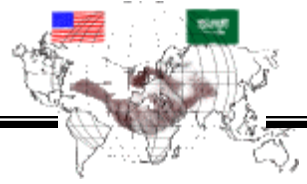


# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Book Serial

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## The Day I Met My Dad By Steve Furman

### Editor's Note:

The Saudi-American Forum is very pleased to present "Lunch with a Prince" by Steve Furman. This delightful memoir of the early days of Americans working and living in Saudi Arabia is excerpted from the book, *Dhahran Fables, Fiesta Room Tales* by Steve Furman, Clark Magruder and Ann Peart. Check below for information to order a copy of *Dhahran Fables, Fiesta Room Tales*.

We hope you enjoy this story and will visit the site below to join us in a discussion.  
<http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/ubbthreads/ubbthreads.php?Cat=>

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### The Day I Met My Dad By Steve Furman

My mother and I sat on a dusty bench in the Port Said railway station. It was mid-morning, and the sun was already hot. I was six-years-old. I sat clutching my mother's hand and wondered at all the confusion and commotion going on around us. My bewildered mother nervously adjusted her print dress and with a wrinkled handkerchief dabbed at the beads of perspiration around her eyes. It was humid and sticky, and we were very tired after a long and fitful journey that began almost a month ago in Inglewood, California. Our two large battered footlockers rested next to the bench. I fidgeted with the padlocks.

"Where are we going now, Mama?" I asked.

"We're going to Cairo on the train," my mother replied. "I wonder where the others are? It's getting late, and they should have been here by now. I don't understand this! The train is about to leave. We certainly can't leave without them," she urgently stammered. My mother was growing more anxious. Our traveling companions had not arrived. We had taken the first available taxi from the port area, and the others were to follow. Time passed. The train was quickly filling up. Where were they?

"Mama, the train is full. Look at all those people," I said.

The railway station was crowded with people, strange noises and smells. Street vendors plied their trade as they wandered the length of the platform yelling and hawking food and drink to the passengers leaning from the train windows. They traded in strange tongues for the sticky pastry covered in flies. Steam billowed around the legs of the porters carrying trunks on their backs and

bundles of bedding on their heads. Amidst the dust and steam, people pushed and shoved their way onto the train. It was swarming with bodies. They clung to handrails and tried desperately to climb on the roof of the cars. They didn't have enough money to buy tickets.

Soon, a soldier arrived with a long stick, which he wielded above his head. He yelled and beat the side of the train with the stick. People jumped from the train's landing and fell from the handrails as the soldier whacked them across their backs and legs. They tried to protect themselves from the long thick stick as they ran away along the platform with the soldier in hot pursuit.

We had reached Port Said that morning and disembarked from the Swedish hospital ship, *S.S. Gripsholm*. The ship had been used by the International Red Cross to ferry the wounded during the war. She was a beautiful ship, all white with big red crosses painted on both her port and starboard sides. We had set sail from New York about three weeks earlier and were on our way to the Persian Gulf. Our first port of call was Naples, but we couldn't go ashore because of a communist insurrection that was taking place in the city. It was part of the many post-war traumas that were taking place in Europe after the fall of Nazi Germany only the month before.

At night, as I lay in my bunk with the portholes battened down and nobody allowed on deck, I could hear small arms fire pinging off the side of the ship. My mother was terrified and winced as the shells ricocheted off the ship's bulkhead. We had been in port for two days but couldn't go topside least somebody might be hit with a stray round. It was hot and oppressive in the lower decks with no ventilation. The ship's steward brought us a small oscillating fan. It didn't do much good to ease our sweltering discomfort, but it was better than nothing. I stripped down to my underwear and tried to stay cool. We took on water and fuel as fast as possible and left Naples. We steamed to Athens, and it was there that I saw first hand the devastation that war had brought to Greece.

The port was in shambles. Wrecked ships were scattered in disarray throughout the harbor and gave testimony to fierce fighting that had raged in this very old city. They silently rested on their rusty sides, some with only their sterns or bows showing above the water line. The hulk of a scuttled German submarine was beached very close to where we were tied up. It was a sad reminder of what had taken place during the last two years of the war. I remember a subdued silence that seeped from the wrecks. It was a vast graveyard of twisted rusting hulks. I was an intruder in a watery tomb.

We were the first contingent of American wives and children to join their men in the Middle East after the war in Europe was over. The war in the Pacific still raged on. My father had left for Arabia in 1939 when I was eighteen-months-old. The war broke out, and he was cut off and isolated in Saudi Arabia with no way to get out or get home. I didn't know nor did I remember my father. I was now six-years-old, and my father to me was a snapshot in the family album. Our group consisted of 13 wives and two children. Some were bound for Bahrain Island, and the rest of us were going on to Saudi Arabia.

Our traveling companions finally joined us. A tall black man with a white turban and long flowing robe was in charge of our group. He shouted orders in Arabic to the porters. They

scrambled over the platform, hoisting trunks and suitcases over their heads as they made their way toward the train. We climbed aboard, but the cases, trunks and footlockers were too big to pass through the railcar doors so in through the windows they came. Everyone was shouting orders as the porters pushed and pulled on the luggage. The other passengers joined in, screaming instructions in Arabic to the porters outside the train. Our group shouted orders in English from inside the train. Chaos ensued, but somehow the job got done.

I leaned out of the window as the train lurched forward, stopped and then lurched again. We were moving. The platform slid by as we gathered speed. Clouds of smoke and cinders started coming in the window openings. My mother tried to close my window, but there wasn't any window to close, just a gaping hole where glass used to be. It was the same for all the windows. The smoke and the cinders poured into the car, but it didn't bother any of the other passengers, only the American wives. They sat with handkerchiefs covering their noses and mouths and flailed away at hot cinders landing on their dresses.

I was delighted with the train. It rocked and shook and swayed its way toward Cairo. I saw camels and donkeys in the fields as we passed into the Nile delta. The trip took about five hours, and we arrived in Cairo covered in soot, grime and ashes. My face was black with soot because I had insisted on hanging out of the window while my mother clung to my belt lest I plunge from the train. What a trip! Until we reached Port Said, everything about this adventure had been well organized and structured. That was not to be the case from now on.

We arrived in Cairo, and after much fanfare and confusion with porters and transportation, our entourage was deposited at the Mina House Hotel. Our stay in Cairo was to be for only a few days while the formalities of further travel were arranged. The hotel bustled with British military personnel, who took little notice of our vagabond group and least of all a six-year-old lad.

Over the next couple of days, we had a wonderful time visiting the Pyramids and the Sphinx. We got to ride camels and donkeys and had our pictures taken. Very close to our departure date, my desire for further excitement became overpowering, and I decided to explore Cairo on my own. That event is memorable to me because it was the day that I went AWOL from my mother.

I awoke very early that beautiful morning, put on my clothes, filled up my GI canteen from the bathroom sink, buckled it around my waist, and went out to face the day. My mother slept as I quietly closed the heavy bedroom door. I made my way down the broad, marble, winding staircase and out the front door. The city was teeming with people and excitement as I bounded into the dusty city streets and made friends with all the street hawkers. They fed me ice cream, fresh strawberries and sweet candy cakes. One of them gave me his Fez and a fly whisk. I wandered through the alleys of shops full of spices and gold. People pushed past me going in different directions. My eyes were full of wonder as I ambled on for what seemed hours, not knowing where I was going and not really caring. I had never seen anything like it, and it was fun.

Somehow, I found my way back to the hotel about mid or early afternoon. My mother was furious. As I walked up the long flight of steps to the front door of the hotel, she descended upon me. The next thing I knew she had me firmly by the arm leading me briskly through the lobby

on our way to the room. My feet never touched the floor. I was air-born. We cleared the lobby in what seemed like seconds, and my mother was seething with fear and anger as she wrestled me into the elevator. When the elevator door closed, and we were alone, I thought that my life was going to end then and there in Cairo!

"Young man, where have you been? Don't you ever do anything like that again. We've had the military police looking for you. Everybody has been looking for you. What do you mean running off like that? I'm a nervous wreck, and I've been sick with worry," she scolded. I was exiled to our hotel room until dinnertime, but by the time dinner became a topic of conversation, I was beginning to feel ill. It got worse until in the early morning hours, it was apparent that I needed a doctor. A British military doctor was resident in the hotel and very kindly paid me a visit.

"Madame, your son is a very sick boy. He has an acute case of dysentery, a result no doubt, from his adventures earlier today. There's no telling what he has consumed. I am arranging for him to be transported to your American medical personnel at Payne Field. There he will get all the medical attention he needs. I'm afraid that it is quite impossible for him to proceed with the others. He's much too ill and beginning to suffer from dehydration. He should be fit to travel within seven to 10 days if all goes well."

I didn't understand what the doctor meant when he said, "if all goes well." But, I did understand that my continuing trip with the group was going to cease. I was sick, and I secretly hoped that my mother was feeling extremely guilty for having been so angry with me. I wasn't so sick that I couldn't feign the pains in my stomach with extra facial contortions and painful grimaces -- anything to switch my mother's feelings from anger and fear to sympathy and guilt.

So, off we went to Payne Field Hospital in an olive drab military ambulance with a big red cross on the side. My mother remained with me at the hospital while our group proceeded to their final destination. It took a few days of medical attention before I started to feel better, but once on the road to recovery, I was treated like a king. The entire staff was the U.S. Army Medical Corps, and they hadn't been around an American child for years. I was fed ice cream and cakes, and my bed was wheeled into the recreation hall every night for the movie. I was given all the comic books I could read and lots of rice pudding. I had become a celebrity guest, but too soon, I was ready to travel. While I was recovering, arrangements were made for my mother and me to continue our trip as soon as the doctors gave the green light. Soon, I was up and about and rapidly becoming anxious to get on the road. One morning, the doctor gave the all-clear sign, and we were off again.

Our mode of transportation changed at this point, and I was now going to embark on my first airplane. This was a real thrill for me -- a real airplane that really flies!!! Our plane was an Army Air Corps two engine C-47, with bucket seats that ran the length of the fuselage facing inboard. This aircraft flew the milk run from Cairo to Bahrain and back again with stops in Baghdad and Basra. The other passengers were all American military. It was a very long, tedious and rough flight. The plane was not pressurized, so we flew at altitudes between 7,000 and 10,000 feet. Flying at such a low altitude over a desert region in the summertime is not a pleasant experience. My mother, I and many of the other passengers were air sick for the entire trip with only two reprieves, stops in Baghdad and Basra. The GI's were great to my mother and me. They saw how

sick we were, and they made a pallet of blankets at the back of the aircraft, so we could lie down. After having been ill in Cairo and air sick for so many hours, I was very happy when we landed in Bahrain. Charlie Rodstrum, Aramco's representative in Bahrain, met us at the airstrip.

"Claudine, Steve doesn't know you're here. He thinks you're still in Cairo. Until I was called this morning by Military Operations, we thought you and Stevie would not be coming for another week or so. I tried to contact Dhahran to get the message to Steve, but I couldn't get through," he said.

My mother replied, "Thank you for meeting us. It has been an awful journey; we have both been very sick. May we go to a hotel? We both need a cool bath and some sleep."

"We have rooms ready for you at the Aramco House in Manama. I'll take you there right now. I'm sure you're exhausted. That milk run trip from Cairo has a terrible reputation. While you're resting, I'll call Bahrain Petroleum Company and see if we can get you and the boy on their launch to Al-Khobar. It leaves early tomorrow morning," he said.

Later in the day, the booking was confirmed. The Aramco House was an old, whitewashed Arab structure built from coral rock called faroush, and, while not being air-conditioned, it was cool inside. The ceilings were very high to ensure good air circulation and were constructed with mangoor matting and chundles imported from India. A large ceiling fan turned slowly above me as my mother tucked me into bed. She secured the mosquito netting around the bed and left the room. My thoughts drifted back to our small apartment in Inglewood, California that seemed so far away. I thought about my friend Teddy who lived across the street. I wondered what he was doing, and I wondered if he knew where I was and what I had seen and done in Cairo. California was a lifetime away. I was on an adventure that Teddy would never understand, and it was only beginning.

The next morning was hot and humid as we left the Aramco House and proceeded to Manama port. The humidity hung in the air like a heavy wet blanket that seemed to press the life and breath out of everything it touched. The sea was flat and so calm, it looked like a huge mirror slowly undulating toward the horizon. Our launch sat dead in the water. Small needlefish suspended themselves in the shadow of the stern. Nothing moved. It was hot and hard to breathe, and there was no shade. We waited.

"I'll continue trying to contact Dhahran. Our communication system is not very reliable. Sometimes we can't speak to Dhahran for days at a time. There's nothing to worry about. When you reach the Al-Khobar pier, check in at the Aramco office. There's always someone there. They'll be able to contact Steve, and it will take him about 30 minutes to get to the pier," Mr. Rodstrum instructed.

Our crew of two arrived looking very smart in their white uniforms. They loaded our footlockers onboard and commenced preparations to get underway. After a few hesitant coughs of bluish white smoke, the engine sputtered to life. We waited for an additional passenger. A brightly polished sedan bounced its way down the wharf and stopped by the launch. A tall thin Englishman stepped out. He was dressed in white shorts, white shirt with epaulets, white knee

length socks, and white shoes. He had a white topee in his hand. Mr. Rodstrum moved forward, and they shook hands.

"Ben, thanks for allowing us to catch a ride on your launch. It is appreciated," he said.

"Glad to help," the gentleman replied.

"Ben, this is Mrs. Furman and her son. She's making her way to Dhahran to join her husband. The boy got sick in Cairo, and they had to stay behind. They were traveling with the same group that arrived here about two weeks ago. Her husband doesn't know they're here. He thinks they're still in Cairo. Would you assist to make sure she makes contact with her husband when you reach Al-Khobar?" Mr. Rodstrum requested.

"I'd be happy to help in any way. I'm pleased to meet you Mrs. Furman," he replied.

We said our farewell to Mr. Rodstrum, climbed onboard and sat down under a big white canvas awning. We pushed off and slowly made our way out of Manama harbor heading west to Al-Khobar. The 20-mile crossing would take about four hours. Our English friend settled down with a book. My mother nodded off in short catnaps while I sat with the captain in the wheelhouse.

We had been out about two hours when the captain called out that another launch was heading our way. It was just a small dot on the horizon, but it was heading toward us. I watched for awhile as the launch drew closer. I became more curious, so I moved out of the wheelhouse and went up to the bow holding onto the handrail as I went. I watched very intently. Soon, the approaching launch came into better view. A man was standing on the bow of the approaching launch. As the launch got fairly close, I recognized the man. He didn't recognize me because I was supposed to be in Cairo.

"That's my dad. Hey, dad. It's me, Stevie! Mom, it's dad," I yelled.

I waved my arms frantically. I could see he was stunned. He looked at me, and when it clicked, he started waving back. I ran to the back of the boat.

"Mom, it's dad. I saw him. He's coming for us," I exclaimed.

It was obvious both captains were confused because the launches started circling each other. My dad ran back into the wheelhouse of his launch, and our English friend spoke to our captain. When it got all straightened out, the boats came together. My dad jumped into our launch and gathered my mother into his arms and gave her a big mushy kiss. I stood by his side yanking on his trousers. After a few minutes, he looked down at me. As I looked up, our eyes met.

"Have you heard that President Roosevelt died?" I blurted out.

He smiled, picked me up and gave me a big hug. That is how I met my father in the Persian Gulf on June 30, 1945.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Steve Furman** was born in Inglewood, California in 1938. He traveled to Saudi Arabia in June of 1945 and was the first American child into the Kingdom after the end of World War II in Europe. He was also the first American child enrolled in the Aramco School System in October of 1945. Furman lived in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia until 1962. He graduated from Holy Cross College, a Jesuit Liberal Arts College in Worcester, Massachusetts, with a B.A. degree in English Literature.

In his career, Furman served as an Infantry Officer, USMC from 1960 to 1965. He has worked for various oil companies and contractors in West Africa, Brazil, Iran, Kuwait and Bahrain. He also worked for Aramco in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

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#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

*Dhahran Fables: Fiesta Room Tales*

By Steve Furman, Clark Magruder and Ann Peart

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Send a check for \$20 (includes shipping/handling to US addresses) to < Steve Furman, 1727 Valley Vista Drive, Houston, TX 77077 >

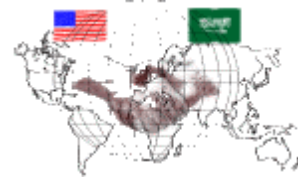
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