

PRESENT TO THE SYRIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S CLUB December 4, 2008 BY
DR. EDNA SAFFY

I should have asked my mother, but I didn't. I should have listened to her more closely about what had gone before. About the Syrian women who were making history here in Jacksonville, but I didn't. I should have realized that she was the archivist, the keeper of our history. There is a saying that "a library closes forever when a parent dies." I should have known that, but I didn't.

So today, I cannot speak about what Lorraine Corey asked me to speak about. I cannot speak of the Syrian women of Jacksonville and how these women made history and changed the world of Jacksonville. Yes, I know how to do research, but I knew that is not what Lorraine wanted of me.

Each of you in this room know so much more than I of the history. Each of you has asked the questions and lived that history.

One day, if you wish, you will write or speak to us so those women—of your mothers, of your grandmothers, of your daughters... Or, perhaps our club will compile the history of "The Syrian American Women of Jacksonville."

It is up to each of you. Do you want to tell their story? Do you want to ask the questions?

That is up to you to decide.

You see, I didn't ask my mother those questions I should have asked. When she did speak of those times and tell those stories, I listened with the ears of a child.

And now it is too late.

So today I have only one story to tell. The only story and the only history I know. I will attempt to share with you the survival of a family... The family of a young Syrian widow with two children who survive in a world in which the laws, the policies and the culture of America impeded her survival...

We will go back in time to the late 1920's. Habib Saffy was 36. He and his brother David Saffy were partners, successful brokers in the Saffy Dry Goods Business on Adams Street.

He decided it was now time for him to marry. A relative told of the perfect family in Pennsylvania with a perfect woman, and so he journeyed to Pennsylvania to first meet with the father, Escuder Jubar Daumit, then the mother Haseba and then lastly with the daughter, Sadie Daumit.

Following a courtship and appropriate formalities, Habib Saffy and Sadie Daumit were married in Pennsylvania in 1928.

Let us move more quickly. In 1930 a son is born, Ralph Daumit Saffy. Then in 1935, a daughter, Edna Louise Saffy. A lovely home in Avondale, a solid business, a car. .. The American dream.

Of course, Sadie did not drive; she didn't know how. In fact, she seldom had need to leave the home. Habib took care of everything for his family. Habib would buy the groceries, usually from his good friend Gus Ina at Ina Brothers Grocery Store on Davis Street—right next to Julia George's variety store.

Please don't misunderstand. Sadie indeed had the freedom to leave the house, to run errands and to go shopping. She even had the right to vote, for women had finally been given that right in 1920. Although she chose not to vote, she had that privilege.

In early December of 1939, the dream ended. Always Habib would come home from the business for lunch to be with his family, but not on that day, not ever again.

A phone call... Habib had been taken to Saint Vincent Hospital. 40 days later Habib Saffy--at age 47 -- died. The cause of his death? It was called agranulocytosis. Later, his death was found to be the result of a prescription drug his doctor had given him for migraine headaches.

The drug was from the German pharmaceutical company of Glaxen Smith Klein. Shortly thereafter the drug was pulled from the market.

The year was 1940. At 32 years old, Sadie Daumit Saffy was a widow. Ralph Daumit Saffy, her son, was only 9 years old, and her daughter, Edna Louise Saffy, was only 4 years old.

What of the successful Dry Goods Business? As was usual in those times, seldom were papers drawn up establishing clear titles of ownership when it was a family business.

Thus the business and all monies involved became the property of the surviving owner, Habib's brother David Saffy.

And a will? It was never found. A lawyer? A law suit for her family's share of the business? Sadie was a woman, a wife, a good wife. Remember, she had been a high school graduate, barely 20 years old when she married Habib. She had never written a check. Never had a checking account. Never even bought groceries without Habib accompanying her. At that time, what did she know of legal battles? Of attorneys? Of legal rights?

However, even with no will to be found, the law did award her the home in Avondale. There was some money, but Sadie knew it would not be enough.

Sadie's battle for the survival of her family began. An unbelievable battle of survival. What jobs were there for women in 1940? There were women behind the perfume counters in Cohen Brothers and Purcell's, but she decided to do otherwise.

She had no marketable skills, so she Sadie decided to learn shorthand and typing. Since she did not know how to drive, she had sold the car, therefore, each day she took the Number 4 Murray Hill bus to the old Duval High School and later to Jones Business School.

In 1942, the United States had entered the Second World War and she was able to find a job at the Naval Air Station. For a woman who had led such a quiet sheltered life, it was difficult to be around so many strangers, so much activity.

Luckily Habib had known the former Mayor of Jacksonville, George Blum (who was now the Postmaster). George Blum gave Sadie a position as assistant secretary in the office of the Postmaster. The salary? The absolute minimum. But Sadie Saffy had a job. For 30 years she kept that job, moving from secretary into administrative services. There were very few women working at the post office during this time.

According to Department of Labor statistics, during the 1940's women made 40 cents or less for each dollar a men with the same education made in comparable positions.

Sadie was excellent at her job; however, she was a woman. Of course there were no women administrators at the post office. Each time one of her supervisors (always a man, of course) left, his replacement would need to be trained.

Who would be chosen to train the new supervisor for his new position? Of course his trainer would be someone who knew how the office was run and had all the knowledge. That's right. Sadie Saffy trained all the supervisors for her section.

At that time in the 1940's, 50's, and for decades, woman were not allowed to be members of the Syrian American Club which later became the Salaam Club, but Sadie had the support of many Syrian friends.

William and Jalili Katibah with their two sons, Billy and Eugene would drive Sadie and her two children to the First Presbyterian Church downtown each Sunday.

Alice Abood was her good friend.

Sadie and her daughter would have coffee in tiny cups (demitasse cups) at the J.K. David's home. Edna Louise took piano lessons from their daughter Beatrice who was blind.

Ann Yeager was her fiend as was Ummna Atallah with her children Helen, Mary Ann, and dear dear Mitchell.

Sadie knew the friendship of Lorraine Corey's mother, Mary Lewis. In fact her friendship with Mary Lewis and Sadie being a member of the Syrian Ladies was of greater support than the women of the club ever knew. For here with the Syrian Ladies she could be warmed by once more being among those she called her people.

Thirteen years after Habib had died, Sadie stood proudly as she saw her son Ralph graduate from the University of Florida with a degree in Business Administration. During the Korean War, he served as a Second Lieutenant in the Army.

Ralph returned to Jacksonville and became an executive with Bell South Telephone Company. He and his wife have four children and 6 grandchildren. No matter how many times Bell South offered him more promotions if he would move to another town, he refused to leave Jacksonville. Can you understand why? Do you see how he knew what Sadie Saffy had done for her family.

Later, Sadie stood with great pride as Edna Louise Saffy also graduated from the University of Florida with a doctorate degree.

Edna married another graduate from the University of Florida, Grady Johnson, who became a dentist. Edna let Grady Johnson keep his maiden name. She even went to court to keep the of SAFFY. So you must know the pride she also has in the name Saffy, the name that she shares with her mother.

Let me begin to close this story of a family's survival.

After 30 years, Sadie retired from the post office. It was later that I finally understood the manner in which she retired. Sadie filled out all the necessary retirement papers and requested that the personnel office not make it known to her Administrative office that she was leaving.

Over the next few weeks, she quietly cleaned out her desk. No one in her office even realized she was leaving. On a Friday afternoon in the fall of 1972, she walked out the front door of the downtown main post office on Monroe Street never to return.

Later when I asked her why she had not let anyone at her office know she was retiring, she said, "I just wanted to go home, to go back to the woman I was so long ago.

Today I have told you the story of the survival of just one family, my family.

Today as I close I ask you to remember your grandmothers, your mothers, your daughters, and most importantly, you yourselves.

It is because of you that your families survive.

You are the historians.

You are the archivists.

You are the libraries.

It is your lives that are the histories.

Do not let the stories end.

Do not let the libraries close forever.