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# Family, Ethnic Entrepreneurship, And The Lebanese Of Kansas

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## FAMILY, ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND THE LEBANESE OF KANSAS

JAY M. PRICE AND SUE ABDINNOUR

As they entered the elegant lobby of the Waldorf Astoria, Elias G. Stevens and his wife, Handuma, must have marveled at how their lives turned out. They had both been born and raised in what was once the Ottoman province of Syria. They had come to the United States at the turn of the century, found their way to Wichita, Kansas, and worked hard to build a successful candy and tobacco business. They were in New York to meet with representatives from Philip Morris. Survey-

ing the accommodations, however, Handuma noticed a major problem that had to be addressed right away. She insisted they find a grocery store, and the family headed out. A while later, the Stevens entourage returned, marching through one of the most sophisticated hotels in the country carrying bags loaded with provisions. Back in the room, Handuma dutifully arranged the food on dishes to set before the company representatives. To her, it was unthinkable to host such important guests without offering them something to eat and drink. The Stevenses understood the needs and nuances of American consumerism, while never forgetting the ancient Arab tradition of hospitality.<sup>1</sup>

The Stevenses were one of several Syrian-Lebanese families who had established themselves in southern Kansas and northern Oklahoma.<sup>2</sup> Names like Stevens, Cohlmiya, Ablah, Farha, Bayouth, Jabara, and Razook, among many others, have become well known in the region, with Wichita being one of the important hubs. Starting as peddlers and proprietors of small stores, they went on to establish a tradition of entrepreneurship that continues to the present. From the early years of peddling to today's real estate and restaurant ventures, the Lebanese have main-

*Key Words:* Arab, business, peddling, Syrian, Wichita

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PHONE MARKET 1279	<b>N. F. FARHA</b>	615 WEST DOUGLAS AVE.
WHOLESALE IN CLOTHING, DRY GOODS, NOTIONS AND JEWELRY	WHOLESALE IN LADIES' READY-TO-WEAR GARMENTS	IMPORTER OF FLORENTINE DRAWN WORK CLUNY LACES RENAISSANCE LINENS AND SILK SHAWLS

**WICHITA, KANSAS,** \_\_\_\_\_ **192** \_\_\_\_\_

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F.M. McKee x

S.B. McKee x

J.A. Fox x

John Lee x

Peter Connellson x

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*تفیدہ مجموعہ انکسار ہر چیز کے*

*ازا جیسے شئی عن سید علی نقی*

*E Y Taylor \$25835*

FIG. 1. An invoice written in Arabic from N. F. Farha. Courtesy of Ted Farha.

tained the practice of family-based businesses with extended family ties central to several enterprises. Naturally, not all Lebanese went into business for themselves; in each generation, some have chosen to work for others. However, the degree to which the Lebanese preferred to found their own ventures is striking and noteworthy. Moreover, those who did found their own stores, companies, and investments embodied a culture of entrepreneurship that merged Anglo-American business practices with features that were also distinctly Arab, such as providing hospitality and working within the extended family. The result was a culture of entrepreneurship passed down from generation to generation, as much a part of local life as eating *kibbe* or dancing the *dabke*.<sup>3</sup>

Studying ethnicity and the adaptation and survival of cultural traits of immigrant groups and their descendants has become a staple of Great Plains scholarship, with works such as Frederick Luebke's *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* serving as a cornerstone of what has become a truly vast literature. The region has a rich tradition of maintaining ethnic communities, from distinctive neighborhoods in large cities to self-contained towns made up almost entirely of one population to rural ethnic enclaves. To understand the nature of these populations, historians, sociologists, folklorists, and demographers have looked at everything from foodways to music, voting patterns to religious institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Economics, work, and labor have been part of this literature as well, including studies of how ethnic groups practiced agriculture in ways that sometimes paralleled and sometimes differed from their Anglo-American neighbors. This literature, much of it from a sociology framework instead of a history one, is still unresolved in its overall conclusions. Some, such as Sonya Salamon, contend, for example, that Germans maintained a "yeoman" approach to farming based on a single family's ability to grow multiple crops on one plot of land as opposed to the "Yankee" view that saw agriculture as a business and tended to favor monoculture of crops for a larger market. Building on this, Gary Foster and others posit that, in contrast to the Germans who found a single plot of land and stayed rooted over the de-

cades, British, Irish, and Yankee arrivals to the Midwest tended to move from place to place several times before finally settling down on a parcel. Some studies argue that ethnic attitudes toward land use are very evident, even over generations. Others find that the difference between the various groups is not statistically significant overall, although certain case studies suggest that at least where immigrant populations are sufficiently concentrated in one area, cultural attitudes toward farming can persist over decades.<sup>5</sup>

Other studies have looked at urban or at least small-town immigrant business traditions. Jews represent a particularly well-documented population demonstrating the interplay between ethnicity, immigration, and entrepreneurship, a conversation particularly evident in scholarship about Jewish communities in the Midwest and the West of North America. There are studies about Jews as peddlers, such as Oliver Pollak's analysis of Jewish peddlers in Omaha, that provide valuable insights into the nature of peddling as a profession, as well as how peddlers transitioned into small business owners by the 1930s. There are recent studies of Jewish entrepreneurship in small-town America, as well as some larger, more analytical surveys, such as Lee Shai Weissbach's survey that looks at the roles midwestern Jewish families played in the heyday of small-town America.<sup>6</sup>

Like Jews, Arab entrepreneurs have also been part of the midwestern entrepreneurial story, although one that is less documented. As with Jewish entrepreneurship, Arab business scholarship in North America seems to be especially interested in the role of particular families. Much of it is descriptive rather than analytical, often the story of an individual who served as a peddler and later transitioned into a small business proprietor. Much of this literature is nationwide, even North America-wide, in scope. A compelling narrative study of Arab American culture and ethnic entrepreneurship in a particular community is Elizabeth Boosahda's *Arab-American Faces and Voices*. She studied the origins and history of Americans of Arab ancestry who emigrated from 1880 to 1915 from the Ottoman Empire of Syria and Palestine and settled in Worcester, Massachusetts. These immigrants' first work of choice was

as a merchant of goods and potions, commonly known as a “pack peddler.” After peddling, Arab Americans in Worcester started setting up stores and owning real estate properties, often transitioning into owning a store that sold dry goods and clothing. The implication is that these Arab American immigrants came out of hardship, with very little money, but became entrepreneurs first as peddlers then as storekeepers, realtors, and stock market investors.

#### ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A CULTURAL MARKER

Those who study Arab Americans have tended to focus on those who stayed on the East Coast, in New York and Massachusetts, for example, with less attention given those who settled elsewhere, such as in the Midwest or in the Great Plains. This eastern bias is understandable although unfortunate, as it ignores the significant role that Syrian merchants played in the development of both small towns and larger communities in the middle of the country, a role that is still visible today. Kelly Caswell’s thesis about Arab Christians in Wichita, Kansas, in the early years of the twentieth century is a good example. This work, like so many studies about ethnicity, culture, and business in the Plains, concentrates on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when immigration was at its peak, and the struggles of first, second, and “one and a half” generations was most acute. To see how cultural approaches to business and entrepreneurship have functioned over time, however, a multigenerational approach is warranted, providing insights into which practices remained and which have faded with the passage of time.

That is where this study of Syrian-Lebanese entrepreneurship in the twentieth century comes in. The Lebanese of Kansas were large enough in population to form an identifiable community and one that has remained in the area over several generations. Therefore, it is possible to look at the continuity of cultural traits that would have faded among a handful of isolated individuals. In contrast to other local ethnic populations, such as the Jews, who have experienced regular

influxes and outmigrations through the twentieth century, the Lebanese provide a particularly fruitful opportunity to explore cultural traits and business practices among families over an extended period of time.<sup>7</sup>

A useful model for explaining how entrepreneurship can function as a cultural marker comes, not surprisingly, from those who study business. For example, Jeffrey Timmons’s *New Venture Creation: Entrepreneurship for the 21st Century* identified six dominant themes based on what successful entrepreneurs do and how they perform.<sup>8</sup> These themes were taken by testimony given by the first twenty-one inductees to the Babson College’s Academy of Distinguished Entrepreneurs. The six themes are (1) commitment and determination, (2) leadership, (3) opportunity obsession, (4) tolerance for risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty, (5) creativity, self-reliance, and adaptability, and (6) motivation to excel. It is tempting to think of entrepreneurs as special people who possess distinct individual traits, but the trend in the literature is to move away from the trait approach toward the behavioral approach. Likewise, we argue that it is the setting in which entrepreneurial approaches function, including community and family, rather than the traits of individual business figures, that is central to the process. In this regard, we draw upon William Gartner’s “behavioral approach” to entrepreneurship that focuses on the creation of the business organization, with the entrepreneur as part of this complex process of new venture creation.<sup>9</sup> Even though the behavioral approach is not new, researchers continued to fall back to the trait approach, seeking to develop personality profiles of the entrepreneur. We argue that the Lebanese community in Kansas is a good example of Gartner’s view of entrepreneurship at work:

Entrepreneurship is the creation of new organizations. . . . If we are to understand the phenomenon of entrepreneurship in order to encourage its growth, then we need to focus on the process by which new organizations are created. This may seem like a simple refinement of focus (i.e. look at what the entrepreneur does not what the entrepreneur is), but





FIG. 2. N. F. Farha and his family enjoy a buggy ride. Farha's niece Nellie (later Nellie Ablah) is in his lap. Courtesy of Ted Farha.

it is actually a rather thoroughgoing change in our orientation.<sup>10</sup>

Entrepreneurship, therefore, is a set of processes within which individuals participate, a dynamic that is especially visible in *ethnic entrepreneurship*, rooted in a group of people who share common attributes in a given location, yet who are distinct from the larger society in which they function.<sup>11</sup>

Although some works discuss historical experiences of ethnic and immigrant populations, the ethnic entrepreneurship model typically discusses current or recent populations such as Korean or South Asian immigrants in large cities.<sup>12</sup> This study argues that the model can also be used by historians to understand the dynamics of previous generations. The experience of the Lebanese families of the Great Plains, therefore, adds to the still-developing scholarship on the interplay between ethnicity and entrepreneurship. The connection with ethnic entrepreneurship makes sense when considering the Arab American story. Being in business was an important, even central, feature to Lebanese communities in the Great

Plains, and one that was simultaneously inseparable from issues of family and culture. Whereas the Jewish peddlers, who were from a diverse array of locations, addressed their interests through formal organizations and groups, and Germans might look to the Catholic, Mennonite, or Lutheran congregation as the hub of community, Arab Christians in places like Kansas looked inward, to family gatherings, to resolve issues or promote ventures. When an immigrant from Syria set up a peddling route or a grocery store, he did not do so on his own. The modest proprietor was not working by herself. She was one part of a vast network that usually extended to other neighboring communities, to larger regional cities, and indeed, to towns and villages back in the Ottoman Empire and around the world.

The Lebanese experience in Kansas and Oklahoma is a vast, complex story involving numerous, intertwined family experiences. Space simply does not allow for covering all the families in as great detail as they merit. Doing so would result in a massive work of genealogy more confusing than enlightening to the reader. What follows, there-

fore, can be considered a sample of case studies coming from a few of the better known names in the community, based on interviews and other research. The reader should note that similar dynamics have played out among many other families who have also contributed to the entrepreneurial heritage of the region, families who one day will be part of additional scholarship.

#### LITTLE BY LITTLE BY LITTLE

About 1896, Salem and David Stevens, brothers from the twin Ottoman Syrian villages of Ain Arab and Mhaithe, arrived in Wichita, Kansas. Just recovering from the economic downturn of the early 1890s, Wichita was emerging as the hub of a trading and commercial area that extended into western Kansas and down into the newly created territory of Oklahoma. Wichita was a wholesaling and warehouse center, the place where objects arrived before being distributed to consumers. It was a natural location for those who wanted to establish themselves in business.

The Stevenses were part of a larger Arab Christian diaspora originating in the Ottoman Empire province of Syria. For centuries, Arab Christians, themselves divided between Orthodox, Catholic, and Uniate traditions, lived in sometimes close, sometimes strained relations with Druze, Sunni, and Shia Muslims. In the Bekaa Valley, between Damascus to the east and the slopes of Mount Lebanon, Christians lived in tight-knit villages where extended family ties governed daily life. Two such populations were those who came from Jedeidat Marjeyoun (or just Marjeyoun) in the southern part of the region, near what is today the border between Lebanon and Israel, and a pair of villages in the north, Ain Arab and Mhaithe. Together, these communities played important roles in the history of Arab Christians in the southern Great Plains of the United States. Although sometimes described as a “colony,” the Arab Christian community that developed in Wichita, southern Kansas, and northern Oklahoma consisted primarily of two vast, complicated networks of families whose origins went back to these places.<sup>13</sup>

Journalist Anthony Shadid, whose ancestors

came from Marjeyoun (which he spells “Marjayoun”), described the trade networks—and challenges to Christians living in the Ottoman Empire—that defined the area in the 1800s:

No one in Marjayoun would necessarily pine for the days of the Ottoman rulers. Massacres occurred, and Jews and Christians faced discrimination in taxes and commerce. . . . Yet more than a few in Marjayoun today might express a nostalgia for the time and place the Ottoman Empire represented, when Marjayoun’s traders ventured to Arish on the coast of the Sinai Peninsula and down the Nile to Sudan, by way of Palestine. The town was a way station on the route from the breadbasket of the Houran in southern Syria to Acre, the Levant’s greatest port. Beirut was an afterthought. Marjayoun’s traders plied the steppe of the Houran, its gentry owned land in the Hula Valley, and its educated ventured to Haifa and Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

Nor was Jedeidat Marjeyoun unique. Ain Arab and Mhaithe were along another major trade corridor. A crossroads of trade for millennia, the Levant’s landscape is covered with routes such as those that connected the port city of Beirut, the ancient metropolis of Damascus, and the sacred pilgrimage center of Jerusalem as well as regional centers such as Baalbek and Zahle. Akram Khater’s study of the region suggests that by the late 1800s there was a modest level of prosperity throughout as a result of the silk industry, increased trade due to steamship routes, and European investment. Early photographs of well-to-do families show a mixture of traditional Middle Eastern and Victorian European fashions.<sup>15</sup>

By the late 1800s, however, a series of economic crises hit the region. The silk industry collapsed. Meanwhile, the recent prosperity resulted in larger families but fewer resources to distribute to the growing number of children of this “baby boom.” Khater suggests that “peasants were not seeking financial salvation, but rather financial amelioration.” Those who immigrated might have been “poor” but they were not destitute, as it took some money to make the passage. As they came of age, the young people of the Mount Leb-

anon area found "silk prices were stagnating, the population was increasing dramatically, and land was becoming more dear."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, instability in the Ottoman Empire brought back painful memories of the 1860s clashes between Christians and Druze and fears about the future. These conditions encouraged families to send out individuals to find better opportunities elsewhere. As tensions and challenges increased, so did the impetus to emigrate. In the first decade of the twentieth century Christians faced the prospect of being conscripted into the Ottoman military, prompting several military-age men to leave before having to serve. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I created additional hardships that only added to the pressure to go somewhere else. Ethnic and religious violence that had characterized the 1860s seemed poised to return. Famine plagued the region. One statistic suggests that a quarter of the population had left Syria-Lebanon by 1921.<sup>17</sup>

Still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire and Arabic-speaking, Egypt was an early destination for Arab Christian immigration and entrepreneurship. By the 1890s, however, Syrian Christian migrants looked further afield for opportunities, venturing to Australia, South Africa, Brazil, Cuba, Canada, and the United States. For some, anywhere across the Atlantic was "New York," and family lore speaks of people who boarded ships expecting to arrive in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, only to find themselves disembarking in Rio de Janeiro or Havana.

From the outset, the Lebanese in the *mahjar*, or "land of emigration," might work as laborers. However, a significant number opted instead for going into business themselves. Interviews with the descendants of the first Syrian immigrants to the region suggest that entrepreneurship allowed for a degree of freedom and autonomy that they would not have had with an employer. Peddling may not have offered the security or even better wages that a company could provide, but at least there was not a manager "asking too many questions," as one interviewee put it. A family could be in control of its own destiny and had the flexibility to adapt as circumstances changed. Once established, businesses provided opportunities

for other relatives to come over without having to go to a manager to find a job for them.

The Syrians arrived at the high point of peddling in the 1890s and early 1900s. As Gregory Orfalea has put it, "before parcel post, and J.C. Penney stores, the car and bus and subway, the Syrian peddler took to the American farmwife, factory worker wife, and country squire wife an invaluable item—the marketplace." The peddler's job was to fill a box or trunk with goods that provided the basics needs of customers who had limited transportation. There were two forms of peddling: urban and rural, and the stories of the Lebanese of Kansas and Oklahoma emphasize the rural form, traveling from town to town or farm to farm selling goods. One interviewee mentioned that the locals around Moundridge, Kansas, referred to the Syrian peddlers as "drummers," possibly because they picked up their wares from "drums" of goods shipped out on the train. Once the peddler established their sales route, they established relations with their customers and often slept in their homes along the way.

Peddling was not just for men. Some women were peddlers as well and had their men accompany them on the peddling routes. Other women were content staying at home to do household work and childrearing with assistance from the extended family. Peddlers, men or women, had to deal with the challenge of traveling on foot, the rigor of winter, and the language barrier.<sup>18</sup>

Finding a location in which to peddle, however, took deliberation and even a measure of strategy. The goal was to find a region that had enough customers to make a circuit profitable but was without the competition of other peddlers. By the mid-1890s, the Southern Plains held promise, especially given that much of what had been Indian Territory had just been opened up to settlement through a series of land rushes. As Caswell notes, "the vast open areas of the Midwest insured enough separation between each other to avoid competition."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, southern Kansas was starting to recover from the economic bust and drought of the early 1890s, with small towns and large cities alike starting to reestablish themselves. Here was a population of farmers who were relatively close together and needed supplies but did not yet have a large number of stores or





FIG. 3. Interior of Jabour Ablah's store. Courtesy of Ablah family.

peddlers to provide for their needs. Moreover, transportation links brought both people and goods from back east, from the Great Lakes, or up from the Gulf via Texas.

#### FROM PEDDLER TO STOREKEEPER

Within a few years of arriving in the United States, most Lebanese families had transitioned from peddlers to other enterprises, especially operating grocery and dry goods stores. The early twentieth century was the heyday of small-town America, and Lebanese entrepreneurs found opportunities in cities and smaller communities alike. In 1900, for example, Farris Jabara came to the United States via Texas and then settled in Oklahoma to be with relatives in Clinton. Like so many others, Farris began peddling in the region, ultimately opening a store in Burden, Kansas, in Cowley County. A few years later, Farris moved his family to Cambridge, where he oper-

ated one of the town's three grocery stores. Farris Assid Razook came in 1901, initially to Cowley County, but by 1920 he had opened a store in Moundridge. Many Lebanese families may have started in peddling, but they did not stay in it for long. Many, like the Cohlmas, Razooks, and Jabaras, transitioned to store owners. Others developed into suppliers, among them Sam Andeel, who catered to the needs of Oklahoma's transient, short-lived oil-field camps.

One such foray involved Farris Farha's family back in Jedeidat Marjeyoun. Farris had four sons, Nemetallah, Churallah, Farah, and Said. Although perhaps of poor or modest status, the family's background challenged the stereotypical "poor peasant" image found in the popular memory of immigration. Trade and commerce had been part of family lore that extended back into the 1700s. Farah's son, Bahij, sold cookies on the town square in Jedeidat Marjeyoun.<sup>20</sup> In 1895 the oldest three brothers came to the

United States, leaving Said back in Syria. The three Farhas initially sought out opportunities in Bloomington, Illinois, where other branches of the family settled. They began as peddlers, selling goods in circuits that covered certain areas of the countryside. Soon afterward, however, the Farhas relocated to northern Oklahoma. Nemetallah, who eventually went by "N.F.," settled in Enid in 1897. A year later, however, N.F. found his way to Wichita, at the time still the area's main supply and wholesaling center. N.F. had made enough money to give up peddling and became a merchant, outfitting peddlers who sold goods on circuits in Kansas and Oklahoma. He settled west of the Arkansas River, in the neighborhood called Delano. His brother, Churallah, going by "C.F.," began in Oklahoma as well, but moved northward about 1908 to establish a store in Coffeyville. Farah eventually returned to Syria, and while Said never came to Wichita, his son Aziz did, setting up a wholesale grocery company with Eid Elkouri, called Farha & Elkouri, or simply "F & E."<sup>21</sup>

Of the four brothers, it was Nemetallah who emerged as the patriarch of the Farhas in Wichita. Initially starting out in peddling, with the support of relatives back in New York, Farha's business did well. The 1905 Kansas state census and 1910 federal census lists N. F. Farha operating what was essentially a large boardinghouse filled with relatives, extended family, and other individuals from Jedeidat Marjeyoun.<sup>22</sup> By 1910 he purchased a store from another family, the Samaras, who had relocated from Memphis, Tennessee, and transitioned into being a wholesaler and outfitter of peddlers. Like so many Lebanese entrepreneurs, Farha was never content with being involved in just one venture. He was involved in a number of other opportunities, from selling "fancy goods" to investing in oil drilling. He once told his daughter Theodora that he spent more money searching for oil "than your weight in gold"—but never made that much. His investments and ventures were not limited to Wichita; he owned property and vineyards back in Jedeidat Marjeyoun, tended by relatives. Farha had a reputation for being a stern, driven individual. Being successful, or at least looking successful,

was an all-consuming passion. One son recalled not having a "real conversation with his father" until he reached the age of eighteen. At the same time, however, Nemetallah could be brought to tears by holding a piece of fine cloth.<sup>23</sup>

N. F. Farha became a major factor in drawing other Lebanese to the region. Jacob Bayouth and his wife, Salima, came from Jedeidat Marjeyoun initially to Montreal. Meanwhile, their daughter, Nabiha, came out to Kansas visit her sister. In 1906 Nabiha married N. F. Farha, and by 1910 Jacob and Salima were both in Wichita, where N. F. Farha got them set up in peddling. Jacob's health did not support the physical demands of that work, however, and it fell to Salima, who was much younger, to take on that responsibility. By 1915 they had made enough money to open a grocery store in a two-story wooden building at 1122 West Douglas. This store was very much a team venture. Jacob Bayouth even offered extended hours in his store, sleeping in a chair in the back and waking up to attend to a customer, no matter the time of day or night. Salima was known for her business sense and strong memory, taking orders over the phone, writing them down, and then getting the order ready to go out on delivery. By 1922 the Bayouths were able to build a more substantial brick store at 1220 West Douglas.

In Arabic culture, the oldest son usually bore the responsibility of guiding the rest of the siblings, and so when it came time for the children of Farris Gholmieh (or Cohlmi) to come to the Southern Plains from Jedeidat Marjeyoun, it fell to Farris's oldest son, John, to come to the United States first. Upon exiting Ellis Island, John, going by the surname "Farris,"<sup>24</sup> sought out opportunities for the rest of the family before returning to Syria. John married and returned to the United States in 1903 with his six brothers, all settling in Oklahoma. From this start, the Cohlmi, like the Farhas and other families, spread out across southern Kansas and northern Oklahoma. At one point, nearly every community in Woods County, Oklahoma, and Comanche County, Kansas, had at least one Cohlmi household. Ruth Cohlmi, who married John Farris's grandson Jim, once recalled that "they didn't need to live in the same town but they looked at driving

distance for a Sunday afternoon visit or help if needed. . . . Oklahoma offered new land and a chance to help build a town with a business."<sup>25</sup>

These early family ties helped additional family members get settled. In 1914, for example, Ellis Cohlmiia left Syria to escape conscription in the Ottoman army, and came initially to Wichita to live with an uncle, Shaker Cohlmiia. Ellis then moved to Kiefer, Oklahoma, to operate a grocery store. Ellis ended up selling the store, and for a time operated a movie theater, but without much luck. Ellis thought he was ready to set out on his own, but experience showed how green he still was. Ellis needed to learn more about being in business, so he worked for a while in the grocery store of a relative in Gate, Oklahoma, until he gained enough experience to venture out on his own again, establishing a grocery store in Englewood, Kansas. While there, he met Lillie Farris, John Farris's daughter, and married her in 1923.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, Ellis moved to Ashland, near his wife's family, and brought over his brother Lee to take over the store in Englewood. This time, Ellis had learned how to buy in volume and hold specials, business practices that were still cutting edge in the region.<sup>27</sup>

By the 1910s a string of businesses extended down West Douglas in Wichita. At the west end, beyond Seneca, was the grocery store of Jacob Bayouth. Going east, around the intersection of Douglas and Seneca, were the wholesaling and dry goods ventures of N. F. Farha and the store of N.F.'s cousin Neman. Toward the Arkansas River stood the stores of Samuel Ojile and Shaker Cohlmiia. On adjacent streets stood these individuals' homes, as well as the residences and businesses of other families such as the Samaras, Kallails, and Addises. Racial slurs did take place, children received taunts for their background, and individuals had to sometimes convince locals that they were Christians and not Jews, but to a large extent the Lebanese were able to negotiate the city's varied populations. They could move between Anglo-Americans, various ethnic and immigrant groups, and other populations of color without being restricted on color lines themselves, allowing for an even greater array of potential customers and clients than would have

been the case had they chosen to serve just one clientele.<sup>28</sup>

In the early twentieth century, "Syrians" were still considered exotic, and they knew they were not automatically trusted in the larger community. They learned quickly that conversing in Arabic when among English speakers implied taking advantage of the customer and was bad for business. Therefore, English was usually the language spoken in the store, with the most proficient family members the ones out front serving customers. Conversely, some Arabic customs actually lent themselves to business in America. One was the tradition of hospitality toward guests, which translated into making a customer feel welcome and comfortable. Scholars such as Tracey Deutsch have noted that during this period, the relationship between grocer and customer was essential for any small, family-owned store, noting that "in these small neighborhood stores, customers developed more personal relationships with their grocers than they might have with transient peddlers," although that relationship could also be a strained one, involving constant negotiations and haggling over products, prices, and credit.<sup>29</sup> Another custom that lent itself to business was the desire to display humility toward others. Being arrogant and showing off one's success was crass, or in Arabic, *aib* (shameful). The concept of *aib* governed relations in the community and maintained a standard of what practices, including business practices, were acceptable. Another practice that was *aib* was selfishness or being seen as taking advantage of someone, and those in charge of businesses often went to great lengths to show their integrity. One interviewee mentioned that when times were tight, and there was a choice between getting groceries and paying the bank, the choice was to pay the bank. It was better to go hungry for a time than be seen as an untrustworthy lendee who skipped out on his debts.

Later on, as the twentieth century unfolded, the families who were in wholesaling, investment, or supply relied on long-term relations with companies for products, clients to support, and banks for loans. Reputation was everything, and in the turbulent days of the Great Depression, for example, a number of families extended credit or gave



FIG. 4. Brothers (left to right) William, Bahij (B.F.), Phillip (behind), Sam (on the phone), and LaBebe Farha guided F & E Wholesale from the 1920s through the 1960s. Their close personal ties extended to family affairs as well as business. Courtesy of Brenda and Joan Farha.

breaks to certain customers, creating loyalties that lasted for decades. Some interviewees felt that the close-knit nature of the Kansas Lebanese contributed to a sense of collective standards, the concept of *aib* governing the expectations of ethical business practices because one person's bad dealings could reflect poorly on the community as a whole. This emphasis on integrity was especially prominent in the Kansas Lebanese context and not always found elsewhere; there were other cities where the use of arson to collect insurance money was called "Lebanese lightning."

#### A WORLD OF SIBLINGS

N.F.'s brother Farah, like so many of the early immigrants, had left his family behind when he came to America. Once settled, he worked to bring his loved ones over with him. He brought one daughter, Nellie, to the United States and then went back to Syria himself to bring over his wife and other children. The timing, however,

was unfortunate. He went back as World War I broke out and the Ottoman Empire disintegrated. Tensions between religious and ethnic groups escalated in Syria. Farah died while back in Syria, possibly from appendicitis, and his wife, Naima, and seven children knew they had to get out. By this time, Syria had become a French mandate, so the family found their way onto a ship headed to France, where they stayed for several months. Meanwhile, the oldest of the boys, Bahij, remained in Syria and went back to Jedeidat Marjeyoun to attempt to collect some of their belongings, only to disappear. Presuming she had now lost a son as well as a husband, Naima gathered her remaining children—William, LaBebe, Sam, Phillip, Samai, and Manira—and boarded the steamship *Philadelphia* for New York. Even as refugees fleeing the turmoil of the collapsing Ottoman Empire, however, they benefited from the family's modest affluence: while most immigrants crossed the Atlantic in third class or steerage, these branches of the Farha clan made the





FIG. 5. The E. G. Stevens family outside their home in Delano. E. G. Stevens is in the back row. Handuma is to his right. Courtesy of Don Stephan.

passage in the relative comfort of second class. Naima's brother A. Salamy, a New York merchant in the import-export business, paid the fare, breaking Arab custom that said that once married, a woman should look to her husband's family instead of her own for support. When they arrived in New York in September 1920, Naima was surprised to find Bahij on the dock waiting for them. He had managed to make it to the United States before the rest of the family. Naima Farha and her children proceeded to Wichita. She raised her family by herself, first in a house in Delano on Maple Street, and later, to a home on Coolidge in the middle-class neighborhood of Riverside. She was a strong figure, indeed, the matriarch of a family that always retained very close connections.

Bahij, Sam, William, LaBebe, and Philip retained particularly strong ties. Arab custom ascribed a level of authority and responsibility to the oldest brother, in this case, Bahij, but it was Sam who came to the family about a new opportunity. It was 1927, Aziz Farha had moved to West Virginia, and Farha & Elkouri was now for sale. Sam decided to buy it for about \$500. At first,

Sam asked Bahij, who was working with relatives back in New York, for the money to help buy the business. After a while, Bahij returned to Wichita to join F & E. Family story says he could no longer afford all the collect telegrams from Kansas. The five Farha brothers went into F & E, each functioning according to their skills. Bahij's financial prowess worked well to handle the books. Sam's personable nature made him a good fit to be up front, and his knowledge of canned goods was a major asset to the business. The rest of the brothers joined the firm as they came of age and graduated high school.

F & E did well providing food service to restaurants, hospitals, and other institutions. When the depression hit, however, the business struggled, and the brothers went out into the city looking for new customers. At first, they were not set up to sell to individual family consumers, but it became apparent that this was a potential market. In 1931 the brothers set up a store in one part of the warehouse. It became so successful that they decided to open the "Cut Rate Supermarket" at Second and Main, moving to an even larger location at Water and Douglas. Doing so, the family



was keeping pace with changes in food shopping, which saw the emergence of the first supermarkets in the 1920s and 1930s, emphasizing the customer making their own selections from among a variety of prepackaged products instead of having to go to a grocer for some items and a butcher for others. Nationwide, the supermarket was becoming an alternative to the intimate, if awkward, personal relationships required of the corner grocery store, and larger stores positioned themselves as more efficient and convenient. Although some hoped that the supermarket was an unfortunate aberration made possible by the Great Depression, the model had by the 1940s started to catch on, with the rise of local and national chains. Families such as the Farhas and the Bayouths were part of the transition. By World War II, there were five Cut Rate stores, with children, cousins, and other family members working in each of them.<sup>30</sup>

Family ties extended to more than just business, however, and even by Arab American standards, the Farhas were exceptionally close. The brothers met Thursday mornings in the warehouse's office to handle both business and family affairs. Personal decisions, such as a brother wanting to buy a home or an automobile, were a matter of discussion and debate, with the other four weighing in, voting on whether to proceed. Even the purchase of bicycles for the children was a family event: if one child was to receive a new bicycle, all the brothers' children received bicycles. The children growing up in the business knew that the Thursday morning meetings were important, and that when sensitive personal matters came up, "that was when they spoke Arabic."<sup>31</sup>

In some cases, a store or venture continued from parents to children, as when Ellis Bayouth took over the grocery store from his father, Jacob. But that was not always what happened. The depression and dust bowl accelerated the demise of both the small grocery store along with the small towns that supported them, meaning that the children could not have continued in the family store even if they wanted to. In Ashland, both John Farris and son-in-law Ellis Cohlma closed their stores in 1934. John took his family to Wichita and went to work at F & E Wholesale until his death in 1937. Ellis, meanwhile, ran a

grocery store in Fairview, Oklahoma. After his death in 1944, Lillie continued the family's entrepreneurial spirit, relocating to Wichita and establishing Lillie's, a children's clothing store in the downtown business district. Ellis and Lillie had four children, two daughters and two sons, but it was a daughter-in-law, Nancy Cohlma, who eventually became the owner of the store.<sup>32</sup>

#### CHANGE AND ASSIMILATION

Even in cities like Wichita, however, the grocery stores, dry goods stores, and fancy goods stores of the first generation were giving way to new sources of entrepreneurship. For example, Jabour Ablah, also from Jedeidat Marjeyoun, crossed the ocean on the first passage he could find, arriving in Canada so that he could take on Canadian citizenship and thereafter come to the United States as a Canadian rather than as a subject of the Ottoman sultan. A few years later, he came to Wichita where his relative Salima Bayouth lived. He began in peddling, operating a route around Florence, and then got his start by operating a feed store. After World War I, he transitioned into the grocery business. By the 1920s, however, Jabour found it more lucrative to supply grocery stores than to operate them, resulting in Ablah Wholesale Grocery Company in 1923. Jabour Ablah's two sons, Hafiz (Harvey) and Fauzie (Frank), when they came of age, transitioned out of the grocery and wholesale business into supplying cooking equipment to hotels, institutions, and restaurants, forming Ablah Hotel Supply in 1928. The firm provided the equipment that may well have prepared the food that came from F & E Wholesale. As with the Farhas, business and family were intertwined for Frank and Harvey. Going into business together allowed the brothers to pool their intellectual and personal skills.<sup>33</sup> When Jabour died in 1932, Frank, the eldest son, guided the family, kept the accounts, and organized things, while Harvey was the salesman who worked with the public. As with several Lebanese families, one sibling was the salesman. Another was in the back, keeping the account books. In time, Ablah Hotel Supply served a large number of the area's restaurants, providing



FIG. 6. Joe, Fred, E.G., Handuma, and George Stevens in the Stevenses' candy and tobacco store. Courtesy of Don Stephan.

everything from fry stations to booths and chairs. One of the firm's most famous products was a small, portable metal diner that came out in the 1930s to provide a relatively inexpensive start-up restaurant that already had everything included. During World War II, the price of steel went up and the Ablahs sold off that portion of the business to Arthur Valentine, whose name became associated with the product, making the "Valentine Diner" one of the most iconic examples of American diner architecture.

By the 1930s the upwardly mobile Ablah brothers, who considered themselves Americans in the fullest sense, had little interest living in the Lebanese cocoon of Delano. They chose instead to build in the prominent new neighborhood of Crown Heights, constructing a striking Art Moderne duplex at Douglas and Pinecrest. Each

brother's family had one wing of the home, but there was a common room in the middle. Their home was near that of their sister, Haseeba, who had been a cashier with Jabour and was assistant manager to Frank and Harvey.<sup>34</sup>

Although not all families chose the duplex housing arrangement of the Ablahs or the regular family meetings of the Farha brothers, teamwork among siblings, perhaps extending to cousins, uncles, and in-laws as well, lay at the heart of most Lebanese endeavors. The extended family, not the individual, is the primary unit of Middle Eastern society, one manifestation being teams of brothers and in-laws working together. There was a marked tendency for a team of brothers to work with an uncle, older cousin, or in-law, as well as (or even instead of) their father. It also placed daughters as liaisons between families. Just fol-

lowing the marriages of the daughters of one family, the children of Farah and Naima Farha, for example, illustrates how the ties connected across family lines. Nellie married Frank Ablah of Ablah Hotel Supply and helped take care of the books for Jabour Ablah. Samai (also called Sumia) married Ellis Cohlma's brother Lee. Manira married Kay Aboussie, who operated a children's clothing store in downtown Wichita.<sup>35</sup>

These complex business and family relations also show up in the story of one of the leading families from Ain Arab-Mhaithe, the Stevenses. David and Salem Stevens remained prominent in the local Wichita community in its earliest years, although the most notable Stevens of the interwar years was their cousin Elias George, or simply "E.G." E.G. and his brother Joseph had come to the United States around the turn of the century. E.G. became involved in a number of different ventures in Kansas, including an ice cream parlor. Joseph settled in Las Animas, Colorado, where he opened a general store. Joseph married Handuma Shaddid, who came to the Americas not through Ellis Island but through Mexico. Although her siblings were in Kansas, Handuma spent the first few years of her married life in southern Colorado.<sup>36</sup> When Joseph died in 1915, his brother E.G. came out to Colorado, ran the store for a short time, and married Handuma. He brought the family first to Grenola, Kansas, and eventually back to Wichita. There, he set up the E. G. Stevens Tobacco Company, selling candy as well as tobacco products. E.G. emerged as a leader in the Syrian community of Wichita, the patriarch of those families whose origins were Ain Arab-Mhaithe rather than Jedeidat Marjeyoun. He became, for example, a leading figure in the establishment of a second Orthodox Church in Wichita. In 1935 a number of families at St. George, mostly with Ain Arab and Mhaithe ties, decided to form their own congregation, known as St. Mary. So strong were the presence of certain families in each congregation that St. George and St. Mary got called "St. Farha" and "St. Stevens," respectively.

The intricacies of Arab extended family relations governed life for the Lebanese of Wichita. Families had different branches, each of which

had its own set of relations. For example, the families of N.F., C.F., Farah, and Said Farha constituted just one branch of the Farha clan. Their cousin Neman Farha was head of a different branch. Several families, including the Bayouths, had multiple branches, each with their own connections and businesses. One branch of the Bayouths, the descendants of Jacob and Ellis, had ties to the first west-side grocery stores, and later on became active in west-side real estate.<sup>37</sup> Another branch, deriving from Shurkry Bayouth, included brothers Jacob (better known as "Jimmie") and George, who developed a printing business, as well as brothers Mel and Charles and a number of sisters.<sup>38</sup>

The children of these marriages, often coming of age during and just after World War II, had grown up surrounded by business. There were chores to do, to be sure, but there was energy and excitement as well. The rest of the family was at the store, anyway. As they grew older, chores became jobs. Education was important, but when the school day was over, teenagers went to work in the family business. Dinnertime conversations involved business the way other families talked about sports or politics. These children observed firsthand how business worked, what was required, and how to see opportunities involving new clients, products, or marketing. They learned about customer service, bookkeeping, making deals, and drawing up contracts. They learned about how to treat customers. They learned cautionary tales about what was *aib*, with elders conversing in disapproving tones, and often in Arabic, about those who violated community standards. It was an education in entrepreneurship that served these children well over the years as they grew up and set out on their own business paths.

#### "LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS"

E. G. Stevens's stepdaughter, Julia, had grown up in the family business. Her stepfather and mother both were involved in the daily operations of E. G. Stevens Tobacco and made sure that she knew how to manage affairs as well. In her youth, she kept the company's books. In 1931, when she was seventeen, E. G. Stevens found a man in the

candy and tobacco business from Fort Wayne, Indiana, whom he thought would be a good husband for her: Taft Stephan. (The Middle Eastern practice of arranged marriages still shaped lives among some Lebanese in America.) The couple's first venture was a small grocery store located at Ninth and Cleveland in what was then the heart of the African American community. A year later, they moved back to Fort Wayne, but then returned to Wichita. Later, Taft opened a nightclub, the Tropicana, but when that burned, Taft and Julia went back into the grocery business, operating Taft's Super Market at Meridian and Second. The store did well during the boom times of World War II, thanks in large part to Julia's ability to acquire quality merchandise.

In time, Julia went into business for herself, purchasing, for example, the Kibbe Grocery in 1948. After her divorce from Taft Stephan in 1951, she found herself totally in business for herself. The grocery store had to be sold, but her Stephan Variety Store remained a fixture on the west side of Wichita for many years. She was an investor, going to local banks to buy up bad loans and working to make the given situation profitable for herself and the financial institution. She decided to open a trailer park, providing housing for the burgeoning aviation workforce that had poured into Wichita during World War II. The war was just over, and Julia went to one of the city's main banks for a loan. The officials at that bank dismissed her, saying that she'd never make it. She ultimately did get a loan from a loan company and opened the trailer court. She found, however, that many of her residents were not able to afford to buy a trailer and make the payments, but they could pay rent. Seeing the situation as an opportunity rather than a problem, she allowed residents to purchase trailers on a rent-to-own basis. Julia gained a reputation as an entrepreneur who was considerate and generous, yet at the same time "all business," characteristics she had no doubt honed as a girl working in E. G. Stevens's candy company.<sup>39</sup>

Julia represented a new generation of young Lebanese entrepreneurs who were coming of age during the 1930s through the 1950s. As the first generation of Lebanese immigrants passed, it fell

to their children to take up the mantle of family leadership. For example, back on West Douglas, Ellis Bayouth had maintained the store through the tough times of the depression, thanks to the help of his eleven children. During World War II, by contrast, business was so brisk with all the aircraft workers in town that the store did not even close for holidays. Every family member available had to work, both boys and girls. With high-paying aircraft jobs and men gone off to fight, there were few available hands to manage the store. "The family was his help," Bayouth recalled. As he aged, the oldest son, Jack, became the main assistant. The one thing the Bayouths could not manage, however, was the competition posed by big chain supermarkets such as Safeway, which came to Wichita in 1940. However, the war had brought prosperity enough for Ellis Bayouth to consider buying a more substantial home for the family. In 1947 he bought the ten-acre Hoover orchard at Central and West Streets. Shortly thereafter, however, before the house was even ready, Bayouth died of diabetes.

The Bayouth children, with Jack as leader, transformed the single grocery business into a series of modern supermarkets, but locals probably remembered better the affable and friendly presence of the oldest daughter, Sally, as the face of the business. They expanded the store on West Douglas, purchased a store at Harry and Hydraulic, and in 1957 built a supermarket, known as "Wescen," on part of the land their father bought a decade earlier. This became the basis of a shopping center that also included a discount store, "Bayouth's Home of Low Prices." Rather than try to compete with chains, however, the Bayouths were affiliates of the Fleming IGA chain. Meanwhile, the business that began at Harry and Hydraulic moved to another building at Oliver and George Washington, a tenant of the Giant discount chain. Like the Farhas and the Ablahs, the Bayouth children worked together on this endeavor, with one son working in the meat department, one in dairy, one in frozen foods, one in produce, and Jack overseeing the operation.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, F & E expanded into an array of food services, from operating warehouses and supplying food products to institutional clients to



operating their own chain of supermarkets. Each Farha brother handled one aspect of the business. B.F. handled the finances and Sam ran the food-service portion of the business. Sam was the most personable one and did not have as strong an accent as some of the other brothers, so he was up front with the customers. Sam was a buyer and so adept at purchasing canned goods that it was said it he could tell where a can of food came from just by looking at its contents. LaBebe ran the warehouse. This division of labor allowed each brother to concentrate on his own particular set of skills. F & E also expanded to meet the needs of a growing suburban population, establishing itself among Kansas's first supermarkets, with Phil as manager. At their height, the Farhas' supermarkets had nine locations throughout the city.<sup>41</sup>

Among the Stevenses there were changes as well. In 1947 the D. Stevens Tobacco Company celebrated its fifteenth year in business, complete with a glowing advertising spread that featured the hard-working, enthusiastic young men and women who were now guiding the company in the wake of D. Stevens's retirement. D. Stevens had no children to take on his business when he died in 1949.<sup>42</sup> However, Salem Stevens's sons did continue the family presence in Wichita. As a young man, Salem's son Keeney delivered candy and tobacco to stores in small towns in the vicinity, including the Jabaras' store in Burden. Keeney functioned much in the tradition of the earlier peddlers, only using a truck instead of a horse and buggy. Following the tradition from peddling to store ownership, Keeney shifted to operating a store, called the Newton Tobacco and Candy Company. By the 1950s, however, he shifted his emphasis to selling discount items, from appliances and toys to luggage. His new building on West Second Street, "West City," was one of the city's first discount stores, later called Keeney's West City. Parkinson's disease, however, forced him shift his career away from retail and more toward investing. Family lore suggests that throughout his life, Keeney exhibited a knack for business, which coincided well with his remarkable ability to remember and compute numbers and the Lebanese passion for customer service. Jack Bayouth noted that it was Keeney

who taught him how to compute numbers in his head. Meanwhile, Fran Jabara's first job out of college was working at Keeney's West City.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, Shaker Cohlmi of Wichita had operated a grocery store on West Douglas, where his five children learned the family business. The depression forced Shaker to move the family to Ashland, Kansas, but by 1937 the family returned to Wichita. After Shaker's death in 1937, the oldest son, George, stepped in to lead the family. George, along with his brothers Sam and Joe, continued in the grocery business but in a very different model than their father's store. They opened one of the first self-serve groceries in Wichita, known as "Big Three." These stores reflected a new approach to food shopping where the consumers picked up their own items from the shelf rather than having the grocer do it for them. George Cohlmi knew how to keep up with trends. He became friends with Harland Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame, bringing "the Colonel" out to Kansas to speak in 1962. Eventually, this branch of the Cohlmi family branched out from grocery stores to food supply, with George founding Kansas Food Packers, Inc., in Arkansas City, which specialized in supplying frozen dairy mixes, especially to the U.S. military. This company became Kan-Pak, with Cohlmi's son Dennis, or "Denny," eventually becoming CEO.<sup>44</sup>

#### TRANSITIONS AND GROWTH

Delano was fading as the heart of the Syrian-Lebanese community, with many of the families, along with their businesses, relocating out of town. Some, like the Ablahs, moved to upscale neighborhoods on the city's east side. Others, like the Farhas, lived in Riverside, with stores spread across the city. The Bayouths had moved to Central Street and West Street. By 1960 a single Farha furniture store at 617 West Douglas was all that remained of the Syrian-Lebanese business district that once extended between Seneca and the Arkansas River, although a pocket of businesses and residences had developed just to the west between the 1000 and 2000 blocks. Bayouth's supermarket at 1202 West Douglas was a major institution. Nearby was the liquor store of



Lasema Kallail. Next door stood Richard Henry's Appliance Store. Not far away was the store of Richard's brother, Eugene. Richard and Eugene's sister Margaret married Charles Laham, and the two operated a glove business. Optometrist Robert Laham had a practice in the vicinity as well. Although names like Farha, Cohlma, Stevens, and Ablah became known for citywide ventures, families like the Lahams and Kallails also reflected a penchant for entrepreneurship.<sup>45</sup>

The 1960s proved to be a time of transition for companies like F & E. Restaurants tended to want items in bulk; supermarkets, medium-sized to smaller packages. F & E initially supplied local supermarkets, but these increasingly developed their own warehouse systems. The brothers met to decide what to do. They concluded that they could not operate at the scale needed to remain competitive and decided to sell the business. In 1963 they sold the grocery stores to an Oklahoma firm called Redbud. Having worked as a team since the 1930s, the Farha brothers went their separate ways. LaBebe retired. B.F. and Sam kept the F & E warehouse operations and food-service business. William and Philip both went into real estate. William, for example, turned his expertise in finding locations for supermarkets toward other commercial developments. Enlisting the help of his son, also named William, he created "William F. Farha and Son Enterprises" and even looked further afield to developments in Texas and Oklahoma. Philip pursued banking and real estate ventures in Wichita and in his wife's hometown of Oklahoma City.<sup>46</sup>

It was during this time that F & E started supplying a new, upstart Wichita company, Pizza Hut. Dan Carney, who was Farris's fraternity brother, had learned that F & E had some old meat cases. Carney bought the cases for fifteen dollars to be used in the very first Pizza Hut. The Carneys later approached Sam Farha to be the supplier for Pizza Hut, but that seemed to be beyond the capabilities of F & E, given the needs of other clients at the time. There turned out to be enough of a market just in supplying the spices for a company like Pizza Hut, and approached Sam's son, Farris, to start just such a venture. Farris agreed, and he and a colleague, Larry Payne, established J & G

Foods (named for the first initials of their wives' names) to go into a very specialized spice trade, doing so with the help of Farris's cousin Amil Ablah. J & G remained in operation until 1969, when Pizza Hut offered to buy out the company. Farris Farha became an employee of Pizza Hut, working for the company until 1978. Farris then embarked on a number of other investing opportunities, including real estate and even the phone business, before returning to F & E.<sup>47</sup>

For forty-eight years, meanwhile, the Ablah Hotel Supply Company operated out of a facility at First and Water Streets. In 1959, however, things changed, and in many ways marked a transition for the three Ablah sons. Downtown Wichita was changing, with smaller structures giving way to modern high-rises and up-to-date office real estate coming to define the center of the city. Following this trend, Ablah Hotel Supply Company erected a nine-story high-rise on the site of its former headquarters, with Don and Amil overseeing the construction and George being the rental agent. The building did not, however, stay with Ablahs for very long, because the following year, Frank and Harvey donated what became known as the Colorado-Derby Building, and the rent from its tenants, to the University of Wichita for the construction of a new library, Ablah Library.

Real estate and entrepreneurship had been part of the Ablah story ever since George, Don, and Amil had been boys. Their father, Frank, had ventured into real estate, and Don Ablah never forgot his father's advice that "you couldn't make any money in a small business like that. To accumulate wealth you had to get into real estate, so that's why he specialized in things like warehouses and truck line terminals."<sup>48</sup> As Frank and Harvey Ablah aged, they left Frank's sons Don and Amil in charge of the day-to-day operations. After their retirement on 1974, they devoted themselves to real estate and investing, which became for them what golf, painting, fishing, and bingo might have been for other retirees. Business was, after all, more than just a way to make a living. Business and entrepreneurship were creative outlets for individuals who had contemplated various enterprises all their lives.<sup>49</sup>

Sometimes, however, the desire for entrepreneurship clashed with the values of staying with the family business. George Ablah, for example, became a contractor at age nineteen and began to develop commercial real estate while also serving as a designer and salesman for the hotel supply company. A retrospective from 1984 noted that "approaching 30 in 1959, he faced up to a conflict with his Lebanese culture, where eldest sons were crown princes in line to head the family business."<sup>50</sup> It took a family agreement to allow him to break out on his own. Not content to stay in Wichita, George Ablah, like another Wichita Lebanese real estate figure, Phil Ruffin, specialized in setting up arrangements across the country, from oil ventures to commercial real estate in Minnesota to purchasing and developing Chrysler dealerships just as a new Chrysler CEO named Lee Iacocca was transforming the company. In the 1980s, Ablah, even more than Ruffin, turned his attention back to opportunities in Wichita. Like all entrepreneurs, Ablah had setbacks both minor and serious, his fortunes always at the mercy of ever-fluctuating trends in real estate. Nevertheless, he remained active in the game.<sup>51</sup>

Nor was George the only one to venture into real estate. Don and Amil also formed a realty company, Classic Realty, in 1981. Keeping with the family's tradition of business development, the firm especially concentrated in commercial real estate. Real estate has continued the family-business tradition as well, with sons Craig and Christian also working in Classic while Don's wife, Faith, and daughters Rachelle and Leigh Ann sold residential homes with another firm.<sup>52</sup>

Although the Lebanese community was just as entrepreneurial as ever, the nature of that entrepreneurship was changing. Formal education was becoming important, and families placed great premiums on finishing high school or continuing on to college. In some cases, parents extended loans to children to attend school. In other instances, young men came back from World War II or Korea and went to college on the GI Bill. Quite a number of young men and women went to what was then Wichita University or the University of Kansas. Some continued on into the professions such as law or medicine. Others went

to business school, perhaps going on to graduate work for an MBA, although Lebanese students who attended business classes sometimes found the coursework redundant. They had already learned business from watching their parents and older relatives.

Few individuals symbolized this application of ethnic entrepreneurship to changing postwar economic realities better than Farris Jabara's son Fran. In 1942 the children of Farris Jabara decided to close their father's store in Burden, Kansas, rather than sell it. The family maintained two homes, one in Burden and one in Wichita, in fact the same home that the Naima Farha family had once owned. The children then went on in their own endeavors. It was Fran, however, who became the family's best-known entrepreneur. Fran Jabara decided to continue in higher education, beginning his career at what was then Wichita University in 1949. He mentored several generations of local business figures, including Pizza Hut cofounder Dan Carney, who took Jabara's first accounting class in 1949.

However, the nature of business education concerned him. One morning while exercising, Jabara noted how a cartoon portrayed businessmen as cold and greedy, not at all the way he experienced business. Moreover, business schools since World War II had focused on training people to work in large corporations, not found their own businesses. To address this situation, he proposed offering a class specifically in entrepreneurship. Launched as a summer class in 1977, the initial hope was to have an enrollment of one hundred. Instead, 338 signed up, and that course became the founding event for what became Wichita State University's Center for Entrepreneurship. The center's funding in the early years came from the donation of Fran Jabara's Wichita State University salary. Jabara himself lived on his investments and business activities that ranged from real estate to hotel management to local companies such as Safelite Auto Glass. In 1989, just as construction of a permanent facility was coming to fruition, internal financial issues between the center and the university's administration resulted in Jabara resigning suddenly from both the center's leadership and academic

teaching. As with so many Lebanese, however, this transition was not a “retirement” as much as a shift to new forms of business and investment, in this case working through Jabara Ventures Group with his son Harvey. As physician Cramer Reed once described his colleague, “Give Fran Jabara a grape and he will turn it into a winery.”<sup>53</sup>

“THEY ALL KNEW THAT  
WAS THEIR FUTURE”

Theodore Farha, one of N. F. Farha’s sons, did a variety of jobs. He sold insurance for a while, and later on ran a liquor store for a time (Ted’s Hide Out). Theodore then started buying and selling machinery that the aircraft companies did not want, becoming a broker for surplus machinery. Ted later recalled that his father “bought and sold everything.” One day, there were thousands of corks in the family home. Then there was a bulldozer. There were a bunch of umbrellas for a time. By the late 1960s, Theodore got into scrap metal, especially carbide.

Theodore’s sons, Ted, Ed, and Ned, all grew up surrounded by business. Each morning, they watched their father sitting in the kitchen on the phone making deals, only to take off and begin his day buying and selling and delivering.<sup>54</sup> As they grew up, the boys worked in Bayouth’s grocery, which was nearby. “I knew I was going to be working in the grocery store,” Ted recalled. Besides, it was where all the relatives were going to be anyway. While there, the children watched older relatives engage in buying and selling. These were skills that paid off later. “When you are around a lot of people doing that . . . you just learned.” Business was just part of life. With the attitude of “I’ll work 70 hours a week if I can do it for myself,” Ted and Ed set up a cabinetmaking shop while their brother Ned established a refrigeration business. They started working for a contractor, who was impressed that they did good finish work. In 1978 they went into business, focusing on commercial construction. They borrowed \$1,000 from Union National Bank. Ted was scared of having to make those eighty-dollar payments if work was uncertain. The gamble paid off. Today, Farha Construction is making a name

for itself on local building projects, including Bradley Fair shopping center and a number of historic building restorations.<sup>55</sup>

Entrepreneurship continued among various branches of the Farha family, including that of N. F. Farha’s cousin Neman. Neman’s son Bus had to drop out of school during the 1930s to sell newspapers. By the 1940s he was selling produce to the residents of the newly established south Wichita community of Planeview. He continued in the grocery business until 1964, when he founded a building supply company. A driven, hard-working individual, Bus spent ten to twelve hour days at Farha Carpet and Building Supply right up until a heart attack took him in 1987. Bus’s dedication to business was an example for his children. One of his sons, Warren, managed the store while also going to college. Unlike Fran Jabara, who studied business, Warren looked to the liberal arts, graduating from Wichita State University with a degree in religion and classical studies. He had become a bookworm, drawn to the writings of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. It seemed that Warren might have been destined for a career in education or writing, following the path of so many postwar families: the World War II generation working hard in practical endeavors to send their baby boom children to college to “follow their bliss.” Warren Farha followed his bliss, but in a way that also connected to the family’s tradition of entrepreneurship. After college, the younger Farha continued in his father’s business. Following his father’s death, Warren sought to take his life in a new direction. He knew, however, that his skills in business, especially retail, would serve him well. In 1988 Warren left the family business to open his own store, Eighth Day Books. He did so, however, just as the book-selling world was changing. Large chains began to challenge the small mom-and-pop bookstore that sold a little bit of everything. Eighth Day Books specialized in the classics of literature, philosophy, and spirituality, especially Orthodox spirituality, providing Wichita’s reading public with hard-to-find works that a Barnes and Noble or Borders would not ordinarily stock. Later on, the store expanded into online marketing, tapping into

the potential of Internet sales. In addition, Warren loaded up the store's van and take books to shows, or set up special tables at events such as St. George's annual Lebanese dinner. He mused that in doing so, he was returning to the traditions of his peddler ancestors, loading up products and taking them out to potential customers.<sup>56</sup>

An oft-repeated pattern, even stereotype, in the history of immigrant communities is that of generational transition from peddler or worker to business figure or entrepreneur to professional. Among the Lebanese, however, the entry of young people into professions complemented family business and entrepreneurship instead of replaced it. In several instances, families whose children came of age in the postwar years saw one sibling go into or continue in some form of business or entrepreneurship while another went into the professions. The entrepreneur-professional mix appeared in numerous families. For example, Adeeb and Haseeba Andeel had seven children, including Lindy, who went into real estate (working with Farris Razook's son Gene), while brother Stan went into law. Fran Jabara began his career in academia, while his siblings engaged in a variety of ventures: George (better known as Jerry) got a job with Steffens Dairy, Eddie ran a liquor store, while Walter Kay transitioned from operating a grocery store to his best-known enterprise, Indian Hills Meat Company. Fran's sisters, Gloria Baker and Helen Galloway, became entrepreneurs in their own right, founding an upscale boutique called "The First Place." With one older brother going into the merchant marine and the other going to West Point, it was Keeney Stevens who continued with the family business, proving that it was not always the oldest son who served as the head of a given family's branch. Julia Stephan's sons, Robert and Don, never forgot their mother's tenacity and business sense, although they applied it in different directions. Robert graduated from Washburn University's law school in 1957 and became passionate about political service. He lost his first campaign, for local school board, and concentrated on building a law practice in Wichita. He remained active in local Republican politics, received an appointment

to the position of municipal court judge, and was elected district court judge two years later. The crescendo of his career was in 1978, when he won the election to become Kansas's attorney general, a position he held until 1995. Meanwhile, his brother, Don, went into advertising, first working for local companies and in 1963 striking out on his own. Beginning with "a small loan and a borrowed typewriter," Don started small, took a particular interest in new, upstart companies, such as Safelite Auto Glass or Taco Tico, with the goal of growing as those companies expanded. His firm was also one of the first major advertisers for Pizza Hut. At its height in the 1980s, the agency had twenty employees.<sup>57</sup>

The 1980s seemed to be another time of transition for the community. Several figures, such as Don Stephan and George Ablah, entered the decade at the height of prosperity. They had built on the entrepreneurial traditions of their parents, who started as peddlers and grocers, to engage in investment, development, and real estate. A decade later, however, many of these ventures had shrunk with a sharp decline in local real estate, especially commercial real estate. Wichita itself was facing a new economic reality as local companies such as Cessna and Beech became part of international corporations with decisions made in corporate offices in other parts of the country. Companies like the homegrown Pizza Hut moved their corporate headquarters. Many Lebanese firms like F & E were in the business of supplying other businesses, but this too was an industry in transition, as national supply chains were increasingly taking over that role. Locally, that trend took place in 2007, when Ben E. Keith bought F & E. Farris Farha, who had been with F & E most of his life, reinvented himself once more by opening a candy store, the Farris Wheel, adjacent to Piccadilly, the restaurant, deli, and upscale food store owned and operated by the Toubia family, who emigrated from Lebanon to Wichita in the 1970s. Meanwhile, many of the key figures in the community, from the five Farha supermarket brothers to Frank and Harvey Ablah, passed on. Those just slightly younger looked at retirement and stepped back from business, as in 1996, when the Bayouths closed their last store, the one

on West Douglas that their grandfather and father had set up back in the early 1920s.<sup>58</sup>

Lebanese entrepreneurship in Wichita, however, was not ending as much as going through another transformation. In some cases, it was a matter of a new generation taking on the reins from their elders, as when George Laham II emerged as a commercial developer, perhaps best known for his work in creating the upscale shopping district on Rock Road known as Bradley Fair. At Jabara's Carpet Outlet, Ted Jabara and his brother Bill have continued their father's business that began by selling damaged freight. Now the next generation is assuming the family business, among them son Jason Jabara, who has taken on a management role and makes regular appearances on the company's television advertisements. Of Ted Farha's four children, three went into business for themselves. One son, Ben, started a roofing company connected with Farha Construction. Warren Farha's son Timothy has marketed hookahs on the Internet. Moreover, a new wave of younger professionals emerged. David Elkouri became a partner in the law firm of Hinkle Elkouri, and one of the firm's attorneys was Eric Namee, both descendants of some of the early Syrian immigrants from the turn of the last century. In other cases, new families emerged into prominence, such as the Steven family. The Steven family, not related to the Stevens family, had come to Wichita just before World War II and had been involved in ventures such as pool halls and dance clubs. One such figure who grew up in that setting was Joe Steven, who went on to found a car wash company. His children, however, made names for themselves in recent decades through their wide-ranging business ventures, from health clubs and car dealerships to the Spangles fast-food chain.

Medicine has also become a major arena for Lebanese families. Examples include Alex Laham, Dr. George Farha and his brother Jim, who started what is now Wichita Surgical Specialists in 1963 (to become one of the largest surgical practices in the country), cancer specialist Shaker Dakhil, and "Dr. Sam" Cohlmi, an ophthalmologist who grew up in Lebanon but had ties to the

Wichita Cohlmi.<sup>59</sup> Several of these individuals represented a new wave of Lebanese immigration to Wichita. Fleeing turbulence in Lebanon, they came to Wichita, in part because of family ties and the city's already prominent Lebanese presence (Wichita had even contemplated at one time, with the encouragement of the younger George Laham, becoming a sister city with Beirut). Although Wichitans went back to visit Jeddah Marjeyoun and Ain Arab-Mhaithe from time to time, even maintaining family ancestral homes there, Lebanon was becoming too dangerous, prompting people to bring aging relatives over to the safety of the United States, as when Dr. George Farha brought his parents to Wichita.

Other migrants included figures such as Antoine Toubia, Melad Stephan, John Srour, and Tony Abdayyem, who went into restaurants and food instead of F & E's food service. This time, however, the emphasis was on importing or making Mediterranean and Middle Eastern foods. Prior to their arrival, items such as pita bread had to be imported, and dishes such as hummus and *kibbe* were homemade and available outside family gatherings only at annual Lebanese dinners held at the churches. By the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century, however, a number of Mediterranean and Lebanese restaurants were in business, as well as grocery stores that sold imported goods. Lebanese-run bakeries provide ample fresh pita bread. Wichita was a city long known for its solid midwestern "meat and potatoes" fare. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, however, tabouli, pita, and hummus were common dishes, showing up at everything from civic receptions to sporting events. Lebanese dinners at St. Mary and St. George became popular events for Wichitans regardless of ancestry, each event drawing in thousands of visitors. Even here, though, the customer service tradition was evident. St. Mary's dinner featured a la carte dining options while St. George set up a drive-up window for those who wanted their *kibbe* and grape leaves as takeout rather than dine-in. After a century of being hidden in plain sight, the Lebanese entrepreneurial tradition in Wichita was becoming recognized as an integral part of the local story.



ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP,  
GREAT PLAINS LEBANESE STYLE

From the outset, Lebanese immigrants to the Great Plains displayed a marked preference for going into business for themselves rather than finding employment in existing businesses. Over the generations, these families have demonstrated features of successful entrepreneurs, from peddler to family business owner. There is no question that the peddler can be considered the first successful Lebanese entrepreneur. The traits identified with today's successful entrepreneurs apply to those first peddlers from Syria. For example, the peddler had to have a high level of commitment and determination. Traveling on foot, carrying multiple suitcases of goods, and enduring harsh weather conditions are all indicative of the sacrifice made in order to succeed. Lebanese peddlers exhibited leadership abilities by being self-starters with very little money. They possessed the experience and knowledge of the products they were selling, such as rugs and silk, which made it easier for the customers to trust them and let them into their homes.

As times and markets changed, the Lebanese entrepreneur was adept at venturing into something new. After peddling, Lebanese families set up stores in small communities during the first years of the twentieth century, the heyday of small-town life that historians have sometimes called the "Agricultural Elysium." Rural Kansas and northern Oklahoma were at their peak populations, ensuring an ample supply of customers. The children and grandchildren of the first immigrants established their own businesses, from the Farhas' grocery chain and the Stevenses' candy and tobacco store to the Ablahs' hotel supply company, from Lillie Cohlmia's children's clothing store to Julia Stefan's trailer court.

The middle years of the twentieth century were in many ways the golden age of the family business, where it was possible to start small and grow relatively rapidly, with family members providing much of the labor in firms from F & E to Ablah Hotel Supply to E. G. Stevens Tobacco Company to Bayouth's Supermarkets. This is not to discount the many setbacks and business fail-

ures that took place. However, being in business seemed to be the best path to comfort, if not always wealth. Following World War II, subsequent generations were able to take advantage of educational opportunities and the opening up of new ventures. Figures such as Fran Jabara could enter academia or Bob Stephan, law. Meanwhile, enterprises such as investment, especially in real estate, proved lucrative.

Almost every endeavor these families took on bore features rooted in Lebanese culture. Familial relations rooted in Arab custom remained in places like Wichita, Coffeyville, or Ashland, where marriages linked both families and businesses, in-laws were as significant as direct descendants in providing support and sharing risks in new ventures, and younger siblings deferred to the leadership of the oldest brother. A venture that on the surface simply looked like three Lebanese individuals going into business together might actually consist of an individual, his uncle, and his brother-in-law. Financial decisions were integrated with family decisions. Other customs shaped business practices as well. Nearly every person interviewed for this project mentioned that the hospitality tradition of the Lebanese lent itself well to customer service while the fear of doing something that was *aib* maintained the expectation of ethical business practices. The story should not be taken as an oversimplified "see how ethnic customs survived in the New World" paradigm that shows up all too frequently in studies of ethnicity in the Great Plains. However, cultural features that lent themselves to business in American society did persist and did play a role in shaping how business was practiced.

Entrepreneurship became an avenue for the Lebanese to adapt and relate to the larger American society in which they functioned. Starting with peddling and having to learn English to sell goods, and on to running a grocery store and taking orders on the phone, entrepreneurship helped the Lebanese assimilate quickly and easily. Meanwhile, the prominence of business figures in the community made it easier for the Lebanese to showcase how they were willing, nonthreatening additions to Wichita and beyond, despite their perceived "exotic" customs. In itself, engag-

ing in business is not unique to any one group or people. However, entrepreneurship patterns and practices, as much as religion, food, or language, can be expressions of cultural values and useful lenses through which to explore the ways in which immigrants adapted to a new land and their descendants negotiated being of a particular heritage and yet also American.

Recalling the poverty that their ancestors left, and the struggle to start anew in America, the Lebanese of Kansas have often noted that their immigrant ancestors seemed to have come "with nothing in their pockets." They may not have come with extensive finances, but the immigrant ancestors of today's Lebanese families brought with them other features that proved just as valuable. These included a willingness to provide for customers, an extensive network of relatives to provide jobs for newcomers and resources to embark on new ventures, and perhaps most important, a family life where the skills of entrepreneurship could be inculcated at a very young age. Their pockets may have been empty, but their extended family ties, as well as their knowledge of business, allowed them to rise to the challenge.

#### NOTES

1. Don Stephan, interview with authors, February 18, 2011.

2. These families came from the Ottoman Province of Syria and thought of themselves as "Syrians" for the first part of the twentieth century. After World War I, the southwestern portion of Syria became "Lebanon," although these Levantine Arab Christians did not commonly think of themselves as "Lebanese" until well after World War II. Kansas newspapers also occasionally referred to them incorrectly as "Assyrians." For convenience, the term "Lebanese" will be used throughout unless a specific context requires "Syrian."

3. The authors are thankful for the conversations, interviews, and correspondence from a number of figures in the local Lebanese and Orthodox community, including the Rt. Rev. Basil (Essey), Bishop of Wichita and the Diocese of Mid-America, Amil Ablah, Don Ablah, George Ablah, Lindy Andeel, Stan Andeel, Richard Ayes, Michael and Julia Bayouth, Robert and Jeanette Bayouth, Jeffrey Chapman, Jeff Cohlmiia, Ruth Cohlmiia, Dr. Sam Cohlmiia, Mary Dake, Farris Farha, Joan and Brenda Farha, Ray Farha, Ted Farha,

Warren Farha, Helen Galloway, Hashem V. Hashem, Fran Jabara, Jason Jabara, Ted Jabara, Thomas Laham, Matthew Namee, Robert Razook, Gene Razook, Anthony Shadid, Victoria Foth Sherry, Don Stephan, Joe and Esther Steven, and Keith Stevens, among many others.

4. Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), and Luebke, ed., *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988). See also, for example, Timothy J. Klobardanz, "Symbols of German-Russian Ethnic Identity on the Northern Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Winter 1988): 3-15; James R. Shortridge, "The Heart of the Prairie: Culture Areas in the Central and Northern Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Fall 1988): 206-21.

5. Robert P. Swierenga, "The Little White Church: Religion in Rural America," *Agricultural History* 71 (Autumn 1997): 415-41; Bradley H. Baltensperger, "Agricultural Change among Nebraska Immigrants, 1880-1900," in Luebke, *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*; Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Cornbelt* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963); Gary Foster, Richard Hummel and Robert Whittenbarger, "Ethnic Echoes through 100 Years of Midwestern Agriculture," *Rural Sociology* 52 (Fall 1987): 365-78; Sonya Salamon, "Ethnic Communities and the Structure of Agriculture," *Rural Sociology* 50 (Fall 1985): 323-40; Jan L. Flora and John M. Stitz, "Ethnicity, Persistence, and Capitalization of Agriculture in the Great Plains during the Settlement Period: Wheat Production and Risk Avoidance," *Rural Sociology* 50 (Fall 1985): 341-60; Jette Mackintosh, "Ethnic Patterns in Danish Immigrant Agriculture: A Study of Audubon and Shelby Counties, Iowa," *Agricultural History* 60 (Autumn 1990): 59-77.

6. Lee Shai Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Harriet and Fred Rochlin, *Pioneer Jews: A New Life in the Far West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), see especially chapter 3; Hal Rothman, "Same Horse, New Wagon: Tradition and Assimilation among the Jews of Wichita, 1865-1930," *Great Plains Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 83-104; Oliver B. Pollak, "The Jewish Peddlers of Omaha," *Nebraska History* 63 (December 1982): 474-501.

7. See, for example, Kelly Caswell, "Lebanese Immigration into Wichita, Kansas" (MA thesis, Wichita State University, 1996); Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2006); Fayiz Suyyagh, "Ethnic Enterprise and the Community Dimension: The Case of Arab Busi-

ness Leaders in Toronto, Ontario, Canada" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1995); Elizabeth Boosahda, *Arab-American Faces and Voices* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Philip M. Kayal and Joseph M. Kayal, *The Syrian-Lebanese in America: A Study in Religion and Assimilation*, foreword by Michael Novak (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975); Akram Faoud Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

8. Jeffrey Timmons and Stephen Spinelli, *New Venture Creation Entrepreneurship for the 21st Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2004).

9. William Gartner, "Who Is an Entrepreneur? Is the Wrong Question" *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Summer 1989.

10. Gartner, "Who Is an Entrepreneur?," 62.

11. The definition of ethnic entrepreneur has been confused with immigrant entrepreneur and minority entrepreneur. Rahda Chaganti and Patricia Greene point out that identification of ethnic entrepreneurs is often done by self-identification as belonging to a certain ethnic group or assigned to a group according to an ethnically identified surname. They propose that a high level of personal involvement by the entrepreneur in his or her ethnic community is a better indicator of ethnicity than mere demographic identification. Chaganti and Greene offer conceptual clarity by offering three definitions, as follows:

*Ethnic Entrepreneurs*: "a set of connections and regular patterns of interaction among people sharing common national background or migration experiences.

*Immigrant Entrepreneurs*: Individuals who, as recent arrivals in the country start a business as a means of economic survival. This group may involve a migration network linking migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants with a common origin and destination.

*Minority Entrepreneurs*: Business owners who are not of the majority population. U.S. Federal categories include Black, Hispanic or Latin American, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, or Alaska native descent. This group occasionally includes women.

See Radha Chaganti and Patricia Greene, "Who Are Ethnic Entrepreneurs? A Study of Entrepreneurs' Ethnic Involvement and Business Characteristics," *Journal of Small Business Management* 40, no. 2 (2002): 126–43.

12. A works that discusses historical experiences

is Ivan Light's *Ethnic Enterprise in America* (London: University of California Press, 1972). He contrasts the development of the Chinese, who were concentrated in domestic service, like laundry work, restaurants, and small shops, with the Japanese, who began in agriculture but then, under pressure, tended to concentrate in urban areas for self-employment in hotels and grocery stores. For works that discuss current or recent populations, see Light, *Ethnic Enterprise*; Ivan Light and Parminder Bhachu, eds., *Immigration and Entrepreneurship: Culture, Capital, and Ethnic Networks* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993); Jeffrey Timmons and Stephen Spinelli, *New Venture Creation Entrepreneurship for the 21st Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2004).

13. Families from of Ain Arab-Mhaithe and Jedeidat Marjeyoun maintained loyalties to their hometowns even in Wichita, a distinction, and sometimes rivalry, that continues to this day. St. George Orthodox Church has tended to consist of families from Jedeidat Marjeyoun. St. Mary Orthodox, by contrast, tends to have connections to Ain Arab-Mhaithe families. The differences even show up in subtleties of pronunciation and spelling of Arabic words and names. E. G. Steven's wife, who often went by "Minnie" in Anglo American circles, came originally from Jedeidat Marjeyoun, where her name was "Handuma." When she married into the Stevens family, the Stevens's Ain Arab-Mhaithe relatives pronounced her name "Hundumie," and both spellings show up in local records. Even foodways reflect the difference. The spiced meatballs that are a staple of Middle Eastern cuisine are called *kibba* in Ain Arab-Mhaithe and *kibbie* in Jedeidat Marjeyoun. In this piece, the authors will use *kibbe* as a somewhat neutral term. The authors are grateful to Keith Stevens for explaining some of these details.

14. Anthony Shadid, "Can Turkey Unify the Arabs?" *New York Times*, May 29, 2011.

15. For a deeper treatment of Jedeidat Marjeyoun and its relationship to Arab Christian communities in North America, see also Anthony Shadid, *House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012). For context, see Akram, *Inventing Home*, 2–47.

16. Akram, *Inventing Home*, 56–57.

17. Kayal and Kayal, *The Syrian-Lebanese in America*, 47–88; Caswell, "Lebanese Immigration into Wichita, Kansas," 27–39.

18. Pollak, "Jewish Peddlers of Omaha"; Khater, *Inventing Home*, 74–79; Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 86–94, quote from 86.

19. Caswell, "Lebanese Immigration into Wichita,"

42. Caswell notes that a laborer might make \$650 a year. Low-level, unskilled workers could make considerably less.

20. Families were large and there were multiple branches. Even so, family ties did extend to local leaders in Syria. Conversations with Hashem V. Hashem, who runs a Jedeidat Marjeyoun heritage website noted that the mayors of the town included surnames that show up in Kansas. During the main period of emigration, Massoud Jabara was the community's mayor, serving forty years, until 1920. Subsequent mayors included Saeid Azzam Barakat, Assad Khalil Bayoud, Salim Musallam, Kamel Barakat, Shukri Rashed, Eid Abila, Habib Farha, Anis Shadid, Fadeel Wehba, Adib Samara, Michel Abila, Joseph Hama, Assaad Khoury, Fawwaz Khoury, Fouad Hamra, and Amal Horani. In Kansas, many of those same surnames also exist, including Jabara, Shadid, Samara, and Farha, and others, with slightly different spellings including Barkett, Bayouth, Rashid, Ablah, Wehby, and Kouri.

21. "N. F. Farha, 64, Is Claimed by Death in Local Hospital," *Wichita Eagle*, November 15, 1943; Farris Farha, interview with authors, December 7, 2010; Joan and Brenda Farha, interview with authors, February 4, 2011.

22. The 1910 census lists N. F. Farha living at 1107 West Douglas. In his household lived niece Nellie Farha (who would later become Nellie Ablah), and nephew Aziz Farha, one of the founders of F & E Wholesale. At the same address lived several other households, including that of George Farha, along with his son-in-law, Eid Elkouri, the other founder of F & E, the families of Albert Farha, Albert Syden (actually Swyden), and Jacob Bayouth.

23. Blanche Sawyer, "From Sunny Syria They Came to Live in Wichita: Thirty Years Spent in Kansas Has Made the Farhas Almost Forget the Land of Their Birth," *Wichita Eagle Sunday Magazine*, October 11, 1925. Ted Farha, interview with authors, September 28, 2011.

24. When he came through Ellis Island in the 1890s, however, there was some confusion about the family name. The official meant John's surname, but John misunderstood, and responded with "Farris," his father's given name.

25. Quote from letter of Ruth Cohlmiya to Jay Price, 2011. Jeff Cohlmiya, interview with authors, February 17, 2011.

26. Large families with multiple branches resulted in distant cousins marrying. In a number of cases, both bride and groom had the same last names.

27. Letter of Ruth Cohlmiya to Jay M. Price, April 19, 2009.

28. Caswell, "Lebanese Immigration"; "Wichita's Syrian Colony Is Happy and Prosperous," *Wichita Eagle*, January 16, 1910; Sawyer, "From Sunny Syria." By 1938, when a local civic organization called the Al-Pha Club put out "The Wichita Syrian Directory," the community numbered 118 families and about 450 individuals. Of the businesses listed, the largest were retail grocers, numbering nineteen and including the four Farha "Cut Rate Food Markets." See Al-Pha Club, "The Wichita Syrian Directory," 1938, Wichita State University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

29. Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 13–42, quote from 33.

30. *Ibid.*, 43–72.

31. Farris Farha interview.

32. Nancy married Bill Cohlmiya, who began by working at Boeing and ended up an entrepreneur in his own right operating Pizza Huts. Cohlmiya to Price, 2009.

33. Although they worked together, each brother also had his own investments. Starting in the 1930s, Frank invested in local Wichita real estate, taking particular interest in foreclosed properties. Harvey, meanwhile, found that some of their portable diners were well situated but not well run, and therefore the owners went bankrupt. Rather than accept the loss, Harvey decided to oversee the operation of some of the more profitable ones in Oklahoma.

34. Haseeba married Sam Andeel's son, Adeeb, who went into the vending machine business. "Their Success Didn't Come Easily," *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, August 12, 1984; Robert Short, "Harvey Ablah Was Half a Success Story," *Wichita Eagle*, February 4, 1991; Frank J. Ablah, obituary, *Wichita Eagle*, September 22, 1986; Sylvia Adcock, "Frank Ablah Worked for His Success," *Wichita Eagle*, September 23, 1986. National register nomination form for the Frank J. and Harvey J. Ablah House, [http://www.kshs.org/resource/national\\_register/nominationsNRDB/Sedgwick\\_Ablah\\_FrankJandHarveyJHouseNR.pdf](http://www.kshs.org/resource/national_register/nominationsNRDB/Sedgwick_Ablah_FrankJandHarveyJHouseNR.pdf) (accessed February 27, 2013). Conversations with Amil, Don, and George Ablah fleshed out this story.

35. Shadid, in *House of Stone*, suggests that the Arab concept of *bayt* or "house" to explain relations that are more than just genealogy, but rather, connote deeper senses of identity and indeed a source of strength in the face of change and hardship. By contrast, Khater, in *Inventing Home*, 192–93, note 12, suggests that

American and European scholars too easily assume the large extended family is "typical" of Arabs in contrast to the nuclear family preference of Anglo-Americans. This article does not argue that extended families are unique to Arabs but does suggest that the extended family has been a factor in the business practices among the Syrian-Lebanese of Kansas.

36. Handuma's sister Mary was wife of Moundridge merchant Asa Razook, while Rashida Shaddid became the wife of Salem Stevens.

37. Ellis Bayouth, incidentally, was brother to Nabha, N. F. Farha's wife.

38. Julia Bayouth, obituary, *Wichita Eagle*, August 4, 2010; George L. Bayouth, obituary, *Wichita Eagle*, December 5, 2001; James "Jake" Bayouth, obituary, *Wichita Eagle*, October 18, 2000.

39. "A Tribute to the Life of Julia Louise Stevens Stephan, August 18, 1913–October 7, 2000," brochure; Beccy Tanner, "Julia Stephan, 'Forged Her Own Way'—'Failure Was Not in Her Vocabulary,' Former Kansas Attorney General Bob Stephan Said of His Mother, Who Died Saturday," *Wichita Eagle*, October 10, 2000.

40. Sally Ellis Bayouth, obituary, *Wichita Eagle*, October 2, 2008; Dan Voorhis, "Shopping Center Renewal Is a Bayouth Family Affair: Plaza West Shopping Center Has Been a Mainstay of West Wichita: Now Its New Owners Hope an Update Will Draw New Tenants," *Wichita Eagle*, October 23, 2003; Kathleen Kelly, "Families Keep Their Hands in the Food Business," *Wichita Eagle*, March 25, 1991.

41. Farris Farha interview.

42. Fifteenth anniversary materials for D. Stevens Tobacco, *Wichita Beacon Town Crier Magazine*, Sunday, December 14, 1947. Obituary for D. Stevens, *Wichita Beacon*, December 10, 1949.

43. Anne Fitzgerald, "Keeney Stevens Helped Pioneer Discount Retailing," *Wichita Eagle*, December 18, 1992.

44. Beccy Tanner, "George Cohlmlia, Known as Innovative Businessman—Founder of Several Businesses in Kansas, George Cohlmlia Believed in Giving People Chances," *Wichita Eagle*, February 6, 2000.

45. "Gene" Henry exemplified the trial and error entrepreneurial spirit that had been part of the story of so many. Henry first went to work selling eggs. In 1950, however, he got out of delivering groceries and used the van to deliver fluorescent bulbs and appliances instead. In time, he set up his own appliance shop, Gene Henry's, located at 620 West Douglas. Although a successful small business, noted for its advertising, the TV store was not enough for Gene Henry, who relocated to new opportunities in Florida. Robert Laham and

his brother Joseph were both physicians. They were sons of Sam Laham, who came from Lebanon as a young man and started working in firms such as Ablah Hotel Supply and E. G. Stevens Tobacco. Sam opened a grocery store on West Douglas but in 1938 opened one of the city's first motels, the Wichita Motel, before continuing on in real estate. Sam's brother George was also a real estate figure whose son, George Laham II, became a prominent developer on Wichita's East Side. Phyllis Jacobs Griekspoor, "Samuel Laham's Life Was Marked by Working Hard in All That He Did," *Wichita Eagle*, May 1, 1995; obituary for Dr. Jerome M. Laham, *Wichita Eagle*, July 8, 2006; obituary for George E. Laham Sr., *Wichita Eagle*, November 4, 2010; obituary for Richard F. Henry, *Wichita Eagle*, June 23, 2010; obituary for Eugene M. Henry, *Wichita Eagle*, November 27, 2007; obituary for Margaret Mae Laham, *Wichita Eagle*, February 10, 2002; obituary for Charles T. Laham, *Wichita Eagle*, February 19, 1986.

46. Philip F. Farha obituary; Dave Ranney, "William Farha Was a Success in Business, in Helping Others," "Bill Farha Likes Voting," *Wichita Eagle Beacon*, April 27, 1984; LaBebe F. Farha, obituary, *Wichita Eagle*, October 5, 1975; "Wichita Silhouettes"—Biography of William F. Farha, *Wichita Eagle*, September 22, 1960.

47. Molly McMillin, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag: A Wichita Entrepreneur and His Partner Have Developed a System to Keep Delivery Pizzas Hotter," *Wichita Eagle*, December 19, 1999.

48. "Five Questions with . . . Don Ablah," *Wichita Eagle*, August 23, 2007.

49. Short, "Harvey Ablah Was Half a Success Story"; Adcock, "Frank Ablah Worked for His Success"; Amil Ablah, interview with authors, December 11, 2011.

50. "Their Success Didn't Come Easily."

51. Ruffin was one of the most successful of the Wichita Lebanese entrepreneurs. Starting out in his family's store at Pawnee and Laura, he saw that the major oil companies wanted to concentrate on just selling gasoline at their stations, to the exclusion of other goods. Ruffin instead decided to develop the filling station in the opposite direction, merging the offerings of a small store with fuel pumps. The result was the "Town and County" chain, one of the areas earliest convenience stores. From then, Ruffin expanded into real estate, including a local Marriott and an industrial park. He went on to become a major investor in hotel and gaming enterprises, particularly in Las Vegas.

52. Dick Dilsaver, "Ablah Has an Eye for Good Deals," *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, August 13, 1984; "Their



Success Didn't Come Easily"; Frank Garofalo, "Ablah Striving to Face Reversals with Grace," *Wichita Eagle*, November 10, 1991; Amil Ablah interview, George Ablah, interview with authors, February 11, 2011. See also website for Classic Real Estate.

53. Molly McMillin, "Banquet Honors Jabara for His Work at Wichita State: The Center for Entrepreneurship, Which He Founded 20 Years Ago, Has Benefited Students and the Wichita Business Community," *Wichita Eagle*, April 15, 1998; McMillin, "Ideas at Work for 20 Years, WSU's Center for Entrepreneurship Has Had a Major Impact on the City and on the Local Businesses It Spawned," *Wichita Eagle*, April 14, 1998.

54. In Theodore's business, bargaining and haggling were essential lessons that he passed on to his sons. Ted remembered when he was growing up and found a used motorcycle for \$350. Theodore looked at it and said to the seller, "I'll give you \$310." The owners said no, and Theodore and Ted left, much to Ted's dismay. The next day, however, the phone rang and the sellers said that \$310 was okay. Theodore now responded that he would pay \$300. The seller was stunned, thinking that that \$310 had become the agreed-upon price, and Theodore's response was, "That was the price yesterday. Today, my price is \$300." The owners hung up, but called the next day saying that \$300 was okay. By then, however, Theodore's offer was \$290. Ted got the motorcycle for considerably less than he was originally willing to pay.

55. Bill Wilson, "Farha Brothers Build on Strong

Foundation," *Wichita Eagle*, July 25, 2008. Ted Farha, interview with authors, September 28, 2011.

56. Laviana Hurst, "Bus Farha Overcame Early Adversity with Hard Work," *Wichita Eagle*, December 15, 1987; Roy Wenzl, "How an Elm Tree, Tolkien and C. S. Lewis Shaped a Wichitan's Life," *Wichita Eagle*, December 17, 2001; Bill Wilson, "A Conversation with . . . Warren Farha," *Wichita Eagle*, January 28, 2007.

57. David Algeo, "The Main Word in Advertising: Results," *Wichita Eagle*, May 10, 1993; Judy Lundstrom Thomas, "Stephan Has No Political Regrets: Lawsuit, Perjury Charges Dark Spots in Colorful Career," *Wichita Eagle*, December 26, 1994; Suzanne Perez, "Businessman Walter Jabara Dies—Family Recalls his Generous Spirit," *Wichita Eagle*, September 9, 1990; Bill Roy, "A 'Wichita Icon' and 'Matriarch of the Community,' She Is Helen Galloway," *Wichita Business Journal*, March 9, 2008; Lori Linenberger, "Family Was Donna Baker's Life," *Wichita Eagle*, April 26, 1991.

58. Frank Garofalo, "Ablah Striving to Face Reversals With Grace," *Wichita Eagle*, November 10, 1991.

59. Carrie Rengers, "East-Side Expansion: Wichita's George Laham Announced Plans to Build Another Upscale Retail Development to the City's Far East Side," *Wichita Eagle*, July 18, 2003; Joe Stumpe, "The Doctor Is in the Kitchen: Cooking Provides Sam Cohlma with a Break from Ophthalmology," *Wichita Eagle*, April 2, 2003; Karen Shideler, "Chair Honors Wichita Surgeon: Medical School Will Benefit, as Patients and Students Have, from George Farha," *Wichita Eagle*, October 18, 1998.