

For most second and third generation Americans, thoughts of our ethnic communities around the turn of the century fill the depths of our identity. While our lifestyles may reflect the American mainstream, we enjoy the legacy of ageless traditions and cultural richness which our grandparents could not surrender as they boarded the ships to the land of "golden opportunities."

Clearly our immigrant fathers found more hardships than gold. Though they were able to survive by hard work and sacrifice, they did not meet with easy acceptance into a society whose core was conspicuously Anglophile. And for most immigrants of that epoch, the struggle for assimilation filled their years and tempered their decisions. Yet beneath these uprooted beginnings lay the courage that built an ethnic structure which adds color to the American ethos, and which quenches our yearnings for roots, for belonging.

The story of the first Arab people to settle in this country is in some ways a textbook case of that immigrant wave which brought millions of new Americans to our shores between 189 and 1920. The early Arab immigrants left villages and towns in what was then Greater Syria (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine) to settle in East coast urban centers where they sought Arabic-speaking compatriots who helped acquaint them with their new surroundings and—most of all—to find employment.

What the pioneer Arab-Americans left behind was an existence hardened by widespread food shortages, stagnant economies, and repression of political, religious and social liberties. Most families sent to American one or two male members with the hope that they would become prosperous and eventually return to the homeland. Most Lebanese and Syrians came to U.S. cities and towns as transients—but soon sent for the remaining family members when the dream of return clashed with the newfound prospects for security, freedom, and livelihood.

The experience of the early community matched the challenges and struggles which faced most prewar immigrant groups. Like their fellow ethnics in the southern European, Slavic, Jewish and Greek communities, the early Arabs came to the U.S. speaking no

English, possessing few industrial skills and, for the most part, already saddled with prevoyage debts and family obligations. The unsettling transition from Arab traditions to American institutions and values was softened by the lingering bonds of kinship, religious sect, and village ties, all of which are at the heart of many existing Arab-American structures.

Yet the Arab immigrant community remained singularly private about their ethnic pride and this stunted the growth of many of their institutions. For the very sources of pride in their ancestry were the same factors which alienated them from the American whole: the richness of the Arabic language translated into names no other Americans could spell or pronounce; their Eastern liturgies contrasted with American churches, and the Arab cultural heritage differed considerably from the primarily European basis of the culture in the U.S.

The decades prior to the first world war saw the Syrian/Lebanese emigration grow into a community which by 1920 numbered more than 250,000. By that time, the native born generation ushered the ethnic enclaves into a new era of intense assimilation, business success and job mobility, education, and the embrace of a civic loyalty to their new American nationality. The number of new arrivals dropped severely when wartime legislation set strict quotas on worldwide immigration. Such a scaling down of newcomers facilitated the Arab-American community for the following three decades.

It did not take long for the early Arab ethnic colonies to be fragmented by rapid mobility into the geography and ideology of the American heartland. The fact that such a relatively small ethnic group became so widely dispersed had quite an impact on the complexion of Arab-American institutions, cohesiveness, and even identity up through the 1950s. In that interim, spoken Arabic in the homes declined—as did the ethnic press—and many of the Eastern rite churches lost a portion of their faithful to the more accessible Catholic and Protestant congregations. While marriage within the community was still prevalent and desirable

between children of the immigrants, most of the third generation had little exposure to their heritage, save the delicacies of Arabic cooking and family names that survived "anglification."

The complexion of the Arab-American community changed dramatically in the 1950s and 60s when political and economic upheaval in the Arab homeland created a new wave of immigration to the U.S. Like their countrymen 50 years before, the later influx of Arab nationals uprooted their families to find financial and political security which were scarce in their native countries (Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, among others). The recent Arab-Americans were spared many of the pangs of acculturation which faced the early arrivals since many of the later immigrants were educated, bilingual, and familiar with the American way of life (which itself is now more "receptive" to pluralism). At the same time, they possess a pride in their Arab ethnic identity which was nourished by decades of struggle for political independence, by a closer link to Islam, and by a conscious pursuit of linguistic and cultural autonomy within the American mainstream. Also, the rapid influx of foreign students of diverse Arab nationalities gives further stimulus to the survival of the Arab ethnic identity in this country.

Today the Arab-American community exceeds 2.5 million, a population which criss-crosses the nation and has centers in Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Boston, as well as booming communities in California, Texas, and Ohio. It is a community which four generations ago survived by peddling dry goods, opening small stores and working in the textile mills of the northeast, and now has successfully entered the full spectrum of professional, commercial and political life.

When weighed in America's ethnic balance, the Arab community would probably exceed most others in their undivided loyalty to the American ideals and liberties that for more than a century have won over their love for the new homeland. Yet what used to be a privately held ethnic identity is in recent years seeping out into public view. The reawakening of an ethnic consciousness