

SR 167 Oral History Interview with Sam and Minerva Teeny

by Robert J. Gassner

Portland's Syrian/Lebanese-American Community

1988 September 8



THE OREGON
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
FOUNDED 1898

Compiled by Ellorashree Maitre, 2019

Tape 1, Side 1

1988 September 8

Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:01	Introduction of Tape's contents				
00:00:44	Family History and Origin	Sam Teeny was born in Portland on Oct 10, 1924 to Joseph and Minny Teeny. Teeny was an "adopted nickname," their original family name was "Dunn." Forefathers, originally from Saudi Arabia, were driven out due to persecution of Christians. Settled in Damascus, Syria, bought property, raised families, but once again, had to leave due to religious persecution. This time, they settled in in Zahle', in the Beqaa Valley, Lebanon, where they found a haven in the community of other Christian believers. This last move occurred 300-350 years ago; most Lebanese immigrants to US, "the promised land," hailed from there.	Christians--persecutions	Zahlé, Beqaa Valley, Lebanon	Teeny, Joseph and Minny
00:03:45	Reasons for Parents' immigration to the United States	Does not know why parents came to Portland. Speculates that the decision to leave Zahle' likely prompted by lack of jobs and opportunity for betterment in the US. Parents arrived in the United States in 1905, possibly around the same time. Joseph Teeny was young at the time of his migration. His family had a lot of property in Lebanon, where they were farmers and ranchers.	Teeny, Bill	Lebanon--socio-economic conditions	United States--immigration
00:06:00	Sam Teeny's early life to adulthood	Parents took Sam back to Lebanon when he was 2 years old; he lived in Lebanon for 11 years. At age 13, returned to US, because he was a citizen, along with his brother, Ray, owner of a berry farm. Sam Teeny lived in Portland for 10 years, attended school, worked part time, and went into service for WWII. Right after the war, went back to Lebanon, stayed there for a year and a half, married there. His wife, Minerva, born and raised in Zahle', Lebanon.	Teeny, Ray	World War II--service	Teeny, Sam and Minerva--marriage
00:08:10	Minerva Teeny's recollections of Teeny family	Minerva Teeny describes her mother-in-law's family, based on conversations with relatives. Joseph and Minny Teeny's marriage in the US; Minny Teeny's maiden name. Minny Teeny's family originally came from Zahle', Lebanon and settled in California; her father ran a blacksmith's shop, where he made shoes for horses.	Teeny, Minny née Abey	Small business--blacksmith	

00:09:51	Sam Teeny's Schooling and Social Life as a teenager in US	Attended Arleta Grade School after return from Lebanon, then Benson Polytechnic (then a boy's-only school) for about 2 years, and finally, Franklin High. Drafted into the army right after school. Names other Lebanese and Syrian school mates. Don Hanna mentioned as a close friend, because "we knew the language," and were "inter-related". Minerva Teeny interjects to say, "you chummed around with the Americans more." Sam Teeny professes to having had a wide social circle, extending beyond Lebanese and Syrians.	Arleta Grade School, Portland	Benson Polytechnic, Portland	Hanna, Don
00:15:01	Activities and Social Gatherings with others from the Community	Community gatherings occasioned by weddings, picnics, activities at the Syrian-Lebanese Club. Also families would get together, visit each other, play cards. In high school, Sam drawn to activities like dating, going to shows rather than communal gatherings. However, visited Hannas, Mozayas, and other branches of the Teeny family, often with family. Recounts gatherings for Thanksgiving dinners, picnics, and weddings, where people would dance the dabke, an Arabic folk-dance.	Syrian-Lebanese Social Club--social activities	Dabke--Arabic folk-dance	Thanksgiving--family gatherings
00:18:21	Importance of Arabic to Sam Teeny in his youth	In his youth, Teeny tried to get away from Arabic. Notes that the younger generation typically shunned the customs of their parents and older relatives, perhaps out of a sense of "inferiority", or because it was not customary at the time to try to hold on to one's customs and traditions. Recalls his parents' efforts to learn English, and notes that his father spoke "really good English," as did his Uncle Dave, because they went into business. "Some families never learned English and couldn't speak Arabic" properly, either. According to Minerva, Sam made a conscious effort to get away from Arabic because he was raised in Lebanon. Describes him as being "probably ashamed of it," or "bashful to speak it before people." Syrian/Lebanese Americans born and raised in the US, according to Minerva, are more curious about their cultural heritage. Sam points out that this is a relatively new phenomenon, since in his youth the tendency was to dissociate oneself from the "foreign," but "now in the last 20-30 years it has swung the other way, and it is wonderful because of travel and intermixing languages. Now we are proud to talk Arabic and to be identified as Lebanese." Discusses lack of awareness of Lebanon as a nation among Americans.	English language--study	Lebanese identity--culture	Arabic language
00:22:49	Cultural Outreach Efforts	Because he runs a Middle East bakery, he does intercultural outreach at schools, where he gives presentations with slides and artefacts, and also puts on a Middle East program to help students become acquainted with Middle Eastern culture. Names 3 things he is most proud of: his Christian faith, his Lebanese identity, and his American citizenship. During the outreach sessions, he answers students' questions about the Middle East, life in the US, and how they went into business. Now, immersion in his identity is a great joy for him as he is older, his perspective having changed with time and shifts in people's attitude to heritage and culture.	Middle-Eastern culture	Intercultural outreach and education	

00:24:24	High School Years	Describes social activities during high school years: 3 Lebanese-American softball teams. On returning from Lebanon at 13, he immediately joined a softball team, and continued to play until after the war. When Meeny Teeny married him, and came to the US in 1949, she watched the softball teams play. Recounts details about the softball coach, George Saba, the composition of the team in terms of age and ethnicity. Meeny notes that at the time, most members of the community did not distinguish between Syrian and Lebanese origins: "When I first came I asked, where did you come from? I don't know--we're Syrians! They didn't know where they came from. That's how it was."	Lebanese-American softball teams	Syrian and Lebanese identities--differences	Saba, George
00:27:48	Church, Community, and the Syrian-Lebanese Social Club	Sam Teeny himself didn't attend church for many years; community worshipped in different churches, mentioned the Apostolic church and Orthodox church. Meeny Teeny mentions a photograph of the men who started it, in the older church. Sam Teeny's father was one of the founding members of the Syrian Orthodox church as well as the Syrian-Lebanese Social Club. The Social club was important to Sam Teeny: I plugged in as soon as I could. He was a secretary of the club at one time; the club organized baseball and softball matches, and dances.	Syrian-Lebanese Social Club--founders	Church attendance	Teeny, Sam--club secretary

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Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:01	Social activities organized by the club	Club organized dinners, fundraising, dances, and other social gatherings. Annual dinners once a year, open to the public for cultural outreach.	Syrian-Lebanese American Club--activities		
00:00:22	Change in role of club over the years	Original purpose of the club was to maintain and develop cultural awareness in the Lebanese, Syrian and Middle-Eastern community. In time, in addition to fulfilling that purpose, "other attractions" gained more prominence in the club's activities. Sam Teeny has not attended club events in the last 15-20 years, so not aware of most recent activities. Mentions the club's involvement in the Syrian-Lebanese annual convention in the West Coast, held every two or three years in Portland.	Syrian-Lebanese American community--Annual conventions and conferences		
00:03:08	Effect of independence of Lebanon on the club and the community	At age 24, Sam Teeny traveled to Lebanon; notes that in the US, a split developed between Syrian and Lebanese communities. Mentions, as an aside, his journey by motorcycle from Portland to New York and subsequent voyage by ship to Lebanon. Minerva Teeny explains how perceptions of Israel contributed to the friction between Lebanese and Syrian communities at home and in the US. Asserts that while relations between the communities in Portland were on the whole peaceful, differences emerged over the naming of the social club which eventually became the Syrian-Lebanese American Club. Influx of Syrian immigrants further increased influence of Syrians in the club; friction between the communities influenced church attendance. Mentions that she and Sam Teeny attend a non-denominational church.	Syrians and Lebanese communities--relations	Lebanon--Civil War, 1975-1990	Syrian-Lebanese American Club
00:09:05	Early business ventures of Joseph Teeny and other members of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Portland	Joseph Teeny and his brother began as "traveling merchants", visiting lumber mills and other locations with catalogs and merchandise. Eventually, Joseph Teeny opened a store on Foster Road. He did so with the help of a Jewish man, John Stein, who started him off with an investment of 500 dollars. Teeny then helped his brother start his own business. Foster Road was a hub of many Syrian-Lebanese owned businesses, including restaurants, shoe repair shops, groceries, and dry-goods stores, all operated by prominent members of the community.	Door-to-door sales	Foster Road, (Portland, OR)	Stein, John

00:12:12	Joseph Teeny's entry into construction business	Joseph Teeny sold his store to his brother around 1915-20, and entered construction industry with one Mr. Abraham. Around 1924-26, Teeny sold his business and returned to Lebanon with his whole family to help his ailing wife, Minny, recuperate. She died in Lebanon, and in 1930s, Sam Teeny returned to the U.S.	Teeny, Joseph	Teeny, Minny--death	Small business--construction
00:14:44	Prominent members of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Portland in the 1930s	Prominent members included the Teenies, the Zaidans, the Bitar family, the Atiyehs, and the Schwary family. Large proportion of the Syrian-Lebanese community concentrated around the Mt. Scott area, while the rest were scattered around North and NE Portland. Discusses a number of families and where they lived.	Mt. Scott (Portland, OR)	North and NE Portland, OR	
00:17:15	History of relations between Lebanese and Syrian Communities	Lebanese and Syrian families lived in the same neighborhoods with "no distinction." Sam Teeny: "We were all one then, whether we were Lebanese or Syrian--it used to matter none then." Compares the current relation between the Lebanese and Syrians to the United States and Canada. Sam and Minerva Teeny describe their regret about the discord and split between the communities, and Minerva Teeny notes that it was not present when she first came to the US. Sam Teeny: "Now, to my wife and I, it still does not matter. We love the Syrians just as we love the Lebanese."	Syrian and Lebanese communities--relations		
00:19:47	Annual Syrian Conferences -- Importance and Function	Conferences served to bring people together, occasion for young people to meet, and for families to inter-marry. No political content or purpose. Also served as a venue of exchange of ideas about business ventures, given that this was a community dominated by business-men.	Annual conventions and conferences--Syrian-Lebanese American community	Syrian and Lebanese communities--marriage and intermarriage	Occupation of Syrian immigrants--business
00:22:35	Weddings and Cultural Activities	Describes a lavish wedding party thrown by the Harris (originally Hariz) family, along with information about the family's recent history (background in Syria, reasons for migrating to the US). Sam Teeny describes his own past career in business, and his ongoing youth work in local schools (elementary, middle, and junior high schools). Describes how much he enjoys his work doing cultural outreach with youth groups, speaking about Lebanese language, culture, and customs.	Teeny, Sam--Intercultural outreach and education	Harris, Rose--Family wedding	