and chairs and a limited number of textbooks and that was about it. The simple kinds of materials used for bulletin boards were unobtainable, and we scrounged among the western companies for various odds and ends that could be put to use in the classroom. Scrounge is really the wrong word since everyone was eager to donate whatever they had that we could use.

The single story building had an entrance hall opening into four or five rooms. The exact number is rather hazy because the school had not been open very long before we started knocking down walls in order to provide for larger classes. Outside was a small servants quarters that housed the nursery school.

We had no telephone, no bus, no school nurse, no gym facilities -- nothing but the wholehearted backing of an entire community. Everyone, including the childless, was imbued with the spirit of providing the best possible education for "our" children. Aramco supplied its expertise in constructing a curriculum as well as providing much of the text material. Every weekend found a group of parents and general supporters painting, patching and, thank heaven, plumbing while

others spent hours clearing rocks from the small yard that would serve as our athletic field. They installed the inevitable desert coolers -- there was no possibility of air conditioning -- and kept the little school running.

Genevra not only served as principal but also taught the youngest children, kindergarten through second grade. This was the largest group and also the most demanding. She had the responsibility of laying down the basic foundation of reading and writing, and there are many thirty-five-year olds in the world today whose capacity to construct complete sentences may well set them apart from their contemporaries, thanks to Genevra.

Our teaching duties covered the spectrum of school activities. The woman who taught the sixth, seventh and eighth grades, a total of seven students, taught P.E. for the rest of the school as well. She was the youngest of us, so that seemed only fair. The third-grade teacher and I split the enrichment assignments; she took art, and I took music. Neither one of us had anything to work with except some watercolors for her and a pitch pipe for me.

We maintained all the elements of American school traditions. Room mothers were probably more active than their Stateside counterparts, knowing that the entertainment they provided was a very big part of the children's holiday experiences. And, we certainly had holidays. We celebrated everybody's, resulting in a festivity of some kind every few weeks and the inevitable chocolate chip cookies -- made with broken chunks of candy bars in lieu of chips -- took their place among an array of favorite sweets from around the world. The children developed exotic tastes, and we teachers developed larger waistlines.

These were the only entertainments we had to offer, so everybody made the most of them. The high point of the year was an evening Halloween party at the Aramco tennis court, a fundraiser open to the public at large. Everybody got into the act.

The Mission provided hamburgers as well as valiant warriors who stuck their heads through a hole in an upright board and let people hurl wet sponges at them -- for a price. Someone had the bright idea of hiring a camel and selling Polaroids of those who climbed aboard. To our great surprise, a number of Saudis wanted their children's photos taken on the camel -- and even more surprisingly, wanted snapshots of the children posing with Woof, whom we had brought along for the outing. She was more than willing and quite a few children trotted happily away with a memento of our dog. Of course, there was a haunted house and a treasure hunt for coins in a sand pile for the little ones and a great deal of food and drink.

We had quite a crowd for this unusual public event and raised a lot of money that would be translated into books and materials by the next person who made a trip to the States or Beirut.

School was not in session in December, but the winter holidays were widely celebrated by the community with gatherings at the Mission as well as individual homes, so nobody missed a thing.

The school year posed a problem from the outset. Patterned on the Aramco model, school operated year round, three-month sessions alternating with one-month vacations. This was

perfectly suited to the Aramco vacation calendar, but it played havoc with the schedules of the Riyadh parents, none of whom had winter and spring months off but who had summer holidays of six weeks or more. We finally reverted to the standard American school year, but while it lasted, the Aramco version complicated all our lives.

It meant that school was open in July, the hottest month of the year, and the desert coolers were no match for the outside temperature. A desert cooler is a simple square construction of straw pads that are kept wet with running water. A fan blows through them and the evaporation that results produces relatively cool air. So, their operation depended not only on a reliable supply of electricity but water as well and, neither of these necessities could be counted on.

Recess and P.E. were impossible; even if the children were up to it, none of the teachers could last long enough outdoors to supervise their activities. So, it meant a very long day indoors with no real opportunity for the young ones to stretch their legs. A kind of torpor set in as the coolers ground away with very little effect, and dust from the unpaved street blew across the desks, and sweaty papers became muddy ones.

By the time graduation came around, students and teachers alike were exhausted, but we worked up everyone's enthusiasm for the sake of our two graduates. This first graduation ceremony was planned as meticulously as a Harvard commencement. The enrollment had grown to fifty-four, and, with the exception of the nursery, all would be present along with their parents for the milestone event.

It turned out to be a mistake to invite everybody since the kindergartners and first graders lost patience with the proceedings early on and had to be removed to the nursery school building. It was also terribly hot with almost a hundred people jammed tightly into the center hall, but the speech by the chairman of the school board was mercifully brief.

My finest hour came when the choir, made up of all the children from third through eighth grades regardless of singing ability, answered the call of the pitch pipe and launched into a two-part rendition of an anthem we had been rehearsing for a month. I had chosen it because it was the simplest piece I could find that could be made to sound difficult by virtue of splitting the group and having them sing it as a round. It was probably better than having no music at all but not much. A piano, a loud piano, would have helped a lot, and I may have hastened its acquisition that hot afternoon.

By the time the two diplomas had been handed out with a short acceptance speech by each recipient, the refreshments had also suffered from the heat. The ice had melted in the punch and the frosting on the cupcakes had started to run, but nobody noticed and everything was consumed. It was a great day.

We had to start at once to prepare the building for what we were told would be a bumper crop of new registrations in the fall. The board predicted an enrollment of between seventy-five and a hundred, and we would be hard put to house this number. In fact, there were ninety-six who reported on opening day.

I marvel at how casually we hired Yemenis with sledge hammers and, pointing at a wall, would

let them have at it. I guess we were just lucky. Nothing collapsed, and the rooms thus enlarged accommodated bigger classes in September.

At the end of 1966, our family moved to Jeddah, and my active involvement with the school did not resume again until the end of 1969. Those interim years were to test the mettle of the entire community for they saw the closing of the school and its reopening as two separate institutions for boys and girls.

I remained in close contact with these developments through the company family who had replaced us in Riyadh and the American Ambassador who became a participant in the events that took place.

By 1968, the school, with a student body of one hundred and ninety, had long outgrown the little villa in Malaz, and a new building was found near Al-Washem Street. From very simple origins, RICS had grown into an institution of noticeable proportions and could no longer operate on an ad hoc basis. It had been as much a community project as a school and simply absorbed any child in need of educational services without regard to legal processes.

As long as it was housed in the little villa in Malaz, no one had paid much attention to it, but now with the move to a large building in a part of the city where it was surrounded by Saudi schools, something had to be done.

The Board's solution was to apply to the Ministry of Education for a license, putting that body in the peculiar position of being asked to recognize an institution that, officially, didn't even exist.

The only foreign schools in the kingdom were PCS in Jeddah, which was actually a Saudi government school under its contract with TWA, Aramco in its autonomous enclave in Dhahran, and the Dhahran Academy, housed and sponsored by the U.S. Consulate also in Dhahran. And, here was this collection of people with no affiliation with any government appearing with a request for a license from the Ministry.

What the Board did not realize was that the Ministry only concerned itself with boys' education. The Presidency of Girls' Education was an entirely different body and licensed its own schools under its own rules, which most certainly did not allow for coeducation.

After many a misstep and misunderstanding, the school was closed by the government until a decision could be reached on how, where and under what circumstances a foreign school would operate in Riyadh.

Discussions between the school, the American Ambassador and the government went on for several months before an agreement was reached. Meanwhile, classes met in various homes, and despite everyone's efforts to maintain an optimistic outlook, morale was very low.

Finally, the decision was handed down that RICS would reopen as a segregated school for non-Muslim students in two separate buildings, and the Raytheon company donated a villa in their newly built compound near the airport to house the boys temporarily. We were permitted to

keep the younger boys and girls together through the second grade. Since the student body had been drastically reduced anyway by the exclusion of the Muslim students, the all-boys' group was quite small.

The solution was far from ideal, but as usual, the community set out to make the best of it and make it work for the benefit of the children. The division into separate entities stretched the school's limited supplies even further, and the additional teachers required to teach the boys strained a budget already in the red with the departure of the Muslim children and the refund of their tuition.

To make matters much worse, in 1969, Genevra became very ill and left on medical leave for treatment in Beirut. Sadly, hers was a terminal illness, and she never returned. During what everyone had hoped would be an interim period, various teachers had rotated the administration of the two schools among themselves but it was clear that this was not satisfactory even in the short run.

The School Board, when it heard from our company representative that Dick would be moving the company headquarters to Riyadh the following spring, wrote to me asking if I would consider returning earlier to take on the principal's position. I flew to Riyadh to discuss the possibility and see the school situation for myself.

The Board had already decided that a move from the Al Washem area back to Malaz was in the best interest of the school and that they would try to locate two neighboring buildings in order to move the boys back into the school's immediate orbit. It was clear to me that community spirit and a staff of splendid teachers had kept RICS alive during a very difficult period, and I could think of no more rewarding job than the one that was being offered to me.

In February, I took up single residence in Riyadh until April when the entire company would arrive. The restrictions of living alone seemed secondary to the needs of the school, which were enormous.

The immediate priorities were to find new premises and, more importantly, the funds to lease them, and I spent the rest of the school year working on these priorities. As always, the community came to the rescue, and the response to our fund raising efforts was remarkable. Companies of all nationalities were more than generous in their donations, particularly the Swedish who were the most recent arrivals but the largest contributors.

With our finances in order, we were in a position to lease two buildings off University Street in Malaz. The larger of the two would house the combined lower classes and the upper-grade girls. It was a pleasant and spacious two-story villa with a fair amount of outdoor play area and, above all, not only a telephone but also a switchboard. The Italian company that had just vacated the villa had left their switchboard behind, and all it took was a couple of Italian engineers to figure out how it worked, and we were in business.

Around the corner, fronting on a different street, but sharing a common wall with the girls' school, was a smaller villa that was suitable for the boys. Immediately across the street from

their front gate was a big empty lot, and once again, the parents went to work and created an athletic field -- not a perfect one but better than anything we had had before.

The girls' school also had a two-story building that adjoined the compound wall. With a door in the wall to provide access directly from the street, this became the perfect administrative office. Male parents and school board members as well as Ministry officials could come and go without ever entering the front gate and violating the rule against men on the girls' school premises.

The immediate budgetary advantage to the move was in the reduction of staff. With a gate in the common wall, it was now possible to share teachers, particularly in the upper grades where the instruction was departmentalized. This worked very well until one of the Science classes acquired a *dub* and chose to pasture it in the garden on the girls' side of the gate. Admittedly, the giant lizard looked ferocious, although it was actually quite docile, and more than one teacher walked around the block from school to school rather than use the gate.

Gradually, everyone got used to the *dub* as they did to the storks -- we tended toward the unusual as far as pets were concerned. The storks were acquired from a local contractor with whom I had traded two venerable and unpredictable school vans in exchange for maintenance of the buildings and grounds. It was one of those happy instances when each party feels that he or she has had the best of the bargain, and Morfak and I enjoyed a cordial relationship.

He appeared in my office one morning with a large stork tucked under one arm, its feet dragging on the floor. He beamed. I expressed a reasonable interest in his burden.

"This bird flew into my house," he said, "you want this bird?"

Well, of course I wanted that bird, apparently a dropout from a seasonal migration. Not only would it have a safe haven with us but also would serve as an object lesson in conservation and nature study. I noted that its wings were clipped, and Morfak cheerfully acknowledged having done it. We put the bird outside in the small garden in front of the administration building, and the school custodian, a skeletal Yemeni of endless patience, assured me that he knew exactly how to feed and otherwise take charge of storks. I did not question this, merely asked the Science teacher to check on its dietary needs.

The following morning, much to my surprise, Morfak appeared once again in my office with yet another stork. The explanation was the same as the day before, and I accepted what fate had sent us at the same time dreaming of nests, eggs and baby storks.

However, third morning, third stork, and I drew the line. The last thing we needed was an avian triangle and its inevitable domestic complications. This time I asked the question that should have occurred to me from the beginning. Where was Morfak's house located that he should be besieged by homeless storks? The answer was that he had a flat downtown in the souk, left me incapable of further discussion. Obviously, I was harboring hot storks, although who had bothered to steal them and who would be interested in recovering them, I couldn't imagine. I thanked Morfak and sent him away with his rejected gift.

I should note here that my benefactor was not discouraged. He came to my house some months later leading a baboon by the hand, and it was, "You want this monkey?" and a very snappy "No, I don't want that monkey," from me. The baboon scowled, Morfak shrugged and they left. But, there were no hard feelings; our relationship continued as sunny as ever.

The storks thrived among the children and even came to enjoy following the kindergarteners in their morning run around the circular drive. Unfortunately, they never caught on to the teacher's commands to change direction, and we would be treated to the spectacle of two gawky birds flapping their wings to maintain their equilibrium as a horde of five-year olds reversed and charged toward them. We did indeed learn a lot about stork behavior, and the children accepted them as fixtures on the playground.

It may seem that my calling was more toward zoo-keeping than school administration, but I just couldn't turn down the pair of fluffy rabbits brought to me by one of the parents. She was an Australian lady with a penchant for bunnies and was culling her herd. They were enchanting. We turned them loose in the garden where the storks showed no animosity toward them, and it appeared that we were witnessing a demonstration of nature in perfect balance.

In due time, nature also provided us with little rabbits, but I was surprised that so few were produced over what was a considerable period of time. Then the playground began to subside, and we discovered the underground world of our rabbit population -- only a fraction of whom were topside at any one time. Measures were taken that I don't care to remember, and we penned the remaining rabbits.

The school continued to grow until we finally had to move the boys once again to a large building near the Aramco houses on Farazdak Street.

In all this time, the Ministry of Education and the Presidency of Girls' Education were cooperative in every way. They each recognized us as unusual appendages to their respective organizations but made the best of it. I welcomed the infrequent visits of the Presidency inspectors, interesting and understanding ladies with whom I could exchange ideas and experiences. The Ministry of Education showed particular courtesy in dealing with the only female administrator of a boys' school. Our relations were very professional and custom was served by addressing mail to me as Mrs. Meade, the headmaster.

But, we all recognized that a single administrator was no longer practical, and a male principal was needed for the boys' school. In fact, the male presence was badly needed. We had one teaching couple from the States and a part time P.E. teacher, but these were interim solutions to a growing problem of rapidly increasing enrollment and could not go on much longer.

A male principal was hired for the boys' school for one year with the intention of appointing him as the first superintendent when I retired.

In the spring of 1975, I met with Ministry officials to discuss our prospects for the fall in the face of a burgeoning school population. The Ministry had offered to supply us with the same prefabricated buildings that they were purchasing for their own increasing needs, but these would not be available for at least another year or two. I pointed out that our housing problem

could be dealt with more easily if the schools were reintegrated, and they agreed. We would still need to lease additional facilities for the short run, but we had some breathing space in which to plan.

The previous year, the government had proposed issuing a single license for one Saudi Arabian International School with branches to serve the various regions and nationalities and an Inter City committee was organized composed of the administrators of the existing foreign schools. The ultimate formation of SAIS leveled the field for us. RICS had been from its inception the odd man out with no affiliation or sponsorship to permit the building or purchase of permanent premises. Although there would still be a period of leasing building after building in order to accommodate the explosive growth that would accompany the economic boom, the last step was in sight. In 1977, the Saudi government generously provided the present buildings, and SAIS-R became a reality.

The school today stands as the culmination of the hard work of many generations of parents and students during the past thirty years. From its inception, it has been committed to the highest standards of both teaching and learning, and this commitment has never been better served than it is today. The school is larger than its founders could have dreamed, but the quality of its service to the community has never diminished nor has the quality of instruction been diluted.

SAIS-R is a sturdy oak, but RICS was one determined little acorn.

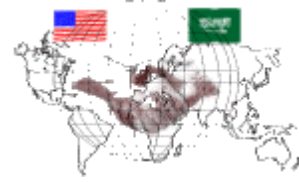
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### **About the Author**

**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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