

# 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 NINE

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

##### **CHAPTER NINE**

*I am on my way home from a meeting in the Diplomatic Quarter. Suddenly, nothing looks familiar. Where did that grove of newly planted palm trees come from? There's a palace I've never seen before. My driver tells me that the new highway has just opened, and I realize that Riyadh has simply gone through one more change. The familiar has once again disappeared giving way to the new.*

Coming back to Riyadh was not as I imagined it. I saw myself as the prodigal daughter being welcomed back as though nothing had happened in the three years since our departure. But, there had been many alterations in the fabric of Riyadh life since then. Most of our old friends were gone, a testament to the transient nature of the community that I had not recognized before. Everything had seemed comfortably permanent during the time we had lived here, and it was something of a surprise to discover that I was a stranger once again. The difference now was my position at the school. A stranger I might be but one whose arrival had been anticipated and planned for.

I met a great many people all at once at a general meeting of the RICS parents and realized that the days of our tight little circle of foreigners were long gone. The crowd I faced in the auditorium of the Mission was a sizeable one and consisted only of those with children in school. There would be no more entertaining of the whole community if, indeed, it was even possible to meet them all.

A new Riyadh was taking shape. There had been an influx of new companies, new buildings, a geometric increase in the foreign population with many new countries represented. There were telephones, although in short supply. The arrival of the first U.S. government civilians with the Corps of Engineers and the English Language Center of the United States Information Service heralded what would become the gradual establishment of quasi-diplomatic enclaves over the next few years. The Mission would be moving into new quarters nearer the airport and out of its role as a focal point for local Americans.

Although there were many new establishments on Wazir Street and the smaller streets between it and Batha, downtown commerce was beginning to decentralize. A whole new shopping area was growing up on Jareer Street in Malaz, and a few shops had appeared on Sitteen, which was now paved. It took me a while to take in all the changes when I first returned. I was living alone and phoneless in one of the two small apartment buildings that, along with the office villa, constituted the new office compound, but until the company move took place, I was the sole inhabitant. My new job filled my days, and the company driver, Ali Harbi's successor, had another family to work for and was only available to me occasionally. So, I had little opportunity to get out and explore, and what time I did have was spent in looking for a new villa.

With the flood of new arrivals, it seemed that every house in Malaz was occupied; in fact, every existing house in town was spoken for. My best shot was in the new area of Suleimaniya, close to the airport, where some houses were under construction. This was a considerable distance out of town, but there were compensating factors of space. There were no neighborhoods as such and each house or small group of houses stood alone. Streets did not exist except as dirt tracks, and short cuts across country reduced the travel time to the center of the city. The house was not finished, so even after Dick arrived permanently, we would have to spend some time in the small flat, which I was now inhabiting. Living alone was even less pleasant than I had expected it would be, and I was becoming an unwilling recluse. Fortunately, my job was demanding enough to preclude evenings of boredom; I had a great deal to do and a lot of time to do it.

It would be impossible to overestimate the role of RICS in the community. With the foreign population growing so rapidly, it was predictable that it would fragment along the lines of nationality, and the old international flavor would be lost. Happily, the school remained the unifying influence and brought out the best efforts of all who were concerned with its status. We were committed to making the two physically separated schools into one institution of the highest possible educational standards, but to achieve a spirit of unity under the prevailing circumstances was a tall order and required the good will and support of the entire community. RICS was more than ever an international school, not only in its student body but also in the friends and supporters who worked so hard to sustain it and help it grow. I have mentioned the generosity of the companies and organizations who came to the rescue of the school's

endangered finances, but hundreds of individuals contributed in hundreds of ways to its development as an institution central to the needs of the community.

I have always thought of myself as a self-sufficient person who needs only an interesting project or a good book in order to feel at home in the world, but the weeks before the company moved to Riyadh severely damaged that image. Dick appeared on a few quick business trips and then he was off again to Jeddah, and I felt exactly what I was -- lonely. I never got to the sorry for myself stage, but the day I watched the trucks unloading at the office villa next door was one of the happiest I can remember.

With Dick in town, I was back in circulation making discoveries every day about the new city I was living in. I was also making discoveries about myself. Gone was the wide-eyed seeker of adventure and with her, sadly, the sharpened senses that had enhanced each day and each incident. I was the old hand, five years in the kingdom and happy to tell anyone who would listen how much better the old days were. Nobody else was nostalgic. The newcomers saw their own Riyadh as the original, and the Saudis were caught up in the prospects offered by development and were not inclined to be sentimental about a recent past with all its inconveniences. Nostalgia requires perspective, and enough time had yet to elapse for anyone to be anything more than objective about the past.

Meantime, there were new amenities to enjoy. The power supply had become much more dependable, and air conditioners abounded. Shopping was localized, and daily trips to the souk were unnecessary. Pepperidge Farm bread appeared in the frozen food chests. Spinney's supermarket opened, and shopping carts were the order of the day. There were more cars but not enough to constitute a traffic problem, and there was talk of installing traffic lights.

Informal groups provided a new range of entertainment with plays and operettas produced at the Mission and even a traditional British pantomime. The racetrack, which had been dormant, now featured a program of all-Arabian horse races plus a camel race each Monday afternoon. The great camel race at Janadriya was far in the future, but every week you could see seven or eight camels gallumphing around the track and, in at least one case, jumping the rail in a show of rebellion. The riders were Bedouin men; the weight advantage of small boys had not yet superseded tradition.

The desert was still the big draw for excursions. We traveled far afield for picnics all the way to the sands, where the ring road now circles to the north of the city. If we headed east instead, we were far enough away from Riyadh to have a clear view of the stars by the time we reached the area now occupied by the National Guard Headquarters. Riyadh was growing, but it had a very long way to go. No one could guess what was going to happen during the decade of the seventies; as late as 1974, we were scouting future locations for the school and ended up having to abandon a jeep that got stuck in the sand where the Hotel Alkhozama stands today.

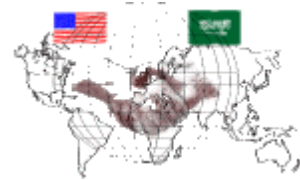
Riyadh was about to plunge into an era of unprecedented and unimaginable change; we were living on the edge and didn't know it. There is a cosmic kindness that prevents us from seeing the future, and we remained comfortably unaware of the coming economic whirlwind that would transform the city and the kingdom.

### 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.

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### 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:  
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