

# SR 16g Oral History Interview with Sherma J. Norris

by Robert J. Gassner

Portland's Syrian/Lebanese-American Community

1988 August 26



THE OREGON  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY  
FOUNDED 1898

Compiled by Ellorashree maitra, 2019

## Tape 1, Side 1

1988 August 26

Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:06	Introduction of tape's contents				
00:00:32	Norris donates photo of Syrian Star Society gathering to Oregon Historical Society	Sherma Norris describes her conversation with Rose Doumit, a Lebanese-American whose family lived in Stevenson, WA. Shows interviewer a group photograph of a Syrian Star Society gathering in Portland, OR: she notes that she is now 74 years old and the picture was taken in her early teens, so it is an "oldie." Discusses logistics of giving the photograph to the OHS for their collections.	Doumit, Rose	Syrian Star Society (Portland, Or.)--meetings	
00:04:19	Norris's birth and early family history	Sherma Jwayad Norris was born in Portland, on Aug 8, 1914. Does not know how her father's side of the family came to the United States, they were "just here." Her mother came with the Kale (Kahl?) family, worked in New York for a while and then moved to Portland in 1912. Met and married Norris' father in 1913. Father's family was from Batroun, Lebanon and mother's family was from Tyre, Lebanon. The family lived in Northwest Portland and then in St. Johns district, both areas popular with Syrian and Lebanese immigrants; mentions Mt. Scott (in and around Foster Road) as another locality where many Lebanese and Syrian immigrants lived. Details about Lebanese immigrants, their families, and earliest arrivals such as Mr. and Mrs. Darwish who "were pioneers."	Batroun, Lebanon	Tyre, Lebanon	Syrian-Lebanese Immigrants--Pioneers
00:08:25	Norris's memories about her early childhood	Norris recalls her childhood friends in the community, including Latifih Kahl, Clara Beiruti, Sara Khalil, Sara Sabaa, and others. Describes their activities together, and recounts communal get togethers in Mt. Scott featuring dances and group photos. Attended Holy Cross School along with many others from the community. Her family lived "very well" and they "never lost a meal." Birthday parties and slumber parties were occasions for social gathering, as were tabbouleh parties organized by Mr. and Mrs. Tabshe.	Holy Cross School (Portland, Or.)	Lebanese immigrants, Portland, Or.--recreation	

00:00:13	Involvement as a child in Syrian Star Society activities	As a child, Norris attended Syrian Star Society events frequently. Notes that when the Syrian Star Society was founded, Lebanon had not gained independence, so "we were considered all Syrians at that time." People of Lebanese descent tended to live in the lower part of town (Mt. Scott area) while Syrians were concentrated in the upper part of town (St. Johns). Still, the two communities frequently got together and organized meetings. Syrian Star Society was the only club she could remember operating at the time. Mentions another organization with a hall (for gatherings) located at 115th and Holgate, which was an offshoot of the Syrian Star Society. When she got older, there was another Syrian-American-Lebanese Auxillary for women--the organization is still going, but Norris does not belong to it.	Syrian Star Society (Portland, Or.)	Lebanon -- History	Syrian-Lebanese Auxiliary Club (Portland, Or.)
00:15:45	Relations between St. Johns and Foster Road communities	Clear division along geographic lines between St. Johns and Mt. Scott communities, but there were no feuds, and the two communities took turns to organize events. Businesses in both areas were pretty successful, but the Mt. Scott community had more businesses, mostly grocery stores. Norris's parents had a grocery store as did the Kahls. The Hannas, Kadis, and Rasks had stores in Mt. Scott. The oldest store she is aware of is the Kahl store, Kahl's Market and Grocery, on N. Lombard, still existing at the time of the interview, run by Tony Kahl. Mt. Scott grocery stores no longer in operation.	Syrian-Lebanese immigrants--small businesses	Kahl's Market and Grocery, N. Lombard Street (Portland, Or.)	
00:20:24	Norris family business	After marrying, Norris's parents lived above the confectionary store they ran at 443 NW Glisan Street. Father started out as a peddler, as did her first father-in-law. Father made a good living peddling in little towns, journeying out by train, while mother tended the store. In 1925, parents bought out a store on Willamette Blvd and the family lived in a two-roomed house behind the store.	NW Glisan Street (Portland, Or.)	Door-to-door sales	
00:22:03	Father's death and her marriage	They lived in Willamette Blvd. until 1934 when her father died in her last year of high school. She ran the store with her mother for a while. Thereafter, sold the business but retained the property. Retains fond memories of the store. Norris married in 1935; in 1945 she and her husband took over the store and ran it until 1954-55, then sold it. Subsequent history of the store. Eventually, sold property in pieces, first in 1970, prior to visiting Germany (where her daughter's husband was stationed) and Lebanon with her husband. Subsequent visits to Europe.	Norris, Sherma--first marriage (1935)	Jwayad, Nicholas ("Nick")-first husband of Norris, Sherma	Norris, Sherma--Germany--tourism
00:24:28	Visits to Lebanon and Contact with Relatives in Lebanon	Visited husband's and own relatives in Lebanon in 72. Kept in touch with relatives in Lebanon initially, but lost touch in 1976, because of difficulty in maintaining contact via post.	Norris, Sherma--Lebanon-family reunion		

00:24:52	First husband's death, work at Portland Community College, and re-marriage	Husband died in 1975. She was working for the Portland Community college at the time, where she had started working in 64 or 65. Worked as a bookstore manager at the Cascade campus. Worked for the college for 13 years, retired in 78 and got married again.	Portland Community College (Portland, Or.)-- Cascade campus bookstore	Norris, Sherma-- Portland Community College (Portland, Or.)-- employment	
00:25:00	Memories of working in family store	Has vivid memories of working in the store. Chores included cleaning the store, keeping the books, and helping parents with social welfare claims. Describes changing feelings about working in the store. Details of family post-marriage: children and grandchildren.	Norris, Sherma-- family business-- work	Norris, Sherma-- family-- descendants	
00:27:25	Memories of high school	Recalls enjoying high school. Describes experience of attending St. Mary's Academy. Cites expense as reason why other Syrian/Lebanese friends did not attend St. Mary's with her. Lists schools attended by friends from the community (Commerce High, Franklin High). Details about her time attending Holy Cross grammar school, also attended by other Syrian/Lebanese children.	St. Mary's Academy (Portland, Or.)-- Catholic schools	Commerce High School (Portland, Or.)	Franklin High School (Portland, Or.)

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Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:07	Lebanese school mates	Describes school friends from the Lebanese community, including Sara Saba. Sara Saba's early marriage.	Saba, Sara	Syrian-Lebanese immigrants (Portland, Or.)-- schooling	
00:01:00	Political involvement	Like her parents, Norris was never politically inclined. After first marriage, followed her husband and became a Republican. Knew the Atiyeh family through her mother's friendship with the elder Mr and Mrs. Atiyeh. Not close to the children or Victor Atiyeh. Recalls helping organize a dinner for Victor Atiyeh when he was running for political office. Victor Atiyeh was guest of honor at the dinner, which was hosted by the Auxiliary Club.	Atiyeh family	Syrian-Lebanese Auxiliary Club (Portland, Or.)	Atiyeh, Victor
00:02:45	Activities of the Auxiliary Club	Auxiliary Club hosted parties, teas, dances and other social gatherings. Had about 15-18 people attending the gatherings. "Some did not want to belong" and when a new group was formed she "just fell out of it." She decided not to join because her husband wouldn't join the men's club and in order to be in the Auxiliary, husband had to belong to the Club. Later when she was invited to join, she refused because she was working and raising a family so did not have the time to spare.	Syrian-Lebanese Auxiliary Club-- activities	Norris, Sherma-- Syrian-Lebanese Auxiliary Club-- membership	
00:04:31	Memories of father's friends	Father 'ran around' with people in the community like Mr. Kahl and Steve Heesy and Joe Khoury, all dead at the time of the interview. Parents also had "very dear" American friends as well because of the store. After closing the store, the family would go for a walk or go visit some people. Describes father as a "homebody." Discusses common recreational activities of adults in the community.	Shaar, William Mike--Social circle		
00:06:18	How old was the Syrian Star Society?	Norris does not know; notes that the photo she showed at the beginning of the interview does not show a date.	Syrian Star Society (Portland, Or.)		

00:07:08	Speaking Arabic at home	Recalls mother's insistence on speaking Arabic at home. As a child, Norris herself spoke Arabic at home regularly, but stopped doing so after high school. Mother spoke English in the store but used Arabic at home. Norris does not speak Arabic very fluently now, but continues to understand it very well. Believes that every child should speak their native language along with English.	Languages at home--Arabic	English language	Immigrants--native language
00:08:42	Details about Norris's family	Details about Norris's father, William Mike Shaar, his brother, Steve, and their families. Norris's mother, Helen Gaffari and her relations. Norris's own children and their families. First husband, Nick Jwayad's family.	Norris, Sherma--Family		
00:12:37	Norris' in-laws, The Jwayad family	Knew Nick's father and mother, Jacob and Mary, who were very devoted to each other. They came from Batroun, and migrated to Canada and then to Oregon. Jacob's sister Ann lived in St. Helens, married into the Baseel family. Jacob followed his sister to Oregon, and lived in Portland. They had relatives in Lebanon, who were "wonderful people," whom she has met.	Jwayad family		
00:13:57	Mother's arrival in Portland	Mother was working in New York, wasn't very happy there. She got a letter from Rose Kahl with whom she had come from Lebanon. Rose Kahl and Saliba Kahl, who had traveled with her to the US from Lebanon, wrote to her asking her to come to Portland and she decided to do so. She met Norris' father and married in 1913. They met while visiting people in the community.	Gaffari,Helen	Gaffari, Helen and Shaar, William--Marriage (1913)	
00:15:15	Thoughts on Syrian community's progress in Portland and how they have done	Have done very well financially and socially. Refuses to compare to other immigrant groups. Compares the Syrian community's modest/strained financial circumstances in her youth to their present prosperity. Regarding community members who did well in Portland and brought other relatives here, cites the case of Rose Doumit and her family. Father-in-law, Jacob Jwayad and his wife, who were settled in the US, brought their children Francis and Nick from Lebanon in 1921 when Nick was 19.	Syrian-Lebanese Immigrant Community (Portland, Or.)--Social and Financial circumstances--History	Jwayad, Jacob--Family	
00:18:34	Final thoughts	Has a lot of memories but getting them down "is something else." Shares memories of her children. Recounts an eventful road-trip with her daughter, Mary, who had just joined the army, to Fort Benning, Georgia.	Carr, Mary Jo nee Norris		