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Fall 2007

Review of *From Syria to Seminole: Memoir of a High Plains Merchant* By Ed Aryain

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Kayal, Philip, "Review of *From Syria to Seminole: Memoir of a High Plains Merchant* By Ed Aryain" (2007). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1439.

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From Syria to Seminole: Memoir of a High Plains Merchant. By Ed Aryain. Edited with an introduction by J'Nell L. Pate. Foreword by John Wunder. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006. xxxvii + 260 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

My uncles on my mother's side were peddlers. I often wondered how they managed this with no English skills, only a few dependable institutions, and a scattered number of informal commercial ties. *From Syria to Seminole* finally answers that question. Though a specialist on Arab-Americans, this is the second book I have reviewed on Syrians in the Plains and Southwest, and again I learned a great deal.

Literature on Arab-Americans is divided into two historical periods. Works written before 1975 were about the early, turn of

the twentieth-century emigrants from Syria and Lebanon. Later on the field expanded to emigrants from all over the Arab world. The early period dealt mainly with Christian immigrants settling mostly in the Northeast, while recent research generally covers a range of Arab religions, nationalities, and communities throughout the country. This edited and "later footnoted" autobiography highlights from a personal account the distinguishing characteristic of Syrian immigrants, namely their ability to peddle their wares successfully throughout the country until they settled down as merchants, entrepreneurs, and citizens.

While primarily an autobiography of Mohamed Aryain (who tellingly renamed himself Edward), the book is also a travelogue, a history of sorts of the High Plains, and an ethnography because of J'Nell Pate's wonderful editing. The story of Aryain's trip from Syria, through New York and Pennsylvania, and then to the Great Plains is an important one, not only because of the way it's told, but because it supports the general historical information on why and how the Syrians came here, how they established themselves in business, and finally how they Americanized. While peddling separated them regularly from the daily life of the ethnic community they depended on for support, contacts, merchandise, and advice, it also reinforced bonds and helped them discover America and thus quickly acculturate. Syrian peddlers learned to network with Syrian wholesalers on the East Coast who supplied them with dry goods and other merchandise that Americans had little access to in the interior of the country. And they were successful salesmen. Syrian peddlers made more than three times the income of typical Americans.

Ed's individual story is representative of a whole people and period in American history. His personal account brings to life the historical record from the causality of migration to the final levels of assimilation, the history of one becoming the history of many. Ed Aryain was a peddler who relied on the kindness of strangers to survive. He was honest, hardworking, and determined to make a life for himself

doing what many Arabs do best, trading. His story exemplifies the usefulness of ethnic connections while assimilating. What I found fascinating was the discovery of these Syrian entrepreneurs in virtually every hamlet or outpost throughout the Plains. Who knew this? Every town seemed to have its Syrian dry goods merchants who were more or less well accepted. It was the hospitality of the people of Seminole, Texas, that made Ed and his American wife finally settle there. This "ethnography" is about his journey to that place and includes descriptions (often detailed) of dozens of small towns throughout the Dakotas, Wyoming, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Kansas, and elsewhere. The narrative stretches from before, through, till after the Great Depression, and experiencing events through Ed Aryain's eyes makes a compelling read.

What distinguishes his tale is that he was not part of the larger Christian Arab migration. He was not even a Muslim in the traditional sense, but a Druse, a minority within a minority. Early books on Syrians simply paid no mind to the Muslims who came with the Christians, never mind the Druse. The book actually explains who the Druse are, what their relations to the Christians were actually like, what the massacres (on both sides) of the 1860s in Lebanon were about, what it was like to live under the Ottomans, and how these two or three (if you include the Muslims) groups actually interacted with one another on a day-by-day basis.

Then there is the moving account of his trip back to the "old country" with his American wife. Hearing from my own kin the events and experiences Ed describes somehow had less impact on me than reading his beautifully edited memoir. He not only puts faces on Syrian emigrants but humanizes them as well.

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