

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Lebanese and Syrian Texans

Texans descended from those who came from the present-day areas of Lebanon and Syria number about 30,000, yet they have established some of the most lasting communities.

Perhaps the first Syrian to come to Texas was Hadji Ali, born Orthodox and raised Moslem, who landed in Indianola in 1856. Among his shipmates were 33 camels. The Syrian was a caravaner for the United States Army, then experimenting with the use of camels for transportation. Hadji Ali stayed in Texas only a short time but did pick up a new name: Hi Jolly. He moved on to Arizona, where he lived for more than 50 years. He is buried under a small stone pyramid with an iron camel on top.

Most Arabic-speaking emigrants came between 1880 and World War I. Many of the first arrivals were Christians, who abandoned their homelands because of religious persecution. Few of the earlier individuals were Moslem, but after 1945 hundreds of Moslems came as a result of military conflict in the Middle East.

The first individuals and families either entered Texas through Mexico or came after entering the United States at New York. Originally from the Ottoman Empire's provinces, the immigrants were simply called "Syrians" until Lebanon became a nation in 1919. Referring to the history of the eastern Mediterranean, many of them appropriately consider themselves of Phoenician descent.

Urban in settlement pattern, the first generation of mostly young men were traveling salesmen or operated tiny businesses. Some individuals dreamed of enjoying a few prosperous years in Texas, then returning home. Few did. The next arrivals established themselves as retail merchants, educators, lawyers, oil producers, and manufacturers. And they established extended families.

The Lebanese and Syrians were typical in acculturation, but many families maintained Arabic as a home language, while stressing the



Annie Swia Casseb with baby George and Solomon (Sr.), c. 1900—Solomon established the first supermarket (c. 1923) in San Antonio.



Solomon and George Casseb's produce store, San Antonio, 1915

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need to handle English well. Most preserved their cultural heritage in terms of food, music, and literature.

Individuals often maintain close family ties to Lebanon and Syria, and visits to the homeland are frequent in comparison to some cultural groups.

Most families belong to the Lebanese Maronite Rite Catholic Church, although Orthodox churches exist in several cities including Beaumont, El Paso, Austin, and Houston.

Community groups often formed close-knit organizations. Many of these were church-oriented; others were formed by individual families. Today, the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs has many Texas members. This nonpolitical federation stresses both Americanization and the preservation of ethnic pride. The organization, often working through local clubs, sponsors economic aid, scholarships, and literary and civic awards. Houston community groups are well known for retaining Arabic as a family language and maintaining cultural traditions at gatherings called *sabrias*. These are held in many communities by families, clubs, and churches, and feature traditional foods, dances, music, and costume.

In San Antonio many families are Maronites, an Eastern Rite of the Catholic Church in which the mass is conducted partly in Arabic. The church remains the community center, and the group spirit is strong enough to support periodic special events during the year with Arabic music, dancing, and food.

The most well-known names in the state have become legendary: George Kadane and Michel T. Halbouty in oil exploration and production; J.M. Haggar, clothing manufacturer and noted philanthropist; Najeeb E. Halaby, former president and chief executive officer of Pan American World Airlines and operator of an international law firm, whose daughter, Lisa, is the widow of King Hussein of Jordan and is titled Queen Noor al Hussein; Dr. Michael DeBakey, the internationally known cardiovascular surgeon; and lyric soprano Helen Donath.



*St. Michael's Antiochian
Orthodox Christian Church,
Beaumont, c. 1936*