

SR 168 Oral History Interview with Nora B. Womack

by Robert J. Gassner

Portland's Syrian/Lebanese-American Community

1988 September 6



THE OREGON
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
FOUNDED 1898

Compiled by Ellorashree Maitra, 2019

Tape 1, Side 1

1988 September 6

Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:01	Introduction of tape's contents				
00:01:28	Nora Baseel Womack introduces herself	Womack was born in Portland, OR, on April 15, 1905. Details father's first arrival in US from Batroun, Lebanon, return to Lebanon to marry mother, 24 years his junior, and return to US with bride. Had 10 children (5 boys, 5 girls). Father died when mother was 32 years. Details of arrival, with a group of people, via Canada and Ellis Island. Came to Portland to be with relatives (the Khourys, dad's sisters).	Batroun, Lebanon	Khoury family	Immigration-Lebanese
00:03:47	Details about Womack's father and his early years	Womack provides the dates of father's birth, arrival in the US, and marriage. Discusses father's occupation as an itinerant merchant in Portland, journeying up and down the river delivering goods in places like Gray's River, WA, Brookfield, WA, and Chinook, OR. The family initially settled in Gray's River, WA but relocated to St. Helens, WA in 1908 to set up a general merchandize store. Father stopped itinerant river-trade after opening store, and eventually built a second store on the corner of Columbia River Highway and Columbia River Boulevard. Womack shows interviewer a photograph of store taken in 1926. Womack: "They were pioneers down there....The Morgeses had the first store and then my folks had the second store in St. Helens." Mentions other Lebanese families who owned stores in St. Helens.	Gray's River, WA	St. Helens, WA	Door-to-door sales
00:07:13	Choice of Grocery Store Business	Choice of grocery store business linked to father's experience in itinerant selling. Father came from a line of grape-growers in Batroun. In the US, gravitated to sales, and eventually to setting up his own business. Came to Portland because there was a settlement of Lebanese and Syrian people, so newcomers to the US tended to congregate there. Womack mentions South America and Australia as other countries popular with Syrian and Lebanese immigrants. Womack's father was likely among the first Lebanese/Syrian people to settle in Portland. Mentions other relatives who had businesses in the Portland area, including her father's sister, Norma Khoury.	Vineyards--Batroun, Lebanon	Portland, OR--Syrian-Lebanese immigrants	Khoury, Norma

00:10:12	How long did the Womacks live in St. Helens, WA?	Members of Womack's family (including her mother and siblings) continued to live in St. Helens, WA, after her father's death. One brother became a fire chief and another entered the real-estate business. Womack worked for the telephone company in St. Helens before being transferred to Portland, OR in 1933. Details of Womack's working life, and her marriage. Husband was a lumberman, worked for the Jones Lumber Company for a long time, including a 6-year stint in Reno, Nevada.	Bell Telephone Company	Jones Lumber Company--Portland, OR	
00:13:43	Womack's childhood in St. Helens, WA	Womack recounts her childhood in St. Helens as a busy one, because of a large family and early death of her father. Her mother ran the store and brought up the children. Womack on her mother: "Every summer she dressed us in white and we had long black curls, and she kept us as spotless as we could be. And we were a very close family....We have been, even now, we are still close. The ones that are living, there's only 2 of us, out of all of us. My sister Rose in St. Helens and I." Family activities included involvement in the church, picnics, swims in the river, entertaining relatives, and berry-picking. The children had to "learn things on our own and how to manage our money--one thing that Mother was always sure that we did." The Lebanese community in St. Helens was small, comprising three families. The family belonged to St. Frederick's Church in St. Helens, a Catholic church. Before the establishment of St. Mary's, the first Catholic church in St. Helens, a missionary came from Rainier on Sundays to administer mass. When a new Catholic church was built, it was named St. Frederick's, after the son of Mr. Morges, who had donated money for building the church.	St. Helens, WA--Lebanese immigrants	St. Frederick's Church, St. Helens, WA	Womack, Rose
00:16:28	Observance of Lebanese customs and traditions at home	Primary custom parents retained from the "old country" was making Lebanese bread and other kinds of Lebanese food, especially during family get-togethers. Womack remembers elaborate cooking sessions with cousins from Portland. These cousins, the Juwaid, would come down on the train from St. Helens to visit. On speaking Arabic at home, Womack: "No, we had to teach our mother to speak English! [laughs] Isn't that awful!" Then observes that mother spoke Arabic with friends and the children understood it. Sister, Rose, speaks Arabic/Lebanese but Womack is not a fluent Lebanese speaker.	English language--Study and teaching	Arabic language--speaking	Juwaid family
00:18:25	Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club	Womack's mother was one of the founders of the Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club in Portland and St. Helens; along with the Morgeses and the Hilans, mother attended the monthly meetings in both locations. Club is still active. Membership currently 18, and has remained more or less constant over the years. Club's primary activity was charity, sending money to Lebanon to an orphanage and also to Providence Nursery. Club was founded around 1925, primarily to share with own community and the needy in general.	Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club--Portland, OR and St. Helens, OR	Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club--activities	Hilan family

00:22:40	Founding members of the Charity Club	Founding members of the club included Mrs. Lewis, Margaret Bitar and Womack's mother. Club aimed to bring together Lebanese ladies in a venue where they could speak Lebanese, thereby keeping the language alive. That is no longer the case at present, since few of the current members speak Lebanese. As a child, Womack was not particularly involved in the Club's activities but eventually, as the older generation passed on, Womack's generation took over the running of the club. Club membership is kept "exclusive" because "we don't want to get too large" as the meetings take place in the homes of members. After moving to Portland, Womack did not join the Syrian-Lebanese Club in Portland. Continued her involvement in the Lebanese Charity. Mentions big annual Christmas charity dinner with about 80 - 100 people.	Bitar, Margaret	Syrian-Lebanese Social Club, Portland, OR	Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club--annual Christmas dinner
00:29:21	Womack's Lebanese Friend Circle in Portland	Mostly comprised her relations, her cousins (the Juwaid, the Khourys, etc).			
00:29:55	Why wasn't the Lebanese Ladies Society a more cultural organization?	Side 1 of tape ends with interviewer asking Womack why the women's society was not involved in cultural events.	Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club--cultural activities		

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Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:02	Comparison of Lebanese Ladies' Society relative lack of cultural activities with the Syrian-Lebanese American Club's cultural programming.	Womack mentions a Lebanese bazaar held at St. George's Church, along with other cultural events, etc. The organizers of these events are from Lebanese Orthodox groups.	St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, Portland, OR	Lebanese church bazaar, Portland, OR	
00:01:38	Impact of the independence of Lebanon on the community in Portland	Womack says that she does not know very much about it; her primary involvement with the Lebanese community was through the Ladies' Society. Affirms awareness of Lebanese identity among the members of the Lebanese Ladies' Society. Expresses dismay at the current situation in Lebanon (during the 1988 Israel-Lebanon War), fears that Lebanese tradition and culture will be "gone" because of the war. On the issue of her own Lebanese identity: "I was born in Portland, but I'm still Lebanese and I like to be...I'm proud of my heritage." Mentions the Lebanese Ladies' Society's contributions for the past 10 years to funding an orphanage in Beirut.	Lebanon--History--Civil War, 1975-1990	Beirut, Lebanon--Orphanage	Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club--naming
00:05:02	The greatest accomplishment of the Lebanese Ladies' Society	Womack mentions the group's charity work, most significantly the funds it sends to the orphanage.	Lebanese Ladies' Charity Club--achievements		
00:06:20	Womack's recollections of Lebanese food at home during her childhood	Aside from bread, lists other Lebanese dishes that she had at home, such as loubya, grape leaves, cabbage rolls, and kibbeh. Womack: "We were all raised on Lebanese food. That's something...we still do." Describes family recipe for version of baklava prepared at home. Mentions one of her brothers making it, along with some other Lebanese dishes, for fellow servicemen in the Coast Guard when he was stationed in Alaska.	Lebanon--food preparation--family recipes	Lebanon--cuisine--kibbeh	Lebanon--cuisine--loubya

00:08:06	Details about Womack's siblings	Brother Joseph was the oldest born in Portland, OR in 1897, Rose was born in Gray's River, WA in 1901, George born in 1902. Mother was pregnant all the time. Another brother, Samuel Peter, born in 1903, never married. Frederick Joseph, born in 1907, was named after her father. Michael was born in 1909, Marie in 1911, and Juliet in 1913, Norma Ann in 1915 and died in 1939.	Womack, Nora Baseel--siblings		
00:11:32	Why did parents originally leave Lebanon?	Womack speculates that they wanted to see the New World "like everyone else." Regrets not having asked these questions when she was a child; notes having difficulty putting together a family history in retrospect. Mentions finding out recently what her grandparents' names were: paternal grandparents were Joseph and Rose Baseel and maternal grandparents were Michael and Nora Juwaid. Provides details of parents' siblings and other relatives.	Womack, Nora Baseel--grandparents		